

Grace of a Wolf – c 251

Andrew's eyebrows pinch together as his eyes search my face with an uncomfortable level of intensity. I'd just asked him to take me back to the camper after wasting half an hour sitting in this rundown diner.

"You sure you're done? You sounded like you had a lot to do, but we didn't even do anything in the end."

"Yeah." We did a hell of a lot more than he thinks we did, but I'm the only one who remembers it.

In the end, Ellie hasn't shown up. I'm not sure where she caught our trail before, but maybe she hasn't found us yet.

On the one hand, I'm still worried she's about to appear at any second with her goons.

On the other...

My fingers twitch over my pocket, where my phone rests in silence, along with the strange coin from Jebediah Wulfric's grave. I want to get all this App bullshit done with.

"Okay, then I'll take you back."

Andrew's calm acceptance of the strange situations I've put him through helps relax the tightly wound muscles of my upper back and shoulders, and I flash him a grateful smile. "Thanks."

He throws a few bills onto the table to pay our meager tab. "Don't worry about it. I'm here to help."

I follow Andrew outside, my head down as I type out a quick message to Caeriel. I've sent several, but as usual there's no response.

[GRACE HARPER: Answer me. You're my mentor, right? Aren't you here to help me?]

[CAERIEL: You're alive, aren't you?]

His sudden response comes out of nowhere, sent almost as soon as my message goes through. But before I can respond to the absurd question, my face smashes into something warm and solid. "Ow!"

Andrew's stopped walking.

I sidestep him, bumping into him with my shoulder with grumpy intent. "What the hell, you can't just stop walk..."

There's a black cat sitting on the hood of the sedan, its tail lazily swishing back and forth as it blinks giant golden eyes at us.

"It's a cat," he says, like I don't have two eyeballs with perfectly fine vision. "Since when do cats hang out in pack territory?"

"Since now, I guess?" But my casual words are the antithesis of the strange feeling of wrongness curling up in my chest.

The cat yawns, revealing needle-sharp teeth, before settling into a perfect loaf position. It's clear it has no fear of Andrew, reminding me of two other pets.

I wonder if Dylan's found them yet, and if they're okay.

Damn, I'm such a bad pet owner. I should probably be a little more worried, but it's kind of hard to be super worried when I know they're some strange version of supernatural being with ties to the Divinity App.

I'm sure they're fine.

Still, the kids would be devastated if they never showed up again...

"Shoo," Andrew says half-heartedly, but the animal ignores him, yawning again.

Andrew glances at me sideways. "First that white cat, now this one. You got some kind of affinity for felines I don't know about?"

"No." I shake my head, giving the cat a suspicious side-eye. "Definitely not." But if I have to hazard a guess, it's about as normal of a cat as the white one.

The cat's golden eyes lock with mine, unblinking and intense. My skin prickles with goosebumps and a vague feeling of guilt, like I'm somehow wrong for doubting its identity.

Then, as if deciding we're no longer worth its attention, it suddenly stretches before hopping gracefully off the hood. With a flick of its tail, it darts into the bushes beside the diner's parking lot.

"That thing better get out of the territory if it knows what's good for it. Wolves and cats don't mix," Andrew says, clearly unbothered now that it's no longer on his car.

"Yeah," I mutter, sliding into the passenger seat and wondering if I should be worried.

* * *

I should definitely be worried.

For one, the car doesn't start.

For two, once the car does start, it makes it about two blocks before dying again.

For three, when Andrew had me steer the car to the side of the road as he pushed from behind, I was almost side-swiped by a swerving truck.

It's like someone poured an entire bucket of bad luck onto us, and I don't appreciate it. Still, all of the above could have been ignored if it wasn't for the

tiny little fact that the coin in my pocket is now burning hot and exuding a stronger scent than before. I'm not sure what it means, but there's a strange, foreboding feeling creepy-crawling its way over my skin every time I touch it.

Andrew doesn't seem to notice the smell, but it's enough to make me dry heave on the side of the road as he looks under the hood of the car, despite having little to no mechanical knowledge.

His head pops out from staring at the puzzle of the car's engine as he asks bluntly, "Are you pregnant?"

"What? No." You need to have sex to get pregnant, for one.

He doesn't look like he believes me. "Then are you sick?"

"No, I'm not sick. I just smelled something nasty for a minute."

"Nasty?" His nostrils flare as he scents the air. "I can't smell anything."

I slip my hand into my pocket, guiltily fiddling with the coin that's practically searing my fingertips. "It's not a big deal. I just swear I can still smell the grave from here."

Andrew scoffs, but then his gaze goes beyond me as his expression shifts into something inscrutable.

I turn around and find myself staring at the black cat again, this time sitting on the sidewalk barely three feet away. It's watching us with unnerving intensity, tail curled neatly around its paws.

Almost close enough to touch, but somehow I know if I try, it's going to run off. It doesn't give off the friendly demeanor of the white cat.

"Huh. Don't humans consider black cats bad luck?"

"You really think a cat's the reason your car broke down?" I ask dryly, gesturing at his sedan. "No offense, but this thing's older than both of us. Probably has a rusted-out something-or-other."

The cat meows, as if backing me up on my automotive diagnosis.

"It was a joke," Andrew mumbles, turning back to stare at the engine. His hands hover uselessly over various car parts, clearly having no idea what he's looking at. After a minute of this charade, he straightens up. "I have no idea what I'm looking at. We'll have to call someone to tow it, I guess."

A cold finger of unease trails down my spine. The car was fine before time rolled back. Now it's dead on the side of the road, leaving us stranded.

My eyes roam back to the cat, wondering if Andrew's onto something.

No. That would be silly, wouldn't it?

Then again, is anything sillier than humans who can turn into wolves and an App with an apparent ability to literally turn time back? The answer is, obviously, no.

The cat meows again, stretching languidly before trotting away. I swear it looks pleased with itself as it disappears around a corner. My fingers curl tighter around the coin in my pocket.

I have no idea why it's hot, but it's more likely the now-broken car has something to do with this strange coin than the cat. I should stop indulging in these random flights of fancy.

It's just a cat.

Sadie and the white cat are also supernaturals, but they didn't make anything break down.

Andrew frowns down at his phone as he looks up a phone number, and I rub at my arms as I look around, paying particular attention to any place it looks like Ellie could be hiding.

I'm not interested in a rematch with her after what happened before the rollback, but I can't shake the strange feeling I don't have much of a choice in the matter.

Hopefully I'm just being paranoid.

"I'm going to have Caine pick us up," I tell Andrew, realizing I should do something instead of standing around staring at shadows.

Andrew's head jerks up suddenly. His nostrils flare as he sniffs at the air, and his face transforms into something hard and grim.

"Good idea," he says tightly. "Tell him to hurry."

c 252

Grace of a Wolf

CAINE

I glare down at the bed where my entire wardrobe splays out like darkness incarnate. Fashion isn't something I've ever paid attention to, but I don't think I ever realized what lack of variety exists in mine.

Black on black on fucking black. I grab one shirt, examining it for any distinguishing feature that might set it apart. There isn't one.

You dress like an emo teenager.

"Shut up." I don't need fashion advice from someone who considers fur their only outfit.

What you need is color, my wolf continues, ignoring my irritation. His enthusiasm grows with every word. Something that catches the eye. A vibrant red, perhaps. The color of blood freshly spilled. Showcase your strength.

I toss the shirt back onto the pile. He isn't helping, but telling him so will only make it worse.

You could shift for the occasion instead of worrying about clothes. Show yourself in all our glory. Have you ever seen a wolf as magnificent as us?

"Your idea of dressing up is showing up naked and furred. Your opinion isn't even to be considered."

Better than anything you can come up with. My coat gleams like the darkest night. My eyes hold storms. My presence alone—

"Shut up. Are you writing a novel?"

Maybe I should. My romantic side is far more developed than yours. Maybe my books will bring in extra income. Goddess knows we need it.

Ignoring his amusement, I stare at my phone, the only lifeline I have left. With a final, resigned curse, I snap a photo of the clothing spread and send it to Jack-Eye. Before I can change my mind, I hit the call button.

He picks up on the fourth ring. "What?" His voice sounds strained and breathless, like I've interrupted something physical. Knowing him, it involves another person.

"Check your texts."

"Are you fucking serious? Do you have any idea what you're—never mind. Hold on."

There's rustling and a faint groan, and I look at the ceiling with a long sigh. It isn't the first, nor will it be the last, time I'm an unwilling witness to his escapades.

"Now, Jack-Eye."

"I am, I am, I—what the fuck? Why am I looking at your laundry?"

I inhale sharply through my nose. "I need to convince Grace to let me mark her tonight. Everything has to be perfect. I can't afford any detail to go wrong."

The silence on the other end stretches so long I wonder if the call dropped.

"Are you saying you're dressing up for a date?" Jack-Eye finally asks, his voice suspiciously high.

"Is that so fucking hard to believe?" I snap.

A choked sound comes through the line. I've heard it enough times to recognize exactly what he's doing. Then he clears his throat. "Yes. Yes it is. You buy the same shirts in bulk since I've known you."

"I do not—" Wait. No, I guess I do. They're cheaper that way.

"And they're all black. Sometimes with slightly different necklines. Once in a blue moon, a dark charcoal gray." He's definitely laughing now. "Holy shit, you must be serious. Your charm isn't enough?"

And you're choosing his help over mine? I hope he dresses you like a peacock.

I drag my hand down my face, regretting my luck in wolf and beta combined. "Are you going to help or not?"

"I'm intrigued enough to try." There's a strangely calculating tone in his voice, enough to send a vague sense of worry through me. But then he asks crisply, "Where are you taking her?"

"There's a hotel in the human city near the edge of Blue Mountain's territory."

A long pause.

"....that's it?"

My brow furrows. "We're going out to dinner." Somewhere. Still haven't figured out where.

"Dinner and bed. How romantic." Another muffled snicker. "Alright, you need something new. Something that says 'I'm still a terrifying apex predator, but I bothered to look nice for you.'"

My unease grows. "I don't—"

"Hold on, I'm already looking. There's a nice place in town, but you'll have to drive. Maybe thirty minutes. Do you have time?"

There's a lot to do before the other packs arrive, but— "Yes."

"Okay, I'm looking through their inventory now. Hold on."

Pacing the room is the only thing keeping my mind settled as he does whatever he's doing.

Then, "Okay, I got it. I ordered it for pick-up and it should be ready in an hour. It's perfect."

My eyes narrow. He sounds sincere, but this is Jack-Eye we're talking about. "What is it?"

"A shirt. Pants. Socks and shoes. What, do you need me to pick your underwear, too?"

"Of course not."

"It's a date, so you have to dress up, right?"

"Right."

"There you go. Just trust me, boss. This is our future Queen; I won't let you down."

* * *

Thirty minutes later, I realize I never should have trusted Jack-Eye.

I stare at the items the cashier's handed me, my brows twitching as I ask, "Are you sure this is the right order?"

The cashier glances at the receipt. "Caine, right?"

"Yes."

"Yep, this is it. Rush order, placed thirty-three minutes ago, paid by card. It's yours. Would you like it gift wrapped?"

I glare at the monstrosity folded neatly into a plastic bag, pulling it out to inspect what I'm already regretting trusting Jack-Eye to buy.

It's an ostentatious red shirt with silver dragon embroidery, paired with black slacks with matching silver embroidery down the sides. The shoes, at least, look normal.

"No," I say, my jaw tight enough to crack molars. "No gift wrap."

I think it looks quite regal, Fenris chirps.

Shut up and focus on what you need to do.

Grace is just sitting at the diner still, he grumbles. Then his attention sharpens. Oh, they're leaving.

Follow them.

I shove the offensive clothing into the bag and step outside the store, pulling out my phone. Jack-Eye doesn't answer my call, as expected.

[CAINE: I will kill you.]

[JACK-EYE: I saw you picked up the order. Like it?]

[CAINE: This will make me look like a peacock.]

[JACK-EYE: Girls like peacocks.]

[CAINE: I'm not wearing this shit.]

[JACK-EYE: Then don't blame me when she says no. Hey, do you think a peacock's cock is as small as a pea?]

[CAINE: I'm cutting your salary.]

[JACK-EYE: Also, I hear girls like pierced dicks. Maybe check out the local tattoo place. You should be healed in time for tonight.]

[CAINE: How do I block a number?]

[JACK-EYE: Good luck tonight, boss. Tie down our Queen! Literally, if necessary. Be careful with rope, though. Rope burn is a bitch.]

Irritated, I call him again, unsurprised when he answers this time.

"You've gone too far—"

"Boss, you wound me. I picked it all out with you in mind."

My eyes twitch. "Then wear it yourself."

"Oh, no, boss. I don't have the aura to pull it off. Not like you."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, barely containing the urge to reach through the phone and strangle my Beta with my bare hands. "Would it kill you to do something properly?"

"Probably. But if you really hate it, just ask the attendants to find you something appropriate."

I gnash my teeth together. "I wouldn't wear this shit if you had a gun to my head."

"Your loss. You know, studies show that bold fashion choices can make a woman more receptive to—"

I hang up on him mid-sentence. The urge to throw my phone across the parking lot is almost overwhelming, but I need the damn thing. Grace might call.

I have good news. And bad news.

"What is it this time?"

Bad news: You aren't going to have time to shop for a new outfit.

"And the good news is?"

We found their Luna.

Chapter 253: Grace: Facts Aren't Facting

Curling up in the trunk of a broken down car is not my idea of fun.

On a scale of one to ten, I'm pretty sure we're deep in the negatives. Times two. Squared. Or something.

Wait. If we multiply negative numbers—okay. Scratch that. Math isn't my strong suit. Whatever. The point is, I'm so damn far down the negative rabbit hole I've devolved into dreaming of twisting Andrew's head until it pops off and flies away like a deflating balloon, complete with all the spitty-farty sounds and background laugh tracks.

I fucking hate laugh tracks.

Anyway.

The point is, obviously, it wasn't my idea to get into this damn hole of darkness.

And if I want to be fair—which I don't—it isn't exactly Andrew's fault, either. Precisely. Kind of.

In fact, I'm not entirely certain how it happened.

One second there was a cat. Then I was trying to call Caine to save our sorry asses. Then Andrew got all squirrely—which wolves, by the way, do very well when they're antsy pantsy anxious—and suddenly there was a yowl, Andrew swearing, the trunk popping open somehow, then Andrew fell on me, I fell into the trunk, and the next thing I knew it was dark.

Oh, and Andrew's lost his keys. Which is why my homicidal fantasies involve his poor neck getting twisted. Also, according to him, he stepped on the cat, which started the entire fiasco.

How do I know he's lost his keys?

Because he's swearing about it. His voice is pretty muffled from in here but he's crawling around under the car trying to find them before, and I quote, "Ellie and her goddamn lackeys get here."

Oh—did I mention my favorite nemesis is on her way?

Pretty sure whatever god is in charge of luck hates me.

If I had my phone, I'd complain to someone. But I don't. Because, you know, I fell, and it fell, and... yes.

So I'm stuck in the darkness of a trunk that smells strangely like sweaty feet and sardines, hoping a certain Luna doesn't come to murder me in plain sight, wondering where the fuck Andrew lost his keys when he had them only minutes before.

Oh, and the coin? It's not burning anymore.

Again, not great at math, but if I add it all up, I'm guessing all this bad luck has *something* to do with it. And the whole time being rewound shebang. And—

"Found it," I hear Andrew mumble, which sounds strangely subdued for such a great moment.

"You found them?"

"What?"

"Did you find them?" I raise my voice to fight the blockade of metal and whatever weird scratchy fabric people line cars with.

"No, I said, 'oh, shit.'"

He sounds strangely calm.

"Why are we oh shitting?" I figure it can't be terrible considering he isn't in a panic.

"Ellie's here."

Okay, I'm wrong. Again, bad at math. Or the facts aren't facting.

Seriously, being in a trunk sucks. I can't see anything, hear anything properly, or—you know—run for my life.

Now I know what a sitting duck feels like.

I'm not panicking.

I'm *not* panicking.

My heart's just trying to beat its way out of my ribcage like some demented drummer who missed every class on rhythm. Totally normal. Completely fine. Yep. Nothing to—

The car goes ballistic.

I shriek.

Can't help it. The whole damn vehicle shakes like someone just drop-kicked it, and metal groans above me like a tortured banshee as my stomach lurches sideways, ready to ditch my body for greener pastures.

"What the f—"

Light floods in.

I blink against the sudden brightness, spots dancing across my vision as Andrew's hand clamps around my wrist and yanks me out without a warning or quick check to make sure I'm, you know, sane. Which I'm not.

His chivalrous brute force has me stumbling out of the trunk on newborn giraffe legs, and I groan, completely forgetting the urgency of the moment. "Ow, Jesus, Mary, and Santa's little elves, couldn't you be a little—"

"Move."

Andrew yanks again, this time forcing me upright, and I finally get my bearings enough to see what the hell is going on.

I regret it immediately.

Ellie's goons are everywhere.

At least twenty of them, all shifted, all snarling, all facing off against—

"Fenris?" I blink a few times, but nope, he's still there.

The massive black wolf stands between us and the pack, hackles raised, lips pulled back to reveal teeth that look like they could bite through steel. His ethereal blue glow pulses bright and vivid even in the daylight, making him look more otherworldly than usual.

Wait.

Twenty wolves? Thirty? Math might not be my strong suit, but...

I count again, squinting past the sea of fur and fangs. Yeah. Definitely more than before. Way more. Like, tripled.

How the hell—

Oh.

Time rewind.

But if time rewind, shouldn't there still be the same number? Unless... unless something changed. Unless me having that stupid coin in my pocket when it rewind screwed with the timeline or—

"Grace, get down!"

Andrew tackles me sideways as one of the wolves lunges. Fenris intercepts mid-air, his massive bigger-than-life jaws snapping around the wolf's throat before flinging it away like a ragdoll.

I hit the ground hard, gravel biting into my palms as Andrew scrambles back up.

"How is Fenris even here?" I gasp, trying to catch my breath.

Stupid question, really. Obviously Caine sent him. Obviously Caine was worried about me and told his giant murder wolf to keep tabs on me.

Never thought I'd love a murder wolf so much.

Seriously, he's the best. Kill them all.

But.

But.

Why wasn't he here before? Before time rewound?

My mind keeps sticking on that point until a snarl rips through the air, cutting off my circular thought process.

The wolves attack all at once, like a coordinated strike as they rush Fenris from every angle. He's a blur of black fur and glowing energy, teeth flashing as he tears into the first wave. Blood sprays. Wolves yelp. One goes flying through the air and crashes into a tree with a sickening crack.

For someone who once refused to even look at Caine because she considered him a murderer, I'm staring in way too much awe now, plus a smidgen of panic as one of them snaps his yellowed teeth a little too close to his haunches.

My hand shoots out on instinct, reaching toward Fenris like I can somehow—

Pain explodes across my knuckles, like someone just slapped my hand with a ruler at full force.

"Ow, what the *fuck*—"

I jerk my arm back, cradling my hand against my chest as a too-familiar *ding* goes off from somewhere nearby.

Andrew fumbles in his pocket, yanking something out without looking away from the fight.

"Here."

He shoves my phone at me, eyes locked on Fenris as the giant wolf lunges for another attacker.

My hand throbs.

I glance down at my phone, fingers still tingling from whatever the hell just happened, and am somehow (am I getting used to this now?) unsurprised to see a flash of a notification from a certain App.

[CAERIEL: No.]

That's it.

Super fucking helpful. The *no* could mean anything, but somehow I'm pretty sure he's the ruler-wielding asshole who just smacked my hand from who-knows-where.

I look up, and for the first time my eyes slide past all the furry fighting wolves to someone standing at the back of the pack, still in human form and looking as if she's been dragged through a hedge backward. Twice.

It's Ellie. (Shocker.)

No, really, it is kind of a shocker. Seriously, she looks... deranged.

Her hair's a tangled mess, dirt's streaked across her face, and her eyes—

Goddess.

Her eyes look wrong.

c 254

Grace of a Wolf

Sharp pains jab into my upper arm as Andrew spins me around and shoves me forward (which is now technically backward, but that's a minor detail I have no business obsessing over in this moment of urgency).

"Get out of here," he grits out, not even looking my way. He's still staring in the direction of Fenris and the stupid wolves Ellie's brought with her to kill us all.

"But—" The last time he had me run, he was in danger. Granted, Fenris is here to be on his side and my favorite murder wolf makes a huge difference, no pun intended.

"They aren't pack," he snaps. "Get out of here!"

Aren't pack?

My head swirls as I try to turn back around, but this time Andrew shoves me so hard I stumble a few steps forward and almost fall to my knees.

"Then who—"

"Just get out of here!"

Heart: Stay and die defending your friends.

Brain: Shut up and listen to the man.

Damn it. I'm worse than no help—I'm a walking, talking, breathing, useless liability who, by the way, is Ellie's prime target.

I stop hesitating and lurch forward a few ungainly steps, unsurprised when something tiny burns the shit out of my thigh.

A thunderous boom comes from behind and launches me forward like a giant slap from the hand of God. Gravity helps slam me face-first into the ground, and I'm pretty sure my teeth rip through the skin beneath my lip as the tangy flavor of blood becomes one of the only sensations I can reliably focus on.

My ears ring and buzz, like a bee's vibrating inside of them, and my sight's filled with strange prismatic shapes I'm forced to blink away. Did I look at the explosion while it was happening? I must have, but those few microseconds are a complete blur.

"Ugh!"

I push myself up, spitting blood to the ground as I rapid-fire blink my eyes to see properly again.

But when I look back, not only is there no sign of some sort of bomb going off—they're all gone.

No Andrew. No Fenris. No bunch of murderous non-pack wolves.

Okay, they're not *all* gone.

Ellie's still here.

She's walking slowly in my direction, maybe thirty feet away now. Her clothes hang in tatters, magically hiding anything important while still looking very much like she's been held captive by a rabid wolverine for a few months.

Her eyes have a wild, unfocused quality as they meet mine, making me shudder.

She takes a step toward me. Then another.

I force myself to breathe, trying to ignore my unnaturally quick heartbeat.

"Hey, Ellie. How's it going?"

The moment the words leave my mouth, I mentally kick myself. How's it going? Really? That's what I lead with when facing someone who tried to murder me? Then again, I'm dating Caine now, and he once enjoyed having his hand around my throat, so maybe I'm just naturally drawn to people who want me dead.

But, if I need to specify—and I feel a sudden urge to—he definitely doesn't want me dead, so it's an unfair comparison.

Ellie doesn't respond immediately, but she does take another few steady steps, and I take a few back, trying to maintain the distance between us. Silly. It's impossible for a human to outrun a shifter, especially one as high-class as her.

Then she snarls, her features twisting into something strangely lupine on her human face. Almost like she's beginning to shift. Danger bells ring a little harder in my head.

"What the hell did you do to me?"

I take a step back, then another, as her fingers stiffen and flex by her sides. "I didn't do anything to you."

"Liar. You did it to Rafe, too, you crazy human bitch."

Oookay.

Ellie's officially lost all her marbles.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I definitely haven't done anything to you. Or Rafe."

"Don't say his name!"

The coin burns hotter in my pocket. My eyes dart around the street, unsurprised to see no signs of life anywhere. It's like we're in a ghost town.

"Sorry, Ellie, but I don't know what you're talking about."

She laughs, a strangely broken sound, filled with a couple sides of hysteria. "It's you. It has to be you. This is why humans don't belong in a pack. I should have killed you a long time ago."

My heel hits a curb and I fall onto my ass on the sidewalk, watching as the deranged woman in front of me gets ever closer.

"Why don't you explain what I did?" Maybe if she talks, she won't use her claws. Which are definitely out and sharp and twitching at her sides.

"This," she hisses, swiping an arm out to the side to gesture at nothing. "All of this. Everything. How many more times do I have to kill you before it finally sticks?"

I blink, caught off guard by her words. "How... many times have you killed me?"

"Ten? Eleven? I've started to lose count." She giggles, but it isn't a particularly mirthful sound. "But it always starts over. Every time."

The burning coin in my pocket zaps me through my pants, and I scramble back as she continues to head for me, wincing at the pain in my leg. Then I pause. "Wait. You're saying time's started over for you?"

"Time, time, time." Her words take on a strange, sing-song lilt. "I've never hated time so much. Will it go back to normal this time? Maybe if I cut off your head."

What the fuck.

What the *fuck*.

Okay, on one hand, I need to run. Like, now. But my legs are all soft and wobbly and my brain's circling around all the shit she's spewing and—

"Wait, so you remember what happened before, too?"

Her foot freezes mid-air, one of her grotesque clawed hands pointed in my direction. Then she slowly straightens, carefully straightening her leg as she cocks her head to the side,

assessing me in the strange, totally bonkers way she's developed. "Oh. This time you do, too?"

Fuck.

"How did you kill me last time?"

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-Elle 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?"

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 blase 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-Elle, 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.

Chapter 257: Lyre: Owen's Medicine

LYRE

I wish I could say it's strange to wake up to two men in my bed, but alas—it happens more often than you'd think.

They aren't usually clothed, though. So I guess I should be grateful for the small things... oh, and I'm still alive. There's that, too.

Even if my body feels heavier than a dead cow.

Damn it.

No arcana. No strength. I'm feeling awfully freaking mortal about now, and I am not appreciating it.

"You okay?" Aaron asks, looking at me with an overabundance of caution I find strange coming from the most carefree shifter I've ever met this side of the century.

"I'm fine." Kind of. Not really. Maybe.

But it isn't like he'd understand the full nuances of what I'm dealing with anyway.

"Yeah?"

If the man had wolf ears, they'd be pricked straight up. And his tail would definitely be wagging. Instead, he sits up and helps me do the same, resting me against the headboard. A quick glance assures me I'm in the same room I've been using, but I'm no closer to knowing who the other guy is sprawled across my legs.

Whoever he is, he's heavy.

A quick jerk of my legs and shoving his inert body with my feet frees me, and Aaron's face gets unbelievably smug once I do so.

"Who's he?"

"Er—that's Sam. You don't remember him?"

I shake my head.

"He's a medic—whatever. It's fine. You don't need to know who he is." Reaching across my body, he shoves the poor, deeply sleeping Sam until he falls off the edge of the bed. "Don't worry about him. Let's talk about you, instead. What the hell did you do down there?"

The smugness fades as he stares at me with a grim, *you're-in-so-much-trouble* kind of stare.

Normally, I'm full of arcana and the idea of taking on a shifter head to head doesn't worry me. Right now, though, I feel a bit like a recalcitrant child, and I don't think I like it very much.

Or maybe I do.

It's complicated, okay?

"Magic," I quip, fighting the urge to swallow under his unblinking gaze. "How's our resident warlock?"

"Probably passed out on the floor outside this room. He's been crying ever since he dragged you back, unconscious." Aaron's lips tighten as he turns fully on the bed to face me. "Why did you push yourself so hard? You might think you're Supergirl—"

"I think her name is actually Supergirl."

"—but you aren't. You looked like you were dying. I was worried about you."

My heart warms, an uncomfortably intimate feeling. "I wasn't dying." Exactly. Maybe. "I was... recuperating."

Not a single muscle in his face twitches as he continues to stare me down.

It's enough to make a girl feel guilty, damn it.

I break eye contact—you know, to make him feel like his intimidation is working and absolutely not in any way, shape, or form because it actually is—and trace a random pattern on the bedspread. It looks new. Pretty sure it's not the one I slept with last time.

Damn it. I've been alive for hundreds of years, and I suddenly have every urge to act like a bashful schoolgirl with her crush. What the hell is wrong with me?

An empty glass tumbler on the nightstand catches my eye, and a faint suspicion runs through my head. "Is that cup yours?"

"What?" Aaron turns reflexively, then shakes his head. "No. Owen gave us some sort of drink he said was medicine."

Of course he fucking did.

"Did it smell like mint?"

It takes him a second to answer. "I think so? I wasn't really paying much attention at the time."

It probably smelled like mint.

My nose wrinkles. "And you fed it to me while I was unconscious?"

He nods.

I groan.

"Why? Is there a problem?"

"No—not exactly." It's temporary, anyway, and the effects are more mortifying than troublesome. "How long has it been since—"

"Six hours, give or take."

Huh.

Reaching out, I snatch the hem of his shirt and yank it up, unsurprised to find several bite marks on his chest. Aaron's fingers almost immediately wrap around my wrist as he says, "I thought you said you were fine. Are we doing this again?"

He sounds exasperated.

"No." Letting go of his shirt, I kick myself for feeling a little wistful when the view is once again covered. "What he gave me is certainly medicine, but it's also—"

"—an aphrodisiac," he finishes for me. "Yeah. We found out."

We? I turn my head toward Sam's side of the bed, even though he's officially out of view after being shoved onto the floor.

Aaron grabs my chin and turns my face back to him. "Nope. Don't worry about him. He's incidental."

"He's human, right? I need to make sure he's okay." Sex with an unconscious me under an aphrodisiac and empty of mana can only mean I was desperately pulling arcana from anyone I could touch. Done wrong, I could kill a mortal without even blinking.

"He's fine. Owen already checked him over. You didn't do much to him; he collapsed after the first kiss."

Ah. That's good, then.

I blink owlshly in Aaron's direction, feeling my skin suspiciously heating under the pads of his fingers. "Did Owen mention how long the side effects last?"

"Forty-eight hours, give or take a few. Yeah." His lopsided, charming smile is back, softening the stern look he's been wearing since I woke up. "Not complaining, but I'd like to get a few answers out of you before we go another round."

An indelicate snort escapes me as I pull my chin gently out of his grasp. "I'm not an animal. Now that I'm conscious again, you don't have to worry about any indiscriminatory advances on my part."

"Oh, no. I love the indiscriminatory advances. I'm just more concerned about the part where you came back half dead."

Like a damn dog with a bone.

But this medication isn't just an aphrodisiac; it can practically moonlight as a love potion. The anguish hidden beneath his light-hearted tone has my heart thumping with its own pain, and my hand's halfway to his face before I jerk it away.

Damn it, Owen.

I'm sure he had no idea I'm under restriction; after seeing me dangerously depleted in arcana, he must have thought this particular potion (I often call it Love Potion No. 8, the precursor to Sandra Bullock's beloved No. 9) would have been the perfect solution to my issue.

After all, it's as natural as breathing for me to pull arcana to replenish what I've lost...

Wait a second.

Frowning, I look Aaron over.

Plenty of pink in his cheeks. Skin still burnished from the sun. Plenty of light in his eyes, and—judging from what's suddenly tenting between his thighs—energy.

"Did we not...?"

"We did," he cuts in. "Five times. Fantastic, by the way, but not what I want to talk about. We can go for number six as soon as you explain things."

Huh.

Touching my tongue to my left fang, I look him over one more time, with a lot more appreciation than before. "Five. And still so enthused..."

My door creaks open and Owen walks in, sounding exhausted as he says, "For whatever reason, you refused to siphon from him."

Aaron immediately reaches over to cover my eyes. "Don't look at him, Lyre. Just focus on me. I thought you said you were going to rest before she bled you dry?"

The jealousy in the room is now palpable, and a lot of puzzle pieces finally slide into place.

Owen fed me the famous angelic aphrodisiac (which, technically, is an arcana-boosting medication used for those who have dangerously depleted their arcana reserves). Aaron, unsurprisingly, offered himself up as sacrifice to the sexual appetite awakened in an unconscious me. Sam was probably an accident.

And, judging by the lack of a certain angel's energy, Owen could be considered the victim of his own medication...

Hmm. Awkward. Tangling with an angel-descendent between the sheets could get a little complicated, especially considering we are technically coworkers and partners at the moment. Hopefully I don't get another slap on the wrist. I don't need more problems.

"She's not going to jump me this time, Jack-Eye. She's fully conscious. Perfect timing, because Grace needs our help."

Shoving Aaron's hand away, I stare at the somewhat pale Owen, my own lethargy forgotten with the spike of adrenaline shooting through my veins. "What happened?"

At the same time, Aaron says, "What do you mean? Isn't she on a date?"

Chapter 258: Lyre: Reaching Out

LYRE

Owen ignores Aaron to sit on the edge of my bed, reaching over to touch my shin. I smack his hand away before he makes contact with a quick shake of my head. "Don't bother. I'm under restriction again." Even if I replenish my arcana, I won't be able to use it.

"Ah."

The relief in that single syllable is mildly offensive, but considering the circumstances, I let it pass.

More importantly, I hold out my hand for my phone without saying a word, and Owen deposits it into my palm without being prompted. It's good to work with people who understand you.

"Explain exactly what's happening with Grace."

The angel-descendant's eyes get a little shifty, while Aaron keeps looking between us. He looks more like a confused golden retriever than a wolf.

I wave a hand toward the door with mild irritation. "Aaron, could you get me some water? With ice, please."

"But Grace—"

"Please." That stupid potion has my heart hemming and hawing at even the sound of his voice, so the word comes out between gritted teeth rather than with the pleasant tone I intended.

He sighs, broad shoulders drooping a bit. "Fine. I know, I know, you two have some weird secrets you don't want to share with me..."

The self-deprecation dripping from every syllable and the sidelong glances my way have my metaphysical, potion-addled heart breaking, but I manage to hold onto centuries of practiced poise. "The water, please, Aaron."

"Got it. Fine. I'll just call Caine and get the story from him," he mutters, bumping aggressively into Owen's shoulder on the way out.

Alpha-level testosterone fills the air, but thankfully Owen isn't bothered by the Lycan's antics as he calmly walks around the bed to grab the erstwhile, still-sleeping Sam by his ankles and drags him out of the room as well.

Moments later, the door is locked and the angel-descendant motions to my phone wearily. "She's gotten herself stuck in a parallel rift. I haven't been given clearance to investigate from here, but from what I gather, there are two time-altering relics in the area, with both activated."

"By her, or...?"

"That's uncertain," he reports calmly. "But our assignment is still incomplete."

A gentle reminder we can't leave until it is.

Damn Isabeau and her stupid little cronies. If I'd blasted through all this shit early and taken a restriction on day one, it might be over by now and I could be at Grace's side...

Then again, it could be even worse than the current situation, so there's no use agonizing over long-passed opportunities.

But my back molars grind together in frustration. At myself, at these stupid restrictions binding us, at the App for giving her a mission so far away... at myself, again, for trusting that creep of a Reaper to keep her safe.

My fingers tap against the display of my phone. It's out of battery, because of course it is. Neither Aaron nor Owen gave a single thought to charging it, I'm sure. But the Divinity App couldn't possibly be constrained by something so mundane.

As expected, a few seconds later the App populates the screen, with several alerts, restriction warnings, and other notifications.

I ignore almost all of them, scrolling to the most active group chat in my messages.

[LYRIELLE: I need help.]

Almost immediately, there's a response.

[TIME: Our ability to do so is limited in scope.]

Of course it is. The last time I dragged him into something even remotely resembling "help" was three hundred years ago—and he's been cautious ever since.

[CHAOS: Get the stick out of your ass already. What @Lyrielle wants, she gets.]

[WRATH: I'm here, point me in a direction.]

[TIME: This is more than a simple request, and you know it.]

[CHAOS: Order's really got you by the balls, huh?]

Ugh. There is such a thing as too many responses.

Ignoring their infighting, I keep it simple.

[LYRIELLE: Grace is in trouble. Time, two of your relics are active in her region. I've never heard of two being active in the same timeline before, so there should be grounds for your intervention.]

[CHAOS: Oh... that.]

My eye twitches.

[WRATH: Uh-oh. I'm out.]

[TIME: ... Fine. I can file an official complaint.]

[CHAOS: Oh no, you really don't want to do that...]

[LYRIELLE: What the hell did you do to Grace?]

[CHAOS: Well, teeeeechnically, I was trying to help.]

[TIME: Interfering in timelines is subject to Balance.]

[CHAOS: GTFO.]

[TIME: @Lyrielle requests my assistance, so I cannot.]

[LYRIELLE: Will you just explain?]

[CHAOS: Better yet, I'll go fix it. Brb.]

[LYRIELLE: Get back here.]

[LYRIELLE: Chaos!]

[LYRIELLE: @Chaos]

[TIME: I'll handle this. If he's interfered, it falls under Balance's purview.]

I blow out a frustrated breath, turning the screen around to show Owen. "Help is on the way. I think."

It takes only a glance for him to catch up on the conversation, and his brow furrows. "So we still have no details."

"No. But if it's because of Chaos..." My head pounds just thinking about it. By the way Owen's eyes have hazed over, he's having a similar reaction.

But then he says, "Lyrielle's Fan Club?"

I twitch. "Something like that."

His gaze slides from my phone to my face, both brows slowly rising. "You're saying Chaos and Time are your fans?"

Perhaps this is a great time to keep the rest of the member list a secret.

Clearing my throat, I turn off my display and affect an unconcerned shrug. "Is that such a surprise?"

"Knowing you, no. But Echo Witches aren't exactly the most favored existences—"

Biting back an instinctive snarl at his words, I shrug again. "An Echo Witch who follows the rules of the Divine." Mostly. "As long as I stay between the lines, both Order and Chaos have no issue with my existence."

Owen tilts his head as he continues staring. "Does Grace understand what an Echo Witch is?"

Of course not. I've artfully danced around the subject of my existence at every possible chance. "Her knowledge is sufficient for the moment."

He nods a couple times before asking, "Is the trouble she's in related to you, though?"

Damn it. When exactly did Owen lose his fearful reverence and become so damn chatty? Perhaps I need to toad another person, remind people how bad of an idea irritating me is.

I bare my teeth at him. "No. She's unlucky enough to be her own special existence."

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 furred beast 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.

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?!