

81 Manipulation

Hades~ 1

I extinguished the cigarette, crushing it under my heel as my gaze bore into the woman standing before me. Her golden eyes were wide, hands twisting nervously in front of her as she dared to meet my gaze, though her posture was anything but confident. 2

"You took her to the left wing without my permission," I stated, voice low but laced with undeniable authority. The words weren't loud, yet they echoed in the quiet of my office, heavy with warning.

She swallowed, her defiance from earlier now a mere shadow. "I have my reasons. If you would just let me explain, Your Majesty."

My eyes bore into her, hard and unyielding. Cerberus prowled like a predator in my subconscious. I lit another cigarette, my blood simmering. I took a puff, my eyes not once leaving her squirming form. 1

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"You have half a minute," I growled. I checked my watch. "Explain to me, or you will have more than a few volts to be worried about." I set the timer on my watch and leaned back. "Now, tell me."

She didn't waste a single precious second. "It is a form of manipulation. I knew that if I wanted her to open up to me, she had to believe that we were on the same boat. We needed something to bond over. I am wolfless just like her. I am hated just like her. And I needed her to see it play out. She will be more inclined to believe that I am her friend. She will trust me faster." 4

I took a slow drag, letting the smoke linger as I studied her, my gaze cold and calculating. "So," I said, my voice an icy thread in the silence, "your brilliant plan was to throw her to the wolves, so to speak, as a twisted bonding exercise?"

Her expression faltered, but she held her ground. "Your Majesty, I thought that if she saw I understood her—if she saw my own lack of status and the disdain others hold for me—she might... trust me. We'd be on equal footing."

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I took another slow pull from the cigarette, my gaze never wavering from her. "Trust," I repeated, letting the word hang in the air, laden with skepticism. "You presume she'll be fooled that easily, that her loyalty will come just because you share mutual disdain from the pack." My eyes narrowed. "It was risky. She's not your pawn to be thrown into just any situation." She was not her pawn. She was mine.

Despite myself, I could see the cleverness in her plan, the way it might just work. Ellen was fragile but very closed off. We did not relate to each other in any way. I was thirty-six, and she was twenty-three. This was the closest I could get without tying her to a bed and claiming her in every sense of the word.

I'd been careful to keep her far from the left wing of the tower for a reason. The intensity of her position, the hostility—she would not face that fully just yet. But now the damage was done. And as much as I hated to admit it, if it did make Ellen feel less alone, it could work in my favor of finding out just what she was hiding.

Still, I leaned forward, eyes darkening as Cerberus prowled beneath the surface.

"Consider this a warning. This will be the last time you use her that way. You put her under

She visibly swallowed, her earlier bravado all but vanished. "Of course, Your Majesty. I won't let it happen again."

I leaned back, flicking ash from the cigarette. "See that you don't. From now on, you run every move by me first. Your plans, while clever, are not worth her trust, or mine, if they aren't kept on a leash."

She nodded, her gaze dropping, and left the room, closing the door with a soft click.

I sat there, feeling the faint pull of something I didn't want to name. Protectiveness. It grated against my every instinct, but it was there all the same. Ellen's involvement in this plan of mine had to be carefully managed. There was a delicate line between failure and victory.

But now, with this bond Jules had forced, Ellen might feel connected to someone here. If she leaned on this ally and felt less alone, she'd be more likely to trust.

I dismissed her. As Jules left, I watched the door close behind her, silence reclaiming the room. Her plan was reckless, teetering on the line between audacity and insubordination. Yet, I couldn't deny its brilliance—risky, yes, but clever. I couldn't allow her that freedom again, though. If

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I extinguished the cigarette, letting the quiet settle around me, and turned toward the monitor on my desk. With a flick of a button, the security footage from the left wing came into view. Grainy at first, but I adjusted the playback, zeroing in on Ellen's small, tense form as she confronted Kael's mother.

There she was, her posture rigid yet somehow commanding, a spark of defiance in her normally guarded eyes. Her voice was low, steady—a blade concealed beneath the soft edge of her tone. She stood her ground against the woman, unflinching, her words laced with a quiet, almost understated threat that left the beta's mother visibly rattled.

"I am sure you don't want to be next."

The corners of my mouth quirked upward as I watched Ellen assert herself. I hadn't seen this

She was a puzzle—cautious, yes, but not weak. Her ability to switch from guarded innocence to something sharper was... intriguing. I leaned back, a trace of satisfaction stirring within me. Jules's plan may have been impulsive, but it had worked. She'd given me a glimpse of what Ellen was hiding, however slight.

Still, I would control how and when she was tested. I didn't need any further meddling from Jules; Ellen would reveal herself to me in time. Her fire had sparked, and now it was only a matter of fanning the flames, seeing just how far she would go.

I leaned forward, replaying the footage, catching every flicker of expression on her face. That resolve beneath her surface intrigued me, and for the first time, I wondered if I had underestimated just what lay beneath that calm exterior. 1

"Interesting," I murmured, allowing myself a rare, private smirk as I switched off the monitor.

But Lorelai had mentioned the Eclipse, and I had to make sure the woman would not run her mouth too much. Ellen could not know until it was too late. 1