

Grace of a Wolf

#Chapter 111: Jack-Eye: You're Not Special - Read Grace of a Wolf Chapter 111: Jack-Eye: You're Not Special

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JACK-EYE

Three hours of silence is my limit. I fiddle with the volume dial just to give my hands something to do. Something like *not* sliding through the messy bun Lyre's created out of her rainbow-colored hair.

"So... sleep. That's still a thing, right?"

She doesn't look at me. "I'm fine."

Okay.

The temperature in the car drops ten degrees with those two words. Not literally—though with Lyre, you never know. I clear my throat and lean back in my seat.

She's been like this ever since Grace called. That girl has a talent for finding trouble, and it rivals Caine's talent for making enemies. The fact they're bound together is cosmic irony.

She seems sweet, though. Sweet enough to keep a feral witch like Lyre loyal to the girl.

Am I jealous? Maybe a little.

"Where are we headed, anyway?" I keep my voice casual, fishing for any reaction beyond her stone-faced focus on the road.

But it's not Lyre who answers, damn it.

"We're circling back toward where we started, actually." Thom's voice pipes up from the back seat, so eager it makes my molars ache. "The ley lines around the Fiddleback territory are fascinating—they twist in ways I've never seen before. The mana flow creates these... these beautiful rivers of light that intersect and diverge. I can actually see them now, which explains how my tracking works. It's like the signature leaves ripples in the—"

I grit my teeth so hard I'm surprised they don't crack. I don't need a lecture from the wizard-who-couldn't. Especially not when he's answering for her like they're some kind of team now.

The way he looks at her—like she hung the fucking moon and stars—makes my skin crawl. Like she's his personal goddess because she did some magical party trick with her lips.

He goes on for a couple more minutes, nerding out to this bizarre magic science I don't understand, before finally ending with, "Anyway... who are we tracking, exactly?"

Lyre answers without emotion. "Someone's hair was on the body. We're tracking them."

"There wasn't enough energy in the strand for me to track, though." He sounds like a confused fucking puppy. Not a brain cell in his nerdy little head.

Her eyes flick up to the mirror, then back to the road. "That's why I gave you a boost."

The wizard makes a soft "ahh" sound, disappointment dripping from that single syllable, and something in me snaps.

"What, think she kissed you because you're special?" I ask, sarcasm coating every syllable, with an undertone of bitter jealousy.

Thom clears his throat and leans back in his seat.

I don't even fully understand what she did—some weird magical energy transfer that required mouth-to-mouth contact, I guess—but the thought of the sniveling little wizard believing she wanted him makes my blood simmer.

Lyre glances in the rearview again, catching Thom's slumped posture. Under her breath, just barely loud enough for me to catch: "Humans are so fragile."

A tiny flare of triumph blooms in my chest. No interest, then. No threat.

"I could help you with that block, if you want." She says it casually, once again focused on the road.

My heart trips.

"What magical block?" Thom perks up immediately, a wilted plant of a man getting a taste of divine, rainbow-colored water.

She shrugs one shoulder. "It's hard to explain. You'll get it once you start feeling arcana properly."

And just like that, my fleeting victory crumbles. I turn toward the window, watching the blur of dark trees.

Of course wizard-boy gets special lessons. Of course they can talk about magic and energy and ley lines like it's pillow talk. Meanwhile, I'm sitting here imagining what it'd feel like if she slipped her hand over and—

Fuck. This isn't me. I don't get jealous. I don't get possessive. I'm the guy who knows how to separate business and pleasure. The guy who's had more women than most men meet in a lifetime.

But all I can think about is how warm Lyre's skin was the last time she grabbed my wrist and how good she smells. She smells like chamomile and something faintly citrusy—orange blossoms, maybe. Soft. Not perfumey.

The kind of scent you don't notice right away, but once it's in your lungs, it stays there. Warm. Familiar. Like the start of a memory.

Makes me hard as soon as her scent hints, which means I've been battling it off and on for hours.

Get your shit together, man. Not the time to want a hand job. You've handled greater temptations than this.

My wolf whimpers in my head. He's still terrified of her. It should turn me off, but there's nothing like lusting after a woman strong enough to intimidate my wolf.

Most of us don't have the same kind of relationship with our wolves as Caine does. Some are more chatty than others, and usually the stronger the wolf, the more they talk.

Mine doesn't talk much. Usually prefers to stick with growls, howls, and the occasional chuff. He *can* speak as often as he wants... the key being, *if he wants*.

He's made it clear he doesn't *want* to talk to me—and he won't waste the energy unless it's absolutely necessary.

We get along fine, though.

Do we? he asks sourly. *If I have to endure one more image of your dick, I might bite it off myself during the next full moon.*

My knees snap together in an automatic reaction, and Lyre glances over with a brow raised.

I pretend like I just needed to shift position, which sucks because I was finally comfortable.

Shut up, I snarl at my wolf, who's usually impeccable at keeping quiet. Guess he's tired of my horny imagination. Can't blame him; it's a little frustrating, even for me.

Every time we pass a restaurant? Thinking about throwing her down on a table. Rest stops? Taking her in a stall. Woods? Fucking her against a tree. When there's nothing particular to imagine, I think about her sliding her hand over and pumping me until I spray all over her dash. How cute it would be when she scolds me for making a mess. How she might lick her fingers clean—

I'm biting it off, my wolf warns.

Damn it.

I watch Lyre's face. She's frowning at the road like it insulted her.

If she crashes us all into a tree, at least I'll die looking at her.

Chapter 112: Lyre: Rest

My phone buzzes in the console tray just as I notice Jack-Eye has finally shut up. He's slumped in the passenger seat with his arm half-covering his face, probably thinking I can't tell he's still awake. His breathing isn't even close to sleep rhythm.

I glance down at the notification, swiping to read Grace's message.

[GRACE: Made it to the spot. We're alive. Also... no water...]

I swipe a quick reply.

[LYRE: Why didn't you fill the tank before you left? Fresh water tank connection's right next to the city water.]

[GRACE: Uhhhhh... oops?]

A snort escapes before I can stop it. Endearing little disaster. At least she's safe for now.

The truck hits a pothole the size of a small child, and Jack-Eye's head jolts up. He groans, reaching for the dashboard to steady himself. "Could you *not* text and drive?"

"We've all got to live dangerously sometime." I toss my phone back into the console tray. "Besides, vampires text and fly all the time. I'm practically a safety expert by comparison."

In the rearview mirror, I catch a glimpse of Thom's panicked expression. He's seated in the middle, between Owen and Andrew—both sleeping—and he has nowhere to grab for safety. He was probably asleep until the pothole, too.

Humans and their pitiful need for rest. Not that I'm immune. Even my energy has limits. Mine just don't come as quickly as theirs.

A flickering vacancy sign appears in the distance—some questionable roadside establishment. It probably hasn't seen fresh sheets since the Reagan administration and the carpet inside likely smells like despair and decades of poor life choices. Someone's definitely selling bodies in this place. Not dead ones, obviously.

Grace and Caine are far enough from Fiddleback's immediate zone now. They're safe enough to allow myself a few degrees of relief, and maybe grant these pitiful tagalongs some rest.

Especially the wizard.

I pull into the shady motel's parking lot, ignoring Jack-Eye's confused stare, and grab my phone again.

[LYRE: Check the truck bed. Two 7-gallon Reliance jugs + three 5-gallon Aquatainers. Use a siphon or pump into the freshwater tank. Should hold you over.]

Grace would have no idea the jugs carry potable water. We'd normally have a full tank of fresh water, but it's been used. I would have topped up before we left, but—well, the current situation is what it is.

The fact she remembered enough to get the trailer packed up and ready to go is already impressive.

[GRACE: You're a goddess. A terrifying, beautiful goddess. I love you. I'll think of you when I shower tonight.]

[LYRE: Sponge bath. The water will go fast. Either have Caine fill up the jugs in town or wait until we're back and use the water sparingly. Don't forget there's bottled water for drinking in the pantry.]

She sends a thumbs-up emoji in response.

I set the phone down and twist in my seat to get a better look at Thom. His aura is flickering like a dying flashlight, dim around the edges. Pathetic. Even with the kiss I gave him—an energy transfer most wizards would kill for—he's running on fumes.

"Burns fast. Doesn't replenish well," I mutter, mostly to myself. The boy can't regulate his arcana circulation for shit. Typical of modern witches.

I sigh, shutting off the engine. "We're stopping for the night. Everyone needs to sleep."

Jack-Eye immediately straightens. "You're getting your own room."

I roll my eyes. "I'm not wasting money. I'll just get a double."

"One double for five people? With *you* in it?" Jack-Eye looks at me like I've suggested we all sleep in lava. Forever, obviously. "You're out of your damn mind."

Owen stirs in the backseat, blinking his unsettling silver eyes. Even half-asleep, his voice is firm. "She should have her own bed."

Of course the angel-blood thinks I need special treatment. He probably still believes in the old legends about my kind. As if I'd burn the sheets or something. Or eat one of them.

"Fine," I concede, drumming my fingers on the steering wheel. "Two rooms, two queens each. Someone can share with me."

I turn toward the backseat. "The wizard can—"

"I'll stay with you." Jack-Eye hastily announces.

Andrew snorts. I guess he woke up, too.

The interruption startles me, genuine surprise breaking through my usual composure. My brows knit as I study his expression. The wolf looks oddly... determined. He even throws the wizard a faint glower. His lip even curls a little.

"He might need another top-off—" I begin, but the Lycan cuts me off again.

"I said I'll stay with you." His tone brooks no argument, though he has absolutely no authority to make demands.

I hold his gaze long enough to make it clear I'm choosing to acquiesce, not being commanded. Then I glance back at Thom, who looks horribly dejected—like someone just told him Christmas is canceled. The last thing I need is the wizard getting clingy, thinking my magical assistance means I have any interest in him.

"Fine."

Better to share with Jack-Eye before something awkward happens with the weak-willed wizard.

I push open my door and slide out of the driver's seat and head toward the front office, leaving them behind without another word. The Lycan falls into step beside me, and I can practically feel the smugness radiating off him.

"I'll pay," he offers, with a charming smile.

He's the Beta of a wolf pack. As independent as most packs are, especially one as impressive as the Lycan Pack, there's no way they have money just floating around to spare on random adventures. Few wolves aim for successful businesses in the human market, so every pack juggles financial woes.

"I've got it. You're all here because of me, anyway."

"Still—"

"Don't argue with me, Jack."

He goes quiet for a minute, still tagging along. "My name isn't actually Jack, you know."

I roll my eyes. "Yes, I know, *Jack-Eye*."

"Well," he concedes, "It's not far from my name. It's just that people always butcher it."

Not interested, but he keeps going, "My real name is Aaron. Aaron Xhekaj. X-H-E-K-A-J, pronounced Jack-Eye." The way he says it, though, is with a slightly different inflection than we've been using.

"Congratulations. You have a name. I already forgot it. Can we just get these rooms in silence? We don't have to pretend to be friends."

"Right," he mutters. "Silence. Since I can't talk magic with you or anything."

His sour face comes out of freaking nowhere, and I sigh. Keeping these damn humans corralled and happy is going to be the death of me.

Chapter 113: Grace: Daddy Material

The display for Lyre's solar power says 1,384W in, 98% battery, and then a number to actually make my stomach flip:

Estimated Runtime: 3h 12m.

Three hours? That's it?

I glance at the humming AC vents, the dehumidifier pulling swamp air from every corner, and the fridge. We're pulling too much. Even with solar pouring in, it's not enough.

How is that possible with 98%?

My fingers hover over the thermostat. I can't shut everything off, but maybe I can cut the second AC. That's one less thing bleeding our battery dry.

But first I have to figure out how.

"What's wrong?" Caine's voice comes from directly behind me, close enough that I can feel the warmth radiating from his body without him actually touching me.

I step quickly to the side, putting six more inches between us. "I have no idea what any of this means." I gesture at the panel. "How much power do we have? How long before we're out? I don't know anything about solar."

All I know is it's expensive, which makes me wonder even more about how Lyre gets by.

He leans in to examine the display, his dark brows furrowed. The muscles in his arm tense as he braces himself against the wall, making sure not to brush against me. We've become experts at this careful dance of almost-contact.

"I know jack-shit about solar," he admits, straightening. "But I've worked with generators before. Does she have one?"

"I..." I realize I don't know. "I've never seen her use one."

Caine nods once. "I'll check the outside storage."

He moves toward the door, navigating around Jer's dinosaur rampage—literally, he's bouncing between the kitchenette and living room, going on about lasers and dinosaurs—and Bun's sudden fixation with light fixtures.

The toddler climbs onto the dinette table and reaches for the light with gleeful determination.

"Bun, no!" I lunge across the room, catching her just before she can grab the swinging pendant light. She squeals in protest as I set her down on the bench seat, my heart hopscotching its way to a normal rate. "Stay low, okay? No climbing."

She immediately starts to crawl under the table instead.

I sigh, exhaustion washing over me. Lyre had texted, telling me to take the bedroom, since we'll need the extra sleeping space. It's a small load off my mind.

The sleeping arrangements make sense in theory: me, Sara, and Bun in Lyre's queen bed; Ron and Jer on the daybed I'd used, though it'll be a tight squeeze; Caine on the couch. In practice, I'm not sure any of us will actually sleep.

The door swings open, and Caine pops his head in. "Found it up front, but it's dry. No fuel."

My stomach drops. "Fuel?"

"Gas or propane. I'm not sure how much propane we have, so we're going to need to get some gas. We emptied all her water jugs, too, so we need to refill those..."

A flicker of panic ignites in my chest. We need the AC running. Bun's too small to handle this kind of heat—but even without her, all the kids need proper hydration and temperature control.

This heat was a mild annoyance before, but now it's my biggest concern, outside from the strange itchy feeling between my shoulder blades.

"So we need gas for the generator, water refills, and probably more food." I mentally catalog our dwindling supplies. "Especially stuff the kids will eat."

Caine moves to the window, sliding up the blinds to survey our surroundings. I join him, staying far enough away that our shoulders don't touch, but I sneakily breathe deep to experience his scent a little more thoroughly. Seriously, he smells so good.

I get the whole *wearing your boyfriend's clothes because they smell like him* thing I've heard about. I would wear his shirts every day just for that alone.

Our boondocking spot—turns out boondocking just means *no hookups at a campground*, aka "being off-grid"—is basically a wide dirt clearing nestled in shallow hills. No trees for shade, just scrubby plants and packed earth. The fifth-wheel sits in a slightly lower area where recent rain has created muddy tire ruts and small puddles. A few other RVs dot the landscape, but they're parked far enough away, they're just metal rectangles on the horizon.

"See that one?" I point to the most distant RV. "I think it's just an older human couple with a golden retriever. They were outside with their dog a few minutes ago."

He nods, then pulls the blinds back down. They're black and help a little with blocking out the heat. "We'll be okay. It's hot now, but the temperature should drop significantly tonight. We can open the windows for cross-ventilation."

"You sound like a weather report." I smile despite myself.

"This heat is unseasonable. There's a cold front moving in tonight—rain, too." He speaks with such certainty that I blink in surprise.

"Did you check the forecast?"

"I can smell it." His expression remains serious, but there's something almost domestic about this exchange—like we're an old married couple discussing the day's weather instead of people hiding from strange supernatural dangers.

The absurdity of it all hits me suddenly. Two weeks ago I was freezing and naked in a forest after being rejected by my then-boyfriend. Now I'm worrying about air conditioning and toddler safety while standing three careful inches away from the Lycan King.

My life has turned into a fever dream.

It's weird. I used to think he was a murderer. Now I keep picturing him chasing a toddler around with snacks and nap schedules. He's... daddy material. Not a kink I ever asked for, but here we are.

I shake my head and head for the kitchen to check our food supplies. As I pass the rear window, something flickers across the glass—too fast, too smooth to be a random shadow. My heart lurches into my throat, and I freeze, staring at the not-quite-blackout blinds as my pulse thuds hard.

Then I lift them.

Chapter 114: Grace: Everything. Is. Fine.

Nothing there. Just the empty dirt clearing and—

"Sadie! Sadie, get back here!"

A golden retriever bounds into view, racing toward the distant RV where someone stands in the doorway, waving.

I exhale a laugh that sounds more like a gasp. See? Dog. Just a dog. Totally normal. Totally fine.

Paranoia's getting to me. This skin-crawling feeling makes everything seem like some monumental problem instead of just some random neighbor's dog coming around to sniff the new arrival.

Caine watches me carefully but doesn't comment. After a long moment, he says, "I need to make a supply run, but it's at least a fifteen minute drive to town. I'll be gone about an hour."

"You're leaving?" My voice pitches higher than I intended.

"There's no indication we were followed." His tone is calm and measured as he explains, "We need water and fuel. I won't be long."

I nod, though anxiety crawls up my spine like tiny spiders. He's right. We need supplies. Who knows how long we'll be here. Lyre doesn't sound like she's coming back tonight. She said they were stopped at a motel because the others were tired.

They were driving all night, so it's no surprise.

Caine gathers his keys and moves to the door. His hand pauses over the handle as he turns back to me, his gray eyes intense. "Lock this behind me."

"I will."

He steps outside, and I follow him outside, watching as he motions toward the underside of the RV. Fenris appears, manifesting out of thin air, smaller than he usually is. Much like when I thought he was a black dog instead of himself, with only the faintest hint of ethereal glow deep in his fur.

He starts padding toward me, but Caine growls, and he jerks to the side and slithers under the RV, panting in the shade of its cover.

"He'll stay here."

I frown. "Does he have to stay outside?"

"Yes."

The wolf's gray eyes peer at me, and I swear they look pleading.

"Can't he come inside...?"

"No."

Caine climbs into the truck, starting the engine. The moment the truck begins to roll away, chaos erupts.

Jer and Bun burst past me, sprinting toward the moving vehicle, and Fenris bolts after them.

"Stop!" I yell. Too harsh. Too sharp. But it's a moment of panic. "Get back inside, now!"

The younger boy freezes, then turns with a scowl sour enough to curdle milk. The toddler, sensing the tension, hesitates too, reaching for Jer's hand once she sees Fenris behind them.

The wolf circles, looking for all the world like... a herding dog.

"Now," I repeat, my voice cracking.

The boy stomps back up the steps, shooting me a dark look. Guilt twists my belly.

Fenris chuffs, bumps my thigh, and slithers back under the trailer.

"What's your problem?" Jer mutters.

"I'm sorry for yelling," I say, softer now, "but we need to stay inside. At least until he comes back."

Ron appears in the doorway, his steady presence an immediate balm. "Jer, knock it off. Treat it like Owen's place—emergency protocol, remember?"

The boy's shoulders sag slightly, but he nods.

The truck idles at the end of our clearing. Something's wrong. Caine's hesitating, and I can see his profile, rigid and alert. I hurry over, jogging the entire way. Fenris trots behind me, clearly taking his guard dog duty seriously.

"What is it?" I call out.

He's glowering out the window, his gaze fixed on the distant RVs, particularly the one with the older couple.

"Probably safe isn't certainty," he says, his voice low and hard. "Get your ass inside and lock the door, Grace."

I hesitate, but the authority in his tone is clear. I nod, jogging back. Up the steps and into the camper, the lock clicks with finality behind me. Poor Fenris remains outside.

By the time I get to the window, he's already gone.

"Who's hungry?" I ask, forcing brightness into my voice.

Four blank faces stare back at me. No takers.

"I can help you set up," Ron offers, breaking the silence.

Sara stands too. "Me too."

"Yeah, okay," Jer mumbles, already over his attitude. "What can I do?"

Bun squeals and starts jumping on the daybed, her little body launching higher with each bounce. Just as she teeters dangerously close to the edge, Ron lunges forward and catches her.

My heart jumps like an overcaffeinated rabbit. I cover with a deep breath, pushing down the panic that threatens to overwhelm me.

We're safe. We're out. Caine will be back soon. Everything's fine. Bun's got all of us watching her, and no one followed us here.

Everything. Is. Fine.

But tell that to the creeping dread still following me around. Better than before, but still present.

"Okay, team." I clap my hands, finding strength I didn't know I had. "Sara, grab things off the bed in the back. Ask me if you aren't sure where something goes. Jer, can you unpack everyone's backpacks? Keep your clothes in your bags, but get all the food and other stuff out, and we'll find a place for them. Ron, help me in the kitchen. There's a lot of stuff in the cabinets we need to put back."

I won't put *everything* out. Optional decor can stay packed, just in case we need to leave in a rush. But we need to at least make sure we're comfortable and can easily access everything we need in the meantime.

"Okay," all three of them chorus.

Oh, wait. I still need to turn off the second AC unit.

The thermostat is sleeker than I expect—flat, matte black, with a soft-glow screen. It mentions zones—one and two—which is super helpful as someone who has no idea what she's doing. What's wrong with "living room" and "bedroom"? It would be a lot clearer.

I poke at it until Zone 2 clicks off. The bedroom AC winds down with a mechanical sigh, and I check the solar panel with bated breath.

Estimated run time: 11h 42m. Battery: 96%.

Thank goodness.

Though I'm guessing the number will go down with the sun.

Chapter 115: Grace: Hide and Seek, Peek-a-Boo

I fish my phone from my pocket and shoot Lyre a quick text.

[GRACE: Made it safe. Kids settled. Everything ok on your end?]

The three dots never appear. Not even a "delivered" notification.

Signal's probably garbage out here. Or she's napping. Could be dealing with her own crew of supernaturals with big personalities and bigger egos. Jack-Eye seems like he'd either be helpful or a handful.

Kind of like Jer, actually. Maybe they share initials for a reason.

Tucking my phone back into my pocket, I squint at the solar panel display again. The battery percentage has dipped slightly since Caine left, but we're still at a respectable 94%. Not bad for an hour of AC use. And the trailer's significantly cooler now.

Behind me, Ron's taken over entertaining the kids. "Hey, Sara, wanna play a game with Bun?"

"What kind of game?"

"Hide-and-seek peek-a-boo, but with a twist. You shift into something small, and Bun has to find you. When she does, we all say peek-a-boo."

A pause. "That's basically just regular hide and seek. And I can't say peek-a-boo in hedgie form."

"So? She likes finding animals better than people, and she likes saying peek-a-boo. Come on, it'll keep her occupied."

"Pa-buu!"

The camper jostles as they storm about, like we're a ship at sea. Sturdy—Lyre made it perfectly clear the movement is very normal—but probably strange to them.

I'm barely listening, focused on deciphering the solar display, only to get distracted when my stomach grumbles. It's later in the day, and we've only had breakfast.

It isn't hard to make a giant plate of baby carrots, sliced cubes of cheddar, apples, and even grapes. Putting it out on the counter? Even easier. Getting the kids to eat it...?

Apparently, it's quite hard.

"Snacks, guys!"

Ron glances up from where he's crouched near the couch. "Thanks, Grace."

Jer appears out of nowhere, his head at my elbow. "I'm not hungry."

Bun? Ignores me. It's mildly offensive. She was glued to me, but now she's trying to cram her head under the couch and oblivious to my existence.

"That's fine. It's here if you want it." I scan the room. Something feels off, but I can't put my finger on what. Like I'm forgetting something important.

Jer hovers as I head back to the kitchenette. "How does the water work in here?"

Great question. I've recently learned all about it, too. Okay, not all about it. But I do know there's a button for the water pump and now I know it's important to keep the "fresh water" tank filled.

"There's a pump system," I answer, gesturing vaguely to the electric panel. "It's connected to a fresh water tank, and it supplies water to all the plumbing lines in the camp."

"What about electricity? Is it all from the sun?"

"Right now, yes. We have a generator, and that's why Caine's getting gas."

"Why gas?"

"It uses gas to... run." I'm not super familiar with generators, either.

"What happens if it rains for a week?"

I blink. "... don't actually know. We'd probably use the generator more?" I wonder how much gas that would require.

His eyes light up. "What if there was a zombie apocalypse? Would we still have power?"

"As long as the sun rises, I guess." I lean against the counter, watching his mind work.

"What if dinosaurs came back? Could we outrun them in this RV?"

"Depends on the dinosaur," I reply, unable to hold back a smile.

His questions are like pinballs, bouncing all over the place. No idea where they come from—or why—but I answer them all as best as I can.

"Do you think the Lycan King could take on the King of Dinosaurs?"

"You mean the chicken's great-grandpa?"

His jaw drops, dark eyes wide with horror. Ron snorts in the background. "Chickens aren't dinosaurs!"

"Actually, birds evolved from dinosaurs. So technically, T-Rex is related to chickens."

My lips quirk as he splutters, gangly arms waving in the air.

"But the T-Rex is the King of Dinosaurs," he protests. "He would totally eat the Lycan King!"

I shake my head. "T-Rex isn't the king. There's no dinosaur monarchy."

"What's a monarchy?" He squints at me, looking more suspicious than curious. Like maybe I'm lying to him.

I'm not—obviously—but I *am* messing around with his head a little. It's more fun than I realized.

"A monarchy is what a king rules over. Like England. They have kings." I pause. "Well, a queen right now? Uh. No, maybe it's a king. Both?" I don't follow royalty, but I vaguely feel like maybe someone important over there died recently.

"Then who's the dinosaur king?"

"Nature doesn't work that way. But if you want my vote, I'd pick velociraptors over T-Rex any day." I've literally *never* thought about tiers of powerful dinosaurs before this very moment, so I just throw out one of the only other dinosaur names I can recall off hand.

Platypus... no, they're not dinosaurs. What are the ones who—right. Pterodactyls. The ones with wings.

And there we go. The extent of my dinosaur knowledge. Chicken evolution and three whole dinosaur species.

I recognize more than three, to be fair.

"Like in Jurassic Park?" His eyes widen. "They were super smart."

"Exactly." Probably the only reason I remember their existence, too.

"But Caine's super big. His arms are even bigger than Owen's!"

"True." I watch as he slides onto the bench seat, grabbing a baby carrot while still debating dinosaur royalty in his head. His serious expression over something so ridiculous makes my heart squeeze with unexpected tenderness.

Something thuds against the camper, and there's a high-pitched shriek. It has a very distinct *outside* sound, not something the kids did.

My heart high-jumps its way into my throat and my eyes immediately go to the door. It's completely still.

Jer scoots closer. Ron straightens, instantly on alert as he looks at me. Only Bun continues crawling around the furniture, whispering "Pa-buu" to herself.

For one wild moment, I wish Caine were here. Just his presence—solid, watchful, impossible to startle—would be enough to make this less terrifying.

"What was that?" the younger boy whispers.

I force air into my lungs. Fenris is under the camper. It's probably just him, shifting position or bumping against something.

"It's okay," I say, surprised by how steady my voice sounds. "Probably just Fenris. He's the black wolf Caine left behind."

Ron moves to the window, lifting the blind to peer outside. "The golden retriever is running away. Maybe Fenris scared her off. Dogs are terrified of wolves."

"See? Nothing to worry about." I plaster on a reassuring smile, feeling my pulse gradually slow.

Jer picks up his carrot again, but his eyes keep darting to the window. "Do all Lycan Kings tame wolves?"

"Um—no. Fenris isn't a tame wolf. He's..." I grope for an explanation, but don't have one. I'm not entirely certain how it work. "He's just Caine's partner."

"Huh. I want a wolf pet, too."

Grabbing a bottle of water, I guzzle it down like it's going to wash away the unease still crawling over my skin. The camper's quiet again. Bun and Ron continue to play together.

Everything's normal.

Sweet, even.

Great, if you really think about it.

But it feels like the calm before a storm. Something's coming.

Or my paranoia's just a permanent resident in my head.

Something small and warm wraps around my leg and I nearly jump out of my skin. Glancing down alerts me to Bun's enormous eyes. She's wrapped around my leg with a wide grin.

Goddess. She scared the shit out of me.

"Hey, baby." I scoop her up one-handed, and her little warms wrap around my neck. Peppering the top of her head with kisses, I murmur, "You scared me, kiddo."

I glance around the camper, tallying heads absently. Jer at the table. Ron by the window. Bun in my arms. Wait.

Where's Sara?

My heart stutters. I scan the dinette again, then the daybed, then peer behind the curtain to the queen bed in back. Nothing.

"Ron," I call, trying to keep my voice level. "Where's Sara?"

Ron turns from the window, giving me a look like I've completely lost it. "She's under the couch."

I stare at him blankly. "What?"

As if on cue, a small, spiky ball emerges from beneath the sofa. Tiny black eyes blink up at me from a pointed face.

Bun shrieks in my arms, pointing excitedly. "PA-BUU!"

The hedgehog rears up on its hind legs before rapidly morphing into Sara, who appears kneeling on the floor with a triumphant grin.

"Aren't I the best hider?" she asks.

My heart starts beating again, the relief making me dizzy. "Yes," I manage weakly. "You're the best, Sara."

I set Bun down gently, my hands shaking slightly as the adrenaline ebbs. Vaguely, I recall something about hide-and-seek peek-a-boo. Now it makes sense.

Mental note: I am so not cut out for watching shifter children.

Chapter 116: Caine: Storm Rolls In

CAINE

The pump clicks off again—the third time in only a few seconds. I throw my head back and rub at my nape, feeling my teeth grind together.

Patience.

I am capable of patience.

Even when dealing with a piece of shit, malfunctioning fuel pump.

Fuel trickles into the second red jug at an agonizing pace, for the fourth try. The first jug filled fine. The second keeps stopping, as if the pump decided to malfunction midway through.

Not my fault.

It just... happened.

Rolling my shoulders back, I squint at the sky. Not at the numbers inching upward. No point in feeding my annoyance, or this restless energy racing under my skin.

A gust of wind whips across the station. The scent it carries is sharp and artificial, and my nose wrinkles as I sniff it in a little deeper. It's strange; I can't quite place it, but it just doesn't smell like a normal weather pattern. And beneath it all, something kind of itchy and strange.

Ten minutes ago, the sky was clear blue. It's being taken over by heavy, dense storm clouds.

"Martha, you seein' this?" an old man calls to his wife from the next pump over. He's filling up a rust-bitten pickup that's seen at least three decades of hard use. His pump seems to be functioning just fine.

Maybe I should wait in line at one of the other pumps. There are only three others, though. It's a small station, with prices bloated to match.

"Were we supposed to get a storm in tonight?" he continues, stepping a few paces to the right and squinting through his wrinkles.

The woman pokes her head out of the passenger window, shouting, "They never get it right anymore. Storms never came in like this when I was a girl."

He's not far enough to warrant the increase in her volume. Either he's hard-of-hearing, or she is. Or both. They're certainly in the right age bracket for it. Their voices grate on my nerves.

Contrary to popular belief, a wolf's sensitive hearing doesn't make shouting any more painful than it would be for a human... but I'm on edge as it is, and hearing gravelly old voices chat about the weather isn't helping matters.

The pump clicks off again. I bite back a snarl.

"Goddamn technology," I mutter, squeezing the handle with enough force to warp the metal. Something is wrong with today. With the storm. With me.

My chest feels tight, like the moments before a shift when my bones prepare to crack and reshape themselves. But this isn't a shift. This is something else—a pressure building inside with nowhere to go.

I take a deep breath. Release it slowly. It doesn't help.

The second jug finally fills, and I cap it with more force than necessary. Every nerve in my body feels raw, exposed. The slightest sound—a car door slamming, the old man's crackling radio—is like a grater taken to what's left of my dwindling supply of patience and manners.

I still need water. Gasoline isn't the only reason I'm here.

Get this done, and then I can get back to Grace. And the kids.

Inside the store, fluorescent lights buzz. Not a sound to normally capture my attention, it's somehow too loud to ignore this time.

Two of Lyre's blue jugs in hand, I head for the bathroom. But the sink is laughably small, barely enough to wash hands, and certainly not capable of filling these containers.

I stare at it, calculating how many times I'd need to fill a bottle and pour it in to make this work. Too many.

There has to be an easier way.

Back at the counter, an attendant with acne-scarred cheeks and the distinct scent of marijuana clinging to his clothes watches me approach.

Human male. Adolescent. Terrified enough to release a familiar, pungent scent.

"I need to fill these with water, but your sink's too small in the bathroom." I place the empty jugs on the counter. "Where can I fill them?"

His pupils dilate, and he shuffles his feet. "Um. The bathroom sink isn't for, like, that."

Obviously.

I lean forward and lower my voice, keeping it soft and steady. Don't want to spook the kid further. He might wet himself. "Then where would you suggest I get water?"

"There's Trucker's Roost about a mile down the highway. They got a water station for RVs and stuff." His voice has gone up an octave, and his eyes keep darting everywhere

but at me. The pungent scent of his fear should bother me, but instead it soothes the beast inside. Just a little.

A low growl builds in my chest. The kid takes a jerky step back, and my metaphorical hackles lower.

It's good to be feared.

"Hey man, I don't want any trouble," he says, hands raised. His coworker, a girl with blue hair, reaches for the phone. "There's nothing I can do."

"There's no trouble." Grabbing the jugs, I head out the door.

Trucker's Roost. I think I saw a sign for it on our way up. There was, if I recall, a chicken on the billboard. Driving a semi.

If Jack-Eye were here, he'd have plenty to say about it.

"Drugs are a real problem these days," I hear him mutter to his coworker as I push through the door.

Outside, the first fat droplets of rain splat against the asphalt. The air smells worse than before, almost electric and burning. The clouds have swallowed the sky now, turning afternoon to premature dusk.

A giant white cat sits atop the ice machine, its blue eyes fixed on the darkening horizon. Its posture speaks of disdain, as if it's taking the weather as a personal offense. As I pass, it turns that steady gaze on me, assessing. Then, without hurry, it hops down and disappears beneath a parked car.

Not afraid. Not even slightly concerned.

A strange reaction for a cat.

Bigger than a normal housecat, too. Then again, I'm not around them much, so maybe my sense of normal is skewed. Cats hate wolves.

I load the empty water jugs into the truck bed next to the fuel cans and climb into the cab. The moment I shut the door, it hits me—her scent. Grace. Still clinging to the seatbelt, ghosting through the small space.

Sweet blueberry muffins, with the hint of Grace beneath.

I inhale sharply, unprepared for how instantly it calms the storm inside me.

The realization strikes with uncomfortable clarity: I've been near her constantly, breathing her in. Her pillow, her clothes, her skin. Her presence has been regulating me without me even realizing it.

Without her here, my senses are raw, exposed. Unfiltered. Is this how I always felt before her? It seems impossible that I could have forgotten this constant, grinding agitation.

I'm going to need to steal her new pillow and keep it in the truck. Maybe switch it out daily.

I reach for the mental link that connects me to my wolf.

How is she?

Fenris's irritation floods back immediately. *The dog keeps coming back. I scared her off again.*

I can feel his frustration at being left outside while I took the truck. He'd rather be inside with Grace, standing guard properly instead of lurking beneath the camper.

No one suspicious?

Only humans camping.

I nod, though he can't see it. His update should ease my tension, but it doesn't. The wrongness in the air is digging under my skin, setting every instinct on high alert.

The rain's falling harder now.

I'll stop at Trucker's Roost for water, then grab food—burgers, chicken nuggets, fries. Something to appease the small monsters.

As I pull out of the gas station, my gaze returns to the sky. Dark. Roiling. Moving too fast. My gut twists with certainty.

Something's strange about this storm.

Chapter 117: Caine: Interference

CAINE

The greasy paper bag of fast food slides across the seat as I turn onto the highway, releasing a cloud of salt, grease, and artificial flavors that fills the cab. I've already wolfed down my own burger—pun not intended.

Fast food isn't really just for the children. It's the secret vice of the Lycan King. Fenris can inhale his weight in burgers, if he really wanted to.

Bring me some, he insists, intruding on my thoughts. He must have dialed in when I was eating mine.

I already ordered you two. And that's all you get.

Good enough.

My hand brushes the seat where Grace sat earlier, sending up a puff of blueberry and the faint hint of cave. The tension in my shoulders eases slightly, almost imperceptibly, but enough to notice the difference. Like a muscle unknotting after days of strain.

I need more of her scent.

Mental note: have Grace sleep in my clothes. Then I'll wear them after. Pathetic, maybe, but my bond won't be denied its due.

The small white bag from the bakery counter sits separate from the rest—a single blueberry muffin. The irony isn't lost on me. Grace smells like the damn things, and now I'm bringing her one like some kind of offering. As if I'm trying to feed her what she already is.

But I can't help it. Every time I see one, I think of her.

Outside, the sky isn't right, leaning further into the scale of strange. The green-gray has deepened to something that reminds me of a fresh bruise—purpling at the edges, sickly yellow where light struggles through. The clouds aren't just moving; they're churning, boiling against each other like living things fighting for territory.

The shadows on the road stretch wrong. Too long for this time of day. Too dark. And they move—not with the clouds passing over the sun, but with a life of their own.

Driving is a white-knuckle affair, or would be if I was human.

I'm not, and my nerves remain steady as I pass several erratic drivers in the two minutes it takes to reach the freeway.

My radio clicks on.

I didn't touch it. The volume dial shows zero, but static hisses from the speakers. White noise rises and falls with no pattern. I jab the power button, but nothing changes.

Wind hits the truck broadside, and the whole vehicle shudders, my back end skidding slightly to the right. Rain patters harder, fat drops exploding on the windshield.

"What the hell," I mutter, easing pressure off the gas pedal. My wipers are already on high, but they're streaking now instead of clearing my windshield.

The rain's too... heavy. Thick.

My headlights flicker on with a click, then off. Then on again. I didn't touch those either.

The fuel gauge jumps from full to empty and back. The temperature gauge spins in a complete circle, and the clock scrambles like it's trying to solve a code.

By now, I've slowed down to a pathetic twenty miles per hour.

The engine hiccups, a hard jolt that sends the truck lurching forward, then again. A metallic whine cuts through the static from the radio—high-pitched, like steel being bent just past its tolerance. I grip the wheel tighter.

Now my composure is starting to fail.

Up ahead, cars have already pulled to the shoulder. Hazard lights blink in erratic patterns, out of sync with each other. None of the steady, even rhythm they should have. It's pouring now, sheets of water hammering the truck. Wind rocks us, and I have to fight to keep us centered in the lane.

My ears pop with sudden pressure, and the truck stutters hard—a violent, shuddering convulsion.

"Fuck!" I yank the wheel right, guiding us onto the shoulder as the engine cuts out completely. The truck rolls to a stop, momentum bleeding away.

I turn the key.

Click. Click.

Nothing.

It's dead.

Other vehicles sit abandoned or occupied by confused drivers. Some people stand outside in the rain, yelling across the noise at each other. Others just stare upward, arms limp at their sides.

The rain switches from steady downpour to full assault, like someone flipped a cosmic tap to maximum. It hammers the roof so hard I can barely hear myself think.

Some of the humans dash back into their cars.

I reach for Fenris.

What's happening there?

His growl rumbles through my mind. *The she-dog keeps pacing near the camper. I've chased her off four times.*

Not that. Grace and the kids—are they okay?

They're inside. Safe. A pause. For now.

That doesn't sound reassuring.

You sense anything unusual? I press, trying to see through his eyes. Our connection wavers.

The air feels wrong. Makes my hackles rise. His mental voice is terse, irritated. *Something smells... off. Not natural.*

My jaw clenches. *Should I shift and run back?* I could make it faster on four legs than waiting for whatever this is to pass.

If something happens, I'll tell you. His annoyance crackles between us. *Stop backseat guarding.*

I break the connection, reluctantly accepting his assessment. Fenris doesn't miss threats. If he says they're safe for now, they are. The storm doesn't seem to have made it to them yet, which means it's moving slow.

Condensation fogs the windows. I wipe a clear patch on the windshield with my sleeve, peering into the darkening sky. The clouds have formed what looks like a funnel, but it's not spinning. It's... pulsing. Expanding and contracting like a heart. Never seen anything like it.

My mind races. What if this storm—whatever this is—hits the campground next? What if it's not natural? Grace and the kids are in a metal box on wheels with no way to move it. If this is some kind of electrical storm, they're sitting targets.

But if I run now, I leave behind the water, the food, the fuel. Things they need. I'd arrive sooner, but empty-handed. And if this is magical in nature, I'd be racing into it blind.

My claws extend, digging into the steering wheel. The wrongness in the air presses against my skin from all sides. The wolf in me paces, instincts clawing at the inside of my skull, demanding action. Run. Fight. Protect. But there's nothing to fight, nowhere productive to run.

A low growl builds in my throat. I tell myself it's just a storm. A weird atmospheric event. Electrical interference.

But deep down, beneath the logical explanations and practical concerns, I know.

It's not.

I try the engine again.

Chapter 118: Lyre: Maybe I Need to Blow Him

LYRE

I'm slouched in the only chair in this depressing motel room that doesn't look ready to collapse, scrolling through my Divinity App while Jack-Eye makes significantly more noise in the shower than any one person should. The constant drumming of water hitting tile makes a surprisingly tolerable white noise—not that I'd ever admit it. There's something satisfying about the rhythmic sound of someone else cleaning off the day's grime that doesn't involve me lifting a finger.

I have another direct message. Third one today. People are far too interested in what I'm doing, which means every step I take is going to be analyzed for Balance, damn it.

[CHAOS: Feels like the old times, doesn't it, Witchlet?]

I snort. He's been unusually talkative lately, which never bodes well. When Chaos gets chatty, worlds tend to crumble. Or at least have very bad days.

My thumb pauses over a new notification, pulsing red at the top of my screen.

[PLAUSIBILITY WARNING: EXCESSIVE INTERFERENCE IN REGION 23-BETA. FINAL STRIKE.]

Oh, for fuck's sake. Not this again.

Excessive interference detected in Region 23-BETA. Current manipulations have exceeded Plausibility Threshold by 417%.

Timeline strain now approaching rupture tolerance.

You are hereby issued a **FINAL WARNING** for deviation from ordained narrative progression.

Further unsanctioned alterations may trigger *Purge Protocol: Soft Reset*.

—Divinity Connect Oversight Engine, Axis Protocols Enforcement Division

"Yes, yes, I know," I mutter, thumbing the warning closed with more force than necessary. "Balance can suck my—"

I stop, staring at the ceiling.

If I'd known we'd be racing against divine bureaucracy, I would've handled this differently, made sure I was alone. I could track down our target myself and be done with this in hours, and the hit probably would have been less without witnesses.

But now, if I do as I want, I'll trigger divine consequences.

And if something bigger comes...

Worse, if they're serious about triggering the Purge Protocol? The thought alone makes my skin crawl. Memory resets, localized timeline alterations... Grace might wake up with no idea how she got into a camper with a man she considered a murderer just days before.

Humans don't handle paradox well.

But right now, we're stuck with Thom—a magical container with all the power of a dying flashlight. He's barely at five percent of his capacity, and ambient charging of his arcana channels is painfully slow.

The water stops. The sudden silence is jarring.

I stare at my phone, my upper lip curled in frustration. The kiss I planted on Thom earlier gave us three hours of decent tracking before he fizzled again. Energy transfer through physical contact is efficient, but limited by intensity and duration.

"Maybe I need to blow him."

"Wh—what?"

I don't bother looking up at the sound of Jack-Eye's voice. Guess he's done showering. "The wizard. He's down to fumes, and I need more from him. I'd rather not lose him from a magical backlash, so I have to meter it out. But hand-holding and forehead kisses are only doing so much. I need to transfer more, more efficiently."

The silence stretches long enough that I finally glance up.

Jack-Eye is frozen mid-stride, water dripping from his hair down his chest, a motel towel hanging so low on his hips it's practically performing a disappearing act. His muscles are tensed like he's waiting for someone to take a photo.

"The kiss wasn't enough, huh?" he finally mumbles, his lips twisting like he tasted something sour.

I blink twice. "Why are you naked?"

His mouth opens, closes, then opens again. "I, uh... forgot my clothes on the bed."

My eyes follow his vague gesture to the nearest mattress—the one I've already claimed, my bag sitting at its foot.

"That's my bed."

"No—I meant the other one. The one that's not yours. Obviously."

I stare at him, completely unmoved. This is the feared Lycan Beta? Seven centuries of watching men fumble through excuses, and they never get any better at it. I return my attention to the screen. "Then dry off. You're dripping everywhere."

But he doesn't move. Instead, he does something so predictable I almost laugh: he positions himself closer, one hand gripping the back of my chair as he leans down slightly. Water drips from his hair onto the screen of my phone.

"You know, Lyre... if *you* have needs, you don't have to use the wizard."

His body language is dominating alpha, but his tone is hesitant virgin teen.

I tilt my head, examining him like an archaeologist who's just unearthed a particularly confusing artifact. "And who else here can process arcana, Beta Aaron Xhekaj *of the Lycan Pack*? Can you?"

His lips part, a breath caught between them, then close again without sound.

"Thought so," I say, turning back to my phone.

He retreats to his bed, rustling through his bag with unnecessary force. The silence has teeth now, sharp little incisors digging into the space between us. I hear the zip of jeans, the soft cotton sound of a shirt being pulled over his head.

Even without looking, I can tell he's pouting.

"Are you really going to... do that?" His voice is gruff, all hard edges and sulking.

I don't look up. "Do what?"

"You're really gonna suck off the wizard?"

The corner of my mouth quirks up despite myself. There's something almost charming about his juvenile discomfort. Almost.

"Are you worried it'll affect team morale, Lycan Beta Xhekaj?"

Jack-Eye doesn't answer, just makes a low sound in his throat that might be a growl. Or indigestion.

I slide my gaze over to him, now fully dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans that have seen better decades. What exactly is his problem? Wolves are famously horny creatures, their blood running as hot as their tempers.

Humans might not realize it—they're often starry-eyed over the idea of mates, especially fated ones, and tend toward the romantic when it comes to a wolf's amorous life—but the reality is they'd often fuck a tree if it flirted back. But he's acting like a teenager whose crush just announced she's taking someone else to prom.

It would be amusing if it weren't so inconvenient. He's far too old to be acting like this—looking at me like I've committed some personal betrayal by even suggesting getting Thom into a state where he could actually help us.

"I didn't expect this attitude from you, of all people," I murmur, turning my attention back to my phone.

"What do you mean by that?"

Chapter 119: Jack-Eye: What's in a Name?

JACK-EYE

"I didn't expect this attitude from you, of all people," she murmurs, turning her attention back to her phone.

Her words are another hit to my already bruised ego. I blink, then blink again, my mouth opening before promptly snapping shut. It feels like a habit around this woman.

My usual comebacks have abandoned me. Something hot crawls up my spine and settles in my chest, sharp and leaden all at once.

"What do you mean by that?" I ask, a little too sharply. Defensively.

The image of her with another man—her mouth, her lips, doing the things I've spent a *lot* of time imagining—slams into me with a possessive intensity I don't know how to manage. It's not like I haven't watched her touch him. But this? Her going down on the wizard? That's something else.

I might have to kill the guy. Wring his scrawny little neck. Maybe stomp on his dick for good measure.

"Beta Aaron Xhekaj of the Lycan Pack."

My name on her lips should not make my cock twitch. But it does. And I hate it. She hadn't looked like she was even paying attention when I told her my name. She remembers. She keeps using it. It's destroying something vital in my brain. No big deal. Just rational thought. And logic. And impulse control.

Poof.

Gone.

Vaporized because the way she says *Xhekaj*

makes me want to fuck three or four kids out of her. At least.

"You have a reputation," she adds, scrolling idly. "I thought you'd be the last person bothered by what I have to do."

I know what she's saying. She's not wrong.

Fuck, I did hook up with a she-wolf the other day just to keep her distracted from Caine. That's not exactly a noble deed, now is it? And how is it different from what Lyre's saying now?

I rub a hand down my face, jaw clenched. Guilt crawls through me.

Like an army of centipedes.

Creepy, crawly, uncomfortable. Something I want to stomp out of existence.

"This is different," I mutter.

"Is it?" she asks, glancing up. "Or are you just not used to being on this end of the equation?"

"There's no equation." It's a lie, and we both damn well know it.

That's the problem.

She *knows*.

She sees straight through me. Flays me with a single line.

I don't know how she does it, but she freaking knows, damn it.

There's no way she's saying this out of nowhere. She's not guessing. She's not playing a game. Lyre has no need to do any of it. She just... already knows about me. Probably knows the name of every woman I've ever fucked.

Even I don't know them all.

The silence drags out. I can't answer her without admitting she's right, but I don't want to admit to my own past.

"Whatever, Jack-Eye. It's just energy transfer. I'm not proposing to him."

Jack-Eye. Not Aaron. Right. Demoted. Stripped of first-name privilege. Casualty of a tactical blowjob.

Yep. I'm gonna have to kill Thom.

She tosses her phone onto the cheap motel table. It skids across the scratched laminate with a plastic clatter. Then she stretches her arms over her head, her shirt riding up just enough to reveal a pale strip of skin. I catch sight of a thin, intricate line of symbols etched there, disappearing beneath the hem.

My mouth goes dry. I glance away too late.

I want to lick them all.

"Guess I'll have to blow him after all," she sighs, rolling her neck. "Hopefully it won't take too long."

My jaw tightens until I feel something crack.

She starts massaging her jaw absentmindedly, rubbing at the hinge like she's prepping for it. My eye twitches. My cock aches.

Traitorous.

Hopeful.

Is it hot in here? It's hot in here.

"You're staring, Beta," she says, not even bothering to look at me.

I cross the room in three strides and plant my hands on the arms of her chair, boxing her in. Her scent hits me like a damn freight train, wild and sharp and divine. I lean in until I'm close enough to count her lashes.

"You can only do it if I'm in the room," I growl.

She doesn't flinch. Doesn't blink. Just lets a slow, serpentine smile unfurl. "Didn't realize you were into that sort of thing."

That smirk. It breaks something.

I snap.

My mouth crashes into hers. It's a messy, hungry thing of a kiss—reckless and aching. My fingers slide into her hair, dragging her closer, angling her up to meet me.

And she lets me. Her lips part under mine, warm and soft. But there's no hunger. No spark. No heat behind the compliance.

She's just letting it happen.

And that should ruin it—but it doesn't. Because I'm drowning. Her scent, her taste, the closeness I've been craving like air—I'm spiraling.

She exhales into my mouth, and something in me jolts. It's like she's breathing life directly into my soul.

Mine, damn it. She's mine.

I want her.

Want to mark her. Claim her. Chase her down and ruin every trace of scent that doesn't belong to me.

I want her pressed against the floor. The bed. The wall. Until her body sings only for me.

My claws prickle beneath my skin. I'm shaking. From the tension. From the restraint. From the desperate, visceral urge to pull her onto my lap and make her forget the wizard exists.

But I don't.

When I finally pull back, my chest is heaving, my heart thundering in my ears.

She stares up at me, serene as a goddess.

Unruffled. Unimpressed.

Aside from how my hands have ruined her hair, there isn't even a flush of color in her cheeks. Her eyes are clear. Her lips are pink and wet, but her expression is clinical.

"Do you want to see how a kiss should really feel?" she asks calmly.

My cock lurches again.

I should say yes.

I should say no.

But mostly, I want to die.

Chapter 120: Jack-Eye: Ruined

JACK-EYE

Lyre's fingertips touch my jaw. Cold as winter but intent like summer heat. Her other hand presses against my chest, not pushing hard but with enough pressure to make me straighten.

She stands, one fluid motion that has me backing up instinctively. One step forward from her, one step back from me. A dance I'm suddenly not leading. My spine hits the wall before I realize she's maneuvered me across the entire room.

"Rules," she says, voice low and matter-of-fact. "You can't touch me. Can't move. No begging." Her cat-like eyes hold mine, unblinking. "No calling my name. No calling for the Goddess. No prayers."

I snort. Is she serious? I've had my share of wild nights, but she's acting like this kiss might break me.

"Can you follow those rules, Aaron?"

"I think I can handle a kiss without calling for divine intervention." My words sound confident. My dick? Not quite as sure.

It's already painfully hard.

The corner of her mouth quirks up, and her tongue darts out to wet her lips. Just a flash of pink against her smirking mouth. My cock throbs in response, sudden and painful.

Fuck.

I swallow hard.

She leans in, and her mouth touches mine. It's gentle. Controlled. Intentional. Nothing like the desperate crash of our lips from moments ago.

That's it? I almost laugh. This is what she—

Heat.

It doesn't start at my lips. It's everywhere at once, sinking beneath my skin like liquid fire, wrapping around every blood vessel, every muscle, every tendon. My entire body tingles like she's somehow touching all of me at once.

Then comes the ice—tiny flickers of cold dancing between the waves of heat. Like she's playing my nerves, strumming me like an instrument.

Her fingertips are still on my chest. Her mouth is still barely touching mine. It's the only physical contact between us, but my body feels like it's being caressed everywhere.

My spine arches slightly against the wall, a puppet pulled by pleasure's strings.

My wolf stirs, aroused beyond reason. His deep growls echo what I'm already thinking.

Claim her.

Mark her.

Keep her.

My hands twitch at my sides, desperate to pull her against me. The moment they move, she pulls back.

The pleasure stops so abruptly I almost whimper.

Almost.

I have pride, you know.

It might... not be very apparent, but it's there, somewhere behind my straining, aching, begging cock.

"No," she says, eyes heavy-lidded as she meets my gaze.

Just the one word. Nothing more.

I drop my hands back, fingers opening and closing in tight fists, trying to ground myself before I lose my mind completely.

She runs her tongue over my lips, a slow, deliberate tease. Her hand slides up my chest, around my neck, tiny touches that leave fire in their wake.

Then she grabs at the back of my neck and yanks me down.

My heart jumps. My cock follows suit, eager for more sweet agony.

Something electric moves through me from her touch—her energy seeping into my chest, into my bones. It's not enough. I need more of it, more of her, and her goddamned soft, breathy touches are driving me insane.

If she wants to dominate, she should do it. Not... whatever this horrible undoing is.

She breathes against my mouth, nuzzling my lips with soft, sensual kisses. Her tongue flicks against the seam of my lips, promising but never delivering. I need to take control. Need to deepen this. Need to devour her.

But I can't move. Her rules. I force my hands to stay at my sides, my entire body trembling with the effort not to say fuck it all and just take what I want.

I realize with distant shock that I'm breathing in perfect rhythm with her. She's pacing me, controlling even the air in my lungs.

My hips buck once, instinctively seeking friction. She breaks the contact with my mouth.

Nothing touches.

And nothing's satisfied.

I force my hips into complacency. No thrusting against her like a rutting beast. Got it. Message received.

She exhales softly, directly into my mouth. I suck it in like it's oxygen in space.

A moan escapes me before I can stop it. Pathetic. Needy.

Shut up. Men don't moan like that. We're strong and capable and don't melt just off a woman's exhale.

But I did.

She's barely touched me, hardly kissed me, and I'm already falling apart.

My wolf keeps clawing at my insides, frantic and feral. I can barely hold him back. His need for her mingles with mine until I can't tell where the animal ends and the man begins.

My scent's spiked, sharp and musky, probably filling the room. I can barely smell her beneath the dominance rolling off me, and yet my scent lies.

It claims domination, but I'm already at her feet.

I want to claim her. Mark her. Not just her body, but her entire existence. Bind her to me so deeply that neither of us could ever be free.

Yet I'm also willing to beg and prostrate myself for even a whisper of a kiss. Sell my soul for a little more.

My cock pulses again, straining painfully against my jeans.

I'm trembling now. Actually fucking trembling, like some virgin getting his first taste of a woman. My thighs are tight, stomach clenched, every muscle wound to breaking.

Lyre did this.

And yet she's done almost nothing.

My mouth aches for more, still open, waiting for her next breath, her next taste. I've become a vessel for whatever she'll give me.

Her tongue flicks against the roof of my mouth and holy shit—I see stars. Actual stars explode behind my eyelids.

She slides deeper, and I suck greedily at her tongue. It sweeps through my mouth in long, languid movements, teasing and retreating. Her taste is stronger than before—sweet, addictive, otherworldly.

I almost break. My hands lift slightly before I force them back, fingers clawing at empty air. My cock throbs so hard it hurts, skin too tight, body too small to contain what's happening.

It feels like she's touching me everywhere—hands on my cock, mouth sucking me, fingers inside me—but it's just her lips on mine, her hand on my neck.

And my wolf—he feels it too, like some bond between us is being stroked and teased. Like we're building toward something that'll shatter us both.

Then she pulls back. Not far. Still close enough for her breath to hit my lips. The sweet nectar of oxygen, even if it's actually carbon dioxide.

My eyes can't focus. I don't know my own name. The day of the week. The fucking century.

But her energy doesn't leave. It stays, buzzing under my skin, vibrating through every cell. I'm still being kissed even though her lips are gone.

I'm so close to the edge I could cry. My balls ache like they've been slowly roasted over open flame. One touch and I'd explode, if she'd just... be kind enough to touch me.

She isn't.

Instead, Lyre studies me like I'm her little lab specimen, head tilted slightly, eyes clinical. At least this time there's a little color in her cheeks, a little droop in her eyelids.

"That was your warm-up," she says.

I can't answer. Don't have words. My hands shake uncontrollably. My throat is too dry to swallow.

I want to punch through the wall. Want to throw her onto the bed and fuck her until we break it. Want to fall to my knees and pray for mercy.

Ah. Now I see why she said no prayers.

She steps back, straightens her shirt with casual indifference, and walks toward the door like absolutely nothing happened.

"You have all that power under your skin, and you never even bring it out to play," she says, glancing over her shoulder. She looks like some sort of sexy pinup model, and I want to destroy her perfect appearance. But I'm still processing all the feelings she's left me with. "Don't worry. You can't hurt me. But maybe if you learn how to use it, you can make me scream."

Ruined. She's ruined me.

I'm fucking doomed.

There's no way I can ever kiss another woman. Or even think about fucking anyone other than Lyre.

The door clicks shut behind her.

My wolf snarls, low and possessive in my mind. *Claim her.*

There's a hidden *or else* in his words, like he might actually go dormant and turn me into little better than an omega if I don't succeed.

I stay pressed against the wall, legs embarrassingly weak, breathing ragged. My heartbeat refuses to slow.

This thing between us? This game? I'm going to win, damn it. No matter what it takes.

Of course, I say that, but I can still feel her on my skin...