

Grace of a Wolf

#Chapter 121: Lyre: Every Girl Needs a Toy - Read Grace of a Wolf Chapter 121: Lyre: Every Girl Needs a Toy

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LYRE

Aaron tastes so much better than I thought he would.

Enough for a tiny little pulse of heat to thud between my legs.

Maybe a smidgen more than tiny.

Okay, yes, I'm wet. But I'm not going to tell him that. Men don't need their egos stroked; they grow without water or care. I'm here to prune it. Shape it into what I need.

Every girl needs a toy, and this man seems exceptionally willing. Always a plus.

Generally, I have a rule against mixing with wolves, but... well.

I saunter out of the room, humming under my breath. There's something satisfyingly twisted about the Eurythmics in this moment. I'm pretty sure I've left Jack-Eye—sorry, Aaron—ready to claw through walls. I'd apologize if I felt even remotely bad about it.

I don't, though.

He started it.

I'm just... ending it.

Or maybe beginning something new.

The wizard and the others are several doors down. A mild annoyance, as it means I can't monitor the wizard's arcana levels very well, but since I have a new plan... it won't matter very much.

He'll be topped off after the transference. Granted, he'll need at least six hours to recover from the sudden influx. Arcane fever tends to hit these new generations of witches hard, since they're not used to pure arcana. The type of energy they pull is muddy and inefficient.

If you see arcana as water in the air, I pull out ninety-nine percent of what's there.

Thom? Pulls about five percent, and it's dirty. It isn't that he's exceptionally bad. It's standard for the new generation.

I knock on the boys' room with three sharp raps. Entertainment awaits.

The door opens, and oh—well, hello there. Owen stands shirtless, his chest broad and well-defined, as expected for an angelic descendant. Water droplets cling to his collarbone. Must have just gotten out of the shower.

His silver-gray eyes flare wide when he catches my scent. He physically recoils, stepping back with genuine fear in his expression.

Delicious. He's gotten used to having me around. Spend a little time away, and now he's scared again.

"What do you want?" he asks, not making eye contact.

"Relax, angel boy. Not here for you."

The room behind him is dim. The werewolf kid is stretched out on one of the beds, face turned to the wall, body too rigid to be truly asleep. I can hear the shower running in the bathroom. Process of elimination tells me it's where our jumpy little wizard must be.

I slip past Owen, who flattens himself against the wall rather than risk touching me. My current high makes his reaction even more amusing. Nothing like a little fear and lust cocktail to make a girl feel powerful.

Without bothering to knock, I push open the bathroom door. Steam billows out. "Hey, wizard. You decent?"

Thom's head pops out from behind the shower curtain, wet hair plastered to his forehead. Without his glasses, he's squinting. He holds the curtain against his chest like a pearl-clutching Victorian maiden.

"Uh—Lyre? Is that you?"

No shit. Who else would it be?

"Finish up and come to my room when you're done," I tell him. "Be quick. I'm not waiting forever."

His expression flickers between confusion and hope.

At least he'll be clean. Shame about the rest of him.

I close the door, turning back to find Owen glaring at me, arms crossed over his chest.

"You know, that protective stick up your ass might loosen if you tried having a good time once a century," I tell him, wagging my fingers as I pass. He doesn't flinch this time. Mildly disappointing.

I briefly consider turning him into a toad. Just for a few seconds. Just to refresh his delicious fear response. But it would be cruel, even for me. Besides, I'm feeling uncharacteristically good-natured tonight.

Huh. Weird.

When I re-enter my room, Aaron's still exactly where I left him, back against the wall. His chest rises and falls in sharp movements. Fists clenched. Eyes wild. Erection visible through his jeans.

"Was it really that earth-shattering?" I ask with feigned innocence. Of course it was. He's never had an arcana-infused kiss before.

It's the best aphrodisiac. All-natural, too.

His teeth clench so hard I'm surprised they don't crack, and he speaks through them with slow, painful words. "Whatever you did hasn't left. It still feels like you're blowing me."

I frown.

Did I really...?

I look closer, past the physical and into the arcane. Sure enough, tendrils of my magic still wrap around him like hungry little sex fingers. Several threads coil around his cock, pulsing with my particular resonance.

Oops.

Rookie mistake. One I certainly shouldn't be making at my age and level of mastery. Must have been distracted.

Actually—wait. I'm impressed. The touch of arcana is hundreds of times more potent than physical stimulation. Having it stroke you endlessly without release would be torture. Yet here he is, still holding on, jaw clenched, enduring it. Most men would have collapsed in a puddle within a minute.

"Hmm. You haven't come yet. That's promising," I murmur, stepping closer.

He grunts.

I trail my fingers across his hip, dancing along the waistband of his jeans, coming close to—but never quite touching—where he wants me most.

"Do you still have to be in the room when I—" I ask sweetly.

"Yes." The word explodes from his gritted teeth.

His hips jerk forward, and suddenly his hands are on me—grabbing my waist, spinning me around, slamming my back against the wall. Control snapped. Patience gone.

He kisses me like he's drowning and I'm air—desperate, sloppy, hard. There's no artifice here, no calculation. Just raw, unfiltered need.

I like this. This is a man whose restraint has fractured.

Not one who's thrown it away.

It's very different.

I kiss him back, tangling my fingers in his hair. He's rutting against me like a wild wolf, and it's more pleasant than I thought it would be.

Especially when he slides his hands down to my ass and lifts me up. I wrap my legs around his waist as he rocks and shoves against me, his denim-clad cock a sweet tease of pressure against my clit.

My nails rake his scalp, and I jerk his head back, baring his throat. I sink my teeth into the tanned skin where his neck meets his shoulder.

"Stop," I whisper against his skin, even as I bite again. "Thom will be here soon."

Aaron groans, his breath hot against my ear. "Do you have to bring him up right now?"

"Yes," I murmur. His skin is salty, but I like it. "Because Thom's not the one who's supposed to be watching. Remember?"

A knock on the door interrupts us. Aaron groans again, his fingers spasming against my ass as he stops thrusting his hips against me.

Sliding my legs down until my feet meet the floor. He squeezes one more time before flattening both hands against the wall, breathing hard.

I straighten my clothes, feeling his gaze track my every movement as I smooth down my shirt and fix my hair. There's something darkly amusing about how thoroughly I've disarmed him.

"There's another dick you can wrap your mouth around," he grits out.

I smirk. "Careful, or I'll leave you knotted like a balloon."

He sighs, and I duck away from his body heat, stepping toward the door. My hand hovers on the doorknob as I glance over my shoulder.

He's staring at me, nostrils flaring.

"Can you smell it?" I ask, with a slow smile.

He gives me one tight little nod.

Of course he can. Wolves have such good noses. And I'm not even attempting to hide the signs of my arousal.

"Be a good boy and wait and watch. If you don't come by the time I send the wizard away—"

Another knock at the door cuts me off.

I smooth my expression into a pleasant smile and pull the door open. Thom blinks up at me like a lost puppy, towel clutched in his hand, glasses still foggy.

Aaron stands with his back to the wall again, his eyes dark as midnight as he stares.

"Come in," I tell the wizard, with a bright smile.

Chapter 122: Grace: Monster in Her Skin

The sky goes dark so fast I think I'm imagining it. One second, the kids are shrieking over hide-and-seek. The next—it's like the sun gets yanked right out of the sky. Clouds roll in thick and gray, swallowing up the blue like it never existed.

Sara's nose is pressed to the RV window, her breath fogging the glass. "What's happening?"

She hasn't moved since the thunder started.

Caine would probably be upset the blinds are open, but Fenris would know if someone's out there watching us. It should be okay.

Jer bounces between couch cushions. "Maybe aliens. Maybe the apocalypse. Maybe the dinosaurs are reincarnating—"

"Maybe it's just a storm, Jer," Ron cuts in. He definitely has less patience for the younger boy than he does Sara or Bun, probably because Jer never stops talking.

Every time I touch something, I get shocked. Static electricity is strong in the air, but none of the kids mention it. Maybe it's just me.

Something about this storm feels... off, though. Wrong. Not like normal rain.

The older girl turns toward me, eyes wide as she asks, "Is it gonna lightning? I want to see lightning."

"Probably." I check the solar display, already worried. With the sun in hiding, it means the panels aren't getting anything in, right?

The display flickers. Numbers drop. Then they spike. The overhead lights flicker and the air conditioner stops abruptly.

A second later, the lights are back, and so is our air.

"Oh, no. Is our power going to go out?" Jer asks, craning his neck to stare at the light above him like it's going to give him answers.

"It shouldn't... We have batteries, too." But everything flicked out for a second when it shouldn't, which doesn't really make me confident in my answer. The microwave clock reads 12:00, blinking obnoxiously to let me know it reset.

Rain hits the camper—not in drops, but in sheets, a solid wall of water slamming against the fiberglass encasing the camper.

The entire trailer shudders, before settling into a new rhythm of noise.

Sara squeals with delight, once again glued to the window. "I love rain! I love it so much. I hope it lightnings more!"

"Maybe we shouldn't stand near the windows during a—" My warning dies as lightning forks across the sky, illuminating Sara's face.

"Look!" she shrieks, bouncing on her toes on the couch even as her nose stays pressed against the glass. "It was a big one!"

Thunder reverberates, as if to agree.

Within seconds, we're all crowded around the windows—even Ron, though he pretends it's just to keep the little ones in check. Jer holds Bun reluctantly, her tiny fists gripping his shirt as she stares wide-eyed at the deluge.

"You know," I say, forcing lightness into my voice, "this is perfect weather for a movie. I've got snacks all set out—"

"Rabbit food," Jer mumbles.

Yeah, healthy food doesn't have the same appeal as chips and popcorn.

And there's the whole solar issue. If I run the TV and a movie, with the sun not out...

Lightning and thunder come with alarming frequency. Sara flinches at one particularly loud boom. It shakes the entire camper.

"Ho-lee!" Jer yells. "That was a big one!"

Bun cries.

"That wasn't even that loud," the older girl announces, rearranging her face into nonchalance, like she wasn't as scared as the younger kids.

Another bolt of lightning, closer this time. The camper lights dim completely before surging bright again.

The pressure in my ears builds with each crash of thunder. Something about this storm feels... personal. Targeted. I shake my head at the ridiculous thought.

Bun stiffens in Jer's arms, her crying suddenly silent.

Her little nose twitches once, twice. She sniffs the air hard, like she's caught something none of us can smell.

"Bun?" I step forward just as her body contorts.

The growl she makes isn't the playful rumble we hear sometimes when she's being stubborn. It's deep, guttural... adult.

Her eyes dilate until almost no iris remains, and something in my mind screams: *danger*.

I reach for her, but I'm too slow.

She launches herself at Jer's face—tiny hands now sporting curved, vicious claws. Not the kind you'd see on a housecat. These are built for rending flesh, for hunting. They catch Jer across the cheek as he falls backward with a shocked yelp, blood spattering across the floor.

Shit.

Sara's scream pierces through the thunder. Jer drops Bun as he falls, hand pressed to his bleeding face.

Ron moves faster than any of us.

His teenage body ripples, bones cracking as dark fur erupts across his skin. His gorilla form is massive in the confined space of the camper, hunched and powerful, yet his movements are controlled as he lunges for the toddler.

But Bun isn't Bun anymore.

I've seen predators shift mid-fight. But this? This is a baby with a monster in her skin.

Her tiny features have distorted—jaw elongated, teeth bared in a snarl that belongs on a mountain lion. Her body's half-shifted, enough to leave bloody pawprints on the ground as she avoids his reach.

She leaps toward Sara, who screams again. Ron's massive gorilla hands catch Bun mid-air as the older girl scrambles out of the way, but the toddler twists and sinks her massive teeth into his forearm.

"Stop! Bun, stop!" I rush forward, trying to wedge myself between them.

Pain slices across my palm as Bun's claws connect. I jerk back, blood welling from four perfect lines across my skin.

This isn't right. This isn't Bun. Her eyes are completely wrong—blown black and feral, foam gathering at the corners of her mouth. She snarls.

The teenager grunts in pain as she swipes a claw across his furry chest. He's trying to restrain her without hurting her, but she's like liquid fury, twisting out of his grasp to cause new wounds.

It's only been seconds and already feels like a long ten minutes.

I spin around, pushing Sara and Jer behind me. "Bedroom, now! Go, go!"

The child they know isn't in the room with us. There's something else inside of her, something large and angry, and it isn't safe. For any of us.

Which is crazy.

This is Bun. Our sweet little baby girl, the one who goes nuts over tanghulu and crushes strawberries all over the floor. The same baby who woke up in the middle of the night to crawl into my lap. The one who stole my heart even though it's only been two days.

"But—" Jer starts.

"Now!" I shove them toward the front of the camper. "Lock the door!"

They scramble away as I turn back to the chaos. "Bun!"

My voice disappears under a crash of thunder so loud it feels like the sky is splitting open. The camper rocks, either from their wrestling or the wind. It's hard to tell. The air conditioner dies with a pathetic whine, and the lights flicker out completely, leaving the room dark.

I can still see them locked in combat, and smell the blood dripping onto the floor. She's going to kill Ron. A sweet little toddler is going to hurt the person she loves and cares for most in this world.

I can't let it happen.

"We need to get out of here!" Jer shouts, his small feet thudding.

Toward me. Not away. He and Sara should be locked in the relative safety of Lyre's bedroom.

Instead, he's bolting down the hall and yanking the door open. "Come on, Sara! Outside!"

"No, Jer, don't—!"

The door flies open, yanked out of his hand by the strong wind. He falls to his knees.

A massive black shape barrels through the sudden opening, clearing Jer's head in a graceful leap.

Fenris fills the space, ethereal blue light pulsing beneath his midnight fur. Dominance rolls off him like a wall, I stagger back, my knees weakening for a moment, before it passes over me.

The kids aren't as lucky.

Ron shifts back instantly, his human form collapsing against the entertainment center, blood running from several wounds. Sara and Jer flatten to the floor.

Bun's the only one still moving. Shrieking in defiance, still feral, and still wrong. She tries to dart away, then turns to fight—but Fenris pins her with nothing but a stare and a snarl.

She shifts partially back—her limbs human again, but her face contorted, teeth still too sharp, eyes still wild. A continuous growl rumbles from her tiny chest.

My heart lodges in my throat.

Blood's everywhere. Ron's chest heaves with exertion, but his eyes are glued on Bun, his hands clenched tight. Worry's written all over his face.

Jer's still bleeding from his cheek, too. Sara's the only one unharmed, and she's huddled against the floor in terror.

And Bun—my sweet, chaotic Bun—curls in a defensive position beneath Fenris's massive form, snarling like a cornered animal.

The storm isn't just battering the camper from outside. Somehow, it's gotten into her.

"Bun?" I step forward hesitantly.

Fenris snaps at the air between us—a clear warning to stay back.

I ignore it, dropping to my knees beside them. "Bun, honey, it's me."

She lunges, teeth snapping at my extended fingers. I jerk my hand back with a gasp, then steel myself and try again—this time placing my palm gently on her leg, far from her teeth.

Her snarling quiets a fraction. Her eyes still flash with something foreign and feral, but there's a flicker of recognition fighting through. Or maybe it's my wishful thinking.

"Bun? Can you hear me now?"

Chapter 123: Grace: Comfort

Something shifts in Bun's eyes. The wildness retreats like a tide going out, leaving behind the little girl I know.

Her features shrink back to normal, pointed ears rounding, claws retracting, even her teeth shortening until they're just tiny baby teeth again. Her heaving chest slows until soft, hitching whimpers.

Tears drip.

"It's okay," I whisper, reaching out again. "Bun, honey, it's me. It's Grace."

This time, she doesn't snap. She doesn't even hesitate.

Her little arms shoot out and wrap around my neck with desperate strength. She buries her face against my collarbone and sobs—not the tantrum cries of a toddler, but something deeper and horrible. The kind of crying you do when you're so full of fear you can't even understand what you're feeling.

I hold her tight, rocking back and forth without even thinking about it. "Shh, it's okay. I've got you, baby."

Fenris stands over us like a living shadow, his blue glow pulsing faintly through his midnight fur, but much lighter now. His storm-gray eyes track every movement in the room as Bun's sobs gradually soften to hiccups.

Jer closes the front door, shutting us out from the roar of rain and wind and thunder. My ears pop when he does.

Only when the toddler is quiet does Fenris sit. But his ears keep swiveling.

The other three children stand together, and my heart hurts to see the blood all over two of them.

"Has this ever happened before?" My voice sounds strange in my own ears. Too calm for the trembling in my chest. I vaguely recall my mom sounding like this sometimes, usually when I was worried about something. Now, I get it.

This is how moms sound when they're trying to pretend they aren't scared, too.

Ron's face is pale beneath his olive complexion, his eyes a little too wide. Blood smears his chest and arms in thin, drying lines. But he's calm as he says, "No. Nothing like this. Not for any of us."

"But something similar?" I adjust Bun in my arms, feeling her tiny fingers clutch at my shirt as she snuffles against my neck.

"Sometimes we slip a little during a shift. But nothing like this. Might run after a bunny without thinking or go for a run, but..."

Sara shudders and leans into his side, and Ron wraps his arm around her without even looking. His big hand pats at her head. "My skin feels weird and crawly," she mutters. "Like the lightning's gotten under it."

"Mine, too," Jer pipes up, still holding his hand to his cheek. He winces as he talks.

"How's your face?" I ask softly.

He shrugs. "Still stings. It'll heal, though."

I move toward him, carefully shifting Bun to my grip so I have an arm free. "Let me see."

He hesitates before dropping his hand. I reach out and gently pull his chin up to examine the claw marks. They're already closing—supernaturally fast healing, as expected. Still, they must hurt.

Sara darts to the sink and returns with a damp towel. I reach for it, but Ron intercepts, taking it from her with a quiet, "I got it. You take care of Bun."

I'm not sure what I would have ever done without Ron here. Everything from basic childcare to even the emergent situation of just moments ago, he's stepped forward and taken over without being asked.

He kneels in front of Jer, gently dabbing the cuts with careful hands.

Jer winces, then straightens his spine. "It doesn't hurt as much as it did," he says again, sounding proud. "I didn't cry, neither."

"Good," the older boy says quietly. "It's already healing."

I look at the blood staining Ron's chest, the deeper cuts along his forearm where Bun had bitten him. "You're hurt worse than any of us."

He shakes his head. "It'll be fine. Don't worry about it."

"We should have you checked out."

His head moves more vigorously this time. "No. We can't go to hospitals."

The matter-of-factness in his voice catches me off guard. "Why not?"

"They're not safe for people like us," he says simply.

My arm tightens around Bun, who seems to have fallen asleep. Or maybe she's just quiet. It's hard to tell with her face buried against me. "What do you do if you get sick?"

Jer's the one to answer this time, piping up, "We don't. Not really. And we heal when we're hurt."

I don't press. But the ache in my chest grows, spreading outward until my ribs feel too tight.

Bun's body is heavy, and I try to shift her to my other arm—but she whines and wraps her arms tightly around my neck. Not asleep, then. At least, not yet.

"You should take her for a nap," Ron says, wiping down his own wounds. Sara snatches the towel from him.

"I'll do it."

"Kay."

Leaving them to their own devices seems strange and wrong after so much trauma, but Bun's clearly exhausted. I hesitate, but Jer scowls at me and says, "Go!"

Fenris sneezes, and the kid jumps.

"I mean... Bun's tired. You should put her to sleep."

"That sounds like you're telling her to—"

Ron smacks his hand over Sara's mouth. "Hush."

"What? I'm just saying, it *sounded* like it. He should be more careful with his words."

"I *am* careful with my words!"

Their return to bickering somewhat lightens the heavy load pressing against my heart. "I'll be back once I get her to sleep, guys."

"Okay," Sara and Jer chorus, before sticking their tongues out at each other.

Ron rolls his eyes and grabs the towel back from the distracted Sara and heads for the bathroom in the back.

Fenris follows as I carry Bun to Lyre's bedroom. The wolf's nails click quietly against the floor, and it's strangely comforting. Good to know I'm not alone, even if I can't converse with him like I can with Caine.

Lyre's bedroom is dim, the shades already pulled. There's a box fan by the bed, and I switch it on, trying to chase away some of the humid heat, though it really just pushes the same warm air around in the room.

With the A/C off in here, it's going to remain warm.

Better not to use a blanket.

Crawling onto the bed with a determined baby clinging to my neck is harder than I expect, and I end up flopping onto my side. Bun grunts a little when her body hits the mattress and she curls up even tighter against me, burying her face even closer. She snuffles.

I'm exhausted.

Not just tired, but my entire body feels heavy and my skin's too tight, like I'm retaining a hundred pounds of water.

I drop a kiss on Bun's soft curls. At least she's not crying anymore.

Fenris's presence is steady and soothing as he climbs onto the bed. Lyre's probably going to kill him for leaving fur on her comforter, but we'll just clean it before she comes back, I guess.

The storm's voice becomes a distant rumble, and I hope it's passing through. No more storms. No more strange, feral Bun shifts. I just want everything to go back to normal...

Even if I'm not sure what normal looks like.

Very little time has passed, and yet so many things have changed.

My eyes drift closed, but the voices from the main room carry through the thin walls.

"Do you think she's gonna leave?" Sara whispers.

"Maybe." Jer's cocky attitude is gone. He sounds strangely subdued. "We're scary now. Wouldn't blame her for wanting to go."

"She won't," Ron's voice is low and calm. I thought he was going to wash himself off, but I guess not. "She's not like that."

There's a pause, then Sara again: "But what if she does?"

Ron doesn't answer.

I want to sit up, to yell down the hall: *No. Never. I'm not going anywhere.*

But I can't. I can't even open my mouth. Can't lift my head from the pillow.

Everything feels soft. Drained. Floaty.

Bun breathes against my neck. Fenris guards the door. The storm still howls outside. And I...

Chapter 124: Caine: No Limits

CAINE

The truck's tires skid through mud as I slam to a halt beside the camper. I don't bother turning it off—just fling the door open and launch myself into the rain.

Every heartbeat is louder than the last, drumming insistently through my veins as I wrench the camper door open. The entire thing rocks as I storm inside, halting only when I see three kids standing in front of me, eyes wide and smelling of fresh panic.

I scared them.

Idiot, Fenris mutters, like he wasn't the one to send me the *get back here as fast as you can* message less than ten minutes ago.

Ron, shirtless and bleeding, stares blankly as he holds a towel to one of his wounds.

"What happened?" The question rips from my throat even though I already know. Fenris told me—Bun lost control. Granted, the worthless lump of fur and fang was short on detail and ignored me when I demanded more, saying he was a too busy to explain.

Ron immediately stiffens, shoving the bloody cloth behind his back. "Nothing."

His jaw sets, defiant despite standing half a foot shorter than me and looking like he went three rounds with a mountain lion. The kid has balls. He doesn't want me upset with the baby.

He has no idea I already know.

"Bun's asleep," he adds, dropping his to a whisper. "Be quiet."

And if you wake her, I'll bite you myself, Fenris murmurs.

Oh, *now* he talks.

I was busy.

There's a deep, visceral urge to snarl aloud at my own damn wolf, but I throttle it back. Ron already thinks I'm glaring at *him*, not privy to the conversation in my head.

I force my shoulders to relax and close the door softly behind me, shutting out the storm's howl. Water drips from my clothes onto the floor, pooling around my boots.

Should probably turn off the truck, too.

A small gasp comes from the only girl of the trio. What's her name again? She avoids me for the most part, but I'd been under the impression she was getting better about it. Apparently not.

"You're getting everything wet," she whispers, something close to horror in her voice.

Before I can respond, she bolts toward the back bathroom and returns with a faded blue towel, which she hurls at my feet like she's afraid to come within arm's reach.

You'd think I was the monster in this scenario, and not the toddler who carved up two of her packmates.

Fenris growls. *Take care of the pups while Grace sleeps.*

I freeze, one hand halfway to the towel. "Grace is asleep too?"

Ron says, "I don't know. She's with Bun, though."

But, of course, I wasn't talking to him.

Yes.

Strange. Why would she sleep when the kids are still bleeding? Perhaps all of this stress has been too much on someone still recovering. Humans are so fragile.

The need to check on her burns through me, but I force myself to assess the situation. Three sets of wary eyes track my every move. Jer's small face has a few scratches on it, though they're already mostly healed. The girl... Sara. Right. She's unharmed, though her eyes are glued to the puddle at my feet.

Ron has the most wounds, but it only takes a glance for me to see they're already healing. Within an hour, he shouldn't be bleeding anymore.

But they're all more than stressed. They're terrified.

"Go sit in the living room," I order all three of them, spreading the towel at my feet to soak up the water I'd brought in.

None of them move, and I look up with narrowed eyes. "Now."

Just a tiny hint of dominance whips out and cracks between us, and all three scramble to obey. Even the slightly rebellious teenager.

I follow behind, leaving the towel on the floor. "Tell me exactly what happened. From the beginning."

The three exchange glances. Ron speaks first.

"We were just waiting out the storm. Then Bun..." He pauses, choosing his words carefully. "She started shifting. But not normal. Her eyes went all wrong."

"Wrong how?"

"Black," Sara whispers. "Not like animal-black. Like... empty-black."

I frown. "That's not possible."

"It is," Jer interrupts, his small face pinched with fear. "We saw it. She went all weird and growly and then—" he gestures at Ron's chest "—she did that."

I study the wounds more carefully. Deep puncture marks, claw rakes across the sternum. Defensive wounds on the arms. It looks like an adult attack, not something a toddler could inflict, shifted or not.

"Did something trigger her? Something that scared her?"

Sara shakes her head. "Just the storm. We were playing hide and seek."

"No, we weren't," the younger boy corrects her. "We were playing hide and seek before, but then we were just sitting here when she went crazy."

"She's not crazy," Ron snaps. "She just lost control for a minute."

It wasn't normal cub aggression, Fenris admits. Even for an unstable shifter. Something else is at work here. She fought my dominance, too.

I've seen countless shifts over the centuries. Young cubs getting their first claws, adolescents struggling through moon-cycles, even adults driven to frenzy in battle rage. But a toddler generating this kind of violence? The damage Ron's sporting would require significant strength and intent—neither of which a child Bun's age should possess.

"Has this happened before?" I ask.

Ron hesitates. "No."

Something in his tone indicates there's more he isn't saying.

"Explain."

"She's always been... different. But never dangerous."

"What do you mean, different?"

The teenager scratches at the back of his neck with a sigh. "Jer and Sara only have a few forms they can shift into, right?"

I arch a brow in a silent bid for him to continue.

"Well, Bun and I are different."

"How so?" My voice is still sharp, but it doesn't deter him.

"We don't have a limit." He pauses, taking a deep breath, then releasing it in a sudden *whoosh*. He grimaces. "More than no limit. I could shift into a dragon if you really wanted me to. Or a griffin. Anything I can imagine. I can even change what I look like as a human."

I believe it, Fenris says as I stare blankly at this large child. She was not forming into any recognizable creature, and she often mixes her shifts.

I blink at the kid, trying to gauge whether he's serious or just trying to sound impressive. Dragons? The sheer ridiculousness of it almost distracts me from the reality we're facing.

Caine.

"What?" I snap, and Ron flinches. "Not you, kid."

Grace isn't asleep.

He speaks with urgency, and I turn with a frown, staring down the hall.

"What do you mean?"

I think she's unconscious again.

I'm moving before he's finished the sentence, darting across the tiny camper with inhuman speed.

Grace is curled up around the little toddler we call Bun, her breathing steady and her face pale. Her scent should be strong and overpowering this space with the fresh-baked blueberry muffin smell, but it's faint. Almost unnoticeable.

The baby, on the other hand, is rosy-cheeked and looks quite peaceful after such an ordeal.

It takes only a second for my brain to click through what I already know.

Grace is capable of transferring her energy into me. And when she did, I felt... calmer. More in control of myself.

She calmed the child, Fenris admits.

As I thought.

I yank the toddler out of the bed, feeling guilty when she stiffens and flails, screaming as she reaches for Grace. "No," I snap, holding onto her tightly. "You can't touch Grace."

"No!" Bun shrieks, twisting herself into a toddler-sized pretzel. "Mama! *Mama!*"

"You can't play with Mama right now, Bun."

Doesn't that mean something else? Fenris asks.

Jer's curly-haired head pokes in. "Bun? Where does it hurt?"

The toddler freezes in my arms, her lower lip stuck out as far as it can go as her giant baby eyes fill with tears. "Mama."

"Does it hurt on your head?"

She shakes it.

"Your hand?"

Another shake.

"Did you hurt your feeties?"

She screams.

"Does your heart hurt?" I ask, rubbing at her chest.

The scream stops abruptly, and she hiccups. Then she nods. "Mama."

Chapter 125: Caine: In the Rain

CAINE

The lights flicker for the third time in as many minutes, casting strange shadows across Bun's tear-streaked face.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath as I bounce her on my hip. The toddler's settled into a persistent whimper rather than full-blown screams, which is an improvement, but the damn RV is a new concern.

"Fah," Bun whispers between big sniffs.

I pace to the front of the camper, where the control panel sits mocking me with its incomprehensible display. Numbers and letters with no comprehensible logic. Grace was the one who set everything up—all I did was drive the damn thing to this godforsaken spot.

The screen flickers, then goes completely dark before lighting up again. A warning icon blinks in the corner.

Maybe it's failing, Fenris observes helpfully.

"No shit." I shift Bun to my other hip, her small hands fisting in my shirt.

"Nuh shuh."

I dig my phone out of my pocket and dial Lyre, cursing the woman for owning this rolling death trap. The line doesn't even ring before an automated voice cuts in: "Please try again later."

I try Jack-Eye and get the same result.

"Something's not right about this storm," I mutter, staring at the blank phone screen.

There's magic to it, Fenris agrees.

We've said the same thing at least ten times already.

My eyes drift toward the back room where Grace lies unconscious. I want nothing more than to curl around her, to guard her while she's vulnerable. To feel her heartbeat against mine and know she's safe. To suck in every last bit of her blueberry muffin scent, which is probably the only thing keeping me from rampaging in this tiny space.

But I can't. Not with Bun still radiating unstable energy. Not with three other potentially volatile shifter children who could lose control at any moment. Besides, I'd just make it all worse.

This inability to touch the woman is driving me mad.

She's breathing better, Fenris reports from where he stands guard in the bedroom doorway. *Steadier*.

"Good."

I turn to survey the rest of the cramped living space. The kids have fallen into an uneasy quiet, and it's more concerning than their earlier panic. Sara sits pressed against the window, her small fingers splayed on the glass as if reaching for the storm itself. Her eyes track the lightning with unnerving focus.

Jer can't seem to stay still. He bounces from one cushion to another, his small body vibrating with excess energy even as he mutters, "Everything feels weird. Everything feels weird," under his breath like a mantra.

The oldest does a better job of appearing calm. But I don't miss how his head tilts up seconds before each thunderclap rings out, his body tensing in anticipation. He feels it coming.

They're twitchier than a room full of hair-trigger pups during a blood moon.

Something about this storm is affecting all of them.

"What's wrong with you?" I direct the question at Sara, who tears her gaze from the window reluctantly.

She wrinkles her nose. "It's like... my skin doesn't fit right."

The younger boy stops his frantic bouncing long enough to scratch violently at his neck. "It itches," he whines, leaving red marks on his skin.

I look to Ron, raising an eyebrow.

"My ears hurt," the teenager says gruffly, then frowns. "No, not hurt. Just... pressure."

Their agitation is building with each passing minute. I can smell it. Stress in shifting adolescents often ends up with a wild shift, though it's never at the level of whatever happened to the toddler.

Let's take them outside, Fenris suggests.

I glance out the window. "It's storming," I point out. Of course he knows already. We all do. Kind of hard to miss when it's knocking our your electronics and turning kids into feral beasts.

Better out there than tearing this place apart, he counters. *If one of them shifts violently in here, someone could get hurt. Or worse—they could go for Grace.*

Between us, we can dominate any of these children—or all of them at once if needed. Better to have them where we can see them, where they have space to move, than bottled up in this tiny tin can.

Even if it's wet.

They're going to be a muddy mess, but at least it's easier to clean up than blood.

"Come on," I announce, shifting Bun to my other hip. "We're going outside."

"But it's raining," Jer protests, even as his body continues to twitch.

"Now."

The command has them all jerking to their feet. Sara first, followed by a relieved-looking Jer. Ron hesitates, his eyes darting toward the hall.

"She's fine," I tell him, relying on Fenris's words.

"Okay."

Ron finally moves toward the door.

Rain pours in sheets as we step outside, immediately soaking through our clothes. I'm surprised when the kids don't protest but rush into it instead. All except Bun, who Ron gently takes from my arms to help down the steps. Her small hands reach for the falling water with wonder, even as she squints in the rain, barely able to keep her eyes open.

I take a moment to trudge through the mud to the truck, finally killing the engine I'd left running in my rush to check on Grace. For a second, there's silence but for the rain and thunder.

When I turn back toward the camper, I freeze.

A golden retriever sits beside me, ears perked, tail wagging against the wet ground. Just... staring up at me with intelligent brown eyes.

This isn't right. Dogs never approach wolves, much less Lycans. Ever. My scent—predator, alpha, danger—sends them running.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I mutter.

The dog's tail wags harder. It's strangely untouched by the rain, too.

Fenris materializes from the shadows, a low growl rumbling from his throat. In one fluid motion, he lunges at the retriever, teeth snapping at its heels.

The dog yelps, scrambling backward before turning tail and bolting for the RV camped in the distance. I narrow my eyes, watching as it scampers away.

It keeps coming back, Fenris notes. It's either stupid or there's something strange about it.

I'm betting on the latter.

"Aww! He was cute!" Sara calls from where she's spinning in circles, arms outstretched to catch the rain.

Jer scoffs. "That was mean. He wasn't doing anything to you!"

Ron doesn't comment. He's too busy holding Bun's hands as she toddles through a puddle, her bare feet splashing with childish delight.

I watch them move through the storm, tension easing from their small bodies. Sara continues her spinning, wet hair plastering to her cheeks as she laughs quietly to herself. Jer has abandoned his complaints to roll in the mud, giggling, though he still flinches at each thunderclap. Ron paces the perimeter like a guard dog, always keeping Bun in his sight.

The older one will be a good wolf. Strong pack instinct mixed with his cautious nature will do him well as an adult shifter.

Strangely, the storm feels... calmer now. Or maybe it's just because the unhappy kids finally seem at peace.

I walk the perimeter, keeping close to Fenris's dark shape as he prowls the edges of our makeshift camp.

The camper's still dark; I guess the electricity isn't coming back anymore. It's a miracle the truck was still running.

I can't see Grace out here, but I know she's inside, vulnerable and alone.

Her heart rate is stable,

Fenris says, sensing my concern. *Body temperature is normal. We caught the drain before it went too far. Not like the night you tried to mate with her.*

I growl at the reminder. I should be with her, not out here babysitting a bunch of unstable shifter kids in the rain.

I shake off the irritation immediately. These are just pups. They need protection too. And Grace would be furious if I didn't take care of them properly.

They're pack now, and I need to appeal to Grace, who seems singularly determined not to fall in line with her role as my mate.

Thunder rumbles and cracks again.

I wish I understood what was happening with this storm. What Fiddleback's damn experiments might have unleashed on this place.

I duck into the truck cab, trying to escape the downpour for a moment. My clothes are soaked through, and now my seat is too.

But phones don't work in water.

I try Lyre's number again. Won't connect.

Jack-Eye. Same result.

Again.

"Goddamn storm," I mutter, switching to text messages instead, sending them both the same terse message.

[CAINE: Report in. Communication down. Need update.]

I look up through the windshield, squinting through the rain-streaked glass to check on the kids. Ron stands near Bun, helping her splash in a puddle. But—

Where the hell are the middle two?

I throw the truck door open, nearly ripping it off its hinges.

"Ron!" I bark. "Where are they?"

The teenager jerks his head toward the camper without even looking up. "Under there."

Sure enough, two small bodies are army-crawling beneath the camper, their clothes caked with mud as they wiggle from one end to the other.

"What are you doing?" I demand.

Sara's head pops out from beneath the metal frame, hair plastered to her face, grinning wildly. "It's a secret tunnel! We're exploring!"

"Get out from under there. Now."

Jer's voice calls from somewhere in the middle. "But we found something cool!"

"I won't ask again."

There's a moment of silence before both children emerge, covered head to toe in mud. Sara looks disappointed, but Jer clutches something in his small fist.

"Look!" He holds up what appears to be a small metal object, perfectly round and slightly rusty. "Treasure!"

I sigh heavily, tension draining from my shoulders. I can only imagine how much groveling would be necessary if I lost two of them. Grace seems sweet, but there's a stubborn edge to her. Seeing her angry might be cute, but I have no doubt it would slow our glacial relationship progress to an absolute stop.

This is worse than war, Fenris observes. At least in battle, you know where the enemy is.

Chapter 126: Grace: Waking to Chaos (I)

Sharp, digital beeps wake me out of what feels like a molasses-like sea of sleep.

My eyes are too heavy to pry open, but I manage anyway.

I'm not in the camper.

Panic is immediate, freezing every muscle. It was already hard to move, and now it's impossible.

Two feet, clad in black flip-flops and wearing an anklet with a bell, chiming sweetly with every step, pace toward me. They're men's feet, making the anklet seem so much more out of place. It's on a delicate golden chain, and I wonder how it doesn't snap every time he walks.

"Oh, dear. You aren't supposed to be here."

His voice slides over me, soft like silk and dripping with the sweetness of honey, but with the faint, smokey sound of a man trying to seduce you in the dark.

I'm already on guard.

The casual amusement in his tone wraps around me with unsettling familiarity, as if we're old friends reuniting after a brief separation. Far too intimate.

I try to sit up, pushing against whatever invisible force pins me down. My muscles strain against nothing and everything at once. The effort makes my vision swim, black spots dancing.

And then the world... glitches.

The floor beneath me shifts from cool marble to an infinite expanse of stars, then to absolutely nothing at all—vanishing and reforming with each desperate blink. My stomach lurches.

I'm seasick, and reality's fracturing.

He crouches beside me, and I try to focus on his face and not his feet floating above... nothing.

Big mistake.

His features refuse to settle. Too symmetrical one moment, then subtly wrong the next. His eyes cycle through impossible colors—violet blending into gold, then abyssal black, then something which isn't a color at all, but more of an impression of chaos.

His skin tone shifts with each blink, his hair growing and shortening and changing texture constantly. Beautiful, but the kind where my brain hurts just trying to perceive it. An optical illusion, cranked to the max.

"You're causing quite the stir, you know." He tilts his head, and the movement leaves tracers in my vision. "The Order is watching your every move. Balance is ready to intervene. And Chaos?"

He leans closer, his breath cool against my face. Long fingers tilt my chin up, and his lips hover dangerously near mine—not quite touching, but close enough for it to feel so very wrong.

"Chaos really likes you..."

Something flickers deep in my chest, a spark of heat spreading outward in a sudden rush. And inside the heat, something else responds—not me, but something within me. It snarls, the sound reverberating through my bones without making a sound anyone can hear.

I wrench backward, away from his almost-touch, my spine arching with sudden strength I didn't know I had. The movement feels instinctual, primal—and strangely, it doesn't come from me alone. I'm pulling from somewhere else, someone else.

Caine.

Our bond burns white-hot, flooding through my veins like liquid fire. Raw power surges through the connection, fierce and primal and alive in a way I've never felt before. My fingers dig into whatever surface I'm on, anchoring myself against the onslaught of energy.

He laughs, his face full of delight as he watches me. "Fated wolves are always so *prissy*."

The strange man stands up straight—or at least I think he does. His height flickers too, sometimes towering, sometimes merely tall, never settling on a single dimension. The amusement on his ever-changing face is the only constant, though it also flickers and

changes with his rise and lowering of his cheekbones and the shape of his mouth and nose.

"I'm not a wolf," I say, surprised by how level my voice sounds. Steady. Like I'm commenting on the weather instead of having an impossible conversation in an impossible place. My voice doesn't match my racing heart or the scream building in my throat. It's like my body and brain are slightly out of sync, operating on different frequencies.

The steadiness rattles me more than panic would have.

I suck in a breath, wondering how I'm even breathing in this place. But I am, and strangely, the air feels wonderful—cool and clean, filling my lungs and easing the weight from my limbs. Each breath brings a little more clarity, a little more strength.

He flaps a hand dismissively. "No, but there's a wolf who's claimed you, no?" His features ripple again, settling momentarily into a beautiful, golden-haired face before shifting away. He sports a giant, bushy beard now, and heavy brows. His nose wrinkles as he squints at me. "Though we don't even get to see the juicy parts since you keep fainting."

The genuine disappointment in his voice sends heat rushing to my cheeks.

The air suddenly changes, pressure building around us. Separate from the weight holding down my body, it feels like it's holding onto this space. He clicks his tongue, the sound unnaturally sharp. "Damn. They've already noticed you're here."

"Who are you?" I blurt out, the questions finally tumbling over themselves. "Where am I?"

Irritation flickers across his ever-changing features. "Why ask such generic questions? Wouldn't you rather know how..." He leans down again, pressing one finger to my chest, directly over my heart. The contact sends a riot of sensations through me—hot and cold, pleasure and revulsion, tingling electricity and unsettling numbness—all warring for dominance. "...to control what's inside you?"

"What's inside me?" My voice wavers for the first time.

His smile stretches too wide. "Kiss me and find out."

"Absolutely not." The words snap out, firm and certain. Whatever's happening, whatever answers I need, I'll find them my own way.

He throws back his head and laughs. "Why do wolves have to be so damn loyal?"

"I'm not a wolf," I repeat, the words feeling more like a question this time.

He shakes his head, something like pity crossing his features. "No. You're much stronger than that."

The space around us stretches and shrinks. The nausea in my belly ramps up. Panic seizes me as I realize he's leaving—or I am.

"Wait! No, I have more questions! Please!" I cry out. "What's Balance? And Order? What are you? Why—"

"I'll see you later, darling," he says, his voice the last thing to fade as darkness reclaims me.

Chapter 127: Grace: Waking to Chaos (II)

The now-familiar beeps wake me up again.

My throat is raw and scratchy. My body weighs a thousand pounds, limbs heavy and uncooperative as I try to push myself up, but it's still better than the dream I just had.

Something's off. The air is too still, too warm. The fan's off.

I grope for the light beside the bed, clicking the switch. Nothing. Power's still out, as expected.

The gentle patter of rain against the metal roof fills the silence—still storming then. But underneath that steady rhythm, there's something missing. No shuffling of little feet. No whispered conversations between the kids. No soft breathing from Bun beside me.

Bun.

My heart slams against my ribs as I pat the bed around me. Empty. "Bun?" My voice cracks. The darkness offers no answer, just a hollow silence that screams *wrong wrong wrong*.

Then—faintly—laughter. Children's voices from outside the camper, muted by distance and rain.

They're outside? In this strange storm? Alone?

Adrenaline floods my system and I bolt upright, my head spinning from the sudden movement. My legs tangle in the sheets as I scramble toward the bedroom door, toward the sound. One foot catches, and I stumble forward, pitching headfirst into the narrow hallway.

The world tilts as I tumble down the small stairwell, my shoulder slamming into the wall, knee cracking against the floor. Pain bursts white-hot behind my eyes. I land in an ungraceful heap at the bottom, bruised and disoriented.

I push myself up onto my hands, ready to crawl if I have to, when—

"Stay where you are, Jer. Sara, hold onto Bun for me."

Caine's voice cuts through my panic like a knife—deep, commanding, but oddly gentle. The single anchor in a world gone sideways.

My wild heartbeat stutters, then slows. I freeze, hands pressed against the cool floor, and force myself to breathe. One deep inhale. One shaky exhale. They're not alone. Caine's with them. They're safe. It's fine. Everything's fine.

I pull myself to my feet, wincing as I brush dirt from my palms and rub at my throbbing knees. My gaze drifts to the wall-mounted solar panel monitor, and I blink, confused by the display. The battery percentage is dancing erratically, flashing impossible numbers—394%... 712%... 1046%—too high to be real.

Without thinking, I smack the display with my palm. The screen goes black, then flickers back to life with more reasonable numbers. 57%. Not great, but not impossible.

I wonder how long I've been asleep.

The lights flicker on overhead a moment later, and the blessed hum of the air conditioner follows. I exhale in relief as cool air starts to circulate.

A bottle of water and a few desperate swallows later, the cool liquid soothes my parched throat. It doesn't do anything for the lingering unease clinging to me like second skin, though. I shiver violently in this humid heat.

That dream... it felt too real. The man with the shifting face, talking about Order and Balance and Chaos like they were people. The sensation of power crawling through my veins. The way the world just... disappeared.

The beeping starts again, pulling me from my thoughts. It's not the monitor—it's silent, just displaying numbers like a silent sentinel of electricity use. I follow the sound, eyes scanning the small space until they land on my phone lying on the dinette table.

It's not a sound the device has ever made before.

The screen pulses with light. I pick it up, frowning at the unfamiliar notification banner splashed across the lock screen.

[Divinity App (Restricted): 2 new notifications.]

What the hell? I don't remember downloading anything like this. Maybe it's one of Lyre's weird apps? That would make sense. It probably synced to my phone somehow.

I swipe it open, curiosity overriding caution, and throw a mental apology her way. I'm not probing. I'm just... investigating. Yeah.

The interface is sleek. A minimalist black background with glowing white text and shimmering silver icons. Three tabs glow at the top: DMs, Urgent Requests, and Warnings.

Under Warnings, a notification:

[PLAUSIBILITY WARNING: Intrusion Detected: Mortal Presence within Divine Plane]

I blink, stunned. What the actual hell? I tap the notification, but it only expands to show the same message with no further explanation.

My finger hovers over the DMs tab, hesitating before I press it. A single message appears:

[CHAOS: Good to meet you, my sweet little anchor. Tell Lyrielle I miss her.]

The air leaves my lungs in a rush, and I'm dizzy.

Chaos. Chaos is who I met in my dream? And he's connected to this strange app, and it was *real*?

This can't be real. It has to be some elaborate prank, or a weird glitch, or—

[CAUSALITY WARNING: Breach of Divine Integrity.]

The newest notification pops up as I'm still staring at the screen.

[WARNING: An Anchor-class anomaly has enabled CHAOS-thread intrusion beyond permitted thresholds. Divine boundary integrity compromised.]

Unauthorized Entity: CHAOS

Event Cascade: ACTIVE

Temporal bleed risk: ELEVATED

Convergence trajectory: UNSTABLE

Current Timeline Viability: 71%

Recommended Action:

- **Cease further resonance with CHAOS-thread**
- **Await Balance intervention]**

There are even three buttons at the bottom. Two are greyed out, though.

[Acknowledge] [Suppress Warning (Locked)] [Request Guardian Support (Unavailable)]

Oh, I get it. I'm dreaming. It must be a dream within a dream. Now it all makes sense.

Panic slithers away and I suck in a deep, humid breath, smiling at the ceiling with relief. Yeah. This is just a dream. I'll just crawl back into bed and go to sleep and wake up properly—

The RV door slams open so hard it bounces against the wall. Caine bursts in, rain-soaked and wild-eyed, scanning the space until his gaze locks onto me. The tension visibly drains from his shoulders.

My hand spasms on my phone.

"Grace." Just my name, exhaled like a prayer.

Before I can respond, he crosses the small space in two long strides and pulls me into a fierce hug, arms banding tight around me. For a heartbeat, I melt into it, the solid warmth of him a comfort against the lingering chill of fear—

Until something under my skin reacts. A faint pulling, like something's leeching out of me and into him. Lyre said this is dangerous.

I gasp and shove him away with all my strength. "No touching!"

Caine goes completely still, hands raised, body rigid with shock. He backs away immediately, giving me space, but his eyes never leave my face. The silence stretches between us, taut and uncomfortable.

When he finally speaks, his voice is low and cautious.

"You're awake."

"I am—oh." The sudden sound of rain against the roof disappears, and I glance out the window. "It stopped raining."

The sun's come out.

Chapter 128: Jack-Eye: Watching

JACK-EYE

The walls of the motel room press in, trapping her scent, her magic. I'm still burning from the inside out. Whatever she did with that arcane kiss, it's crawling under my skin like electricity, making my wolf pace and snarl. I breathe through my teeth, fighting for control.

When I hear Lyre invite Thom in, my stomach drops. I know what's coming. What she's about to do. But knowing and seeing are two different kinds of torture.

The door creaks open and there he is—the wizard. Damp hair hanging in his face, smelling of cheap motel soap and nervousness. Too clean. Too weak. I don't move from my spot against the wall, don't speak. Just watch, every muscle in my body locked tight as steel.

Thom freezes when he sees me, his eyes darting between us. "I—uh—"

Lyre slides past him, shutting the door with a soft click. "Come in, come in. Let's get this over with." Her voice is bright, casual, like she's about to help him move furniture instead of—

She grabs a chair from the small desk, dragging it to the middle of the room. I don't miss how she angles it with deliberate precision, making sure I'll have the perfect view of her face. Of her mouth.

Unfortunately, his dick will be in the picture. But I'm trying not to think about it.

Thom hovers, uncertain. "What exactly is—"

"Sit," she commands, and he does, perching nervously on the edge.

The smirk she shoots me makes my cock twitch. Her eyes lock with mine as she begins explaining to the wizard, her tone clinical and detached.

"Arcana transfer works best with physical contact. The more intimate, the purer and faster the transfer." She tilts her head, rainbow hair cascading over one shoulder, and I want to grab it in my hands and yank until she's on her knees and begging for more.

From me. Not from the stupid wilting human.

"The most efficient way for *us* would be oral contact," she continues, making this blow-job sound like a medical procedure.

I like that.

But not if she speaks that way to me later.

Then again, I might have a new kink. Nurse Lyre, sucking the evil out of me with her mouth...? Yeah. I'm okay with this.

Thom's eyes widen, his pulse quickening so loud I can hear it from across the room.

Less okay with *that*.

"You mean—"

"My mouth, your dick."

"M-my d-dick?!"

"I'm going to blow you, yes." She doesn't look at him, keeps her gaze fixed on me, like she can read my mind. Her lips are curved up on one side in the faintest smirk and I really wish it was my cock going between those pretty lips of hers.

This is going to be torture.

"Problem?" she asks the magic-user, still not looking his way.

Thom squirms in his seat, swallowing hard. His eyes flick to me, then back to her. "Does he have to be here?"

"Yep." She doesn't even turn to acknowledge him. Just smiles at me, knowing exactly what she's doing and how hard my cock's getting.

Fuck.

I don't blink. Don't move. Want him to feel just how unwelcome he is in this space between Lyre and me.

Thom withers under my stare, shoulders hunching. "Okay," he mutters, trying to sound nonchalant. Failing. "I guess that's... fine."

Lyre kneels in front of him, and every movement is swift and composed. She looks like she's done this a thousand times. My fists clench involuntarily, and my wolf both growls and whimpers in my head. He has no idea how to feel, either.

She takes her time unbuckling his belt, sliding down his zipper. Everything deliberate. Everything for my benefit, because she's watching me as she does it.

The wizard's already trembling.

When she takes him in her mouth, I see everything—her lips stretched around him, the flash of her tongue, the fluttering of her eyelashes. And always, always, her eyes on mine.

Heat sears through me. My wolf claws at my insides. I want to rip the human to pieces. I want to be the one in that chair. Want her pretty, sassy little mouth wrapped around my cock instead of his. The tension builds in my chest until I can barely breathe.

His head falls back, a strangled noise escaping his throat. His hands, which had been white-knuckled on the armrests, suddenly shoot up to grab her head.

Lyre jerks back instantly, his dick sliding out of her mouth as she snaps, "Don't touch me."

Thom gasps, face flushed, hands flailing back to the armrests. "S-sorry! I wasn't thinking—"

I don't change my expression, just cross my arms over my chest. But inside, satisfaction mingles with the rage. She doesn't want his hands on her. Good.

She returns to her task. Thom's chest heaves, his face bright red. His hands twitch and spasm on the armrests as he fights to keep them still.

Lyre cups his balls, and my own cock jerks in response. I'm harder than I've ever been in my life, watching her work. Every muscle in my body strains with the effort of standing still, of not charging across the room.

Thom's breathing grows ragged. His legs tremble. He's close.

"I'm—I can't—" he chokes out.

Lyre doesn't speed up, doesn't slow down. Just maintains her rhythm until his hips jerk and he comes with a strangled cry.

She pulls back immediately, her expression twisting with disgust. She doesn't swallow.

Without thinking, I push off from the wall, pulling my shirt over my head in one smooth motion. I hold it out to her, silent. She meets my eyes and spits into the fabric without hesitation. The intimacy of the moment cuts through my rage.

I step closer, gently wiping her lips with a clean corner of my shirt. Her lips curl into a small smile, and my heart stutters.

Fuck.

She's got me wrapped around her gorgeous little finger, and I'm delirious to be here.

I drop the shirt to the floor between us. Neither of us speaks.

Thom sits dazed in the chair, struggling to fasten his pants with fingers that don't seem to work right. Magic crackles around him—visible even to my non-spellblood eyes—a hazy glow illuminating his skin. He smells a little like... potato chips.

"Get some rest," Lyre tells him, not bothering to look his way. "Tomorrow's going to be busy."

He staggers to his feet, flushed and unsteady. "Th-thank you," he stammers.

Now she does look at him, expression flat. "It's just a transfusion, Thom. Nothing to thank me for."

"Still..." A small, dazed smile appears on his face. "I liked it."

A growl rips from my throat.

Thom jumps, eyes wide with terror, and fumbles for the doorknob. The door slams behind him.

The second we're alone, I snap. Crossing the room in two strides, I grab Lyre and push her against the door. Her back hits the wood with a soft thud.

"I'm done with your games," I growl, face inches from hers.

She raises one eyebrow, completely unfazed by my display of dominance. "Is this the part where I pretend not to be in control?"

My anger splutters, my hands spasming around her shoulders.

My cock doesn't mind. It twitches just by having her heat close to us once again.

I groan, dropping my forehead against hers. "Why do you always have to destroy the moment?"

She slides one hand up my bare chest, her touch like fire against my skin. "Ooh, yes, big bad alpha," she drawls, "I'm so afraid. Whatever are you going to do with me?"

Chapter 129: Lyre: His Dominance

LYRE

My mouth tastes like shit and disappointment.

Not literal shit—though after what just happened, I'd need to think about it. Arcana transfer through sexual contact always leaves a distinct flavor of shame, regret, and something unpleasant. Like... licking a subway pole after a rush hour commute.

Never a fun time.

Who the hell set the metaphysical laws of arcana transfer to porn logic, anyway? Probably Chaos. It's always Chaos. Some bored cosmic entity sitting on their multidimensional ass, thinking: *"You know what would make power exchange more interesting? If they had to suck dick for it."*

I resist the urge to spit again as Aaron's forehead presses against mine, his breath hot on my face. His bare chest radiates heat, and his hands still grip my shoulders from slamming me against the door. The wood presses into my back.

I'm still buzzing from the transfer—power crackling beneath my skin, ready to snap and burn everything it touches. It would be so easy to push him back, to remind him who's really in control here.

But I'm curious.

"Well?" I ask, keeping my voice cool and casual. "You watched me suck someone else's dick. Are you gonna do something about it, or what?"

His shoulders shake with laughter, though there's nothing amused in the sound. It's rough, gritty, like it's being dragged out of him against his will.

"So this is your idea of being submissive?" He looks down at me, pupils blown wide, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

I shrug, stretching my neck and arching my back slightly—a deliberate, catlike movement, brushing my breasts against his chest. "It's harder than it looks, alright? Take it or leave it."

His eyes track the movement, lingering on the exposed line of my throat. Good. Let him think about sinking his teeth there. Let him imagine what I'd do to him if he tried.

"Hurry up and slam me down, big bad alpha." I curve my lips into a taunting smile. "Show me what a *real* wolf can do."

He groans. "I'm just a beta, remember? Wouldn't want you too disappointed."

The man's got jokes. We both know he's an alpha-strength Lycan, but he's desperately clinging to his humor to keep himself under control.

Time to make it snap.

I raise an eyebrow. "So you disappoint a lot of women, then?"

His nostrils flare. His scent spikes with something sharp and tingly.

Before he can respond, I reach out and palm the hard length of him through his jeans. His cock jumps beneath my hand, hot even through the denim. Even if his technique sucks—and I'm sure it doesn't—it'll feel good from the stretch alone.

My tongue slides across my teeth as I glance up at him through my eyelashes, aiming for sultry and innocent.

Innocent... might not work very well. I'm not great at it. As you can see.

"Oops," I say, giving him a light squeeze. "My hand slipped."

His breath catches. A snarl rips from his throat, vibrating through his chest and against my palm.

"You still suck at being submissive," he mutters.

I tilt my head, meeting his gaze directly. "Then *make* me submit."

Something changes in his eyes—a switch flipping. The playful tension disappears, replaced by something darker, hungrier. His grip on my shoulders tightens for a fraction of a second before sliding down to capture my wrists in a single swift movement as he spins us both around.

He walks me backward, his body crowding mine, forcing me to retreat step by step toward the bed. For once, I allow myself to be moved. I could stop this—could drop him with a thought, with a whispered word, with just the right flex of power.

But I don't.

I watch him carefully, gauging his every reaction. The way his pupils dilate. The flush creeping up his neck. The careful control in his grip—firm enough to guide me, not hard enough to bruise.

"You're gonna regret that challenge," he growls, his voice dropping to something low and dangerous. Normally, alpha posturing doesn't do much for me. His? Sends an unexpected shiver racing down my spine.

My calves hit the edge of the mattress. His hands release my wrists only to plant firmly on my shoulders, and he pushes.

I fall back onto the bed, the cheap motel mattress creaking beneath my weight. The landing isn't hard—he's measured his strength, thrown me down with enough force to claim space but not enough to hurt.

A laugh bubbles up from my chest, breathless and excited despite myself.

"There we go," I say, propping myself up on my elbows. "That's the spirit."

The sound of his belt buckle hitting the floor sends a twisted thrill through me. It's the language of intention—metal against cheap carpet, the scrape of a zipper. Purposeful. Deliberate.

Aaron stands at the foot of the bed, fingers hooked in his belt loops, jeans hanging low on his hips. His expression has hardened into something cold and commanding.

"Strip."

One word. No embellishment. He's learning.

I take my time, dragging my fingers to the hem of my shirt, pulling it up inch by agonizing inch. His gaze tracks every movement, hungry but controlled. He wants to rush me—I can see it in the flex of his jaw, the tight press of his lips—but he doesn't.

Good boy.

I maintain eye contact as I bare my torso, discarding my shirt to the side. His nostrils flare slightly. The room suddenly feels smaller, tighter, the air between us charged with static electricity.

Aaron sheds his jeans with efficient movements, never looking away from me. His cock springs free, hard and thick, flushed at the tip. He kneels at the end of the bed, wrapping his fingers around his length with casual ownership.

My turn.

The slow glide of fabric down my hips. The deliberate arch of my back as I bend to remove my underwear. Every movement a silent challenge, a test of his restraint. I'm not playing submissive—I'm making him earn it.

When I'm finally naked, I straighten, letting him look his fill. His eyes have turned molten gold, wolf bleeding through as he strokes himself. The room fills with his scent, and I can imagine him suddenly: wolfed out, in the rain, deep in the mountains. Wild and natural.

He's releasing his pheromones deliberately, filling the air with his dominance.

Good boy.

I keep my arcana passive, quieting the usual crackle of power. I let his aura reach for me instead, testing the borders of my energy. It brushes against my magic—not forceful, not demanding, but with velvet strength.

My skin prickles. My pussy throbs.

Well, well. He's figured out finesse in record time.

His breathing deepens, chest rising and falling in a measured rhythm as he watches me. "Turn around," he commands, voice dropping an octave. "Hands and knees."

A flicker of disappointment curls in my stomach. Straight for the gold? Predictable wolf. But his dominance presses against me, not just pheromones but genuine alpha energy, and I find myself complying. Not because I must—I always have a choice—but because I'm curious where this leads.

I position myself on all fours, my back to him, waiting for the dip of the mattress, the heat of his body covering mine. Instead, the bed lightens as he moves away. His warmth disappears entirely.

Where—?

I turn to look over my shoulder, confused.

The crack of his palm against my ass comes without warning. Sharp, stinging heat blooms across my skin, and I jerk forward with a startled gasp.

"Don't look," he orders. "Eyes forward."

Oh.

Sting. Heat. A pleasant tingle going straight between my legs.

My pussy clenches around nothing.

It's a game.

Not a straightforward fuck at all. Something with rules and consequences.

I bite back a smile as I face forward again. Perhaps he's more interesting than I thought.

Chapter 130: Jack-Eye: Clean Your Dirty Mouth

JACK-EYE

I have no idea what I'm doing.

Not that I'd ever admit it out loud. I've had my share of women—more than my share, if we're being honest—but this is different. Lyre wants something more. Something with teeth and edges. A dominance running deeper than two bodies colliding.

Her ass is pink from my hand, a perfect handprint streaked across her creamy skin. She's still on all fours, legs spread just enough to give me a cock-throbbing view. She's wet—slick and glistening—and every instinct in my body screams to just drive into her, claim her, make her mine.

But no. First things first. Stop getting distracted, Jack-Eye.

I turn abruptly, walking away from the bed and her perfect ass. From the bathroom, I grab one of those wrapped plastic cups they leave by the sink and fill it with water from the tap. When I come back, she's sitting up on her heels, a slight frown creasing her forehead. The sight of her naked and waiting makes me want to toss the cup over my shoulder and force her pretty little mouth onto *my* cock, to feel the heaven she already bestowed upon the damn twitchy wizard, but I keep my expression neutral.

"Drink," I thrust the cup into her hand, my voice a little rougher and deeper than I mean for it to be.

One eyebrow arches perfectly. "You left me alone for *this*?" The sarcasm drips from her voice, but there's something else there too—curiosity, maybe.

"Get him out of your mouth, sweetheart."

Her lips twitch, almost imperceptibly, but I catch it. A tiny crack in her impenetrable wall.

Between the barest ghost of a smile and the scent of her arousal between her legs, wafting delicately in the air, I'm pretty sure I'm doing okay.

For now.

Maybe.

"You're too sweet for your own good, wolf," she says, but there's less bite in her tone than usual. Something's shifted. Defenses officially breached.

I climb onto the bed behind her as she takes a sip, settling on my knees. My hands find her back, running down her spine in firm, possessive strokes. Her skin is warm silk under my palms. But even as I touch her, I can't shake the image of Thom's dick in her mouth, spurting his nasty wizard cum into her mouth.

It doesn't sit right—the thought of any part of him still inside her burns my gut.

I want to drag her out in front of him, take her from behind as he watches. Want my cock deep inside, my hand around her throat, showing Thom she was never his and always meant to be mine.

Fuck.

My balls tighten even thinking about it.

Thinking about how I could claim her, suck the tender skin of her neck and bite down as he watches. How I'd make her beg and scream and writhe under my touch, my hands, when she wouldn't even let him touch her.

Prove who's really winning here.

She swishes the water around in her mouth, and something in me snaps. I grab a fistful of her rainbow hair. The jealousy turns bitter and nasty in my stomach.

"Spit," I order.

Without turning, without question, she obeys—spits into the cup cleanly. I take it from her hand and set it on the nightstand, as far away from us as I can reach.

She remains on her knees, still and waiting. Then she reaches behind her, finds my hands, and places them firmly on her breasts. The weight of them fills my palms perfectly. I hesitate for just a heartbeat—this is the moment to decide how far we're going.

Fuck it.

Her nipples pebble beneath my thumbs, taut and aching. I stroke my fingers slowly across her curves, teasing the sensitive tips until her hips slowly grind back against me.

Her breathing's shifted. No longer calm and rhythmic, it comes in harsher pants and quicker beats. I can smell her pussy, the heat and invitation there, and it's so fucking hard not to throw her forward and take her in one full stroke.

That would be pathetic.

A one-pump chump kind of move.

And there's no way I can keep Lyre around if I show her that side of me, even if my dick's all too willing.

I roll one nipple between my fingers, pinching it hard enough to make her hiss. Her breath stutters, but she doesn't pull away. I do the same to the other, twisting it slightly, and she makes a small, strangled noise low in her throat.

There we go.

My sweet Lyre's responsive beneath her indifferent attitude. A spitfire in bed. I knew she would be.

So fucking hot and soft in my hands. Every touch feels like a button I've just discovered—one I want to press until she breaks apart.

Her hips twitch again, spreading a little wider.

My cock throbs.

And I let go of the restraint I've been clinging to. Let the wolf rise just beneath the surface of my skin.

Her body reacts instantly. Her breath stutters. Her thighs quiver. I send a heavier wave between them, sliding across her pussy. Her hips twitch, as if she can't help herself. A small, soft breath slips out, a strangled moan.

I'd meant to test her. What I didn't expect was her reaction testing *me*. The deeper I push, the more she bends. Not breaking—never that. But yielding. Luring me in like a trap set with silk.

Fuck. She *likes* this.

And Goddess help me, so do I.

"Is this all you've got?" she murmurs, her voice husky but still challenging. Always challenging.

"Don't push unless you're ready for what happens next," I warn, my lips grazing the shell of her ear.

She turns her head just enough that I can see her profile, the curve of her smile. "Show me what you're hiding, wolf. I can take it."

This isn't just sex for Lyre—it's a test. She's measuring me, seeing if I can handle her, dominate her, claim her in the way *she* needs. She isn't emotionally invested. Yet.

It's fine. I'll get her there.

For a second, I pause. My hand slides from her breast to tangle into her hair again. My other hand curves around her throat. She's so still I can feel her pulse pounding against my fingers.

We stare at each other, suspended in a breathless moment.

Then I jerk her head back as I press my cock between the cheeks of her ass. Goddess, they're so soft.

"We haven't even started yet," I growl against her neck. "I had to clean your dirty mouth