

Grace of a Wolf –

Chapter 131: Lyre: Wash it Out

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LYRE

Aaron's fumbling a little, hesitating before he jerks my head back, his voice trembling just a little when he tries to sound cold.

It's cute.

Like he wants to treasure me, not take me like a common whore.

But I don't want to be something precious. I want dirty. Filthy. And to see exactly how much dominance lies under his skin.

I know he's thinking about it. About how easily I took the wizard in my mouth. How I didn't even flinch. It's the kind of thing to bruise a man's ego.

Good.

Let it bruise.

Let him fuck me like he's got something to prove. I want his claws out, his teeth at my throat—not worship. I want him to use me. Break the illusion that I'm untouchable. Leave marks where everyone will see them. I'll heal, but he needs to know what it feels like to fuck something divine—and realize she liked it.

Being powerful is like a drug. The highest of highs, but it comes with its own side effects—like knowing no one can put their hand to your throat and expect to live through it.

I'm tired of being the strongest in the room. Of being worshipped. Sex is little more than an itch to be scratched every few years, usually with some random slop of a human. And they're always so reverent, so awed, unable to handle the power oozing even from my breath.

But not Aaron.

He's hesitant, but he isn't weak.

Demanding things of me, even when he has no place to do so.

If Caeriel tried it, I'd tear out his fucking spine.

But when Aaron yanks my hair back again and I can feel his hard, heavy cock pressed against my ass, my heart thumps hard. He's willing to play along, and I *like* it.

The air smells of wolf and alpha heat, my pussy's throbbing from his aura whispering against it, and for the first time in far too long, I'm aching for more.

If he stops, I might actually kill him.

"My mouth?" I purr, shoving back against his cock. "How dirty is it?"

Aaron's voice drops to a rough whisper, and I swear the sound alone drags across my clit. "That mouth is a fucking sin. Makes promises your body can't cash."

A delicious shiver ripples through me.

The usual rhythm of existence is tedious immortality punctuated by brief moments of violence or necessity. This? This feeling of yielding control to another's hand? It's rarer than an honest politician.

Let him think he's in control. Let him think this is about him. The truth is, I'm the one who gave him the leash—and that makes it mine.

His thumb presses against my cheek, pushing slowly over my lips until it breaches my mouth. My breath catches in my chest. He's understanding my assignment so well I could purr. I give his thumb a long, slow lick, tasting salt and wolf.

"This mouth's gonna get you in trouble." His voice strokes along my nerves, low and deliberate, sending a slick pulse of want straight between my legs. "First it's all over another man's cock, and now you won't shut the fuck up."

I laugh—low, mocking, sultry—the sound scraping against his thumb. "You gonna punish me, puppy?"

His hand glides from my face, down my throat, over my shoulder, trailing heat across my skin. In one swift motion, he captures my wrist and twists my arm behind me, forcing my back to arch, my breasts to thrust forward. The sudden shift in power sends a flood of wetness below.

Fuck.

Yeah.

He knows what he's doing.

The fumbling is done. Whatever decision he's come to, it's exactly what I needed.

"You sound like you want me to," he growls against my ear.

His heat rolls off him like a second skin, brushing mine without ever quite touching. My breath hitches, not because I'm nervous—but because my body's an attention whore.

I can smell his arousal, thick and wolfish, bitter with jealousy and something darker. Every inch of me reacts to it. It's humiliating. And fucking delicious. My thighs are already slick, my spine arched like I'm begging for it. I'm not. But I *will* let him think so. Let him believe he's in charge, just long enough for both of us to enjoy the lie.

The spark he ignites isn't just desire. It's a challenge. A game worth playing.

I lean my head back against his chest, deliberately exposing the vulnerable line of my throat. My eyes find his from below, half-lidded and taunting. I've faced death and walked away intact—I'll surrender, but only to someone strong enough to earn it.

He leans down, and I brace for impact, for teeth and hunger and dominance.

Instead, his lips meet mine with unexpected restraint. Slow. Controlled. His teeth catch my bottom lip, tugging gently before releasing. His breath warms my cheek, scented with desire and restraint. This kiss isn't claiming—it's savoring. It leaves me unexpectedly breathless.

His dominance holds my body still, unable even to wriggle against the throbbing low in my belly. I could fight it, but I don't. It would be defeating the point of this little game of ours.

He has me metaphysically tied.

It's sexier than any sin.

"You're gonna suck my cock until tears spill down your face," he murmurs against my lips, each word a caress and threat combined. "Until you can't breathe without tasting me. I won't stop 'til you're gagging, choking, crying, and *begging* for more."

I chuckle, the sound vibrating between us. I'm still in control. Barely. My body hums with anticipation, my skin thrilled everywhere he touches me. This restraint, this patience—it's more devastating than brute force could ever be.

He learns so quickly.

"That's a lot of words and no action," I purr, each syllable dripping with challenge.

A growl tears from his throat, rumbling through our bodies. His nostrils flare, his pupils dilating with primal jealousy. I can smell it.

"I can still taste him in your mouth."

Seven hundred years of existence, and this might be the first time I've considered letting someone truly possess me, if only for a night. The thought should terrify me. Instead, it thrills.

I tilt my face back further.

"Then wash it out for me."

Chapter 132: Jack-Eye: Her Game (I)

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JACK-EYE

She looks at me, lips parted, eyes blown wide with want. "Then wash it out for me."

The invitation hangs between us, filthy and explicit. I know exactly what she wants from me. She wants my cock down her throat until she's sobbing. Wants me to fuck her mouth until she can't taste him anymore, until there's nothing left of Thom's magic or his presence.

And Goddess help me, I want it too. Have been dreaming about it since I first caught her scent. The thought of sliding between those sharp little teeth, watching those cat eyes water as she takes me deep—it's been torturing me since I laid eyes on her. I hated watching her do it to another man. Hated everything about it.

But giving Lyre exactly what she wants? Too easy. She's testing me. Everything with her is a game, a challenge, a way to see if I'll break. And I refuse to fail.

My mind wanders to a ridiculous place. I imagine grabbing her wrist, dragging her into the bathroom, and brushing her damn teeth. Slow and condescending, standing behind her at the sink mirror, watching her furious eyes as I move the brush over every tooth.

"Minty fresh," I'd say with a smug grin, right before she'd spin around and punch me in the balls.

The image is so absurd that my lips twitch, amusement flickering briefly across my face.

Lyre's eyes narrow immediately. Nothing gets past her. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing," I lie, my voice a little too casual.

Her pupils contract slightly at the obvious bullshit. She doesn't want jokes. She wants control—my control—over her. My wolf growls, the sound vibrating through my chest. I've been sucked into her orbit, drawn in by her arousal, by the strange pull she has over us both. The promise of dominating the woman who scares my wolf to death is impossible to resist.

I bend down, my grip firm on her hair as I kiss her—upside down, her head tilted back against me. My mouth consumes hers, tongue pushing inside without hesitation. I taste her, explore her, deep and slow, cleaning every crevice. My tongue slides against the roof of her mouth, behind her teeth, intentionally thorough.

It's filthy. I love it.

When she tries to catch and suck on my tongue, I bite her bottom lip hard enough to make her gasp. "Open," I growl against her lips.

She hesitates—always testing, always pushing. I reach down and pinch both nipples, hard and sudden. Her back arches off the bed as a moan spills from her mouth, giving me exactly what I want.

I don't stop kissing her until her mouth is thoroughly fucked. By the time I pull back, her lips are swollen and red, her eyes glassy with arousal. I run my fingers over her mouth

possessively, tracing the outline of her lips. Then I press two fingers past them, pushing in slowly.

She accepts them immediately, tongue curling around my knuckles as she sucks. The wet heat of her mouth sends jolts straight to my cock.

She takes them like she's starving, her cheeks hollowing with every suck. The heat of her mouth draws a hiss from between my teeth, and I have to close my eyes for a second—just a second—or I might lose the plot entirely.

I want to keep her like this, mouth full and obedient, tongue flicking lazy circles like she's savoring it. She's not just teasing me back. She's showing me she *knows* what she's doing.

"I had a different kind of washing out in mind," she murmurs between licks, her voice a purr of challenge.

"I know you did." My words come out like sandpaper against my throat; it's dry and parched from all this damn want I'm holding back.

Without warning, I jerk back and flip her over in one fluid motion. She lands with a startled gasp that quickly transforms into a moan as one of my arms hooks beneath her hips, lifting her ass into the air. My other hand yanks a pillow from the head of the bed and shoves it underneath her, elevating her hips perfectly.

Her legs spread for me instinctively—no hesitation, no shyness. She's dripping, flushed pink and so wet I can see it gleaming on her inner thighs. The sight of her displayed like this, offered up and waiting, makes my wolf howl with primal need.

Lyre shudders beneath me, all that flawless skin begging for my hands, my mouth, my teeth. Even my wolf whines with the need to claim her. And fuck, it would be so easy to give in.

But I don't. I won't.

Instead, I trace two fingers along the slick outer edges of her pussy. No penetration. Just a teasing brush, barely there. Just enough to feel how wet she is without giving her what she wants.

Her hips buck involuntarily, chasing my touch. I pull back so she can't get pressure where she needs it, and she makes a frustrated little sound in the back of her throat. So fucking adorable.

"Problem?" Restraint has me sounding like a chain-smoker of fifty years, and I hope it doesn't turn her off. But it's hard, damn it.

She scowls at me, her slitted eyes flashing with impatience. Her breath catches when my fingers pass close to her entrance again, circling without dipping inside.

"You're stalling," she says, trying to sound bored. But her voice trembles on the last syllable.

"Not stalling." I drag my fingers up one side of her slit, then down the other. So close, but never where she wants me. "Taking my time."

My cock throbs, achingly hard, desperate to replace my fingers. To sink into her slick heat until she's gasping, until those sharp little teeth are sinking into her own lip as she comes undone beneath me. But I've spent my life learning restraint. Caine might be all impulsive instinct, but I'm the one who has to think with his brain instead of his wolf.

And right now, my brain knows giving Lyre exactly what she's asking for is the surest way to lose this battle before it begins.

I have to break *her*, while letting her think she's breaking *me*.

Chapter 133: Jack-Eye: Her Game (II)

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JACK-EYE

She pushes back against my hand, trying to force my fingers inside. I pull back again, denying her. Her growl of frustration sends a shiver down my spine.

"I thought you were going to wash out my mouth." She's trying to provoke me, challenge me. "Or are you all talk, wolf?"

In response, I let my dominance pour out of me like smoke—thick, suffocating, filling the air between us. It rolls over her skin, a ripple of goosebumps rising in its wake as it presses against her like an invisible hand.

I've never seen a non-wolf react to alpha energy like this. This is a trick that works on betas, omegas—pack members who recognize the hierarchy. Humans might fall beneath it, might struggle to breathe and be crushed by its pressure, but they don't *feel* it like we do. Like more than just a wave of heavy, crushing weight.

But Lyre's back arches under it, her breath coming faster.

I lean forward and grab a handful of her breast, squeezing with slow, deliberate pressure. My thumb circles her nipple before giving it a firm twist, just enough to leave a phantom ache behind.

She doesn't moan, doesn't flinch—but her breath hitches, barely perceptible, and her skin tightens beneath my palm. I switch hands, repeating the pattern with quiet focus. No rush. No mercy. I want her keyed up and off balance before I even truly begin.

Then something strange happens. Her magic pushes back against mine. Not resisting, exactly—more like... teasing. Playing. Her energy slides against mine, coy and challenging, like fingers dancing along the edges of my power.

The feeling is electric. My skin prickles with it—this sensation of her magic taunting mine, coaxing it, then slipping away when it gets too close. My wolf snarls, frustrated by this game she's playing, even as my body burns with arousal at the strange intimacy of it all.

I push harder, concentrating all my dominance into a focused wave of alpha energy. It crashes over her, breaking through the teasing resistance with an outpouring of primal power. Her magic buckles under it—not surrendering, but yielding space, acknowledging the force behind my will.

She laughs breathlessly, the sound of it half-moan.

"Good boy," she murmurs, like I'm the one being trained. "I was beginning to think I'd have to spell out what I wanted in small words."

That condescension, that edge of control even when she's spread out beneath me—it makes my wolf bare its teeth, makes my heart pound. She's not fighting me for dominance; she's still trying to control how I dominate her.

Her thighs fall wider, an invitation. Her scent curls around me, thick and decadent. Not just arousal—*hers*. Sweet, sharp, and soaked into the sheets.

My wolf howls for it, for a taste. I want to bury my face between her thighs and drink until I drown.

I draw my hands back, not touching her at all now. Instead, I concentrate my aura *there*, between her legs. I've never tried this before—using my dominance as a physical force, focused so precisely. But something about her magic makes me want to try new things, push boundaries I didn't know existed.

I shove my energy forward, a little at a time. It's hard to control, hard to keep focused in such a small area. Sweat beads on my forehead with the effort. Every nerve in my body is screaming at me to abandon this and just fuck her, but I dig in deeper.

The control. The precision. The knowledge that I'm touching her without touching her—rewriting the rules of what it means to dominate someone.

It's intimate in a way I wasn't prepared for. Violent, too, because it tears something open in me. Something I didn't know I'd sealed shut.

Her pussy flutters, opening without a single physical touch. Just my dominance pressing inside her, invisible but powerful, filling her inch by inch.

The sight nearly breaks me. I grab the base of my cock, squeezing hard to maintain control as I watch her open for me, millimeter by glorious millimeter. It's the most erotic thing I've ever seen—her body responding to nothing but my will, my energy, my power.

And the feeling is indescribable. It's both like my cock's inside her and not at the same time. I can feel her heat, her wetness, the way she clenches around nothing but my aura. I'm buried inside her without a single inch of flesh—just will and want, driving her open.

"Fuck," I breathe, watching as she takes more of my energy, her body trembling with each invisible thrust. "How have I never thought to do this before?"

I push deeper, harder, watching her back bow with the pressure of it. Her hands fist in the sheets, knuckles white with tension as her body shakes. Every muscle in my body is tight with the strain of maintaining this connection, this focused point of dominance. But it's worth it for the way she writhes before me, taken apart by nothing more than my will.

My teeth grit. Holding this much power in one place feels like keeping a damn earthquake on a leash.

She groans, throwing her arm over her eyes as it overwhelms her. "Where'd you learn that?"

I lean over, mouth near her ear, my chest brushing against her straining breasts. I keep my aura firmly pressed inside her, unrelenting as I whisper, "From you. When you left me with your magic fingers all over my cock to grab another man to blow."

Her whole body jerks at that.

I don't know if it's the reminder of what she did to me or the way I've turned it back on her, but something about my words breaks through that last bit of composure she's been clinging to.

She trembles around the pressure, trying to grind back into it, but there's nothing to grab onto. No friction. Just me—my will—pushing inside. Her whole body sings with it, and my name would probably be on her lips if her pride would let it.

But she's Lyre. She'd rather bite through her tongue than give me the satisfaction.

Chapter 134: Lyre: Her Game (III)

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LYRE

His dominance pushes deeper inside me—an invisible, maddening pressure. It fills without filling. My hips buck against it, desperate for friction that isn't there. Just this ethereal presence stretching me open while I clench around nothing but air and alpha energy.

"Fuck," I gasp, grinding down harder. It's maddening—too much and not enough. Both filled and empty. Every thrust of his aura just reminds me I've got nothing solid inside me.

My magic sparks wildly under my skin, crackling along nerve endings that haven't fired in way too long. I'm completely lit up with want so intense it borders on pain.

Aaron slides his cock against my entrance, and I jerk forward, positioning myself just right, ready to take him in one perfect thrust—

But the bastard sees it coming.

He pulls back with a smug *fuck-you* smirk, dodging me just as I line him up.

"Goddamn it," I growl, my thighs trembling with the need to slam myself down on him anyway. Arcana surges, wild and hungry, lashing out to drag him in—greedy and reckless, just like me.

But he's learned faster than expected, using his dominance to hold firm against my need. His aura expands inside me, pressing deeper, wider, filling me with everything but what I want.

I'm furious. I'm aching. If he wanted to fuck my mouth, I'd open for him. If he wanted to fold me in half and pound me through this shitty motel mattress, I'd wrap my legs around him and beg for more. But this? This slow, torturous denial? I might actually lose what's left of my mind.

I snarl. "You're going to regret this."

The alphahole in him must be smug as fuck, because he chuckles. *Chuckles*. "Maybe. But right now?" His eyes drift down to where I'm spread open for him, clenching around invisible pressure. "Right now I'm enjoying every twitch, every pulse, every drop of you. You're so fucking wet I can see it."

His words push me higher, tightening the coil of need. I've always been the one setting the pace, dictating the terms. Now I'm writhing beneath an alpha wolf who's figured out how to use his dominance, making my ancient blood sing.

"Look at you," he murmurs, voice dropping to a panty-melting register. Fuck. "Every time I push a little deeper—" He demonstrates, his dominance surging inside me, thrusting deep enough to have my back arching off the bed. "—your body just pours for me. So wet you're soaking the sheets."

My hips roll forward against my will, seeking him, begging without words because I refuse—absolutely refuse—to plead. But my body betrays me, tilting upward, trying to capture the head of his cock as he teases it along my entrance.

"Then do something about it already," I snap, frustration making my voice crack.

I'm braced for some smart-ass remark, but instead his mouth finds my breast. No warning, no softness—pain. I hiss, back arching as he draws my nipple through his teeth. Then he soothes with his tongue, lazy and deliberate, like he's claiming the spot he just marked.

His cock slides along my folds, hot and slick with my arousal, but he still doesn't fuck me—just keeps thrusting against me like a goddamn tease, every wet drag of him making me twitch with need. His dominance pulses inside me in time with each thrust, a maddening rhythm of almost-but-not-quite.

Arcana ripples under my skin, desperate to capture him, to pull him inside. But he's learned to counter it, his energy sliding against mine, teasing but never surrendering.

"Aaron," I grit out. A plea disguised as a warning.

He answers by shifting me onto my side, rough hands arranging me like I'm a doll. One of my legs lifts over his thigh, exposing me completely. His cock slides between my thighs, gliding along my entrance, gathering wetness.

Finally, I think, relief surging through me as he positions himself. But then he presses my leg down, sandwiching his cock between my thighs instead of pushing inside. The pressure against my clit makes me jerk, a strangled sound escaping my throat.

I tilt my hips at the perfect angle, ready to capture him on his next thrust, calculating the exact moment—

And the fucker pulls back just enough to dodge me, knowing exactly what I'm trying to do. Again.

The groan escaping my lips is animalistic, primal—the sound of a creature pushed beyond patience. I could kill him. I could set this whole motel on fire. I could unleash power to leave nothing but a smoking crater from here to the state line.

Instead, I grind against him, desperate for friction, for release, for anything to ease this unbearable tension.

He keeps thrusting between my thighs, cock sliding along my folds but never entering. His dominance continues its invisible claiming, pulsing inside me with each roll of his hips. The dual sensation—his aura filling me while his cock teases my entrance—is maddening, overwhelming.

My body twitches with each pass of his cock against my clit. Every nerve ending is raw, hypersensitive. My magic crackles along my skin, sparking between us where we touch, little jolts of energy that make him hiss but never break his rhythm.

He's stronger than he looks. In more ways than one.

"That's it," he murmurs against my neck, his teeth scraping behind my ear. "Let me feel it. I want to feel you falling apart."

A blast of dominance slams into my core, and he twists my nipple with zero hesitation. The pain lights a fuse; arousal races straight between my legs, and I can't stop the sound I'm making—a wrecked, needy noise I've never made before.

His hand wraps around my throat, firm but not choking. Just holding. Owning. His cock keeps sliding between my thighs, slick and steady, hitting my clit with every pass while his aura fucks me open from the inside.

"Come for me," he growls, his voice deep and rumbling behind my ear. "Now."

And I do.

My body locks up, hips jerking as I fall into it. My magic flares, sparking across the room—literally. The bedside lamp explodes in a crack of static, and all I can do is cling to him while the orgasm rips through me.

But it's not enough.

Even after, I'm still clenching, still empty, still desperate for something real. That release? A false high. Like scratching a phantom itch that never stops burning.

Chapter 135: Lyre: Her Game (IV)

Chapter 135: Lyre: Her Game (IV)

LYRE

"Get inside me before I turn you into a toad."

The words come out before I can think twice, but I won't take them back.

I'm going to kill this man if he keeps up this game of his. I know he wants more; know he's nowhere near satisfied. And yet he's holding out.

His hands on my skin, his cock teasing my pussy, his power pulsing inside of me... it's infuriating. Intoxicating.

Almost like I've started a game I have no chance of winning. But of course not. I've just handed him the reins for today.

One time. A temporary release. A single night of pleasure with an oversexed wolf. Maybe more, since he's proving himself to be a very nice toy...

But that's all this is.

Lyrielle doesn't beg.

Aaron leans down, his lips brushing my ear. His breath sends shivers down my spine, tickling my skin.

"That's not how you beg, Lyre."

This bastard. I could kill him for this—for making me want, for making me surrender. And yet here I am, legs spread, hands clutching at the sheets, every fiber of my being centered on the semi-empty ache between my thighs.

My teeth grind together as I fight the urge to simply hex him. I could do it. A snap of my fingers, a whispered word, and this wolf would be on his knees. But that's not what I want. Not right now.

"...Please."

It's a false surrender on my tongue. Bitter and sweet at the same time.

He rewards me immediately, lining himself up against my entrance. I can feel the head of his cock pressing against me, the promise of fullness after all his teasing. My body is slick, ready, trembling with anticipation. I hold my breath, waiting for the moment he finally pushes inside.

ERRRNNNN. ERRRNNN.

We both freeze.

The sound of an emergency alert slices through the glorious moment like an entire glacier thrown at our naked, sweaty bodies.

Son. Of. A. Bitch.

My phone screams from the bedside table, a distinct tone that I've heard only a handful of times before.

Pure instinct takes over. My foot connects with Aaron's chest, shoving him off me with enough force to send him sprawling backward. I lunge across the bed toward my phone, grabbing it from the nightstand.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," the Lycan growls, sprawled awkwardly at the edge of the bed, his cock still hard and jutting upward.

My eyes scan the screen, heart pounding for reasons entirely different from moments ago.

"Sorry. It's an emergency. Can't ignore it..." The words tumble out automatically as I swipe through the notification.

Silence settles over us as we both process what's happening. My thighs are still shaking, my pussy still pulsing with unfulfilled need. Aaron looks like he might punch a wall, his erection showing no signs of flagging despite the interruption.

The alert expands on my screen.

[Divine Warning Protocol: Cosmic intervention documented in region 23-BETA and 20-L. Pattern recognition suggests coordinated action against established parameters.]

Damn it.

The specificity of the timing isn't lost on me. Seven hundred years I've been avoiding entanglements, and the one time I decide to indulge...

"Looks like the gods are jealous," I mumble, checking my other notifications. There's a few texts from Grace, and I frown.

Aaron frowns. "What did you say?"

"Nothing—"

A sharp, authoritative knock cuts through the air. Three precise impacts against the door. The arcana outside is easy to recognize, all golden and pure; Owen.

Jack-Eye flops back on the bed with a groan, equal parts frustration and resignation. He drapes an arm over his eyes, muttering some inventive curses. Something about being blue-balled by a phone, among other things. Hellfire on a leash? That's a new one.

My eyes drift to his cock—still hard, still perfect, still not inside me. A genuine pang of regret hits.

Owen knocks again.

"I'll be there in a second!" I shout toward the door, knowing he can hear me perfectly well. The angelic asshole must be able to smell what's behind our door, too, making it a smidgen more irritating he's out there banging to interrupt the moment.

It doesn't take a genius to know why he's here.

I sigh. "Get dressed. Owen's outside."

Aaron lifts his arm off his face and looks at me incredulously. "It can't wait ten seconds?" He props himself up on his elbows. "Five. Hell, I can do it in two."

A snort escapes me despite everything.

But—well, he brought me over the edge, denying himself the pleasure. Maybe I can help him out.

I cross back to the bed, feeling a twinge of guilt at his obvious discomfort. Leaning down, I press a soft kiss to his lips. My hand slides down his chest, over his abdomen, until my fingers wrap around his length. His hips jerk instinctively toward my touch.

"I thought you said to get dressed," he says, but he's definitely not complaining as he wraps his hand around mine, forcing me to squeeze as he pumps his hips once again.

My lips quirk against his. "This will take less than a second."

I wiggle my way down the bed until I'm bent over his bottom half, sliding his cock into my mouth in one smooth motion. It's not just physical—I channel arcana directly through my lips, my tongue, my fingers, straight into his flesh.

He's strong enough to handle it, though... he'll be forever chasing this high for the rest of his life.

Aaron reacts with a sudden shout, his back arching off the bed. His hands grasp my head, fingers tangling in my hair as he slams his cock all the way into my throat without warning. I feel the pulse of his release, hot and sudden.

Semen is bitter and disgusting, and I never swallow if I can help it.

But, looking at his face through my lashes, seeing the cords in his neck tighten with the force of his orgasm, I'm struck with the urge.

His hands twitch in my hair before falling to the bed.

I swallow, then slide my mouth off his length, looking up at his dazed expression.

"Better?"

"Holy shit," he mutters. "That was..."

"Heaven?"

"Better." His eyes go straight to my mouth. "Let's do it again."

I laugh. "Get dressed, Romeo."

Chapter 136: Lyre: Sight

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LYRE

More knocks.

The bliss of orgasm has already faded, and Aaron tugs his boxers on swiftly. Thankfully, he isn't one of those men who'd lay there dazed for hours after even a brief burst of arcana.

The muscle in his jaw ticks as he watches me yank my shirt down over my hips. It barely covers what it needs to—just enough to maintain the illusion of modesty, which has never been my strong suit anyway.

Another sharp knock at the door. Owen has zero patience and even less consideration for what he's interrupting.

I slide on my panties, ignoring Aaron's glower as I move toward the door. His possessiveness radiates off him, hot and aura-dense. He looks ready to lunge between me and whoever's on the other side.

I roll my eyes. As if he has any claim over who sees my body. I could answer the door stark naked if I wanted to.

I don't, though. Some battles aren't worth fighting.

When I pull the door open, Owen stands there like judgment incarnate—all broad shoulders and blank expression, exuding an infuriating angelic composure.

"You got it, too?" I ask, not bothering with pleasantries.

He nods once, his silver-gray eyes flickering down to where my shirt stops and my thighs begin. His eyebrows twitch ever so slightly—a microexpression of disapproval he can't quite suppress.

Typical. Angels are tedious prudes obsessed with other people's genitals. They've got an entire rulebook about who can fuck whom and under what circumstances. Unsanctioned sex with non-Divine-affiliated partners is practically heresy. A "power imbalance," they call it. Morally corrupt. Eternally frowned upon.

Of course, once they *do* have sex? They're like fucking bunnies.

Angel sex is divine. Pardon the pun. Definitely would do it again. But the *talking*... fuck, they're annoying.

I wonder which section of the celestial handbook covers an Echo Witch getting railed by a Lycan Beta. Probably an entire appendix devoted to this particular sin.

"Thom still needs sleep," I say, cutting directly to logistics and ignoring his silent judgment.

Owen's posture shifts minutely. "I can keep him asleep in the car."

I pause, weighing our options. With what's most likely Chaos poking around, we need to move fast. But pushing Thom too hard could burn him out completely—and a drained wizard would be worse than useless.

His tracking is currently unavailable, more or less on pause as he sleeps off the sudden infusion of pure arcana. But it's unlikely the direction will change much, and Grace and Caine are that way as well.

I nod. "Get everyone ready. We leave in thirty."

He doesn't argue, but his eyes dart past me to Aaron, who's standing halfway between the bed and bathroom, radiating territorial wolf energy.

My phone buzzes in my hand. I glance down, scanning Grace's texts again. There's also one from Caine.

I look back up at Owen. "Pretty sure Chaos is in the area."

He grunts acknowledgment before turning to walk back toward his room. I lean against the doorframe, watching him retreat down the dingy motel corridor. His shoulders roll with each step, the fluid movement of someone who knows exactly what his body is capable of.

Too bad he's an angel. Such a nice specimen of man.

"Are you really staring at another man in front of me?" Aaron growls, sounding distinctly put out.

I turn slowly, arching an eyebrow. "Am I not allowed to?"

His face darkens like a thundercloud. He swears viciously under his breath, storms into the bathroom, and slams the door hard enough to rattle the cheap artwork on the wall.

From heaven to hell in only minutes.

He was fine until I opened the door skimpily dressed, of course.

I step back inside and close the door with a sigh. Wolves—so predictably territorial. You give them an orgasm and suddenly they think they own exclusive viewing rights.

A pulse throbs behind my eyes, and the world disappears for a heartbeat. My Sight flickers on without permission—a snapshot of something not quite here and now:

Grace and Caine standing close. A tension between them that's more than sexual. Something electric. Dangerous. And someone else—a presence I can't quite make out—coming toward them. Someone with purpose.

The vision slips away like water through fingers, leaving nothing but uneasy prickles along my spine. The most frustrating part is not knowing when. Could be happening right now. Could be a month from now. Could've already happened hours ago, the damage already done.

I rub my forehead, irritation simmering under my skin. Divine interference always gives me migraines.

My thumb swipes over my phone, opening the Divinity App. The interface glows, notifications stacked high in the corner.

I open the messaging section and type:

[LYRIELLE: You know Balance is gonna kick you in the ass for this, right?]

I hit send, though I know better than to expect a response. At least not yet. He likes to keep people on edge. It's his nature.

A swift response is too comfortable for him.

I toss my phone onto the bed and grab my jeans from the floor, yanking them on with more force than necessary.

"Pretentious cosmic assholes," I mutter, shoving my foot through a pant leg. "So many lifetimes of the same tedious script. You'd think at least one of them would play by the fucking rules."

It's funny how they'll call me out every time I step in, but whenever something seems interesting enough, they'll dive in without remorse.

But not when they're desperately needed. Or wanted.

No, it's always on their own agenda.

The whole pantheon needs a collective kick in the ass.

The bathroom door opens just as I tug my shirt back down. Aaron stands there, water droplets clinging to his chest, eyes dark and searching. Did he throw himself into cold water to calm his temper?

Seems so.

Adorable.

I ignore him, focusing instead on the task at hand. We have children to protect, Chaos's interfering hands to smack, and miles to cover before anything happens to Grace.

The game we were playing will have to wait.

The universe has terrible timing. Always has.

Chapter 137: Caine: Fraying

Chapter 137: Caine: Fraying

CAINE

The storm's wandered off, calming the air. But not me.

My skin doesn't fit. My muscles twitch with excess energy. I pace the narrow confines of Lyre's camper like something caged, each circuit bringing me closer to Grace, then forcing myself away.

Fenris is still outside. The blessing of the Lycan King—to have my wolf as a distinct entity. Right now, it feels like a curse. Double the chaos, double the pressure building with nowhere to go.

You need to settle, Fenris growls through our bond. The pups can sense your distress. You're leaking it out.

I ignore him. Grace had pushed me away earlier, hands firm against my chest, eyes wild with panic. Smart girl. I understand why—the logical part of my brain even agrees with her caution—but the primal core of me seethes with rejection.

Her scent fills the confined space. Blueberry muffins, warm and sweet. It used to calm me. Now it agitates, hooks into something dark and hungry, demanding satisfaction.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Grace asks from behind me, her voice soft.

I close my eyes. "Fine."

But I'm not. And she knows it.

Grace leans over the dinette table, gazing out the window where the children are playing under Fenris's watchful eye. The now-bright skies highlight her face, the cascade of her artificially golden hair. She is soft, human, and thankfully oblivious to the war raging inside me.

Something's wrong

, Fenris says, agitation rushing his words. *I feel out of control.*

Me, too. *Keep the kids outside*, I snap. If they come in here... I don't want to scare them again.

He huffs. Then, *Don't touch her.*

"I know," I hiss. The words are anathema on my tongue, against every desire crashing through my body.

But I can't walk away. Can't leave her.

Can't stay.

If you don't get it together, I'm going to lose it too, Fenris warns. The young ones don't need to see that.

I drag in a breath through my mouth, trying to center myself. But her scent permeates everything, amplifying with each heartbeat. It fills my lungs, curls through my blood.

Need, not peace.

I dig my fingers into my palms, tensing my body against the onslaught within.

Grace laughs suddenly, the sound light and musical. She turns to me, eyes bright with delight. "Did you see that? Bun—"

I snap.

My hand catches her arm, and I pull her in—too fast, too hard, but it doesn't matter, because her soft, perfect little body is finally flush against mine. Her breath hitches, her words lost as my mouth crashes into hers.

The kiss is brutal. Hungry. A mistake. But the second our lips touch, everything inside me goes quiet.

Blessed stillness.

My hands slip to her hips, gripping tight—tight enough that a normal woman would bruise. But Grace just exhales against my mouth, her body stiff for half a second before she melts.

Her fingers find my hair. Her lips open under mine. She *kisses me back*, just as desperate, just as fucking *gone* under this damn temptation of our bond.

I groan into her mouth. I need her. Need all of her. To pin her, mark her, bury myself in her until the storm in me has nowhere left to go.

But then she hesitates, her lips no longer as pliable and soft, her body stiffening.

A breath caught wrong. A tremble under my palms. She tries to speak, to pull away, and I don't notice fast enough.

My mouth moves over hers again, teeth grazing soft skin. My hands slip under her shirt, her bra, my fingers flicking over her nipple. Skin. Heat. Hers.

She breaks the kiss, jerking back with a gasp. "Caine! What the hell is wrong with you?"

Outside, Fenris howls, the sound sharp with alarm. The kids shout in response.

I blink, my chest heaving. The world freezes around me. The pressure is gone, replaced by horrified clarity.

I jerk away, hands shaking. I'm an ass. I didn't mean to, but—

Grace rubs her arms, eyes flashing a little at my reaction. "I mean, you don't have to act like I'm contagious..."

But her words trickle off. She did the same thing just moments ago.

"I'm sorry," I grate out, struggling to understand what just happened. The drive to claim her had been uncontrollable, unstoppable. I've only felt that kind of all-consuming need once before in my life, with—fuck.

I shake my head violently, trying to dislodge the thought. For one disorienting moment, another face overlays Grace's. Another beautiful blonde, with cold eyes and a faint smirk...

"Are you okay?" Grace asks, her anger softening to concern.

Pain stabs, sharp and sudden, in my skull. I clutch my head, a growl escaping through clenched teeth. "I'm fine."

You're scaring her, Fenris snaps.

"You're scaring the kids," I snarl back.

Silence falls in my head, thick and heavy.

"Uh... Caine? This is weird, right?" She says after a moment, rubbing her thumb over her bottom lip. I follow the movement like a starving man. She seems to notice and drops her hand to awkwardly gesture toward the window. "Fenris seems a little... Are you messed up from the storm, too?"

My hand lifts of its own accord, reaching for her again. I yank it back, disgusted with myself. "I don't know."

"Caine..." She steps toward me, concern creasing her brow.

I back up until the counter hits my spine. She's too close. Too soft. Too tempting. The need to mate, to claim surges again, violent in its intensity.

She reaches out before I can stop her, brushing cool fingers against my forehead.

Everything stills.

The chaos in my mind goes quiet. The tension drains from my muscles. My lungs expand.

She frowns, staring at her hand. Then her eyes widen, and her mouth drops open. "I think I can feel it."

"Feel what?" My voice is barely audible, choked with the force of my restraint. Just one quick grab and I could flip us both, bend her over the counter, tear off the flimsy clothes she's wearing and plunge deep inside while biting her neck until—

"The energy." Her eyes widen with wonder. "I can really feel it. How it's moving."

I jerk away from her hand, terror replacing desire. If I give in to what I'm feeling, I could kill her.

"Don't touch me again." The command comes out as a growl.

"No—" She shakes her head, stubborn as always. "I think I can stop it. If I try hard enough. Maybe. I'll have to touch you again to make sure."

I narrow my focus to the only thing that matters, the one ray of impossible hope in this nightmare. My voice comes out hoarse, stripped of all pretense.

"Are you sure?"

"Well, no. But maybe?" She touches my forehead again, and I grab onto the counter edges with a soft curse, telling myself not to grab her. Don't throw her down like a wolf in rut.

Chapter 138: Grace: Arms Outstretched

I close my eyes and focus, searching for that spark again. For a moment, there's nothing but the warmth of his skin, the steady thunder of his heartbeat.

There's some sort of current between us, pulling something out of me and into him. I can *feel* it, but seeing it is another matter entirely.

Still, there's a strange sensation of something tangible, like water pouring through a pipe. Not easy to hold onto, but with some sort of weight and density, if I can somehow reach out and grab it. If I can just concentrate a little harder, push a little more...

It's *right there*. I can almost taste it, and it's strangely sweet and metal at the same time, giving me an almost sickening feeling behind my jaw. My eyes burn behind my eyelids, and my heart squeezes and jumps around, falling out of rhythm.

For one flickering second, I swear I can grasp it, bend it—

Caine jerks his head away.

"No. We're not doing this." His voice leaves no room for argument, and I swear frost covers my skin over how freaking *cold* he sounds.

Disorientation has my head spinning, and I blink hard. It takes a little too long for his face to come into focus, and I wish it stayed out of focus once it gets there. He's staring at me with a hard, flat expression.

My body's still primed for a momentum no longer there, like a rollercoaster slamming to a freaking stop midway down the first big hill.

And everything under my skin is unbalanced and off-center, as if a vital piece of my soul's been disconnected. Dramatic, I know, but it's hard to explain something you've never given words before.

I rub my arms, trying to recapture even a whisper of that sensation, but there's nothing—just memories of a vague potential he snatched away right at the most important moment, damn it.

"But I was getting somewhere!" Okay. I sound a little childish and maybe not as reliable as I should be, but damn it, I was *right there*, and he moved, and now he's saying I can't try again? Really?

"You just fainted again," he says, arms folded to really hammer in his *don't touch me* aura. "I'm not risking it again."

I roll my eyes, frustration bubbling up hot in my chest. "I didn't faint. I fell asleep."

But his mouth curves down into a frown and his eyebrows draw together, and I remember the strange dream and the odd way everything felt so tired and heavy right before I closed my eyes.

"Probably," I add reluctantly.

"Probably?" Caine raises an eyebrow now, thoroughly unimpressed. "That's not reassuring."

"But I was so close to—" To what? Understanding? Power? I don't even know what I'm reaching for, just... it feels important. Essential, even.

The Lycan King in front of me doesn't budge. He's not warm Caine with daddy vibes anymore, not the guy who just kissed me against my will (and made me like it, but we aren't talking about *that* little detail). He's definitely the crowned wolf king at this particular moment, all cold and standoffish.

His expression might as well be carved from granite. Maybe that's what I should get him for a birthday. A stone carving of a wolf, saying it looks just like him.

A sharp bark cuts through the tension stewing between us, and Caine's head jerks up as he glowers out the window.

He growls, the sound rumbling from deep in his chest. "I swear, if that damn dog is back, I'm going to kick it."

I blink at him, momentarily forgetting my frustration. "You can't just kick people's dogs, Caine." And he was surprised I might have—for a *little bit*, okay—thought he was a serial killer. Sheesh.

"Watch me," he mutters, skirting around me like I'm the Black Plague in human skin and storming out the door. The entire camper shakes with each footstep.

I follow him outside, squinting in the sunlight. Everything has that peculiar after-rain-fresh smell to it, the air scrubbed clean. I breathe in deep.

A high-pitched squeal breaks through the quiet. Bun, spotting me from where she's playing with Sara and Jer, races forward on unsteady legs, arms outstretched, with a huge grin on her face.

My heart melts, and I bend, ready to scoop her up—but Caine moves with supernatural speed, swooping the toddler into his arms before she can reach me.

I stop short, arms empty.

Bun's face scrunches with confusion, little hands reaching for me even as Caine holds her firmly against his chest.

Jer bounds toward me next, dark curls bouncing. "Grace! Did you see what I—"

Caine neatly steps in his path, redirecting the boy with a hand on his shoulder. "Come help me check the generator," he says.

The boy looks between us, deflating visibly. "Oh. Uh, okay? What's a generator? Do we get to make a fire with it?"

Even Fenris, usually so attentive, keeps his distance, circling wide around me as if I'm surrounded by an invisible barrier. Ron isn't even looking at me—he's looking in the direction of the golden retriever bounding our way.

I wrap my arms around myself, feeling very alone and leprous all of a sudden.

Seriously, I can understand *Caine* avoiding me, but why isn't he letting the kids near me?

Twenty feet away, the golden retriever bounds to a stop, tail wagging in a slow, steady rhythm and mouth open in a happy dog smile. Her coat catches the sunlight, turning into molten gold.

Sara bounces on her toes, pointing as she squeals, "The dog came back!"

Jer squirms away from Caine, his previous disappointment already forgotten. "Can we pet it? Please?"

"No."

Fenris trots forward, hackles raised as he snarls. It's a horrible, skin-crawling sound, louder than anything you'd hear from any domestic dog—and yet none of the kids flinch, though Sara does turn to frown at him.

The golden retriever flattens herself to the ground, tail tucked, ears back. Doesn't even blink. And, strangest of all, doesn't... leave.

Any normal dog would have run off with their tail between their legs.

Maybe she's one of those dogs with only two brain cells to rub together?

"Hi, neighbors!"

Chapter 139: Grace: Started Early

Chapter 139: Grace: Started Early

I turn to find the elderly couple from the nearby RV approaching with cheerful waves. The woman's dressed like she's out for a hike, with a huge, floppy hat on her head. The man's wearing overalls splattered in oil and paint. Both of them walk with a spryness belying their apparent age; judging by their wrinkles and the whiteness of their hair, they're pushing seventy.

Then again, I've never been great at guessing age. Once I thought someone was forty, and it turned out they were in their twenties. Another time I thought someone was sixty, and he was seventy-three.

Don't get me started on kids. I'm notoriously bad at guessing them. I've already been guessing Bun at two and Jer at about eight, Sara around ten, and Ron at fifteen. I should probably ask them. As their de facto guardian of the moment, I should definitely know how old these kids are.

Behind me, I can practically feel Caine coiling with tension. Before he can do something regrettable—like growl at two senior citizens—I hustle forward to intercept.

"Hello!" I call, plastering on my best everything-is-normal smile. I hope I don't look like a freaking lunatic. "What a strange storm, right?"

"Don't," Caine warns under his breath. "You shouldn't talk to strangers."

I shoot him a look over my shoulder and hiss, "They were here first. It's not like they followed us." Then I plaster a welcoming smile back on my face as I greet our new neighbors.

I never expected to be the family with a bunch of kids at some sort of camping spot, but here I am, with four of them. And a wolf I have to somehow pass off as a dog.

... hopefully Fenris doesn't eat them.

The couple stops a respectful distance away, their smiles unwavering. There's something oddly symmetrical about them, their posture mirroring each other with uncanny precision. I've heard old couples start looking like each other over time.

Does that mean I'm going to look like Caine when I'm old...?

"Quite the electrical storm," the man says, his voice pleasantly weathered. "I think I finally understand what they mean by that term!" He chuckles, like he's made a joke.

The woman nods, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Did you all lose power too? Our camper's been on the fritz since it hit. Batteries are completely drained! We're going to have to power up the generator."

"We had some issues," I admit, relaxing slightly. We're all just normal people making normal conversation. Nothing strange here.

Movement at my feet draws my attention. The retriever—Sadie, if I remember correctly—has belly-crawled the last few feet to where I'm standing, her eyes fixed hopefully on my face. I bend down to pet her, running my fingers through her soft fur.

Caine growls again, the warning in his tone unmistakable.

I ignore him. Sadie's fur is silky, warm from the sun, and she leans into my touch with a contented sigh. At least someone isn't afraid to let me near them.

"She's usually much more reserved with strangers," the woman says, sounding mildly surprised.

Jer and Sara have edged closer, their eyes bright with excitement.

"Can we pet her too?" Sara asks, practically wiggling.

The man nods, his smile widening. "Of course! Sadie loves children."

The kids don't need further invitation. They crowd around the retriever, who accepts their enthusiastic pats with dignified patience.

I notice Bun wriggling in Caine's arms, clearly wanting to join the fun, but he holds her firmly, his expression unyielding.

A presence at my shoulder makes me start. Ron has materialized beside me, silent as always. Has he always been so tall? He's past my height now, his lanky frame filling out with adolescent muscle. It's literally been two days. He couldn't possibly grow in two days, right?

"The weather's just getting weirder each year, isn't it?" he says to the couple, his voice gentle and a little deeper than usual.

The elderly pair chuckle appreciatively.

"Such good manners," the woman says, beaming at Ron. Her gaze shifts between him, Caine, and me, taking in our mismatched group. She tuts knowingly, her smile softening. "You two got started on your family early, didn't you?"

My brain fries at her insinuation. I blink rapidly, my mouth opening and closing without producing sound.

Do I... look old enough to have a kid Ron's age? This is a horrifying thought. Lyre is a fanatic about her skincare regimen and even tried to get me onto it. Maybe this is why.

There's of course the knee-jerk reaction to explain this isn't like the old lady thinks it is, but the words refuse to come out. Because I've been thinking of all four of them as mine, and (as has been made abundantly clear to me), Caine and I are fated mates. So, regardless of what I think, we're... in a relationship. Sort of. More or less.

So, if you *really* break it down, the old lady isn't exactly... wrong.

Beside me, Caine's low rumble stops abruptly. I glance at him, expecting annoyance or dismissal, already primed to jump in if he says anything particularly cold or cutting.

Instead, his face has softened, the hard lines of tension easing away. For the first time since the storm hit, he looks... pleased. Almost content. Relaxed and *welcoming*, which is highly unexpected and strange and what am I supposed to do with this?

My heart does a peculiar little flip in my chest, and I have no idea what to do with that, either.

"A house full of pu—children is a happy home," he says, tacitly agreeing with the old lady without even batting an eyelash. He smiles at me. A warm, soft curve of his lips, coupled with an affectionate stare. A very *I'm your man and we're a family and you totally had all these kids with me* kind of stare.

Something inside me melts while the other half is still panicked over how old I must look.

Bun shrieks like she's dying, right on cue. She's pissed. Caine's still got his arm wound around her, and she's wriggling like a dying fish, desperate to get at the dog.

Chapter 140: Caine: A Rescue Mutt

Chapter 140: Caine: A Rescue Mutt

CAINE

My family.

Two simple words, and they've sunk their way deep into my chest, leading me to stand a little straighter. And if my face seems to glow a little, well, sometimes kings glow.

I adjust Bun against my hip, her little body surprisingly heavy for such a small thing, and her screaming suddenly sounds like music instead of a tantrum.

"NOOOOO!" she screams directly into my ear, her entire body rigid with want as she reaches both arms toward the golden retriever. Her shriek could shatter glass, but I just pat her little bottom with a smile.

"DA DA GA! DA DA GA!"

The old couple laugh, delighted by her enthusiasm. I remain smiling faintly, still patting the young child, completely neutral to the assault on my eardrums.

Let them see a man unbothered by a toddler's tantrum.

Let them see a *father*.

"She really loves dogs, I guess," Grace explains, her face flushing pink. "I'm so sorry, she isn't normally like this..."

Bun thrashes against my hold, her tiny little legs kicking my ribs hard enough to bruise a normal man. She's too strong for a bunny shifter child. "DA DA GA!" she shrieks again.

I tighten my grip just enough. "No, Bun."

My voice carries no heat, no anger—just absolute finality. Kings don't negotiate with two-year-olds, especially in front of a strange old couple who considers me her father.

Bun's face crumples like she's been mortally wounded. Her screams intensify for exactly eight more seconds before she goes completely limp, draping herself across my forearm in theatrical defeat. Her bottom lip pushes out, and her thumb finds its way to her mouth. She fixes the retriever with a look of such profound longing that I almost—*almost*—feel bad.

But I don't put her down.

Grace, on the other hand, looks at me like I'm the worst being on this planet for letting her get to this point.

She's soft. It's a good thing. Kids need a soft mother.

The old woman's eyes crinkle with amusement. "Looks like you've got your hands full."

I nod, allowing her the smallest smile. My hands are indeed full—with a soulspliced toddler and her chaotic shifting abilities. My arms cradle a child who, only half an hour ago, transformed into something feral and tried to tear her family apart. But beyond that, my chest swells with something dangerously close to pride.

Family.

Here I stand, holding a baby while a beautiful blonde woman entertains conversation beside me, and our three other children orbit around us.

My arms are full, and my ego is fuller.

Jer picks up a stick, waving it over his head. "Hey, dog! Wanna play fetch?"

Sara joins in, grabbing another stick off the ground. There are plenty. "Let me do it! I can throw farther than you."

"Can not!"

"Can too! I'm bigger, so I can throw harder. It's called psychics!"

"Physics, Sara. It's *physics*."

"Whatever, Ron. You know what I mean."

The golden retriever watches their antics with mild interest, tail wagging lazily. When Jer launches his stick with surprising force for a seven-year-old, Sadie doesn't move. When Sara's stick sails even farther—I note with quiet approval she has excellent form—the dog still doesn't budge.

Instead, Sadie stands, stretches with deliberate slowness, and then ambles over to Grace's feet. The dog plops down directly onto them, looking up at her with naked adoration in her chocolate-brown eyes.

My jaw tightens. My eyes narrow.

The dog's strange, showing such affection to my mate. Between my presence, and Fenris, she should be hiding in their camper, unwilling to come out for fear of being hunted by the king of beasts.

And it isn't as if my Grace is a dog whisperer—she's just a woman. *My* woman. The same woman this stupid mutt is far too close to.

The dog presses harder against Grace's legs, and I have to fight back the urge to snarl.

"She really likes you!" the old woman exclaims.

Grace smiles down at the retriever, reaching to scratch behind her ear. "I like her too."

That's when I catch it—the barest flicker of something in the dog's eyes. Something intelligent. Something watchful.

Fuck this mutt.

A blur of black fur streaks past. Fenris plants himself in front of the retriever, lips pulled back to expose teeth the size of steak knives. His growl vibrates even the ground beneath our feet.

Grace stumbles backward. "Fenris!"

The golden dog flattens herself to the ground, belly scraping dirt as she scrambles behind Jer and Sara. Within seconds, the dog transforms from cheerful pet to terrified prey, eyes wide, tail tucked.

Fenris, smug bastard he is, settles onto his haunches directly in front of Grace. He licks his chops with deliberate slowness, curling his tongue around his own muzzle while staring directly at the cowering retriever.

Show-off.

My chest loosens as I inhale deeply. Blueberry muffins mix with the over-clean scent of the storm's aftermath, and it's back to calming me down. The chaotic energy building inside me recedes a bit.

I'm almost calm. Almost placid. Even with my suspicion bubbling over these old people and their strange dog.

That's definitely not a normal dog, Fenris says in my head, his mental voice dripping with disdain. *But it doesn't seem to have any animosity toward us.*

I stare at the retriever, now peeking from behind Sara's legs with the most pathetic expression I've ever seen on a canine.

Even a kid could see there's no animosity there, I reply dryly. What amazing observational skills you have, king of all wolves.

Fenris turns his massive head toward me, baring his teeth in a silent snarl. The old man notices, leaning in with sudden interest.

"Those are some impressive canines," he says, his eyes widening as he leans in close. "Never seen a dog quite like that before."

Grace freezes like a deer in headlights, even as my wolf preens, raising his head a little higher. "Oh, he's, uh, a rescue. A mutt."

I can physically feel the wolf's outrage slam into me through our bond. A *mutt*? The ancestral wolf spirit of the Lycan Kings, a creature of legend and magic, reduced to a common mutt?

I will eat her in her sleep, Fenris seethes, his mental voice practically vibrating with indignation.

You will not

, I counter, fighting to keep my face neutral. Apparently his devotion to Grace ends where his immense pride begins.

How dare she. After all I... a mutt? She calls me a mutt?!

Jer snickers, not even trying to hide his amusement at Fenris's obvious offense. The wolf's ears flatten against his skull as he looks at Grace out of the corner of his eye.

Sara approaches cautiously, reaching out a trembling hand to pat his enormous head. Her movements are painfully slow, like she's afraid he might snap her arm off—which, to be fair, he absolutely could. If he wanted to.

"Nice doggy," she says, her voice unnaturally high. She's determined to back Grace up. What a good kid.

I will eat this one too.

The laugh catches in my throat before it can escape. The mighty Fenrisúlfr, terror of the supernatural world, reduced to being awkwardly petted by a nine-year-old girl who's calling him "doggy" while an old couple coos at the scene.

If the other alphas could see this, he'd never live it down. Or me, for that matter.

"What breed mix do you think he is?" the old woman asks, squinting at Fenris with clear curiosity.

"German shepherd and... Great Dane?" Grace offers weakly.

Dire wolf and ancient god, Fenris mutters in my head, snapping at the air. Sara jerks her hand back.

He huffs indignantly, sprawling across the dirt to make a point of how massive he is. His head is at Grace's hip even lying down, and his paw is larger than her hand. No one with functioning eyeballs would believe he's just an unusually large dog.

Though he was definitely smaller earlier. He's purposely boosted his size.

"Must eat you out of house and home," the old man comments.

Fenris once devoured an entire elk without sharing.

"He's on a special diet," I say, the corner of my mouth lifting slightly.

Yes, the souls of my enemies and stupid humans who call me a mutt, he grumbles.

This time I can't hold back the short bark of laughter that escapes me. Everyone turns to stare—apparently the Lycan King doesn't laugh often enough for it to go unnoticed.

Grace raises an eyebrow at me, a silent question on her face.

"Sorry. I had something in my throat."

Ron snorts. "Right."

His disbelieving noise is a bit of a surprise; he usually tends to stay in the background.

Bun has completely surrendered in my arms now, her head lolling against my shoulder as she watches the golden retriever with mournful eyes. Her thumb hasn't left her mouth, and I can feel a wet spot forming on my shirt where she's been drooling.

The old lady smacks at her husband's back and motions toward the children, and he clears his throat. "So... y'all like barbecue?"