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Greysmoke Rising

Chapter 27: Meet Me in the Middle

CW: ACAB (Always), PTSD, Imprisonment, Magic, Nudity, Thievery

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Despite everything, Thursday did finally arrive.

As Eneera sat on the edge of the bed, quietly observing Mabel riffling through her closet, they pondered the necessity of the task at hand. They did not understand all the fuss over clothing — a uniquely mortal concern — but it appeared to be *very* important to the puma, so they watched, listening to her quiet noises of consideration and dismissal as she inspected her wardrobe.

“Nope... noooooope... *mmmmmaybe...*” Mabel tossed another pair of jeans, darker than the last pair, and with several more tears, and lobbed them toward the bed, on the small pile of clothes that lay there. “Yeah, you can absolutely *rock* that...”

So long as my nether regions are covered, is that not enough?

“Mabel, I do not wish to be a burden to you. Are you certain—”

“Neera, sweetie, I’m gonna stop you right there.” The lioness did not turn away from her work as she gently chided the djinn. “You are *not*, and never *could* be a burden for me. You’re my *partner*, and I want to help however I can! We can’t both be self-deprecatory, and since I was here *fir—OW!*” Mabel yelped and rubbed at her ear, “Fine. *Neither* of us get to be self-deprecatory,” her muttering continued, “unless it’s *really* funn—EEE-YOWCH! *TOO HARD!* Relly, you *mean* thing!”

The catamount whined and held her paw over her ear, giving her best wounded innocent pout.

“It’s the only way you seem to *learn*, sweetie. Far be it from me to deny you the necessary *reinforcement*.”

The caracal-shaped being covered their mouth to hide their smile at the pair’s antics, but the chuckle bubbled up anyway.

“Mmm... *the point is*, you’re not a burden, and that I am certain of. Please don’t call my friend that?”

“I will try to keep that in mind moving forward. Please, forgive my faux pas.”

The cougar wiggled her shoulders and swished her tail, “*Ooo la la!* Turns of phrase *en Français!* Color me impressed — you are a *quick* study, Dusty!”

“Thank you...” The djinn felt the warmth creep into their cheeks, as they managed their reply. “Your shared memories have made adapting to this new time far less of a hardship, as well as Miss Amarelys helping to guide my studies. There is so much, but I am excited to learn!”

“You’re very welcome, sweetie! I’m happy to assist however I can.”

“Love a passionate learner, and I’m glad to hear you two getting along so well! Now, to address the original question: is this a necessity? No, you could very well walk around naked as the day you blew into town, and I’m sure no one would care. In fact, I suspect there are *many* who would enjoy it! *However*, I am not one to let an opportunity like this pass me by.”

“And what opportunity is that?”

“Getting to play dress up with my very own life-sized djinni dolly, of course! I didn’t get to play with many Barbie-type toys growing up, so you’re

helping me relive a childhood moment I never got to have! So really, I should be thanking *you!*”

Eneera blinked their large golden eyes, once, before glancing over to the corner where the lioness kept a desk in a tasteful amount of disarray, including some distractingly busty statuettes.

“...What of those? Are they not dolls depicting Miss Ellen?”

Mabel scoffed. “Those are *action figures*, Neera! S’not the same!”

“...I am not sure I can appreciate the distinction?”

“Neither could my ex...” the cougar muttered, before clearing her throat. “*Ahem!* Now, I think that’s enough options to start with!” As she stared at the pile, her smile grew as an idea blossomed behind her joyful green eyes. “Ooo! Wait! We could coordinate our fits! That’ll be *sooo* cute! Yeah? Yeah. Now, I threw some cute witchy stuff on the pile here for you, let’s see what I can do to match it...”

Eneera could only smile, as Mabel’s excitement made it impossible to do otherwise. “As you wish.”

The puma stopped sorting to place a paw on her chest, and looked back at the caracal in mock surprise. “A Princess Bride quote now! *Goodness gracious*, are you trying to get into my panties *both* ways today, dear?”

The movie was one their partner had eagerly shown them, which made Eneera realize that sharing a film was one of the ways Mabel chose to show her affection, and they were eager to reciprocate the affection with another the lioness’s favorite pastimes:

Playfully *suggestive* banter.

“Is this sarcasm, or a genuine request for me to enter your undergarments?” The caracal flicked up an eyebrow, and enjoyed watching the teasing puma become the teased, tail puffing slightly as the inside of her ears

began to shift from pink to red. “As you mentioned, I am finding the touching of holes is *quite* commonplace here, and I do want to ‘*fit in*’...”

Mabel snorted, and turned back to look over her shoulder. “Well, as we both seem to recall, you and Vixie are fitting in together *just* fine, dear.” She cleared her throat as she picked up a tee to “inspect.” “*Sadly, no time for a demo!* Back to the matter before us: a proper ensemble for the discerning djinn!”

The caracal allowed themselves a self-satisfied smile, knowing they had successfully “won” the exchange. “I am your doll to dress, Mabel.”

The catamount’s eyes lit up, and the djinn felt a familiar warmth settle into their chest.

That smile is worth the moon and stars...

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The look that Mabel and Amarelys had settled on was decidedly butch-leaning, but Eneera’s distinctly lanky and graceful frame begged for twinkly sort of femme accents.

The djinn did not understand the sensibilities of fashion, but they appreciated how light the clothing was, and how it did not restrict their movements. The long, pinstriped dress pants (tailored for Mabel) were unsurprisingly a little short, but accentuated their height, while the fishnet shirt under the onyx-colored vest showed off what the cougar referred to as “the goods.” The burgundy cowl scarf draped over their shoulders was chosen by Eneera, and complimented by both their partner and her sister (“Excellent choice! Helps show off that lovely neck!”).

The accessory was something that the djinn recognized, and it was a comfort to see something they knew.

The caracal was no closer to *understanding* fashion, but the compliments made them smile nonetheless. Mabel had assured them that the subject of style

was simply a matter of taste that needed to be cultivated, and she was certain the djinn's would be *fabulous*.

*Mabel is so sure of my abilities... of my **belonging** here...*

The cougar continued to discuss the inspirations behind her outfitting choices as they made their way towards the agreed-upon meeting place, mentioning a skeleton named Jack, and a wolf called Crow, that were apparently central to two more movies that she would share, and Amarelys was excited to gift them her own favorites and "must-sees."

The subject of the conversation was inconsequential. They could have spoken about anything, and the djinn would have listened with rapt attention. They knew it was important to these people who cared for them as much as they cared in return.

The certainty in that was a comfort that Eneera had nearly forgotten in their time within the stone.

Without a single word, Mabel laced her fingers with the djinn's, pulling their paw up to touch their knuckles to her cheek.

*"You're safe, Neera. Never again. I'll **never** let that happen."*

"Thank you, Mabel..."

She intuits so quickly, from a flicker of a feeling...

"Ask me how training is going, Dusty." The catamount bumped them with their hip, but did not release their paw.

"How is training going, Mabel?" The djinn was learning that rapidly changing conversational paths were a fact of life with their partner, just a matter of how her thoughts oscillated.

"A little off the rails, but I'm conducting myself well enough, I think!" The cougar snickered, bubbling up into a giggle.

[I don't know that Eneera has gotten to the Industrial Revolution in their studies quite yet.]

While it was true that Eneera's knowledge was limited, the bond with the lioness had given them access to her library of knowledge; while the tomes were many and some *seemingly* useless, they were all helpful in their own ways, and no less precious to them.

"Oh I'm sure they are chugging right along — isn't that right, Neera?"

"Do not be steamed. I am learning as fast as modern engineering permits!" The twinkle in those moonbeam eyes would have melted the heart of even the most dour creature.

Mabel's giggle spooled up into full-throated laughter.

[Gods bless, it'll be good to introduce you to more people that aren't Mabel or Ellen-shaped. Your sense of humor could use some expansion, if only for my sake.] Amarelys's words may have been sour, but the lilting tone of her laugh was sweet indeed.

The chorus of the sisters like music to the djinn.

"Well, Dusty, it seems like your training is right on schedule, and hey—" Mabel stopped in front of the doors leading to their destination: The outer chambers of KDARC. "Looks like we've arrived! *All aboard for Spooky Town!*"

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"Willkommen! Bienvenue! Warmest welcomes to my newest colleagues!" Alder held their arms wide, positively beaming as they ushered the pair into the meeting space, motioning to a pair of chairs opposite a wooden desk, all in the same dark-stained oak. The room was mostly empty save the furniture, the laptop on the desk, and a single pneumatic tube leading to parts unknown.

The avian was simply clad in what could only be called “librarian chic,” but they would come to learn they shifted between masc and femme presenting based on the day.

The pencil skirt and long woven cardigan suggested a lunar lean.

“Miss Greysmoke I have met, and you are the djinn, Eneera, is that correct?” They offered their hand across the desk to each as they stepped behind it. “I am Agent Alder Irrwisch, they/them. Please, don’t worry about addressing me as Agent; Alder is just fine. It’s my pleasure to make your acquaintances in-person!”

The avian spoke with the eloquence of a long time orator, and with a truly unplaceable accent, a melange that leant an almost lyrical quality to their speech.

Mabel accepted the proffered limb and shook their digits, and the caracal followed suit.

“A pleasure, Alder! Happy to meet you outside of my visor!”

“Yes, I am Eneera. Thank you for the opportunity to find my place here, with Mabel.”

“As much thanks goes to Lock and Key, as it does to me, Mix; their testimonial was convincing enough to allow Director Wick to defer to myself, which I am grateful for, as this is a singularly unique opportunity for each of us.”

The caracal made a note to thank the ermine and the rat at the earliest opportunity.

The hazel grouse settled back into their chair, clasping their talons before them. “I am sorry that we have to have our first meeting outside of the division proper, but security clearances, and all of that, not to mention the possible misadventures on the way without the correct gear and guidance... I’m sure you understand?”

“In theory!” Mabel smiled as she settled into the offered chair, with Eneera following suit.

“Excellent! We’ll try to arrange a proper tour, once we have all met the necessary requirements, but this room works well enough, if a bit... *bereft*, for my liking.” They clacked their beak quietly in annoyance before continuing. “Now then, I know you are both busy, given the new circumstances, so if you please, tell me all that has happened since we last spoke! If I understand correctly, there have been some positively *intriguing* developments vis-a-vis your boon’s manifestations, Mabel?”

“Absolutely! The blessing has shown some serious versatility in just how it functions. Relly can forward you my observations thus far as well as training footage, but I’m *excited*.” The lioness launched into an animated discussion of the previous several days and a demonstration of her newly discovered abilities — albeit in a much more subdued manner than in the training chambers.

She is so passionate about so many things, but few topics make her light up like her gifts.

The djinn listened intently to Mabel’s understanding of her training thus far, her missteps en route to their goal, and how she was relying on her partner and family for aid. The catamount deferred to Eneera when Alder requested further explanation on their involvement in the process, and the caracal was happy to provide their insight.

“We have mainly been focusing on control exercises, as well as candescal stamina and memory. Mabel, without formal training, has a deft paw for the art, if a little... *impatience*,” the caracal answered honestly, and glanced at Mabel to see her cheeks reddening. “But she has already shown great promise, and patience is a muscle just as any other. It must be properly exercised.”

The meeting went on like that for another hour or more, the avian nodding and noting things, all while the djinn grew more and more curious of Alder himself. The eyes behind their amber colored lenses spoke of experience far greater than their appearance might suggest, as did their energy.

The Alder they chose to present was cultivated in a very particular way, but there was something much more beneath the surface, the djinn was certain. While Eneera was only residing in the body of a mortal feline, their curiosity was *certainly* comparable and suitably piqued.

“May I ask a question, Alder?”

“Please do, Eneera! What would you like to know?”

“When we first came in, you mentioned this situation as a ‘singularly unique opportunity.’ What did you mean by that?”

“Well, to speak plainly, a bond between a djinn and a mortal has become an altogether *rare* occurrence. Our records are *woefully* sparse, with even the most recent still being several hundred or more years old, and lacking depth.” They sighed softly, their tone becoming subdued. “What you two represent is essentially the chance for KDARC to preserve and document not only *this* bond, but to better understand *past* bonds, and *potentially* lead to finding out what shaped the current state of the relationship between mortals and the elemental forces... *if* you both still wish to join, that is.”

“Of course, Alder. We’ll be more than happy to help however we can.” Mabel smiled and glanced at the djinn. “Whadya say, Dusty?”

Eneera nodded in assent. “However I can assist, please just say the word.”

Alder smiled softly. “I will be sure to, Eneera. Thank you both. Shall we consider it a date, same time and place next week? I am excited to see what you can accomplish with another week!”

It seemed the hazel grouse was just as curious as a cat.

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Another week of living and training, another check-in with their liaison, but this time with *activities*.

Alder provided Mabel with several tools to help gauge her progress, and encouraged Eneera, as her partner, to assist.

The span of time the catamount had with access to magic was miniscule in the grand scheme of things, but these exercises weren't about scoring high on a arcana aptitude test (which Mabel *definitely* didn't want to do, and *totally* recognized it was not at all feasible to expect a good grade), but a chance to gauge a proper starting point for the puma's studies.

The first task involved utilizing her candesca to solve a simple puzzle: retrieving a key from the inside of a bottle. Naturally, the neck appeared to be too small for the key. "Now, I'm sure you could figure the mundane solution to this, but I would like to see your arcane ingenuity in action! The bottle must remain whole, as does the key."

Eneera silently watched and smiled as their partner got to work.

Mabel lifted the bottle, considering its weight, and rattling the key inside. She rotated it in her paws, nose nearly touching the glass, as a smile split her muzzle. "What lock does the key belong to?"

"Why does it matter?"

Ebony colored claws tinkled softly against the glass.

"Why wouldn't it?" Mabel kept her eyes on Alder. "A key goes to a lock, a lock secures *treasure*."

"The treasure, then, is the potential for knowledge."

The cougar handed the key to the grouse with a smirk. "Done."

Inside the bottle was filled with dark, fragrant smoke, swirling, but remaining contained within the glass without a cork.

The djinn had watched the smoke coalesce, smiling as tendrils lifted the key, twisting, and turning it so it could slip free. Mabel never once looked up,

casually conversing while doing such delicate motions with phantom digits until the key was in her palm.

Her fine control of her own manifestations is already admirable.

Alder chuckled softly and took the key, tucking it into a pocket in their coat. “There are no extra points for showmanship, Mabel, though one might argue for the consideration.”

“Aww — well then, I suppose the show is simply for my little audience of two, then!” The cougar winked at the caracal. “What’s next?”

A flash of something shone even under the lenses of the avian’s glasses; the word *puckish* came to the djinn’s mind.

“Your next task is no more difficult than the last, just a different application.” The avian slid a piece of paper across the desk with a diagram and several bullet points. “This is a cantrip, specifically to generate a small orb of illuminance! If you’ll pardon the pun, it is light spellwork — traditional arcanum for the budding initiate.” Alder gestured to Eneera, with a nod. “If you would be so kind as to demonstrate for your partner?”

“Of course.” The djinn did not hesitate, holding their palm open, and uttering something under their breath. Floating like a delicate seed above their paw was a tiny mote of pale light. “The word is up to you; this is your spell’s focal point. I simply said the word for ‘sun’ in the old voice. The key is to shape the candesca tightly, and ignite it.”

When they closed their paw, the light was snuffed out.

Alder’s fingertips were steeped before their beak, carefully observing the pair, a wry smile barely hidden behind their digits. “Couldn’t have explained it better myself.”

“Well, I think I can manage that!” The cougar was unconsciously tugging on her knuckles as she spoke, her brow furrowed slightly as she stared at the slip

of parchment for further insight. Eneera immediately recognized the telltale sign of her nervousness; they placed a paw over hers, and squeezed gently.

The gesture brought her back to the present, and reminded Mabel to take a breath in through her mouth and out through her nose, just like they had practiced when meditating. Her features softened as she placed a paw over the djinn's.

"What did I do to deserve a familiar like you?"

"You were kind. Kindness should be reciprocated without thought. Remember: tightly packed, like a ball of clay, and then ask for light." Eneera released her paw and stepped back to give her the space she needed to focus.

The cougar closed her eyes, and held their paw out, palm up.

She whispered her word of focus...

The caracal winced as they recognized the flaw in their explanation.

The flash of light that erupted was almost incendiary, filling the room with a light so bright that all the cougar could do was cover her eyes and yowl in surprise as she and her chair fell back.

Eneera caught her just before she would have hit the floor, both of them quietly thankful for their preternatural reflexive response.

"AH! Fuck! **ME!**" The catamount rubbed under her visor, which did little to nothing in this instance, the AR wear unable to react fast enough. "Godsdamn it..." She blinked rapidly as her pinkprick pupils did their best to recover, squinting up at the shape of Eneera. "Too much?"

The djinn held their thumb and index finger just barely apart, and nodded. "Just a *little*."

Alder scratched a quick note on the pad before him, still smiling as his full-moon lenses faded from opaque to transparent once again. “That was very informative, Mabel, thank you!”

“Always happy to provide a useful data point,” she grumbled, still trying to shake the spots from her eyes. “Maybe someday I’ll be able to see the results...”

“I’m certain you will! That is the goal of learning, after all!”

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There were several more tasks given to Eneera and their companion, all of which were completed — some more successfully than others. Regardless of the results, Alder retained their unshakably pleasant and patient demeanor.

As they prepared to part ways, the bird handed a small leather-bound book to Mabel. “Please use this for guidance in your studies, but don’t hesitate to reach out with any questions, please! I will see you both next week.”

“Of course! Wouldn’t miss it!” The cougar had bounced back from her botched cantrip, and slipped the journal into her back pocket. “And not just because I don’t want a surprise visit from Director Wick.”

“You certainly do not! Her... *distaste* for the Texas heat, and the state as a whole, is second to none! But that won’t be a concern,” they stared over the rim of their glasses, “so long as you both keep up your end of this bargain, hm?”

“Of course,” the djinn intoned, dipping their head in agreement. “We look forward to spending time with you, Alder.”

“For sure! Have to claim that... *treasure*... after all...” Mabel’s roguish smile faltered as she patted her hips, biting her lip as she felt around, even hooking a finger in her shirt to look down into her cleavage. “What did I *do* with...?”

“With this?” Alder crossed their arms over their chest before lifting one hand to reveal the key tucked between their fingers. “Miss Greysmoke, while I

appreciate your enthusiasm for the *art* of legerdemain, you need to pick your marks a little more wisely. Good effort, though.”

The catamount’s blush was instantaneous and strikingly noticeable even on her softly furred cheeks as her smirk melted from smarmy to sheepish. “I meant no disrespect, of course...”

“None taken, my dear. You’ll pick up lots of tricks here, if you stick around long enough.” The bird lifted their other hand, revealing another journal.

Mabel hung her head, stepping back to retrieve not *another* journal, but the same one that she *thought* was still on her person.

The djinn couldn’t help but be impressed by the display, *especially* considering...

“No magic?” The cougar questioned with a tilt of her head, flipping the book over in her paw before slipping it back from whence it came.

Apt observation. Either it was all mundane, or their skill is far greater than they let be seen...

“A magician never reveals their secrets — nor does a warlock, witch, or any other practitioner worth their component parts.” A cheeky wink from the hazel grouse forced the cougar to giggle.

Eneera’s response to the display was more measured.

“May I have a moment with Alder, Mabel? I won’t be long.”

“Oh, of course! I’ll wait by the elevator.” The puma nodded and exited without question, giving a little wave before the door slid closed behind her.

“What can I help you with, Eneera?”

“There are many advantages to being underestimated, are there not?” The caracal was not aggressive, merely assumptive.

“Indeed! Not knowing the depth of someone’s skills allows for improvisation and adaptation.” Their air of confidence held no malice, only practiced surety.

“Deception?” The caracal’s tufted ear flicked, as they raised a brow.

“Not hardly! *Reservation.*” The avian pulled the key from their pocket, the black iron gleaming dully in the warm office lighting. “*Reserving* the right to reveal information when it is most beneficial to my friends, and most harmful to those that would threaten them.” Their gaze was suddenly distant, a flicker of sadness quickly passed. “You’ll find that old habits die hard, Eneera, as you settle into this new world.”

“...Your candesca reveals so much more than Mabel knows... is *ready* to know...” The djinn fell into step with the ancient dance favored by magic users; of half-questions, and unspoken truths.

“She’ll learn when she is ready. Your partner is *exceptionally* bright.”

“How long?”

“Hm...” They tapped a fingertip on their chin, considering. “Longer than most memories, lesser than some. *Gilgamesh* was not my peer.... At least, not in *that* life.” Another sly smile.

Another unexpected path.

“So the answer is ‘old,’ but not quite so old as myself.” Eneera chuckled, and held out a paw. “Thank you for trusting me as you have.”

Alder accepted the offer with the same warmth he had always given, but pretense had given way to comfort. “I’m glad that I was right to trust you, Eneera of the Wind and Fire; I would not have liked the alternative.”

“I shall endeavor to be worthy of that trust, and of hers.”

“You are her *familiar*, Neera,” The hazel grouse leaned close enough for Eneera to feel their feathered cheek brush against their fur, but did not release their paw. “She *chose* to give a piece of herself to you, just as you gave to her. You are *worthy*, silly sirocco...”

They speak with such conviction...

“Mm... I would like to know you better, Alder.” Eneera’s voice barely rose above a whisper.

The facade faltered, if only for a moment. “Who am I to turn away such a handsome caller? Nur ein großer Narr, und ich bin kein Narr.”

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[Return to the Beginning](#)