

Grace of a Wolf –

Chapter 151: Grace: On a Scale of One to Ten...

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My body feels like someone's buried me in wet cement, on top of every cell in my body pulsing with a low, electric hum.

It isn't painful. It's just... there.

Present.

Like background noise.

I flutter my eyes open, squinting against the dark ceiling. It's definitely morning—there's light peeking around the room-darkening blinds—but no idea what time.

Hell, it could be afternoon.

The air conditioner's on, too. I wonder if someone was smart enough to close the window. They must have, because I can hear the generator running, but it's muffled.

Stretching is a whole process, involving groaning and trying to untangle myself from the sheets, evidence of restless sleep and...

Oh, sweet Goddess.

All the memories flood back. Caine's hands, his mouth, the golden threads connecting us, the freaking bite, his face when he came all over my hands—and my cheeks flame instantly. I shift, feeling the ache between my thighs, the tender spot on my neck where his teeth met my skin, and a strange internal vibration which hasn't quite gone away.

A little girl's squeal rings out from outside, followed by Caine's deep voice.

"Bun, don't put that in your mouth. That's dirt. We don't eat dirt."

I scramble to the edge of the bed and pull the black fabric shades back just a little, enough to peek through the side.

Caine's standing with his back to my window, holding Bun upside down by her ankles while she giggles uncontrollably. Sara and Jer are chasing each other with sticks. Ron's using Fenris as some sort of furry pillow as he snoozes in the sunlight.

They look... normal. Happy. Like a family.

Huh. And the strange, foreboding feeling is completely gone.

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, wincing as my feet hit the floor. My body doesn't just ache—it buzzes, like my entire body's been wrapped around a battery.

If I had to guess (not like it's a hard one to figure out), this has something to do with our... shenanigans.

There's no time to contemplate it. I need coffee, a shower, and to look even semi-human. Caine had changed all the sheets last night during my shower—another reason he's amazing and doesn't deserve the frustration I'd thrown his way yesterday—and I'm feeling a little...

Well.

Useless?

Seriously. A girl's gotta earn her keep these days.

Running my fingers through my tangled hair, I shuffle toward the bedroom door. Mistake number one is looking in the mirror.

Jesus.

I look like I've been electrocuted.

Sleeping with wet hair doesn't always end well.

A brisk brushing of hair and teeth later, I step into the main living area of the camper, only to jerk to a stop.

Lyre sits at the dinette, one leg folded under her, scrolling through her phone with a deep furrow between her eyebrows. Her slitted eyes flick across the screen rapidly. She doesn't look up.

"Hi, Grace."

"Uh... morning, Lyre. When did you come in?"

"Last night. We slept together, but I don't think you noticed."

Definitely did not notice. Probably could have had an atom bomb go off at my feet and I wouldn't notice.

Well—obviously a bad metaphor, since I would have died immediately.

But you get the point.

Feeling a little guilty with all the memories of things I definitely should *not* have been doing (in *her* bed, no less!), I trudge my way to the coffee maker. One step at a time. Just need to get the coffee going, and then—

A sharp curse cuts through the silence as Lyre slams her phone face-down on the table.

I turn, startled by the noise, and find her staring directly at me. Her cat-like eyes are laser-focused, seeing through me rather than at me.

I flinch.

And then, terrifyingly, her eyes focus on me again. The wrath behind them disappears.

Instead, she smiles. It's sweet and knowing and I am so, so screwed.

On a scale of fuck-ups from one to ten, I'm pretty sure playing with your boyfriend's dick on your best friend's bed is a ten. Maybe a twelve.

"I heard you two fucked last night," she says pleasantly, as if commenting on the weather.

Heat explodes across my face as I stutter, "Wha—no! We didn't—I mean—not all the way—"

My hands fly up, hovering uselessly in front of me as if they could push her words away. How does she even know? Was she watching? Did Caine tell her? How *much* did he tell her?!

She cuts through my panic with a drawl, "I made it very clear. No touching."

It feels a little like getting caught by your mom.

My shoulders slump. "It wasn't supposed to go that far..."

I wrap my arms around myself, remembering what a great idea it seemed in the moment—touching him, feeling the energy, thinking I could control it. The memory of power surging between us makes my skin tingle, even now.

The rainbow-haired witch snaps her fingers sharply and points at me. "Exactly. That's *why* you can't touch him."

She leans forward, her voice hardening. "You can't trust your mind once you've established a link. He'll devour you. Body and soul. Neither of you have the control to fight it. Even if he *should*, he doesn't. I guess the knowledge has died out in recent generations."

A chill races down my spine. Not like she hasn't warned me before; as she's so clearly stated, she *has*.

But that's not what it felt like. It felt like... connection. Understanding...

"You can feel it now, can't you?" Lyre asks, her head tilted. "The arcana. When he touches you."

I nod slowly, awkwardly turning away to make my coffee. I clearly need some caffeine for this conversation. "Yeah... I can see it now. Like... threads? Golden threads connecting us. I can see them, but not with my eyes, if that makes sense."

Glancing over my shoulder lets me observe her expression shift. She leans back, chin resting on her hand, a strange thoughtfulness replacing her anger. She studies me with her unnerving cat-slit eyes, and I have the distinct impression she's seeing more than just me.

Like whatever vision I could use to see the threads of energy yesterday.

Only the air conditioner and the muffled generator tell me time's still flowing. Then a burst of laughter from outside. Sara. Maybe Jer.

Then Lyre says, softly but clearly:

"You met Chaos, didn't you?"

I blink at her. Then blink again. "How'd you know?"

Chapter 152: Lyre: Anchors and Divinities

LYRE

Grace looks like a spooked deer, and I reign in my arcana hard. The poor thing's a mess. Thankfully, she slept through my little spat with her royal leech last night.

I sigh.

"The storm's one of his signatures. He likes a dramatic entrance, but it's not all his fault. Chaos can't really exist without..." My hands flutter in the air. "Chaos."

"Uh-huh." Grace just looks more confused than ever as she finishes making her cup of coffee. She slides into the bench opposite with me and takes a slow sip, her eyes finally meeting mine without sliding all over the place.

Guess it's finally time to turn the poor girl's world upside down.

She sucks in a deep breath. "So, did I sign my own death warrant by meeting him?"

"No, no. Nothing like that."

I tap my finger against the table, watching the girl across from me. Grace is trying so hard to appear casual, but her entire body's strung tight and her leg keeps jiggling under the table.

"Have you seen any strange apps on your phone recently?" I ask, keeping my voice deliberately light.

Her eyes widen immediately. "Yes! I got this weird notification from Chaos through it. I can't open it whenever I want, though."

Well, shit.

The confirmation wasn't really necessary, but it still sucks to hear it.

I sigh deeply, the sound dragging out of me like it weighs a thousand pounds. "Yeah. It's probably because Chaos pushed up the timeline of your fate."

"What does that mean?" Grace leans forward, her coffee forgotten. She's a bloodhound of a human now, latching onto the possibility of answers in her strange new life.

I shake my head. Some truths aren't mine to deliver, and frankly, I'm not in the mood to be smote before lunch. "That's not something I'm free to share."

Her face falls.

"More importantly, Grace, do you understand what Chaos is?"

The girl hesitates, fiddling with her cup, spinning it between her palms. "If angels exist, then my assumption would be Chaos is the devil?"

The laugh that bursts from me is genuine. The same tired binary. Good versus evil. Heaven versus hell. As if existence could be packaged so neatly.

"You're not exactly wrong, but also, you're very wrong."

Her brow furrows adorably.

"Chaos isn't a *who*," I explain, "but a *what*. Chaos is closer to the type of existence one might call 'God' or 'Goddess.'"

She frowns, opening her mouth to ask what appears to be one of fifty burning questions judging by the look in her eyes. I hold up my hand, stopping her before she can derail us.

"Three ancient gods—to put it in a way you might understand—exist and rule this world and others. Order, Chaos, and Balance." I count them off on my fingers, trying to simplify concepts that predate language itself. "All other gods fall under their purview. The Goddess most wolves pray to would be considered a minor divinity, for example. She does not have the power one would think she has compared to a primal divinity, such as Wrath or Justice."

Grace stares at me blankly, looking like she's trying to solve differential equations in her head.

"Are you still following?"

She nods slowly. "Kind of."

"To put it simply, you had a brief visit with Chaos. One of the three ultimate divinities in this world. As you can imagine, chaos is his purview. Anything to disrupt order in this world is under his reign. Like you."

Predictably, she blinks again. "Me?"

"Yes. You."

I wait for her to process this new line of information.

"How am I... disrupting order?"

"To be precise, *you* aren't disrupting order. Your existence does. Did Chaos say anything to you about Anchors?"

She nods. "Sort of. He called me an Anchor."

I grin. "Yes, he would. That's because you are one."

I let the silence simmer a little longer. Part of it is for my amusement, of course—watching the confusion grow in Grace's eyes. But most of it's for her to digest this information at her own pace.

But also because I'm weighing and judging what I can and cannot reveal to this child who's stepped into the realm of gods.

It's a painful balancing act, but Time has failed us both, letting this happen under his watch.

The apologies flooding my inbox aren't nearly enough to douse the irritation Chaos has roused in me. Daring to touch Grace, to push her when she isn't ready...

"Okay. I'll bite. What's an Anchor, Lyre?"

I reach across the table and poke Grace's nose, making her blink in surprise. "What do *you* think an Anchor is, little miss?"

She sits back, frustration creasing her brow. The girl has such an expressive face—all her emotions play across it in high definition. Right now, she's vacillating between annoyed and desperate, caught between wanting to tell me to go to hell and begging for answers.

"Why do I have to guess? Can't you just tell me?" Her voice edges into a whine, one hand curling around her coffee mug like it's a lifeline.

It isn't the type of whine a child might use, but more like... an annoyed younger sister.

It's cute.

"Because, darling, you've been walking a very interesting path. You must have some theories by now." I tap my nail against my own mug, studying her. "You've been feeling

things, haven't you? Sensing things? I've rarely seen someone face so many extraordinary circumstances in such a short window of time without developing a working hypothesis."

The frustration slowly melts from her face. Behind it, something thoughtful emerges—cautious but genuinely curious. She's chewing on the inside of her cheek as she thinks.

"Well..." she starts, voice quiet. "Caine mentioned that I seem to... calm him."

I nod, letting the silence stretch just long enough to encourage her to continue.

"And when we touch, I could feel the energy—like gold threads connecting us." Her words pick up speed. "When Bun shifted and lost control, I was able to reach her somehow. And last night with Caine..." She stops, a flush invading her cheeks. "There was something there. Something powerful. It felt like he was pulling something out of me. Or maybe we were sharing it?"

I watch her work through it, pieces clicking into place behind those intelligent green eyes. The girl isn't stupid—just woefully uninformed and drowning in supernatural existence.

"So whatever I'm doing, I'm... anchoring Caine, right?"

She's closer than she realizes. I nod again, more deliberately this time.

"Caine feels less..." She gestures vaguely with her hands, searching for the word. "Less volatile around me. Less dangerous. Is that what an Anchor does? Stabilizes things?"

My lips curve into a smile. Not bad for a child who was raised by wolves with absolutely zero magical education. Granted, the signs were there in blazing neon, but still.

"Indeed." I lean back, weighing how much to tell her—how much I'm *permitted* to tell her. The lines between guidance and interference blur so easily. "An Anchor is exceedingly rare."

Grace's eyebrows lift. "So I'm special?"

"Didn't you already know that?"

She laughs a little, but it's awkward. "You knew I was an Anchor when we first met, then?"

"Of course."

Chapter 153: Grace: Feared and Revered

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Something's off with Lyre.

Her multicolored hair catches the morning light streaming through the RV's windows, but the usual sparkle in her cat-like eyes is missing. Her slender fingers drum against the table, creating an irregular pattern as her gaze drifts somewhere past my shoulder, unfocused and distant.

This isn't the Lyre I've come to know—the one who's always three steps ahead, confident to the point of arrogance and always ready with a sarcastic comment or cryptic warning. This one looks... worried.

"There's a reason you aren't very open with me, isn't there?" I ask softly, breaking the silence between us. She's completely stopped talking.

She sighs, her fingers pausing their restless dance. She taps the back of her phone with painted nails and gives me a smile, though it doesn't reach her eyes.

"If I say too much, I risk losing too much."

More cryptic answers.

"Losing what? I mean... you don't seem very attached to anything."

I mean, Lyre travels light and lives like some sort of nomad. This RV is her most substantial possession, but even it feels temporary—a vessel for freedom rather than something to treasure.

Her whole existence seems designed for minimum attachment, maximum mobility.

Instead of answering with words, Lyre lifts her palm. Something shimmers in the air above her hand, condensing into a perfect, glistening orb of water that hovers impossibly in midair. It catches the light, sending tiny rainbows dancing across her face.

"It could be as simple as this power," she says, her voice stripped of its usual playfulness. "Or we could lose time."

The water orb dissolves, droplets vanishing before they hit the table.

"Time?" I repeat, not understanding.

"Imagine you—back when you were terrified of Caine, running from him. Yes?"

I nod silently. Those memories feel both recent and distant—like they happened to a different version of me. And yet it's only been a timeline of days.

Crazy how much can happen in a single stretch of twenty-four hours.

"Now imagine waking up naked in his arms, with no understanding of how you got there, and now he's obsessed with you."

I blink rapidly, my stomach twisting at the thought. That would be... terrible. Disorienting. Beyond awkward.

Lyre's eyes darken at my expression. "This is the kind of thing that can happen when a timeline is shifted. If those of divinity interfere excessively in the lives of mortals..."

I spin my coffee mug again, thinking it through. "So, if you tell me too much, it's considered excessive interference?"

"Of course." She leans back with a sigh. "There are rules, Grace. Even for beings like me. Losing my power for even a few years wouldn't be much of a hassle before, but it would be detrimental now. Even an hour can change everything."

My mind spins, trying to connect all these weird puzzle pieces into some sort of coherent picture. If telling me things could trigger divine intervention serious enough to rewrite time itself, then...

"Why are you telling me things now?" I frown, resting my elbows on the table as I lean forward.

Lyre's lips curve into a half-smile. "Chaos opened the door. But it's only a crack."

Each new piece of information only spawns more questions, but one rises above the others.

"Then why are you helping me?" I finally ask, the question that's been nagging at me since she first offered me a ride when I was desperate to escape.

"Because you're an Anchor."

"But what does that actually *mean*?" I press, frustration edging into my voice. "So far all I know is that I'm supposedly special and can calm down some angry moods. And that Chaos is interested in me, which is terrifying, by the way."

More than terrifying. It's freaking me out.

"It's more than just stabilizing your little boyfriend out there," she says, a hint of her usual snark returning as she gestures vaguely toward the outside, where Caine and the

kids are still playing. "Sure, it helps his erratic mood swings, keeps him on this side of murderous..."

I nod. It does, in fact, explain a lot about how differently he's presented himself in recent days. He's practically bubbly compared to the man I met in the forest.

There hasn't been a single restraint or gag. No choking, either. Instead, he's been... sweet. Caring. Very much Boyfriend Material.

"But it isn't just the Lycan King you can affect."

I straighten. "Bun, too."

"Mm. Yes. You can even affect..." She points to herself with a slow smile. "Me."

My breath catches. "But I don't have to worry about touching you."

"Because I have control."

Oh.

That makes sense.

"Can... other people affect you?"

"No, Grace. That's what makes an Anchor so special."

I bite at my lip, rolling it between my teeth as I think it through. "So I'm not human?"

"Oh, no. You're definitely human."

Tilting my head, I squint at Lyre. "Anchors don't sound... human."

"Your existence as an Anchor is separate from your physical body."

Uh-huh. Understanding the words she speaks is very different from understanding the *meaning*, and my head's already aching.

My coffee's growing cold; my stomach's a little too queasy to try another sip. "Why are Anchors so rare?"

"Because there are plenty of gods out there who'd rather not see one alive."

My stomach plummets. Forget queasy, it just squashed itself into a pancake. "My power is dangerous, then?"

"Your power has the ability to disrupt divine influence," she corrects.

A shiver runs through me, goosebumps rising on my arms.

"Fate is a funny thing," Lyre continues, her voice still calm, like she didn't just tell me to *beware of gods wanting me dead*. Jesus. "It exists outside of Order and Chaos. Fate doesn't care about Plausibility, but it cares about the souls within its grasp."

"You speak of Fate like it's a person...?"

She nods once, definitively. "Yes. Someone like you would see Fate as a being like a goddess."

"Is Fate stronger than Chaos?"

Lyre's lips quirk upward. "Fate creates Chaos. It also creates Order. And Fate creates Anchors, their stabilizing influence in this world." She leans forward, her eyes suddenly intense. "Where gods exist, so too must exist those with the power to fight their power, no?"

She points a single finger at me, and I feel the weight of her words pressing down on my chest until it's hard to breathe.

"That would be you, Grace. An Anchor. Blessed by Fate, both feared and revered by the gods."

I stare at her, my stomach flipping over like it wants to crawl out of my body. It's gone from pancake to something existing on its own, and it wants nothing to do with this situation at all.

Hah.

Rubbing at my aching head, I stare down into my cup of coffee. For a second, I swear I see the face of a white cat staring up at me. But then I blink, and it's gone. "Why me?"

"Why anyone? You were born with this Fate."

"What if I don't *want* it?"

"You don't have a choice."

I grunt. Right. We're talking about *gods*. Literal gods. Not just God, or Goddess, but *multiple gods*. And they have... an app. Which seems rather mundane, when you think about it. Why the hell would gods need an app?

"If I'm so strong, why am I so... you know." I peek at Lyre through my eyelashes. "Weak?"

She snorts. "Can someone become an expert martial artist without practice?"

Um, no. Obviously.

Guess my question was a little bit silly.

"Am I Caine's mate, then? Or is this just because I'm an Anchor?"

Her lips quirk. "You're his mate, Grace. There's no doubt about your relationship with the royal dunce."

My shoulders relax a little; I hadn't even realized they were scrunched up to the vicinity of my ears. "Oh. That's good, then."

She watches me for a long time, and I squirm. It isn't like I don't have questions, I'm just... so filled with information, I'm not even sure how to *ask* what I want to know.

"So... why are gods scared of Anchors, exactly? How can I affect them?" Calming down an angry god does sound like it could make some massive changes—maybe stop them from obliterating a city. But it isn't like we have gods just roaming the world and doing that kind of thing, so it seems rather—I don't know. Pointless?

I'm still reeling over the idea gods are *real* like that. We all pray to something. After coming to Blue Mountain, I learned to pray to the Moon Goddess like almost all shifters do.

But it doesn't mean I ever expected to *talk* to her. Or even assumed she was really able to hear our prayers. Honestly, I never thought too much about religion or the Goddess. Either she exists or she doesn't, but it never seemed like something to affect me on a personal level.

So all of this? It's strange.

Beyond strange.

Inexplicable is a better word.

"An Anchor is capable of binding even a god to them. In essence, you could become the master of gods. You could force them to do your bidding. Even if it meant you wanted to raze this world to the ground and start over again."

I blink at Lyre.

"I'm sorry, did you just say I could literally erase this world and *start life over again*?"

"Of course not." Her lips quirk. "I'm saying you could have a god do it for you. Assuming you got some really good sucker punch in, it might even work. Of course, then the other gods would come forward to fight, and it would end up in a war, so it isn't necessarily something *feasible*—Grace? Are you okay?"

I rub my hands over my face with a loud groan. "No, Lyre. I'm not okay."

Chapter 154: Grace: Arcana (I)

Chapter 154: Grace: Arcana (I)

Lyre waits until I'm calm again, her chin still resting in her palm as she watches me.

"I don't get it," I finally admit, scrubbing my hands over my face again. It's not that I'm trying to hide, but just... the pressure and darkness helps me feel a little better. A little less dizzy and lost with the information thrown at me.

Anchors. Divinity. Gods. Fate...

"What don't you get?"

"Everything. I understand what you're saying, it just... doesn't feel real." Like Lyre's making up a story.

"Hmm." Her fingers tap against the table again. "Well, it's understandable. You'll come to know more with time, but it's against us at the moment. More importantly, Grace, there are things you need to do, now that Chaos has opened your door."

Somehow, I know I'm not going to like whatever she has to say.

"What things?"

"Well." Cool fingers touch the back of my hands, and I pull them away from my face to blink at the rainbow-haired woman in front of me. Lyre smiles faintly. "First, you need to learn to harness your power. I hear you can see arcana now?"

I nod.

"It's a bit fast, but I suppose I should thank Chaos for this gift, at least. Can you see it at will? Or only when you're in the middle of your..." Her index finger swirls in the air. "...shenanigans?"

I blush.

"Only when I touch Caine. They look like golden threads."

"Hmm. Interesting. You're all out of order." Again with the tapping as she frowns. "Can you touch it? Manipulate it? Stop the flow?"

I shake my head. "Not exactly. I can touch it sometimes. I can't really... stop it. I tried to squeeze it, and it worked a little." We just won't tell her about the whole strangling-my-boyfriend's-dick thing.

Some embarrassment just never needs to see the light of day.

"How does it feel when you touch it?"

I tilt my head a little, thinking back. "Warm. Almost like a wiggling rope and water at the same time, but sometimes I can't feel it at all—"

"Hmm." Her finger drums at the table again. "It sounds like your perception and expression are on different planes."

I stare at her blankly.

She sighs. "You see arcana as a thread, but it's more than squiggly golden lines in the air. It's part of the air you breathe. Part of the blood running through your body. It's in every inch of your skin. Everything in this world is made of arcana. If you want to control it, you need to manipulate it from its basest form. Don't think of it as water, or air, or even a rock. Base arcana is most similar to a gas." She makes a fist with a wry smile. "No matter how much you try to hold onto it, it will always escape your grip."

Okay. This makes some sense. I nod. "So how do I control it, then?"

"Give it purpose. Arcana exists everywhere. Either disperse the density of it, or absorb more. Give it roads and direction, and it will follow your will. If you know where it's coming from, it's easy to divert as necessary. What you consider *pushing* or *pulling*

now is like taking a sledgehammer to a popsicle stick."

Lyre holds out both hands. "When I'm *pulling* arcana, I'm not yanking it out of its proper existence. It comes to me on my order. I absorb it, and therefore it's mine." Slowly, a faint, fuzzy ball of golden light appears in her hand. "Try to call it to you. It should be easier, since I've already corralled it."

I hold out my hands, palms facing upward, the awkwardness making my fingers tremble slightly. The ball of golden light hovers between Lyre's hands, pulsing gently like a miniature sun. I squint at it, trying to see beyond what my eyes show me.

Nothing.

I can't see anything other than what any normal human would—a weird glowing orb that shouldn't exist but somehow does. My jaw tightens with frustration. Last night with Caine, I'd seen those golden threads so clearly. I'd touched them, manipulated them. I'd felt the power surging between us. Now? Nothing.

"Can't feel it?" Lyre asks, her cat-like eyes studying my face.

I shake my head, feeling more defeated than I probably should. I'm a beginner. This is all new to me. It would make sense to fail. And yet I feel... frustrated. Annoyed with myself.

I'm surrounded by powerful people, relying on them to keep me safe. I want power, too. At least enough to defend myself a little.

"No. I thought... after last night with Caine, I really thought I'd unlocked something."

A humorless laugh escapes me. Just my luck—I finally discover I'm some mythical being called an Anchor, capable of influencing gods, and I can't even see magic right in front of my face.

It sounds about right for the kind of life I've led so far, but then I feel a little guilty for having such a pessimistic thought in the first place.

Lyre chuckles, the sound surprisingly gentle. She moves her hands forward until they're beneath mine. "Perhaps you need a more direct approach."

Her palms press against the underside of mine, and the warm orb of light transfers between us. As she slowly pulls her hands away, the golden ball remains, hovering just above my skin.

"Oh!"

The sensation hits immediately; it's warm and gentle, but the heat it emits is something beyond a surface-level temperature. It tingles, starting at my palms and radiating up my wrists.

The best I can explain it? It feels like holding onto electricity, except the electricity doesn't hurt. It hums, vibrates, and makes the fine hairs on my forearms stand up.

"The arcana will slowly absorb through your skin," she says, her voice taking on a teacher-like quality. "It's little more than a trickle, but try to feel it as it does so."

I stare down at the ball of light, trying to understand what I'm feeling. The warmth intensifies, sinking deeper into my hands.

"Focus. If you concentrate hard enough, you might be able to see it."

I narrow my eyes, attempting to look beyond this... physical manifestation.

My breathing slows as I concentrate, blocking out everything else—the sounds filtering in from outside, the diffused hum of the generator, and even the loud blowing of the air conditioners overhead.

There's just me and this glowing ball of energy, and Lyre's voice.

"I don't see anything," I mutter through clenched teeth, trying to force my jaw to relax. I fail. My entire body's coiled up with the force of *trying*. "Just the ball."

"Don't try to see with your eyes," Lyre says. "Your eyes are designed to perceive physical reality, not arcana. Close them."

I hesitate, afraid the ball will disappear or fall if I'm not watching it.

"Trust me," she adds, as if reading my mind. "The arcana isn't going anywhere. Close your eyes and feel."

With a deep breath, I let my eyelids drop shut. The darkness behind my eyes isn't complete—there's a brightness there, the impression of the ball still visible, like when you look at a light and then close your eyes.

"Now what?" I ask, feeling stupid standing here with my hands out and my eyes closed.

"Just feel. Don't try to control it yet. Just observe."

The warmth in my palms grows more distinct. Without my vision dominating my senses, I become hyperaware of the sensation—how it pulses slightly, how it seems to have a rhythm almost like a heartbeat. The tingling intensifies, and now I can track it moving up my wrists, spreading through my forearms.

Chapter 155: Grace: Arcana (II)

Chapter 155: Grace: Arcana (II)

"It's... moving," I say, surprised. "I can feel it traveling up my arms."

"Good," Lyre says. "That's the arcana being absorbed. Can you see its path?"

I concentrate harder, focusing on the sensation rather than trying to visualize anything. And then—

"Oh!"

There it is. Not golden threads this time, but something more like... streams? Veins filled with liquid light pulsing up from my palms, branching through my arms. They're not as distinct as what I saw with Caine, more like impressions of light beneath my skin.

Wait. I can *see my arms*. They're definitely my arms; I know it down to the marrow in my bones. But it doesn't *look* like my arms. If anything, it's similar to the faint outline of light when I'd "seen" our hands last night...

"I can see it," I breathe. "Not like before. It's faint. But it looks like little rivers under my skin."

"That's because you're absorbing it directly. What you saw with Caine was arcana in transit—energy moving between bodies, through structured channels. This is arcana becoming part of you."

If only I could really *understand* what Lyre's saying. Again, it isn't as if the words are foreign, but the concept seems beyond what I can truly wrap my mind around.

The light spreads further, tiny rivulets reaching my elbows, my biceps, creeping toward my shoulders. It feels... good. Like a shot of caffeine without the jitters, or the satisfaction of stretching after sitting too long. My body hums with it.

"This feels different than with Caine," I say, my eyes still closed, tracking the progress of the light.

"I imagine it would." There's a smirk in her voice. "Arcana expression varies widely based on the source and the... circumstances."

My cheeks heat again. "That's not what I meant."

"Of course not. But differences are important to note. The arcana you're absorbing is what I've already refined. What flows between you and Caine is wild, coming straight from your source. Both are valid expressions of power, but they're vastly different in application."

The light has reached my chest now. I can feel it spreading outward from my sternum, little branches of warmth extending between my ribs. It feels like my entire torso is filling with gentle sunlight.

"It's everywhere," I murmur. "Is it supposed to spread this much?"

There's a pause that lasts a beat too long.

"Lyre?"

"Open your eyes, Grace."

I do, blinking against the sudden influx of normal light. The ball above my palms has shrunk to half its original size, but what catches my attention is Lyre's expression—eyebrows raised, lips slightly parted in surprise.

"What's wrong?" I ask, suddenly anxious.

"Nothing's wrong," she says, but her tone suggests something unexpected is happening. "You're absorbing it much faster than you should be able to. Most beginners take hours to process that much arcana. You've taken half of it in minutes."

I look down at the diminished ball of light. "Is that... bad?"

"Not bad. Just unusual." She tilts her head, studying me with those unnerving slitted eyes. "You're hungry for it."

The way she says it makes me uncomfortable, like I've been caught doing something shameful. "I'm just doing what you said."

"I know. It's not a criticism. If anything, it's good for you. Of course, had I known earlier... well, never mind." She gestures toward my hands. "Continue. I want to see how quickly you can take in the rest."

I focus on the remaining light, and this time, instead of just observing, I find myself wanting to pull it in faster. The warmth is addictive, the feeling of strength and lightness it brings intoxicating.

The ball shrinks rapidly now, streams of light flowing into my palms like water down a drain. Ten seconds, and it's gone completely.

"Impressive," Lyre says.

The energy thrums through me, making me feel jittery, powerful. I flex my fingers, half expecting sparks to fly from them.

"Now what? Do I... do something with it?"

"No. It will disperse on its own."

Then she leans forward and rubs my head, like I'm a cat. "Good girl."

A warm, pleasant sensation washes through me, like liquid sunshine spreading from the crown of my head down through my shoulders. It's comforting and gentle, almost maternal.

I jerk back, my exasperation cutting through the pleasant feeling. "Could you not treat me like a pet?"

Lyre's lips quirk into a small smile, her slitted eyes studying me with amusement. "Did you feel it?" She tilts her head. "No?"

I blink at her, confused. "Feel what?"

"That." She flicks her fingers vaguely in my direction, mild exasperation coloring her voice. "I just transferred a smidgen of arcana into you with my touch."

My mouth falls open. "That was—I thought that was just... a feeling. Like, emotion." Kind of like a rush of affection toward an older sister.

"No. That was *arcana*." Her smile edges towards predatory now. "This is what an Anchor can do to others. A single touch, and you can have someone on their knees, desperate for another."

Every time I'd brushed against Caine—every accidental touch, every deliberate contact—had I been affecting him? The way he looks at me sometimes, like he's drowning and I'm air... is that because of what I am?

Lyre straightens suddenly and points a finger at me with a stern frown. "Stop overthinking. Whatever you're thinking now, you're probably wrong."

I bite at my lip and try to shove the intrusive thoughts away. "Okay."

Of course it's wrong. It has to be wrong. She's already explained that we are fated mates, so being an Anchor should have nothing to do with it.

I suck in a deep breath. Yeah. No overthinking.

"Are you..." I clear my throat, a little embarrassed when my voice croaks. "Sorry. Are you also an Anchor?"

She snorts. "No. An Echo Witch is not an Anchor."

"What's an Echo Witch, then?"

"I'll explain another day, maybe. When Plausibility allows it. But more importantly..." She looks at her phone with a sigh as it buzzes on the table. "We have work to do."

Chapter 156: Lyre: Assigned Missions

LYRE

Thankfully, Grace seems to have a natural affinity for arcana manipulation. It might seem as if it would be natural with her being an Anchor, but... surprisingly, it isn't always.

I frown at my phone. No Plausibility warnings yet—which is suspicious in itself. My screen glows with a stomach-sinking alert.

It isn't like I didn't know it was coming, but still...

[ASSIGNED MISSION: Neutralize detected agent of Chaos in Region 23-BETA.]

The alert is region-wide, meaning Owen's probably got the same message burning a hole in his pocket. At least he's competent.

"What's this?" Grace is staring at her own phone with a frown. When she sees me looking at her, she turns the screen toward me. "What does this mean, Lyre? It's from that app."

The familiar interface of the Divinity App glows back at me. And a mission.

But this one is different.

[ASSIGNED MISSION: Investigate disturbance in Region 20-L. Locate and secure compromised artifacts. Report findings.]

Region 20-L. Blue Mountain territory. Grace's old pack, and the same place she was running from.

"Let me see that." I snatch the phone, scanning for details. Grace is nowhere near ready for field assignments. She's barely grasped the barest concept of her own power, for fuck's sake.

Then my eyes land on the bottom of the screen.

[Temporary Guardianship Assigned By: Reaper Caeriel]

"That son of a bitch!" The words explode from me before I can stop them.

The camper shudders violently, dishes rattling in the cupboards. A few books tumble from their shelf. Grace yelps as her coffee cup slides across the table, grabbing it just before it tips over the edge.

"Earthquake? Do we even get earthquakes here?!"

I force my breathing to slow, pushing my rage back into the box where I keep all my other inconvenient emotions. "No. Not an earthquake."

That overdressed, obsessive bastard. Caeriel knows exactly what he's doing. Assigning guardianship of an untrained Anchor without consultation? Sending her back to the place she just escaped?!

He's trying to corner me, force my hand. And the worst part is I can't follow her there—I'm bound by my own mission parameters.

Fuck!

Before I can explain anything to Grace, the door's yanked open. Caine fills the doorframe, wild-eyed and bristling with protective fury.

"What the hell was that?" he demands, eyes darting between us. "Grace, are you—"

No. No wolves in this conversation.

With a sharp gesture, I send a blast of concentrated air that catches him square in the chest, propelling him backward out the door. Another flick of my wrist slams it shut, and I engage every magical lock I've built into this camper.

The banging starts immediately. "Lyre! Open this goddamn door!"

I turn to Grace, who looks torn between shock and wanting to let him in. "Listen to me very carefully." I keep my voice deadly serious, and she jerks her eyes away from the door to meet mine. "Caine cannot know about the app. Not now, not ever."

"But why—"

"He won't even be able to see it. The interface is perception-filtered. If you start talking about missions and divinities, he'll think you've lost your mind." I lean closer. "And if you push it, if you try to force him to see what he can't, the system will auto-correct the plausibility breach."

Grace's eyebrows draw together. "What does that mean?"

"It means reality will shift to maintain coherence. And those shifts are rarely gentle." The banging on the door grows more insistent. "I don't like telling you to keep secrets, especially from him. But this is beyond either of us."

The weight of what I'm asking settles on her face. She nods slowly, reluctantly, as Caine continues his assault on my door.

"What is this mission, then? What am I supposed to do?" Grace asks, her voice steadier than I would have expected from someone who just had a mini-meltdown over learning she could control gods.

A sour taste fills my mouth as I mutter, "You need to go back to your old pack. To Blue Mountain." The words feel like betrayal coming from my lips, and I don't like it. "Find out what's been compromised there."

"Go back? There?!" Her voice goes up into a half-shriek; I can't blame her.

I clench my jaw. "And I can't go with you. I'm pinned here by my own assignment. Different regions."

If I get it done quickly...

But Chaos is such a fucking pain in the ass. There's no way I'm going to find his agent on the first try.

Damn it.

"But I don't—I can't—" Grace stammers, panic rising in her eyes. "They don't want me there. And I don't know what I'm looking for or how to—"

"You'll figure it out. The app will help." I run a hand through my hair with a grimace. This is *not* how I expected today to go. I was hoping to grab the Sleeping Beauty of a wizard and force him to track our prey down.

What was even the point of filling him with arcana if this stupid fucking mission is in the way?

This is exactly why I tried to stay away from this damn app and its headaches.

"Fuck Chaos right in his cosmic eye socket. If that pretentious divinity hadn't made direct contact with you, we wouldn't be in this mess."

The noise at the door grows more threatening. I hear Fenris's deep, warning growl join Caine's demands. The kids are shouting, too, and Grace doesn't like it. Her hands keep fluttering over the table as she looks at the door.

A snap of my finger brings blessed quiet.

Don't worry; they're still outside banging and yelling away. But now at least Grace can't hear it.

"Will they hurt me if I go back?" she asks quietly, and something in my chest twists at the fear in her voice. Doesn't she realize she has the Lycan King behind her?

We need to work on her confidence.

"Maybe, but your boyfriend will be with you. And if you say Rafe one more time—"

Grace frowns at me. "Why would I bring up Rafe?"

My mouth closes. Every time I say anything about her boyfriend, she would bring up the annoying and mysterious Rafe. It looks like Caine's finally eclipsed her ex-boyfriend's existence in her head.

Good for him. What a useful canine.

But the girl still looks worried.

"You have power now, Grace. More than you even understand. You'll be okay."

I hope.

If Caeriel lets her get hurt...

My eyes darken. I'll have to send him a warning, but it's probably what he's waiting on. Fucking pervert.

Her eyes flicker down to the phone, to the notification there. It won't go away until the mission is completed, one way or another. "How long will I be gone?"

"Not long, if you're efficient." I check my own mission parameters again, but they haven't changed. "I'll try to wrap mine up quickly. Then I'll find you. Take the camper with you. I assume you'll be bringing the children?"

Grace bites her lip and nods, but she looks... worried. Her eyes dart back down to the phone, then toward the silently vibrating door. All that panic bottled up—it's like watching a teacup trying to hold a thunderstorm. A tiny, chipped cup without any pairs.

I reach over and rub the top of her head, channeling a thin stream of arcana through my fingertips. The golden energy shivers through the blonde strands, invisible to anyone who can't see magic. Which is most people.

I'm not Grace. I don't have her gift for calming souls and steadying chaos, but I'm not completely useless at comfort.

Just mostly useless at it.

Emotions have never been my strong point. I've had them hammered into me by sheer force of centuries of time spent among humans, but there's a reason divinities stay removed from the lives of mortals.

Emotions aren't as temporary as their lives.

"Don't worry. The App never assigns missions you can't handle."

I'm lying.

Oh, it's true in theory, but the App's idea of "can handle" usually involves a generous helping of trauma, terror, and narrowly avoided death. Or not avoided at all.

Their standards are absurdly high. Divinity doesn't waste resources on failures; they just send people likely to succeed, with an acceptable casualty rate of—well, I try not to think about it.

But Grace doesn't need to hear this. She's already vibrating with anxiety, and I don't need her hyperventilating. Caine already wants to rip me apart for keeping him away from his mate.

Though it's good he's here; he can keep her safe in my stead. And if he fails, I'll just rip him apart. Another widescale shifter war is an acceptable price.

I check my phone again, scanning once again to see if any additional details have been added for the mission.

Nope.

Just the maddening command: *Neutralize detected agent of Chaos.*

As if that's so fucking easy.

I sigh, slipping the phone into my pocket. "Make sure you don't go under any low-hanging bridges."

Grace's eyes widen slightly. "Trolls?" she asks, voice tight with a new fear. "Do I need to worry about trolls now too?"

I stare at her, feeling my face settle into the exasperated expression I reserve for humans, werewolves, and most things with a pulse. Seven hundred years

and still nothing surprises me like the mortal capacity to fixate on the wrong damn thing.

It's a good thing she's cute.

It's no wonder humans like to raise pets.

"No, Grace. You'll sheer off the roof of my home if you do."

Chapter 157: Jack-Eye: Standoff

Chapter 157: Jack-Eye: Standoff

JACK-EYE

Waves of dominance brush against the SUV as we roll up to the boondocking spot. I kill the engine, but don't move right away. I'm in no rush to jump into the shitstorm brewing outside.

Lyre and Caine stand about ten feet apart, locked in some kind of standoff. Her rainbow hair seems to catch non-existent wind while he's rigid and ready to attack.

The pressure wave of their combined power crashes against the car windows.

"This is gonna be great," Andrew mutters. He's getting pretty mouthy.

I grunt in response. The question is whose side I'm taking when things go nuclear. Loyalty says Caine, but my dick has other ideas, especially with Lyre's ass so perfectly molded by her jeans.

Owen doesn't hesitate. The car's barely stopped when he flings the door open and takes off toward the RV, not even glancing at the supernatural pissing contest. His stride is long, purposeful—a man with his mind on one thing only.

He's been impatiently waiting for us to get here, to the point of dragging Thom into the shower to wake him up with cold water. The concept of lazing about until five minutes before check-out was denied with a flat stare and a grunt.

"Priorities, huh." I watch him disappear inside, wondering how it feels to have kids to worry about.

I wonder what Lyre's natural hair color is...

"Are we coming with you?" Andrew asks, interrupting my happy thoughts.

I sigh.

"Yeah."

Whatever Caine and Lyre are fighting about—

Only one way to find out.

I push open the driver's door and saunter toward them, hands in pockets, forcing casual confidence. The air between them practically sizzles, making my skin prickle.

"Should I be recording this for posterity," I call out, "or are we settling things wolf-style in the dirt?"

Caine's head snaps toward me, a growl rumbling from his chest. He's not amused.

Lyre's slitted eyes narrow dangerously. She's not amused, either.

Wrong time. Message received.

"You don't get between me and my mate again. Ever." My friend's voice is deadly quiet. Looks like Grace was in the center of it again. No surprise there; Caine seems to lose his mind over the girl.

Lyre crosses her arms with a sigh. His alpha dominance doesn't even faze her, which is hotter than her ass in those jeans, but not as hot as her naked yesterday. "Sometimes you're just going to have to butt out of a situation. That was one of them."

"Words are useful, Lyre."

"Wow, a wolf who knows how to use words." Her tone drips acid. "Sorry, I didn't realize."

Caine responds with another growl, and I'm impressed he's holding back. The man's never been known for his patience for disrespect.

Granted, he was calmer once. A long time ago.

The rainbow-haired witch looks up at the sky, pressing her lips together. For some reason, I have the feeling she's counting.

Then she looks down, and half the pressure of the area ceases to exist, settling the prickling hairs on my arms. "Fine. I'm sorry for throwing you out—"

"It only worked because I wasn't expecting it," Caine announces, finally letting up on his dominance.

Amazing. I can't tell if it's because Grace has calmed the man with whatever strange power she possesses, or if Caine's actually respecting the woman standing before him.

"Whatever, Ego King." Lyre's eyes flash dangerously. "But there are things I can only share with Grace. Don't you dare pressure her into telling you anything, either. If you do, I'll neuter you like the dog you are, even if it makes her cry."

The air around us shivers and compresses. Dominance radiates off both of them in waves—Caine's familiar, roiling and wolfish, pressing down like gravity, but Lyre's... hers feels different. Ancient. Like standing at the edge of a storm that's been building for centuries.

I clear my throat, about to ask what the fuck they're actually arguing about since I'll probably need to pick a side soon—

"Is it time?" A dreamy voice cuts through the tension.

We all turn to see Thom hovering nearby, looking like he just stumbled out of some magical trance. His eyes are fixed on Lyre with abject devotion, and my stomach curdles at the sight. The way he stares at her—like she's the moon and he's nothing but a helpless tide—makes my fingers itch with the urge to sucker punch him in the jaw.

The pressure in the area fades completely as Caine and Lyre both realize potential victims are nearby, and I struggle to keep my own in check. Letting out a little dominance around your already-agitated alpha is a great way to get your throat torn out, and Caine's temper isn't easy to quell.

Not unless your name is Grace, anyway.

"Maybe we should be neutering wizards instead of dogs," I mutter.

Lyre ignores Thom completely, rubbing her face like we're all massive headaches she can't shake. Caine's still standing there, radiating fury and glowering at her.

"I'm warning you," she snaps at him, "don't mess with Grace."

Caine's lips curl into a sneer. "What I do with my mate isn't your damn business."

Her face darkens, and I swear the sky goes dark for a second. She doesn't respond—just scowls and storms past, brushing against my arm as she goes. The brief contact sends electricity crashing through my body, leaving my nerves raw in its wake.

My dick twitches.

Not the time, boy. Not the time.

It might be shocking to learn I *do* know how inappropriate my thoughts might be in certain situations. I just don't normally care.

Then again, I never had someone who could turn me into a toad before...

Remembering *that* sends a mildly terrified shiver down my spine, but I try not to think about it too much.

She's heading straight for Andrew, who's leaning against the SUV, arms crossed over his chest. He watches her approach with an expression that morphs from studied boredom to wariness to outright alarm as she closes in.

I follow a few steps behind her, shadowing her movement. Something's up. She's focused on Andrew with a predatory intensity.

Andrew straightens as my witch gets in his space, but he's not fast enough. She grabs his collar with surprising strength, yanking him down to her eye level.

My heart jumps into my throat. She wouldn't—she's not going to kiss him too, is she? Not another man, not right in front of me—

"Where's your loyalty at?" Lyre demands, her voice sharp enough to skewer the boy where he stands.

Chapter 158: Caine: He's Besotted

Chapter 158: Caine: He's Besotted

CAINE

If my mate didn't have so much loyalty to the rainbow-haired witch, I'd kill her on the spot.

She might have magic, but as far as I can tell, her physical combat ability is closer to nil than average. Even magic requires time, and a Lycan is fast. A Lycan King is even faster.

But I keep my hands fisted and force down the instinctive urge to shift, even as Fenris yawns in the back of my head. *Are you two done now?*

Once he was able to check on Grace, his anger dissipated. It might have something to do with leftover slices of bacon Lyre tossed his way, because even the great Lycan King's wolf—apparently—is willing to sell his soul for a bit of meat.

Bacon isn't just any meat, Fenris grumbles.

Lyre turns her back to me, storming toward the SUV. Each step thuds against the ground with fury.

Jack-Eye's reaction to her is concerning. My Beta's eyes follow her swaying hips with the same desperate focus of a starving Fenris watching bacon sizzle. There's no mistaking the look—he's fucking besotted with the witch.

When isn't he obsessed with women? the wolf in question mutters with disgust. *If it's a warm hole, he's there. At least bacon is practical.*

I don't bother responding. I'm too busy mentally cataloging which of these idiots needs a leash the most. At the moment, my own Beta is winning by a landslide.

The witch marches straight toward the Blue Mountain pup, who's leaning against the vehicle fiddling with his phone. Before he can even look up, she grabs him by the shirt and yanks him half off his feet.

"Where's your loyalty at?" she snaps, her cat-like eyes narrowed to slits.

Andrew's eyes go wide with shock. Before he can answer, Thom floats over like this is some kind of romantic comedy instead of a real-life threat, hovering near Lyre's shoulder with a pathetic look of devotion.

It's nauseating.

Somehow, the witch has managed to scramble my wizard's brains.

"I'm loyal to Gra—" the pup stammers.

A low growl rolls out of Fenris, vibrating through my chest and into the air around us.

Grace is mine.

I don't need to speak the words aloud. The dominance blanketing the area says it for me.

Andrew's eyes dart in my direction. He swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing nervously. "I mean—the Lycan King. Our High Alpha," he corrects himself, sounding a little steadier, even though his eyes are far too wide.

I narrow mine.

I'd already suspected this one had his sights where they didn't belong. Grace has been surrounded by too many wolves who think they have a right to her. This pup from her old pack is just one more problem I'll need to eliminate if he doesn't learn his place.

His absence lowered his priority level, but now...

Careful, Fenris warns, though he sounds like he's ready to rip the pup's throat out himself. I think Grace likes him.

My fist tightens.

Not that way, of course. She's ours.

Right. Of course not. My mate would never. She has much better taste.

Then again, she dated that pathetic pup of an Alpha...

Calm down before you explode, my wolf advises.

Like he isn't grumbling and snorting with hackles high in my head.

Lyre grips Andrew's face between her fingers, squeezing his cheeks until his lips pucker like a fish, and leans in close.

"If you're lying, I'll haunt your dreams and rip your heart out while it's still beating," she whispers, her voice knife-sharp and clear to my enhanced hearing. "You think toads are the worst I can do?"

The color drains from the pup's face. I snort. No backbone at all.

"No, ma'am," he mumbles through compressed lips.

Lyre releases him with a shove and wipes her hands on Jack-Eye's shirt without even looking. He's nothing more than a convenient towel.

And Jack-Eye—my supposedly lethal, competent Beta—beams like she just proposed marriage.

Something's happened between them. Something I'm sure I won't like.

I'll have to interrogate him later. Maybe when Grace takes a nap with little Bun.

If this man starts following the witch around like the pathetic wizard is, he's out of the pack. No exceptions. I don't care how long he's served as my second. I won't have my entire operation compromised by men thinking with their knots.

As if you would get rid of your most loyal pack member, Fenris snorts.

I scowl.

Lyre's sharp gaze does a sweep of the group. She frowns at Thom, who jerks and shrinks back. Then she turns and glares directly at me.

I stare back, unmoved by her attempt at intimidation as my lip lifts off my teeth. If she wants to start this fight over, I'll gladly oblige. I'm still pissed at her little trick from earlier.

Finally, her attention shifts to Jack-Eye, who's still grinning like an idiot, only a step behind Thom's vacuous gaze.

"Where's Owen?" she asks, her voice sharp again.

Andrew's the first to answer, pointing toward the RV immediately. "Inside," he says, clearly desperate to hand her off to someone else.

I snort.

As far as I've been able to deduce, that insipid Alpha should be appointing this one as his new Beta. They're quite the pair. Blue Mountain will be doomed before the next generation, unless an Alpha comes to challenge him.

Alpha challenges aren't as common since I came into power, but they're not unheard of.

Lyre turns on her heel and storms to the camper, sending a nasty glare my way as she passes.

The witch's insubordination burns under my skin. Magic or not, there are limits to what I'll tolerate, especially from someone standing between me and my mate.

She's amusing, at least, Fenris offers lazily.

She's a problem, I counter.

A problem who feeds me bacon.

My wolf's loyalty is pathetic.

A movement to my right draws my attention. Jack-Eye watches Lyre climb the camper steps, his gaze once again fixed on her hips. I fight the urge to slam his head into the nearest tree—which isn't very close at all.

His expression is nothing short of worship—the man looks like he's ready to drop to his knees and beg for a crumb of her attention.

Jack-Eye finally notices my gaze on him and has the decency to look chagrined. A sheepish grin spreads across his face, his shoulders lifting in a helpless shrug.

"Sorry, boss," he says cheerfully. "I'm just weak for strong women."

"Moderate yourself."

He nods, standing straighter, trying to pull himself together. "Yes, sir."

It's not enough. Not by a long shot. But I don't have time for this right now.

I need to make sure my mate isn't caught in the middle of whatever bullshit the witch is tangled in.

With a final warning look at my Beta, I stalk after Lyre.

Chapter 159: Jack-Eye: Report

Chapter 159: Jack-Eye: Report

JACK-EYE

I step in front of Caine just as he's about to barrel into the RV. Maybe not the smartest move, but there are things he needs to know before he goes storming in there like a goddamn tornado.

"Hold up." I plant my hand on his chest, feeling the vibration of his growl against my palm. "I need to report."

His flat stare comes with a brief flick of dominance in the air. It's more of an instinctual push than anything he's doing on purpose, but I'm used to these little flickers of his.

The muscle in his jaw twitches, and for a second, I think he might just snap my arm off. He seems pretty pissed about something.

Probably noticed me staring at Lyre's ass.

Still, he takes a step back, breathing in deeply. "Make it quick, Jack-Eye."

I can't help the smirk as it slides across my face. "You were pretty busy last night when I tried to check in. Now you're in a hurry? What were you up to, hmm?"

It's not hard to tell; I can smell Grace all over him. Not the kind of scent-sharing where you're in a room together for hours, but marked and saturated. Good for her. I didn't think a human would be capable of this level of scent-marking, but it'll come in handy for a slip of a girl like her.

His eyes flash with a flicker of amber in the gray. Yeah, he's pissed. "Get on with it, Jack."

My smirk disappears. Fine. Not the time to poke the bear—or wolf, in this case.

"We tracked our killer to a remote cabin." I keep my voice level, all business. "Unfortunately, they were already gone. All we found was a body—Marsh, the only other young one in the pack. His body was a mess. No sign of Halloway or anyone else."

Caine's eyes narrow. "And?"

"And the cabin had been scrubbed clean. Not just physically, but my nose couldn't pick up anything. Lyre managed to catch some trace with her witchery, and she's been using Thom to help track whatever it is. She's being cagey with the information, but at last report, they backtracked here."

"Their territory," he murmurs. "It's not surprising, especially if it's Holloway. He's not going to give up his territory so easily."

"Right."

"What else?"

I watch the war play out on his face. He wants blood. Caine's never been the kind of alpha to stand back and let his subordinates take care of trouble, especially in recent years.

But he keeps glancing back at the RV, where Grace is. Where the kids are.

His priorities have changed.

Then again, he's showing some signs of being calmer. Maybe not by much, but it seems like Grace is a good influence on his emotional state.

"I'll handle it," I say, making the decision for him. "Me and Lyre. You can stay here with Grace and the kids. She'll need you to keep them safe, anyway. I'm not sure how good Owen is in a fight."

He's burly, but it doesn't mean he's efficient. Or even skilled.

Caine hesitates, and I press on. "Lyre's a powerhouse in her own right, and you don't even get along with her. Both of you in the same car will derail the mission before you get within a hundred yards."

He scowls.

For a moment, I think he's going to tell me to fuck off, but then his shoulders drop a fraction of an inch. "Fine. Keep me updated."

"Got it, Your Majesty," I say, unable to resist poking him just a little.

He raises his upper lip in a silent snarl. Nothing like an old-fashioned *Your Majesty* to put him in a bad mood. He hates it. Says it makes him feel like he's in some strange play.

But then he does something unexpected. Something more reminiscent of the Caine pre-King.

He smacks at my shoulder. "Thanks."

Granted, he sounds constipated and his face looks like he wants to murder me, but...

It's good to see him like this, able to calm down after an adrenaline rush. He's usually amped for days afterward. Even Fenris has a hard time keeping him in check when it gets real bad.

I can't help but grin. "Wow, you must really be losing it. You almost ripped my head off a minute ago, and now you're thanking me? Don't say you weren't. I can always tell. You get this twitch in your left eye."

He makes a groaning, growling kind of mixed sound, like he isn't sure whether to be exasperated or to hit me in the jaw. "Don't push it, Jack-Eye."

"Got it, boss." Sobering, I add, "Lyre seems to be taking this personally. She seems on edge. I know it isn't like we know her well, but it's pretty obvious."

He nods. "It's not surprising, considering."

Yeah.

It's a pretty fucked up situation, no matter how you splice it.

But—

"Well, well, High Alpha. Is that empathy I detect?"

"Fuck off, Jack-Eye."

"Ah. There's the king we know and tolerate."

Caine stares at the RV for a long moment before turning back to me, his expression suddenly serious. "What's your take on Lyre? And answer me with your brain, not your dick."

I laugh, but it dies quickly when I see he's dead serious. "Maybe you could be more specific? My take on her in what way?"

"As an ally. As someone in Grace's orbit. As someone in my territory."

I take a breath, considering my words carefully. This isn't a question to half-ass an answer to. "If you're asking if we can trust her..."

"I am."

"Well, first off, she's scary as hell and could probably kill us all in our sleep if she wanted to."

Caine raises an eyebrow. His entire stance says *not me, she can't*. A disloyal part of my head thinks, *yeah, even you*.

But I know better than to project it at my alpha, so I keep it locked into a corner of my head, where my wolf sleeps.

Keep me out of this.

Yeah, yeah.

"But," I continue, "she's loyal to Grace. Whatever her deal is—and I'm not pretending to understand her—she genuinely cares about the girl. She's dangerous, yeah, but she's also direct. Just gotta take her at face value and move on."

Which is probably impossible with how territorial a wolf gets over their mate. Caine might not understand why he doesn't like Lyre, but it's plain as fucking day to the rest of us.

It's the same reason I want to rip Thom's beating heart out of his chest and stomp on it.

"What else?"

I rub my jaw, thinking. "Keep her close. Treat her as an ally, not a subject. She won't respond to dominance plays the way others will. I'm sure it's barely more than a tickle for her." The way she uses magic to fight back is something I've never experienced before.

Wizards and witches in this world are weak. Almost a pathetic nod to the fact magic exists. Lyre's... different.

Strong.

Terrifying.

Sexy—

"I said not to think with your dick."

"Sorry, Alpha."

He sighs. "Anything else?"

"She seems to know a lot of things we don't. I think it'd be stupid for us to step on any goodwill she might extend our way."

My blunt words are a bit much for a subordinate to the Lycan King, but I've never been known for holding back. Impulse control? Don't have it.

"I'll take that into consideration."

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"And leave them where, exactly?" Owen asks, his massive form somehow fitting into Lyre's cramped bedroom without bumping into everything. Bun clings to him like a koala, her tiny face buried in his neck. Her chubby fingers twist into the collar of his shirt, refusing to let go.

"With Grace, far from this territory. I already explained this." Lyre paces the tight space, which is about three steps long on the other side of the bed.

Outside the door, there's a shuffling of small feet and not-so-hushed whispers.

"It's not fair," Sara whines. "Owen just got here and she's hogging him."

"Is she gonna turn him into a toad again?" Jer's voice rises with curiosity.

"Shut up," Ron hisses. "Get back to the living room and just wait patiently."

I focus back on the conversation in front of me.

"What are we even looking for?" Owen asks, patting Bun's back. "The notification was vague at best."

Lyre turns, her cat eyes flashing and sharp teeth more apparent than normal as she snarls, "If they know there's an agent of Chaos, they should damn well say what it is."

Owen's reply comes out measured and calm, but the bass in his voice still sends a chill down my spine. "They won't. It's up to us to figure it out."

I really can't get over how someone who makes candied fruit for children can sound so much like he's planning a murder. Nature's cruel joke—giving the gentlest soul the voice of a hitman.

"No shit, Sherlock," Lyre snarks.

Owen flinches a little. He's not pale and cringing every time she looks his way anymore, and I wonder how they got so close after the toad incident. Still, it's clear he has fear of the rainbow-haired woman by the way he avoids her anger.

I would, too, if she ever turned me into something croaky.

"Is this connected to the massacre? Or perhaps the sanguimancer?" Owen asks after an awkward period of silence.

"No." Lyre's eyes flick to me as she frowns. "It's probably not about the massacre. It's about the arcanic storm Chaos threw down when he came to visit our girl here."

Owen's head jerks toward me, his silver-gray eyes going wide. "You met Chaos?"

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, suddenly feeling like a kid who accidentally started a forest fire—and didn't know about it. "Seems like it?"

"Grace..." Owen steps toward me, his movement causing Bun to lift her head and stare in my direction. His voice drops to a scary rumble. "Are you okay?"

I lift my hands and force a laugh. "I'm fine. It was just a dream. Nothing happened to me. More importantly, what's an agent of Chaos, exactly?"

Lyre shrugs, leaning against her dresser. "Could be anything. A person. A monster. An object left behind. Even an entire town."

"Could even be an open rift," Owen chimes in, bouncing Bun gently as she starts to fuss.

I blink, feeling the familiar sensation of not understanding what they're saying. "Wait—what's a rift?"

Owen opens his mouth to answer, but Lyre cuts him off with a single sharp word: "Plausibility."

He snaps his mouth shut.

She sighs, gesturing vaguely at me. "She doesn't have full access yet."

Owen glances at me, his intimidating frown somehow managing to look apologetic. "Sorry. Another time."

My jaw tightens. This stupid *plausibility*

thing is the most cryptic bullshit I've ever heard. Almost worse than the drivel coming out of Rafe's mouth when he tried to convince me to go to Forest Springs.

Ugh. Rafe.

I'll have to see him again, too, when I go back.

I'm not looking forward to it.

Lyre sighs, sounding centuries old in that moment. "Sorry, Grace. I know it's irritating. It isn't fun for us, either."

Owen nods.

Maybe this is why he's a man of few words. I'd naively assumed it was due to his scary voice, but being worried about all these... breaches, or whatever they are? Yeah. I get it.

Well, kind of. In theory.

Lyre's cat-eyes narrow as she stares at me. Her expression shifts from frustration to concern.

"You shouldn't put yourself in danger, even if you're in danger of failing the mission. Okay, Grace? Your safety comes first."

I blink, my brain catching on her phrasing. "Wait, *failing* the mission?"

That concept hadn't even occurred to me. I'd been so focused on the fact I was being sent back to Blue Mountain Pack territory—back to bad memories. I hadn't even considered the possibility of failing the mysterious task I've been assigned.

Well—kind of. I had worried I wouldn't know what to do, but hadn't quite followed up on that thought process.

"What happens if we fail?" I ask.

The grimaces on their faces send a cold prickle down my spine.

"There's usually some sort of imposed penalty," Lyre says reluctantly. "But it shouldn't be terrible for someone like you, who's listed as a temporary guardian."

"Ah," I say, as if that clarifies anything. My hands fidget with the hem of my shirt. "And what exactly is a guardian?"

Owen glances at Lyre, who gives him a slight nod.

"Guardians are divinities assigned to a specific region in order to maintain the balance of the world."

"We're just glorified babysitters," she adds dryly. "Missions generally come in spurts, but once the core issues are taken care of, it can take decades for new ones to appear."

I absorb this, trying to fit these cosmic concepts into my painfully ordinary understanding of life. Just last week I was a lowly human in a wolf pack. Now I'm apparently a "temporary guardian" with divine assignments? The mental whiplash is real.

But this life is infinitely better than the one I ran from.

"Should I be afraid?"

Lyre shakes her head decisively. "You have a mentor. As a temporary guardian, he'll be there to help you if it comes down to it."

I grasp at this potential lifeline. "Who is my mentor?"

Her face sours instantly, like she's just bitten into something rotten. "Just hope you don't need to meet him."

I blink at her, frustration bubbling up through my confusion. "You're not making any sense. How am I supposed to rely on a mentor so I'm not afraid, when you're also saying it's better if I don't meet him?"

Owen frowns. "Who is the mentor?" Even with Bun attached to him like a koala, he looks imposing.

Lyre shakes her head. "It's better not to say. The more I say, the worse it might be if Grace meets him."

"This isn't reassuring," I say flatly, crossing my arms. "Is this another Plausibility issue?"

She rubs her face with a long-suffering sigh. "No, it's something else. Look, Grace; he'll keep you alive and make sure you're returned in one piece, so you can trust him there. But don't think he's a friend. Don't assume he cares. The man has no heart. Keep your distance. That's all I can really say."

She looks up suddenly as we all hear the RV door open and close, heavy footsteps crossing the living area.

"Looks like your boyfriend's come in," she says, pushing herself off the dresser. "Let's tell him the plan and hope he doesn't lose his shit."

I groan.