Chapter 31

What Else Are Sharpies For?

There was a really practical upside to the promise I extracted from Odin. If my sisters and I knew where our brothers were, it was easier to find Loki. After all, he’d surrounded himself with them. I suspect that was one of the reasons Odin accepted the deal. He probably had a host of other reasons that I couldn’t even wrap my brain around. After all, I’m not a god. I could drive myself crazy trying to see all the angles and I’d still miss half of them.

The downside—there was always one when dealing with the gods—was it wasn’t like someone texted us helpful GPS coordinates to find them. No, it was more like a magical game of hot and cold. If I concentrated on Quinn, the brother I’d talked to the most, I could point in the direction where I knew he would be. Which is less helpful than it sounded. If we were in the same city? Sure. But I didn’t think we were. Still, it was better than nothing.

Besides, I’d had an idea. The way the brothers had settled in our minds, I knew there was some sort of mental connection there. I wasn’t sure if they felt it on their end, but it was a risk I needed to take.

Despite the lengthy drive, we decided to go back our rooms in Boston. Ava and her group were staying the night—they’d follow in the morning. It was a little over three hours back to Boston from where we were in Maine. The drove would have found us tents for the night, but I missed my weapons and I wanted a real bed. Besides, I had a feeling Quinn and my brothers were closer to that city than they were to Currant. To be honest, I didn’t like the way some of the drove kept looking between me and Grant—a mix of pity and disgust. I had a feeling I’d violated some basic moral of the drove and they no longer approved of my company. Parts of my deal with Odin were hazy, so I couldn’t exactly argue my case. I was too tired to anyway.

I’d cornered Edda to ask her some questions before we left. I didn’t remember Grant, and I trusted that he was part of our group and all, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want some background before I got into an enclosed space with the guy. Edda had sketched out what she knew of our relationship and gave me the run down on Grant in general. She hadn’t explained how we’d met—I wasn’t sure what kind of circumstances would cause a Cupid and a daughter of the Valkyrie to strike up a friendship. Maybe I’d ask Grant at some point.

There was a palpable awkwardness in the van as we drove along the highway. My dad was driving, Edda navigating. Grant sat with Tally and Ruby in the back. I could feel him looking at me sometimes and it made my shoulders bunch in a weird way. He didn’t feel like an enemy, but the weight of his attention pricked at me the same way. I sat with Garm. He was the only one that didn’t seem to be judging me. During our vanishing act, the warg had gotten attached to the drove, so we’d left him with them. One giant canine was plenty in my book.

I scrunched down in my seat. It was going to be a long drive with no one talking to me. Edda reached back, her palm up, though she never broke off conversation with my dad. I took her hand and gripped it tight. This is what I loved about my sisters. She was here for me before I even knew I needed it.

We didn’t get back to Boston until almost two in the morning. Still, the guards at the small check-in desk were bright-eyed and looked us over very thoroughly. My night wasn’t over yet—I needed to try to locate Quinn. I wasn’t sure if sleep would work better or meditation. I would have to ask Edda. First, I wanted to crawl into some pajamas. I needed to be as comfortable as possible.

I ran into a small problem when I went to fetch my pajamas, because Grant followed me into the bedroom. I froze halfway to my bag.

He held up a hand, not looking at me. “I’m just grabbing my stuff.”

This should have filled me with relief. I didn’t want to share a room with a stranger, even if everyone was telling me he wasn’t one. He still *felt* like one. But I couldn’t ignore the evidence. I clearly knew this man well enough that we were *sharing a room*.

I felt like I owed him something. I had no idea what, and that feeling of obligation made me feel scratchy and weird. “I’m sorry.”

He hesitated, his hand hovering over his bag. Though he still wasn’t looking at me, I could tell his entire focus was on me, not his things. “For what?” He had to clear his throat twice to get the words out.

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Flapped my hands in irritation. What the fuck even was *that*? I wasn’t a bird. “I don’t know.” I drew the words out, annoyed by the plaintive whine laced through them. I was a warrior, damn it. We didn’t whine. We punched things until we felt better.

Grant’s head snapped up. He stared at me, his eyes flicking back and forth in a quick assessment. Then, he straightened, flinging the bag over his shoulder. He stepped close until we were only inches apart. Very slowly, he raised one hand to my face, tracing his fingers along the line of my jaw. Though I could feel my brow furrowing, I didn’t step back. I wanted to see what he was going to do. He settled his hand on my jaw, then moved in close to me, slow as molasses. After an eternity, his mouth settled on mine, feather light. A soft sweeping brush of lips. Once. Twice. I heard the thump of his bag hitting the floor before both of his hands cradled my face. He nipped at my lower lip and I automatically opened to him, letting him deepen the kiss into something that bordered on ravenous.

By the time he pulled away, we were wrapped up so tight in each other, we were practically braided. He grinned then, the smile lighting up his whole face. Wow. I mean just *wow*. He really was a handsome devil.

“What’s made you so happy?” I hated how breathy my voice sounded.

Grant nuzzled my jaw. “You may have forgotten me, but your body hasn’t.”

I frowned. “What does that mean, because it sounds creepy.”

He gently nipped my jaw. “It means, Lena, if I was really a stranger to you, you wouldn’t have let me step so close. You would have chucked me to the ground like you did at the fire, if I was lucky. But you didn’t.” He let me go and grabbed his bag, once again hefting it up to his shoulder. He tapped a finger against my temple. “That means I’m in there somewhere.”

I crossed my arms, not liking how cocky he sounded. “That doesn’t mean I’ll ever remember you.”

He pressed another kiss to my cheek, pausing with his mouth close to my ear. “I have faith in human magic.”

I huffed in frustration. “What does that mean?”

“Hope,” he said, stepping away and grabbing for the doorknob. “I have hope.” Then he left, the door snicking shut behind him.

Well, that made exactly one of us. Cupids. What on earth possessed me to make friends with one?

After I got ready for bed and consulted Edda, I starfished out and took up the whole thing. It felt…weird. Was I not used to sleeping alone? Ugh. Stupid Grant. I needed my head clear. I was garbage at meditating in the first place. After consulting Edda, Tally had painted a few runes on my forehead and cheeks with Edda’s liquid eyeliner. They were supposed to open up my mental pathways and help with the connection the Quinn. For all I knew, they were nonsense or Tally’s version of drawing a penis on my face with a sharpie. I couldn’t really see her doing something that childish, but Grant was her friend, and sometimes we get petty when it comes to avenging our loved ones. Or maybe petty vengeance was just a Valkyrie move. Because of my sisters, I was really good at getting sharpie off my face. Experience was a great teacher.

Whether I was good at meditation or not, I would try my best. I turned off the overhead light, leaving only the faint light from the bedside table. Then I laid down on the bed again, my eyes closed, my muscles relaxed.

I fell asleep almost instantly.

I’m not sure when I figured out it was a dream. Maybe when I realized I was walking between rows of grapes. It was dark, so it took me a minute to figure out what the neat rows were, exactly. I didn’t exactly hang around in vineyards on a frequent basis. Then I looked up and saw a large, weather-beaten barn attached to an old farmhouse. The lights were off, everyone asleep. The moon was behind some clouds, but I had enough light to make out my surroundings. There was a pond off to the left, and between the pond and the house, a gazebo. That was where I was headed. Something was drawing me to the gazebo.

As I drew closer, I saw movement, just the faintest shifting of shadows. Someone was in there. I wasn’t sure if I should call out or not, or sneak up, but the decision was taken from me when someone poked their head out over the railing and looked right at me.

“Oh,” he whispered before his shoulders relaxed. “I thought you might be Loki.”

I recognized Quinn’s voice, though I wasn’t quite close enough to see his face yet, not with the way the light was falling.

“Nope,” I said, keeping my voice at the same whisper-level. “Permission to come aboard?”

His teeth flashed in the night. “Permission granted.”

I climbed the wooden steps into the gazebo. I wasn’t sure, but I thought it might be made of stained wood, with a shingled roof. Inside there were built-in benches with striped cushions. Quinn was stretched out on one, a drink on the railing next to him.

“Were you waiting for Loki, then?”

He shook his head. “Not exactly, but he does have a tendency to show up in dreams. I must have passed out in the gazebo. It’s been a hell of a week.”

Now that I was closer and my eyes had adjusted to the lack of light, I could see his face better. Quinn looked weary, the shadows under his eyes pronounced. “You know you’re dreaming then?”

He stayed stretched out, his upper half propped up on one elbow. “It’s easy, once you’re used to it. Dreams have a certain feel to them.” He watched me as I sat, the fingers of one hand tracing the side of the cushion. “Why are you here?”

I’d considered how to approach this. At the heart of it, I was trying to steal Loki’s people out from under him. I couldn’t take on the god myself. He was a *god*. Even in this day and age that meant something. But what I could do was ruin his plans, and I think it was clear that ruining things was one of my many gifts. Watching Quinn, taking in his weariness, I decided that the best approach was honesty. Loki was a twisty creature. Couldn’t help it. It was his very nature. But to someone like me, that kind of manipulation was irritating and exhausting. I was gambling that Quinn was the same.

“I talked to Odin tonight.” I swung my feet idly back and forth, skimming my feet across the wood.

One of Quinn’s eyebrows arched up. “Did you now?”

“Yup,” I said, popping the p. “Threw a party, sacrificed some blood and a classic from Dunkin’ and bent his ear good.”

Quinn’s laugh was soft as it flittered through the night air. “I just bet you did.” He stopped laughing. “What did you talk about?”

I told him as clearly and simply as possible about what I remembered of my discussion with my mom and then Odin.

His attention never wavered, probably weighing ever word I said for truth. “That’s a lot of trouble to put yourself through.” His voice was quiet, but each word was carefully pronounced, making it into a question somehow. Why? Why had I done this?

“What happened to all of us—it’s not okay, Quinn. We didn’t know, but that doesn’t really mean anything, does it? We never asked. I never thought to ask.” I sighed. “Our ignorance and complacency hurt all of you. I couldn’t let that stand.”

He dipped his chin once in a nod. “What did it cost you? The gods do nothing for free.”

“A friend,” I said, then grimaced, scrunching up my nose. That wasn’t entirely accurate, was it? “Maybe more? I don’t remember him. According to Edda, I sacrificed my heart.” I lifted one shoulder and dropped it. Nonchalant, that’s me. Except it felt anything but. My throat was made of razor blades as I swallowed. “But I have to take her word for it. I don’t remember him at all.”

Quinn’s brow wrinkled, his hand stilling. “You gave up the Cupid?”

I threw my hands up on the air. “I guess?” I must have been very obvious if even Quinn had seen whatever it was between me and Grant. “How did you know?”

He barked a laugh. “You’re not subtle, and anyone who can read body language could see there’s something there.” He levered himself up, his elbows on his knees as he continued to watch and weigh me with his gaze. Quinn appeared confident, but underneath that was a wariness that I understood completely. “You gave up your heart for strangers? Why would you do that?”

He wanted to know my angle. I mimicked his stance, my elbows on my knees, putting my face closer to his. “Not strangers. Brothers. *Family.*” I gave him a toothy grin that was probably borderline feral. “You’re in for it now. All of you. None of you will ever know peace again. I’ll warn you now. Our holiday parties are non-negotiable, and BYOB. Oh, and we have little to no boundaries. We’ll just waltz right into your life and make ourselves at home. One time—”

I didn’t get the rest out, because I’d realized that Quinn’s shoulders were shaking, and so were his hands. At first I thought he was laughing, but when I looked closer, his brow was pinched, his eyes wet.

“Hey, hey.” I scooted closer and put an arm around his shoulders, hugging him. “None of that. It’s okay. Don’t cry. I’m garbage with crying.”

He choked out a laugh. “Me, too.”

I held him like that for a long time. We didn’t say anything. The night breeze brought me the smell of water and growing things. Crickets chirped somewhere in the night, competing with a few ambitious frogs. I felt oddly at peace, even though my heart was breaking for Quinn, for my brothers.

Finally, he shuddered and straightened, his smile watery. “I can’t guarantee anything, you know. My brothers…” He shrugged. “Some of them are angry.”

I squeezed his hand. “Rightfully so. We know this is a first step. We’d like time to make more of them, but that’s up to all of you.”

“And if Loki makes his move, you won’t have that time,” he said cynically.

I shook my head. “While that’s true, that’s not entirely why we did this, I want you to know that. I understand if our gesture is too little too late. No matter what you choose, you’re our brothers. I’d rather not fight you, but we’ll do our duty. We can’t let Loki go through with this.”

“I’ll talk to them,” Quinn said, his hands clasped together in his lap. “No promises.”

“None needed,” I said. I hesitated, something occurring to me. “I’d prefer you didn’t say anything to Loki. He knows we’re coming for him, but it would be nice if we maintained whatever level of surprise we can.”

This time I got both eyebrows winging up to his hairline. “If you think you’re going to surprise Loki…”

I nudged his knee with my own. “You don’t know this yet, but I’m a bit of a wild card.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I’m starting to see that. I wish you luck, sister. If nothing else, you certainly make things interesting. I like interesting.”

“Now that,” I said, “I can promise you. We aim to entertain.”

He reached out, offering me a hand.

I took it.

“Until we meet on the battlefields, then.” He shook my hand and then dropped it.

“May your sword stay as sharp as your mind and your aim always be true,” I said.

He nodded, a soft smile on his lips.

And then I woke up. Gone was the gazebo, the vineyards, my brother. Instead I was alone in my room, shivering in the air conditioning. I didn’t think I would be able to get back to sleep. My emotions were all over the place, making me restless. My door clicked open, and in the dim light I could just make out Edda.

“Need company?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I really do.”

“I made us some chamomile tea.” She stepped into the room, mugs in both hands. Edda closed the door with her foot before coming over and holding a mug out to me. I sat up and took it. She sat cross-legged on the bed next to me, patiently listening as I told her all about the dream. When I’d finally run out of words, she set her empty mug aside. “We’ve done all we can on that end for now. In the morning, we’ll contact our sisters. Make sure everyone understands what’s happened.”

“Okay.” I set my own mug down, suddenly tired again. “Then what?”

She flopped down on the bed next to me, her head hitting the pillow with a soft exhalation of air. “Then we end this.”

“You make it sound so simple,” I said, my words starting to slur with sleep. My eyes drifted shut.

Edda snorted. “Easy? No. Simple? I guess we’ll just have to see.”

I meant to respond, but fell asleep instead, not waking again until morning.