Chapter 18

Spoils of War, Barbie edition

We all spent the morning doing whatever we needed to prep ourselves. Edda had done more internet research before giving up and meditating in the backyard. Garm rested next to her, napping with his feet in the air, his belly to the sun. Tally had taken over the dining room table, assembling various healing herbs and bandages for our battle that night. It wasn’t her strength, but she’d be able to patch us up a little. I couldn’t tell if she thought we were going to get our asses handed to us, or if she was just doing the only thing she could to help.

I took myself to a different end of the yard. I didn’t want to interrupt Edda. Honestly, I didn’t know how she did it. I had tried meditating, but the minute I sat down and tried to quiet my brain, I got the opposite effect. It was like my brain was a bag of squirrels and meditation practices threw in a whole bag of nuts. They all just ran in different directions. The only way I could get my brain to quiet was with exercise. It was too hot to run, so I ran through some sword exercises and stretches.

When that didn’t work, I went to look for Grant. I found him in the garage, working on an arrow. He was sitting in a camping chair wearing a pair of jeans and a tank top, his bare feet on the cement. His head was bent to his task, his hands moving quickly as he pared down a thin branch with a knife. My father was in another camp chair, watching him as he worked while they chatted. Grant ran a thumb over the branch, his attention split between the work and what my father was saying. Whatever it was, he obviously thought it was funny, because he laughed suddenly, delight lighting up his face. My heart actually skipped a beat, which I was officially blaming on the third cup of coffee I’d downed. That was a thing, right?

Grant looked up, catching sight of me. “Your dad was telling me about your eighth birthday party.”

My nod was grim. “The doll incident.” I had been casual friends with a boy that lived a block over—Justin. His mom had come with him to the party, mostly because she’d had a thing for my dad. My father was good-looking, employed, and appeared single, so this was a reoccurring theme of my childhood. Justin had told her what I wanted, but she was absolutely certain that her son had garbled up my list. He had obviously just told her things he wanted for his birthday, because what little girl would want a new baseball bat, matchbox cars, and NERF guns? Justin’s mom was apparently unaware that girls can ask for all kinds of things on their birthday. Instead of what I asked for, she got me a doll. A very nice doll, I’m sure. I have nothing against dolls, I just wasn’t much interested in them. Toy horses? Yes. I definitely went through a horse phase. Since one of my best friends is a unicorn named Steve, one could argue that I never left my horse phase. Dolls, though…I didn’t know what to do with them. But my dad had attempted to raise me in a civilized fashion so I’d tried my best to be polite.

“The look on Lena’s face.” Dad was laughing so hard he was grabbing his stomach. “I wish I’d had a camera. She very politely said thank you, but it was like the woman had gifted her a bag of poisonous snakes.”

“I would have liked the snakes,” I said.

“What happened to the doll?” Grant asked.

“I played with it,” I said, sounding defensive, even to my own ears.

My dad was overcome by another fit of laughter. He was literally crying. I didn’t think it was *that* funny. “The next day she shaved its head and gave it battle scars with a sharpie.”

“I tied it to a stick and carried it around pretending it was a battle trophy,” I said grudgingly. “My spoils of war. I still don’t see why she was so upset.”

“Justin wasn’t allowed to play with her for a week,” Dad said, the words barely recognizable through the wheeze of laughter. “And I was subjected to a lecture about the necessity of a feminine influence.”

I grabbed another camp chair, unfolding it and sat down with them. “I’m sorry, Dad. I was hell to raise, wasn’t I?”

My dad grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “You were a joy to raise. Justin’s mom was a nightmare.”

“What did you do?” Grant asked.

My father’s grin was almost malicious. “The next time Solveig visited, I made sure she crossed paths with Justin’s mom.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.” I would have paid good money to watch that interaction.

My dad’s eyes were still twinkling with mirth. “Your mom made it very clear that you have a feminine influence, but if she was worried about a *nurturing* influence, I could provide that as any gender can nurture.”

“You failed miserably,” I said.

“Really?” My dad’s tone was deceptively mild. I knew that tone. I was about to be oh-so-gently reprimanded. “Who takes care of Steve? What about your joint apprentice, Jonah? Did you forget to feed him?” He jerked his thumb toward the house. “And what about all the strays in there, hm?”

“They are necessary to—”

My dad rolled his eyes and groaned. “Stop. Just stop. Lie to yourself, kiddo, but don’t bother with me. You may not be comfortable with the role, and you might approach it with the grace of a bear fresh from hibernation, but you nurture.”

Grants shoulders were shaking, but he didn’t look up.

“Shut up,” I said.

“Did I say a word?” Grant reached out. “I need your hair.”

I canted my head away from him. “Hold on there, how much are we talking?”

“A few strands.”

I pulled a few strands out and handed them over. My eyes narrowed. “What do you need them for?”

“An arrow.” Grant was very carefully avoiding looking at me.

“What kind of arrow?” When he didn’t respond, I repeated the question.

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

I could tell by the mulish set of his shoulders he wasn’t going to tell me, either.

“Fine,” I said. “I’m going to go take a shower.”

We had an early dinner and got ready to leave for Fort Wetherill State Park. Tally planned to stay home with my mom, but in a surprise move, my father insisted on driving us. He was smart enough to grab the keys before saying a word, because I most certainly did not want him to go.

“Absolutely not,” I said, handing Loki’s clutch to Edda. Over dinner we’d decided to play it safe and get her a disguise as well. While my sisters had been helping me track down and break up the fighting rings, I’d been the one actually entering into the fights, which meant I was the one most likely to be recognized. Edda *had* been with me at the last one, though, so we decided better safe than sorry. When she upended the clutch, she got a necklace similar to mine. She did not get any condoms, so apparently that sly commentary was specifically for me.

“I don’t know if you know this,” My dad said, crossing his arms. “But even though you’re an adult, you still don’t get to boss your dad around.”

I shook my head. “Dad, this is going to be super dangerous. People die at these things.”

“You’re going,” My dad pointed out.

“Yes, and my mom is a Valkyrie. So is Edda’s. Grant is a Cupid. Garm is, well, Garm.” Garm gave a sharp bark, as if he wanted to help in the argument. “You’re not only human, but unarmed, and have no fighting experience.”

“I don’t plan on fighting,” he said calmly. “But I do plan on driving, something that I have quite enough experience in. I’m going.” He shook his head when I started to argue. “What happens after the fight, Lena? What if you’re injured, or exhausted? It’s a forty minute drive from here to the park. You’ll be driving that at night. Tired. It’s not safe.”

“What about mom?”

“Your mother is going to stay here with Tally,” he said calmly. “And do you really want to get in the car with your mom at the wheel?”

My jaw snapped close with a click. My mom could drive, yes, but it was like getting behind the wheel with a stunt driver on a closed set. She had no fear, excellent reflexes, and zero regards for driving laws and how they applied to her.

Edda grabbed my arm. “He has a point.” Edda had heard stories from me about my mother’s driving.

“Fine,” I said, pointing my finger at him. “You can drive. But you have to do exactly what we say.” I turned to Edda. She’d apparently donned her glamour necklace already. She was the same height, but instead of her usual lithe form, she was stockier. While her skin was still a warm brown, her hair was now shaved close to the scalp and dyed a bright blue. Both her arms were covered in black ink—intertwined snakes on one, and a wolf on the other.

“Loki is not subtle, is he?” I asked, taking a picture with my phone so Edda could see.

She peered at the screen after I was done. “I think it’s good camouflage, actually. People will remember the hair color and the tattoos, but not the person.” She clapped her hands. “Time to go, people.”

We said goodbye to Tally and my mom. I knew my mom would hate to stay behind when we were going into battle, even if she couldn’t help us fight. She didn’t argue, though—she knew she was staying home for a good reason. I could trust her to not only keep an eye on Tally, but to also protect her. If we were wrong and our cover had already been blown, now would be a perfect time to come after the witch. My mom would be both babysitter and guard, you couldn’t ask for a better one.

I donned my glamour and got into the passenger seat of the Camry. We’d loaded all of our gear into the trunk earlier. I also had Loki’s clutch and the invitation to the fight with me. Grant and Edda got to sit in the back with Garm. They would have to deal with Garm’s otherworldly doggy breath, something I didn’t envy them for.

Grant looked back at the house as we pulled away, and I could tell that he was worried about Tally. Though she was slowly growing on me, he’d been friends with her for a long time. I turned in my seat. “She’ll be okay. My mom won’t let anyone hurt her.”

Grant’s smile was strained. “And nothing can beat the might of the Valkyrie?”

“The truly frightening thing about Valkyries,” Edda said, “isn’t that they’re fierce, unstoppable warriors. Or at least not just that. No, the thing about them is that they’re never really alone. If Solveig felt overwhelmed, she could call for help.”

“One Valkyrie is scary,” I said. “But a mob of battle-ready women armed to the teeth? Terrifying.”

Grant tipped his head against the window and scratched Garm behind the ears. “I know all Valkyries are women, but what about their children?”

“It’s the same,” I said. “Valkyries only produce daughters.”

Grant’s brow furrowed. “But how does that work, exactly? It’s the male genetic contribution that determines the sex of the baby.”

“I don’t know,” I said, surprised. I’d never really thought about it. It just *was*.

“And what about when you or Edda have children, if you have children?” He asked. “Would you only have daughters, too?”

This we had an answer to.

“No,” Edda said. “We reproduce just like any other human would. In fact, our hereditary magic dilutes quickly, making our children mostly human in all respects. Assuming the father is human.”

“As opposed to what?” My dad asks, checking the mirrors before he changes lanes.

“As opposed to, say, a Cupid,” Edda said slyly.

“Or,” I said, a trifle too loud, “Something else humanoid, like shapeshifters, witches, or necromancers. It’s not just us out there, you know. Nature loves variety.”

“Still,” Grant said, not taking Edda’s bait. “It’s weird, isn’t it? Only daughters? Ever?”

“Something wrong with daughters?” My dad asked.

“No,” Grant said with a laugh. “And Lena is right, nature loves variety. Parthenogenesis happens in nature, after all—plants, insects, some lizards, and fish who reproduce asexually. If they can do that, why not have only female offspring? I’ve just never really thought about it before, that all Valkyries and their children are female.”

I hadn’t really thought of it, either. Oh, some of my siblings didn’t identify strictly as female, being more comfortable as either non-binary or trans. But all of them had been assigned female at birth by the hospital. They were still part of us, children of the Valkyrie. What Grant was saying, it was something to ponder over.

I thought about that for a few minutes, the car quiet except for Garm’s panting. But I didn’t think about it for long, my mind already jumping ahead to tonight’s battle. Was tonight the night that we finally found the head of this snake I’d been chasing? Could we put this organization into the ground for good? Or would it be another exercise in frustration?

We parked, Grant got out first to grab the duffel bags that held our gear. My dad of course decided to be stubborn and not stay in the car.

“You promised to do exactly what we said!” I grabbed my duffel away from Grant.

“No,” my dad said. “You told me that I had to do what you said. I never promised—I never even agreed. I just didn’t correct you.”

I threw my hands up in the air. “You silence acted as compliance.”

“Did that ever work for you?” My dad asked mildly.

“No,” I grumbled. My dad has always, *always* made sure I responded when he asked a question, because I *had* used this tactic before. I’d been gone from home too long and become rusty, that was the problem.

“If you try to make me stay,” he said, “I will just try to sneak in without you. Which I believe would be very dangerous.”

I wanted to keep arguing, but we weren’t alone in the parking lot. Other people, some falling clearly into the fighter category, others obviously spectators, were getting out of their cars as well. I ground my teeth.

Edda gave me a little shove. “What she means is, ‘that’s fine. You of course want to be close to your *only daughter* as she does something dangerous’.”

My dad gave my shoulder a squeeze. “I will feel better watching. I also kind of want to see my baby girl kick some ass.”

Ugh, and now I understood. My dad rarely got to see me in full battle mode. In fact, I’m not sure he’d ever really seen me fight. In his place, I’d want to be in the bleachers, too. I was suddenly overwhelmed with affection for my dad. I’d been really lucky to have him. I leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Okay, but if shit goes sideways, *run.”*

“I’m stubborn,” my dad said. “Not stupid.”

Now I just had to hope that my dad didn’t see us all bite the dust. Once again, I was missing Steve. Well, I might not have a battle unicorn, but I did have the wolf of wolves. I ruffled the fur on the back of Garm’s neck. “Ready to do some damage, buddy?”

Garm’s tongue lolled out in a wolfy laugh. He was ready. And so were we. I settled my duffle bag on my shoulder and walked toward the park.