(Lena Story)

Chapter Two

This Ranch Does Not Spark Joy

It didn’t take long to subdue the crowd. Even though they liked violence enough to pay hard-earned cash to watch the blood hit the sand, their opinions always changed when the blood was their own. Funny how that worked. When faced with a dozen women armed with spears, knives, hatchets, and a rather impressive machete, they backed down pretty quick, especially after one of my sister’s broke a man’s nose. Noses bleed. A lot. It’s a good move if you want to get someone’s attention and don’t care about getting blood splatter on your shoes.

Edda pushed a man to his knees in front of me, his arms bound behind him. Edda was short, but muscled, and despite the intense workouts she tackled every day, had some curve to her. She took her half-Valkyrie status very seriously, and if the guy in front of her didn’t start doing the same, he was in for a world of hurt.

Sweat beaded on his bald head, but he spit a bloody gob at my feet anyway. False bravado at its best. “Bitch.” He sneered up at me, blood coating his teeth. The rest of the crowd was sitting meek and quiet, but this one wanted to poke the bear. There were always outliers.

“As my gran likes to say, you can’t fix stupid.” Edda shrugged at me before leveling a sharp kick to his lower back. “Next boot goes to your head.” Her tight curls bounced with the movement and I couldn’t help but admire her form. In the short time we’d dated, Edda had a lot to say about my fairly unhealthy diet and spotty workout regimen. Though I missed the sex, I didn’t miss the lectures. That didn’t mean I didn’t ogle her on occasion. She mostly ignored it, as was our way.

Valkyries were pretty pragmatic about sex, and that attitude generally passed down to their children. It was a need, like food, sleep, or smiting your enemies.

“This lovely specimen of humanity is Jerry. Say hello to the nice lady, Jerry.” Edda nudged him.

Jerry muttered a slur under his breath. Edda grinned at me and snapped a kick at the man’s head. Edda’s skin was a rich brown, which you might think is odd for a Valkyrie’s daughter. It’s not. Our mothers are drawn to warriors, and there are warriors in every land and culture. Edda’s dad, a now-retired Navy Seal, made a hell of a lot more sense than my dad, a mechanic out of Rhode Island.

As such, the daughters of Valkyries come in all shapes and sizes, but we can all kick your ass, something Jerry was learning first hand. I dropped down to his eye level and clucked my tongue.

“Poor, Jer. Can I call you Jer?” I didn’t wait for a response. “Jer, it’s not a good idea to do anything but sing Edda’s praises.” I held my hand up to cup my mouth, like I was about to tell him a secret. “She has violent impulse issues,” I stage whispered. “Fun fact? We all do.” Then I gave him what Steve calls my evil grin. The one that accurately telegraphs that I could debone Jerry with a small blade and sleep like a baby after.

He swallowed hard. *That’s right. Your life is hanging by a thread held by two well-armed maniacs who want nothing more than to see if we could spatchcock your ass.*

I gave Jer a love tap with the blunt end of my spear. “Now, Jer, we know you’re not the head of this operation. You’re not the brain. You’re not even the big toe. So spill, and we’ll let you leave here alive. Not walking right, because we have a certain reputation to uphold, but still breathing. That’s something, isn’t it?”

Fear glittered in Jerry’s eyes. I knew that look. He’d break. Fear is a funny thing. It could be a very motivating emotion. In this situation, the slow way of handling Jerry would be to dispel his fear—get him to trust us and to make him relax in our tender care. Of course, we didn’t really do “tender care” and we had no time for that anyway. So what I needed to do was to make us scarier than the person holding his strings.

I pulled out one of my small knives, and with a move too swift for him to track, sliced the sleeve of his shirt open. A thin line of red welled on the inside of his arm. I breathed and waited for the pain to hit. My blade was razor-sharp and I’d moved quickly, so the pain response would be delayed, like thunder after a shock of lightning. He let out a choked whine as the blood trickled down. Despite operating part of a vicious creature-fighting ring, he didn’t want to take any pain himself. Typical.

I grabbed his elbow in a tight grip and followed my cut, smearing blood all the way down to his wrist. “Talk, Jerry.” I was not a big believer in torture for lots of reasons. Valkyries preferred a straightforward battle, a clashing of might until a victor emerged. Torturing Jerry felt cowardly, wrong and against my nature. It was also inefficient. People told you what you wanted to hear to stop the pain. But I’d been flitting about with Steve, breaking up these fights, and I’d seen too many battered and tortured creatures. My patience and goodwill toward Jerry was gone before we met. He was an instrument of misery and pain and I wanted him to hurt.

He must have seen that in my face, because he opened his mouth to talk. “It’s—” And that was far as he got before his eyes bugged out. He wheezed, making an awful gurgling sound, and his face turned purple.

Edda cursed softly before pitching her voice to the crowd. “We need a witch!”

No one around us moved. I glared at them, knowing full well how terrifying I looked, my eyes a bright white out of a face painted in dried buata blood. It was starting to itch, but I would have to wait until I was able to shower and get comfortable.

“There’s no way this kind of operation doesn’t have a witch,” I said, projecting my voice to carry, but not quite shouting. “This man is dying. He won’t last long.” It was the truth. His face was already purpling, tongue swelling, and eyes bugging out. Finally I saw someone run off to one of the campers out in the makeshift parking lot. It was no use. By the time they drug the clearly hungover witch to the stands, Jerry was too far gone. He wheezed his last at the witch’s scuffed boots. The witch swayed slightly, her face wan. If I didn’t smell the liquor coming off her, I would wonder if the swaying was from malnourishment. She was too skinny, the skin under her eyes shadowed from exhaustion. Yellowing bruises marched up her arms, and when she caught me looking, she pulled her arms into her oversized army jacket. Her copper hair was dull and tangled. She cast flat eyes on Jerry.

Despite everything, the witch was surprisingly compliant.

“It’s a gees,” she said, and though she didn’t kick Jerry, she clearly wanted to.

She didn’t spit on him, either, telling me that the witch either had restraint or was smart. You didn’t want to leave a trace of yourself about for anyone to use, magic-wise. Blood, spit, hair—anything that came from you could be used in a spell. On top of that, if we didn’t dispose of Jerry properly, that spit could link the witch back to a dead body if the human police decided to investigate.

Edda tapped her fingers on the handle of her machete, and I didn’t have to see the set of her shoulders to tell she was worried. The gees complicated things. Gees were the magical version of a gag. It was a curse, really, when you got down to it. I’d dealt with them before, and they varied wildly in nastiness. Some were gentle--you shared the forbidden secret and in retaliation got hives, or the hiccups. If it was a little stronger, your hair fell out, or you got a vomiting jag. Not everyone could cast gees, and certainly not everyone could cast the highest level, which brought death, and Jerry was very, very dead.

"We all have them," the witch said as she shoved her hair out of her eyes. She was small, her body almost engulfed in her army jacket. When I took a good look at her, I could see more bruising along the pale skin of her neck, the coloring yellow and old like her arms. She had a split lip that had barely started to heal. “Even the crowd. They won’t be able to give any details about this place to anyone who doesn’t have an invite.”

Edda and I stared at each other a moment. We had worked together so long and so close that we didn’t have to speak. I knew how she did things, and vice versa. We wouldn’t get anything by questioning anyone. I stepped away from Jerry’s swiftly cooling body and headed up the dirt path toward the dilapidated ranch house. A quick burst of sunshine and butterfly wings let me know that Steve was in the stables, questioning the animals with another one of my people. No one had put gees on them, so we might be able to pick up some information, though probably not as much. Steve’s shouting was giving me a headache and I told him so. He made fun of the big, bad Valkyrie spawn whining about her head. I ignored him.

Edda went with me, while Greta, one of my sisters who really did look like she came straight out of an advert for Norway, dragged along the witch. The rest stayed behind to search and disperse the crowd. Just because we can’t question them doesn’t mean we can’t go through their things and discern patterns. I didn’t think they would get anything, but it was worth a shot. The crowd was here for a show, they weren’t part of the inner circle, but sometimes these organizations made flyers that we could trace. Whoever was behind this was smart, though, so again, my hopes weren’t high.

Frustration built in me like magma. Steve and I usually traveled widely, dispensing our own personal brand of vigilante justice. Creatures like Steve, the witch, and me have to hide from the majority of humanity. This put us in a dangerous position—if we needed help, we couldn’t go to the human authorities. We couldn’t go to humans, period. There were a few different factions you could reach out to, and Valkyrie scions were one of those groups.

About six months ago, Steve and I discovered and quickly disbanded, a fighting ring like this one. Someone had been capturing magical creatures and making them fight to the death. It was cruel and inhumane, that went without saying. The animals generally didn’t volunteer for the fights. The buata I slaughtered today might have. For some things the chance to kill and feed without restriction would be worth the danger. The fights were also an exposure risk. The organizers of this fight might have taken precautions when they advertised to keep the wrong type from showing up, and a large portion of the crowd probably identified as something other than completely human, but it was still dangerous.

A worn picket fence, the white paint peeling and the wood rotting, surrounded the ranch house, reminding me of broken teeth. The gate no longer latched, but hung drunkenly on its hinges. At one time the fence had probably delineated a neat lawn from the parking area and stables, but now it was just dead, patchy grass.

My boots made the stairs up to the ranch house shudder, the wood old and needing to be replaced like the fence. I tried to pull open the door, but it was locked.

“I got this,” Greta said, her face lighting up.

I raised an eyebrow at her.

“Lena, please. I want to pretend I’m a cop from a TV show or a movie!” Greta held up her hands in supplication, her face pleading. I sighed and stepped to the side, waving her on. She clapped, excited like a child. Then Greta stepped closer, leaned back, and kicked the door so hard it flew off the hinges.

Edda and I both stared at her.

Greta just frowned at the gap left behind. “What a crappy door.”

“It’s a run-down ranch,” I said, gently pushing her aside. “Not a high-end vault or a panic room.”

After peeking inside, I wasn’t sure why anyone would bother locking the door, or even closing it. The ranch house was disgusting. Though someone—probably Jerry—had been camping in it, as had several rats. A few surfaces had been cleaned, but everything else held layers of dust. It seemed more and more like they had been squatting here illegally.

The witch pointed out Jerry’s office. She kept her mouth firmly shut, but waved us in, pointing at certain drawers and Jerry’s phone and laptop. Edda sat down with the laptop and did her magic. She was much more tech savvy than I was.

“What’s your name, witch?” I asked, wiping some of the dust off onto my pants before I remembered that I was covered in blood and the dust would just make things worse.

“Tally,” she said.

“You’re being awfully helpful, Tally.” I checked Jerry’s desk drawer for booby traps, looking for wires, scuffs, or the smell of adhesives or powders that might be used by magical ilk. When I didn’t find anything, I waved Tally at the drawer. “Open it.”

She didn’t hesitate, not even glancing at Greta as she moved forward. Either she didn’t fear us, or she didn’t care if she died. I needed to figure out which. Things like that dictated how a person behaved and you could anticipate their actions accordingly.

“I don’t trust helpful, Tally.”

She yanked the drawer open. “I’m not a good Samaritan. I’m not doing this out of any goodness in my heart. I just want out, and you lot look like my ticket.” Her eyes were hard as she opened the other drawers for me.

Tally was a survivor and would do what it took to stay that way, which included selling us out if it benefitted her. I trusted that a lot more than a noble do-gooder. Tally would be consistent, at least.

We searched the office, not finding anything marked “useful evidence,” which wasn’t much of a surprise. The fighting rings had been popping up more and more. At first, it was just Steve and me taking them on. Then I couldn’t keep up so I had to bring my sisters into the fray. Even with them, we were getting stretched thin.

After a frustrating search, the office didn’t yield anything. I washed the blood off my face and hands while Edda kept up with the laptop. She found me sitting on the edge of the tub, using a rag to get the worst of it off my boots. I’d given up on my hair, shirt and neck for now, but I was hoping to salvage the boots.

“Find anything useful?”

She leaned against the doorjamb. “I found a possible crumb.”

“Good.”

“I have an idea, but you’re going to hate it.”

I stopped bothering with my boots and rested my elbows on my knees. “Okay.”

“We have the contact info for the next fight. I can go undercover, pose as a dealer or bookie, something.”

I waited, because so far the plan was basic, and I wouldn’t hate that.

“But with the gees, our usual bash and grab won’t work.” She crossed her arms. “We need subtle. We don’t do subtle.”

My gut dropped. “No.”

“We need balance on this, someone who does the delicate work. The soft stuff. Someone who can work around the gees, but also be unexpected.” She stood up, effectively blocking my exit. Edda knew me well, and she figured about now I was ready to bolt. She wasn’t wrong. “They’ve got to be anticipating us at this point, but they won’t be expecting him.”

I was already shaking my head. “Double no. Negative. Ix-nay on the Upid-Cay.”

Edda sighed because she thought I was acting like a child and I was. “We need Grant, so you need to go get him.”

“He’s busy. He has responsibilities at the farm.”

Edda shrugged. “I’m sure one of our sisters can stay there and help out, and your apprentice, Jonah is there as well. He can slip away, surely.”

My mouth opened, my hand went out, and…nothing. I didn’t have a single other shitty excuse, not even a vague one. “His…cow is sick?”

“Does he even have a cow?”

“Yes,” I said, definitively, though I had no earthly idea. Grant didn’t have a cow last time I’d visited, but who knew what had happened since then?

Edda clearly wasn’t buying it. “He’ll come.” Her lips curled up on one side. “Especially if you’re the one asking.”

“You’re right,” I said, bunching up my rag in my fist. “I don’t like it.”

“But you’re going to do it anyway,” Edda said, and her face was so smug I wanted to punch her. Except she would punch back harder and then I’d have to retaliate, and this wasn’t the time for a brawl. Or maybe it was. I must have been tired if I was thinking of backing away from a throw down. Tussling was one of our favorite pastimes.

“You’re right,” I said, getting up with a stretch. “I’ll do it anyway. But you’re coming with me, and we’re bringing the witch.”

“What if she doesn’t want to go?”

I snorted. “I’m not going to ask her. She’s either going of her own free will, or bound, gagged, and tossed into Steve’s travel trailer.”

Edda’s scowl was more thoughtful than angry. “She’s a victim. We’re not going to further traumatize her.”

“Alleged victim,” I said, tossing my rag into the filth-pit that was the tub. “And while I will try to use the softest of kid gloves, I’m not going to be breezy with security. She is still a witch and a dangerous one if they had her working for this place.”

Edda moved out of the way so I could join her in the hall. “Do you think she set the gees?”

I shook my head. “Doubt it. She’d have been able to remove Jerry’s easily, though she could have just decided to let him die and not deal with it, but she seems keen to give us all the dirt on Jer and this place.” I scratched at a patch of dried blood behind my ear that I missed. “Or maybe she’s just playing along for now? I don’t know. But she wouldn’t put a gees on herself, unless she’s lying about that…” I sighed. “We’ll just have to err on the side of caution and treat everything she says as suspect.”

“Oh, goody,” Edda said dryly. “Caution. We excel at caution.”

“It’s almost in our top ten best traits right behind punching things and macramé.” I clomped my way back into the main living area, Edda in tow. “Let’s gather up our troops then and head out. We don’t want to stick around here and I need to make a phone call.”

“Be sure to grovel,” Edda said. “To make up for pissing him off.”

“How do you know I pissed him off?”

Edda just laughed. To be honest, it was a little insulting how long it went on. It wasn’t *that* funny.