Make My Heart an Arrow

Part 2

I woke up to voices. My eyelids felt fat, my lashes crusted together. I know crying is supposed to make you feel better on an emotional level, but on a physical level it made me feel like something scraped off a shoe. Lena and Grant’s voices were muffled, but I could tell who was who, even if I couldn’t quite make out what they were saying. I rubbed my sleeve across my eyes and rolled quietly to my feet. Wuf opened one eye and chuffed at me. I held a finger up to my lips, a gesture Wuf understood He gave me a reproving look before letting his eye shut.

 I tiptoed over to the side of the barn, and pressed my ear against the wood. As children, we’re told that eavesdropping is wrong. It’s none of our business and we should let people have their privacy. But as a child I also quickly realized that often adults were talking about things that directly involved me, which does make it my business. It also meant that the only way I was going to find out what was going on was to shamelessly spy on all and any grown-ups around me. I had decided a long time ago that it’s a moral gray area and let it go.

 “I can’t believe you still have these devil birds.”

 “This is a refuge, Lena. It means I take in creatures other people can’t. Do you know of anyone else who could handle a flock of basilisks?”

There were a riot of hisses and I missed Lena’s reply.

“They saw you bring out the food bucket. It’s okay—just don’t take off your goggles. Ever. And if you hear a clicking noise, jump back unless you’ve become fireproof since I saw you last.” I could hear the laughter in Grant’s voice, just as much as I could hear the annoyance in Lena’s.

“Evil devil birds. I would roast you on a spit.” I assumed she was referring to the birds.

I could just make out the soft clicking noise right before I heard Lena swear and the clatter of a dropped bucket. Grant’s resulting laughter made me smile a little.

“You wouldn’t like the taste, I can guarantee you that. The eggs are good, and besides, they protect the chickens. I haven’t lost a single one to predators this year.”

“I bet you’ve had plenty of new lawn ornaments. And I can’t believe you eat the eggs.”

“So will you if you stay here for any length of time.”

All I heard for the next minute or so was the shuffling and clucking of the birds.

“You can’t keep training him like a Valkyrie, Lena. He’s not one. Thank the gods on that. You’re quite enough.”

“Are you sure, though? About Jonah?”

I pressed my ear so hard against the wood I think I got a splinter. Wuf would say it served me right. Even so, I could barely hear them now over the beat of my own heart, which was thundering like Steve on a mission.

“Only one way to see.”

The silence stretched so long this time, I wasn’t sure Lena was going to answer.

“He stays, then.”

“It’s a good decision, Lena.” There was the metal clang of settling buckets. They must have been putting them away. “Are you going to stay, too?”

“That’s not an easy answer, Grant, and you know it.”

“I make a mean Basilisk egg omelet.”

“Are you trying to make me leave?”

I didn’t hear anything else, because they’d clearly left the coop. But it probably wouldn’t have mattered. All I knew was that my fears were coming true. Lena was leaving me behind. I hadn’t lived up to her expectations. I slumped down into the hay. What was I going to do now?

Apparently tired of my moping, Wuf got up, stretching his back like a cat. He ambled over and grabbed the collar of my jacket with his teeth and gently pulled me to my feet. He thought Granny Mae’s suggestion of seeing the goats was a good one, and it was almost dark now, and they could probably use help herding them into their pen for the night and didn’t that sound like fun? Wuf must really like the farm. It was making him chatty.

He nudged me at the door with his nose just in case I didn’t get his message. Moping in the barn wouldn’t do me any good. At least I could work for my supper. After everything else we’d done, herding goats would be a cakewalk.

Herding goats was not a cakewalk. It turned out that goats didn’t particularly want to be herded anywhere, thank you very much. Azzy giggled at my attempts to help Granny Mae get the goats to do anything at all. Wuf finally took pity on me and jumped into the goat enclosure and directed them in much the same manner he’d shepherded me.

After the goats were secure in their pen, Granny Mae offered to show me the spare bed. I told her I was perfectly comfortable with Wuf in the barn. Wuf chuffed in laughter as Granny ignored me and dragged me up to the attic anyway.

The room was triangle in shape and the ceiling tall enough that I wouldn’t have to duck to walk around. There was a large window behind me in the wall that belonged to the front of the house, and another at the end. Someone had built a window seat under that one. As I finished coming up the stairs, I saw an old brass bed frame that held a full sized mattress. A sidewall had a few neatly labeled boxes, but all in all it was a tidy space.

Next to the bed was a nightstand with a lamp, and there was an old scuffed hope chest at the foot. An equally scuffed dresser squatted against the other wall. I dropped my bag on the patched quilt covering the bed.

“The mattress looks lumpy, but it’s the best sleep you’ll ever have.” The words seemed nice, but Granny’s tone held a challenge to it.

“I’m sure it will be amazing,” I said. But would it be as comforting as a bed of hay with Wuf as my pillow?

“Don’t go sneaking out to that barn, now,” Granny Mae said, and I wondered if she could read my mind.

“Wuf’s going to have his paws full with the pups and hay can be mighty pokey. You sleep in my nice bed and be grateful.”

And again, her words were at odds with their sentiment. What she said sounded rude, or implied that I was, but her meaning was clear—you are welcome here and you will be taken care of.

“Thanks.” I gave her a smile to show I understood.

She waved it off and told me to settle in. I started to unpack my bag and wondered how long I’d be settling in for.

If I thought I’d be useless on the farm, that notion was quickly put to rest. I got up early and helped Azzy with—as she called them—the danger chickens. They weren’t too bad. I had to wear goggles and gloves when spreading the feed, and I had to pay close attention to where I stepped. If you moved too fast or stepped too close, the basilisk would belch fire.

“They’re not bad, really,” Azzy assured me, her grin looking mad under her goggles. “Just like normal chickens, really. Just, you know, don’t tick ‘em off.” The largest basilisk strutted by me, its reptilian tail dragging and flicking behind it. If you missed the tail, it looked a lot like a regular chicken. A little smaller in stature, they had a bright autumnal coloration if their plumage, giving them an almost festive air. Except there was the tail. And the larger hooked beak and claws that were closer to raptor talons. I shuddered.

Azzy opened up the door to the coop, letting the chickens out into a little fenced off area. Then I dumped and refilled their water while Azzy checked for eggs.

“Why do they have herbs and flowers in their nests?” I asked when I was done with the water.

“We get them from the garden,” Azzy said, motioning in the general direction of the garden. “Some are treats, and some act as natural bug repellent and stuff. Happy healthy chickens mean better eggs, so we grow extra herbs just for them.”

After we were done with the danger chickens, I helped Azzy feed and take care of several other creatures the farm was hosting. It wasn’t far off from my old job, really, except the animals were being well taken care off and no one died.

Once the basic chores were done, we went to join the adults for breakfast. I was once again not allowed to have coffee, but I was given a glass of fresh apple juice from the orchard and a cup of hot tea. Black tea. How is that different from coffee? Adults are weird.

Lena pushed her eggs around on her plate, skeptical. I was more worried about the bacon. The farm seemed mostly self-sustaining, and I hadn’t seen any pigs. If it was pig. I was racking my brain for any sort of porcine-based creatures when Grant told me that he traded for the bacon and other things with another local farmer.

“It’s actual pig, I promise,” Grant said solemnly into his cup of coffee, the jerk.

“This time,” Azzy chirped before guzzling the rest of her juice. I shoved a fork full of bacon and eggs into my mouth. I would deal with next time as it came.

While Lena had sparring practice by the orchard, the frolicking cerebi puppies nipping at her heals, I helped Grant start building the new puppy enclosure.

Even though it was only mid-morning, it was already hot, the sun beating straight down on us. Grant shoved a goofy-looking straw hat on my head.

“I’m not sure I can wear this,” I said. “It’s ridiculous.”

“So is a sunburn and heatstroke because you wouldn’t look silly wearing a hat.”

Grant presented a solid argument. We started on the pen first, since the pups could currently sleep in the barn. Grant had some fencing supplies left over from the danger chicken coop, so we were putting in metal posts and then using a wire mesh to enclose it. It was not easy work, and pretty soon we were both sweating like, well, dogs. I had to peel my shirt off after awhile. So did Grant and I realized he had a lot more tattoos than I had first thought. The designs I’d caught a glimpse of before now snapped into clarity. They were feathers, and the feathers made up two very large wings. The wings started by his shoulder blades, but instead of folding flat along his back parallel to the spine like a lot of the tattoos I’d seen, they wrapped up along his shoulders and arms, like he was in flight. The tattoos moved as his muscles rolled and flexed, and I swore there was almost an iridescent sheen to them. I ducked my head before he could catch me staring, but they were so beautiful it made my heart squeeze.

We took a break for some iced tea and a snack, even though I tried to argue that I could keep working.

“Big heap of good you’d be once you passed out from dehydration,” Granny Mae said, depositing the jug of ice water she’d brought out onto the little folding tray Azzy had just set down. The water had mint from the garden and was the best water I’d ever tasted. Maybe I was a little dehydrated.

Granny also brought out some apple slices, cheese and cookies. Azzy brought a jug of lemonade to go with the water. They had been working in the garden, and Azzy had smudges of dirt on her face to show for it. If she minded doing the work, she hid it well.

After our break, Grant and I went back to working on the puppy paddock while Azzy attempted to play fetch with the cerebi. Not only were the puppies fighting over the ball, but once the pup managed to get it, the individual heads fought over it, too.

"What will happen when they get older?"

"As soon as this is done, we'll start in on the dog house by the orchard. When they're grown enough to understand, they'll begin their guard duties." He pulled a bandanna out of his pocket to wipe some of the sweat away and stared at me. "They'll have a home here. Permanently. Just like everything else, they'll pull their weight, but they will get feed, cared for, and have acres to roam."

I nodded, making sure to keep my gaze down. It didn't fool Grant. "It's okay to worry about them, Jonah. To miss them—" he started, but I didn't let him finish.

"I'm going to go grab more nails out of the barn." And like a coward, I ducked away, my thudding footsteps not managing to drown out his defeated sigh.

When we were done with the temporary paddock and got the pups situated, we moved on to the doggie guardhouse. My days took on a pattern--danger chickens, livestock, breakfast. Building projects, lunch. Granny roped me into Azzy's lessons, which weren't too bad. We did have to cover math and history a little, but the focus was mostly on mythology, biology, and Greek and Latin. It's like I was studying to be a wizard.

The doghouses took longer than they should have, first because Grant wanted them built to last, and second because we had to stop occasionally to mend the fence around the orchard.  Grant treated this with utmost importance, even though I couldn't see any animals in the orchard and it wasn't like the trees were going to get away. He was also picky about the kind of wood we used—I'm not sure where he got it, but he wouldn't use anything else, and each piece had carvings in them that I didn't recognize.

In the evenings, I worked on Lena’s stuff. I gave the trailer a good scrubbing, cleaned Steve’s tack, anything that needed to be done. Lena was getting restless and I wanted to remind her that I was still useful, a necessary part of the team.

One evening, after we’d been there about a week, Lena found me after dinner. I was doing my best to remove some burrs that Wuf had managed to get tangled in his fur. For a big, badass waheela, he was pretty whiney about getting his hair combed.

Lena rested against the porch railing and watched Wuf squirm. “I need to take off in the morning—something Steve and I need to check into down in northern California.”

I stopped mid-comb and squeezed my eyes shut. She’d said “I” not “we.” My stomach dropped. “I’m staying here, aren’t I?”

“Yes.”

I’d always appreciated Lena’s blunt manner. It could be painful sometimes, but it was always quick. She didn’t drag things out. I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

She let out a frustrated huff. “I’m not good with this. Look, this isn’t permanent. I’ll just be gone a few days—a week, tops. Wuf will stay here with you.” Lena squatted down next to me when I continued to not respond. “Grant says you’re worried that I’m going to ditch you here. Is he right?”

I straightened, a little surprised that Grant had managed to figure that out. “Yes.”

Lena sat next to me, her head on her knees. “You’re my apprentice Jonah. I’m not going to ditch you anywhere. But I promised Grant we’d help get the pups situated and that’s not finished yet. I also need to check into a rumor and this way I can do both.” She reached out and tugged a burr free of Wuf’s hair. “Grant’s going to continue your training while I’m gone. I’ve been neglectful in some things.” She flicked the burr away. “I’ve never had an apprentice before, and I’m not sure I’m good at it, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to quit, either. I’m just—” She stopped to dig out another burr. “Supplementing your education, okay?”

“Okay,” I said. She held out a fist and left it there until I bumped it with my own.

“You do know that he can just freeze those burrs out of his hair, right?”

I glared at Wuf. “No, I did not.”

Wuf gave me a rather canine smile, his tongue lolling out, before he licked my face from chin to eyebrow.

“You ran through the burrs on purpose, didn’t you?”

Wuf nudged my hand that held the comb.

Lena was gone in the morning. I’d stayed up late preparing a letter for her to send to my mom along with the money I’d put aside. It wasn’t a long letter, but it was hard to write. Besides missing my mom and sister, and being upset with Lena leaving, it was tremendously hard to write a letter when you couldn’t talk about most of the stuff you did. Since I had taken up with Lena, my whole life had become redacted. I usually didn’t mind, but that morning it was hitting me hard. I was poking at my oatmeal more than I was eating it.

 “All right, Mopey,” Grant said, getting up from the table. “It’s time to finish up your breakfast and get to work.”

 I shoveled in the last few bites of oatmeal and helped Azzy clear the dishes. When I went to go and fetch our tools, Grant stopped me.

 “Not today. We have a different project today.”

 He wouldn’t tell me anything else, just sent me along to the orchard gate with Wuf to wait. When he joined us, Grant held a bow, a quiver of arrows, and had his T-shirt off and shoved into his pocket. It wasn’t really warm enough yet to warrant the shirtlessness, so I was a little dubious about the whole venture.

 Grant wouldn’t answer any of my questions. He just ushered me into the orchard rather firmly before making sure the gate was closed behind him. I’d seen a lot of crazy stuff since I’d partnered up with Lena, but the orchard blew all that away. Before we’d walked through the gate, all I could see was rows of apple trees in the distance. An older, established orchard with nothing that really made it stand out in any way. That changed the second we walked through the gate.

 The apple trees were still there, only bigger, gnarled and crooked with large, ripe apples hanging from the branches. Some were red, some green or yellow, and a few in the center were a bright and shining gold. The ground wasn’t as clear, but full of smaller plants. A white stag walked right past me, nodded at Grant, and proceeded to parade through the thick yellow grass that was now up to my knee. Birds flew and chirped and bees buzzed and butterflies flew and everything was thick with life and magic.

 “Not the same orchard, is it?”

 “No.” Grant waved a hand at a young girl that peeked from behind a tree. “Dryad.”

 I waved at the dryad and she ducked back behind the tree.

 “This orchard serves as somewhere between—a safe place for creatures. Don’t kill anything, hurt anything, or damage any plants if you can help it. Watch what you say and use your manners. Humans are tolerated here at times, but not welcome by any means.” He turned and took a path deeper into the woods, Wuf and I padded along behind him. “The locals will likely get friendly with you after you’ve spent some time here and proven that you can be trusted.”

 We walked through the woods for several minutes, finally coming to a clearing. At the far end, several hay bales sat, each one fixed with a target.

 “We’re going to work on archery?”

 Grant waggled a hand back and forth. “And other things. First, let me see you shoot.”

 We walked until we were about fifty yards from the target. He handed me his bow and arrow and stepped back to observe. I moved until the target was directly in front of me, then I turned sideways getting into the proper stance, my feet shoulder length apart. I stood up straight and turned my head so that my chin lined up with my shoulder. Hips tucked, shoulders down, back straight—this was called the square stance and Lena had been making me use it because she said it was good for beginners. She made me do the stance, over and over, trying to get to that point where muscle memory takes over. Repetition helps and builds endurance.

 Grant’s bow was a longbow, which is what I’d been training with. Lena said it was a good one to start on. I nocked the arrow carefully, making sure the fletching was lined up properly. I drew, letting the bowstring down slowly when I wasn’t happy with my grip. Then I drew again, anchoring myself like Lena had taught me. When I felt ready, I took the shot, making sure to keep my bow up and steady until the arrow had landed in a meaty *thunk* on the edge of the target. I hadn’t had time to practice in the last week, so I was happy I’d hit the hay bale at all.

 Grant had me repeat the process, taking a second here or there to make minute corrections in my form. We went through the whole thing until my arm started to ache and he let me take a break.

 Wuf, who’d been sitting behind me watching, puffed a freezing breath on the back of my neck, which felt amazing.

 “I’m going to show you something,” Grant said taking his bow from me and slinging the quiver onto his back. “And part of it might freak you out. But I need you to trust me and remember that I would never hurt you or Wuf, okay?”

 “Just you saying that freaks me out, you realize that, right?”

 “If you ever think of a way to do this without causing some panic, I’d love to hear it,” Grant mumbled, then closed his eyes. He rolled his shoulders. Then he began to glow, just a soft shimmer, like maybe an errant sunbeam had landed just on him. Then the tattoos on his back exploded out into a great set of shining wings. His eyes opened, the sunbeam effect intensifying there. He ran toward the target, letting off shot after shot, each arrow hitting dead center with a brutal efficiency. Then his wings flexed out, his feet leaving the ground. Up he went, circling the meadow. I watched him fly, my breath caught. There were simply no words.

 He went into a dive, swooping down on Wuf and me. His wings flexed out brining him back to an almost standing position—if he’d been a falcon, his feet would be lined up to pick up his prey. Instead he brought the bow up, knocked two arrows in quick succession, and let them fly.

And I just stared stupidly as the arrow hit my chest with a resounding *thup* that I felt down to my toes. I blinked, my mind registering the fact that the arrow looked odd, like nothing I’d seen before. The shaft was warped and knotted, like it had been hand made from a crooked limb. I reached out and touched the downy soft fletching—they looked like something taken off a baby goose and all wrong for arrows. When I looked over at Wuf, he had a similar arrow sticking out of his chest. Except the shaft was copper wire, the fletching the brilliant eye of a peacock feather. I reached out to touch it, but my fingers never connected. The world seized and everything went white.