Chapter 29

Raven Gifts

The room was quiet again. We’d run out of small talk and no one felt like talking about anything important, all of us ignoring the fact that we were waiting for Grant’s little miracle to work. We were also trying desperately to ignore the possibility that it wouldn’t work at all. When I first heard the scratching, I thought I was hearing things—conjuring sounds out of nothing except forced optimism. I didn’t want to bring it to anyone else’s attention in case I was hearing things, but then I heard it again. Just the faintest noise.

I scrambled up off of the mattress and jogged over. “Hello?” I pounded on the door. “Anyone there? Hello?”

Someone smacked the door back. “Quiet.” The reply was muffled, the voice higher than I’d expected. *Olive.* “I’m trying to concentrate.”

I had to stop myself from replying. I’d give her all the quiet she needed if she got us out.

Everyone had turned, their attention on me. I mouthed *Olive,* unable to hide my grin. Several minute passed while we waited, taut with anticipation. Then the door clicked open. The door was open!

I yanked wide, revealing Olive as she was putting some sort of kit away, Veronica and Sid. Sitting next to Sid, his tongue out and wagging, sat the Warg.

I frowned at Sid. “What happened to your cast? The doctor insisted—”

Sid pushed his way in, holding the door open for us. “I followed doctor’s orders. We’ve been looking for you lot for three days.”

I blinked, my gut clenching. “Three days?”

He nodded, and I looked closer. Sid looked haggard, like he hadn’t been sleeping. He also hadn’t had time to shave in at least a day or two. Veronica had dark circles under her eyes, and Olive’s clothing had the rumpled look of something that had been worn a few days. “We’ve been looking around the clock. Couldn’t get any bead on you.”

“How did you find us?” I asked, while waving at everyone else in the room to gather up their stuff. It was time to go, and I didn’t want to waste another minute in this terrible place.

“We kept searching,” Veronica said, her hand on Olive’s shoulder. “We were pretty sure they hadn’t taken you off the grounds, but there wasn’t any trace of you. Everyone else had left, but we had some of the drove follow the cars until they could get a look inside—you weren’t in any of them. So we broke in and started to search the house.” She smiled down at Olive. “It was Olive who found the door.”

Olive had finished tucking her gear away and shoved her hair out of her eyes. “More like I found the ravens. Hard to miss *them.*” She held her hands out. “Big ass bird pecking away at the wall. Only it wasn’t a wall but a hidden door.” She shook her head. “Wouldn’t have caught it without the ravens.” She dug something out of her pockets, presenting me with Grant’s arrow. “The second one gave me this.”

I took the arrow and handed it to Grant. When it came to my family, two ravens usually meant Odin’s ravens. “Looks like I owe Huginn and Muninn some treats.” Roughly translated, their names meant memory and thought. If my mom was able to get them on loan from Odin, she must have been really worried. It took a lot to worry my mom. Of course, both her partner and her daughter had suddenly fallen off the earth for several days. That would scare anyone.

I gave Olive a salute. “We’re deeply in your debt either way.” Everyone looked ready, so I waved the hares toward the stairs. I really wasn’t looking forward to those stairs. “Let’s get out of here. We can finish the reunion when we’re free.”

Going up a seemingly endless set of stairs is much, much worse than going down. If my brothers had been doing this frequently, they must be in amazing shape. I mean, I was in pretty amazing shape and I still had to take breaks. Grant and Sid tried to take turns carrying Tally’s little sister, who I finally found out was named Ruby. She was reluctant to ride the Warg, which was too bad. It seemed disrespectful to ask Garm. He was the wolf of wolves, not a pack horse. But he must have become irritated at our slow pace, snapping at Grant until he placed the young girl on his back. She’d gripped his fur, her expression one of abject terror for the first flight. After that, she relaxed.

We finally reached the top, bursting out into the sprawling mansion. The space was eerily quiet in a way that told me, without even looking, that it was empty. I don’t know how to explain it, but empty houses just felt different. “Any sign of our things?”

The butler had divested us of anything we’d tried to smuggle in, piling them on the table. I wasn’t even sure where that table was in relation to the hallway we were currently walking down.

Sid shook his head. “We searched this place top to bottom. If you’re weapons were here, we would have found them. Probably. This place is huge and who knows how many other magical hidey holes there are?” If losing our gear was the price we paid for freedom, I’d gladly pay it.

Without discussion, we kept moving until we were outside, blinking in the watery morning sunlight. Our rental van as well as Lock’s van were the only two vehicles in the driveway except for a handful of motorcycles. As we stood there acclimating to once again being part of the real world, several bikers materialized from the woods surrounding the estate.

Sid put a hand on my arm, which had automatically reached for a weapon, even though I didn’t have one. “They’re with us. The search party.”

I dropped my hand and let out a breath. “Wow, we’re going to have so many late fees on that van.” I looked at Edda. “Good thing you rented it. That bill is all yours.”

Edda glowered at me. “In your most fevered dreams, Lena.”

Ava, Lock, and Ezra were greeting the search party, exchanging hugs and borrowing phones to call loved ones to let them know they were okay.

“My dad is going to be so pissed,” Ava mumbled as she borrowed Veronica’s phone. We’d left ours in the van, but they were all dead and needed charging.

“You’d think they would have ditched the vans or something,” My dad said as he got Tally and Ruby situated in our rental. “Pretty easy to trace them if they were found.”

Edda shrugged. “Who’s going to stumble across them here? Besides, this is Loki we’re talking about. If he does own this house, it’s going to be buried under a legal trail resembling a twisted ouroboros.”

“Now what?” Grant slung an arm around my waist, his gaze on Garm, who was currently peeing on the side of the mansion. His way of thumbing his nose at Loki, I guess.

I let out a breath. Good question. Now what? I realized everyone was looking at me. Right, I guess I was in charge of this shit show. Yay, me. “We have to find Loki, find our brothers, and put a stop to their plan before they go full Ragnarok.”

The problem, of course, was that we had no idea where my brothers had gone or what the next stage of their plan was. But I realized that there was someone who might be able to help us. I rubbed a hand over my face. “First things first—we get out of our formal wear, and find something to eat.” And get some weapons. I felt absolutely naked. “Then we’re calling my mom.”

A short drive, a quick shower, and a truly embarrassing amount of takeaway later, and I felt more like myself. We were back in our rented apartment. I was in my own clothes, there was a knife strapped to my thigh and a collapsed spear in the holster strapped to my back. Heaven. I felt like *me* again. Lock had grown a flower to make Ruby smile, Ava currently had flames dancing along her fingertips, and Ezra was running around the apartment in fox form. It was like if they didn’t use their powers for a second, they were afraid they’d lose them again. My dad was drinking coffee, laughing as the fox darted around our legs and nipped at Garm’s tail. Garm was putting up with the indignity fairly well, but if Ezra kept it up, he was going to become lunch soon.

I no longer had any excuses. It was time to confront my mother. I could never be sure she’d answer, but I thought, what with us disappearing like we had, she might be listening for me. “Mom?” I asked the ceiling. I don’t know why. It’s not like she was up in the clouds or anything. Weird habit, I guess. It didn’t make any sense to raise my voice, but I did it anyway. “Mom?”

The buzzer by the door went off, shockingly loud in the quiet. Edda was closest and hit the button. “Yes?”

“This is the security desk,” a smooth voice I didn’t recognize issued through the speakers. “You have a visitor. She says her name is Solveig and she’s carrying a spear.” The voice sounded like they were very used to women carrying spears. “Should I send her up?”

“Yes,” Edda said. “Thank you.” She looked at me as she released the button. “Why is your mom downstairs?”

I shrugged. A few seconds later, we let her into the apartment, my mother in all her Valkyrie glory. She wore her circlet, the swan feather cape, the whole shebang. She also looked visibly relieved to see me and my dad. Solveig rushed forward, touching my face, then my dad’s, hugging us both tight.

When she finally released us, her eyes looked a little watery.

I patted her bicep awkwardly. “You usually just show up. What gives?”

Solveig huffed. “This apartment is warded to the hilt. I could have busted through, but it would have taken time and significant energy, and since the wards are protecting this room, I felt it best I take the normal way in.”

“Mom, we need to talk.”

She frowned, eyes darting to the rest of the room. Normally, I would have sent everyone away. This was our business. But since everyone here had been impacted by our business, I felt like they all had a right to be here. So I ushered my mom to the couch as everyone else got comfortable. There were more people then chairs, so some had to sit on the floor.

My mom’s expression was perplexed, her brow pinched. “What’s going on?”

I took the seat next to her, my fingers tapping along my thigh as I tried to figure out where to start. “We figured out who’s behind the fights.”

She brightened, turning a smile up at my father as he leaned on the back of the couch behind her, a hand on her shoulder. “That’s wonderful!”

Her face fell as she turned back to me, seeing that I didn’t think it was that wonderful. Then I told her everything we’d learned. I told her about the fights, the battle with the jotunn, and our meeting with Loki and my brothers. By the time I was finished, she had a haunted look about her.

I put my hand on hers. “Mom. Why didn’t you tell me?” I waved at Edda. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

Solveig twisted in her seat, uncomfortable. “It’s part of the pact.”

“What pact?” I asked.

My dad squeezed her shoulders and she reached up with one hand and took his, shooting him a look of pure affection before turning back to me. If I’d ever doubted how my parents felt about each other, that look would have erased it. “To be a Valkyrie, to become who we are, we made a deal with the gods.” Her voice dropped down to almost a whisper. “You have to be careful with the gods and their dealings—you have to be careful with the words you choose.” She shook her head, her mouth pursed. “We’re not women of words.”

My gut sank at the same time sympathy welled inside me. In that way I was just like my mother. I wasn’t good at words, either. Valkyries were beings of action. “What happened?”

Her eyes filled and she sniffed. “We wanted to fight. To be the warriors we were meant to be. To be able to raise our daughters strong, to not lose them to the machinations of man. We just wanted our daughters to be strong.” Her eyes were pleading as she looked at me.

Knowing the gods, I could fill in some of the blanks. “But you never made provisions for your sons.”

She shook her head. “We never know, you understand? What happens to them? They’re born and then they just…go away.” She waved a hand in front of her face.

The babies went back to their fathers, left to be raised as humans, never knowing why they felt different. And I knew they felt different now. I’d seen the difference when I was in the room out of time. How awful to not *know why.* Worse if you found out, because then you knew that you’d been forgotten, ignored.

A tear slipped down my mom’s cheek. “I don’t even know. I can’t remember.”

She couldn’t remember if any of those lost sons were hers. At least she knew that she hadn’t had any with my dad, or they would have ended up with him. Not a lot of comfort, but some.

I wiped her cheek with the heel of my hand. “Mom, I’m sorry. But this—it’s not right. It has to stop. Our brothers—we have brothers.” I looked at Edda.

“They’ve been hurt,” Edda said, her arms crossed. “We need to right this wrong. Make a change.”

“Valkyries are always women,” Solveig said, sniffing. Lock shuffled over and handed her a box of tissues.

“Then we call them something else,” I said. “We make them a space. Something.” I slammed a hand down hard on the coffee table. “They’re family.” My sisters were everything. Our bonds, unbreakable. To think that we had a balance—a flip side to our coin—and they were out there all alone. Without us. “It’s unthinkable, mom. For them. For you.”

She shuddered. “It’s not up to us.”

I frowned. “Fine, then we take this to the next level. Who’s it up to?”

“The All Father,” my mom whispered. “You’d have to take this to Odin.” Her face troubled, fear etched along every line. She had a right to be afraid. Odin wasn’t exactly known to be warm and fuzzy. Or fair. If we took this to Odin, there would be a price to pay, and you never knew exactly who was going to pay it. It made me hesitate, just for a second. Dealing with Loki was scary. Dealing with Odin? The very idea made me want to run screaming into the night. Again, I turned to Edda, a question in my eyes. What were we going to do?

She squared her shoulders, her chin jutting out. “Then we take this to Odin. We make change happen. We are Valkyrie, and though we may tremble, we do not run.”

“Right,” I said. “Right.” No fleeing like terrified bunnies from the snapping wolf’s jaws, even if we wanted to. I clapped my hands together. “We’re going to need supplies.”

“What do you need?” Sid asked from where he leaned against the wall.

“An oxen, a big ass fire pit, and a secluded spot where people aren’t going to ask questions,” I said, ticking the items off on my fingers.

Sid rubbed a hand along the stubble on his chin. “The oxen might be a bit of a problem, but we can definitely do the rest.” He titled his head. “Does it *have* to be an ox?”

I waffled my hand back and forth. “We need a big sacrifice, something to call his attention and gain his favor.”

Sid nodded. “I’ll see what I can wrangle.”

“Where are we going?” Edda asked.

Sid grinned wide, an almost feral look on his face. “To the drove, where else?”

Ava scrambled to her feet. “I call shotgun!”

I frowned. “You realize you don’t have to keep helping us, right? Alastair loaned you to us for the fights. You’ve done your part and we got you kidnapped on top of that.”

Ava snorted. “Exactly. They kidnapped us and broke Sid’s legs. You couldn’t send us home if you tried.”

Lock leaned close to me, his eyes bright. “So don’t try.”

“Okay,” I said with a shrug. “Let’s get this party started, then.”