Chapter 28

Oh, the Humanity

It turned out that being human sucked. It’s not that I considered myself non-human, exactly. To be honest, I hadn’t really thought there was much of a difference until now besides some fighting skill bonuses, aptitude towards violence on a genetic level, and my unorthodox upbringing. Turns out I was wrong. I felt like a gas oven whose pilot light had gone out. Like a part of me had gusted out and died, leaving only vapors.

Sound echoed oddly in our little concrete chamber, so even though we weren’t talking, it sounded noisy. All the little rustling of cloth as everyone fidgeted. Most of the people in this room weren’t any good at sitting still and that included me. The air felt a little stuffy, and weirdly stale. This was a nightmare.

The one really good thing was seeing Tally, her arms finally around her baby sister. They weren’t talking, just holding each other. The little girl’s face was pinched, and she looked thin, but not sickly. Someone had been taking care of her.

“She okay?” Edda asked, keeping her voice low.

Tally opened her eyes and gave a nod. “As okay as she can be.”

I waved a hand at the wards covering the walls. “Any chance you can do anything about these? Change them, break them, anything?”

Tally was shaking her head before I finished talking. “Nothing to write with.”

“I hate to suggest blood,” Lock said, his expression apologetic. “But what about blood?”

“Blood changes magic,” Tally said, running a hand over her sister’s hair. “Intent, strength, and considering the blood options we have available, I’m not sure what that would do. And then there’s this room.” She sighed. “This is magic like I’ve never seen. I don’t know how anything here works. What if we found a way to open a vein and it wouldn’t close? I don’t even know if it would work or how I’d change the runes, but what if we escaped only to discover we couldn’t get help in time? And if we didn’t escape, well, no one has any reason to check on us. Either way, someone could bleed out before we could get them help.”

We fell silent. No one had any arguments to sway her—no one knew the kind of magic she used like she did, at least not in this room. Unfortunately, no one else had any ideas to offer, either.

“Are we going to die here?” Tally’s little sister’s voice squeaked out from where she was huddled in her sister’s arms. “I want to go home.”

“I know you do, sweetheart,” Tally said, patting her sister’s hair again, but her eyes on us. I read resignation in her face. Tally thought we were going to die here. Or if not actually die, then exist in this non-space until Ragnarok.

“Having no magic sucks,” Ava said. She was looking at her hand, the one Lock wasn’t holding. “I dreamed of this for so long—being normal. No fire, just me.” Her nose crinkled and she dropped her hand as she looked at Lock. “It’s terrible and I want it to stop.” Lock let go of her hand and wrapped an arm around her, cuddling her close. He pressed a kiss onto her temple and then murmured something to her, something too soft for us to hear, something that made her grin.

Ezra lolled on the mattress across from me. “Tell me I’m still beautiful.”

Ava snorted.

“You’re still the most handsome and charming,” Lock said dryly. “In and outside of time.”

Ezra’s grin was a sharp flash of teeth. “I’ve always wondered. Is it just me, or is it my magic?” He stretched, arching his back and wiggling his toes. “Turns out it’s *all* me. What a relief.”

Everyone laughed, the sound dying quickly in the odd little room.

I’m not sure how long we sat there. The natural ways we measured time were all missing. Couldn’t look out and see the sun. No hunger or thirst. We didn’t need to use the bathroom and no one was tired. But after awhile I caught Grant staring at me speculatively.

“What?” My voice was edged, rather pathetically, with despair. Which was unlike me. I didn’t give up—to the point of pathology sometimes. The daughters of Valkyries fought until death claimed us, and with our last dying breaths we’d laugh in your face.

But right now, I wasn’t a daughter, was I? Just human. I hated it.

Grant reached out and touched my hair. “Can I take a few strands? Maybe more than a few. I’m not sure how much I’ll need.”

I eyed him. “You want some of my hair? For what? You’re not going to make some sort of weird hair-doll voodoo thing, are you?”

His lips tilted up at the corners. “Would that work?”

I shrugged. “I honestly have no idea.”

“I have an idea, but I need your hair for it.”

I tilted my head closer to him and felt the quick pinch when he tore several out. “Is that all you need?”

“From you, yes.” Grant reached down to pull one of the buttons off his suit jacket. He gathered the rest from the group—Ava had to sacrifice the underwire from her bra, and Tally gave up an elastic hair tie. After he had those in hand, he looked at Lock. “I don’t suppose you have any seeds?”

Lock took off his jacket, a speculative look on his face. He started pulling pockets inside out, even though they’d searched us really thoroughly. “Funny thing about seeds. Some of them are pretty small.” He shook out his coat over the floor, pausing to examine the concrete when he was finished. After a moment, he leaned forward and pressed a finger to the floor in front of him. When he lifted his index finger, a small black dot stood out against the whorls of his fingerprint. “That’s all I’ve got.”

Grant walked over to him, cupping out his hand. “One is all I need.”

I’d figured out what he was doing, but I couldn’t see how it would work. “We don’t have access to our magic. You can’t make an arrow or reach for your bow.”

He didn’t look up at me, intent on his task of reshaping the wire, and using all of the objects he’d collected. “You’ve forgotten a very human kind of magic.” Grant glanced up from his work, our gazes connecting for a moment. “Hope. Hope is a human magic, and a very strong one. That’s why I needed a seed from Lock. What’s a seed if not nature’s hope for the future?”

I frowned at him, sidling closer so I could watch him work better. “Then why did you need my hair?”

His hands stilled as he leaned close to me and placed a soft kiss behind my ear, pausing before he pulled away. “Because you give me hope.”

I couldn’t help it—I snorted. “That would be a first. I usually cause the opposite feeling. You can ask my dad.”

“Ask me what?” My dad said, leaning back on his elbows, his legs stretched out over the mattress and onto the floor.

“Please tell Grant that I’m the human avatar for the phrase, ‘Abandon all hope, ye who enter here’.”

Russel laughed, his head thrown back. When he faced me again, his eyes twinkled. “I can confirm that you’ve brought that feeling out for many people over the years, but never me.”

I got up to go and hug my dad. I’d come so close to losing him today. “Never’s such a strong word, and I’m thinking of all the times I brought home notes from school, got detention, questionable grades...”

He grimaced. “Home skills. What possessed you to take home skills?”

“I thought it would be easy,” I grumbled.

Edda shook her head, making an exasperated sound. “Sewing and baking aren’t easy and they both take patience, a virtue you lack.”

My dad’s chest started to shake with laughter. “I still have the pillow she made.” He was choking now, barely able to talk. Garm was wagging his tail at him.

“Bad?” Ava asked, as she stretched out her toes. She’d long abandoned the heels.

“It was supposed to be a dinosaur with a little pocket, you know, to hold a tooth for the tooth fairy?”

“It totally looked like a dinosaur!” Sort of. Okay, it was mostly a blobby amoeba shape, but I will take that thought to my grave. I’d finished it with little to no help, except from another student named Anna who took pity on me and gave me a few pointers. The whole project was supposed to be hand stitched, with a little pocket and buttons for the eyes.

“The teacher wouldn’t help her,” my dad said, holding a hand to his chest, his eyes watering. “Because Lena argued with her about the pocket, saying it was irresponsible for parents to offer up teeth to passing fairies because who knows what they would do with it.” He wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand. “I got so many notes home from that class. I kept them in a scrap book.”

I smacked his chest. “What? You didn’t tell me that.”

“I kept the pillow, too.” He wheezed. “The pocket doesn’t even have an opening and the button eyes are very disconcertingly placed.”

I’d had a really hard time lining them up evenly on each side and finally just gave up and sewed them on where I wanted.

Edda’s eyes shone. “I wish to see this pillow.”

I crossed my arms. “Now I’m not sure if I even want to get out of here.” I moved back over to Grant. He had the wire mostly flat, the hair wound around the button to hold the seed to it. Now he was trying to connect the two pieces with the hair tie. “Can we help at all?”

“Can you go look around the door?” He didn’t look up from his project. “See if there’s any way we can make space around it?”

I got up to check the door out. In order for the wards of the spell to work properly, the door needed to be fairly flush to the frame. Builders usually leave a little space so that the door swings smoothly and so the materials can expand or contract in cases of excessive heat, cold or humidity. They used moldings, plastic, foam or rubber to keep the seal so that houses stayed warm or to keep air conditioning in. The door to our little pocket of heaven was metal, the sides and top had looked almost completely flush. “How much space do you need?”

“Enough to get a button through,” Grant said.

I laid down flat on the ground and peered at the bottom of the door and smiled. A while back I’d rescued some little cerberi puppies and taken them to Grant’s. They’d made themselves at home there. After a few months, there was a rainstorm. A big one. My apprentice, Jonah, had put the pups into the mudroom in Grant’s farmhouse because he didn’t think they’d do as well in the barn. The pups didn’t like being shut in—they wanted to be with everyone else in the house. They’d absolutely destroyed the door and my apprentice got a lesson in *replacing* a door from Grant. “Hey, Garm?”

The wolf of wolves got to his feet and padded over, his nails clicking on the concrete floor.

I poked a finger at the bottom of the door, specifically at the slim piece of plastic wrapped foam at the bottom. “Could you reach that with your claws?” I paddled my hands in front of me, like I was doggie paddling the air. “Shred a spot for us?”

Garm let out an amused chuff so I got out of the way and let him go to work. The wolf cocked his head to the side, assessing. Then he started digging.

By the time Grant was done with his arrow, we had a jagged two-inch long section of space below the door, just wide enough to fit Grant’s arrow.

I scratched Garm behind the ears. “Good job, buddy. You’re a credit to the pantheon.”

Garm’s tongue lolled out.

Grant got up and came over to us, before dropping to his knees and looking at the space. He smiled.

“Now what?” I asked.

He laid his arrow on the floor, notching it into the space under the door, sliding it through until I couldn’t see the hair-wrapped button anymore. Grant held it there for a long moment, his fingers resting on the wire, his eyes closed. Then he shoved it as hard as he could through the opening. “Now we wait.”

I put my hands on my hips. “I don’t see how the arrow is going to work. Human magic, hope, sounds pretty, but…” I trailed off, not sure how to finish that sentence.

“It’s human magic in here.” Grant rolled onto his back, his smile wide as he tapped the door with one finger. “But once it’s outside this door? It’s cupid magic then.”

“But there’s no one out there to hit,” I said.

“Arrows can have other purposes,” Grant said. “Like when soldiers would shoot flaming arrows off of battlements to send messages to troops.”

My eyes widened. It was simple and kind of brilliant, even if I didn’t know how it was going to work. Grant was right—it did give me a little hope. “I could kiss you right now.”

His smiled widened. “What’s stopping you? We’ve got nothing but time.”

“An audience,” I said dryly.

He wrapped a hand around my ankle. “I’ll take it on credit then.”

I held a hand out to him, helping him up from the floor. Once he was up, he lurched forward, slipping an arm around me and pressing a kiss to the corner of my mouth.

“I thought it was on credit,” I said, glaring at him.

“I accept credit,” he said with a smile. “But never without a down payment.”