Chapter 22

I Wish I Could Just Punch Feelings in the Face

Grant was waiting for me in my room when I got out of the shower. He looked like he wanted to talk, so I shut the door behind me. He must have used my dad’s shower, because his hair was wet and he’d changed into sweats and a worn gray T-shirt. Though he sat on the bed and looked relaxed, I could tell he was unhappy with me. His face was carefully blank, which meant he was trying very hard not to share his emotions. Grant was a sharer. If he was keeping it to himself, it didn’t bode well for me. Though his muscles were loose, there was a certain tension running through them as well. I didn’t like to see Grant like this. He yelled sometimes, sure. But this was how he got when he was really upset or angry. Had I been wrong in my earlier assessment? Was he jealous and it was only now coming up? Disappointment flooded me, but I ignored it. It wasn’t fair to him to get pissy until I knew exactly what was going on.

I finished toweling my hair and draped it over the back of a chair. “What’s up?”

“Do you really think Tally would run back to the people who abused her?”

Huh. So not about jealousy then. I went to my bag, rooting around for my hairbrush. “I think that she’s smart, a survivor, and smart people do all kinds of things to survive. If she thought it was in her sister’s best interest, I think she absolutely would run back. I don’t blame her for that.”

Grant scowled. “She knows going back to them wouldn’t be helpful at all. They’d keep her under their thumb indefinitely.”

I finally found my brush and attacked my hair with it. Despite careful braiding, it had ended up with knots and tangles and…stuff…from the fight. Washing it had removed the nasty stuff from the fight, but it had left me with a few small rat’s nests. It was going to take some work.

The muscle in Grant’s jaw ticked. “You may not know Tally, but I do.”

“Before,” I said.

“And now.” His eyes were practically burning with repressed anger. “You think I don’t know people change? What Tally went through, that would shake up anyone.”

“So you understand why I don’t entirely trust her.” I yanked my brush through my hair and then had to pause as it got stuck on a knot.

“Of course I understand that.” His jaw bunched as he almost chewed the words out. Wow, I’d really pissed him off. He rubbed the heels of his hands over his eyes, before choking out a laugh. “I consider myself pretty even tempered. People have to really try to piss me off. But you, it’s effortless for you. Like a fucking gift. You’re a goddamn *savant* at trying my patience.” His shoulders slumped as he gazed down at the duvet.

I let go of the brush—it was stuck in my hair now, tangled up in the knot anyway—and reached out to him, gently pressing my fingers to his shoulder. “I don’t understand.”

He looked up at me then, his eyes flicking minutely back and forth as they searched mine. I don’t think he cared much for what he saw, because suddenly he just looked so *tired.* “I don’t expect you to trust Tally. What I did expect was for you to trust me, trust my judgment. You think I’d keep her with us, keep her in the knowledge loop, let her sleep anywhere near you, your dad or Edda—people I care about—If I thought for a second she would be a danger to us?”

I opened my mouth, only I didn’t know what to say, so I ended up snapping it shut.

Grant flopped back, resting against the headboard of my bed. “You’d trust Edda though, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course.” The words fell out without thinking. A flash of something crossed his face and then he was back to that carefully neutral expression which I suddenly hated.

“She’s my sister in arms, Grant.”

“And what am I?”

Again I opened my mouth, but didn’t have an easy answer.

Grant nodded, like he hadn’t expected me to answer at all, which somehow felt worse. “I’m not disputing your trust in Edda. Even if she wasn’t a fellow daughter of the Valkyrie, you’d trust her because she’s Edda—not just smart, but wise and almost preternaturally competent. She’s solid.”

I nodded slowly, feeling like I was stepping into a trap.

But Grant simply closed his eyes and tipped his head back, that muscle in his jaw ticking overtime. He took in a deep breath, his body relaxing as he let it out. He smiled softly, but when he opened his eyes, I could tell the smile was a fake.

“Grant—”

“Is the brush tangled in your hair? You’re just letting it dangle in the knot, aren’t you?”

I blinked, startled at the change of topic. He wasn’t going to make me talk about feelings? I should be grateful. I hated talking about feelings, but again, that feeling of wrongness prevailed. “Yeah?”

He pointed at the space in front of him and drew a circle in the air with his finger. “Let me do it.”

I glanced at his carefully composed face before I took a seat in front of him, wary. It felt like I got off too easy. As soon as I was comfortable, Grant freed the brush, and started brushing from the bottom, keeping a grip on the strands so they didn’t yank at the scalp. He didn’t talk until all the knots were gone, his movements quick and efficient.

“I’m always surprised you keep your hair long.” The bed shifted as he grabbed for one of the hair ties I’d left on the nightstand. “You seem like the type who would shave it all off. Easier that way. Long hair for you is impractical.”

He was right. It was. The way I lived, something short and no fuss would make far more sense. I liked my hair, though. Sometimes I felt like it was the only soft thing about me. Except when I braided spikes into it. “You want me to shave my head?”

“It doesn’t matter what I want.” He separated my hair into three parts, deftly braiding them and then securing it with the hair tie. Then he let go, setting the brush on the nightstand before leaning back against the headboard. When I turned to look at him, his eyes were closed again. “I’m sure Edda has the coordinates looked up by now. Go talk to her. Decide how you want to play tomorrow.”

I stood, frowning when he didn’t move to follow. “Aren’t you coming?”

That tight-lipped smile came back, and with his eyes closed, I couldn’t tell if it was real or not. But I was betting on not.

“I’m turning in early. Long day and I’ve got arrows to make in the morning.”

“Okay.” I hesitated at the door, feeling again like I’d missed half the conversation, but Grant didn’t move, that weird not-smile on his face. Finally I shut the door behind me and went to find Edda.

I found her alone at the table, washed, and in her pajamas, her hair wrapped up in a towel like a turban. Her laptop was open as she clicked away, but she stopped and looked up when I walked in. “Your dad and Tally are out walking Garm. We thought it best after that big meal. We also ordered takeout. Your dad chose for you, because we figured you’d be more hungry than picky.”

“That’s fine.” I took a seat across from her. “Suggestions for tomorrow?”

“I looked up the both the coordinates of the place we’re supposed to fight and the place Alistair sent us. He said he changed his mind about the B&B after talking to his people. Instead he’s offering us an apartment in a secure building. I assume he owns it.”

“What do you think about that?”

Edda flipped the laptop around so I could see the building. It was only four stories, brick, and on the small side. “Each floor is an apartment. He sent the security specs. It could be he wants to keep an eye on us.”

“Or it could be he assessed the situation and decided we needed better protection.”

Edda nodded. “My guess would be both. He’ll know where we are, but this is his building on his turf. Anything happens to us? He’ll look bad. I took a minute to look into him—he’s not actually Council, but the head of something called the Coterie, but that’s a fairly recent thing. Sometime in the last year or two there was a bit of a coup and he took over. The Council here is pretty weak, and from what I understand, he’s more in charge than they are.”

“Regime change, huh? So he can’t look weak, and if he invites us in and gives us safe passage and we get banged up on his watch, that will look bad.”

“My thought exactly.” She tapped a key, bringing up a different screen. “This is where the fight is taking place—SOWA power station. It’s an old building that’s been revamped as a community event place. It’s supposed to be under construction right now, according to the website. It’s within walking distance to the apartment Alistair offered us.” She spread out her hands, palms up. “This could be one big set up, but no one could have guessed that we’d call in James’s marker, so I doubt it. I say we take it and be careful.”

I nodded. “Sounds good. Did Tally talk to you?” When she shook her head, I filled her in as quickly as I could.

She pursed her lips. “It’s a risk, but it’s her risk to take. We can see if Loki’s purse has anything to offer her, but she has a point—and she might recognize people there. Might be able to give us more information.”

“You don’t think she’ll run back to them?”

I didn’t even get the question out before Edda was shaking her head. “The risk is there, but it’s minimal. She seems to understand that running back wouldn’t save her sister and would likely endanger them both. But if she does?” Edda lifted one shoulder and dropped it. “We’ll deal with it. Your dad wants to come, too. I think we should let him. I don’t like the idea of leaving him behind by himself—just in case someone tailed us home today.”

I agreed with her, and suddenly I felt my stomach drop. Grant was right. I didn’t question Edda’s opinion whatsoever. Oh, I would argue with her when I saw fit, obviously, but when she said Tally wouldn’t bolt, I accepted it.

Edda’s eyebrows scrunched together, not in a scowl, but in a question. “What is it?”

I hesitated.

“You can tell me now, or wait until whatever it is explodes in your face,” Edda said, amusement lighting up her expression. “You usually choose the latter, but may I recommend the former? Just for novelty’s sake.”

“I think I fucked up.”

“You’re going to need to be a *lot* more specific, because you fuck up on a frequent basis.”

I jabbed a finger at her, but my indignation faded quickly. “That’s true. Damn it.”

“What did you do?”

I told her about the weird discussion with Grant. When I was done she reached out, grabbing my hand in hers, her expression sympathetic. “You’re an idiot.”

“That is hurtful and unhelpful.”

Edda sighed and squeezed my hand before letting go. “I love you. You’re one of my favorite people. There’s no one else I’d rather have at my side in a fight.”

“I am sensing a rather large and important ‘but’ at the end there.”

“Huge. *Huge* ‘but’. Don’t giggle at that.”

“I can make no promises.” But I didn’t giggle. I felt too awful to laugh.

“You’re a terrier when it comes to our work. I have no doubt that we will get to the bottom of this, because you will never let it go. And because I’m brilliant.”

I nodded, rolling my hand to get her to continue.

“But somehow, you’re thick as a post when it comes to personal relationships. Which I don’t understand at all. Your parents are very loving. Your dad adores you. Maybe that’s it. You’re so used to unconditional love you expect it as your due, and so you don’t work at it.” I opened my mouth and she cut me off. “No, let me finish. Look, for reasons I can’t quite comprehend, that boy loves your obnoxious ass. Like, big heart and apostrophe love, even though you give him precious little reason at times.” She took my hand again. “It’s not that you’re not loveable, you know, you’re just…”

“Scared,” I said, my voice soft. “Mortally terrified. My dad loves my mom. Loves her, even though it means he’s spent most of his life alone. I can’t do that to Grant. He needs a partner.”

“So be a partner.” She raised up her free hand in a stopping motion. “No, seriously, what’s stopping you? Think about that. You’re not your mother. You’re not being called back to the celestial realm all the time. You can choose to live your life however you want. But I do think you need to make some sort of choice and soon.”

“You think Grant’s given up.” My throat closed up, my heart fluttering with panic and I realized Edda was right. I’d been taking Grant and his patience for granted.

“I think,” Edda said slowly, choosing her words carefully, “that he’s beginning to give up. I think he was fine with you flirting with that VIP today. Grant isn’t territorial like that. But you not trusting him? You not listening to him like you do me? Even though he’s always there? I mean it, Lena, one word from you and he dropped everything and flew out here. And don’t tell me it was because of the creatures. They’re important, but he would have come anyway, because you asked. For once, you wanted something from him. You needed him.”

I scowled, pulling my hand back. “Grant knows I appreciate his help. Do you think I’m taking advantage?”

Edda leaned back into her chair. “No, it’s not that. It’s just—you’re very self-sufficient. We both are. And that’s fine. But you taking his help, it’s the only way you let him in. He’s been patient, Lena, and very up front. You can’t tell me that he hasn’t been crystal clear about his feelings for you.” When I didn’t argue, she nodded. “Grant is not a prideful man, but he is a smart man. And if he gets his hands slapped every time he reaches for the cookie jar, he’s going to eventually go look for another treat.”

“I do not care for that analogy,” I said.

She grimaced. “Me either. I just meant if you tell him no, or at least keep hinting at that ‘no’ like you have been, he’s going to listen. He’s not going to be one of those dudes that takes ‘no’ as a challenge to try harder.”

“Of course not.”

“I think he’ll be patient with you if you’re clear that you want him around, but that’s something you need to decide, one way or the other. He’s a good man, Lena. Decide what you want and choose.” She said it gently, but firmly.

“Okay.” I stood, but then leaned down to kiss her cheek. “So wise. You sure you’re a Valkyrie? Maybe you’re really one of Athena’s get, and someone swapped the bassinets.”

She shoved me away. “Either way, I can kick your ass.”

I grinned. “See what Loki’s purse has for Tally. I’m going to go check on Grant.” Now it was my turn to cut her off. “I’m not saying I’m going to go up there and tell him what I want.” I needed to think, really sit down and think, about what I wanted my life to look like and where he fit into that. “But I need to at least fix this a little. He went to bed before supper, Edda.” I made him so sad he wasn’t going to *eat*. I hated that. She shooed me along and I ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

When I opened the door, the room was dark except for a little light filtering in through the window from the street. Grant was under the blanket, curled around a pillow, his breathing even. He looked so peaceful, his lips soft, the dark fan of his lashes laying across his cheeks. I didn’t want to wake him. So I stepped quietly back, shutting the door as softly as I could.

I would wake him when the food got here. Everything could keep until then.