Chapter 14

The Beer of Beers for the Wolf of Wolves

I didn’t know why my mother felt she had to warn me—I wasn’t so foolhardy or rash that I would swing open a door unprepared or unprotected to a gift from Loki. I brought out my spear. My mother reached into the celestial void and brought out her sword. It looked like she pulled it from thin air and was a neat trick at parties. Edda, Grant, and Tally came up behind us as my dad flanked out to the side. We listened as something scratched at the door. It wasn’t a little scratch, either.

“I’ll open the door,” my dad said. “Since I don’t have a weapon in my hands.”

“You’re very useful,” I said. “You fetch things, bring food, and loaned us a car. Now get on it. I want my puppy.”

He sighed, grabbing the door knob. “At least I’m good for something.”

We crouched, ready as my mom silently counted down to three. Then my dad swung open the door. I was suddenly eye-to-eye with one of the biggest wolves I’d even seen. If I stood next to him, his back would have been several inches past my waist. His fur was mostly golden browns, whites, and grays, with a good amount of black thrown in, especially on his back and face. His eyes burned a bright golden color and were filled with intelligence. When you looked at him, you instantly thought, *now that’s a wolf.*

He didn’t look threatening and all of his body language was…well, it wasn’t friendly, exactly. Faintly amused at the adorable antics of humans was the general impression I got. A bit condescending, really. He did smug very well.

Since my mom didn’t put her sword down, I kept my spear up as well. “Loki sent us a wolf?” I batted my eyelashes. “Can we keep him? Pleeeeaaase?”

“Stop that. Valkyries don’t bat their eyes. They slaughter those that stand against them and burn their crops.” Solveig tipped her chin at my new puppy. “Is that what you’re seeing? Just a wolf?”

“Yes?” I caught myself before I turned to fully look at my mother. It wasn’t a good idea to ignore a predator. I learned “eyes on at all times” when most kids are learning to ride a tricycle. My childhood was very eventful and included more flesh wounds than most. To this day my dad kept an extensive first aid kit, and was a dab hand at bandaging and stitching, because let me tell you, nothing alerts social services faster than an abundance of ER visits.

“Is that what everyone else sees?” My mother asked. “A wolf? Nothing—” she waved at her face and torso. “Else?”

“Yes,” Tally and Edda said.

“Yes,” Grant said, hesitation in his voice. “But he also seems more. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“He is the wolfiest of wolves,” my dad said.

Solveig smiled. “That’s pretty apt, actually. He is not so much a wolf as *the* wolf.”

“I’m sure that makes sense,” I said. “But can you make it make more sense? You know, for the witch. I don’t think she gets it.”

“Thanks,” Tally said dryly.

“He is to wolves what Yggdrasil, the world tree, is to trees,” Solveig said. She placed her sword flat on her palms and held it out almost as an offering as she kneeled on one knee. We all mimicked her partially because she knew more than we did and so it seemed smart, but also because it’s weird when one person kneels and everyone else stays standing.

“It’s not Fe—“

“No,” My mom cut Tally off. “Don’t say that name. There’s a bit of competition between them and it’s been made worse by the fact that one of them tends to get more attention than the other.”

Well that told me exactly nothing. I held my tongue, because my mom would get to it eventually.

“Garm, wolf of wolves, guardian of Hel, you honor this house.” Solveig may have kneeled, but she didn’t drop her eyes. She was respecting Garm, but not lowering herself.

Edda let out a little gasp. I wasn’t sure if anyone else knew who Garm was, but Edda and I both were a lot better versed in Norse mythology than most for obvious reasons. Suddenly everything my mom had said made sense. Garm, or sometimes Garmr, depending on the translation, was often mixed up with Fenrir in myths and stories. They had a lot of similarities, but it’s a bit like mixing up beer and wine. Both are liquids that will get you drunk, but they aren’t the same thing.

Garm stared at her until my mother got up, ushered us out of the way, and allowed the giant wolf to walk into the kitchen. It was surreal to see, and I say that as someone who lives with a unicorn. Still, I would have thought I was hallucinating if I didn’t hear the click of his nails on the kitchen tile. My father shut the back door as we all dutifully followed Garm into the living room. We watched quietly as he sniffed the couch and other furniture.

 “I wonder how Loki talked him into fighting with us,” I said, keeping my tone soft. “Garm is kind of a big deal.” Golden eyes looked up at me and the wolf’s tongue lolled out in a canine laugh.

“He’s huge,” Tally said, “But will that be enough for them to let you fight? Will they know he’s mythic enough? People might just assume he’s a big wolf.”

“Garm, would you do us the honor of showing us your other form?” Sloveig tented her hands in supplication. She must have put the sword away when I wasn’t paying attention.

Garm cocked his head at her, the question obvious in his posture.

“Mortals.” Solveig shrugged. “Practically blind.”

Garm stepped into the middle of the room and it was like the world blinked—not me, not my eyes, but everything in existence. It was a deeply unsettling and slightly giddy feeling, like coughing champagne up your nose. Not that I’ve done that. Much.

Where the big wolf had stood, another creature took his place. Garm was still wolf-like, but even larger, more than double his original size. He had to maneuver sideways so he didn’t knock the coffee table over. Garm’s broad chest was blood spattered and covered in bits of gore. His legs were covered in so much blood it was like he was wearing little booties over his paws. I could actually hear it dripping from him. Red flecked his face and jaws, glistening in the golden fire that came from his four eyes.

“Is that his blood or other people’s?” My father asked.

“Other people’s,” my mom answered.

“Does it make a difference?” I asked.

“Not really, except if it was his, I’d get my kit.” My dad peered at Garm’s paws. “Is it going to stain the floor?”

We all turned to look at him.

“What? I have to keep the house show ready, and if he’s going to drip blood, then I need to be prepared. He’s a guest, so I’m not going to throw him out or anything.” He jerked a thumb at Garm. “Do you really think I’m going to tell him what to do? My current life plans don’t include becoming kibble.”

The world blinked and Garm was back to being a wolf, which now seemed way less terrifying. It’s all about context, I guess.

“Which is the real Garm?” Tally asked.

“Both,” I said. “Each is a manifestation of the same creature.” I stepped forward. “Thank you for joining us on our hunt. Can we get you anything?”

Garm stepped up onto the couch, turned in a circle, and sat. Okay then.

“Would he be insulted if I brought him a bowl of water?” Russel asked. “Or should I get a goblet or stein or something?”

My mom shook her head. “Yes to the big bowl, but instead of water, bring him ale. Mead would be better, but you don’t keep that on hand.”

“What kind of host doesn’t keep mead?” I scoffed. “Way to go, Dad.”

“I don’t keep that much beer on hand, either, smart ass,” Russel said, turning to go back into the kitchen. “Not enough for him. I’ll have to get a keg if he’s going to be here long.”

“Bring him that roast from the fridge,” Solveig said, following him.

“Than what will we have for dinner?” My dad shouted from the kitchen.

“We can always order out,” Solveig said. “Do you really want him hungry?”

Edda eyed Garm. “I’m fine with pizza. He can have the roast if it makes him happy.”

“Or I could go to the store,” Grant offered. No one wanted the giant wolf to be even slightly peckish.

Tally picked up the invite where I’d dropped it on the table. “I’ve never seen one so nice. What do the numbers mean?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s a lot of numbers. My uncle didn’t see fit to tell me. He likes to withhold information and feel clever.” I glanced at Garm. I should probably watch my mouth. I had no idea if he was reporting back to my uncle or not. “And by that I mean he likes us to do our own work, mostly.”

Edda leaned over Tally’s shoulder and examined the card. “I think those are coordinates. That would make sense, wouldn’t it? We’re looking for a place, after all.” Tally handed over the card so Edda could get a better look. “I can plug them into the computer and see. I think the rest of the numbers are time and date.”

“Did you find anything in the footage?” I asked.

Edda grimaced. “I can tell you when Tanzer left the hotel, but not with who. We don’t get a clear shot of anyone’s face.”

“Do we even need to know anymore?” Tally asked. “Since we have an invite?”

I grimaced. “It’s not as dire now, but the more we know about these people, the better. So I’d still like to find him.”

A muffled thump came from the hall closet. Garm’s ears perked up, but he didn’t leave his spot on the couch. The door opened and Ed walked out, peeling a scarf off his jacket.

“Did you just come from my dad’s hall closet?” I asked. “Or have I finally gone insane?”

Ed neatly folded the scarf and replaced it on the shelf. “People find it unnerving when I manifest on the mortal plane out of nowhere. Mortals feel better if a door is involved.”

“But that’s less weird?” I asked, pointing at the closet.

He looked embarrassed. “I was aiming for the garage and miscalculated.” Ed shut the door, and walked over to us, tipping his head up respectfully when he spotted the wolf on the couch. “Greetings, brother.”

Garm chuffed a greeting.

“I have come with news.”

“People usually specify whether the news is good or bad,” Grant said.

Ed considered this. “It’s not good, but it’s not particularly bad, either.” Ed took a seat on the couch on the far end from Garm. “I come with ambivalent news.”

“Lay it on me, Ed.” In the kitchen I could just see my dad’s profile as he poured two bottles of beer into a glass punchbowl. Why did my dad even own a punchbowl?

“Tanzer has crossed over into my realm,” Ed said. “I can’t tell you anything about who put him there or where his body is, but I can take you to where he died.”

This news would have upset me a lot more before Loki and Garm had shown up. As it was, it felt mildly disappointing.

“Will that help?” Grant asked, leaning his hip against the end of the couch where Garm had stretched out. “Seeing where they took him?”

I thought about it. Would it help? I didn’t know. But it couldn’t hurt. “We’ll check it out. It might tell us more about the people who killed him.”

Garm leaned out and sniffed Grant’s hand before pushing it with his muzzle. Grant very carefully stroked Garm’s head between the ears. He was right to be hesitant. One snap of the jaws and Grant could be down to one hand, which would make his job as a cupid more difficult. It did give me an idea, though.

“Garm, would you mind doing some tracking? I know you are here to battle for us, but tracking down Tanzer’s body would also be really helpful.”

Garm yipped, a positive sounding noise.

“What if the spot’s been cleaned?” Edda asked. “We don’t know what the scene will look like.”

I grinned. “And this is why you should all bow down to my forethought. Because of my pettiness, we now have Bill Tanzer’s boxer briefs. Even if they were clean, they hung out in his house, his laundry, his bag—he at least touched the damn things.” I looked at wolf sprawled on the couch. He had tilted his head so Grant could get behind his ear. “Will that be enough?”

Garm’s tongue lolled out. Yep, it would be enough.

My father brought in the punchbowl full of ale and hesitated before finally setting it on the coffee table, which was a good choice—easy for Garm to reach, but not on the floor. Then he ducked back into the kitchen.

I looked around the room. “Okay, who’s going with me?”

Grant raised his hand. Tally grimaced and then raised hers, too. “You might need my skills.”

Edda had started to offer, but I shook my head. “You’re dead on your feet. You rest this time. I’ll take photos, videos, whatever you might need.”

My dad came back in, this time carrying a raw roast on a platter. He set it down next to the beer. “Is that okay? Do you need it cooked?”

Garm leaned closer to the roast, sniffing it. Then he snapped it up, swallowing the roast whole.

“I think it’s fine,” Edda said. “Garm approved.”

“I better run to the grocery store,” My dad said. “Get some more beer, and a new dinner choice. Coming, Sol?”

I frowned at my mom. “Are you sticking around?” My mom didn’t often stay for long periods. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to be around us, but being a Valkyrie kept her busy.

She linked her arm through my dad’s. “I think I’m going to stay for awhile. I might not be able to aid you much, but I’ve got the feeling I’m needed here.” She looked at Russel. “If that’s okay?”

My dad leaned in to kiss her cheek. “You’re always welcome here, you know that.”

Her face lit up as she smiled at him.

“Ugh, get a room, you too,” I said rolling my eyes.

“We have several rooms,” my mom said. “Your father’s house has several bedrooms, bathrooms, and let’s not forget the kitchen—“

“Mom, no,” I said. I scrubbed my hands over my eyes. I did not want to think about the kinds of things my parents might be getting up to in the kitchen. “We make *food* on that counter.”

I hadn’t noticed Grant moving until he was behind me, slipping his arm around my shoulders. “Now, Lena, it’s a natural thing between two people that love each other.”

I elbowed him in the side.

“Thank you, Grant.” Solveig turned her pleased smile on him. “It’s very natural. The people don’t even have to love each other. Sometimes it’s just someone who handles a battle axe with ease, smiting his enemy and raining blood down among the fallen.”

“Your mother is kind of scary,” Grant whispered.

“She’s just being natural, Grant,” I said, my tone innocent. “Just like it must have been for Granny Mae when she met your grandpa. Did she ever tell you about the time he—”

Grant covered my mouth with his hand. “Yes, she did. I’m sure of it. Point taken. When would you like to leave?”

I pulled his hand away from my mouth. “As soon as Garm, Wolf of Wolves, finishes his microbrew.”

Tally let out a whoosh of breath. “I better put my bags away and put on some jeans. Who knows what we’re going to have to tramp through.”

“Right,” I said, clapping my hands together. “We leave in ten. Everyone going needs to get their adventure clothes on.” I pointed a finger at Garm who was delicately lapping beer out of the bowl. “I’m not telling you to chug, buddy, but a quick pace is greatly appreciated.”

Garm looked up at me and belched.

“I’m just going to take that as a yes.” I turned and ran up the stairs to change out of my gown. It was nice and all, but it wasn’t really crime scene chic.