Make My Will a Bow

Part 1

I've never considered myself an impatient person. I'm not a well-spring of it, either, but I sure as hell can outlast Lena who once growled into a drive-thru speaker when she was told that she had to wait a full ten minutes for her fries. A whole mess of little leaguers had come in before us and swamped the Burger Hut. We had to wait our turn.

I can neither confirm nor deny whether or not Lena bludgeoned the speaker with the butt-end of her heavy-duty flashlight, but I can tell you that speakers make a ghastly sound when you do that. It was like someone stepped on a robot cat.

Grant was proving to me exactly how impatient I could be. When I took him up on this whole Cupid business, I thought we'd get right down to it. Like a montage from the 80's movies Lena likes so much, I thought I'd be studying, running, fighting, shooting arrows and, I don't know, maybe meditating or something.

Instead, I'd been put back on farm duty for a week while Lena and Grant went on some adventure without me. So I spent a the time cleaning, helping Granny Mae in the kitchen, and helping Azzy with the goats, cerebi, danger chickens, and various other livestock.

In anticipation, I'd already started jogging with the cerebi in the evenings after all the work was done. We stuck to the outside of the fencing like I promised, following along the very edges of the orchard. I knew better than to go in, but sometimes I swear I could hear the trees whispering my name.

*Good things, normal things, never whisper.* Wuf edged one of the pups back into line with his nose. *They shout if they want your attention.*

"I'm not stupid, Wuf," I paused to double over and catch my breath. Months of truck travel had killed any endurance I'd had, and I hadn't had much. I had never been "sporty." "You don't see me climbing the fence, do you?"

Wuf side-eyed me, but didn't say anything.

The next morning Lena and Grant sat at the breakfast table. Lena had that look on her face that said no coffee in the world would be enough and I should hold any and all questions until later. I’m sure the large—and slightly oozing—red welts weren’t helping any. Grant didn't have any welts, but his expression didn’t look much better.

"What are those marks all over your face?" Azzy either couldn't read body language very well or didn't care. I was betting on the latter.

Lena glared at Grant. "Someone needs to have his eyes checked."

Grant carefully drizzled honey into his steel-cut oats. "My eyes are fine. The lighting was low and they were moving too fast for me to distinguish the markings." He finally looked up at her as he put the honey pot down. "Which is why I told you to wait."

Lena slammed down her cup, the coffee sloshing over the sides. "They were getting away!"

"The barn was abandoned. There was no eminent danger and we would have caught up." He poured cream into his coffee, then splashed some into his oats. "Which is why I told you to wait." He stirred his coffee, his movement calm, measured.

Lena growled in frustration. "May the sky maidens drop you into the forgotten realms, you infuriating man!" She pushed away from the table and stood. "I'm going to go chop some wood."

Granny Mae put a hand on Lena's shoulder and shoved down, hard. I knew from experience that Granny Mae was stronger than she looked, and I could tell that Lena had forgotten that strength from the surprised look on her face.

Lena scowled and I smiled into my oatmeal.

"You will sit," Granny Mae said. "And you will eat. After you eat, I will get you some ointment for your face." Granny shoved a dishtowel into Lena's hands. "But first you will clean the mess you've made before you stain my table."  She patted Lena on the shoulder. "Besides, Grant has already chopped all of the wood from dealing with you. We are likely set for two winters."

I was trying so hard not to laugh that I choked on my oatmeal. "Horse shoe nails and old leather," I whispered at her.

"Is that how tough she is, or what she eats for breakfast?" Lena mumbled.

"Both," Azzy and Grant said at the same time. Granny Mae preened.

After breakfast, I went about my usual chores, knowing full well I shouldn’t approach either Lena or Grant until I’d finished everything and Lena had treated her welts. I was practically bouncing on my toes when I returned to the house. Grant was sitting in one of the wooden chairs on the porch, appreciating the morning and working on another cup of coffee. Lena sat on a stool facing him, and from her expression, it was probably a good thing she didn’t have her spear. Granny Mae had Lena stripped down to a tank top and a pair of boy short underpants. The welts extended from head to toe. I could smell the ointment before I even hit the steps—a sharp, bitter smell, with a strong menthol bite to it.

Grant caught my gaze as I hit the steps, giving me a subtle shake of his head. I could tell from his eyes that he found this very, very funny, but you couldn’t see it from his face. And from the thunderous looks Lena kept casting over at him, it was likely a good thing that Grant had such control.

Granny dipped a gloved hand into the jar, pulling out a glob of ointment and smearing it on a particularly red welt on Lena’s chest. She gagged.

“Stinky is good. Stinky means healing.” Granny moved on to the next mark, her hands quick and confident.

“I don’t think that’s a universal truth,” Lena grumbled.

Granny stopped, holding up the jar. “Fine. You don’t have to like it. I will just take my stink with me then.” She reached for the lid.

“No, no, I’m sorry,” Lena said, grabbing her arm. “I didn’t mean to insult your medicine, Granny Mae.”

Grant tried to hide his smile with his coffee cup and failed.

“Don’t start.” Lena tipped her head up so that Granny could get under her chin.

“Next time, *listen*.”

“You’re being a condescending jackass and I hope you get worms.”

Grant leaned back in his chair. “That wasn’t my intention, so I apologize for tone, but Lena, when we go out together, we’re partners. We’re a team. Which means we trust each other’s judgment.”

Her frown deepened. “The only reason you’re not sporting a few of these yourself is because I saved your bacon.”

“Yes, exactly.”

Lena opened her mouth, then stopped, confused. “Wait. What?”

“A situation presented itself. You shouted. I listened.” He folded his hands on his chest. “And I listened because I trust your expertise. I trust you and your abilities. As a *partner*. Because I respect you as one. You just don’t give me the same respect in return.”

She pointed a finger at him. “That tone is back. I don’t like that tone.”

“You just don’t like the truth.”

“It’s possible that I don’t like the tone and the content.” She centered her focus on me suddenly. “What do you think, Jonah? Am I a bad team player?”

Grant started to respond, but she waved him off. “I asked Jonah.”

I thought about it, and Lena let me. A fast response wasn’t important to her—she preferred thoughtful to fast. Which is good, because my first thought would have landed me into trouble with her. Lena liked Grant. It was obvious and mutual. However, she didn’t enjoy the feelings Grant inspired. She didn’t like liking someone at all. It made her waspish and uncomfortable. Give Lena a battle and she’ll fight all day long. Try to hug her and she suddenly has things to do elsewhere. Grant tilted his head at me almost as if he could follow my train of thought. Hopefully Cupids weren’t mind readers. That wasn’t a gift I particularly wanted. People were terrible enough without bringing innermost thoughts into it.

“It’s not the same,” I said finally.

“You don’t consider us a team?”

“No, I’m not saying that,” I said quickly, reassuring her. “But the team isn’t the same. If you have a partner on our team, it’s Steve. Not me. I’m your apprentice.” I grimaced. “At least partially. You tell apprentices what to do. Sometimes you ask their opinion, but ultimately the decision is yours.” I leaned against the railing attempting to appear relaxed. Lena was good with the truth, but that didn’t mean she was going to like it, and I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. Despite what she said, she did have them. She just chose to ignore them.

“When we go out, you’re the boss. I know it. Wuf knows it. Even Steve occasionally acknowledges it.” I spread my hands out, fingers splayed. “But you and Grant? Both bosses. If there were leaders in your field, I’d suspect you would be it. So it’s not the same.”

Lena still frowned, but at least now it was more of a thoughtful one. “The dynamic is different.”

I nodded. “Grant did okay, because he’s comfortable taking direction—” I cut myself off because I knew I’d stepped one toe over.

“And I’m not?” She was scowling now.

Grant laughed, the kind that shakes your whole body. “Lena, you’ve backed him into a corner. He can’t safely answer that question. No, you don’t take direction well, at least not from everyone. That’s not your training. You only accept other warriors as equals that are therefore worthy of your esteem. You only listen to other warriors, which in your mind is other Valkyries. I am not one, so even though I have a large bow and many pointy arrows, I still deal with feelings, which you hate. You see my weapon as *less than* which means I am not worthy of your ear.” He stood up and stretched.

“I—”

He cut her off with a wave of his hand. “Don’t bother arguing, Lena. I made my peace with it long ago. From here on, though, maybe it would help you if you considered my orders to you in the field as strongly worded suggestions.” He gave me a gentle nudge. “Jonah, if you will?”

I followed him, but cast a quick look back at Lena. I expected her to look pissed. Instead she looked surprised and a little guilty.

Grant took me to his workshop, which was back behind the house. It was about the size of a small bedroom and held a large battered table in the middle. Light streamed in through the windows making some of the tools gleam. One wall had several pegs holding unstrung bows, and the adjoin wall held the larger tools and several shelves. There were a few tools I didn’t recognize, along with bins and jars full of all kinds of…things. While the tools were all neat and ordered in a logical way, I couldn’t figure out how everything else was grouped. One jar held marbles, doll eyes and bits of bone. The next held pieces of rocks, a toy soldier, and petrified wood. One bin held feathers and ribbon, the next bits of cloth and wire. It looked, well, like junk.

I had assumed that we would start off with more archery lessons. Target practice and the like. Maybe we would do that next.

“We won’t be building arrows away,” he said running one hand over the nicked table. “But I wanted you to get an idea of what the workshop looks like.”

I peered into a jar. A cracked blue eye stared back at me. “I see.” I didn’t. Which Grant, of course, knew.

“Take a few minutes. Look at things. You can touch, just be careful. Some things are sharp and I’m not sure how up to date you are on your tetanus shots.”

Not exactly the best thing to say to put me at ease. Still, I did what he said. I walked around and poked through collections of odds and ends. I admired the bows and the small collection of completed arrows. I respected them enough to not touch them for without a good reason. The last thing I needed was another random flashback to a terrible moment in my life.

Finally, after I’d given it a thorough pass, Grant brought out a jar. He tipped out some of the contents onto the table. I was left with a piece of twine, a twenty-sided die, a shark tooth, a half-used birthday candle, and an old metal toy car that was partially rusted.

“Pick them up,” Grant said. “One at a time. Tell me what you feel.”

I picked up the metal car first. It felt cold, the metal heavier than I thought it would be. But I knew that wasn’t what Grant meant. I went through each item, picking them up, looking at them, weighing them with my senses. After a minute or two, I’d set them down.

“Nothing?”

I shook my head, the sharp taste of failure already in my mouth. My first test and I’d already failed. I know Grant didn’t expect me to get things right away, but I’m sure he thought I’d do something. I guess I’d hoped to be some sort of Cupid wunderkind—instantly picking it up like it was a mantle meant only for my shoulders. Instead I got a whole lot of nothing.

“That’s okay. I want you to go through them again, only this time, close your eyes and just hold them.”

Once again I sorted through the pieces. The car still felt heavy and cold. That was all I could get. The tooth was sharp and light and I had to be careful with it. The candle was exactly what you’d expect—a little waxy with a faint smell of carbon from being lit before. I sniffed it and for a second I thought I felt almost a…tingle. I tried to reach for it, to see if it was really there, but couldn’t get it to come back. I chalked it up to overreaching on my part. I wanted to feel something, so my body imagined a tingle—the body and mind coming together to trick the senses. I set the candle down. There were no surprises from the twine, and the die was faintly sticky, which I tried not to think about. I put the die down.

This time I felt the disappointment sink all the way to my knees. What if Grant had been wrong? What if I couldn’t be trained to do whatever it was that I was supposed to be able to do?

“Still nothing?”

I couldn’t detect anything except polite inquiry in Grant’s tone, but he was very good at masking things when he wanted to. I shook my head, but kept my eyes closed.

“Not even when you touched the candle?”

I hesitated—just for a second—and then shook my head.

“This won’t work, Jonah, unless you’re one hundred percent honest with me. You held the candle twice as long as anything else. Why?”

“It’s nothing—just my mind playing tricks.” I felt Grant flick my forehead right between the eyes. Not hard, just enough to get my attention. Surprised, my eyelids popped open and I squinted, adjusting to the sudden influx of light.

“I will decide if it’s nothing, Jonah. That’s my job as your…” he trailed off and I could tell he was searching for another word for “master.” Grant would be uncomfortable with that title.

“Trainer?” I offered. “Jedi? Squad Leader?”

“Let’s go with Squad Leader. So please, once again, I ask you to be honest, even if you feel silly doing so.”

“Okay.” I pinched my lip, thinking. “It wasn’t anything, really. Just a fleeting tingle, maybe. Here and then gone just as quick.”

“And what did that feel like?”

I was starting to understand why Lena got annoyed with Grant sometimes. He pushed. It was a gentle nudge instead of a shove, but a push nonetheless.

“I don’t know,” I said, dropping my hands. “Just a tingle.”

“What kind of tingle?”

I shoved my hands in my pockets. “The tingly kind. I don’t know. It wasn’t even a real thing—more like a possibility of a thing.” I blew out a frustrated breath.

Grant grinned at me, and I have no idea why. “That’s it exactly. Possibility. *Potential.* That’s what you’re looking for.”

I picked up the candle again, twirling it in my fingers. “I don’t understand. I thought it would be more, you know?”

“You thought it would be like the arrow?”

I hadn’t really considered it, but I guess that was what I’d been waiting for—that overwhelming image and feeling, so I nodded at him.

“That’s not how it works,” Grant said. “A completed arrow is a totally different thing. When you have pieces like this, you’ve just got potential—you have the possibility of an arrow, not the actual thing. Then you find pieces that harmonize together—that amplify the potential of each other in an exponential fashion.” He picked up the car and the twenty sided die. “I pick these up together? Nothing. They don’t combine.” He set the car down and picked up the twine. “But these two? There’s something there. Not the strongest vibration, but they could work depending on the other gathered pieces. You’ll learn as you go along, but until you get them all together, they don’t amount to much. A full arrow? Now that’s something else? And getting hit with it something else entirely.”

I nodded like I got it, but I didn’t fully. I had the theory, but that wouldn’t mean anything until I actually tried it. Grant seemed to accept my response, though.

“So we’re not going to build arrows today?”

“Nope, but you are going to pick a bow.”

“I get my own bow?”

“Yes, for now. These are just for practice.” He handed one to me so I could check it out. “For your actual bow, well, you’re going to have to make that.”

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My building projects up until this point have been fairly straight forward and followed a recognizable pattern. You go to the hardware store or lumberyard, you pick up materials, you build from those materials. Life on the farm had included some of that, but with a lot more…foraging…than I was used to. So when I got in Grant’s truck, I expected we were going to a Lowe’s or something.

Instead, we ended up at the edge of a large copse of trees back where the road intersected with Grant’s driveway. Grant pulled the truck over to the side of the road and we both hopped out, the dust puffing up a little when I landed. I followed Grant as he started picking his way into the trees.

“Normally, when you make a bow, you pay close attention to the kind of wood—you want something with natural give, and some woods are better than others.” He stopped at the tree line, assessing. “As Cupids, our approach is slightly different.” He pulled out a bandana and folded before tying it over my eyes.

“In this scenario, does Lena come looking for my body in a few weeks?”

“Lena would be out here in a few hours, and with Wuf in Steve I doubt it would take her very long, but no, that’s not the scenario we’re going for. What we’re doing is helping mute your senses. When you’ve had more training, we won’t need to do this. But as it is, you’ll get too distracted.”

“I can see how walking blindly into a tree would give me focus.”

“Keep that up and I won’t guide you at all.” He finished tying the knot in the back. “Can you see anything?”

I turned my head, only catching the occasional vague outline and told him as much.

“That’s fine. We don’t need you completely blind. Now I’m going to guide you through and you’re going to stretch your senses out as far as they can go.”

“Am I becoming one with the forest?”

“You’re about to become one with a smack upside your head if you keep it up, but yes, you’re becoming one with the forest. You’re also feeling for that same gut-tingle you got back at the workshop.” He grabbed my hand and put it on my shoulder. “It should be stronger this time, more like a call from the tree out to you. Because the difference between us and regular archers? They choose the wood to become the bow, but for Cupids, the wood chooses us and we both become the bow.”

That didn’t make much sense, but I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want a smack upside the head, or to tick off the guy leading me blindfolded into a forest. He could easily guide me into a wasp’s nest.

We walked for over an hour and I got a whole lot of nothing. Not a single tree-tingle. We walked back to the truck and drove to another chunk of forest, the evergreens dark and green and lush. And again, nothing.

We took a lunch break and then headed out again. After three hours of blindly touring another woodland, we came back empty handed. Thus became our pattern for the week. I started with chores and breakfast, continued with blind tours of the various local forests, and ended with archery practice, dinner, class work with Azzy. Add frustration, stir, and bake for forty-five minutes, and you’d have the complete recipe for my current existence.

By the eighth day, even Grant’s patience was wearing thin. He’d taken to staring at me during meal times like I was a puzzle he couldn’t quite crack. Unable to endure it, but not willing to actually bring up the uncomfortable staring, I ate quickly and excused myself.

Wuf and the pups wanted to go for a jog, but I didn’t have the heart for it. Also, my feet were sore and my calves stiff from hiking all over for days at a time. Granny kept eyeing my fraying sneakers and I kept finding things to distract her. My shoes may be falling apart, but I didn’t want to buy new ones until I absolutely had too. Any money I spent was money I couldn’t send home. My mom and sister needed the money a heck of a lot more than I needed new shoes.

Wuf came up with a compromise. He would run with the pups, and I would ride on his back. He kneeled down and I hopped up, apologizing for the necessary grip on his fur. One of the cerebi, Spock, thought this was great fun and nipped at my heels. Wuf gave him a warning snap, which was good, because it was hard avoiding three snapping jaws at the same time, even in play. That being said, six puppy dog eyes on each dog were a bit much to handle. It was like the puppy dog eye effect only squared. Or I guess trebled. Maybe Granny Mae could help me figure out an equation. I assured the pups that they were forgiven and that we’d play after our run. Nine sets of ears perked up and three tales wagged. Oh man, the cuteness. Someone help me with the cuteness.

Once I was fully on Wuf’s back, I took off my jacket and made a sort of saddle blanket. Wuf was, after all, a waheela, and it made me feel better having another layer of cloth between me and a particularly embarrassing case of frostbite.

There are times when I don’t really notice how amazing my life has become. Other times, it hits me right in the face. Riding Wuf, the warm breeze wafting past, the chorus of excited cerebi yips from behind us, was definitely more of a face-hitting moment. I turned my head to see snowflakes spinning off in our wake like tiny fireflies in the night, the pups leaping in the air and snapping them in their jaws. I let out a little whoop of joy and leaned down close to Wuf’s back, cutting down on the air resistance. It felt powerful and joyful, and the disappointment and fear that had been weighing on me bled into the darkness and melted with the snowflakes. I felt lighter than I had in a week.

Our run was over too soon, but the pups were tired and I had homework. Dismounting was a bit embarrassing. I didn’t have frostbite, but I was going to have to come up with something thicker than my jacket if I was going to ride Wuf for long distances again. I think some of my skin peeled off with my jeans.

I took a hot shower after the run and then read some of the books Granny Mae left out for me. I feel asleep shortly after, face-first in a paragraph about the many uses of a local strain of magical ferns.

I heard the whispers first—the soft sound winding through my ears and my body, wrapping around my toes, encouraging them to move. Then came the warm night air on my skin, the far-off hoot of a horned owl and a few other animal noises that I couldn’t quite name. Why was that, exactly? I’d been getting pretty good at identifying the local flora and fauna between Azzy and Granny Mae. But these noises were just slightly foreign, like hearing a popular song converted into elevator music. Or actually, from the soul-waking vibrancy of the sounds, maybe it was the other way around.

I knew where I was before I opened my eyes, but I still hoped that I was wrong. I creaked open one eye, then the other, like going slowly would some how lessen the chances of me being right. It didn’t work. When I looked around I had to admit that I was smack dab in the middle of the forbidden orchard, barefoot, with no idea where I was or how I got there. I was going to be in so much trouble. That is, if I made it back to the farm. I remembered Grant’s warning. I was a human trespassing into lands that weren’t mine. If I wasn’t careful, I was lunch.