Chapter 24 Part 2

The snow crunched under my boots as I sprinted toward what was likely going to be my death. I immediately packaged that thought up and buried it in a mental bog. It was a bad idea to think that way. I had to go into a fight thinking I was invincible, that the conclusion was inevitable. I would win. They would lose. Simple.

Garm bounded next to me, his form shifting until he became the nightmare wolf of the underworld. Across from us, the draugr ran at a speed closer to more recent zombie lore, sprinting like gazelles across the frozen tundra. They were undead berserkers, with all that entails. Off to the side I saw Lock running full out toward the burial mound. He scrambled to the top, kicked aside the snow, digging down to the ground. Ground which was probably frozen. Lock had decided to do something to block any possibility of reinforcements for the draugr. I just hoped that whatever his idea was, it worked.

Ava raised her arms above her head and then dropped them with a sharp motion, causing a sheet of fire to spring up in front of our enemies, like a barricade. I kept running toward it, but they hesitated, the draugr having an instinctive fear of fire. It wouldn’t grant us much time, but it might give us a few precious seconds. She used the time to climb up the burial mound to aid Lock. As soon as she was close enough, she directed a stream of fire into the top of the burial mound. Hopefully it would be enough of a thaw for Lock to be able to dig into the soil.

A shadow glided across the snow ahead of me and I glanced up to see Grant, his wings extended, hovering high in the air. He already had an arrow knocked. In that moment he was so beautiful my breath caught. Then he loosed the arrow. It landed with a meaty *thunk*, the sound carrying across the snowscape.

At first, I thought he missed. The arrow stuck out of the middle of the warg’s chest, the arrowhead buried deep. The wolf-like creature stuttered to a stop, losing its footing in the snow before tumbling into a pile of snow, fur and legs. The jotunn was thrown free, face first toward the snow, but he rolled when he landed, coming back up to his feet like they’d planned it.

The warg lifted its shaggy head, shaking it in a distinctly dog-like motion before staggering to its feet. Once it was steady enough, the warg ran straight for Garm, but its body language was all wrong. Gone was the curling snarl of a mouth, the bared teeth. It leapt through the sheet of flame, landing on the other side, its ears forward, all of its body language playful. The warg only had eyes for Garm, and the eyes were distinctly heart-shaped, metaphorically speaking. It was the weirdest version of puppy love I’d ever seen.

The sheet of flame finally sputtered and died, then the draugr were upon us. Ezra and Sid took one, harrying the creature from opposing sides. They both moved like lightning. Their speed and reflexes would have told me that they were shifters if I hadn’t known already. Garm snagged one of the draugr with his mouth, shaking it like a toy, before tossing it yards away into the snow. Ava kept the third berserker at bay with a volley of precise fireballs the size of golf balls. Lock was still on the hill, but it was no longer a snow-covered mound. Ivy rapidly grew down the sides, thick and knotted, encasing the entire mound as surely as if it had been a cage of iron. Within seconds, the burial mound was entirely enveloped.

The jotunn threw back his head and roared. The sound echoed around us, causing fat clumps of snow to fall from tree branches. He stomped, his feet making the ground shake around us. With each stomp, his body grew. By the time his tantrum was finished, he towered over us, at least forty feet, maybe fifty in height, and broad as a barn. A big barn, built for enormous cows.

Edda stopped at my side, her ax in her hands. “Well, now what?”

“I’m going to do something stupid,” I said. “Try to keep him busy for a second.”

Edda didn’t argue, likely because she was used to me doing something stupid. Instead she ran forward, dancing around the giant’s stomping feet. I guess she’d decided to do something stupid, too. Or brave. The line was a fine one. If we both survived, it would be considered brave, I guess.

I whistled at Garm. He took a moment from playing with his draugr to run to me. The draugrs were all still in play, our team doing their best to fight the unstoppable monsters. One of the berserkers had the shaft of a cupid’s arrow sprouting from his chest, but it wasn’t having an effect. I would have to ignore everything else and focus on the jotunn, trusting that my team could handle the draugr. We didn’t have to worry about the warg, who was following Garm like a lovesick puppy.

As soon as Garm got close, I waved my arms at him. “Can you toss me, buddy? Carefully—not like a chew toy. I need to get up, understand?” I pointed at the sky, hoping that would help.

Garm didn’t waste any time, bending down and nipping my belt with his teeth. I was suddenly enveloped in the moist warmth of his breath and tried not to breathe in through my nose. Then I was flying through the air as if I’d been shot from a catapult.

My trajectory was off and I went too high, arcing over the jotunn’s head.

Arms plucked me out of the air as I was briefly held by Grant before he spun and tossed me back at the jotunn.

I pulled out a knife and as soon as I was close enough to the blue-tinged skin of the giant, I plunged the blade down. He swatted at me, my blade no more than a thorn-prick to him. I wasn’t trying to hurt him, though. I was just trying to get purchase, and the knife gave me a handhold. Mountain climbing, giant-style. I’d landed on the back of his shoulder, just above midback. With my free hand I reached out and grabbed a fistful of his hair. I pulled my knife out of his shoulder and clamped the hilt in my teeth like a pirate. With both hands free, I began to climb up the long strands of the giant’s hair.

The jotunn swung his hands back, trying to slap at me, to unseat the obnoxious insect bothering him, but he was distracted by Edda at his feet, slicing away at his legs with her ax. I missed all of his swats but one. As I got higher, he managed to hit me with a glancing blow. I didn’t lose my grip, but he did knock the blade out of my mouth and it dropped down to the snow below us. The pain from the blow was excruciating and I saw stars for a minute. I had to hold on and breathe through the pain.

When my vision cleared, I resumed my climb. As soon as I got close to where his neck should be, I stopped going up and began climbing inward, digging through his mane toward his skin. I didn’t know about all jotunn, but this one had a healthy head of hair. I quickly found myself buried in the middle of it, with only a little bit of light filtering in. It was weirdly like swimming. Except through hair that, frankly, needed a wash.

After countless seconds, I reached the back of the jotunn’s neck. I had just grabbed onto the chain of the giant’s necklace when he bellowed in pain, the muscles underneath me clenched in response as his whole body stiffened and then I felt us falling forward.

I wrapped a lock of his hair around my arm, freeing my left hand so I could hold onto a loop of the chain but not slide down his back. With my right hand, I grabbed another blade. I slid it into the loop I made and yanked up, trying to split the chain. My blade was wicked sharp, but not quite enough to split the giant’s necklace. We were still falling and I knew we didn’t have much time. I let go of the hair, clasping only the chain and slid down the giant’s back, only to yank to a halt after a few yards when I ran out of slack. I swung around, planting my feet on the jotunn’s back. Once again I put the blade into the loop still in my other hand, then pushed against his back and threw all of my weight into the momentum of the blade.

It snapped and I fell free, sliding down the jotunn’s back. I rolled away from him, falling fifteen feet into the snow. I landed with a thud, the snow doing little to pad my fall. Then the ground shook as the jotunn fell only feet from me.

I lay there, my body rigid with pain as I tried to draw breath. As soon as my lungs started working again, I flopped onto my belly, trying to regain my feet in a drift that was at least two to three feet deep. Ahead of me the giant’s chain glinted gold against the white expanse of the scenery. I scrambled to it, grabbed it in my fist, and lifted it to the sky.

A whistle rent the air, followed by an announcer.

“Team Ancile for the win!” The voice boomed across the snow, though I still couldn’t see the crowds. It was a little disorienting.

I braced my hands on my knees, my lungs working like bellows, and looked for my team. Edda was closest to me, she was holding an arm against her ribs—I hoped they weren’t broken. Her other arm held the ax she’d used to chop into the Achilles tendon of the jotunn. He would live, but he wouldn’t be happy for quite a long time.

Ava was standing over the flaming body of a draugr, his head several feet away in the snow. Another lay a few feet away, entirely wrapped in clinging fines, its head removed and waiting for Ava’s flames. Lock held the draugr’s necklace in his fist. He looked pale and tired, probably from expending so much magic so quickly.

The warg…well the warg was happily sitting at Garm’s feet, his necklace hanging from the wolf of wolves’ teeth.

“We’re not taking him home,” I wheezed out. “You cannot keep a warg as a pet.”

Garm chuffed, and I had a feeling he was telling me he’d do as he pleased.

Finally to the far right I found the last draugr. Ezra stood over what was left of the body. He held one of the draugr’s arms in both hands and was using the arm to club the creature as it struggled on the ground. One of them must have the necklace or we wouldn’t have been declared the winners, but I couldn’t see it.

All I could see was Grant kneeling on the ground, his face frozen in shock, as he held the battered body of Sid in his arms.

I struggled forward, tripping in the snow, only to almost lose footing completely as it suddenly disappeared, putting us back into the SOWA power station. The crowd was going wild, screaming in joy or agony, I couldn’t tell which. I suppose it depended on who they’d bet on.

I almost slammed into Grant in my haste to get to Sid. Blood covered the were hare’s face, and both of his legs were twisted at weird angles. Bone stuck out of his jeans, right below the kneecap. He wasn’t moving.

I placed a shaking hand along his throat, feeling along for a pulse. When I found it, thready but there under my fingertips, I started crying. Alive. He was alive. As long as he was alive and we kept him that way, everything else could be fixed.

“Breathing,” I said.

Grant let out a shaky breath. “I couldn’t tell.” He cradled Sid to him carefully. “We need to set his legs fast or he’s going to heal wrong.”

I lifted my chin, sucked in a breath, and yelled. “Medic!”

Behind me I could hear the noise of flesh hitting flesh as Ezra continued to snarl and beat the draugr with his own arm.

I didn’t stop him.