Make My Heart an Arrow Part Three

The whiteness dissolved from the center, like sugar dropping into coffee. Picture first, fuzzy, slowly solidifying and coming into focus. The sounds burbled up--whispering, the volume building until there was a crackle, like static on a really ancient TV, and then everything came rushing in.

We were having dinner. Kid's pick, and my sister and I had bartered very seriously for our choices. I wanted to go to Ray’s, a fifties style diner that had burgers and about thirty different kinds of milkshakes. My sister wanted to go to a pizza buffet place that was pretty terrible, but she liked to ride the little mechanical pony they had there. We went to Ray’s, and I had to clean my sister’s room for two weeks.

It was worth it.

We were celebrating. The paperwork was all turned in, notarized, stamped and whatever and my stepdad was officially our dad. We were officially a family unit in the eyes of the law, and I couldn’t be happier. My mom and dad ordered root beer floats and my sister and I ordered milkshakes (butterscotch for me, pineapple for my weirdo sister) and we clinked them together in a toast. I don’t think any of us had ever grinned so much. It was the best day, even though my sister had too much ice cream and puked on the way home in the car.

It was a memory that made my heart expand, like a tiny sun.

It was also a memory that made my heart collapse inward, leaving a black hole anchored into my chest. Within a year, my dad would be dead, my sister sick. My mom had to stay home and take care of my sister, so she lost her job. She got part time work, but it wasn’t enough. Even with the under the table work I got, we lost our small house and ended up in a tiny apartment.

That memory from Ray’s is the last time I really felt like a normal kid. After that, I grew up. And as Lena says, being a grown up blows chunks.

There is no slow dissolve this time. Not gradual progression. I simply wake up on my back in the field. Wuf is nudging me with his nose. There’s a dull ache in my chest, but it’s not from the arrow. That’s where that memory sits and it hurts again—an old wound ripped raw. In a few days I’ll forget that it’s there and I’ll feel whole again until something else prods it back open. I don’t think it will ever fully heal.

The outline of Grant’s head swims into view, a black cut out against the sun.

“You okay?”

About as okay as I ever was. “You shot me.”

“Yes.” He held out a hand and helped me up. “Forgive me?”

Wuf rolled in the grass blissfully as I checked to make sure I was still in one piece. I felt wobbly, but I was all there

“I guess,” I said, straightening. As soon as said it, reality shifted and snapped back into normal speed. It was like the whole thing never happened. “What was that?”

“That is the result of the choice you made.” He pulled his shirt back on, but before he did I noticed that his tattoo has shifted slightly. I guess when the wings settled back in, they didn’t sit the same every time. “If you had decided to be angry with me, the world would have snapped back a different way.”

I nodded, like I knew what he was really talking about. But I didn’t. I felt worn thin, like I’d been up all night working and I was just now walking out into the dawn. The sun was too bright, the bird song too cheerful.

Grant walked through the clearing, waving at me to come along. We traveled in silence—I assume Grant was letting me absorb what had just happened. We reached a small, clear stream, with a large flat rock on the other side. Grant paused and squinted. “Just making sure the rock is free. Nice day like this, all kinds of things come out here to sun themselves. I refuse to fight over a rock.”

“All kinds of things?”

Grant hopped over the stream. “That’s what I said.”

“Care to be specific?” I jumped after him, but didn’t quite make it to the other side. Water soaked into my shoes before I could leap onto dry land.

“Not particularly, no.”

Wuf trotted happily through the stream, splashing and diving after small, dark shadows in the water. I would assume that they were tiny fish, but I didn’t think any guesswork was wise in this place.

Grant leaned his bow on the rock before pulling off his boots and socks and dangling his feet in the water. I followed suit, spreading my socks out so they would dry faster. He handed me his quiver full of arrows then leaned back to bask in the sun.

The arrows left were more of the same—weird hybrid creations that shouldn’t work properly. One was made of barbed wire and fletched in brilliant red feathers I couldn’t identify. Another was made entirely of glass so delicate that I was afraid to touch it. The materials were a dizzying array of metals, woods and stone. The fletching included everything from ostrich to what appeared to be lace yellowed with age. There was no apparent rhyme or reason to any of it. Even I knew that none of these arrows should fly—yet I’d been hit with one of them after it flew from Grant’s bow.

I held up one to the sun that was barn wood and chicken feathers, the arrowhead a large fragment of a chipped marble, one of the big ones—I forget what they’re called. Grant stayed silent as I examined everything. I went through the whole thing, hoping that I would suddenly understand what I was looking at. No clarity came.

“You’re going to have to give me a hint,” I said. “Is it bigger than a bread box?”

Grant sat up, pointing at the arrow in my hand. “That one is nostalgia.” He pointed at the rest of the arrows in turn. “Anger, betrayal, whimsy, lust, fear, elation, and dread.”

“You named your arrows?”

He ignored my question. “What you’re looking at is the tool box of a Cupid.”

Ah. Wings, arrows—I should have put it together sooner, really. “So you make people fall in love?”

“Did that arrow feel like love to you?”

I handed him back the quiver. “No. It felt like joy, but also sadness.” It felt terrible.

“I hit you with bittersweet.” He rested the quiver down by the bow. “Wuf got delight. I didn’t think it was a good idea to hit a waheela with anything nasty.”

“That was probably wise,” I said, as I watched Wuf plunge his nose into the water, his jaws snapping at something. “So if they don’t make people fall in love, what do Cupids do?”

“We make people feel. An emotion at the right time and place can change the outcome of someone’s life. A pang of guilt before you steal a twenty out of your mom’s purse. Or a rush of courage making it possible to jump off the high dive in front of a crowd. You ever had a second thought before you did something stupid?”

“Yeah, all the time.”

“Cupids give people that second thought. We give them a split second to reflect and decide which path they want. Emotions are the impetus that sets that in motion. Our arrows are essentially magically concentrated feelings.”

Wuf dropped a soggy stick in my lap and waited patiently for me to throw it. I’m fairly certain he picked the slimiest, most algae-ridden stick in the whole stream. I picked it up and threw it as far as I could. He took off, spraying us both with water.

“So why are you showing me all of this?” Quite frankly, I could have done without the experience. Wuf came back, this time giving the stick to Grant. He didn’t hesitate before picking up the slimy thing and chucking it.

“You’re not a Valkyrie, Jonah. Not genetically, like Lena, or even personality wise. It goes against the person you are.” He glared at me when I opened my mouth to argue. “That wasn’t a slight. I’m being honest. You feel things deeply. Your emotions guide you in a way that they don’t guide Lena. Neither is a better way to live—they’re just different.” He threw the stick again. “Honestly, I think the two are fairly complimentary.”

“Is this your way of telling me that I’m going to stay at the farm while you run off and work with Lena?”

“No, I was talking about you, Jonah.”

“But I’m not a Cupid.”

This time after he threw the stick for Wuf, he wiped his hand off on the back of my shirt. “Do you want to be?”

It seemed like a good deal. It also seemed like it was too good to be true, which immediately made me doubt it. “You could make me one, just like that?”

He shook his head. “No, Jonah. I’d have to train you. It’s gong to take some time.” As we watched, Wuf abandoned his stick to chase after a butterfly. At times like this, it was hard to remember that he was a dangerous creature. Dangerous creatures shouldn’t frolic. “Luckily, you’ve had a little training with the bow. You’ll need a lot more. Then you’d have to make your own bow, and I’d have to teach you how to make the arrows.”

Shit, I was going to have to stay at the farm. Leave Lena. Would Wuf stay with me? Who would take care of Lena if I left? How would I make money to send home to my mom? I loved it here, but not enough to jettison everything important to me.

Grant rested a hand on my arm. “Don’t answer now. Think on it. Okay?”

I nodded, my mind too full to answer him properly.

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I thought about what Grant had said a lot over the next couple of days. Though some work took all of my concentration—like taking care of the danger chickens—other things like waterproofing the doghouses left lots of room for contemplation. I liked the farm. It was nice to have a warm, clean bed that didn’t smell like bleach or look like the 1970’s threw up on it. The food was good, and I liked Grant, Azzy and Granny Mae. And I was learning. Not that I hadn’t been before, but when I went to bed at night, my body felt worn and my brain full, and it was a pleasant combination. I didn’t miss sitting cramped in the truck for days or eating nothing but gas station burritos.

But I did miss Lena. I missed fighting the good fight and seeing new places. Of course, Grant was part of the good fight, too. His side of things was quieter, though. Not as flashy. They took a different kind of courage. It’s one thing to go in, unicorn and spear blazing, and rescue a litter of three-headed puppies. It is quite another thing to take care of those puppies long term. To keep them alive, healthy and safe. The thing is, I enjoyed both parts. My heart and brain were arguing and the discussion was turning ugly. If I didn’t make a decision soon, Logic was going to hit Feelings with a pool cue.

And why I thought my brain would fight dirty and have access to a pool cue, I have no idea.

“You missed a spot,” Azzy said, placing a crown of dandelions on Wuf’s head. Spock, Hercules and Stooge tumbled after her, the puppies nipping at her heels.

“I did not.”

Wuf raised his chin and puffed his chest out. *I feel very regal.*

“Don’t start getting ideas, Wuf.” He snorted before resting his head back on his paws.

Azzy nodded in satisfaction before heading over to me and pointing out where I had, indeed, missed a spot. “It’s easier to see from where I’m standing.”

“Don’t patronize me, Azzy.”

“They look good,” she said. Stooge followed her, bumping her with one of his heads, begging for a scratch. “I get why they’re raised and even why they have little porches, but were the Greek columns really necessary?”

“I think Grant was being funny.” The houses we were building by the orchard were certainly the nicest doggie domiciles I’d ever seen. Waterproof and built for most weather conditions, though Grant told me that if it snowed, they would probably sleep in the barn.

Azzy kept scratching Stooge behind one of his ears, causing his foot to thump erratically. “It will be nice to have a guard on the orchard.”

“Your own personal Cerberus, only you have a whole litter, and they’re guarding an orchard instead of the gates to the underworld.”

Azzy picked up a spare brush and started helping me. “That story always made me so sad. It’s not like Greek mythology is full of happy endings or anything, but something about that little girl and her monster dog always seemed worse.”

The original Cerberus was supposed to go and work for Hades, who thought a giant three-headed monster dog would be the best guard for the underworld ever. But Cerberus wasn’t interested. He lived with his best friend, a young girl, and he was happy. He loved her. She loved him. I wish the story had ended there. Instead, Hades had the girl killed and used Cerberus’s love for her to force him to guard the gates of the underworld anyway. Azzy was right. It was a terrible story.

We worked in silence for a while. During my time at the farm, I’d learned a bit about Azzy. She was profoundly comfortable with silence. You could get her talking if she was interested in the topic, or if she felt she had a lot to say on a subject, but she wouldn’t chatter just to chatter. I had the feeling that she wanted to talk to me, but was taking her time trying to decide how she wanted to approach the topic.

“So you going to spill or what?”

Or maybe I was giving her too much credit. “Spill what, exactly?”

“You’ve gone into brood mode. Been in it since you went into the orchard.” Her eyes never left her work while she talked, her strokes smooth and even. This was not new work to Azzy. “I’m not saying you’ve been grumpy or anything, but you’ve been stewing and mulling and I wanted to give you some space, but that’s boring, and I’m over it.”

“I see.” Where to start? “How much do you know about your Uncle?”

She didn’t hesitate. “I know all about the tattoos, the arrows, and everything.”

“He offered to train me,” I said. “You know, in the Cupid business.”

Azzy stopped then and assessed me, her head tilted, her eyes in a squint. “He’s never had an apprentice before. Not that I remember.”

For the first time, it occurred to me that this might be a problem between us. She might see me as a usurper, someone coming in and taking her rightful spot.

She tilter her head back and returned to her work. “I can see that. You’d probably be good at it.”

I waited, sure there would be something more, even though Azzy had proven herself to be very even keel about most things. Nothing came. “That’s it?”

“It better not be. I want to hear all about the orchard and how he told you.”

“I mean from you.”

“What did you expect?”

I dipped my brush back into the finish. “I don’t know. I thought you might be upset, I guess. Like maybe I was taking your place.”

She laughed then, and I could tell I’d surprised her. “Hardly. If I want to go into the business and Uncle Grant thinks I’m a good fit, then he could take me on, too. I haven’t decided yet, though.”

“Have you always known he was a Cupid?”

“No,” she said, and I could still hear the laughter in her voice. “At least not the exact title, but I knew he was something. Growing up here, it’s not like he could hide it. He tried to keep me out a lot of it, but ignorance here can be dangerous. Especially when your niece is nosy and keeps finding your arrows now matter how carefully you stash them.”

“Must have been difficult growing up here.”

“Sometimes,” she said with shrug as she moved the can of finish closer to her. “But crazy fun, too.”

She stopped talking then, and I knew her patience was up and it was my turn. So I told her about the orchard, her uncle, and the quiver full of improbable arrows, but I didn’t tell her what I’d seen when I’d been hit by bittersweet, and she didn’t ask.

Lena came back a few days later, her truck and horse trailer slowly making its way up the drive after the sun was down and the stars out. I walked up to the truck to greet her and we stood awkwardly for a moment, both staring at each other. Lena wasn’t really a hugger.

Finally, she jerked her thumb at the trailer. “Steve needs a good rubdown, and the trailer is a mess. I swear, the second we drove out of here, everything went to shit. That unicorn is a filth wizard.”

Grant, totally ignoring Lena’s “don’t touch me” bubble, ambled up and hugged her, lifting her off her feet. He kissed her temple as he set her down, her ears tinged red as she glared at him.

He grinned at her irritation. “You going to blame all those beef jerky wrappers on Steve, too? What about the soda bottles and fast food bags?”

“Still blaming Steve.”

“Have you eaten anything healthy since you left here?” Grant asked, crossing his arms as he stared down at her.

“What are you, my mother?”

“Not even close,” Grant said, nudging her toward the house. “The last time I saw your mother she was lecturing you about battle tactics while arm wrestling the biggest trucker I’ve ever seen right before she drank him under the table. I’m about as far from your mother as you can get.” He gently took the keys from her and tossed them to me. “But Jonah can handle Steve and I can get a real meal into you without offending the gods of badassdom.”

“The gods of badassdom demand pork chops.”

“Well they’re going to have to settle for chicken salad and coleslaw.”

Lena grumbled, but even I could tell in was half-hearted.

I let Steve out of the trailer and took him into the barn so I could give him a good brushing. I’m not sure about other unicorns, but Steve is on the fussy side. He liked to be brushed until his coat shone, and he would definitely want any and all tangles removed from his mane and tail. It could be a lengthy process, but I didn’t mind. Wuf sat behind me supervising.

I caught Steve up on what he missed while he was gone. He pretends he isn’t, but he’s a big gossip. Before I knew it, I was talking out Grant’s offer, weighing the pros and cons of it all. It was list I’d been working on, and one I was pretty sure Steve was ignoring.

“I think,” Lena said, startling me, “that you should take Grant up on his offer.”

“You do?” I couldn’t look at her. If I looked at her, my heart would crack. After all she said, she really was going to ditch me at the farm. It wasn’t a fate worse than death for sure, but the rejection still stung.

Lena grunted. “Take a break, apprentice and sit down and discuss this with me like a Valkyrie.

I slowed my brushing and gave her a side eye. “Does this mean I’m going to have to do shots and arm wrestle?”

“No, but it means we’re not going to discuss feelings or any of the crap Grant is big on. We’re going to hash this out in a no bullshit manner and be done with it.”

I put down the currycomb and patted Steve, telling him we were done for now. I hooked a milk crate with my foot and drug it across from Lena before I sat on it, my elbows on my knees.

“I can’t guarantee that I can do that. I’m not a Valkyrie,” I said. “I know that disappoints you—.”

“No, Jonah, that’s the thing. It doesn’t disappoint me.” She dug a fork into the piece of pie she’d apparently brought with her from the house. “You are not a disappointment. I don’t want you to ever think that. You have worked hard and without complaint since I took you on. I can’t ask for any more of that.” She pointed her fork at me. “That doesn’t change the fact that you would make a piss poor Valkyrie.”

“You would make a terrible inspirational speaker.”

“No doubt,” she said, forking a bite of pie into her mouth. “But I think Grant’s right. I think you would make a good Cupid.”

My chest tightened to take the blow of what she was telling me. “So I’m staying here permanently, right?”

She glared at me then. “Is that what you think of me? That I would just chuck your training off to the first person I see? I am your Fearless Leader, Cannon Fodder, and you will treat me as such.”

The constriction eased, but I didn’t feel much better. In fact, I wasn’t sure how to feel. “I’m confused.”

“That’s what happens when you make assumptions, Jonah. You need training, and for this portion, Grant is a better teacher.” She jabbed her fork at me again. “But just for this part. You’re still going to be training with me. Don’t think you’re getting out of work, buddy. You’re going to be getting double servings for awhile.” She took another bite of her pie. “We’ll just have to use the farm as a home base for now. I’ve talked it out with Grant. There will still be times when I have to leave you here for a few weeks, but most of the time you’ll just take breaks to come with me if the timing works—”

She didn’t get a change to finish her sentence because I’m afraid I tackled her with a hug almost knocking her off her seat. Her pie hit the floor and Wuf ate it in one bite.

“Damn it, Jonah. I lost my pie,” her voice was gruff, but she patted my arm awkwardly with one hand.

“Thank you,” I said, my eyes squeezed shut and I held her tight. “Thank you, thank you, thank you. You won’t regret it.”

“Damn right I won’t,” she said, untangling herself from me and handing me her plate. “Now go replace my pie.”

I took off at a run, my feet flying, my whole body feeling weightless. If this feeling were an arrow, it would be bliss. I would get everything I wanted. I wouldn’t be left behind.

“Freaking Cupids,” I heard Lena grumble behind me. “Always with the hugging and the feelings. I’m telling you, Steve, Grant is going to ruin that boy.” I lost the last of her grumblings as I jogged to the house, my smile wide and my heart light.

That night, I slept well and dreamed deep. I woke up early, the sun only a hint in the sky, and part of my dream remained—an image of me on Wuf’s back as he ran through the long golden grass in the orchard. I had my shirt on, so I’m not sure if my wings were there yet or not, but it felt like I was flying. I drew an arrow out of my quiver, set it, and pulled it back, holding it as still as I could while I sighted. I wasn’t in any rush. I was concentrating hard in the dream, my eyes locked onto my target in the distance. And in that weird way that you understand things in dreams, I knew the arrow I had knocked was pure joy. The shaft was wood left over from the doghouses. The point a clipping from Wuf’s nails, held on my hair from Steve’s mane, and it was fletched with feathers from Lena’s war mantle. It was a perfect arrow, and it was mine, I knew it was mine. Because if I made my heart into an arrow, that’s exactly what it would look like.

I took a breath and let it fly.