Make My Will a Bow Part 3

A paw landed on my shoulder and I nearly jumped out of my skin. “This is a quest, Joe-NA. Is your heart vanquished so easily?”

I opened my eyes out of surprise, turning to look at Hssta. “I can’t beat a dragon. No one can. They’re an apex predator. Winged death.” Hssta chortled, an amused sound, but I kept going, the fear and panic making my mouth move before my brain filtered it. “Do you know what humans are?” I poked my chest. “Fleshy meat bags. I’m a chicken nugget to this guy. A sack lunch. Not even that, I’m barely a snack!” I was practically hyperventilating now and choking on the smoke from the dragon. The air around us had become uncomfortably warm while he decided how to eat me. I turned on him, gently smacking his nose with my palm. “And stop that. The heat and smoke is bad for the tree. If you’re going to cook me alive, we should at least move away from it.”

The dragon startled, his eyes wide as he reached forward and rubbed his nose. *You want me to eat you somewhere else because you’re worried your demise will hurt the tree?*

“Yes,” I snapped.

Pip cleared his throat, catching my attention. “Temper, Joe-NA. It always pays to be polite to dragons.”

“Sorry,” I said to the dragon, who didn’t reply.

“I admit that I do not know much about your people,” Pip admitted, scratching his jaw. “But are they not predators, too?”

“Yeah,” I said, thinking it over. “Though not because we’re big and tough, really.” And Pip just smiled, waiting patiently. I think my new Mim friend knew more about humans than he was letting on.

 When you get down to the details, humans really are lousy predators—or at least we should be. We’re not fast like cheetahs or lions. He have no protective skin. Our claws are a joke and most of our teeth are meant to grind—the teeth of prey. We don’t see well in the dark, we aren’t the best jumpers, and our sense of smell is a joke.

Yet here we are, tip top of our class. Why? Simple. It’s because we are *clever beasts.* Bad claws? We make weapons to replace them. Thin skin? Clothing and armor. Mediocre sense of smell? We train dogs. Humans are one of the nastiest predators because we use tools to get our way. We can be surprisingly efficient predators. So physically, I’m not a match for a dragon. From my reading, I also know that I’m intellectually no match for a dragon. They are also clever beasts.

I also don’t have much time to think on this.

Grant thinks I’ll make a good Cupid. I have doubts about that, but I want it. The burn of want is almost physical. While I don’t trust myself, I do trust Grant. If he thinks I’ll be good at it, then I will be. So what makes a good Cupid? What does a Cupid do?

*We should pick out a good eating spot. Maybe I could roast you on the beach?* The pixies were back, dipping merrily around the dragon. He didn’t even look at them as they dove close. Why look at a tiny morsel when a bigger meal was right before you?

Cupids make people feel. They offer a split second chance to make a change. The right emotion or thought at the perfect time can make a difference, that’s what Grant said. I couldn’t outfight the dragon, and I certainly couldn’t outsmart him. But maybe, just maybe, I could out *feel* him.

That sounded dirty.

The problem, one of many currently, was that I didn’t have any of the tools Cupids were supposed to have. No bow. No arrow. No raw materials at all. Just me. But then, wasn’t I a raw material, too?

“Before you eat me, could I have a moment? Please?”

The dragon dipped his head, bringing it close. My eyes watered from the lingering heat and smoke. Taking his silence as acceptance, I brought my hand up and touched the dragon’s nose. Which, now that I’d done it, I regret. I could have put my hand anywhere, why did I chose to put it so close to his giant teeth? Too late now.

The dragon’s nose was warm, his scales surprisingly soft. I had a feeling they wouldn’t be that way if I brushed my hand against the grain. Keeping my touch light, I closed my eyes and relaxed as best I could. Out of my head went the dragon, the quest, even the Mim. I pushed out Grant and the farm and Lena. Out went Steve. I considered, briefly, going as far back as my mom and my sister, but hesitated. That would be good, but not quite right. The dragon could brush off anything there as the bond of family. I thought about Wuf instead.

When I first met Wuf, he’d been abused. Neglected and half starved, he was fighting other creatures in cage match fights to the death. We didn’t dwell on it much, because I know Wuf wants to forget that part of his life. He doesn’t want to poke the wound, he wants to let it scab and heal. So while I start there, I don’t linger. Instead I think about how still he sits while I brush him. How sometimes he’ll freeze the water while I’m giving him a bath, just to make me laugh. (And to try and get out of the bath.)

I remember his warm, musky scent, and how sometimes when I can’t sleep, I curl up with him and listen to the steady thrum of his heart. The same creature that tore apart his former owner in the ring will chase butterflies but will stop short of actually catching them. I concentrate on my best friend in the whole, crazy world, and open myself up to the dragon. I let him feel that sharp almost desperate emotion that friendship, real friendship, can bring on—the feeling that I would do anything for Wuf. That I would put a scarred, sometimes violent, creature’s well being above my own. The love I feel for Wuf is overwhelming. My skin feels tight to bursting with it. It’s more than a paltry human heart can contain. But a dragon’s heart is large. It’s so much bigger than I ever imagined.

And even that can’t contain it. My love for Wuf could level cities, move rivers, shake the very heavens if I let it.

*Your species*, the dragon’s voice rolled around my mind, leaving my ears ringing. *Is strange. Weak, yet strong. Smart, yet so very unwise. Capable of the cruelest acts.* He blinked, his eyes so close to mine I could see the individual flecks of orange, gold, and brown. *I enjoyed eating them, you know?*

“I hear we’re good with ketchup.” I finally manage to squeak out.

There was a creaking noise and we all looked up. The giant tree was moving, it’s branches so slow, I thought at first the wind was causing it, but the air stayed still.

The dragon shuffled its wings a little, settling. It reminded me oddly of the chickens at the farm.

*Are you sure?*

A tree branch came down and bopped the dragon on the head, the way some people would do to a dog that was misbehaving.

*You’re sure.* The dragon moved with an almost liquid speed as it struck, like a snake, grabbing the branch with his teeth and pulling it free with a crack. If I’d blinked, I would have missed it. He lowered it down and offered it to me.

*Beyond the odd indulgence, I am not fond of your kind, Jonah.*

I nodded, because I’d scene enough to know that I wasn’t always fond of my kind, either.

*But you…you are more like a dragon, I think. You protect your hoard.*

“My hoard?”

“A dragon’s hoard extends beyond gems,” Pip said. “Anything that is not a dragon is less, much like…” he struggled for the right word.

“A pet?” I asked.

“Yes, a pet.” Pip agreed. “Or perhaps livestock? It is the same to them. Anything not a dragon is something to hoard.”

“So the tree is part of your hoard?” I asked.

The dragon spit out the branch so that I caught it with both arms out of reflex.

*It is.* He nosed my arms shut around the branch. *And now you are, too.*

I held the branch so tight, the smaller branches dug into my chest. I felt it then, that tug that I followed. It burrowed into me and got smaller and smaller until it was a tiny pinpoint down by my solar plexus. When it was almost gone it stopped. Pulsed. Then with an inaudible boom, it expanded out until it reached each vein, fingernail, and hair follicle. The branch was now a part of me as it had been a part of the tree. I held it close.

“Thank you,” I said to the tree. “Thank you for your gift.” The leaves rustled, making the pixies squeal and burst from the tree, winging about like glittering sparrows.

The Mim patted my shoulders and back as they headed for the trunk. “We will stay and mend the tree,” Pip said. “And protect it in your absence.”

“Your cape.” I tried to get to the clasp without letting go of the branch.

Hssta stopped me with one paw and shook his head, but it was Pip who spoke. “We would like you to keep it, Joe-NA. Our gift to you for letting us accompany you on this part of your journey.”

I bowed to them all. “I am grateful to the Mim,” I said, and I meant it. I had a feeling things wouldn’t have gone well at all without them. “And if you ever need me, I’ll be there.”

This seemed to be the right thing to say as the Mim left and headed to the tree. Now it was just me and the dragon.

*Time to go home.*

I nodded and turned, wondering how I was going to find my way, now. The tree no longer pulled me and the Mim were staying. I had no guide and I was still in a dangerous forest. The weight of the branch was comforting, but I didn’t exactly want to use my sacred gift to bean predators on the head.

It turned out that it didn’t matter. The dragon picked me up and deposited me between his wings.

*Hold on.* He laughed then, and I broke into a cold sweat. *This is not going to be comfortable.*

For the record, riding a dragon is *terrifying.* They move fast and dive at unpredictable times. I couldn’t get a good grip—especially since I was trying to hold onto the branch. I almost threw up twice and fell off six times. The dragon would catch me as I hurtled through the air and toss me back on. I’m pretty sure he thought it was a game. It didn’t help that I had to keep a death grip on my branch.

The dragon finally deposited me outside the gate to the orchard. I was shaking so bad at that point that I’m sure I’d mastered the newborn kitten look—weak, wobbly, and for several seconds I couldn’t open my eyes. When I finally could, I was met by a crowd: Grant, Lena, Azzy, Granny Mae, Steve and Wuf. Azzy and Granny Mae were pleased, but I think that was from getting to see a dragon. Steve was bored and Wuf licked my face. Grant and Lena looked like they wanted to skin me alive.

Grant stepped forward and bowed. “Peregrine of—”

*Don’t start that, Grant. If you insist on saying my full name with titles, we’ll be here all night and your apprentice will freeze.*

“Thank the heaven’s for that,” Grant said, straightening. Unfortunately, that meant he could now focused on me. “Any particular reason I shouldn’t hand you over to Perry as a snack?”

“You know each other?” The words came out stuttered and clipped since I was still shaking and cold.

“Of course we do,” Grant growled. I don’t think I’d ever seen him this mad.

“But I thought you said you hadn’t seen humans in ages?” Perry seemed amused by the accusation in my tone.

*Grant doesn’t exactly count. He’s a Cupid, for one thing, and the Guardian of the Gate for the other.*

“I’m a Cupid!”

*In-training. Still human.*

“Thanks for not eating our apprentice.” Lena was smirking now, and I’m fairly certain it was at Grant’s expense. “They can be rather difficult to come by.”

Perry chuckled and it felt like pebbles had been chucked into my brain. I was suddenly exhausted.

Perry nudged me with his nose, almost knocking me off my feet. *You’re entertaining, Jonah. I find your company to be most amusing. Try not to die, eh?* And with that, he turned around and leapt, propelling himself into the night sky and banking over the orchard. He blinked out of existence.

I found myself staring into the scowling face of Grant, and I was suddenly nostalgic for the fire-breathing dragon.

“I got the wood for my bow,” I said, my words tentative as I held out my branch. All of the color drained from Grant’s face. “Surprise?”

Grant stood there, his body rigid, as if he was afraid that if he started talking, he would completely explode.

Lena grabbed his shoulders, steering him away from me. “It’s late. A lot of things have happened. How about we all sleep on it and scream ourselves raw in the morning, hm?” Lena stifled any protests as she ushered us into the house.

I went to join them and she placed one hand on my chest. “Not so fast, Cannon Fodder. Let’s take a look at those feet before you get blood on Granny Mae’s lovely sheets.”

Great, I was back to Cannon Fodder. “I feel fine,” I said, though I knew better than to argue.

“Yes, well, your fine feet are bleeding all over the nice grass,” she said dryly.

I didn’t argue again. It wouldn’t do any good. With Lena it was almost always better to go follow her lead and save your arguments for the times that really counted. “Yes, Captain,” I mumbled, and followed her into the house.