Chapter 9 Part 2

It seemed like hours went by before Grant and Jonah came back. The baby harpies screamed the *entire time.* Thirty-five minutes is a long time to listen to sustained screaming. I was tempted to leave them alone, but I was afraid they’d get out of the box and destroy the hotel room if I left them unattended. By the time Grant walked through the door I was sitting on the bed holding pillows to my ears.

Grant dropped several bags on the tables, before taking a Styrofoam tray of beef out, along with a small cutting board. He pulled a little knife out of the bag, removed the packaging, and started slicing the beef on the cutting board. The harpies, either because they smelled the beef or because they smelled a male, screamed louder. I was developing a whopper of a headache.

I dropped the pillows and walked over, grabbing the first few strips of meat. I dropped them unceremoniously into the box. Blessed silence filled the room as the harpies scrambled for their food.

“Wouldn’t it be better to actually feed them? You know, aim for their mouths?” Grant asked. “What happened to your gauntlets?”

“They don’t have mouths—they have scream holes. And my gauntlets? The adorable little sprouts chewed them to bits,” I said, tossing in the meat as quickly as Grant could slice it. “I think my head is going to split open. I’m never having children.”

Grant had the audacity to grin at me. “I don’t think human babies would eat your gauntlets.”

“Mine would,” I said. “I certainly can’t handle the screaming.”

“Do I need to cut the meat smaller?”

I watched as one of the harpy babies snatched a fistful of steak and began gnawing on it. “No, I think you’re fine. They may resemble humans a little, but they’re born with a set of razor sharp teeth, and have better hand-eye coordination than the usual human larvae.”

Grant paused. “Did you just call babies human larvae?”

I shrugged. “That’s what they are. Because of our big heads, babies aren’t done yet when they come out. It’s a larval stage. They crawl around, eating, pooping, and gnawing on things. Sounds like larvae to me.”

He finished off that steak and reached into the bag for another. “I want you to say that to a mother’s face. Call her baby a larvae, I dare you.”

“Some mothers would be into it,” I said. “Ugh, babies.”

“The selkie’s baby is cute,” Grant offered.

I tossed some more beef in, making sure the smaller harpy offspring got one. I had a soft spot for runts. “Sure, but that baby could also eat your face. I respect babies that can eat faces.”

“These can, too,” Grant said, peering into the box. One of the harpies snapped at him.

“Yeah, but they also scream. I don’t care if they were hangry.”

“I give you five more minutes before *you* start screaming for food,” Grant said.

My stomach rumbled. “Did you get anything besides raw meat and fish?”

Grant nodded. “As soon as we get these things calmed down, Tally and Jonah will take over on this side. We get to go to the quiet hotel room and eat breakfast sandwiches and drink mediocre coffee.”

“Slice the beef faster,” I said. “I’m starving.”

Once the harpies were fed, they curled up to nap in the box. It would be a short-lived respite, and we needed to take advantage of it. Grant and I quickly threw away the Styrofoam packaging in the motel room garbage and washed our hands. Within seconds I was in the other room, one hand wrapped around a large coffee, the other shoving an egg and sausage breakfast biscuit into my face. It even had that weird fake cheese that melts really well. Absolute bliss.

Now that I was fortifying myself with caffeine, food, and blessed silence, my headache was receding. I popped some generic Tylenol anyway. The selkies were in their seal forms, sleeping quietly in the kiddie pool. Edda was setting up her laptop and sipping tea. *Herbal tea.* Sometimes I wonder if Edda had any human in her at all. Like, maybe her dad was some sort of cyborg, because she couldn’t be real.

“My dad wasn’t a cyborg and I’m not a machine,” Edda said, not looking up from her laptop.

“How did you know?” I hissed.

“Because I know what that look on your face means,” Edda said. “If you get proper sleep, you don’t need coffee.”

“There’s need,” I said. “And then there’s want. As in, ‘if you want to live, make sure I have coffee’.”

“Okay, drink your coffee, shut your mouth, and bask in my brilliance,” Edda said, her fingers quickly flicking over the keys. “I wish I’d had time for video, but no luck there. However, I do have some audio.” She hit a final key.

Bill Tanzer’s voice came out clear, crisp, and obviously anxious. “They’re gone.”

“Who’s gone?” This was a second voice, male, lighter, with an east coast accent.

“My whole stock. It’s vanished. The cages are still locked. The collar is shattered.” Bill’s voice was shaking now. I smiled.

The other man cursed. “No more over the phone. Not a single word.”

Now it was my time to curse. We needed more words from Bill, damn it all. We needed information desperately.

“Catch the next flight,” East Coast said. “Come out here, lay low for a bit.”

Bill hesitated. “Are you sure? Maybe I should—”

“No, no,” East coast was soothing now. “It’s not a big deal. We just need to watch your place, make sure you’re not being targeted, that’s all. I’ll even pay for you ticket. Don’t worry about a thing, okay?”

“Okay,” Bill said, but I could tell that he was still on edge.

“You didn’t mention this to anyone else?” The man asked.

“No, no,” Bill said. “Didn’t seem wise.”

“That’s good. Hang up. Pack a bag. I’ll email you your ticket. Don’t you worry about a thing, okay?”

“Okay,” Bill said, his voice calmer now. “Thanks. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“That’s why I’m here,” East coast said. His voice sounded false to me, though. I had a bad feeling for Bill if he got on that plane. But then I thought of the selkies sleeping quietly in the pool behind me and that sympathy evaporated. The call ended right after that.

Edda kept clicking, bringing up another screen. “I checked his email. They have him taking a flight out of an airport about two hours from here. He’s headed to Rhode Island of all places. I’m currently tracking down where the email came from and trying to find out more about the person who sent it and made the call. I’ll have more information soon, hopefully.” She grinned at me. “Rhode Island! You can go visit your dad.”

I was already shaking my head. “We have the selkies and the harpies and I have Steve—”

Edda leaned back and crossed her arms. “I’ve already made some calls. There’s a Valkyrie, Rissa, who’s not too far from here. She can take Steve and Jonah home.” She pulled up a map. “Happy Camp is about three and a half hours from the ocean. She said if they take this route—” she pointed at a red squiggly line on the map. “They can pass by a local harpy nesting site and hopefully hand the hatchlings over. Then she’ll swing by to the coast and drop of Brin and her baby. With the selkies and harpies taken care of, she can take Steve and Jonah home. She said she’d stay with Grant’s family for added protection, just in case.” She glared at me when I started to argue and then pointed at the selkies reminding me that we didn’t want to wake them and I was being loud.

“No,” I whispered.

“Yes,” She said back, calmly. “It doesn’t make sense for us to get sidetracked. Anyone can get Brin and her baby home and handle the harpies. I’ve worked with Rissa before—she’s solid. And another Valkyrie isn’t going to fuck with Steve. She will treat him well, and take care of your apprentice. We’ve been on this case—we know the most. It makes sense that we go. So, let her drive your precious truck and take care of business.”

It did make sense, damn it. I just hated being separated from Steve.

Grant bumped his knee against mine. “Steve can stay with Jonah and my family at the farmhouse and help take care of everything. A break would probably be good for him. I know he’s indispensable when we’re dealing with creatures, but I think Bill is going to lead us to more human monsters, and that’s your specialty.”

“And you can’t take a unicorn on a plane,” I grumbled. “Fine. We’ll catch a flight and follow Bill.” I pointed a finger at them. “Tally is going with us, someone is buying me an overpriced snack pack on the plane, and we are *not* visiting my dad.”

Edda grinned at me, and I swear it took up half her face. I didn’t like the look of it. “I already called him. We’re going to stay at his place.”

I groaned and flopped back in my chair. It’s not that I didn’t love my dad. I did. He was the best. It’s just he would mother hen me to death while I was there. I’d also be showing up with my ex-girlfriend *and* Grant, which would be its own special kind of torture. But it made no sense to rent a hotel room when we could stay with my dad.

“Fine,” I said. “Fine. Let me go find Steve and let him know what’s going on. My phone buzzed and I took it out. A message from my dad. *Can’t wait to see you, kiddo!* That makes exactly one of us. But I couldn’t say that. Not to my dad. *Me either, pop.*

Maybe I would get lucky and get to kill something in Rhode Island. Then would make me feel better.