Chapter 8

The selkie shivered next to me, both of us barely breathing as we listened to Bill Tanzer entering his house. The door creaked open and car keys jangled as he tossed them onto the counter. I listened to him grumble and open the fridge, while I spent my time trying to decide what to do. It was likely that if it came down to a physical fight, I could take Tanzer if he was a regular human—which was our educated guess. But it was a guess. He could be something else, or he could have a gun or knives or be a master at krav maga for all I knew. With everything we’d encountered so far, he might also have various magics backing him up. What did I have? I had a very pregnant selkie at my back—Bill’s victim—and I needed to put her health and well-being above my need to put a boot in Bill’s backside.

We also wanted Bill scared—so scared that he might reach out to contacts. He was the little fish in this disgusting pond, and I needed him to lead us to the big fish. He wouldn’t do that if I jumped out and kicked his ass. If I beat him, he would likely just go to ground out of fear of letting the higher-ups know that he screwed up and possibly leaked information. His house wasn’t very big, so pretty soon he was going to sprawl out in front of the TV and we would be found. What we needed was a distraction—something to keep him from hearing us, and something that wouldn’t trigger the wards. I just didn’t know how I was going to manage that.

Someone knocked at the door and I heard the rustle of cloth as Bill probably pushed aside the drapes in his kitchen window to peek outside. I heard him mumble something as he unlocked the front door and opened it.

“Yes?”

“Hi, sir, my name is Jason—”

I knew that voice. Jonah. Grant was using our apprentice as a distraction. Which was smart—Jonah has an open, innocent face. A face Bill wouldn’t recognize, because Grant would have made Jonah wait in the car during the meeting. Still, I was very protective of my apprentice, and though I knew I needed to let him do things, I worried.

“I don’t want any.” I heard the door start to close and then heard a soft thump as it hit something—my guess being Jonah’s sneaker.

“I’m sorry, sir—I’m not selling anything. But I’m looking for my dog. Have you seen her? She’s got a yellow coat. Here, let me show you.”

Bill interrupted Jonah again, but I wasn’t listening. We needed to move now while he was distracted. But I didn’t know what the fuck to do about the wards. My phone vibrated in my pocket and I carefully took it out, seeing a message from Grant.

*Tally says Tanzer hasn’t reset the perimeter ward yet. Get out NOW.*

I smiled. Team work—got to love it. Grant didn’t have to tell me twice. I gently grabbed the selkie’s hand, leading her quietly through the room. I could still hear Jonah talking, so Bill’s attention was elsewhere. I carefully opened the slider, wincing at the soft sound it made. Once it was wide enough, I waved the selkie out, following behind her. After I closed the slider door behind us, we hightailed it to the gate. Our pace through the woods was glacial. The selkie didn’t have shoes, which wasn’t much of a problem—she had tough feet and they don’t usually wear shoes or clothes. The problem was she couldn’t exactly jog. The best she could manage was a very dignified waddle.

I’m not sure I’d ever been so happy to see my trailer. Tally was already sitting inside the truck and Steve was put away. Edda had her helmet on, ready to kick her bike to life at any second. Tally saw the selkie and scooted into the center of the truck’s bench seat.

I opened the passenger door. “It’s going to be a tight fit but—” I frowned. I’d thought the selkie was right behind me, only she was about ten feet back, still at the trailhead. And she was gripping her stomach. Her face was pinched, her breath coming out in sharp huffs.

Fuck. I went back to her. “Please tell me you’re not going into labor right now.”

“Okay,” she said. “I won’t tell you.”

“Oh no. No!” I started herding her to the truck. “I don’t think we’re anywhere near an ocean. I have no idea how long of a drive it would take. Hours?” I shook my head. “You’re just going to have to keep that baby inside you.”

She blinked big brown eyes at me. “You do know that’s not how it works, right?”

I helped her into the truck, then climbed into the driver’s side. Then I officially didn’t know what to do. “Okay.” I stared at the steering wheel. That didn’t help. I looked at the selkie. “This is kind of outside my realm of knowledge. If you wanted me to fight your uterus, I could do it, but I have no idea what’s involved in having a baby. Especially a selkie baby.” Did they come out as seals?

The selkie reached out and gripped my arm, squeezing as another contraction hit her. “I already have someone fighting my uterus. What I need is water. Shallow water. I’d prefer natural water, but I will take what I can get.”

“Okay.” I pulled out my phone and called Grant. “Is my apprentice still alive?”

“Our apprentice,” Grant said. “And yes. Everything go well?”

“We got out, but now I have a minor problem and I don’t know what to do.”

Grant barked a laugh. “You don’t have minor problems. You have varying levels of catastrophe. What is it?”

“I have a selkie in labor.”

The phone was silent. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“Selkie. Labor. We need shallow water and privacy.”

“Give me two minutes.”

I hung up. Two minutes was a very long time to sit next to someone in labor. I wanted to help, but there was nothing I could do but sit there like an idiot. Three very long minutes later, Grant sent me the address of a local motel. I hit the mapping function and handed my phone to Tally. “You navigate.” Then I started the truck and edged out of our hiding spot, Edda’s motorcycle following close behind.

The motel consisted of two narrow buildings forming an L-shape with the check-in office in the corner. It needed new paint, and the lot was pretty empty, but other than that it looked well maintained. I pulled in as far from the office as I could, waiting while Edda went to check us in.

Grant had rented two rooms, but we beat him to the motel. Edda met us with the keys, letting us into the room at the end of the complex. I helped the selkie in, setting her on the bed. The room was pretty basic—two queen beds, a small table, two chairs, and a tiny bathroom. Everything looked clean, if old, and it didn’t smell weird, which was really all I could ask for. Tally followed, but ignored us and started drawing on the walls in chalk. I froze in the middle of the room. Now what?

I eyed the selkie. “Can I get you some ice chips or boiling water?” What did pregnant women need? “Towels?”

She blinked at me. “What are you talking about?”

I shrugged. “On TV, people always ask for towels and boiling water.”

She looked at me with amusement, then pointed at the door. “Why don’t you make sure no one bad comes through that door? I’ll take care of the rest.”

I nodded. “Can do.”

Tally snorted, but kept drawing.

Fifteen minutes later, Grant came in with grocery bags. I’d never been happier to see him in my life. “Yay, the cavalry is here. Where’s Jonah?”

“He’s helping Edda next door with the harpy eggs. They’re getting them back up to temperature and ordering pizza. He also let Steve out so he could check out the local woods.” He set down the grocery bags on the small table.

Tally finished her drawings and put her chalk back into her pocket. “I’ve warded the place for sound, so if she has to scream, no big deal.”

“Thanks,” Grant said, unloading the bags onto the table. I spotted a large plastic block of some sort, a six pack of protein shakes, and some sweats, among other things. “If you want to go next door and rest, go ahead.” Tally patted his shoulder and left. I went to follow her. Grant was here and he’d handle it. My part, such as it was, was done.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

I stopped with my hand hovering over the doorknob. “Rest and pizza?”

“Oh no, you don’t. I need a helper. You’re it, badass.”

“I am literally the worst choice for this job,” I said. I turned to the selkie. “Tell him I’m useless.”

“You’ve done a good job guarding the door,” she said between clenched teeth, grabbing her stomach and breathing through another contraction.

“Traitor.”

Grant tossed the plastic square at me. “Make yourself useful and blow that up.”

I caught it, blinking at the package in my hands. It was a small, inflatable kiddie pool, specifically a blue one covered in little turtles. “A kiddie pool? We couldn’t just put her in the tub?”

“Tub is probably too small,” Grant said. “That thing isn’t going to inflate itself.”

I tore open the plastic, frowning at the noxious chemical smell. After I shook it out, I sat on the bed and started to blow. As I did, I watched Grant check on the selkie, talking to her softly, helping her breathe. He was really good with her, totally calm and gentle. You would think he did this every day.

Once the pool was inflated, we moved the table and situated it so the selkie could lean against the wall if she needed. Grant helped her into it while I used the ice bucket to transfer water from the bathroom to the pool, filling it until the water reached just below her navel. Grant made sure the selkie had her sealskin tucked around her.

“What can we call you?” Grant asked her once she was settled.

“Brin,” she said, cuddling into her skin.

“Okay, Brin. I’m Grant. That’s Lena. We’re going to help you—so if you need anything, you let me know.”

She nodded, her eyes going distant as she breathed through another round of contractions. “What happens after?”

“After, we take you and your baby wherever you want to go,” I said. “We’ll get you home. I promise.”

She nodded again. “Okay. If you try to take my baby, I will eat you.”

I kneeled down so she could see me. “I can honestly tell you that I’d prefer that you eat me over taking care of a newborn.”

The next six hours consisted of us helping Brin breathe and getting her water to sip. Grant made her drink one of the weird protein drinks he’d bought, which she really didn’t like. But he didn’t want her energy to get low, and we didn’t trust that Tanzer had been feeding her enough. He assured her that after the baby was born, we’d get her some nice, raw fish to eat. I like sashimi as much as the next person, but I’m fairly sure Grant was going to give her a whole fish and *no thank you*.

At some point, Edda brought over a pizza for me and Grant to eat, but I’m not sure when. Time sort of blurred together as we helped Brin. There was a good amount of screaming, some of it even by Brin, so I’m glad Tally had thought to ward the room. Darkness had fallen when Brin gave the final push. The water in the pool turned pink and a minute later Grant plunged his arms below the surface. When he brought them up, he was holding a baby seal, its dark eyes blinking at the sudden light. Grant grinned and offered the little seal to Brin. She looked exhausted but pleased. She should be exhausted. I was ready to tip over and I didn’t even have the damn baby.

Brin brushed away the baby seal’s fur, almost like she was unwrapping a package. In the blink of an eye, she held a small, squirming baby, wrapped in his own fur. She cooed at him as she brought him up to her nipple to feed him for the first time. Grant stayed where he was, eyes on the water.

“Don’t tell me it’s twins,” I said.

He gave me a tired grin. “No, but there’s such a thing as the placenta. The process isn’t done after the baby is here.”

“Oh, good,” I said, fetching one of the grocery bags. “More fun for us.” About thirty minutes later, the process was done, and I had a bag of afterbirth to go throw in the forest. Hey, it might be gross to you, but to scavengers it’s a real treat. Plus, I couldn’t exactly leave it in the hotel garbage. People noticed that sort of thing.

Edda and Tally came over with a cooler full of fresh fish for Brin, then took over watching out for mama and baby so we could rest.

Grant and I let ourselves into the motel room quietly. Jonah was passed out on one bed, diagonally. All I could see of him was a tuft of hair sticking out on the pillow. This room was just like the other room, right down to the green patterned comforter. Which meant my choice was pushing my apprentice over or sleeping with Grant. Teen boys smelled weird—it was either hormone sweat or too much body spray. There was no in between with them. Grant, I knew for a fact, smelled fantastic, which was its own problem. I stalled by sitting in a chair and taking off my boots.

Grant stripped down to his boxers quickly and crawled into the bed before I even got the second boot off. “When you’re done overthinking it, can you turn off the light?”

“What does that mean?” I set my boots neatly by the door.

Grant huffed a laugh. “What are you afraid of, little Valkyrie? Surely not me? Not a little, ol’ Cupid. We’re practically harmless.”

Harmless my ass. Cupids were warriors in their own way, in a way that my body tighten in panic. I might fight with blades, but Cupids fought with feelings. I would rather be stabbed, thank you very much. But he’d just made it a challenge, which meant if I pushed Jonah over and took the other bed, Grant won. The jerk knew me all too well. It is damn near impossible for Valkyrie’s to back down from a challenge.

I shut off the light and crawled into bed next to him, his soft laugh sifting through the darkness.