

**FLIGHT OF THE GOLDEN HARPY II:  
WAYLAID**

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Published and printed in the  
United States Of America

## Prologue

“Senator, you do realize the timber can’t be harvested?” said the young businessman on the communication screen. “The harpies forbid it.” The interstellar hookup between the man on Earth and the senator’s planet had taken two days.

In Hampton, the eastern capital of Dora, Senator Blackwell leaned back in his reptilian leather chair and said, “I’m well aware, Mr. Phillips. I was against giving human rights to those winged parasites, and I voted against the treaty granting them the western Outback. Now half the continent is worthless.”

“Believe me, I know. Our business took a financial hit last year. Our Outback holdings amounted to nothing more than a tax write-off. But I’m curious, Senator. You admit that the property is worthless. You can’t develop it or harvest the trees, and yet you wish to acquire the land titles?”

Blackwell’s large belly jiggled with a chuckle. “I’m an optimist. Things could change down the road.”

“I must disclose that my representatives have already talked to the harpy leader, and this Shail is unwilling to budge. Wealth and prestige mean nothing to him. He won’t let men touch his jungle. His only exception was for the citizens of Terrence, who were allowed to cut timber and rebuild their city after the beetle swarms destroyed it.”

“I’ve been around harpies all my life, and I believe I can deal with that cocky winged bastard, so I’m willing take to the risk

and buy your holdings. The good citizens of Dora might wake up some day and realize that harpies are animals, not people, and things will revert to the way they should be.”

“All right, Senator. If you’re interested in buying, we’re definitely willing to sell. Between the giant destructive reptiles, the deadly beetle swarms, and now this, wild harpies governing the land, Dora has proven to be an unstable investment. Send me your offer, and I’ll present it to my board. If they accept it, we’ll transfer the titles to your name once we receive your credit voucher.”

“Very good, Mr. Phillips,” Blackwell said and ended the com call to Earth, his fifth negotiation to purchase Outback land in a month.

He gazed across the expansive room at the yellow wings that hung on the adjacent wall. He smiled, reflecting on the hunt when a teenager. His father had used a stunned brown-winged fledgling to bait the trap for the parent, and they waited for the male to come and rescue his young. Instead, a magnificent golden harpy appeared. One laser shot, and Blackwell brought the creature down. No experience, before or since, gave him as much pleasure.

He strolled to the bar and fixed a cocktail. At the window, he sipped the drink and stared at the jungle beyond the high iron fence that protected his stately mansion from dangerous wildlife. “Yes, Shail, I will deal with you.”

## Chapter One

The giant fan trees rustled in the cool night breeze, and the sound of drizzling rain on the rooftop had lulled Doc White into a deep slumber. A male glider lizard flew out of the jungle and landed on the cottage windowsill. The little reptile flashed its orange throat and croaked out a response, probably believing the snoring sound came from a female inside. “Shut up,” Doc murmured, turning on his side. He nodded off again.

A minute later, a beeping came from the living room. Doc’s eyes opened a crack, but he didn’t budge from the bed, unsure if the noise was the communicator or the pesky lizard. A second beep, and Doc rose. “Calling me at this hour, it better be damn serious,” he grumbled and hurried through the dark house. He had retired from medical practice, and most residents of the small town of Westend traveled to the new hospital in Terrance for treatment. He switched on a desk lamp and hit the com button.

Charlie, the elderly Indian who lived on the Turner estate, appeared on the screen. “Doc, you need to come.”

“What’s going on, Charlie? Someone sick or hurt?”

“It’s Kari, John’s daughter. She’s having her baby, but she’s been in labor a long time. The harpies couldn’t help her, so Shail flew her here.”

“Load her up in your hover and bring her here. I have everything for a cesarean, if need be.”

“If you cut her, Shail will kill you.” Charlie lowered his

head. “I can’t even get near Kari. He’s frightened and beyond reason.”

“Since when is any harpy reasonable? Fine, I’ll throw on some clothes and be there shortly.”

Doc scurried into the bedroom and dressed, his thoughts on delivering the baby, but this wasn’t a human infant. Kari might resemble a lovely, petite woman, but she was in fact half-harpy. Shail, her mate, was a full-blooded harpy with majestic wings. If their offspring was a male, it too would have the extra feathered limbs that protruded from the shoulders of its human frame. Fifty years as a Dora doctor, and Doc had never touched a baby harpy, much less birthed one.

To add to Doc’s concerns, this fledgling was no ordinary brown-haired, brown-winged harpy, but a rare golden, a blond subspecies with yellow wings. Its young parents were the last breeding pair of golden harpies, and their baby would be the first golden born in decades.

Goldens were known for their courage and aggressive natures, so they reigned over the docile brown-winged flocks. Shail had taken it a step further. Surpassing his ancestors, he was not only the harpy monarch, but also ruled half the planet, including the humans that resided there. Doc’s head spun with the importance of a successful delivery. This tiny baby would be like royalty. The media proclaimed Shail’s offspring to be a true Dorian prince or princess.

Doc hustled into his exam room and placed in his black bag

the necessary equipment and drugs for a delivery. He glanced at the operating table and scratched his snowy beard, reflecting on the only time he had seen Shail. Last year, Kari had brought him in after hunters had done their worst. The slender male lay on Doc's table, unconscious and bloody from a severe beating, a laser blast to his gut, and another breaking his wing. At that time, male harpies were game animals. Despite their handsome, humanoid frame and features, their wings were prized as mounted trophies. After examining Shail with his severe injuries and blood loss, Doc didn't hold out much hope.

Doc wasn't a harpy lover, but he had figured the wounded male on his table was probably the last golden. None had been spotted in years. With extinction on the threshold, Doc had worked on the harpy all night, noting that even in his wretched state, Shail possessed a stunning image, with his lean muscled body and pretty boyish face. Amazingly, the harpy pulled through the surgery, but the next morning when he woke, he was far from grateful or civilized. He acted like a cornered feral cat, hissing, snapping, and striking out at Doc. If healthy, the harpy would have been downright dangerous.

As Doc recalled the incident, he walked through the rain to his old hovercraft. He considered the risk of dealing with Shail. Kari supposedly domesticated her mate and even taught him to speak, but he still killed several men. Charlie had added, "He's frightened and beyond reason."

Doc climbed into his hover for the ten-mile trip to the

Turner Estate, where a stressed, deadly golden awaited. Before lifting off, Doc took a laser gun from a compartment, adjusted the setting, and placed it in his medical bag. “I don’t care if everyone loves that lofty sucker,” he mumbled. “If he gives me grief, I’ll stun his ass.”

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At the Turner Estate, Shail knelt beside Kari’s old bed and stared at his declining mate. He clasped her hand as nervous sweat dripped from his frame and his long locks. He panted and trembled with irrepressible anxiety that caused his wing feathers to quiver. He sniffled and nuzzled Kari’s clammy skin for the hundredth time. His eyes watered when he detected she was weaker with a rapid heart rate. Her temperature had dropped another degree as life drained away.

All the horrific abuse Shail had endured had not aroused the fear he felt for his mate. Death among female harpies during labor sometimes occurred when the baby was male, with its wings complicating a birth. Shail was so distraught over the possible loss of Kari that he reverted to his wild animal nature. He had learned human language, but he couldn’t even conjure up one of their words.

“*Please, Kari,*” he telepathically relayed. “*Don’t leave me.*” He buried his face against her side.

Kari placed her limp hand on his head. “*I love you, Shail.*”



He jerked his head up, and his teary eyes stared at her. She was surrendering to her fate and saying goodbye. He glanced at the two old humans who stood in the doorway of the bedroom. Kari had called the man with long gray braids Charlie, and the plump woman was Maria. Shail's chaotic behavior of hissing, head tossing, and feather ruffling had banished them from the room. These people loved Kari, wanted to help her, but kept their distance, too afraid of him to come near.

"Kill him, Charlie," Maria said with a sob. "Get a gun and shoot that wild thing. Kari will die if you don't."

Charlie put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "He's terrified, Maria. He senses the birth is not going well. Doc will be here soon. Then we'll decide how to handle Shail."

Slightly raising his upper lip, Shail showed his teeth and seethed. He crawled onto the bed, carefully coiled his body around his mate and covered them with his wing. This was the end. Kari and his unborn son were going to die, and he would soon follow, expiring from a broken heart. Under the feathers, he nuzzled her cheek and closed his eyes, recalling some animals he had recently saved. *It had been so easy to help them, but I am helpless to save her.*

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Shail had left the river city of Terrance, irritated with its residents. Unlike harpies, humans were difficult to rule, noisy,

quarrelsome, and greedy. He found the more he gave into their needs, the more they wanted. On this last trip, he had had his fill and said they could not kill any more trees for their buildings. When they argued with him, he arched his wings and threatened to banish them from the Outback.

He glanced at his yellow wings and wished they were brown, finding no peace or pleasure in ruling the Outback, but he was the only one who could. With his aggressive golden bloodline, he was destined to be the dominant male among the flocks. His intelligence and insightful instincts gave him an advantage over humans and won their respect. While he flew, he gazed ahead at the breathtaking scarlet horizon in the hopes of forgetting the pressures of leadership and relaxing.

To his right he saw the towering black mountain range that dipped southward. Beyond lay the emerald ocean and Kari, who waited for him in the old log cabin that had become home. Most male harpies suffered from claustrophobia after decades of hunters caging and trapping them. They feared residing under a human roof, but Shail had adapted. The cabin made him a little anxious, but with a rain-proof roof, running water, lights, and a soft bed, Kari's life would be easier during the latter part of her pregnancy.

With her in mind, his stamina was renewed and he flapped his wings harder. He soon came upon the extensive savanna created the previous season when an enormous beetle swarm had devoured the trees. He soared lower and inspected the new sprouts. His jungle was reclaiming the empty land.

His acute hearing detected the distressful baying of a creature in trouble. In the distance, a zel herd had gathered on the edge of the plain. The docile deer-like creatures paced nervously, too upset to graze. Shail saw the large bog, a result of the wet season's torrential rains. Mired in this death trap was a zel fawn that cried desperately to its mother. The panicked doe called back, urging her stranded baby to free itself. The doe's green and yellow legs and belly were coated with slime, indicating she had already entered the hazard in a vain attempt to save her offspring.

On the other side of the bog, two large red dragons stalked the shore on their strong back legs, tempted by the easy meal trapped in the mud. A third dragon had tried to reach the helpless fawn, and it, too, was stuck. It thrashed its plated reptilian tail and fretfully snapped its sizable jaws. No doubt the fawn and dragon were doomed, and soon the doe and other meat eaters would most likely follow.

He glided down to the baby zel and rapidly fluttered his wings to hold himself in place. Grabbing the young creature's neck, he tugged until the zel was freed. Shail cradled her in his arms and flew a safe distance from the soggy ground. He set her down, and the doe cautiously approached him and her tired baby. Her neighing inspired the baby zel to struggle to its feet. It stepped to its mother's side, and the whole herd vanished into the secure trees.

Ruffling his soiled feathers, Shail gazed at the mired reptile that topped a thousand pounds. As a flying creature, Shail weighed

only eighty-five. He lacked the strength to pull the reptile out, and its huge mouth could easily snap a willowy harpy in half. To free the monster would take caution and strategy.

The thunderous roar of the other dragons echoed through the vacant land, calling to their helpless sibling. Shail knew these three were born of the same nest. Their half-grown head cones, smaller size, and method of pack hunting proved their age. They hadn't matured to live the solitary life of a wise and ruthless adult. Their commitment to stay with one another would give Shail an edge.

He flew to the jungle and returned with a long, stout vine. After fashioning a noose on each end, he sailed over the stranded dragon and dropped a loop around its neck. Like all large reptiles, its energy was short-lived. It stopped thrashing and only seethed while lying in the thick sludge. Next Shail fluttered over the two dragons on the shore. They instantly leaped into the air to snatch up the flying morsel. Anticipating their move, he dodged their three-inch fangs while dropping the vine noose around the largest one's neck, roping the trapped and the free together.

He then dive bombed the enormous reptiles. At first the young dragons thought Shail was effortless prey, begging to be eaten, and they sprang at him. Before they could regroup, he swept down and kicked their tender noses and eyes. Soon the reptiles were ducking his aerial assaults, and their aggression faded. Not experienced with harpies, the tenacious rulers of the sky, the dragons fled in terror. As the largest reptile raced to the shelter of

trees, it jerked the third reptile out of the bog by the vine.

Shail landed in a tree and watched the three spooked reptiles crash a short distance through the forest. A tree trunk snared the vine attached to the two. They tussled with it until the vine broke, separating the siblings. When their fears abated, they resumed their meandering search for another meal.

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In the massive white house, Shail rested on the bed with his limp mate in his arms and thought about the fawn and dragon he had freed from a sure death. Over the past year, he had also ended a hundred and fifty years of cruel hunting and saved his harpies from extinction. With the promise of peace and land, he rescued thousands of humans in Hampton when beetle swarms covered the city and went on to destroy the remaining swarms that threatened all life on the planet. With his courage, cunning, and golden supremacy, he had done those things, yet he couldn't save the most important one in his life.

Kari moaned and panted with another contraction. Shail grimaced and clutched her. *"I am here, Kari. I shall never leave you."*

The painful spasm eased, and her shallow breathing returned. Her drowsy eyes opened and gazed at him. *"I'm sorry, Shail. I so wanted to give you this son."*

*"You shall. You shall. You and our son shall live."*

*“I can detect your thoughts, and you don’t believe it. My beautiful, devoted Shail, you’re nearly insane with worry. If I die....”*

*“No! I forbid it.”*

*“If I die, promise you’ll go on and find another mate. You must. You must give the harpies a golden heir.”*

Shail shuddered so badly, he couldn’t breathe or respond. He rested his head against her chest, broke down, and cried.

Charlie leaned against the doorjamb and watched the golden male shake badly and heard his faint sniffles. Kari was out of sight, hidden beneath the male’s trembling feathers. “Oh, these poor harpies,” he muttered to Maria, who stood nearby. “Where is Doc?”

In Charlie’s seventy years, he had spent most of his time with nature and animals and was one of the few on Dora who understood harpies and Shail’s erratic behavior. Except for sporting wings, male harpies looked like handsome young men, the result of their partial human DNA, but these creatures were vastly different from men, and wings had nothing to do with it. Harpies were really advanced animals with enough intelligence to mimic human speech and behavior, in order to survive man’s invasion of their jungle.

Charlie knew that Shail had simply reverted to his true nature. He was the male and protector of his family, giving up his life if necessary. Powerless to fulfill that role and help his mate

and bewildered and petrified, he became hostile and defensive with humans, an enemy who had threatened him throughout his young life. He couldn't see past that.

Shail raised his head and flung his shoulder-length hair from his alert eyes. He sniffed the air and seethed.

“He hears something, probably Doc’s hover,” said Charlie. “Go downstairs and let him in.”

Maria frowned. “I don’t hear anything except rain.”

“Trust me, Maria. His hearing is better than a dog’s.”

Maria left, and Charlie took a step into the bedroom. Shail hissed and glared at the intrusion.

“Easy, Shail,” Charlie said quietly. “This man is going to help Kari. You must focus on that fact and let him in this room.”

With the sound of the front door closing and Doc and Maria’s voices and footsteps on the wooden staircase, the six-foot harpy sprang off the bed and arched his wings, posturing for a fight. Charlie stepped back, out of striking range of the harpy’s long wings.

“How far apart are her contractions?” Doc asked when he approached the bedroom.

“Just minutes,” said Maria. “When Kari arrived, she said her water broke early this morning. Once we placed her on the bed, the male harpy went crazy. He strutted around the room puffed up like a nasty rooster. He flew at Charlie, knocked him down with a wing. That creature won’t let us near her.”

“He won’t, huh?” Doc said and stepped next to Charlie.

Shail faced two men and fully extended his wings, whacking a lamp off a dresser. When it shattered on the floor, he jumped nervously and hissed.

“Be careful, Doc,” Charlie whispered, staring at the male’s fiery blue eyes. “He’s so rattled that one move toward him, and he’ll attack.”

Doc rubbed his bearded jaw, studying the harpy. “He hasn’t changed a bit since I last dealt with him. He’s still a little demon.” He sighed. “I hate to stun him. These lightweight harpies are prone to fatal heart attacks, but he’s not giving us much choice. I brought a laser gun.” He started to open his black bag.

Charlie stopped him. “Don’t take it out. He’s as quick as lightning. If he sees a weapon, he’ll attack and break your neck before you could fire it.”

“What do you suggest?” Doc said. “He’s too wild to be talked down.”

“Shail,” Kari called with a listless voice.

Shail glanced over his wing at her but didn’t move from the foot of the bed or lower his guard. He turned back and glared at Charlie and Doc.

“Shail, come here,” Kari ordered.

Shail’s hard stare diminished, with a look of indecision. He folded his wings and leaped to the bedside. He dropped to his knees, and his long yellow feathers spread across the floor.

“You must calm down,” she said and petted his head. “You remember Doc. He saved your life when hunters shot you. He’s



here to help me just like he helped you. Please behave and stay out of his way.”

“Listen to her, Shail,” said Charlie. “Use your instinct and sense my mind. We want to help Kari, and this is the only way to save her. You have to trust me and let Doc in.”

For a moment, Shail gazed at Charlie and then looked back at Kari. He took a deep breath and nodded. He rested his head on the sheets, and Kari stroked his silky locks.

“I’m sorry about Shail,” she whispered. “He’s so upset, he can’t think rationally, but he’ll be okay now.”

Doc walked to the bedside, opposite Shail. “Don’t worry your pretty head about him. You just focus on having this baby.”

Charlie came alongside Doc. “Can I do anything?”

Doc glanced across the bed at Shail. “Be nice if you could remove him.”

Shail lifted his head and glared at Doc as an inhuman sizzling escaped through his teeth.

“Guess the sucker does understand English.” Doc turned to Maria, who had remained in the doorway. “Could you fetch some hot water and clean towels? We might need them.”

“I’ll get them, but I’m not coming in this room. That harpy scares me to death.” She hurried off down the hallway.

Doc opened his bag and dug out a small plastic box. “See the crack in this scanner’s casing? He broke it last year when I was trying to check his wounds. Knocked the damn thing out of my hand.”

Shail hissed at Doc and the scanner.

“Yeah, you remember that, don’t you, fella?” Doc said and pressed the scanner buttons. “Well, let’s find out what’s going on here.” He ran the scanner over Kari’s pregnant belly and studied the instrument. “Just like I feared, she’s having a boy, and one of his wings is extended over his head. It’s preventing him from coming out.”

“What can you do?” asked Charlie.

“Normally I’d suggest an emergency cesarean, but you’re right about this male. He’d have a hissy fit, literally, and with her unconscious, there’d be no one to control him.” He placed his hand on Kari’s wet forehead, and she opened her eyes. “Kari, I have to go in and straighten out your son’s wing. Your vitals are weak, but do you still have the strength to push this baby out?”

“I think so,” she said with a gasp as though each slow breath were her last.

Doc frowned at Shail, who watched like a hawk eyeing prey. “Look, you,” he growled. “Like me or not, this has to be done.” Doc dug through his bag and removed medical equipment, clamps, forceps, gloves, and so on. He also took out his laser gun and placed it on the side table. “Charlie, if this doesn’t work, you’ll have to stun him so I can do a C-section.” Doc moved to the foot of the bed with his equipment. Between Kari’s legs, he began to probe her. “Wish I knew more about these harpies.”

Charlie kept his focus on Shail. The harpy hyperventilated and clung to the sheets so hard, his fingernails ripped material as

Doc invaded his mate. He swallowed deeply and looked up at Charlie for reassurance. His huge blue eyes watered, and he sniffled with his small nose and bit his full lip, resembling a terrified little boy. “It’s all right, Shail. Doc is not going to let her die.”

“Got it,” said Doc. “The wing is folded back in place. Okay, Kari, push.”

Kari was wringing wet with sweat and gasping for air. She gripped Shail’s hand, and through her gritted her teeth she groaned quietly and strained with the contraction.

“I see the head,” Doc said. “Once more, Kari; one more good push.”

Kari took a deep breath, summoned her remaining strength, and pushed one last time. The little golden fledgling slid out into Doc’s hands.

Doc cleaned off the baby and cleared its throat of fluids. “Jesus, that was a rough delivery,” he said while he severed the cord. After a quick exam, he placed the baby on the bed between his exhausted parents. With no feathering on the wings, the infant looked like it had four arms, and unlike a human baby, it never cried. Kari glanced at the baby and closed her eyes, apparently too worn out to move, but Shail immediately licked and nuzzled his son.

“He’s removing your scent,” said Charlie, “and imprinting his own, so his son knows him.”

“Strange creatures, these harpies,” Doc commented and

stretched his back, standing. “People think they’re like us because of their humanoid body, but we’re worlds apart.”

“Couldn’t agree with you more,” Charlie said.

Doc placed his equipment in his bag and took the blankets and towels from Maria. “Let’s not worry about cleanup. Kari needs her rest, and changing the bedding can wait until tomorrow.”

As soon as Doc put the towels on the bed, Shail changed. The terror left his eyes, and they held a hard stare. He flung his locks back and rose. As his wings lifted from his back, he emitted one long, deadly hiss.

“We need to go, Doc,” said Charlie. “He’s protecting his family and wants us out.”

“He’s an ungrateful little shit,” Doc grumbled. “Patched him up last year and now saved his wife and kid, but instead of thanks, I get hissing.” He and Charlie stepped to Maria in the doorway as Shail climbed on the bed and covered his family with a wing, with his gaze fixed on the three humans.

“Thank God it’s over,” Maria said. “I still can’t believe Kari married that thing.”

“Maria, he’s a young male who was traumatized with the possible loss of his mate,” said Charlie. “He simply reverted to his animal nature. It’s not uncommon. Even dogs when stressed can relapse to their wild ancestors, the wolves. Try breaking up a dogfight, and you get bit. Shail was acting on instinct, the strongest being fear and devotion. He’s guarding his family, but in a few days his reasoning should return.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Doc. “I’m not worried about the baby, but I’d like to come back tomorrow and check Kari’s blood pressure and make sure she’s healing properly. I’ll call before I come, learn if this traumatized harpy is ready to cooperate.”

“Shail can’t thank you.” Charlie extended his hand. “But I do, Doc. Without you, our little Kari and her baby would’ve died.”

Doc shook his hand, and a grin emerged in his beard. “I’m glad I could help.” He looked back at Shail. “I hate to admit it, but seeing him brings back memories from my childhood, the fascination and excitement of spotting a golden male. Damn shame they were gunned down and he’s the last of them.”

“But you saved his son, and now Dora has two.”

## Chapter Two

Kari felt her son nursing on her breast and slowly opened her eyes. In the morning light, she stared at the white bedroom ceiling in her father's home, but the room smelled of minty jungle moss mixed with the delicate scent of flowers. She caressed the soft linen beneath her and recognized the texture. The goff insects wove the material within caves, and male harpies used it for their scant hip sashes, while females created light, airy robes out of the fabric. A feast of colors surrounded her, created by the thousands of wild flowers carefully interwoven into spongy green moss. Her mate had removed the soiled birthing sheets and transformed her old childhood bed into a gorgeous harpy nest.

*"It's beautiful, Shail,"* she relayed, knowing male harpies stayed close to their newborns, and he had to be near.

Shail stepped from the open balcony into the room and knelt beside her bed. *"No nest of flowers is as beautiful you."* His deep blue eyes shifted to his son. *"And him."*

She clutched the baby and smiled. *"He looks more like his handsome father. What should we call him?"*

Shail caressed the baby's blond hair. *"A harpy name is not usually given so young. A fledgling must earn it. I crawled across the smooth river rocks and was named Shail. My nest brother, Aron, took to the air early."* He tilted his head and held his chin in. *"His birth was so long and hard, I feared he had died within you, but he emerged. The will to live is strong in him."*

*“Will, that’s a good name. I like it, and William is also my father’s middle name.”*

*“Then we shall call him Will,”* he relayed and looked around the bedroom. *“You think of your father, and this place where he raised you. It brings sadness because you still miss him.”*

*“I was angry with Dad for trying to keep us apart, but then he stepped in front of the laser blast to protect you.”* She lowered her eyes to their baby. *“I just wish he could’ve seen his grandson.”*

Shail leaned over and kissed her forehead. *“Turner saved me so his grandson would have a father. He was a good man with a good heart. I too wish he still lived.”*

There was a knock on the bedroom door. Shail stood, and his wings lifted slightly off his back. His eyes narrowed, and he seethed softly through his teeth.

*“Shail, please, you know it’s only Charlie or Maria, and they’re hardly a threat.”* She called to the door with her human voice. *“Come in.”*

Charlie opened the door and peeked inside. *“Kari, are you okay? Doc called and wants to come over to give you a checkup.”*

*“Tell him I’m a little sore and tired, but I’m fine. I just need a few days of rest. Tell him he doesn’t need to come.”*

*“All right,”* Charlie said and looked at Shail. *“How about Shail? Has he calmed down yet?”*

*“I’m afraid he’ll also need a few more days. He has the new father jitters, and being in a house isn’t helping his nerves.”*

Charlie glanced over his shoulder. *“Maria is in the hallway*

with a tray of food. Do you want it?"

Kari glanced at the side table. On it sat yellow trisom fruit, her favorite, that Shail had picked during the night. "We have plenty of food." She then detected her mate's thoughts. "I suppose Maria baked nut bread and her fruit-filled pastries?"

"There's also juice and cheese," said Charlie. "I had to remind her that harpies are vegetarians."

"Put the tray inside the doorway, and tell Maria thanks," said Kari. "Shail can be ornery with humans, but he loves their food, especially bread."

Over the next few days, Kari was grateful that her edgy husband finally relaxed. He recovered from the stressful birth of his son and became less defensive around Charlie and Maria. He wasn't the best shut in. Unlike the tranquil little cabin in the woods, the large house held the constant scent of humans and sound of their voices. The creak of footsteps on the wood floors, the closing doors, and the downstairs hum and beep of appliances and machines all had him wide-eyed alert and anxious. He did begin to speak again and refine his human traits, but he wasn't the same Shail, hadn't been the same since his captivity in the Hampton hunting range the year before.

Among his flock and the humans, Shail put up a strong front, but Kari knew the fearless golden who had wooed her into becoming his mate was gone. His sleep was erratic, and he'd wake startled from horrific nightmares. To relieve the tension, he spent



half the night, wandering in the cool, soothing jungle. Concerned, Kari had questioned him numerous times, but Shail refused to disclose his dreams or the details of the abuse. He hid his emotional scars and seemed determined to take his secrets to the grave.

Kari held her baby and watched Shail as he leaned against the balcony doorway and gazed at the jungle. *“Shail, go outside. Swim in the ocean, or fly to the mountains. You don’t need to be in here.”*

Shail raised his head to show dominance and stared at her with defiant eyes. *“You forget. I am the male and decide if I need to fly or swim.”*

Kari shook her head. In the human world, women had equal rights, but among harpies, the male defended his female and made the decisions. Kari, however, didn’t abide by subordinate harpy roles and had no problem giving him orders. Upon their bonding, their diversity of culture had caused the occasional heated argument between the pair. *“Lower your head, and knock off the attitude. You’re driving me nuts with your moping in this house. The fresh air will do you good.”*

Shail dropped his head, and his gaze shifted to the floor. *“I know you worry for me. I try to change and be whole again for you, but am unsure if I can.”*

Kari set Will on the bed and stepped to Shail. She massaged his shoulder and sighed. *“You are the love of my life, whether you change or not. And you have succeeded where all*

*other golden monarchs have failed. You brought peace to your flock and have now given them a golden son, a future ruler. There is no more for you to do but enjoy life. I know male harpies live in the present and have difficulty grasping their future, but believe me, we have a wonderful life ahead of us, and you will heal. It just takes time.*” She patted his bottom and smiled. “*Now go on and have some fun.*”

He kissed her cheek and stepped out on the balcony. Spreading his wings, he flew toward the jungle behind the house. Kari covered her mouth and watched him disappear into the trees. “My sweet, troubled Shail, if I only knew how to help him.”

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Deep in the jungle, Shail fluttered his wings backwards and landed in a small stream. Like a dove in a birdbath, he doused his wings and slender body in the cool, clear water and then shook his wet locks and ruffled his feathers. For a male harpy to maintain healthy feathers, daily baths were required to remove the excess oil and dirt. After the bath, he stretched out on the bank and individually preened the long flight feathers with his fingers and mouth.

He thought about the conversation with Kari. His gloom was like a dark cloud that overshadowed her happiness. She feared for him but tried to hide it. He realized he needed to block the past from his mind to regain his daring nature and end the terrifying

dreams, but how?

He flew back to the estate, but instead of lighting on the bedroom balcony, he fluttered to the ground near the front porch.

Charlie sat in a rocker with a cold drink in his hand. Two large gray dogs that Kari called Irish Wolfhounds lay beside him. “Shail, you decided to come out in daylight. I’m glad to see you.”

When the dogs approached, Shail crouched and rubbed their shaggy necks. “My mate wished me to go. She says I am moping. This word is new, but I sense it is not good.”

Charlie chuckled. “It means you’re sulking, miserable.”

“At times I am.”

“Understandable, a roof and walls can make a male harpy mope. So how is your little boy?”

“He grows, and downy feathers now cover his wings.”

“He certainly is quiet. Maria and I have yet to hear him cry.”

Shail furrowed brow. “Why should he cry? He feels no pain and knows no fear. In the jungle, a noisy fledgling is a dead one. The sound brings predators.”

“Harpies are lucky. Human babies scream constantly and make a racket.”

“I believe this, since they grow into chattering adults that are never silent.” He straightened, and the dogs settled back on the porch. “I wish to find Doc. Do you know where this man lives?”

Charlie pointed across the meadow toward the jungle. “There’s a little town called Westend that’s east of here. Doc’s

cottage is yellow and at the end of the main street.”

“At night I have flown over this place many times and know his home.” He looked down and pushed some dirt around with his foot. “I wish to say you are a rare man, Charlie. You understand a harpy and have always been our friend. Without you, I might not have yielded that night, and I would have lost my family.” Before Charlie could respond, Shail bounded into the sky.

Shail soared over the main street of Westend, with its small stores and dwellings, and saw the old doctor’s yellow house at the end of the road. From his view above, he spotted Doc on his hands and knees in a backyard vegetable garden. Shail landed in front of him between the plant rows. The man apparently didn’t notice him and continued toiling in the dirt with a hand rake.

When Doc came upon Shail’s feet, he looked up anxiously. “Jesus Christ,” he yelled and fell backwards on his side. “Where the hell did you come from?”

Shail glanced upward.

“You scared the living shit out of me. You’re so damn quiet.” He climbed to his feet and dusted off his pants. “So what’s up? Any problems with Kari or the kid?”

“They are well.”

Doc chuckled. “You’re finally talking.” He meandered to a tree stump in the center of the yard and leaned against it. “So let’s keep them well. That delivery weakened your mate’s little body, and she needs at least a week of bed rest to recover, so don’t get any ideas of dragging her back to the sticks.”

“I am aware of her weakness and understand. I came here to thank you, since humans expect these words. Harpies sense each other. The telling is unneeded. Your healing magic saved my life, and now that of my family’s. For this I know not the words for such thanks.”

“You learned to talk pretty good and aren’t the same wild heathen I treated last year.”

“I am still wild but control my nature among humans.”

“You certainly lost control when your wife was in labor,” Doc said and wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve. “I nearly stunned you for acting like a maniac.”

Shail placed his hands on his hips and glared. “I am grateful to you, old man, but I am not sorry for my behavior. I am a harpy, not a sniveling man who has regrets.”

Doc scowled. “You’re also an arrogant, yellow-winged prick.” The white-haired man slowly grinned and then laughed. “But I like you, Shail. You tell it like it is. I respect that. Let’s go inside and get out of this heat. I’ll treat you to the best lemonade in the Outback.”

Shail trailed the old man through the back door and into the cottage. While Doc fixed lemonade in the kitchen, Shail wandered from room to room and recalled his terror, trapped within the suffocating building, too weak and injured to escape as he anticipated his agonizing death. As prized game trophies, captured male harpies had once suffered the fate of being dressed out alive. Hung by their wrists, they dangled helplessly as the hunters hacked

off their sex organs and wings, watching the harpy squirm and bleed out.

Shail shuttered with the thought and returned to the kitchen and Doc. “When here last, I believed my life was over.”

“Yeah, you were in pretty bad shape after those Westend boys shot you. I was amazed when you survived those injuries.” As Doc handed him a cold glass filled with yellow liquid, he inspected the old wound below Shail’s ribs. “You still have a little scar where I did surgery.”

“It is a reminder of the good and evil in men. The hunters hurt me. You healed me.” He sniffed the drink before taking a sip. He wrinkled his nose with the sour-sweet taste. “I wish to ask you about your healing magic. Can you cure a mind? Remove bad memories and dreams so one does not mope?”

Doc settled on a stool near the counter. “Sounds like depression. Humans take pills that can calm anxiety and helps them sleep. They feel better, happier, but they’ll always have the memories. If you’re referring to a depressed harpy, I’m not sure the medication is wise. You guys rely on telepathy to communicate. The pills could numb your senses and destroy those instincts.”

“I see,” Shail said quietly. He stared out the window at the garden in the yard. “You grow the plants for food?”

“I prefer fresh vegetables and can’t stomach the packaged crap that comes out of those confounded machines. I’ve been meaning to remove that stump and expand my garden, but never

get around to it.”

Shail placed his drink on the counter and walked outside. He circled the stump as Doc watched him from the doorway.

When Shail extended his wings, Doc asked, “Where are you going?”

Shail flew away but soon returned with four brown-winged male harpies. They landed in the yard and began digging around the stump’s roots with their hands.

“I’ll be damned,” Doc said, approaching them. He grabbed a shovel and pitched in to help.

Doc’s young next door neighbor called from his porch, “What’s going on, Doc? I saw the harpies fly in.”

Doc leaned on the shovel handle. “Apparently, Shail has decided to remove this stump, since I delivered his son at the Turner Estate.”

Gene walked into Doc’s yard with an open mouth and startled eyes fixed on Shail. “I’ll be darn. It’s really him.” After watching a minute, he reached in his pocket and took out a small com. “It’ll take forever to remove that stump by hand, and I know a guy with heavy equipment.” He punched in the numbers and placed a call. “Dick, get over here with a backhoe. You’re not going to believe this, but the golden harpy and some of his flock are trying to remove a stump from Doc’s backyard. They could use the help.” He paused for a moment. “I’m not shitting you. Shail is really here. Doc delivered his fledgling, so he’s returning the favor.”

Word spread quickly that Shail was in the little town of Westend. Within a half-hour, the residents merged on Doc's cottage. The men carried buzz saws and shovels, and the women brought food and drinks for the laborers. The small yard resembled a party, with the spotlight on Shail. Most folks had never seen their golden ruler but knew everything about him. Kari had told Shail about the press articles that portrayed him as the dashing winged hero of the planet and handsome ruler of the Outback.

Shail didn't relish the fanfare, the humans obsessing and idolizing him, but he eventually gave in and played along. He sensed that men admired his courage, wisdom, and honesty, while women became smitten with his looks. The children longed to be like him, a superhero who could fly.

By the afternoon, the stump had been pulled up with the heavy equipment, cut up, and hauled away. Shail nodded to his harpies and shook hands with the men as they left for home.

Doc walked up to Shail. "I want to thank you, Shail."

"I said a harpy needs not hear the words."

"I suppose, but I wasn't talking about the stump. I might've treated your wounds and delivered your son, but despite all the cruelties done to you and your flock, you forgave and rescued us from the swarms. Your compassion put us to shame. We can't thank you enough."



In the river city of Terrance, Windy stood at the back of the town hall meeting. Her waist-length blonde hair hung over the white harpy robe as she watched the several hundred locals argue about the city's future and lack of income based on timber. A few weeks earlier, her son Shail had lost his patience with the Terrance residents and ordered the complete halt of the timber harvest. The room seemed divided, half frustrated with Shail's decision and the other half agreeing that the jungle should be preserved.

Aron, a brown-winged flock leader and Shail's most trusted friend, was beside Windy. Aron's father had adopted her five-year-old son when Shail's father was slain. Raised in the same nest, Aron and Shail grew up like brothers.

*"It is good Shail does not hear them,"* Aron relayed. *"He would cast them out of our land."*

*"Aron, it is their way, voicing their opinions."* Windy was accustomed to people ranting. After the death of her golden mate, Shail's father, she had married the governor of Dora and lived in Hampton with the hope she could help the harpies and end the hunting. When her human husband died and the beetle swarms no longer threatened, Windy moved to Terrance to help her son rule the humans. Harpy laws were simple: do no harm to harpy, human, animal, or tree. The towns and settlement in the outback maintained the same democratic government they had before Shail came into power. Elections for mayor and city commissioners took place, and a police force upheld the standard laws.

Aron ruffled his feathers with irritation. *"They lack respect*

*for Shail and his decisions.”*

“*Perhaps you should remind them.*” When Shail was not there, she oversaw Terrance, the largest city in the western continent, and Aron would fly in as a symbol of harpy authority.

Aron closed his eyes in agreement.

Windy watched him saunter down the center aisle between the rows of the seated people, his sweeping chocolate flight feathers nearing touching the floor. Aron was a magnificent harpy, older, taller, and more levelheaded than her reckless golden son. He rarely spoke, and his aloof mannerism and hard green-eyed stare made most people nervous. With his tiptoe-ish stride, he approached the dais of commissioners and mayor at the front of the room.

The mayor rose and asked humbly, “You wish to add something, Aron?”

Aron turned toward the crowd and flung his shoulder-length brown locks from his eyes. “Shail has decided,” he growled in a low, imposing voice. “The jungle is to remain as is. Your talk defies his wishes.”

“We understand what Shail wants,” said the mayor, “but it has placed a hardship on some of these people. They need the lumber for their income.”

“Then seek other income. Your needs are no more important than the animal’s need for tree shelter and food. If you disagree...” Aron arched his wings. “You should not live here.”

An uncomfortable silence filled the room, and the people

stared at their feet, too intimidated to meet Aron's gaze. A harpy's arched wings were a display of anger and done in preparation of combat. If one bickered with the harpy, he might be snatched up and dropped on the other side of the river, out of harpy land.

To everyone's surprise, a hefty, bearded man in his forties rose from his seat and faced Aron. "I'd like to say something. My name's Mark Sawyer. I'm a retired war vet, and I moved here recently to find some peace. I've been to plenty of planets, and you people don't realize what you have here. Dora is a paradise, like stepping back into Earth's Jurassic period with giant ferns, trees, and unbelievable flying creatures, and you want to destroy it and bring in civilization," he said with a head shake. "I agree with the harpy. This place should be left alone. But what he said about the animal's need for food got me thinking. The trees are loaded with rare exotic fruit. Imagine what people on other planets would pay for it. It could be the answer to your dilemma and replace the timber economy." He sat back down.

The town hall meeting rumbled with voices, the people discussing this new option. One of the commissioners stood. "That's an excellent idea, Mr. Sawyer. After the wet season, the fruit could be harvested. There's so much then that most of it rots on the ground, and we wouldn't infringe on the animals."

"We'd have to build a warehouse for packing and shipping," said the mayor. "We could even go into jellies and jams." He turned to Aron. "What do you think?"

Aron's wings folded against his back. "This could be done.

A harpy can pick fruit in high trees more easily than a human. My flock shall help, if you wish.”

The mayor looked to the back of the room. “Miss Windy, what’s your opinion of this plan? Think Shail will like it?”

Windy smiled. “I believe my son will be very pleased.”

After the meeting, Windy stepped outside with Aron. “*That went well.*”

Ted, a young man who was in charge of the Terrance airport, walked up to them. He had befriended Kari on the spaceship when she left Earth and returned to Dora, and later he comforted her when Shail was imprisoned in the Hampton hunting range. “Any word if Kari has had her baby?”

“None,” said Windy, “but harpies don’t announce a birth like humans. We wait until the fledgling is strong and sure of survival.”

Aron placed his hand on Ted’s shoulder, his eyes holding a glint of amusement. “Ted, you worry as if the father of her fledgling.”

With a frown, Ted brushed Aron’s hand away. “I promised to protect Kari, and I’m just following through. And my personal feelings are none of your business, so stop the mind probing.”

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In the predawn hour, the Turner house was dark and silent. Shail slept on his side in the nest bed with his nude body coiled

against Kari's back. His extended wing covered her and their fledgling cradled in her arms. He woke, hearing a vague humming in the distant jungle. The sound had once sent shivers through every harpy, since it signaled the approach of a hovercraft and deadly hunters. He nuzzled Kari's neck to wake her. *"Someone comes."*

"At this hour?" she mumbled. "Are you sure?"

He withdrew his wing and slipped off the bed. He grabbed his hip sash and tied it around his waist, covering his genitals, and stepped out on the balcony. Dora's twin moons lit up the jungle, shrouded in mist. *"It is many hovercrafts."* He turned back to the bedroom. *"I cannot defend you here. We must flee to the trees."*

Kari sat up and turned on a light. *"Just hold on, Shail. You're probably getting rattled over nothing. You're the ruler of the Outback. No one would dare harm you."*

A harpy landed on the balcony and knelt, bowing his head to Shail. He was out of breath, and his body dripped with sweat. Shail knew him as Reaf, the dominant male of a small flock that dwelled in the territory. Reaf's mate, Lea, was Aron's sister and Kari's best friend.

*"Who are they?"*

Reaf stood. *"Unknown, Master. A river harpy sent word that many humans came in the night from the east. Humans in settlements throughout our land also travel here. None hold weapons, but the flock leaders fear this massing, since their intentions are unclear."*

A small com on a side table began to buzz. Kari answered it as Shail came in and stood beside her. A man appeared on the screen. “Miss Turner, I’m with Hampton Journal. There’s a rumor spreading across the continent that you’ve had Shail’s baby, and it’s a boy. Could you confirm this for our paper?”

Before Kari could answer, Shail closed the com lid, which cut off the caller.

*“That’s what this is about, Shail. When you helped Doc remove the stump yesterday, the word got out about your son. Those hovers are probably full of well wishers and reporters.”*

Shail paced the room, agitated with the invasion of the curious. *“My family is none of their concern. If Will was older and you stronger, I would fly you from this place.”*

Kari took his arm. *“Hiding in the jungle is not the answer. I know you like our privacy, but you’re a celebrity, and the people love you. They want to celebrate the birth of our son. It’s better to let them take their pictures, write their stories, and be done with it. It’s not going to go away.”*

Shail ruffled his feathers and turned to Reaf. *“Bring enough harpies to guard this house. Allow no one in.”*

With a nod, Reaf flew away. The com buzzed again.

*“Do not speak to it, Kari.”* It rang for a while and then stopped.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the bedroom door. “Kari,” Charlie called from the hallway. “There’s a reporter on the com, and he wants to talk to you or Shail.”

“Disconnect the coms, Charlie,” said Kari. “The whole world has learned about our fledgling, and they’re on their way.”

“Good grief,” responded Charlie. “I’d better tell Maria. Make sure she’s up and dressed.”

Kari moved off the nest bed and stood alongside Shail as he gazed out the balcony, watching the faint gray light of dawn creep into the eastern sky. *“I doubt you’ll be bathing in your stream this morning, but we have time for a quick shower before they all arrive.”* She took his hand, lacing her fingers through his. *“Come on. Your harpies will guard the house.”*

*“That water is for humans.”*

*“I know, but it’s warm and soothing. This will be fun.”*

*“Your fun, not mine,”* he relayed but allowed her to guide him into the bathroom off the bedroom. She explained the toilet, sink, and shower and then removed his sash. She turned on the water and led him into the stone-walled shower stall.

As she lathered his hair and tan body with soap, he scowled. *“I am not a pet, Kari.”*

*“A little domestication won’t hurt you.”*

He hated to admit that the warm water felt good, but he could have done without perfumed soap that made him stink like a flower. In the close quarters with his nude mate washing him, he unintentionally became aroused. She smiled and filled her hand filled with soap and began fondling his sex organs.

*“No, Kari, do not encourage me. This is not our way. A male loses his seed only for creating his offspring.”*

*“Some rules are meant to be broken. You’ve gone without for a long time, so close your eyes and let me pleasure you.”*

Under the circumstance, he could hardly argue. He leaned back against the cool stone with the balmy water flowing over his body and shut his eyes, but he could still picture his lovely mate, smell her sweet scent, and feel her small firm breasts against his chest as her hand stroked his erection. With the stimulation, he began to pant. *“The humans gather outside, and I am here, allowing a thing forbidden to harpies.”*

*“Stop feeling guilty, and don’t fight it. You deserve more pleasure in your life.”*

Conflicted about yielding to the gratification like a self-indulgent man or staying true to his harpy nature, he resisted. Apparently sensing his unwillingness to climax, Kari bit him hard on his neck. The pain caused him to lose focus, and he trembled with excitement. He clutched her and gasped. *“Female, I am yours. Take what you wish.”*

*“Then let go.”*

With her request, his wings shook violently as he strained and released his seed. His wings drooped, and he breathlessly watched his discarded seed washed down the shower drain.

She glanced up with smirk. *“Any regrets about taking a shower?”*

He bashfully shook his head.

Kari slipped on a white harpy robe and sat down before the vanity mirror in the bathroom. She dried and brushed her long



blonde hair, preparing to meet the human crowd.

He leaned against the doorjamb and watched her, wondering, as he often had, about her unconventional ways. She was unlike other female harpies. Perhaps being half-human and raised by a powerful father had caused her to be different, more independent, or maybe her boldness came from her mother's golden bloodline. Either way, she was his equal and the only creature alive that dare defy him. With their bonding, she had taught him to accept the untraditional, such as sexual pleasure in a shower. He bent over and kissed her cheek. "*I love you.*"

"*I know.*" She smiled and wove a cluster of white flowers into her hair.

Hearing a tapping on the bedroom door, Shail left the bathroom and opened the door.

Maria's fretful eyes stared up at him. "Where's Kari?"

Shail glanced over his wing. "In the water room." Submissively, he lowered his head to the old woman. "Come in, Maria," he said softly, but she hesitated. "You need not fear me. You raised my mate when her mother died. I would never harm you."

"I've never spoken to a harpy, but I'm starting to believe I've been wrong about your kind."

"Maria, I *am* a harpy," Kari said, walking into the bedroom, "and you've spoken to me since I was a baby."

"I meant boy harpies." Maria brushed past Shail's wing and entered the room. "There're hovers and vehicles parked all over

the meadow, and a large crowd of people is gathered in front of the house, but a bunch of harpies are on the porch, keeping them from the doors. Charlie says Shail needs to handle this before there's a fight."

"We know." Kari stepped to the bed and picked up her fledgling, wrapping him in the same white cloth as her robe and his sash. Shail kissed her forehead and caressed his son's head. "You're ready?" she asked, and he gave a nod.

Maria covered her mouth, and her eyes grew moist. "You're the most gorgeous family I've ever seen. Mr. Turner once said that Shail was everything a man should be, but I didn't believe it, couldn't understand why you ran away and took up with this harpy. Now I understand." Kari kissed Maria's cheek, and the group went downstairs.

Shail opened the foyer doors to the veranda. The twenty male harpies bowed their heads and moved back, giving him a wide berth, as several hundred humans erupted with cheers and clapping. He stepped to the edge of the porch, and Kari joined him, holding their son. Shail half-extended a wing, partially cloaking his family in protective feathers, and gazed out at the adoring crowd, happy that the rare golden numbers had increased by one. Harpy males, females, and their young emerged from the nearby woods and joined the people. They, too, wished to pay tribute to their ruler and his new little prince.

Shail raised his hand to silence the humans. Quickly the place was still, except for jungle sounds of singing birds and

animal calls. “I sense you are pleased with my son,” he said, forcing his subtle voice to be heard. “He comes during this first season of peace between us. I promise I shall raise him to be a strong, wise, honorable ruler, so when he comes of age and reigns over this land, the peace shall continue.”

When the clapping and cheering died down, a reporter asked, “Shail, what’s your son’s name?”

“He is called Will. His birth was difficult, yet he showed the willpower to survive.”

“What’s he weigh?” another man called.

Shail tilted his head, puzzled with the obvious. “He is light.” The humans laughed.

“Will you be staying at the Turner estate now that your son is born?” asked another.

“He shall be raised among the trees, like all harpies.”

A few more questions were asked. Once the crowd seemed content that they had seen his fledgling, Kari and Shail retreated to the cover of the house, Shail relieved to put the intrusion behind them.

The front porch was littered with thousands of flowers, and more arrived each day. Shail would have preferred to take his family deep in the woods and away from the publicity and fans, but against his animal impulses, he followed the doctor’s orders and allowed Kari to recover at the estate.

## Chapter Three

In the eastern city of Hampton, Governor Sam Waters sat at his office desk with eyes closed and massaged his forehead. Joel, one of his advisors, stood patiently before him, awaiting his response. After a minute, Waters looked up and sighed. "I've put it off too long. I have to tell him, Joel."

"How do you think the harpy will take it?"

"I know how I'd take it," he growled. "I'd feel goddamn betrayed." He ran his fingers through his thick black hair and rose from the chair. "For the life of me, I don't understand these senators. Shail saved their lives along with fifty thousand others when he destroyed the swarms last year. He then had his harpies feed us and help us erect temporary shelters until Hampton and Terrance could be rebuilt. He's done everything possible to heal the rift between harpies and men and make the relationship work. And now mankind is stabbing him in the back again."

"Governor, you've done your best to protect the harpies. No one can argue with that."

"Shail might argue. Harpies see things in black or white. He trusted me, trusted our laws and treaty. When he learns of this, he'll feel deceived and that we have no honor, and he's bloody well right. Notify my hover. I want to leave for the Outback within the hour."

"Perhaps you should consider a com call. It's wiser and safer rather than a face-to-face. Shail is part-animal, making him

unpredictable, and he's a golden harpy, known for their aggression. He proved it when he murdered four men."

"It was self-defense. Those men abused him and got what they deserved. I'm not calling him with this news. Harpies have incredible instincts, but they can't sense a person's mind over a com. I have to go so he knows I'm still on his side. Do you have his current location?"

"As of yesterday, reports indicate he hasn't returned to Terrance or his home range in the northern mountains but is still at the Turner estate outside of Westend. His mate is recuperating from the birth of their fledgling."

"I heard Kari and the baby nearly died. Poor Shail, he's been through so much, and here I come with more bad news."

"Governor Waters, I'm still concerned for your welfare. You should at least bring extra security."

"Show up at his home with men and weapons? I don't think so. I'd like to salvage his friendship and trust, not destroy it." Waters lifted an eyebrow. "Besides, if Shail wanted to harm me, no amount of protection would save me here or there."

At the Turner estate, Shail stood in the vegetable garden beside the house and watched Charlie hoe a row of corn. "I do not understand the need for these pet plants. You, Doc, and other humans work hard for them, when the jungle holds much food."

Charlie leaned on the hoe and chuckled. "To a harpy, we must seem ridiculous; the digging, spraying, watering to keep these

measly Earth plants alive, but Maria loves tomato sauce in her dishes.” He picked a small red fruit off a vine and handed it to Shail. “Try one.”

Shail popped it into his mouth and noticed it wasn’t sweet, sour, or spicy, but tasted bland. He ruffled his feathers and swallowed the fruit. Trying to be diplomatic, he said, “It is different.”

Charlie laughed. “Not impressed. I suppose tomatoes take getting used to.”

Shail lifted his head toward the western sky and jungle. “A hover comes, a large one.” He flew to the front porch to defend the doors, unsure if the hover held friend or foe.

Charlie followed at a trot and was out of breath when he climbed the porch steps. “You still hear it, Shail?” he puffed.

Shail nodded and arched his wings. “It comes fast.” Eventually the olive green and black hover came into view, proving to be five times the size of a private four-seat hover.

“Green and black, that’s government,” Charlie said. “There must be some important people on board.” Soon the craft set down in the cattle pasture just beyond the house. When the hover door opened, a lean forty-year-old man with jet-black hair stepped out. Recognizing Sam Waters, the governor of Dora, Shail folded his wings and walked toward him.

Waters smiled. “Shail, I’m glad I found you here. I’ve missed our talks.”

“I, too, have longed for the words between us.” Shail shook

hands with the governor, learning that handshaking was a common greeting among humans. “Your visit is unexpected. Never before have you come.”

“I had to see your son and congratulate you. The harpies must be delighted with the new addition to the golden bloodline.”

Shail eyed Waters and slowly nodded. “Come. He is in the house.” As he led Waters to the doors, he explained, “My mate had trouble with his birth. The doctor said she must stay here and rest.”

“You must’ve been terrified.” They walked inside and climbed the steps to the upstairs bedroom.

“I was, but every light, I mean every day,” Shail rephrased, “she grows stronger.” He opened the bedroom door.

Kari sat in the flowered nest holding Will. She smiled upon seeing the governor. “Sam, what a wonderful surprise.”

“I had to come see your boy for myself, and a visit to the Outback was long overdue.” Waters stepped to the bed and peered down at the winged infant. “The photos in the paper didn’t do him justice. I’ve never seen a more beautiful baby. He’s as handsome as his father.”

“He does look like Shail.”

“Are you all right? I heard you had trouble.”

As Waters and Kari talked, Shail stood quietly at the foot of the bed. When touching Waters’ hand, he had sensed stress, fear, and guilt in the man. Despite the polite smiles and pleasant talk, the governor was worried and had not traveled across the continent to see a fledgling.

“Sam, have a seat,” said Kari. “Would you like something to drink?”

“No,” Shail responded, interrupting their conversation. “Come, Waters, we must talk.”

Waters took Kari’s hand. “Yes, Shail and I do need to discuss a few things. Take care of yourself, and your baby is just gorgeous.” He followed Shail downstairs to the study.

Shail closed the door, whirled around, and glared at the man. “Why are you here? And do not lie and say that you wish to see my son.”

“I wasn’t lying. I’m just not as direct as you. I admire you for that. Nothing gets past you, and you don’t mince words.” Waters rubbed his jaw. “I came here because we have a serious problem. I’ve held off telling you, hoping I could resolve it. You’ve had enough hardships. Unfortunately, things are coming to a head, and I can’t keep you in the dark any longer.”

Waters’ anguish was apparent, and Shail motioned to a chair opposite the large desk. “Sit and explain.” Waters sat down, and Shail leaned against the desk, facing him.

“Where to begin?” Waters said with sigh. “A few months after your flock destroyed the swarms, the Dora senators filed a motion in the Galactic appellate courts, saying our treaty was illegal for several reasons. The first issue is that Dora is colony, and only the federal government can approve and sign a treaty. Before I could ratify the treaty with the government, the senators filed their case and stopped it. The second issue, and the most



damning, is the senators contend that harpies are animals and should never been given human rights. My lawyers had Dr. David Watkins, who did the harpy study on Dora, testify on your behalf. Watkins stated that the DNA evidence proves you are indeed part-human, and in his opinion you are intelligent mortals, comparable with humans. The problem is harpies are a unique species. There are no laws on the books to give you equality or to designate you as animals. My lawyers even tried to list you as alien beings, but our own evidence is against us. Men created the harpies when they procreated with the local eagles, so you carry human blood and don't qualify as aliens. The senator lawyers countered that an animal called a chimpanzee has ninety-nine percent of human DNA, and they are also intelligent, and yet chimpanzees are still considered animals with no human rights. My lawyers have informed me that the senators have a strong case. The treaty will probably be tossed, so you'll lose ownership of the Outback land. But my biggest concern is your loss of status." Waters ran his fingers through his hair and looked up at Shail. "Do you understand all this?"

"It means that things shall go back as before, my harpies hunted again."

"Yes, if the court rules in favor of the senators, you'll be listed as animals. Men can legally kill you. Even if this appellate case is lost, we can still file a petition before the Galactic Supreme Court, but that takes time, at least a year."

Shail paced the room and ruffled his feathers. "Explain this

court that decides such things.” His soft voice had become forceful and edgy.

“The court is on the planet Earth, and it’s made up of several wise men called judges. They hear both sides of an issue and make a decision on the facts, laws, and what’s fair.”

“How can they be wise and fair if they know not what they judge? These men have never seen a harpy.” His wings arched slightly from provocation. “And what of the humans I saved last season so my flock could live in peace? Was there no honor in that?”

“My lawyers argued that point, but the senators countered that many types of animals serve and protect humans. The judges dismissed it, saying that the human lives saved from the beetle swarms were irrelevant to the case. I’m sorry, Shail. I’m so damn sorry.”

Shail lowered his wings and walked to the window. “I was warned not to trust humans, told I should let the swarms rid us of our enemy, but I could not. I encountered many good humans and believed a friendship would grow, once your people knew and understood my harpies.” He glanced back at Waters. “Was I wrong, foolish?”

“No, the people of Dora haven’t forgotten what you did for them, and they will continue to love and respect you despite the court’s decision. And Shail, the case is pending. There’s a chance the judges will rule in your favor.”

“Do not waste false hope on a harpy. You do not believe

we shall win.”

The governor looked down. “I wasn’t trying to deceive you,” he said sadly. “I’m the one who could use some optimism. I’m sick about this. We voted on the law to give you rights and drew up the treaty in one night without researching the facts. You trusted me, and I’ve let you down.”

Shail inhaled deeply to calm his nerves. He sensed Waters’ torment over the double cross that he had failed to predict. “I know you are my friend, and the blame is not yours. Bad things happen and are unforeseen. The court must decide if harpies are equal to men, but in truth, we are not. We are different.”

“You’re not equal, but better than men. Humans lack the integrity and compassion of harpies. After decades of cruelty and hunting, you absolved us and saved our lives. Even now, Shail, you should be angry.”

Shail breathed deeply. “I am angry, but this feeling is toward the senators. If harm comes to my flock because of those men, they shall not see anger, but a golden’s rage.”

“I don’t understand the senators. Their lives were spared as well. The Dora people are not happy with them for concealing the truth about the harpies, and they have no hope of reelection. When word gets out about this case, they’ll truly be despised.”

Shail strolled around the room and stopped. He gazed at the ceiling in thought. “It is greed that disgraces and drives such men. As animals, we must hold more value.”

“Last year, you were sold for three million credits at the

hunting-range auction, but I can't believe the senators would make enemies of everyone on the planet and incur court costs, just for harpy wings."

"I would give them my wings if it would protect my flock, but I agree. They long for more than feathers."

Waters stood and rubbed his forehead. "Until we know more, I'm at my wits end as to what to do. If the appellate court rules against you, as governor I can bypass the senators and have the people vote on new laws. We can prohibit harpy hunting and list you as an endangered species, even set aside sanctuary lands for your flock, but that has a downside. By voting for protective laws, the Dora people would confirm your status as animals, and you'd lose any chance of winning in future courts. Besides, the endangered-species law is no real protection. The fine for violators is ten thousand credits or a short prison term. It never stopped illegal hunting in the past and won't stop it now, especially when one pair of brown wings is worth five times the cost of the fine."

"Keep the laws. They are only for the honorable among you. The harpies must turn away from mankind and seek our own fate."

"What do you plan to do, Shail?"

"In the past, my males sacrificed their lives by luring hunters away from our fledglings, but this has been a season of change. Humans know of our females, and they cannot hide as women in your towns anymore. Also, the harpies have lived among your kind and lost their fear. For these reasons, my males

shall shake off their gentle nature and attack any hunter who crosses the river.”

“Shail, those men will have laser guns. They’ll slaughter your harpies. Don’t confront them,” Waters pleaded. “Hide your harpies in the jungle until the court rules.”

“No, Waters, it is the hunters who now face slaughter. I have honored our truce and protected your humans. I yield no more.”

Waters stared at his feet. “I understand. I’ll continue to do everything in my power to help you. Just remember the people on this planet care about you and don’t want your harpies harmed.”

“The friendship exists, but with the flow of men’s blood, many shall turn away from us.”

Waters placed his hands on Shail’s shoulders. “I won’t be one of them.”

Shail stared into the other’s eyes and could only nod.

“The case ends in a few days. The judges could hand down their decision as soon as next week, but it usually takes longer. I’ll let you know immediately. Shail, I’ll fight this to the end.”

“Do what you must, but I am the harpy ruler, protector of my flock. Their lives are my only concern. I do not wish conflict but fear it comes.”

Waters bit his lip and patted Shail’s shoulder again. Without a word, he left the house and walked to the hovercraft in the meadow.

Shail stood on the porch and watched the craft disappear

over the eastern jungle. He closed his eyes. All his hopes of peace and happiness were gone in a blink, replaced with insecurity and worry. With the coming struggle, was he wise and brave enough to preserve his harpies? He heard the front door open.

Charlie stepped out. "Shail, are you all right?"

In a daze, Shail glanced at the concerned old man but couldn't answer him. He disheveled his feathers, trying to shake off the devastating feeling, the weight of a world bearing down on his wings. He stepped inside and hurried up the stairs to Kari's bedroom.

Kari's eyes watered as Shail explained what he had learned from the governor.

*"I do not wish to leave," he relayed, "but must prepare the harpies for what may come. We shall make our stand along the river and must ask the humans to leave. Their safety lies in the east. When I return, you must be strong for travel. This house shall be dangerous. I shall take you and Will to the sacred mountain. It is the safest place."*

*"I'll be strong enough. How could this have happened?"*

He gathered her in his arms and kissed her. *"Do not worry. I promise no harm shall come to you and our son."*

*"Can you also promise you won't be killed?"*

He cleared his throat and spoke. "I cannot."

Shail flew a short distance into the jungle and landed on a fan limb. *“Reaf, I need you,”* he telepathically called into the trees. In minutes, Reaf landed beside him. *“I must go to the large river of the east. Bring the strongest males from your flock and defend my family. I hope to return in three lights.”*

*“I am honored to protect the golden family.”*

Bounding off the limb, Shail flapped his wings hard and never slowed to glide and regenerate his energy. He wanted to get there fast, set things in motion, and return as quickly as possible. Straying so far from his newborn was uncharacteristic of a male harpy, but he had no choice. He was the last golden male, the ruler and guardian of his flock. His role took precedence over his personal life.

At dusk, he reached the expansive river that divided the continent in half and flew north along the muddy banks toward Terrance. Night closed in, but twenty miles away against the black sky, he saw the vague light on the horizon, created by the building and street lights of the town. The howls and cries of the nocturnal jungle creatures lessened as he approached human civilization.

At Terrance, he sailed over the newly built homes and stores, all painted in pale multicolors with white lattice, doors, and carved railings to copy a Victorian era on Earth. A golden flicker of street lanterns lit the quiet brick streets. Though harpy, he admired the beautiful little town that he had allowed and helped the humans create. He sighed, wondering what would happen to this peaceful place and its people if war came to the Outback. On

the outskirts of town, he landed at his mother's home.

Windy smiled. *"Shail, I did not expect you."* Her smile vanished. Her brow furrowed. *"What is it, son?"*

He stepped inside and hugged her. *"Bad news, bad news, Mother."* He breathed deeply and released her. *"It is over. The peace with the humans, the calm of our jungle is at an end."* On a soft rug in front of a fireplace, he sat down, clutched his legs, and gazed at the small flames as he told her about the pending court case.

Windy took a chair nearby. When he finished, she stood and paced the room. She stopped and turned to him. *"But Shail, from what you say it is not definite. The court might find for us."*

*"I sensed Waters' doubts. This court shall take away our land and bring back harpy hunting. I need your help. Gather all females, their young, and males too young or old to fight and take them to the sacred mountain. Humans know not where it dwells, and it must remain so. Do not use com calls or have hovercrafts go near the mountain. Humans once trusted might lose their loyalty when the killing begins."*

*"You plan to fight?"*

*"Yes. Waters knows and shall give warning. Any man who crosses the river and enters our land risks death. I know the kind that shall come, hunters hunger for our feathers and who find pleasure in our blood. There is no shame in killing those men."*

Late at night, Shail left his mother and sought a moss-covered limb. The cushiony orange moss, though, failed to yield a



peaceful night of sleep. He was far too upset, thinking about his flock's future.

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Predawn, Shail flew to the Terrance airport and tread back and forth across the smooth pavement, waiting for the sun to rise and the humans to wake. He tossed his lengthy locks with nervousness, as he had often done before the peace. He shuddered as if chilled by a cold wind of an approaching storm, wondering if his harpies would survive it.

The sun crested above the tree canopy, and Ted soon arrived in his terrain vehicle. The good-natured young man pulled up alongside Shail and grinned. "Hey, Shail, you're back. Checking to see if the place went to hell without your clout?" he joked.

"I bear ill news. Make the emergence call, and have the town people come here."

Ted's eyes filled with worry. "Is Kari all right?"

Try as he might, Ted couldn't conceal his feelings about Kari. Shail sensed how much the man loved his mate, since the day they had met on the spaceship from Earth. Initially, Shail was outraged that a pathetic human had designs on his female, but now he felt sorry for Ted. "Kari is well. Go and do as I ask."

Ted trotted to the small airport terminal to broadcast the com call that usually warned citizens of destructive weather. When

unlocking the door, he looked back at Shail. “Oh, congratulations on your son,” he said and disappeared inside.

Aron flew rapidly over the port and landed beside Shail. *“Your mother told me of the human betrayal.”* He growled with fury in his wide green eyes. With a raised head and wings, he was clearly incensed.

*“Betrayed, yes, but not by Waters and the humans who live here. But you have proven to be right. I should have heeded your advice and let the swarms kill the humans last season. We would not face this danger now.”*

Aron relaxed his wings. *“No, I was wrong. I am glad you chose to save them. I have found many worthy men. And to allow the women and children to die...”* He looked up and seethed. *“You toy with me; your words false. You have no regrets.”*

*“You were enraged, and anger destroys reason. I need you, but must have a steady, focused harpy at my side if we are to win this war.”*

Aron nodded. *“I do not understand how these men in the stars can judge a harpy.”*

*“They cannot. Laws and courts are for men. We must rule our own destiny. Let this be our legacy, never to fear and flee again. All may fall, but we fall with dignity. This is how we shall be judged.”*

*“You are unlike past rulers, taking your flock down unexplored paths. Last season you negotiated an unheard-of truce with the humans, and you have now decided to take on an*

*undefeatable foe. To kill hunters shall bring the army from the stars. You know this. I am unsure if courage or insanity drives you, but...*” Aron dropped to his knees and bowed his head. *“I shall follow you to the end, brother. What are your wishes?”*

*“We must first protect the females and young. Send your males across the land and tell the other flocks to hide their families within the sacred mountain.”*

*“Your mother says that several large metal birds come and shall take those here to the west coast.”*

*“Once our families are safe, we need to line our males along the riverbank. In the past, hunters came to Terrance before they scattered across the Outback. We must stop this scatter. But the seas to the south and west shall be the greatest challenge, for there are few harpies to guard those borders.”*

*“I shall see to the females now,”* Aron said and took flight.

Shail saw many vehicles approaching from Terrance. They parked on the airport landing pad, and the humans converged on the building and Shail. Their voices were loud and full of tension, knowing he had bad news. Shail watched them with a heavy heart, his friendship with them ending. Before long, the entire town was present.

Aron flew back to Shail and reported in silence, *“Your words spread. The females make ready to travel to the mountain and leave with the fading light. Others are being told.”*

Shail nodded and focused on the large human crowd. Many faces held fond memories.

“Hi, Shail,” a little girl called. “I’ve missed you.”

“I have missed you too, Anna,” Shail responded quietly. He raised his hands to silence the crowd’s babble. “I have news that affects all of us. The senators have gone to an Earth court and claimed harpies are animals, not equal to men. They seek to take away our rights and abandon the treaty that gave us this land.”

Appalled voices rose, and many ranted with alarm. “They can’t do that!” yelled the mayor. “We voted for your rights, and Dora laws stand.”

Shail raised his hands again, and the noise subsided. “The governor says they can. Waters fights for us in court, but the senators’ case is strong, and we shall probably lose.” The people grew very quiet and watched him. “Without the treaty, the Outback no longer belongs to the harpies. Of your homes, I do not know.”

“I’m not worried about a house,” called an old woman. “What will happen to you and the harpies?”

“If we lose...” Shail hesitated, feeling an overwhelming rush of concern from their minds. “If the court rules against us, we shall be hunted again.”

“No!” some yelled. Others shook their heads in disgust.

“But you’re not an animal.” The woman sobbed. “Everyone knows that.”

“I do not know how men judge things or why animals are less. I only know my flock comes under threat. I have decided that my harpies shall fight the hunter invasion. For your safety, I ask you to leave and dwell in the east. Someday we may live again as

friends, but for now our season of peace is over.” He dismally lowered his head and walked to Aron.

Ted ran up to them. “I’m not going, Shail. I can help you.”

Aron lifted an eyebrow. “You can kill hunters? If you stay, you shall die, and be of no help to us.”

“I can’t fight like Shail, but who can? But I’m not a coward, Aron.”

“No, Ted,” Shail said gently. “You must go with the others. This is not your fight.”

“It’s my home, too,” said Ted. “And you know how I feel. Do you really think I’d run off, knowing Kari was in danger?”

Aron shook his hair and glanced at Shail. “*I do not wish to see his death. He must go.*”

“Damn it, Aron, I can tell you’re talking about me.” Ted sneered at the brown harpy and then spoke to Shail. “You’re going to need more than wings and guts to win this fight. That’s where I come in. I can teach your harpies about machinery, weapons, hovercrafts, communicators; everything hunters rely on. For example, I’ll show your harpies how to bring down a hover. It’s easy, if they know how.”

Shail nodded. “To defeat humans, we must have this knowledge. You shall stay, Ted. And if I fail and fall with this battle, Kari may need you again.”

A score of men approached them. “We’ve decided to stay also,” said a large, burly man with a full beard.

“*He is called Mark Sawyer,*” Aron relayed.

Shail tilted his head. “Why do you wish to remain, Mark Sawyer?”

“Huh, you know my name.” Mark looked surprised. “First off, I like this planet and would hate to see some asshole senators destroy it. I’m also a war vet, Mr. Shail, and have no problem blasting bastards. Plus I’m a sap for the underdog in a just cause. The men tell me you’re a tough son of a bitch, worth fighting for. I’m with you.”

“That goes for us, too,” said the mayor. “We’ll send our women and children east, but most of the men in town are staying. We owe you, Shail. If hunters come for your wings, they’ll have to go through us.”

“Mayor, you and these men should know this fight shall not be against just hunters,” Shail explained and walked through the fifty-odd men. “The senators have always said they would bring a great army down from the sky if the harpies defied them. That army is sure to come. To join us shall risk death.” Shail’s wing brushed against a small man with greasy hair. Shail froze and looked down at the man. “Why are you here?”

“I’m here to help.” The man grinned.

“Help slay me.” Shail seethed and arched his wings. “Perhaps you should be the first to die.” The men fell silent as Shail terrorized the puny man.

“I don’t want to kill you,” the man stammered and backed away.

“I sense your thoughts, and yours have betrayed you.” He

lunged and grabbed the front of the man's shirt. He lifted him slightly off the ground to further probe his mind. "You lust for my death and wings but lack the courage to act alone. Who is this fat man who holds your leash? Lie again, stupid man, and I shall throttle the life out of you."

"Blackwell, Senator Blackwell sent me here," the man sputtered. "He wanted to learn where you were. That's all. I swear. I wasn't sent to hurt you."

"My hands shall not be stained with first blood." He released the man, so weak-kneed, he collapsed on the ground. "Tell this senator I am here and wait for him."

The man scrambled to his feet and fled to his transport.

"Get him," Mark yelled. "He's a spy for the senator."

"Let him go," Shail said. "His words tell our enemies that none shall slither amongst us."

"I heard harpies were telepathic," Mark said, grinning. "That's a damn handy trick. You got more going for ya than just wings. I'm with you, even if it means facing the galactic army."

A rumble of agreement escalated from the men.

"Humans are the most unpredictable of creatures," Shail said. "Even with my instincts, I did not expect this loyalty."

"Okay, let's pack up the ladies and kids," said the mayor. "It's a three-day journey to Hampton in a small hover. We want to be back before the court ruling."

Small bands of the river harpies began to ascend on the airport and gathered around Aron and Shail. Word was quickly

spreading across the western continent that every male was needed for the fight, the end result determining their survival.

A long day ensued as men and harpies prepared for an invasion. A com message was sent to the cities in the East that the Outback was closed to visitors. Ted took Shail, Aron, and some of the harpies to a hovercraft and showed how a harpy could fly up under it and poke a stick into a narrow opening to jam the blades and cause it to crash. The harpies who had learned human speech were taught to use a communicator and deployed along the vast riverbank as a watch. Outside on the landing strip, Mark instructed the harpies on how to fire a weapon.

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At sunset, several hundred female harpies and fledglings arrived at the airport and began to load into the two freight hovercrafts that had once hauled timber to Hampton. Shail watched with his mother and asked, *“All that dwell along the river are here?”*

*“Most of them,” said Windy. “The freighters will take us to the west coast, stopping at small towns on the way. They’ll then leave us on the beach. From there, individual male harpies can fly us to the sacred mountain. Although I trust these pilots, I believe you are right to keep the mountain’s location a secret from humans. In the days ahead, the freighters will travel south and then north to pick up harpy families. It’s the fastest way to move*



*everyone.”*

*“Yes, we must use the human things to our advantage. The harpies now learn of coms, weapons, and hovercrafts. This fight shall be like no other, not a few hunters crawling through our trees, but many, an invasion. We must meet the enemy on even ground.”*

*“I still hope we win in the appellate court, and there will be no bloodshed.”*

*“I hope too, but better to be prepared than not,”* Shail said as he watched Aron say goodbye to his pregnant mate, Starla. His tall nest brother nuzzled her and wrapped his chocolate-colored wings around her elfin body. Tears of fear ran down her pretty face. Other males hugged and tried to console their mates, all uncertain if it was the last hug, the last time they would see one another. Shail sadly realized he’d soon face the same emotional goodbye with Kari.

*“I talked to Governor Waters,”* Windy said. *“He assures me you have his full support. The man truly admires you and is deeply distressed by the senators’ actions.”*

*“He is a good friend, but I have found many such humans in Terrance. Their offer to help lifts my spirit and says we are not alone in this fight.”* The last of the females had boarded. *“They wait for you, Mother. In a few lights, I shall bring my family to the mountain.”*

*“I’m eager to see my grandson.”* She embraced him, tightly squeezing his torso and wings. *“My beautiful son, please be*

*careful. You are a true golden, obsessed with protecting your flock, but that fearless and reckless nature killed all the other golden males. Think before you act. The fate of the harpies rests with you.*”

“*I shall be cautious,*” Shail said, detecting her dread that he might be shot down like his father. They pulled apart, and Windy walked up the ramp. The hover door closed, and the two large freighters lifted off. Aron came alongside Shail. “*Do not worry, Aron. My mother shall keep her and your unborn safe.*”

Aron took a deep breath as the hover lights disappeared into the night. They strolled back to the building where Ted, Mark, and several men waited for them.

Shail stared quietly at a large map of the Outback that lay on a table. Mark, the leading authority on wars, told him the best way to plan their defense. Throughout the night, the brown-winged flock leaders who had left their home turf arrived one by one at the Terrance airport as their males settled in the nearby trees. The room steadily grew congested.

After listening to the men and contemplating their advice, Shail broke his silence and made decisions. Mark would be the leader of the men, sworn to guard the town of Terrance. The mayor suggested an emergency ordinance that hunters would be arrested for trespassing and given an indefinite sentence, and their hovercrafts and weapons would be confiscated.

The mayor chuckled. “If an appellate court can abolish a harpy’s rights, we can pass a few drastic laws of their own. If the

hunters don't like it, they can take us to court."

Using the Outback map, Shail pointed out sections of the river to each flock leader to defend it from hunters who dared to cross the river.

Seth, a big older male, ruffled his light brown feathers with irritation. *"Last season, you ordered my flock to destroy the swarms so to save men. Now you tell us to kill them. Both decisions do not sit well with harpies."*

Shail arched his wing and glared at Seth. *"The whims of men force these changes, but if you wish to challenge my decisions, we can step outside."*

Seth took a step back and lowered his head. *"No, never. You are the golden monarch. I might question, but I shall do all you ask."* He turned and left the building.

Shail lowered his wings. The men stared at him, noticing his confrontation with the big harpy. "I ask much of my harpies," he said with a sigh. "They are gentle, with protective natures, and telling them they must now kill is unsettling. With this battle, we may gain our freedom, but I fear we shall lose our souls."

Ted grinned. "You say the most profound things. You should have been a poet."

"What is a poet?" Shail asked, and the men chuckled good-naturedly. He knew how men perceived him. Some thought he was an idealist, too naïve to rule the Outback, while others respected him for his courage and honesty, but all were humbled by his golden reputation, knowing he could be calculating and ruthless if

crossed.

Mark closed his com and said, “I just talked to the hardware store owner in Terrance. He checked his inventory and has only twenty laser guns in stock. We need more, a lot more, if we’re gonna supply the harpies with weapons.”

The mayor spoke up. “I’ll call Hampton and see how many I can order.”

Late at night, the men left for their homes, and the remaining harpies retired to the trees. Shail found a choice tree limb for sleeping. Lying on the cushiony moss, he stared up at the stars and inhaled the cool, fresh air. Being outside in the liberating jungle felt good, but he preferred the stuffy house that held his mate. Worried about saving his flock, he longed for her comforting embrace.

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At dawn, Shail and Aron returned to the airport and were surprised to find Ted’s vehicle outside. “I started getting com calls at home, so I came back here last night,” Ted said. “The news is out about the senators and their court case. Everyone in the Outback knows and is furious. I’ve gotten dozens of call from men pledging their support. They’re coming to Terrance to fight for you and their homes. It’s unbelievable.” The communicator buzzed again. “There’s another one.” He smiled and stepped to the desk to answer it. His grin disappeared. “Shail, it’s Governor Waters.”

Shail bent over in front of the com screen. “What news?”

“Not good. I just learned the appellate court handed down its decision, earlier than expected,” Waters said with a tired voice. “They nullified the treaty and declared your status to be animals. Our lawyers immediately appealed to the Galactic Supreme Court, but it could sit on their docket for a year. The Hampton newspaper is running the story about the harpies losing this case. The people are going to be very upset with those senators. To us, you’re a hero, Shail.”

“I am aware of human fondness but stunned that many in the Outback are coming to Terrance to join us in this fight.”

“I’m not surprised. You saved their lives, gave them free homes, and have been a fair-minded ruler. They should help you. I’ll keep my lawyers busy with the appeal.”

Shail nodded, and the transmission ended.

Shail looked to Aron. *“The star judges have decided. Again we are the hunted. I seek my mate and son now. Hunters prize them above others. Guard our borders. I return in two lights.”*

Aron embraced Shail and nuzzled his neck. *“I feel your worry, my young brother. Do not doubt yourself. With your guidance, the harpies shall survive.”* He withdrew. *“I tell my flock, and they shall warn others that the fight now is real.”*

As Aron walked toward the door, Mark stepped inside. “Hey, Aron.” When the tall harpy didn’t respond and stepped outside, Mark turned to Shail. “What’s the matter with him?”

“We have lost in court. He goes to tell the harpies.”

“Shit!” Mark took a deep breath. “I was getting bored anyway.”

“I, too, must go and move my family,” Shail said as the communicator buzzed and Ted answered it.

“I’ll get him,” Ted said solemnly to the caller. “Shail, you need to take this call.”

Ted’s grave voice and startled eyes sent a shiver down Shail’s spine, and he leaped to the com.

On the screen was a man in his forties in need of a shave. “There’s that pretty blond buck I was looking for.”

Shail knew he was speaking to a hunter. “What do you want?”

“I’ve got something of yours.” He chuckled and held up a newborn golden harpy. “No questioning its pedigree, the little varmint looks just like you. Now be a good stud and come and get him. Once you’re mine, I’ll let your family go.”

Shail could barely breathe and control his shaking feathers, watching his son in the arms of a hunter. “Agreed, I give my life for theirs, but if my mate or son is harmed, you shall not see another day.”

“You’re a brazen fucker, but in no position to threaten me,” the man growled. “Get here, or I’ll kill your brat.” The communicator went dead.

Shail hysterically flapped his wings, sending papers and foam cups into the air. He flew toward the open door, folded his

wings down to clear the exit, and extended them again, not missing a beat.

Behind him at the airport, he heard Ted frantically yelling, “No, Shail, come back. Don’t go alone.”

Shail disregarded Ted’s pleas and made a beeline for the west. He flapped his wings so hard that after an hour, they felt like they would break off his back. He fought the pain and flew at breakneck speeds over the jungle. He knew the hunter wanted him and his full-grown trophy wings more than he wanted Kari or his tiny son. He gladly would sacrifice himself for the sake of his family, but he hoped the man would honor the trade, his life for their freedom. *I should not have listened to the doctor, he thought. I should have moved Kari to the mountain or at least the jungle before I left. I should never have left them. Please, great Jungle Spirit, take my life, but spare them.*

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With a view of the airport, Aron stood in a massive red fan tree, his feet clasping a limb. He tossed back his long brown locks and mentally summoned his flock. In minutes, several arrived and landed in the tree. *“The star judges have decided we are hunted animals once again. All must know and be prepared for the hunter invasion.”* He nodded toward his two fastest males. *“You shall go north along the river, and you, south, telling the flock leaders.”* He was suddenly distracted, hearing Ted’s yelling, and he saw

Shail's rapid departure from the building. He bounded off the limb and sailed down to Ted. "What?"

"Hunters, one had Shail's son on the com screen! He told Shail to come and get him."

"A common trap, Shail knows he flies to his death," Aron said with anguish.

Mark came storming outside with several laser rifles in his arms. "Let's go, Ted," he hollered and raced to a small hover.

Ted hesitated. "Think we can catch up with him, Aron?"

"No, Shail can outfly a metal bird and every brown wing." Aron darted toward the sky, calling telepathically to the harpies. *"Hunters have the golden family. We fly west to save them."*

After several hours, Shail passed the small town of Westend and continued to the estate. He saw the great white house and a large green-and-black hovercraft parked in the yard. He tried to flutter his wings and land near the porch, but his wings were exhausted. He tumbled a short distance to the ground. Panting hard, he lay there momentarily before struggling to his feet. On the deck lay four dead harpies, their beautiful brown wings sliced from their backs. The feathered limbs were heaped in a bloody pile. Reaf, the leader of the small Westend flock, was among them. Beside the harpy corpses were the two lifeless bodies of the Irish wolfhounds. Shail gasped at the slaughter, his whole body shaking from exertion and rage.

The front door opened, and the hunter who had been on the



com stepped out. “You’re a fast sucker. Didn’t expect you so soon,” he said, grinning. “Three and a half hours from Terrance to Westend has to be a record.” Shail arched his wings, and the man raised his laser gun. “Don’t even think about it. You jump me, and your fledgling ends up like the dogs.” He called toward the house, “He’s here. Bring ’em out.”

A second man shoved Charlie and Maria through the doorway. Maria’s eyes were swollen from crying, and Charlie’s arm bled from a laser wound. “I’m sorry, Shail,” said Charlie. “They tricked us, coming in that government hover. We didn’t know they were hunters until it was too late.”

Another man stepped out holding Shail’s son wrapped in a harpy cloth. Kari came out, her wrists bound with rope as a fourth hunter gripped her arm. The side of the man’s face had been raked bloody where she had obviously scratched him, defending her baby. Her watery, hopeless eyes looked up at Shail. Another man appeared holding several wine bottles from the estate cellar.

Shail seethed through his teeth, longing to attack. He was fast, as the hunter had said, but to bring down five armed men in one sweep was too risky. If one survived, all he loved could be lost.

“What did I tell ya, boys?” said first hunter. He walked up to Shail and grabbed the back of his slender neck. “Works every time, lure these roosters in with their chicks, and they’re as good as caught.”

Shail glared at the man but didn’t resist the hold. “Yes, I

am caught. I am yours. Now honor the trade and release my family. I promise not to defy you.”

“That’s pretty good English for a harpy, but I heard you’re smart, maybe too smart for your own damn good.”

Shail had been so rattled and angry, he had failed to use his instincts. He shut his eyes, getting a quick impression of the man’s mind. “You have no honor. You never intended to free them, with or without me.”

The man laughed. “That’s right. Your golden female is very valuable.”

“Jack, we need to get out of here,” said the man holding Kari.

“Get her and the fledgling aboard so this male behaves,” Jack ordered. “Bob, load up those wings. They’ll bring a pretty penny. Get the shackles out for our pretty boy. I’ve been warned he throttled some men between the cage bars last year.”

“Please don’t take Kari!” cried Maria.

“Shut up, woman, or you’ll be nursing a wound like your old man,” Jack yelled.

Charlie put his good arm around Maria as she sobbed on his chest.

Shail stood quietly and watched Kari, Will, and the men disappear inside the hover. Jack held Shail’s neck as Bob attached chains and hard steel shackles to his wrists. Using the chain, Jack jerked Shail toward the craft. “Get in there.” Already Kari stood inside a cage, staring through the bars at Will in the hunter’s arms.

As Shail followed Jack up the ramp, the bright sky suddenly darkened as if a thundercloud had moved overhead, but the shadow was created by hundreds of brown wings.

“Jesus Christ!” Jack ducked as the harpies descended to the ground and surrounded the hover. He moved next to Shail and placed his laser gun against his temple. “Tell them to back off. Before they take me down, I’ll wipe out the whole golden line, starting with your son.”

Shail knew his harpies were desperate to save him, but the hunter wasn’t making idle threats. A newborn harpy might be precious to its parents, but it wouldn’t be an expensive hunting trophy for years. “*He speaks true,*” Shail relayed to the harpies. “*If you attack, they shall kill my son. I order you to stay away.*”

The harpies drew away from the large hovercraft, distress filling their green eyes.

Jack shoved Shail harshly onto the cage straw, and he fell at Kari’s feet.

Enraged, Aron flew to the ramp and hissed loudly. He flapped his wings in a challenging manner. Jack aimed his laser gun at Aron.

“Harm him, I shall order my harpies to kill you,” Shail said to Jack. “My family and I are probably dead anyway.”

Jack lowered his weapon.

Shail stared out the hover at his best friend. “*Do not attack, Aron. I need you to defend my harpies and keep them free.*”

Aron lowered his wings, stepped off the ramp, and the

hover door closed.

Jack leaned out the window and shouted to the large flock, “If any of you follow us, your golden harpies die.” The sound of a hovercraft approached from the east. “Take off!” he yelled to the pilot. “Another hover is coming.” Their large craft rose in the air and headed west toward the ocean.

## Chapter Four

Aron flew up to Ted's hover and fluttered near the window. "Is that them? Do they have Shail?" Mark yelled from the passenger seat and pointed to the large hover that fled toward the ocean.

"Yes, but do not follow," Aron shouted over the noisy lingering aircraft. "They shall kill the goldens if we do."

"That old freighter, we could catch up with them easy," said Mark, holding a rifle. "One shot, and I'll disable it."

Aron anxiously stared at the two men, wondering if they would heed his words. He was not the leader of men or the harpy monarch. Or was he?

Ted stared ahead at the distant freighter that steadily grew smaller. "I'm doing as Aron says and landing."

Aron descended and watched Ted's hover set down in the nearby field. He approached, wiping the sweat from his brow. The four-hour race across the Outback had been draining and in vain, with the failure to protect the golden family.

Ted killed the hover engine and stepped out. "I've already contacted the governor. I need to call him back and give him a description of that freight. I'll use the house com; better reception."

Aron and the two men walked to the porch and saw the four dead harpies. "Sons of bitches," Mark cursed. Aron knelt on one knee over Reaf and caressed his dead brother-in-law's forehead. His concern went to his sister, and he wondered if Lea would

survive the loss of her mate.

“There are three more outside of Kari’s balcony,” Charlie said, grasping his wounded arm. He sat in a rocker and stared down at his majestic dogs that lay dead at his feet. “These harpies fought bravely. They flew into the laser blasts, knowing they would die. Even my dogs...” He could say no more, overcome with grief. He reached down and gently stroked the animals’ shaggy coats and wept.

“I’d better make that call,” Ted said and stepped into the house.

“What are you going to do, Aron?” asked Mark.

Aron straightened to his full stature. “Shail said we would not shed first blood. The blood is now spilt. Shail was forgiving. I am not. By taking my golden ruler, these men have unleashed a monster who knows no mercy.”

Mark shrugged. “Sounds fair to me.”

Several harpies took the dead off the porch and flew the corpses into the jungle. Unlike humans, there would be no ceremony or grave. The bodies would be covered with leaves and left to nourish the trees and animals, repeating the cycle of life.

Ted came out of the house. “I called the governor. He’s prompting the satellites to look for the freighter that’s disguised as a government craft, and he’s securing the Hampton spaceport in case they try to ship Shail and Kari off the planet. I just hope they don’t kill them.”

“If they wanted them dead, they would be so, like the

brown-winged,” said Aron. “There are two kinds of harpy hunter: those who find pleasure in stalking and killing, and those who seek to profit from selling our wings. These hunters seek profit. Shail is worth more alive than dead, which prolonged his life once before. I pray it shall again.”

Maria came out of the house and stepped to Charlie. “Doc is on his way. You old fool, why in heavens did you lunge for that big guy’s gun?”

“The bastard shot my dogs,” Charlie grumbled.

Aron hopped off the porch, left the yapping humans, and walked among the harpies. He approached one that carried a small portable communicator. “*You know how to speak and use it?*”

The harpy nodded.

Aron turned to the large flock. “*Enough time passes for the hunters to think they are not followed. Scatter and find them. Once found, trail them at a great distance. Let me know with the com where they land. I shall be in Terrance. Go now and seek.*”

The sky turned brown with feathers as the flock rose and headed west.

Aron walked back to the humans, who stared curiously at him. “They go to find Shail,” he explained.

Mark leaned against a post and frowned. “I thought that was too risky. You said those guys threatened to kill the golden harpies if their hover was followed.”

“We see farther than men. The harpies shall trail unseen. We must have Shail for this battle to come. Humans respect and

support him, but if he is lost, his mother is our last golden and shall rule. The humans might not accept her or wish to fight alongside me.”

“That’s not going to be a problem, Aron. Everyone loves Windy,” Ted said as he sat on a porch railing and dangled his feet. “The people in the Outback want to protect the harpies and keep their homes. With or without Shail, they’ll help the harpies.”

Mark rubbed the bristles on his unshaven jaw. “Aron brings up an interesting point, thinking the Outback won’t support this cause without Shail. Those hunters used a big freighter, and that ain’t cheap. I’m betting a wealthy backer is behind Shail’s kidnapping and believes the same as Aron. It’s no secret Shail was rallying the men and harpies to fight. Get him out of the way, the people back off, and the harpies are left leaderless, unarmed, and vulnerable. Might be the real reason Shail was taken.”

Charlie stood and shuffled to Aron and the two men. “Come to think of it, the hunter said that Shail was too smart for his own good. It makes sense now, but if they wanted Shail out of the way, why didn’t they just kill him?”

“Ridiculous, Charlie,” Maria piped in. “The golden family is the closest thing to royalty on this planet. Those men wouldn’t dare shoot them. They’d be hunted down and hung from the tallest tree. Never realized how much Kari and Shail are loved until their son was born and I cleaned up a truckload of flowers.” Doc’s old hovercraft landed in the front yard, and she walked out to meet him.



“I hope she’s right,” said Ted, “that those hunters will be too afraid to harm Kari and Shail.” He eased off the railing. “I guess Mark and I need to get back to Terrance and brace for this war.”

“I also return,” said Aron. “A male in the flock has a com and shall call Terrance if the hover is found. But it goes to the ocean, a large place to search, and already the harpies are tired from the flight here. All the flocks gather at the river. I must send them across the land in search of Shail.”

“I’ll see you in Terrance,” said Ted. He and Mark strolled to the small hover.

As Aron extended his wings to fly, Maria called to him, “Wait!” She hustled to him. “I remember you now. You’re Kari’s guardian, the one that stayed with her last year. Please, bring her home to me.”

Aron lowered his wings and gazed at Maria. “I forfeit my life for hers. I shall try.”

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On the freighter, Jack gazed out the port window at the ocean. The large hover flew just above the waves, to prevent radar detection. Dora was a backwards little planet with few satellites, so the harpy abduction had taken place when none were overhead. Everything had gone as planned. Predictable creatures, he thought. Use a fledgling for bait, and the adults are as good as mine, even

when it came to a golden. The arrival of the large brown-winged flock had been momentarily startling, but a laser gun pressed to their ruler's head, and they cowered like sheep, fearing his death. "Predictable."

"Hey, Jack, I don't think they're following us," said Bob, turning away from his window in the freighter.

"Just keep watch," Jack ordered. "They've got no choice but to follow." He moved to the cage and stared down at the pair. The male harpy had been shackled and chained to the lower bars, forcing him to lie in the straw on the floor. His wing covered the female's body as she rested beside him. They ignored Jack and kept their worried eyes fixed on Fred, who held their son. To have leverage over the male, Jack figured it was better to keep the fledgling away from its parents and bottle feed the baby.

Jack squatted and gazed at eye level into the male's large blue eyes. Senator Blackwell had said his name was Shail and warned he was sneaky and deadly, nothing like a brown harpy. Last year in the Hampton hunting range, the blond had lulled several men into thinking he was harmless before he attacked, causing serious injuries. He also killed the range owners and two employees. Jack jerked the male's chains, making sure they were secure. The male flipped the lengthy locks from his glaring eyes as a vengeful hissing escaped his clenched teeth.

Jack chuckled. "Yeah, you'd love to kill me. Just remember I've got your family. You cause trouble, and they'll suffer." The harpy ruffled his feathers and lowered his head to the straw. "Good

boy.” Jack stood and moseyed to the cockpit to talk with the pilot and his other guy.

Shail closed his eyes, discouraged. The man spoke the truth. This captivity would be different from last season’s. Shail’s hands were tied, and it had nothing to do with shackles. If he resisted and fought back, he would place his family at risk. Shail gazed at his new enemy. Jack was tall, the same height as Shail, but with a strapping muscular body, he more than doubled Shail’s weight. His long auburn hair was pulled back into a ponytail that exposed a tan, weathered face and hawkish blue eyes. With rugged features and crow’s feet off his eyes, he appeared to be nearly twice Shail’s age, maybe in his mid to late forties. He was a fine human specimen, even handsome by female standards.

Shail wasn’t concerned with the man’s looks, but focused on his mind. When held by his neck, Shail had sensed Jack. He was an experienced harpy hunter, the worst kind, who knew harpies inside and out and what made them tick. He had killed more than his fair share of Shail’s brethren, but oddly, he didn’t lust for Shail’s death or wings, didn’t want him harmed, and had no plan to profit from Shail’s sale, now or in the future. Stranger yet, Shail sensed that Jack admired him.

Kari nudged Shail. *“He put Will in that straw-filled box. I can’t see him. Why don’t they give him to me?”* She crept out from under Shail’s wing and stood, clutching the cage bars.

*“Kari, stay with me,”* Shail ordered. *“I cannot protect you,*

*and this is not the time to defy me.”*

She ignored Shail’s demands and stared helplessly at Fred, the man in charge of her son. “Can I please have my baby?”

Fred smiled and walked to her. “You sure are gorgeous.” He called to Bob. “She wants her kid. I can’t see the harm in giving it to her. You got the keys?”

Bob put down a wine bottle and left his window watch, joining Fred at the cage. “I think you’re right. Hate to see her beg for it.” Bob dug in his pocket for the disc that would unlock the cage door.

Shail flapped his wings in desperation. “*Kari, they mean you harm. Stay away from them.*” He hissed loudly at the men and his naïve and disobedient mate.

“Easy, boy,” Fred said to him and grinned at Kari. “Your mate sure gets flustered.”

Bob unlocked the cage door, and Fred grabbed Kari’s bound wrists, jerking her out of the cage. He shoved her down on top the excess straw bedding that was piled against the cabin wall.

Bob slammed the cage door as Kari struggled against Fred’s hold. “I’m first,” he said and rushed to help his pal pin down Kari. “Man, she’s a fighter.” As Fred held her down, Bob ripped up her harpy robe and unfastened his pants.

Shail went berserk, slamming his light body against the bars. He saw the huge human climb on top of Kari with only her struggling legs visible. His open flapping wings hit the cage bars, causing a racket, and he hissed loudly, more from panic than anger,

but the men were so intoxicated with lust, they didn't notice.

Jack suddenly appeared. He stomped to Bob and kicked him hard in the ribs, sending him flying off Kari. Bob cried out and curled up in anguish. Fred released Kari's arms and scrambled backwards.

"Christ, Jack," Bob sputtered, clutching his bruised side. "You can be first."

"Did you nail her?" Jack yelled at Bob. "Did you penetrate her?" He took a step to kick him again."

"No! I swear," Bob cried and stumbled even farther away from Jack. "She was wiggling too much."

"You better not have," Jack snarled and knelt over Kari. She gasped for breath and shook. Paralyzed with fear, she didn't resist when Jack picked her up and placed her back in the cage.

She lay dazed for several minutes as Shail stroked her with his outstretched wing. "*Kari, come to me now.*" She gazed at him, and without responding, she crawled under his wing, out of view of the men.

Jack looked down at Shail. "Your little female is way too pretty. You'd better keep her hidden."

"Jack, what's the big deal?" Bob whined. "We've laid plenty of female harpies. The senator will never know if we have this one. Besides, we've been stuck on that lousy ocean barge for over a month."

"Fucking idiots," Jack growled. "You know damn well that most of these females curl up and die from shock after they're

raped.” He picked up a yellow feather and raged. “And his goddamn feathers are all over the place! Those wings are worth a fortune. Touch these harpies again, and I’ll kill you.” He took a few steps toward Bob and Fred, and they retreated.

Jack bent down and studied Shail’s wings. Shail hissed and moved his body over Kari to protect her. Jack disregarded his threats and nodded. “Lucky for those guys, you seem okay.”

Things became quiet in the hover cabin. The men stayed away from the cage, but every time they glanced in Shail’s direction, he hissed and puffed up his feathers to look menacing. It was an instinctual act. He knew the true menace was Jack, their leader. The men were frightened of him. Shail finally relaxed and bent his head down under his wing to lick and nuzzle Kari. She shivered intermittently, still traumatized.

*“I’m sorry, Shail. I wasn’t thinking. I just wanted Will.”*

*“I understand,” Shail relayed. “But you are a caught harpy and must follow my words. We are not among the gentle humans you have known. To mimic a woman shall make thing worse and shall not help us. The advantage lies in being ignorant and silent during our captivity.”*

*“Silent? But I might persuade someone to free us.”*

*“You cannot depend on any human now. Even the good ones treat animals differently, and we shall reap their compassion. You must cast out human sound and smiles and take the nature of an innocent caged bird. I have learned this when caught. When people believe they are superior, they become careless. This is the*

*advantage.” He rubbed his cheek against hers. “It shall be hard, for you were raised human and trust them, but I am your mate. You must trust me now.”*

Kari rested her head against his chest. *“Speaking to those men and ignoring your warning nearly got me raped. It’s a frightening lesson. You’ve relied on your instincts all your life. They’re phenomenal compared to mine. I promise to behave like a wild harpy.”* She stretched up and tenderly kissed his lips. *“And I do trust you, Shail.”*

*“Place your hands to my mouth, and I shall free you from your bonds.”* Shail began to chew through the ropes that held Kari’s wrists.

Fred noticed Shail’s endeavor. “Hey, Jack the male is gnawing her ropes off.”

Jack walked closer, and Shail made a low sizzling sound, much like an angry snake.

“I figured he’d chew them off her before long. That’s why he’s wearing chains.” Jack placed his hand on a cage bar. Shail crashed his head into the cage to bite his hand. Jack jerked away and laughed. “Senator Blackwell said this male was the prettiest harpy he’d ever seen, but also the most vicious. I’d have to agree, not a cowardly bone in this sucker.”

“That skinny thing doesn’t scare me,” Fred commented.

Jack stood. “Don’t be fooled. His slight body looks harmless, but with six striking limbs, he’d take you down in a heartbeat.”

Jack walked over to Will and took him out of the box. “This fledgling’s pedigree must be pure golden. His hair and wings are nearly white.” Naked and cold in the rough man’s hands and inhaling the unfamiliar scent, Will squirmed and flapped his tiny wings. Shail jerked on the chains, beat his wings against the bars, and his loud hiss resembled a growl.

*“Will is frightened,”* Kari relayed.

Shail breathed hard. *“He shall soon be in your arms.”*

*“What are you going to do?”*

*“Be ready to move away from me.”* His muscles tensed, and his breathing became rapid. He tossed his locks, and his angry threats increased.

“Jack, that male is really getting pissed with you holdin’ his baby,” Bob said. “He looks like he’s ready to explode.”

“He needs to get used to people handling his fledgling.”

Shail gathered his legs under him and crouched. He arched his wings, as if preparing to fly through the bars. Kari slid to the other side of the cage and gaped at him.

Will whimpered. His first sound was a plea to his parents for protection.

Shail’s stress and rage boiled over into near insanity. His mate had been attacked, and his terrified little son was begging for help. He leaped from his hunched position, his wings flapping hard, and crashed into the bars with his head and shoulders. The whole cage was jarred a foot and would have fallen over if he had rammed the higher bars.



“Holy shit,” Bob yelled. “It’s gone crazy.”

Shail shook his head, dismissing the stunning pain. He gathered himself and threw his body against the cage again, determined to break the bars or his body. He fell into the straw and tasted the blood that ran down his face from a head injury. He rose again, violently beating his extended wings as he twisted and tugged on his wrist chains. He smashed into the bars a third time.

*“Stop, Shail, stop! You’ll die,”* Kari pleaded silently as small feathers filled the air and floated down like raindrops that covered the cage and cabin.

Bob grabbed his laser gun. “I’ll stun him!”

Shail hissed and hit the bars again. Either the men would give him his fledgling, or he would batter himself to death. There was no in-between.

“Don’t shoot him. It could stop his heart,” Jack shouted. “Open the cage!” Bob opened the door, and Jack quickly placed Will on the straw. Kari snatched up her baby and huddled in a corner. Shail heaved from the exertion and slowly calmed. He folded his wings against his back, and with his slight nod, Kari crawled into his arms. Partially opening his wings, he concealed his family like a bird nestling on eggs. He ducked his head under the feathers and licked Will while Kari nursed their son.

“Damn him,” Jack cursed. “The senator is gonna pay extra for handling this one.” He bent down close to the cage, and Shail lifted his head to watch him. Jack’s eyes narrowed with concern. “Goddamn it, he’s injured a wing. Bob, get the first aid kit out of

the locker.”

With his adrenaline dissipating, Shail felt the pain from a deep cut in his left wing fold and saw blood soaking into his feathers. His head also hurt from a gash on his forehead. His brief rebellion had cost him.

Jack squatted near the cage and opened a small white box. Shail seethed, warning him away. “Look,” Jack said. “I know you’re smart and can be reasonable. We’re going to be together for some time, and I’m suggesting a truce. If you keep fighting me, you’ll lose, and so will your family. Now, I need to treat your wounds.” He placed his hand in the cage so Shail could sniff him.

“That harpy is gonna bite the crap out of you,” said Bob.

“Maybe, but I’m counting on his strong instincts. He’ll sense I’m leveling with him. We can do this the hard or easy way. It’s up to him.”

Shail stared at Jack. The man was unpredictable and scary, with instincts of his own. He knew Shail wouldn’t bite him. Shail stretched his neck and smelled Jack’s hand. He wasn’t interested in a truce, but he needed to know more about his adversary.

“That’s right,” Jack said quietly. “You can’t figure me out.” Without hesitation, he pulled Shail’s cut wing closer and applied an ointment on the cut.

Shail didn’t resist and allowed Jack to doctor his wing. When Jack treated Shail’s head wound, Shail grasped more of the man’s inner thoughts. He not only admired Shail but was committed to caring for him. Shail had sensed the same feelings in

Charlie, concerning his cattle. The old man defended, doctored, and fed those animals, yet had no remorse when they were sold. Shail finally understood Jack and his motives. He saw Shail as livestock, rather than a game animal, which worried Shail even more. Humans knew that harpies couldn't be domesticated and usually died in captivity. He watched Jack apply some liquid bandage to his wing cut.

*We shall play this game of master and pet, Shail thought, as long as my family is unharmed.* He submissively rested his chin on the straw.

“You’re learning,” Jack said. “I’ll be good to you as long as you behave for me.” He stood and called to the cockpit, “Are we getting close to the turnabout?”

“In another half-hour, we’ll hit the last island and head back,” the pilot answered. “We should arrive at daybreak.”

Through the hover windows, Shail watched the light fade to dark. Three hours later, the smell and sounds of the ocean vanished and he detected the jungle below. He then felt the cold air of the mountains. The freighter had traveled to the northernmost reaches of the continent, where little life dwelled. He sadly closed his eyes and realized that no harpy could travel this long and far. Their wings would give out, and they would drown in the ocean. The men’s plan had been laid out far in advance of any court ruling.

He kept his guard up throughout the night, even though most of the men slept. Despite the terrible situation, Kari also dozed, feeling secure under the tent of wings and cradled in his

arms. The outside air began to warm, and Shail caught a whiff of flowers, tree bark, and rich loam. The hover was leaving the north and traveling south into his jungle. One by one, the stars in the night vanished and were replaced with a pale gray horizon. He nuzzled Kari awake. *“The light comes, along with our fate.”*

She looked up and kissed him. *“No matter what happens, know I have had a lifetime of happiness and love in our short time together.”*

*“You sense my distress, my failure to protect you and Will.”*

*“You couldn’t have foreseen this.”*

Over a speaker system, the pilot announced to the men, “Wake up, guys. We should arrive at the warehouse in half an hour.”

Fred sat up on his bunk and gazed at Kari in the low cabin light. “Wish I had a female like her.”

Bob rubbed his eyes and yawned. “You may get your wish,” he mumbled. “Hunting season is open on harpies. Trouble is, they’re like butterflies. They die after a few days in a jar.”

As the men rose, Shail tossed his locks and sniffled aggressively. They ignored his threats as they ate and packed their gear and weapons. The pilot announced their arrival. Shail felt the hover’s descent.

Jack looked out a window. “Shit, the senator’s hover is already here. Everyone look lively.” With a slight thud, the freighter landed, and Jack opened the back doors. “Good morning,

Senator,” he said and walked down the ramp. “I didn’t expect you till this afternoon.”

“I’ve been here all night, waiting and wondering,” said Senator Blackwell. “Well, did you get him?”

“Of course,” said Jack. “We agreed no com calls, since they can be tracked.”

“Yes, yes.” Blackwell sidestepped Jack and entered the hover. “There you are.” He smiled at Shail and edged closer to the cage. “Magnificent. Utterly magnificent, wouldn’t you say, Jack?”

“He’s a looker, but also a handful.”

“I warned you,” Blackwell said with a chuckle. “He’s different from any harpy you’ve ever caught, flamboyant, nervy, and perfect for my needs.” His smile dissolved, and he looked anxiously around the cabin. “Where is she? Where are the female and fledgling?”

“They’re in the cage, under his wing,” Jack answered.

As Blackwell peered down into the cage and gloated over his new prize, Shail stared at the senator, surprised. He had expected an impressive man, someone skillful and clever, since he had taken Shail’s freedom. Instead, Blackwell was a fat, jiggly man, short in stature with thinning gray hair, and he stunk like a pungent flower.

“I can’t wait to collect my trophies off him,” said Blackwell to Jack. “Take him out, and we’ll hang him from that blue tree.”

Shail swallowed hard, realizing he faced slaughter. He

would dangle from a rope until his resistance gave out, and then his wings and sex organs would be sliced off. They were trophies men sought.

Jack massaged his chin. “Getting him out of this cage won’t be easy. He’ll put up a hell of a fight when he’s taken from his female.”

“There’re five of you, and his hands are already secured with shackles.”

“Yeah, but he’s far from defenseless. He can still bite, kick, and whack you with those wings.” Jack took a deep breath. “All right, men, Bob and I will hold down the wings. You two tackle his feet, and Fred can grab the female and baby.” The men nabbed some ropes and opened the cage. As Bob attempted to seize a wing, Shail flapped furiously and sent Bob crashing into the bars. A wing hit Jack’s knuckles, and he cursed with the pain. Two other men lunged at Shail’s legs. Shail kicked the closest one in the face, breaking his nose and knocking out a few teeth before throwing him backwards into the straw. The other man groped for the kicking feet but couldn’t get near enough to grab them. In minutes, Shail had injured several men and made them all leery.

“Can’t you idiots overpower one little harpy?” the senator ranted. “How did you get him in there?”

“Easy when you control his female and young,” Jack said. “This time, we all jump him at once and pin him down.”

As the five men tackled Shail, their combined weight held his wings and legs down. Kari slid out from under him, put her

baby out of harm's way, and leaped to his defense. She scratched their faces and sank her teeth into one's ear.

"Damn! She's like a mad cat," one man screamed.

Jack grabbed her and tossed her into the straw. She scabbled to her feet to defend him again.

*"No, Kari. Stay back,"* Shail ordered silently. *"I do not want you hurt. Protect Will, not me."* He glanced into her watery eyes and stopped resisting. His limbs become flaccid, and he lowered his head on the bedding.

"He's giving up," said Jack. "Quick, get the ropes on. Tie down those wings and bind his ankles before he has second thoughts." After securing Shail's wings, they tied his ankles together and pulled them back toward his wings. Unfastening one wrist chain at a time, they pulled his arms back and attached his wrists to his ankles until he resembled a sacrificial lamb.

"Come on," Fred said to Kari as she cradled her baby in a cage corner. "Behave, and you won't get hurt." With fear and uncertainty in her eyes, she looked to Shail.

*"Go with him, Kari."*

Clutching Will, she let the man take her arm and lead her from the cage. Blackwell stopped Fred and her at the hover exit. "The daughter of John Turner and a golden harpy mother, that's a volatile mix. No surprise she attacked. You're exquisite, dear." He reached to pet her. Kari jerked her head back and spit on his face.

Blackwell's cheeks reddened. "Just like your father," he growled and wiped the spit off with his sleeve. "Too bad he's dead

and can't help you." He turned to Fred. "Put her in one of the warehouse cages."

Shail fretfully watched Kari and the man walk to the large building constructed of metal sheets. When they disappeared inside, he tussled against his bonds.

"Save your strength, my little prince," cooed the chubby senator. "You're going to need it. Get him to the tree."

Jack gagged Shail's mouth with a rag to prevent him from biting and picked him up. Cradling him in his arms, he strolled to the massive blue tree. A rope already hung over a limb.

Staring up at the rope, Shail foresaw his slow, tortuous death and began hyperventilating with terror. Jack's crew, along with several of the senator's men, gathered around him. The dozen grinning men joked and chuckled, anticipating the show, but Shail focused on Jack, who had said he'd be good to Shail. Were his words a lie?

"Yeah, this is a bunch of shit, boy," Jack grumbled under his breath as he knelt over Shail and attached the rope to Shail's wrists and removed the shackles and mouth gag. "Okay, hoist him up."

Two men pulled the rope that hung over the limb, and Shail's feet left the ground. As he dangled, the men fastened his ankle ropes tightly to the tree roots on the ground, so Shail's torso was unmercifully stretched out from limb to root. Next his white hip sash was removed, and the senator took possession of it. His folded wings were still bound, and Shail gasped for breath because



the hanging position compressed his lungs. When Jack cut the ropes off his wings, Shail impulsively extended them to avoid suffocation. Driven by instinct and fear, he flapped wildly in a frantic attempt to break free. The men howled and followed the hunting custom of poking a harpy's gut and ribs with sharp sticks. The painful torment increased Shail's desperate struggle.

Blackwell produced a camera and began recording. "I'm here in the eastern jungle, documenting the demise of the last golden harpy on Dora. As you see, he's a fine young stud full of fight and has an adult wingspan." He moved in closer, focusing on Shail's sex organs. "Note that male harpies are well endowed with a longer penis than the average man's. Scientists believed it makes propagation easier on a tree limb. A captive harpy is strung up for several reasons. For one, the position forces these creatures to spread and beat their wings. Once exhausted and traumatized, these creatures go into a trance, which makes them easier to handle when castrated. The tanned skin is highly valued for wallets. Prior to removing its wings, a tourniquet is applied to the base of each wing near the shoulders, and the blood vein is cut at the wing tip. With the heart still beating, the harpy's blood drains from the wings without soiling the feathers, and then the wings are amputated. In the last decade, harpy meat has become an expensive delicacy that tastes similar to wild boar, so most harpies are now gutted and skinned like any game animals." He stopped recording, lowered the camera, and turned to Jack. "Think I covered everything?"

“I believe so. If things don’t go the way you plan, you’d better destroy that film.”

Blackwell chuckled. “I’m not worried, Jack.” He gazed up at Shail. “Look at him, still going strong. Listening to my documentary has reenergized him.”

Shail breathed hard, and his heart pounded as he thrashed on the rope and beat his wings.

The cool morning gave way to the hot afternoon. Shail’s hair and slinky nude body dripped with sweat, and blood ran down his arms from the wrist ropes.

“Senator,” Jack said. “This one will die before he gives up.”

“He’s tougher than you think,” said Blackwell. “Back in the day when these blonds were plentiful, my grandfather said they’d flap on a rope all day. They’re not as fragile as the common browns. They yield within an hour.”

A few hours later, the muscles in Shail’s wings burned like fire, and he could barely hold them up. Panting hard, he closed his eyes and tossed back his head in defeat, realizing that resistance was futile. The harpy fatalism had sunk in, and he was resigned to his slaughter. Jack punched him hard in the bladder, and Shail, as expected, urinated. His testicles were groped and squeezed to see if he would endure the excruciating pain. Shail summoned a soft hiss but never flinched. Emasculated, he longed for the knife and death.

“He’s done,” Jack said to Blackwell. “You can do whatever with him now.”

Blackwell handed his camera to his assistant. "Take over. I want to be in this film." The senator ran his chubby hand down Shail's lathered body, roughly patting him. "This is a great little stud, and worth his weight in gold." He plucked out several of Shail's choice flight feathers.

"He's overheated," said Jack. "If we don't get him inside and cooled down soon, you risk losing him."

"I'm so tempted to dress him out," Blackwell said. "But he is worth more alive. Cut him down."

Jack untied the rope and lowered Shail to the ground, where he collapsed like a corpse. Only his panting and pounding chest were proof of life. Jack produced a knife and cut off a lock of Shail's head hair. "The rest of your trophies," he said and handed the hair clump to Blackwell.

Jack cradled Shail like a baby in his arms and carried him to the warehouse. Shail was so delirious that he clung to the man and buried his face in Jack's ponytail. He nuzzled the hunter's neck, grateful the terror and pain had stopped.

"That damn senator had to have his fun," Jack whispered, "but it's over now, boy. Before long, you'll be your old hateful self again."

Shail began to fathom he was safe as Jack carried him into the cool, brightly lit warehouse. The hanging had been a mock demonstration to prove his arduous nature.

"Put him on this table," the senator said. "He should recover before my ship arrives in a few hours."

Shail lay on the large wooden table, gasping for breath. His wrists and ankles smarted from rope burns and his wings hung off the sides, since he lacked the strength to fold them against his back. He intercepted Kari's worried calls, but he couldn't telepathically respond. The physical abuse was minor compared to his mental devastation. His animal temperament had taken hold, and he had surrendered to his predators, unable to shake off the doomed feeling. He turned his head and saw Kari standing in a nearby large cage, staring back at him. She was crying. The senator stroked his head while the others secured his limbs to the table legs. Shail shook his head, determined to snap out of the stupor and get his faculties back.

"He's starting to come around," Jack said and applied ointment to Shail's rope burns. "He's played out like a hooked fish after a battle, but it won't take him long to recoup, so be careful, Senator." After treating Shail's injuries, Jack wiped him down with an icy wet rag to lower his body temperature.

"He's the most valuable creature on the planet, and he's finally mine," Blackwell gloated while stroking Shail's forehead. "I know everything about this one. For years the golden harpies were thought to be extinct, but then rumors surfaced of a sighting of this young male on the Turner Estate. I called John Turner, but he informed me that harpy hunting was banned on his land." He glanced at Kari. "I couldn't understand why the man was stubborn about defending harpies. Now everyone knows. Turner's wife and daughter were harpies."

Slowly recovering, Shail pulled his wings up and curled his body on the table. He tucked his face into a wing and cautiously stared out through his feathers while flinching from the human contact.

Blackwell took a sip of a drink and continued his story. “Then last year the two Simpson brothers had beginner’s luck and captured this beauty for their hunting range. The first time I saw him, he was asleep in a cage surrounded by hundreds of people. He looked like an angel, with his enchanting face and luxurious wings. That night, he proved to be more of a demon when he killed three men, including one of the brothers. It was unheard of, a harpy slaying a man. I wondered how the Simons had managed to turn a harmless harpy into a man-killer, so I met with Bill Simpson. Over a few drinks, he told me.”

Shail looked up and hissed softly at the senator.

Blackwell grinned and patted Shail’s head. “He doesn’t like this part of my story.”

Jack placed a water bowl near Shail. “Come on, drink it.”

Shail hesitated, but his throat was parched and his head ached from heat exhaustion. He leaned over and sucked up the water.

Jack refilled the bowl and asked, “So how did they turn him?”

“Simpson said his deranged brother, Gus, along with his two ex-con buddies, spent the night raping him. The next day, the harpy killed his rapists, and later Bill Simpson.”

Shail stopped drinking and turned to Kari. She closed her eyes and lowered her head. She had finally learned about his traumatic experience in the hunting range, the cause of his nightmares, and why he lost his harpy values and took lives. Ashamed, Shail hid his face in his feathers.

Jack massaged his chin. “Find that hard to believe. Plenty of hunters, bored, drunk and stuck in the woods, have raped these males before they’re dressed out. They’re like the females and go into shock. I’ve never heard of one turning vicious.”

“That’s true of brown harpies, but revenge for the rape wasn’t the reason he attacked.” Blackwell turned his attention to Shail. “Was it, my little prince? Those men discovered a secret about you and your harpies. Something that could change the dynamic of your race. You thought your secret died with those four men.”

Shail made a low, venomous, seething sound.

“Careful, Senator,” Jack warned. “He can hurt you now.”

“I’ve handled plenty of harpies,” said the senator and talked on to the interested men. “Bill Simpson told me everything that happened that night, and the fool didn’t realize its significance. It’s the reason I’m spending a fortune in court costs to keep the harpies as animals, since they’re going to make me one of the wealthiest men in the galaxy.”

Shail slowly lifted his head from his wing and glared at the senator.

Blackwell grinned at Shail. “You know exactly what I

discovered. You're on this table, acting like an innocent, stupid beast, but you're smarter than these morons who caught you. Don't you have anything to say about my plans for your sons, Shail?"

Shail lifted his head and cleared his throat as if to speak, but instead he lunged upwards against his bonds in an attempt to bite the senator's throat. Jack pushed Blackwell away, but not fast enough to save his hand, the same stubby hand that moments earlier had stroked Shail like a pet. Blackwell screamed and tried to pull free, but Shail chomped down on the senator's fingers. Jack grabbed Shail's hair and tried to pry his jaw open while the other men beat him. Only after Shail had gnawed off two fingers did Senator Blackwell get free from Shail's teeth. The man moaned as blood squirted from the stumps.

Shail kept up his insolent demeanor, his hate-filled eyes fixed on the senator. Without uttering a sound, he answered the horrified senator's question by defiantly spitting his mangled fingers on the floor.

"Tighten his ropes and gag him," Jack yelled. "Get the first-aid kit." One of the senator's assistants ran to the back of warehouse and quickly returned with the kit. Blackwell howled, cursed, and whimpered as Jack sat him in a chair and doctored his bloody finger stumps.

"Break him, Jack!" Blackwell screeched. "Do you hear me? I want that golden to suffer a long, slow death."

"I'll break him," Jack said and gave the senator a strong painkiller. "I'm sorry, Senator. That harpy chewed your fingers up

pretty good.” He picked up the lumps of flesh and examined them. “The Hampton hospital is a long ways off, and even still, I don’t think those fingers can be reattached.”

“He was biding his time, waiting for the right time to strike,” Blackwell whined. “That goddamn harpy knew exactly what he was doing.”

A loud engine sounded outside. “Your ship is here,” Jack said. “What do you want to do? Send him to Earth, or kill him?” The man was so angry that even Shail did not know what would happen to him.

“Send him. He’d rather die on a rope than face what I have in store for him.”

“Let’s get him in the cage with the female.”

“No. I want him alone,” Blackwell ordered.

“Senator, think about this,” Jack reasoned. “It’s a four-month journey to that zoo. The male is tough, but separating him from his female will surely kill him. He’ll get depressed and stop eating. I’m not worried about the female. She’s got her fledgling.”

“I want him alone. If he succumbs to depression, give him drugs. If he won’t eat, shove a feeding tube down his throat. You’ll figure out a way to keep him alive.”

“Your harpy, but my neck,” Jack grumbled. “That little son of a bitch is dangerous to handle. If he’s with his female, I won’t have to touch him.”

“I’m paying you plenty to handle him,” Blackwell said. “Besides, the zoo doesn’t want the female pregnant again. It will



delay their artificial breeding program. Those drugs are starting to work.” He wiped his sweaty brow and got up from the chair. “Within a month, you can expect a brown harpy shipment. Send the females to the zoo so their eggs can be extracted and impregnated with the golden’s sperm. The fledglings can be sold as pets. The males can be hired out as prostitutes, but not with women. They’re too wild. Find one of those seedy gay sex clubs. They’ll pay plenty for a male harpy. By the time we harvest his first crop of blond fledglings, we’ll have a built-in clientele.”

Hearing the senator’s plans, Shail thrashed wildly in his bonds, angry that he had missed his chance to kill Blackwell. The men struggled to keep him on the table.

Jack walked over. “All right, let’s put this little monster into a cage. Get the ropes and gag off him.”

“We don’t want to lose a finger,” Fred complained. “He’s so pissed that when we free him, he’ll tear us apart.”

“Easy fix,” Jack said and walked to Kari’s cage. Shail stopped tossing and watched Jack open her cage and grab her neck. “Behave, or I’ll throttle her,” he threatened. Shail submissively lowered his head. “He’s listening. All right, put him in the cage and shackle one of his wrists and chain it to a bar, so I can get my hands on him.”

The men quickly carried Shail to a second cage and untied his bonds. Once the men finished and were out of his cage, Shail sprang to his feet.

“Get that robe off her,” Blackwell called. “People might

see her and think she's a woman."

Jack released his grasp on the female's throat. "You can take it off, or I can," Jack told her. "If I strip you, you know your boy will hurt himself. Neither of us wants that."

Kari slipped out of her white harpy robe and lowered herself into the straw next to her fledgling. Her long hair and nest straw hid her nude body from view, but raised as human, she still suffered from modesty. Every man in the building was fixated on her, and she shivered with discomfort.

Shail paced back and forth in the cage, furiously yanking his wrist chain. He flew at the bars to distract the gawking men.

"Stop looking at her," Jack yelled at the men. "It's upsetting him. Go load the straw and bags of dried fruit and nuts."

Shail reached out through the bars and made a grabbing motion toward Kari, but their cages were too far apart. Both harpies clung to their cage bars, longing to touch each other.

The harpy cages were pushed from the warehouse across a lawn toward a small spacecraft. Kari lay low in the straw and clutched her baby, while Shail stood and stared out at his jungle, wondering if he'd ever see it again. He sniffed the air in the hope of sensing another harpy, but none hid in the foreign woods. He gazed at the vivid-colored trees and the sky, pale with grays, pinks, and greens. Unconsciously, he arched his wings, craving freedom and flight.

The men loaded Shail and Kari into the spaceship. The senator and Jack followed. Blackwell handed Jack an envelope.

“Here’s their paperwork. I’ve listed them as grogins, in case our harpy-loving governor is checking manifests in this part of the galaxy. Only Dorians know that a grogin is brown, cat-like creature. Once you’re passed the Oden system and enter the wormhole, you’ll be out of Waters’ reach, but until then keep a low profile on our investment. Under no circumstance do I want that male back here stirring up trouble. If there’s a problem, kill all of them.”

“I understand. I brought some tarps to cover the cages when I transfer them to the star cruiser. Once they’re in cargo, only Bob and the animal handler down there will see them, and generally those guys aren’t very bright.”

“Good, good,” Blackwell said. “I red-tagged the male, so that should keep the cargo handler away from his cage.”

“Wish you hadn’t done that. The shipping clerk might demand additional security if he’s listed as a man killer. A headache I don’t need.”

“It’ll be fine. If he’s red-tagged, no one will mess with him. When you reach Earth, you’ll be working with Director Green at the Washington Zoo. He knows nothing of harpies and may need your help.”

A man, obviously the pilot, left the front of the ship and walked to Blackwell. “Good afternoon, Senator. The weather is good for liftoff, and we’re on schedule. Once we clear Dora’s wormhole, we’ll rendezvous with the star cruiser at the Oden spaceport in two weeks.”

“This is Jack Jones,” Blackwell said. “He’ll be handling the animals. I just want to take one last look at my harpies.” The pilot shook hands with Jack and returned to the cockpit. Jack and Bob stowed their gear up front as Blackwell gazed into the two cages.

Shail looked to Kari. “*Though I vowed silence, I must say words to this senator.*” He approached the bars near Blackwell, and the man backed out of his reach, claspng his injured hand. “Take your last look,” Shail said, “and remember me and my words. Your plans for me, my sons, and flock shall fail. Instead of wealth, you shall die.”

“That’s all you can say? Idle threats?” said Blackwell. “I expected begging.”

“A golden does not beg; neither does he lie. This is no threat, Senator, but a promise,” Shail said, “the same vow I made to the four others. Their white bones whisper from the ground that I speak true. The fingers are a warning of the loss to come.”

“Well, well—I’ll make *you* a promise,” he uttered. “You’re going to rot in a cage for a long time before you die, and I’ll be around when the last wild harpy is removed from this planet.”

“Then one of us is false.”

“What makes you think you can kill me?”

“You are a plague on our jungle, like the beetle swarms. The humans failed to defeat the swarms, just as they have failed to stop you in their courts. Like the black bugs of death, you shall also be destroyed.”

The senator’s face flushed. “Listen, you winged varmint,”

he stormed, “my hunters are going to invade the Outback and either capture or eradicate your flock.”

“Then prepare the graves for your hunters,” said Shail coldly.

Blackwell yelled to Jack. “Get this damned harpy to Earth before I change my mind and string him back up.”

Jack hurried to the cages and senator. “What’s the matter? What did he do?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Blackwell said. He collected himself. “If these harpies start speaking, asking for help, I want you to kill their fledgling. It can be replaced.” Jack nodded, and the irate senator stomped off the ship.

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The doors were secured, and the small ship roared and vibrated when lifting off. Kari huddled in the straw, watching her poor mate. Shail stood at the bars, acting brave, but she knew he was terrified. Everything he had known and loved was vanishing under the ship. He nervously flung his locks, and she sensed his thoughts were on the future of his family and flock. He had asked her to remain silent, and she soon learned the benefits. The men dismissed them and spoke freely. Senator Blackwell’s boasting revealed his plans for them and the harpies. She was returning to Earth, a dismal place with no trees and wildlife, where she had attended school for ten years. While there, she constantly fought

depression, but with the knowledge she would come home some day and being part-human, she endured. She glanced with concern at Shail. Would he survive?

The ship cleared the Dora atmosphere, and the shaking and noise stopped. In the cabin up front, Jack left his seat and walked to their cages. Jack chuckled, gazing at Shail. "I could kiss you for riling up Blackwell and biting off his fingers. I've put up with that fat asshole for months." He called to Bob. "Let's move his cage alongside hers. He'll be less stressed if they can touch."

After the men moved the cage, Shail slid down into the straw next to Kari.

Kari clasped Shail's hand. *"Speaking to Blackwell nearly got you killed. I'm not sure it was worth it."*

*"It was. My words shall haunt him, for he knows harpies have honor and do not lie. Fear shall cloud his judgment, and without confidence, he shall grow careless. This helps Aron protect my flock, and there was no risk of my death. As Blackwell petted me, I sensed his greed. He values my life."*

*"You said Aron will protect the flocks, but your mother is a golden harpy. Wouldn't the leadership fall to her?"*

*"In a time of peace, and as the last golden on our land, she would reign, but to fly and lead the flocks and men into battle, a male must rule, even if his wings are brown. My mother knows this, knows Aron is best capable of defending the harpies."*

*"I was worried about you. I don't understand why they hung you in the tree and made you suffer."*

He shook his head. *“I shall never understand this cruelty in some men. Blackwell could not take my wings and life, so he sought pleasure in stripping me of courage and defiance, taking away all that I am.”* He sighed. *“He succeeded. I longed only to die.”*

*“I wish we were together so I could protect you, too.”*

She couldn't physically defend him, but together he would have purpose as the guardian of his family. Alone, feeling worthless and plagued with a futile existence, he risked suffering from the fatal depression that consumed a caged full-blooded harpy. Kari's human blood made her more resilient, plus she would survive the hardship for the sake of her son. Even Jack was concerned that Shail might deteriorate with captivity and separation from his family.

*“Will and I need you, Shail. You must stay strong for us.”*

With a nod, he lowered himself against the bars and closed his eyes. Since the kidnapping two days before, he had gone without sleep, and the senator's abuse had drained his slight frame and nearly destroyed his mind. As he dozed, she stroked his head. *“My beautiful, brave mate, we will survive this and be free again.”*

## Chapter Five

Aron flapped his worn-out wings on his return journey to Terrance. Glancing back, he saw Ted's small red hover trailing him, but over the miles, the human craft lagged farther and farther behind. Normally a hover could out-fly a spent harpy, but Aron's adrenaline was so pumped up that his mind denied fatigue. He could focus only on Shail and the horrible fate that awaited him. In the late afternoon, he finally descended at the Terrance airport. Many humans and harpies had gathered in the outside landing strip to join Shail's fight against hunters. None were aware that their golden ruler had been kidnapped.

Aron landed by the port building and surveyed the crowd that consisted of several hundred men. A thousand harpies flew out of the jungle and joined the humans. Aron started toward the door, and a man in the crowd yelled, "Aron, we've been waiting all day for you and Shail. Where is he?" Aron couldn't answer. He wiped the sweat from his brow and stepped inside the building. A desk communicator sat in a corner of the large empty room. Ted had taught him the correct sequence of numbers on the machine, and he punched the square keys. Out the window, he saw Ted's hover land near the building and heard the conversation between Ted and the men.

"What's happened, Ted?" one man asked. "Aron won't speak to us."

"Bad news." Ted climbed from his hover, and choking on



the words he explained, “Shail, Kari, and their son have been kidnapped. Hunters raided the Turner estate and forced them aboard a freight that was disguised as a government craft. We don’t know where they are or if they’re still alive.” An audible wave of anxiety and anger sweep through the men. The quiet harpies dropped their heads.

One man asked in disbelief, “How could Shail be captured?”

“The men held Kari and his son hostage,” Ted said. “Shail had no choice but to surrender. The freighter headed west toward the ocean, but the hunters threatened to kill the golden family if we followed. Aron sent his flock out to find the freighter and then trail it at a safe distance. Just pray that his harpies succeed. I have to talk to Aron.”

\* \* \*

Aron stared at the com screen, waiting for his mate, Starla, to respond. The call was risky, but he had to contact Shail’s mother. Covered by an avalanche of mountain rocks, the ancient spaceship lay hidden from humans and unoccupied by harpies for three hundred years. Now the harpy’s sacred mountain hideaway teemed with beautiful female harpies and their fledglings.

The screen lit up, and Starla smiled. “Sorry for the delay, but I had to go outside on the crevice for better reception.” She must have noticed his heavy breathing and sweat-drenched hair, because her smile disappeared. “What’s wrong, Aron?”

“Bring our golden mother,” he gasped. “It is urgent that I

speak to Windy.”

Starla nodded, placed the portable com on a rock shelf, and raced back through the crevice as fast as her pregnant body would allow.

Soon, Aron saw Shail’s mother materialize on the airport screen. Fighting back tears, he tried to muster the human words. “They took him!” his shaky voice said. “Hunters took your son and his family. We do not know where. You must return to Terrance. If I fail to recover Shail, you are the last free golden and our ruler. You are needed in this war.”

Windy covered her mouth. For several moments, she gazed out at the vast mountain range in the background as the cold winds whipped at her waist-length hair. She looked back at Aron. Her eyes watered, but she behaved with the valor and dignity of a true golden harpy. “No, Aron. Shail asked me to protect our females and young. I am following his wishes and will remain within the mountain.”

“But without Shail, the male flocks and humans shall not fight the hunter invasion. You are needed here.”

“I will pray for my son’s safe return, but if he is truly lost, you shall lead the flocks and men.”

“I cannot.”

“I see the anguish on your face, the doubt,” she said. “You are worthy, Aron. You shared my son’s nest and learned to be wise and tenacious like a golden. You also know Shail’s wishes and plans for this battle. He would want you to lead his flock. The

burden of rule must rest on your wings.”

“Brown wings,” Aron said. “Shail might wish me to lead, but the flocks shall disagree. A brown harpy has never ruled. Shail had their respect and could inspire them to attack men. When they become the hunted, they shall go back to the old ways of fleeing and hiding. And the human loyalty shall vanish without Shail.” His anxiety tinged every word.

“In this time of great danger, hair and wing color make no difference. All know Shail trusted you,” Windy said. “The flocks shall do the same. The lives of their families are now at great risk, and this shall inspire them to fight the threat. Any flock leader who raises his wings and challenges you, send him to me.”

Aron rubbed his forehead. “I was raised with Shail, but do not have his shrewdness or courage.”

“You have the courage and wisdom to rule, plus something more. You have a brown’s caution, a trait lacking in Shail. His rash, fearless nature is his greatest flaw and has brought him much suffering. Kari is with him, and I pray she instills reason in him so he survives.” She bit her lip and looked down for a moment. She raised her head, obviously composing herself. “The time approaches that wariness and cunning is needed. You will do well.”

Aron took a deep breath. “I shall try.”

“No!” she snapped. “Try is a word for brown harpies. You shall do.”

Aron lowered his head, humbled by her anger. “I shall do

or die.”

“Good.”

“I must speak with my sister, Lea. I bear great sorrow for her. Her mate was killed defending Shail’s family.”

Windy shut her eyes and sighed. “So much sadness, so soon.”

A few minutes later, Lea appeared on the screen. “I sense our golden mistress is distressed and see the misery in your eyes, brother. Is Reaf still guarding Kari and her son at the Turner Estate? Aron, is he alive?”

Aron bit his lip and slightly shook his head.

Lea’s eyes welled up with tears, and Starla embraced her. Windy returned to the com screen. “We will take care of her.”

Aron had the additional worry of losing his sister to fatal depression. A harpy bond was so strong that the loss of a mate could cause the other to lose the will to live, shutting down their organs or going into shock. “These hunters shall pay for what they have done. My flock follows the large metal bird that holds Shail and his family, but flying for so long at such speeds, they near collapse. I shall tell you if the news is good or bad.”

She nodded, and the com screen went blank.

On the other side of the room, Ted ended another com call. “I told them outside what had happened, and I’m spreading the word to others in the Outback.”

Aron walked outside to address the huge crowd of harpies and humans. He flapped his wings and landed on top of Ted’s

hover. “I have spoken to our golden mother. It is her wish that I rule until Shail returns to us.” He placed his hands on his hips and arched his wings. “I stand ready to challenge any who oppose her decision and me.”

Mark stepped up to the hover. “Every guy here is with you, Aron. If those hunters thought we’d back off without Shail, they’re dead wrong.”

A shout of agreement rose up among the several hundred men.

“And you?” Aron said, gazing at several flock leaders and nearly a thousand male harpies beyond. “Shall you follow me as you would Shail?”

Seth, a powerful leader, walked confidently toward the hover. Aron had fought him for dominance in the past. Fluttering his wings, Aron landed on the ground and faced the larger and older male. He tossed his hair and ruffled his arched wings. Aware of a male harpy’s behavior for combat, everyone moved backed and cleared an area. *Shall you bow or fight me, Seth?*

“Wow,” one man exclaimed, “never seen a harpy fight.”

Seth lifted his sash and urinated. With a lowered head and wings, he stepped within striking distance and dropped to his knees. He bent over and licked Aron’s feet. The urination and feet-licking demonstrated submission and respect for another. The act was normally performed by a terrified fledgling, orphaned and begging for protection from a foreign flock. To prove his loyalty to Aron, Seth had humiliated himself for all to see. The enormous

flock of males fell to their knees and lowered their heads, honoring Aron.

The men gaped at the strange animalistic ritual, clearly baffled. Mark chuckled. “Yeah,” he said and knelt on one knee. The men followed his lead and also knelt. Aron gazed out at his subjects as the new ruler of the Outback.

Ted stuck his head out the building door and called to Aron. “There’s a harpy on the com that wants to talk to you.”

Aron flew over the crowd to the door and rushed inside. On the com screen was a male from his flock. He held his sweaty side and heaved for air. His wings lay extended on the ground, too exhausted for him to fold them against his back. “Where is he?”

“Unknown.” The harpy gasped. “To the islands, and then north and east back to the mountains. To follow, we drown.”

Aron realized his males had traveled nearly a quarter of the planet at record-breaking speed to save Shail. “You are on the last island?” The harpy closed his eyes, acknowledging the answer. “Take rest, and then return to the river town.” He turned off the communicator and walked outside to the large flock. “*The metal bird returns from the sea and goes to the northern mountains. Find it,*” he relayed to the harpies.

A thick plume of dust rose off the ground, caused from beating wings as every harpy took flight and headed northwest.

Mark approached Aron. “Did they locate the freighter?”

“My flock found and trailed it to the last island, and then the hover turn around, back toward the high mountains in the

north,” Aron said. “My harpies could not fly on.”

“From Terrance to that island has to be fifteen hundred miles, maybe two thousand. Those men thought of everything. They traveled far out to sea so any harpy on their tail would tire. Whoever executed this kidnapping is no moron. I hate to say it, but the chances of getting Shail back aren’t good.”

Ted walked up to them. “I updated the governor with the com call from your harpy. He’s having the satellites reprogrammed to scan the northern mountains, but it’s a hell of a big continent. They could be anywhere by now.”

Mark glanced at the large group of men milling around the airport. “What can we do to help?”

“Brown harpies have been killed and our golden family stolen. War is upon us. Shail spoke of the need for human weapons and the talking machines. We must have them now.”

“The mayor ordered them, but we can’t wait for an off-planet shipment. We’ll load up the women and kids in every hovercraft here and fly to Hampton. After the passengers are dropped off, we’ll hit the stores and clean them out of weapons and coms. Same goes for every eastern town on the return trip. It’ll be a start.”

Aron gripped Mark’s shoulders. “You have not lived among us long, but have become a good friend.”

Mark laughed. “Shit, Aron, I’m a war vet who came to Dora to plant roots and retire. I just got bored. I can’t wait to kick some ass.” He moseyed to the men. “Okay, boys, go home, clean

out your bank accounts, and pack up your ladies and kids. In an hour, we're flying to Hampton to drop them off and buy weapons. Any men left behind can take boats down the river. Others take truck transports and head west. Visit every farm, village, and small town for spare weapons and coms." He turned to Ted. "Start contacting the Outback towns. Tell them the plan and that we need every able man and weapon in Terrance. We should be back in four to six days."

"I'll spread the word," Ted said. "I'll start teaching more harpies about operating a com. Most of the young males have learned to talk."

"All right, men," said Mark, "as Aron said, war is upon us, so let's move." The men scattered to their vehicles to prepare for the journey ahead. Within minutes, the crowd that had been around the airport building disbursed, leaving Aron and Ted alone.

Aron walked to a tank near the building that had collected rainwater. He splashed his sweaty body until he was soaking wet. Through his dripping locks, he gazed in a daze at the golden horizon as the sun sank behind the towering trees. It seemed like the end of an average day, but it was not. Everything had changed. The yellow sky was reminiscent of Shail's brilliant wings and hair. Aron's stomach knotted with grief. Would he ever see his young golden brother again? He also felt the strain and doubts that came with leadership. Could he successfully guide the army of men and harpies to victory over their oppressors? Could he save the harpies? He leaned against the building and fought the moisture



growing in his eyes. How many times, he wondered, had Shail felt this crushing pressure?

Ted came alongside him. "We'll find him, Aron."

"Mark does not think so," Aron muttered. "Shail finally found peace after a lifetime of struggle. Why could they not leave him alone?"

"Mark doesn't know everything."

Aron straightened, sniffled up his resolve, and tossed the wet hair from his face. "Shail once told me he longed for brown wings, that I could not know the burden of a golden monarch. I now know."

"Everyone has faith in you. You'll do fine as the Outback ruler."

Aron turned from the view and looked at Ted. "If I ruled last season, you and every human on this land would be dead now. I would have let the swarms kill you."

"Aron, you were a hunted harpy, fleeing for your life. We were the enemy." Ted shrugged. "Heck, I would have felt just like you."

"Maybe, but Shail knew better. He foresaw the friendship between harpy and human. Today, men rush to help us. He said I must break my vow of silence and learn the human words. I resisted, yet I now speak and you know my heart. He believed the harpies must take the human knowledge and learn about hovers, coms, weapons. I argued that the knowledge was evil and we would become like men. He said the evil is not in the knowledge,

but in those that use it. The harpies now learn of human things, and this knowledge might save us.”

“Shail is very smart, and weapons will make a big difference when the hunters come.”

Aron kicked at the ground. “Yes, he was right about many things, and I was wrong. I do not fear hunters or death but am afraid I am unworthy to rule.”

Ted grinned. “You’re worrying over nothing. Sure, maybe you’re not as smart as Shail, but you don’t have to be. You just need to outsmart the hunters. And I know you can.”

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Senator Blackwell gazed upward at his small spaceship that rocketed through the atmosphere. “Goodbye, my beautiful Shail,” he whispered as the ship vanished into the dusk sky. Even though he’d lost two fingers, Blackwell felt a little sad. Never again would he gaze upon a more perfect creature. Besides his stunning looks, the young male was noble, fearless, and honorable. Blackwell admired and envied him, but feelings aside, his motivation for capturing Shail was his insatiable appetite for prestige and wealth.

“Senator,” said his aide. “We really need to get you to the Hampton hospital and have your fingers looked at. That hunter was no doctor.”

“Whatever Jack did, they don’t hurt, but I suppose you’re right.” He glanced around the warehouse grounds and smiled,

spotting the blue tree. It had become a memory worth savoring. His two aides followed him on board his large private hover. The pilot was already seated at the controls. Blackwell sat in a big plush chair and noticed the harpy's three-foot-long yellow flight feathers scattered on an adjacent couch. "You just tossed his feathers there so they can be crumpled and bent?" he screeched at the men. "Wrap and box them, damn it."

The hover escalated above the jungle canopy and headed east. A half-hour into the trip, Blackwell began to mull over Shail's threats. Harpies were terribly truthful, which concerned him. "Contact that little weasel I hired to sneak around Terrance." An aide punched in the com keys, and soon the small, greasy-haired man appeared on the screen before Blackwell.

"Senator," the man said with surprise.

"You did well informing me that Shail was in Terrance," said Blackwell. "Now I need to know about his mother. Find out if Windy still lives on the outskirts of Terrance."

"Uh, I'm not in Terrance anymore," said the man. "I'm on my way to Hampton."

"What?" Blackwell stormed.

"The golden male sniffed me out, sensed I was working for you. The men nearly strung me up, so I hauled my butt out of there."

"Men? What men?"

"The Terrance men," the man said. "They're joining the harpies to fight hunters."

“The harpies plan to fight back?” Blackwell asked. He leaned forward in the chair.

“That was the talk. Shail said his harpies would kill any hunter who crossed the river. He got the townspeople pretty riled up, too. I tried calling but was told you were out of town.”

“Shail is gone, so I’m sure this whole defense plan has fallen apart. Go back and learn where the mother is.”

“N-n-o, sir, Senator,” the man stammered. “Those men know me, and they’ll kill me if I’m found in Terrance. Those harpies scare me even more. They can read your mind and tell if you’re a spy. It’s suicide to cross the river.”

“Fine, make your way back to Hampton.” Shutting off the com, he slumped back in the chair. So there was some truth to Shail’s words. He had motivated the men and harpies to fight back. But without a ruler, the Outback would fall into chaos, a condition that had been part of Blackwell’s plan. He rubbed his double chin, still tormented about Shail’s promise to destroy him. “Connect me with Senator Peterson.”

Soon, the impeccably dressed Peterson appeared on his com. His graying hair and mustache and his hazel eyes matched his suit. “How’s the harpy hunt going?” he asked with a grin.

“I got him,” Blackwell answered gruffly. “I shipped him out a few hours ago. I’m on my way back to Hampton as we speak.”

“You don’t seem very pleased, Harry. I thought you were calling to gloat about your catch.”

“That catch cost me two fingers. The nasty son of a bitch bit them off. He’s the cagiest harpy I’ve ever handled. On top of that, I just learned he stirred up the Terrance men into defending the harpies. They might oppose our hunters.”

“Two fingers,” Peterson said with a raised eyebrow. “You knew the golden was dangerous. Should have been more careful.”

“Right now, I’m concerned about these Outback people.”

“What about them? Their so-called prince is gone. There’s no one left to lead them. All this hype will blow over when those people come to their senses and realize harpies aren’t worth the trouble.”

“I hope you’re right. My lawyers say our governor plans to re-file the harpy case and have it heard before the Supreme Court. I’ll be facing a deadline to catch the harpies before a ruling. I don’t need additional grief from the Outback residents.”

“That case is a long way off, and I doubt it will even get heard,” Peterson said. “Personally, the other senators and I think your harpy-breeding program is ludicrous. It’s hard to keep a caged one alive, much less turn them into pets. The entire flock should just be exterminated.”

“I’ve done the experiments, and with the right drugs, it works,” Blackwell snapped. “You and the others will be sorry you didn’t invest.” He ran his hand over his bald spot and said calmer, “Look, I’m not concerned just about the Terrance men or court. It’s something Shail said to me.”

Peterson broke out in laughter. “Harry, you’ve spent too

much time at your warehouse with those creatures. I can't believe you're worried about what a harpy said. Hell, he only learned to speak last year."

"Well, he learned to speak pretty damn good," Blackwell barked. "He's won the heart of every damn person on this planet, including the governor, and he's incited the Outback to defend his harpies. On top of that, he worked up the flocks into fighting."

"Harpies can't fight," Peterson said. "They're scared of their own shadow. That blond male was a freak of nature, the only harpy with the balls to kill a man. Now he's on his way to Earth, so stop worrying."

"He said his harpies would destroy me, just like they destroyed the swarms," Blackwell said seriously. "Harpies have this honor thing, plus they're simple minded, so they don't know how to lie."

Peterson roared again and shook his head.

"Laugh all you want, but if I need more than two hundred hunters, it's coming out of your pocket."

"All right, Harry." Peterson cackled and managed to say, "If you need help, the other senators and I will chip in on the hunting bill. But our hunters won't be catching harpies. They'll harvest the males for their wings and put down the females and young."

"Tomorrow things could turn ugly, with the story breaking about the golden kidnapping. Some folks in Hampton think they owe their lives to the harpies, the worst being the governor.

There's bound to be trouble.”

“We expected the public to be upset with the golden's disappearance. Besides his striking looks, he's very charismatic, but people are fickle. They'll soon forget him and get back to their lives. As far as our harpy-loving governor goes, Waters is powerless. The law is on our side. In a few years, Dorians will stand in line to buy one of your winged pets. They may even think you're a hero for saving the species from extinction.”

Blackwell grinned. “That would be nice, but I plan to market the harpies on Earth; less interference. The people there have never heard of a harpy, much less seen one.”

With Peterson's reassurance, Blackwell ended the call.

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Shail awoke and glanced around the dimly lit cabin. He heard the low voices of the crew in the cockpit. All others slept, except his infant son. Will's light blue eyes stayed focused on his sleeping mother while his tiny hand pulled her hair. Shail sniffled, and his son turned his attention toward his father. Although Will was a newborn, his animal blood caused him to mature faster than a human baby. He wrinkled his small nose and sniffed back, urging his sire to nuzzle and lick him. Shail sighed and lay back down, feeling worthless. He watched Will through the separating cage bars. Not only was Shail helpless to protect his family, he had become a detriment to them as well. The men were using Kari as a

hostage to make him yield.

*Better if I were dead*, he thought. *My family would suffer less, and without my seed, no other golden sons would live as captives.* He tried to see the bright side, but none existed. No future seemed worth living for. The harpy depression that came from caging was taking hold. His stomach growled with hunger, but he turned his back on the bowl of fruit. His desire to eat and survive was gone. He sniffed remorsefully to his mate. Kari didn't hear him and continued to sleep. She would suffer with his fatal decision, but she'd have to understand. He was a golden male, destined to die with his dignity and courage intact, rather than as a broken prisoner laboring for his masters.

Shail heard the men stirring in their bunks and raised his head. Bob approached the cage. "Jack, the male didn't eat again," he called. "It's been three days. He didn't drink much water either."

Jack walked to the cage, and Shail seethed through his teeth.

"Yeah, he's going down with the damn depression," Jack said with disgust. "We'd better knock him out and get the drugs in him before his heart stops. We might as well also rig him with a feeding tube before he loses weight."

Shail sprang to his feet, extended his wings and hissing loudly at the men.

"Save your breath," Jack growled. "Your threats are wasted on me."



Kari woke from the noise and looked up at his arched wings. *“Don’t fight them, Shail. Give in, or they’ll hurt you.”*

He gazed incredulously at her. *“Give in? I would rather die.”*

Jack stood with his knuckles cocked on his hips as Bob fetched the drugs and returned with an injector. “All right,” Jack said. “We’ll pull his arm out of the cage. I’ll hold him still while you give him the tranquilizer.”

The two men grabbed the chain that was attached to Shail’s wrist and pulled him toward the bars, but he resisted, flapping his wings and bracing his feet against the cage. He couldn’t out-muscle two big men but was prepared to damage himself in the tug-of-war. He placed his arm across the bars so it would not fit through. Bob tried turning his arm and was met with Shail’s snapping teeth.

“Shit!” Bob shrieked, yanking his hand away. “Damn thing nearly bit me. Jack, he’d rather break his arm than let us have it.”

Jack released his hold. When the chain slackened, Shail fell backwards. If not for his fluttering wings, he would have hit the floor. He righted himself and hissed. He nervously paced back and forth, shaking his sore, shackled wrist.

“Damn it,” Jack said with a huff. “I didn’t see this coming. I should’ve brought a tranquilizer gun.”

Jack walked to Kari’s cage and unlocked the door. Shail flung himself against the bars when the man entered her cage. Kari held her baby, but when Jack reached for her, she swiftly clawed

his arm. "Goddamn these goldens!" he exclaimed. He shoved her hard against the bars, stunning her, and swiftly caught her by the throat. Choking, Kari let her son slip to the straw. She struggled briefly but was subdued in the large man's hold.

Watching Jack harm his mate, Shail threw himself against the bars. When his behavior failed to distract the attacker, he flew into the cage like a hysterical, wild bird.

"Jack, he's close to breaking his neck," Bob shouted.

"Stop that," Jack yelled, "or I'll choke the life out of her."

Panicked and breathing hard, Shail clung to the top of the cage by his hands and feet. Once again, his mate paid dearly for his insolence.

"Okay, Bob," Jack said. "Yank his arm out and give him that shot. Let's get this over."

Bob pulled on the chain, and Shail dropped to the floor. He obediently lowered his head and let the man coax him closer. Bob smirked and grasped his arm, pulling it out of the cage. As he reached down for the drug injector, Shail seized Bob's throat and slammed the man's head hard against the metal bars, knocking the resistance out of his victim. He quickly wrapped his arm around Bob's neck and with his other hand wrenched his jaw.

Jack stared in alarm at Shail's death hold. One small jerk, and Bob's neck bones would pop. Jack tightened his grip on Kari. "Release him," he yelled. "I'll hurt her."

Shail twisted the man's neck further, and his angry hiss spoke volumes. Only Kari's life was sparing Bob's.

“Release him,” Jack shouted again.

Shail created a low, sizzling sound and wrenched Bob’s neck further, proving he wouldn’t back down.

“Jesus, Jack, stop yelling at him,” Bob wheezed, his face blood red. “If you don’t let her go, I’m dead.” With the battle of wits, Jack and Shail glared at one another and tightly held their hostages. The standoff appeared even, but Shail had the advantage. He sensed that Jack dared not injure his mate, her life more valuable than Bob’s.

After a long minute, Jack chuckled. “All right, you little bastard, you win.” He released Kari’s throat. “Now let him go.”

Shail still held Bob and tossed his head, motioning Jack to leave her cage. Jack backed out and slammed the door. Shail seethed a poisonous warning into Bob’s ear before shoving him hard to the floor. The man choked and rubbed his twisted neck, staring up in terror at Shail.

“Are you all right?” Jack asked and helped Bob up. “Take a break and get a drink.” Bob stumbled to the front of the ship.

With the showdown over, Jack turned his attention back to the male harpy. The creature tossed his locks, and his mutinous blue eyes stayed fixed on Jack. He hissed aggressively and paced back and forth with arched wings. Jack recognized the harpy gesture for a challenge. In the wild, he had witnessed the bird-like ritual between rivaling males, the prancing in a circle, flinging their locks and raising their wings. They would flutter several feet

off the ground and batter their opponent with all six limbs. The golden was inviting him to a fight, harpy-style.

“No, thanks,” Jack responded. He wasn’t a coward but also was not a fool. Harpies were lightweight and wafer-thin, but they could take out a man, no matter his size, with their aerial bombardment. Luckily, brown harpies were naturally timid with men. This nervy golden was the first to challenge Jack.

Jack strolled through the cabin to check on Bob. He found him sitting in the small galley, sipping a cold drink. Jack sat down across from Bob. “I told you to keep your eyes on that male when you’re near his cage.”

Bob massaged his red neck. “It won’t matter. He’s too fast and strong.”

“Catch your breath, and we’ll try again. I’ll grab the female, and this time secure his chain before administering the shot.”

“Are you nuts?” Bob stood. “I’m not getting near it. When we reach the spaceport, I’m out of here.”

“I hired you to take those harpies with us all the way to Earth.”

“You never said it was a suicide mission. I don’t plan to be that harpy’s next victim. He hissed in my ear and made it very clear he’d kill me next time.”

Jack huffed but didn’t argue further with Bob. Being scared of the harpy made him useless as an animal handler. He faced the dilemma of replacing Bob when the senator’s ship landed at the

spaceport in the Oden system. There, the harpies would be transferred onto the huge star cruiser bound for Earth. If Jack was shipping any other creatures, he could easily find a substitute handler. The harpies, though, were a sticky situation. First, they had to be kept under wraps. No one except Jack and his helper could see or know about them until they traveled out of Governor Waters' reach. Secondly, the wingless female harpy looked like a small, pretty woman that could raise a new guy's eyebrows as to why she was caged. The male had his own set of drawbacks; feeding him, cleaning his cage, or just getting too close to him could get a person killed. The harpy also suffered from the first stages of depression. To keep him healthy and alive might mean daily drugs and tube feeding.

Jack rubbed the five o'clock shadow on his jaw and thought, *I'm not getting paid enough for this shit*. He rose to check on the male harpy that should have gotten calmer. Prior to attacking Bob, he had crashed into the bars with enough force to break bones. Pumped up with adrenaline and agitated, most creatures didn't feel pain and injury until later.

Jack walked toward the cage and saw the male reclining in the straw, but he gathered his limbs and crouched as Jack got closer. No hissing or wing-raising, the male was as still as a stalking cat, with his intense gaze concentrated on Jack. The male seemed okay. Jack didn't see any cuts, bruising, or swelling. "Listen, boy, we're going to be together a long time and can avoid all this trouble if you start eating." He noticed the harpy's water

bowl had been overturned in the conflict. He reached down, intending to refill it. With Jack's focus on the bowl, the male leaped at him. Startled, Jack stumbled backward, but the harpy caught his shirt and ripped the sleeve off.

"You little bastard," Jack cursed. "If this is how it's going to be, you'll lose. I'll break you."

The male stood poised with an arrogant raised head. His tranquil, almost smug expression conveyed that Jack's ranting and threats were worthless.

Rattled with the close call, Jack took a deep breath to regain objectivity. A second faster, and the harpy would have had him in his clutches. For the first time, he felt intimidated by an animal and didn't like it.

The lofty male flung his locks with an irrational stare that confirmed a refusal to back down, no matter the cost. Jack realized he'd lost the upper hand. If he harmed the female again, the male would beat itself against the bars until it died. "There are other ways to skin this cat," he murmured. He called the galley. "Bob, help me move her cage to the front of the ship."

"What for?" asked Bob.

"No more mister nice guy. He's not getting any food or water, and I don't want her comforting or feeding him. By the time we reach the port, he'll be on his knees with dehydration and too weak to be a problem. Then I'll restrain him for the rest of the trip."

After the men had moved the female's cage, Jack returned

to the male's cage with a small box and clamped it to a cage bar, out of the chain's reach. The harpy curiously stared at it. "It monitors your heartbeat. You try shutting down, and an alarm goes off. There's a risk of losing you, but I'm betting I can revive you in time. Then you'll be strapped down and force fed. You've pissed off the wrong man, my little friend. Before we're done, you'll learn to behave." Jack produced a black tarp and covered the male's cage. Like a plant obscured from light, a harpy's spirit withered in constant darkness. Without seeing his mate, the loneliness would be devastating.

Kari stood, gripped the bars, and stared at Shail's covered cage at the back of the ship cabin. Like a large black monster, the tarp seemed to breathe in and out and make a scratching sound, but the cause was Shail. He frantically clawed the tarp to look upon her and see light. "*Shail, please stop. The tarp is made of tear-proof fabric. You cannot get through it.*"

The scraping noise abruptly ended and gave way to the low hum of the ship engine. Kari slid into the straw beside her son, feeling ill with worry. Without hope, Shail could die. His instability and despair would grow, creeping into his mind like a deadly poison. She was upset that he wouldn't yield, but she understood. He was a full-blooded golden harpy, rebellious to his last breath. She had fallen in love with him for who he was but now feared his nature would cost him his life.

Shail's soft voice entered into her mind. "*Kari, I am sorry*

*I cause you worry.”*

*“I am worried. Fighting those men has made things worse.”*

*“Do you not see why I did it? They hurt you to control me. It had to stop. They know now I would rather die than yield, die if they harm you again. Jack shall leave you alone.”*

*“But he plans to starve you into submission.”*

*“He has a choice. Either he unites us, or I shall leave this life. Maybe death is better. I have failed in all things.”*

*“You are not a failure,” she relayed harshly. “You are a good husband, father, and protector of your flock. You even saved the humans on Dora.”*

*“That was then. This is now.”*

*“I know you’re scared of what lies ahead for us, afraid these men will succeed and turn your harpies and sons into slaves, and you’ll be beaten into a whipped pet. These things are in your thoughts, and death is tempting. But think of me and Will. We need you.”*

*“I cannot fulfill your needs when we are apart.”*

*“But you do. Your reassuring voice enters my mind and gives me comfort, as much comfort as your warm wings on a rainy night. This voyage to Earth is very long, and good things might happen. You are the golden ruler of the harpies. Behave like a golden. Don’t yield to the depression like a frightened brown who gives up in the bottom of a cage. I challenge you to survive. Promise you’ll live for me.”*



He didn't respond for some time. *"Kari, you are stronger than me. You always have been."*

Kari knew he was right. Mentally, she had optimism and resilience inherited from her headstrong human father. *"Make a pact with me. Take my hope and survive this journey. If we are still prisoners at its end, then Will and I shall join you in death, for no golden harpy should live as a captive."* She awaited his response. *"Shail?"*

*"For your sake, I promise. I shall give you this need, though I think it small."*

Kari smiled at his vow. A harpy's promise was solid as steel. Shail would keep his word. *"As you lie in this shadowy silence, we shall reminisce of good things, and I'll tell you how your son grows and learns."*

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Time passed as the small ship traveled through a wormhole to reach the giant spaceport in the Oden system. Shail listened to Kari talk about their son. He responded briefly and hid the suffering of hunger and thirst. At first his stomach ached, and then searing headaches and stiff joints began, as his body weakened.

Jack lifted the tarp daily to check Shail's progress. Shail would rally his strength, leap up, and raise his wings. After ten days without water, he merely sat up and fluttered his feathers while hissing through parched lips. Jack goaded him with jabs

from the vacuum rake, to test his resilience. Eventually, Shail curled up under his protective wings and ignored the man.

“We’re nearing Oden,” Jack commented to Bob. “Guess I’d better give his cage a thorough cleaning before it’s loaded onto the star cruiser.” Shail lay on his side and quietly watched him. “No more hissing?” Jack said, prodding him with the rake.

Shail closed his eyes and snuggled his face deep into his feathers. His breathing was labored, and his wings were partially extended in an unnatural position.

“Yeah, he’s close,” Jack said to Bob.

Bob had stayed away from Shail’s cage, but he pulled the tarp back. “Man, he looks bad, so skinny.”

“These creatures are all muscle, no fat, and go downhill quickly. In another week, I can get a feeding tube down his throat. Amazing he survived this dark cage without drugs. Blackwell said he was hardy, reason he wanted him for a stud. The man knows his harpy.”

“I bet you could tube him now.”

“I once dragged an emaciated brown out of a cage. Took my hand off it for a second, and the damn thing flew off. Never underestimate their tenacity. I’ll find out just how weak he is.”

Jack took a leash and walked to Kari’s cage. “Come on. I’m gonna let you see your boy, and don’t you dare scratch.” He returned with Kari, who had left Will behind in the straw nest.

Her eyes teared up when she saw Shail’s deplorable state. In their silent communiqué, he had hidden the terrible reality, not

to worry her. She stepped to the bars, but Jack stopped her from bending down to him.

“You want her?” Jack said. “Get up and get her.”

“*Come to me, Shail, so I may feed you.*” Kari silently called. Shail mustered his remaining strength and crawled to her. Slowly, he pulled himself up by the bars and they wrapped their arms around each other. Shail lowered his head to her milk-filled breasts while her long blonde hair concealed his face. “*Drink. Your son has plenty,*” she relayed. Shail gently sucked like a nursing fledgling. Depleting one breast, he moved to the other. The men were unaware of this shrouded feeding, as they appeared to be merely nuzzling.

“I’ll restrain him, another week,” Jack said. “He’ll be so traumatized that he’ll turn into a puppy. Starving is a surefire way to break an animal’s spirit.” He tugged on Kari’s leash. “That’s enough. Time to go back to your cage.”

Kari hissed at the man and tried to hold onto the bars. Jack jerked her backwards. Shail flapped his wings and snapped his teeth, exhausting his remaining strength to defend her. She worriedly glanced at Shail and submitted by trailing Jack back to her cage.

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Jack reclined on his bunk when the pilot called out, “Hey, Jones, the spaceport is on the monitor. We should arrive in a few

more hours.”

Jack pulled out a second tarp and walked to the female’s cage. “Sorry, princess, you look way too human and can’t have people seeing you when we board.” With Bob’s help, he covered her cage. Before long, the ship’s engine died and the thrusters came on, but soon they too were silent. A slight bump confirmed that the senator’s private ship had docked.

Jack stepped into the cockpit. “There’s your star cruiser,” the pilot said and pointed. “According to the schedule, it departs in twelve hours.”

Jack grinned, staring out the cockpit window at the immense passenger ship that would take him and the harpies to Earth. “It’s a beauty. I’ve never been on a deluxe cruiser before, I’ve always shipped animals on old cargo freighters with cabins the size and smell of a toilet.”

“You’re in for a treat, then,” said the pilot. “This baby’s big and fast, can make it to Earth in four months, rather than five, and has every luxury imaginable. The senator spared no expense in shipping his harpies.”

Bob entered the cockpit and gazed at the cruiser. “Wow.”

“So you’re not going with me now?” Jack asked.

“It’s tempting, but nay. That near-death experience was a life-changer. I’m done with wild animals.”

“Probably for the best if you’ve lost your nerve,” Jack said. “Even an old nag can sense fear and will throw an inexperienced rider. Either you suck it up and get back on or walk away forever.”

“I suppose, but that blond harpy is lethal, more dangerous than any animal I’ve ever encountered,” Bob said. “You’d better be careful, Jack.” They shook hands as the co-pilot opened the ship’s side door. Bob grabbed his gear and departed.

“I’ll check in and get the harpy’s paperwork squared away before I come back and move them,” Jack told the pilot.

Jack strolled down the long see-through corridor that felt like a walk in space. He reached the spaceport bay that resembled a city and made his way through the crowded street that was lined with shops, restaurants, bars, and inns to the corridor that led to the mammoth star cruiser. Following the signs, he arrived at the shipping clerk station. The clerk stood behind a podium as other exporters waited in line with their papers. Eventually, Jack handed the clerk the harpy’s paperwork.

“Grogins? Never heard of them.” The clerk studied the female and fledgling’s papers.

“Yeah, they’re pretty rare,” Jack responded with a smile. “Come from a little jungle planet called Dora.”

“Mr. Jones, I see you have traditional barred cages with no heating,” the clerk commented. “Cargo is rather cold and lit only half the time. Your jungle animals may not do well, and the ship offers no guarantees.”

“I know the policies. Here’s my handler license,” he said, producing his card. “I’ve shipped lots of animals and need the wide bars to get my hands on them. Besides, these grogins are insured.”

“How many cages, and what size?” the man asked.

“Two. Twelve by twelve, and ten feet high.”

“Is that enough space for this long journey?” he asked as he wrote down the information.

“They’re small creatures and don’t need exercise.”

The man turned to the male’s paperwork. Jack held his breath. The clerk stopped reading and looked up. “Your male carries a red tag, says here he’s killed four men. This could be a problem.”

“He won’t be a problem,” Jack said nonchalantly, hiding his nervousness. “His cage has double locks and is covered with an unbreakable tarp, plus he’s chained inside and will be drugged the whole trip. He’s the property of Senator Blackwell and the Washington, D.C., Zoo. They’ll guarantee he won’t escape or harm anyone.” Jack silently cursed the pushy, fat senator, who had insisted the male carry a man-killer’s tag. If the clerk rejected the male, the harpy would have to be destroyed.

“Do you have a security guard?” asked the clerk.

“I did, but he took ill and can’t make the voyage. I was hoping to hire your man in animal cargo. Pay him a little extra to watch my shipment when I’m not around, if you know what I mean.”

“That would be Rusty. He’s a stocky little fellow, but very good with animals. He has an excellent record for keeping creatures alive over long voyages. I’ll have to inspect this male grogin before you board. Make sure he’s confined properly.”

Jack fidgeted with uneasiness. Word might get out about

the elegant harpies that resembled humans—word that might reach Dora. “Sure, but the zoo and senator trust my security, and my record of shipping animals speaks for itself. Never had an incident.”

The clerk glanced behind Jack at the growing line of exporters. “Well, I’m fairly busy with the ship departing soon. If a senator and the zoo trust you, I don’t need to spend my time with this. Besides, Rusty knows our policy on confining dangerous animals. He’ll make sure they’re secure.” The man stamped the papers and handed them back.

Jack breathed a sigh of relief and turned to leave.

“Mr. Jones,” said the clerk, “since you’re short-handed, do you want Rusty to help you load them?”

“That’d be great.”

The clerk spoke into a com. “Rusty, there’s a Jack Jones here who’s boarding some exotics. He could use help loading them and would like to hire you as a guard. Can you spare the time?”

“Sure,” Rusty exclaimed. “What kind of exotics?”

“Grogins. His ship is in Gee twenty corridor.”

“Never heard of a grogin. I’ll be right up,” Rusty said, leaving the clerk’s screen and failing to turn off his com.

The clerk shook his head. “He’s not terribly bright about some things.”

Jack grinned, thinking the guy might be perfect for the job. Jack returned to the senator’s ship. A short red-headed man in his early twenties soon stepped aboard. “Hi. I’m Rusty.” The cheeks

above his broad smile were covered in freckles. “You must be Mr. Jones.” Without hesitation, he stepped to the first covered cage and started unfastening a tie. “Are these the grogins?”

“Not so fast,” Jack growled. “I’ll be the one to take the tarps off when I’m damn good and ready.”

“Sure, mister.” Rusty grinned, unfazed. “I just wanted a quick peek. Ready to move one?”

The kid was a little overzealous, making Jack uncomfortable. The voyage of the harpies had to be discreet, with the Dora’s governor having influence in this sector. Jack placed the floaters beneath one cage for easy transportation down the corridors. The men and the cage arrived at the cruise ship and entered a lift.

“I’ve never heard of grogins,” Rust said as they moved quickly through the various ship levels. “What do they eat?”

“Dried fruit and vegetables,” Jack said as the elevator stopped. The cargo area was enormous, resembling a vast warehouse with a towering ceiling. If the male escaped, he’d never be caught in there. Rusty rattled on happily about exotics and that sometimes their food was harder to keep alive than the animals that ate it. Jack ignored him. They rolled the cage to the animal section.

“To the left,” Rusty directed, “next to the office where I bunk. I like to keep wild animals close, since travel is harder on them than the domestics.” The men left the female’s cage and started back to retrieve the male. “So, Mr. Jones, can you tell me a little about your grogins?” Rusty asked as they walked.



“Like what?” Jack sniped.

“Well, are they mammals? Reptiles? What species would they fit into?”

“They’re part-mammal, part-bird,” Jack answered gruffly, “a monkey with wings, so to speak.”

“I can’t wait to see them,” Rusty said cheerfully.

Jack’s frosty responses bounced right off the kid, and he couldn’t tell if Rusty was dense or good-natured. “Only the males have wings.”

“Kinda like termites,” Rusty said with a smile.

“I suppose,” Jack muttered. They retrieved the other cage, stacked the remaining food, straw, and Jack’s gear on another floater, and made their way back to the cargo hold.

“This ship has a huge garden. For a few extra credits, you can give your grogins fresh fruit. I’ll be glad to run up to the kitchen every morning and bring it to them.”

“They’ll survive fine on dried,” Jack stated. Rusty began pushing cages together. “No, I want the male’s cage on the other side of those crates. He’s vicious and will upset the female. In fact, I want the tarp left on his cage. He won’t eat and isn’t adjusting to captivity. In five or six days, I’ll be back down to restrain him and hook him up with a permanent feeding tube. Forget he’s here, and just take care of the female. She needs a little dried fruit daily, and her cage cleaned. Yell at her, and she’ll stay in the corner when you go in.”

“Don’t you want me to clean the male’s cage?”

“Am I going to have to spell everything out for you?” Jack barked. “Don’t go near him.”

“Sorry, Mr. Jones, I only want to do a good job for you.”

Jack huffed. *This guy really is an idiot*, he thought, *what I really need for this trip*. “Look, kid,” he said and pulled the harpy’s paperwork out from his back pocket. “You see this? Do you know what a red tag means?”

“Sure, Mr. Jones. He’s a man-killer.”

“Four men, to be exact, and he recently reached through the bars and throttled the handler that was supposed to take care of him on this voyage. The guy nearly died, and he quit. That’s why you got the job. His cage is covered for your protection. Understand now?”

“Yes, sir.”

Jack walked around to the female’s cage and unfastened the ties. “Don’t be surprised, but she resembles a woman. She’s not. Her DNA is different, and she has the mind of a wild cat. Look at these claw marks the bitch gave me.” Jack extended an arm and showed Rusty his healed wounds. “Don’t try to touch her, and she’ll be okay.” Jack lifted the tarp.

Rusty’s eyes widened at the sight of the harpy female sitting in a straw nest holding her son. Long blonde hair largely covered her nude body. He moved closer, and the female glared and hissed, clutching her fledgling. The baby’s tiny creamy wings hung loosely from his back.

“Knock it off,” Jack yelled at her. The female cowered and

fell silent. “She’ll stop that nasty hissing once she gets used to you.”

“She’s just scared,” Rusty mumbled and stepped to the cage, causing the female to huddle defensively in the straw. “She does look similar to a woman, but her hair is thicker and her eyes are larger. She behaves like an animal.” He grinned. “But she’s far prettier than any lady I’ve ever seen.”

Jack glanced at Rusty with surprise. Very few people could make the subtle distinctions between a woman and a harpy female. Perhaps the kid wasn’t an idiot after all. “The real difference is when you pick up one of these creatures. They’re lightweight, nearly half the poundage of a human. Any more questions?” he asked. “I want to get to my cabin and clean up. I’m ready for a good, stiff drink in the lounge.”

Rusty shook his head, his eyes focused on the female.

“Good. My room number is on the manifest if you need me. I’ll be back in several days to deal with the male.” Rusty didn’t seem to notice when Jack grabbed his bag and left for the lift.

Kari warily watched her stubby new caretaker, who had placed a chair near the cage and sat only a few feet away, fixated on her every move. She covered herself and Will in the straw bedding and hissed at him, but the more she hissed, the more he grinned.

“I’m not going to touch you,” he said, but even with Kari’s

limited instincts, she sensed the lie. His mind was preoccupied with getting his hands on her. She covered herself and her baby with the straw and trembled, partly from the cold and partly from fear. She was more frightened of Rusty than of Jack.

Will squirmed for food, and she reluctantly let him nurse. She then cuddled him until he fell asleep under her hair.

Rusty walked around her cage and kept ogling her. “You’re so gorgeous, I could stare at you forever,” he said. “But I can tell I’m making you nervous.” He walked into his office, a nearby small structure, and returned to her cage with a blanket. “This will help keep you warm,” he said and shoved the blanket between the bars. Without hesitation, Kari grabbed the blanket and cloaked herself and Will. She settled down into the straw and peered out from under the cover.

“I can’t see you, but would rather have you comfortable.” He glanced at the time. “The lights go out soon, so you can get some sleep.” He studied the paperwork from Jack. “Grogins from the jungles of planet Dora,” he read. “Not much information, and Mr. Jones was sure getting irritated with my questions. I guess I’d better do some research.” He glanced at Kari and smiled. “Goodnight, pretty girl. I’ll see you in the morning.” He walked into his office, and minutes later the large overhead lights in the cargo bay dimmed to dark, simulating night.

Peeking out from the blanket, she saw a small light come on in Rusty’s office and heard the beeps and clicks of his computer and his muffled voice. She realized that a man who talks to himself

and has only animals for company must live a lonely life. She settled in and listened to the occasional rustling of other caged animals in the ship hold. After a while, the powerful ship's thrusters fired and a rumbling shook the massive cargo bay. The deluxe star cruiser was leaving the spaceport. She and her family had begun their journey to Earth.

For the second time, Kari would make this journey. At age eleven, her father sent her to Earth for an education. She had disembarked on the cold, sterile planet, filled with steel buildings, domed cities, and machines. She shivered again, not from the cold, but from her recollection of the despair she had suffered on Earth—despair she felt anew for her family's future.

After an hour, the office light went out and it was quiet, with Rusty obviously going to bed. "*Shail?*" she called silently toward his cage. She waited, but he didn't respond. Could he be asleep, or worse? "*Shail?*" she called again, and still no response. "*Shail, answer me, damn it!*" Her speechless voice was filled with trepidation.

"*I am here, still.*" His soft voice entered her subconscious, but it seemed distant and listless.

"*Don't leave me,*" she begged.

Again there was a long delay before he responded. "*I love you, Kari.*"

Her mate was barely conscious. "*Don't say your goodbyes,*" she whimpered. She recalled an old human poem and recited it to him.

*“Do not go gently into that good night.*

*Fight, fight against the dying of the light.”*

Kari curled up around her baby and sniffled. She was losing her husband.

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The bright floodlights came on in the cargo bay. Rusty sat up on his cot, stretched, and yawned before he left his office. He strolled directly to the female’s cage, bent down, and spotted her elfish face, peering out from under the blanket. “You’re just as pretty as you were in my dreams. After I clean up and have breakfast, I’ll be back. I’ll take care of the other animals, and then I’m spending the rest of the day with you.” The female made a sizzling sound with her teeth, conveying she didn’t care for his plan. Rusty chuckled and walked to the lift.

On returning from the employee mess hall, Rusty fed the other animals. They consisted of mostly pets; two small dogs, twelve domestic cats, and several birds. The Earth pets were a luxury that only the very wealthy could afford. Besides Mr. Jones’ exotics, a few small reptiles were slated for a zoo. Within an hour, he had exercised the dogs and cleaned all the cages. He paused before the covered cage of the male grogin, wanting to see this man-killer, but shook his head and kept walking. Mr. Jones had given him a stiff warning to leave it alone. Rusty opened the female’s cage door, poured a scoop of dried fruit into her dish, and

retrieved the water bowl. He grinned when she made no attempt to escape. “Good girl; we’re gonna get along fine.”

He approached her cage with a full bowl of water. She crawled from the blanket and grabbed a handful of fruit. “You’re hungry,” he said. “That’s a good sign,” He unlocked the cage door and entered. “Stay back, girl,” he said gently and bent over to place the bowl on the floor.

As soon as Rusty’s attention left her, she pounced on his back. Knocked off balance, he fell against the doorjamb. She sprang over his stunned body and dashed out of her jail. By the time Rusty had scrambled to his feet, the female had vanished among the numerous crates that filled the huge hold. “Darn,” he cursed. “This is a first.”

Rusty glanced at the nest and saw she had abandoned her baby in the blanket. *I can’t believe she deserted her young, especially a newborn*, he thought. *There’s something wrong with her*. He locked the cage door behind him. “If she’s any kind of a mother, she won’t go far.” He crept around the crates in hopes of surprising her.

He caught a glimpse of her near the male’s covered cage and considered running her down, but the swift little female could run circles around him. He’d have to lure her into her cage with food or her baby. “Come on, sweetie. Come to me,” he coaxed. That was hopeless. She feared him, and likely all men. He noticed she did not stray far from the male. He carefully peered around the tarp and saw her frantically tugging at its ties.

She saw him and leaped to her feet, vanishing around a corner. Next time he sighted her, she was still struggling again with the male's tarp. She hissed, but it was a groundless threat and she prepared to retreat. "All right, all right," Rusty called. "I'm not going to chase you." He backed away to show that he wasn't a predator. She sniffled and tossed her hair, unhappy animal gestures.

"You want to see him? Well, so do I." Rusty unfastened the closest tie, and the female watched from a safe distance. As he undid each tie, the female slowly followed him. After removing the ties, he carefully pulled the tarp off and cautiously stepped back.

Rusty had expected to see a fierce, lunging male, but instead a slight human frame lay broken on the straw. The large, pale-yellow wings sprawled in different directions reminded him of a gunned-down game fowl. The male raised its head, and the female rushed to the cage. Rusty could only watch as her delicate, trembling hands forced hard fruit through his crusted lips. The male's dull, lifeless eyes closed, and it gasped in defeat. Rusty gazed at the neglected animal. "Damn him," he exclaimed. "Damn that Mr. Jones. He's one sorry excuse of a man."

Rusty became a man with a mission. He was no longer concerned with the escaped female or his job with Jones or the fact that this male was a killer. Vicious or not, the creature was dying and needed help. Rusty raced to his office and grabbed a water bottle and the cage keys. The female stood by the cage door as he



approached. “Look out, sweetie,” he said. She moved slightly, seeming to know he had lost interest in her capture. He flung the cage door open and knelt over the helpless creature suffering from dehydration and on the verge of losing consciousness.

Rusty lifted the male’s head and put the water bottle to his cracked lips. He watched the male eagerly suck up the liquid. “Easy, little buddy, not too fast,” he said, petting his head. “You’re going to be okay.”

Once the male had moisture in his mouth, he glared at Rusty’s stroking hand and seethed. “You have attitude.” Rusty grinned. “That’s good. Fighters are more likely to survive.” His menacing hisses didn’t concern Rusty. The poor thing was too frail to cause him harm, but unlike the female who hissed out of fear, the male’s threats were legitimate. He wasn’t afraid of men. No doubt in good health, he’d be dangerous.

An hour of slow water sips and moistened food returned some of the male’s vigor. He twisted his neck and snapped fiercely at Rusty’s hand. Rusty jerked away before he was bitten. “Guess that’s the end of patting you.” He smiled at the ungrateful creature, pleased with his growing aggression and recovery. The female stood behind Rusty, just out of his reach, and watched.

As the male recuperated, Rusty studied every inch of his charge. Like the female, he was beautiful. He had the same dense blond hair, a streamlined human frame, and a little boy face with large blue eyes. The contrasting difference between the pair was his addition of majestic wings. Rusty folded the sprawled wings

and frowned when noticing the male's swollen shackled wrist. "What happened here? That looks like a fracture." He lifted the creature's arm to examine the break, and the male strained to bite. "Quit now," Rusty reprimanded, ignoring its hostility. Rusty gently twisted the wrist. The male flinched and breathed hard, his eyes watering. "Hurts bad, don't it? Poor little guy, I wonder how long it's been broken." He glanced around the cage. "I bet you got injured when they pulled on the chain and tried to restrain you. Jones probably never noticed or cared that you were hurt."

The female came alongside Rusty and dismally stared at her mate's puffy wrist. She dropped to her knees and nuzzled his cheek. She looked concerned when gazing up at Rusty. "Don't worry, girl. I'll fix him." He stood and left the cage.

In his office, Rusty gathered his medical bag of equipment, drugs, and bandages and dug through a toolbox for a small laser saw. He moistened a bowl of dried fruit and headed back to the male's cage. Deep in space with no veterinarian clinic around, he had learned to make due when animals were sick or injured. He stepped into the cage and discreetly locked the door. The female moved aside, and the male hissed at him.

Rusty placed the food bowl near the male. He sniffled, leaned over, and slowly started to eat. "That's a good little buddy. Hopefully, the food'll distract you until I'm done." Rusty started by cutting the shackle and freeing the wrist. The male reflexively withdrew his damaged limb to protect it, but Rusty firmly pulled it out and placed his knee on the creature's arm. The male struggled

briefly but could only berate him with threatening sounds. Finally, feebleness forced him to concede. Rusty ran a medical monitor over the damaged wrist. “Yep, it’s broken.” He reset it and wrapped the wrist in gauze.

“That should hold it.” Rusty glanced at the female, who sat beside her mate with legs tucked under her. “Guess I need to get you back to your cage.” She glanced at the locked cage door, jumped to her feet, hissed, and poised her fingernails to attack. The male taxed his fatigued body, trying to rise and defend her. He managed to partially arch his wings and raise his upper lip to show teeth to frighten Rusty.

“Okay, okay, settle down,” Rusty said and backed away from the distraught pair. He rubbed his jaw and watched the primitive eerie creatures with their human faces and frames, yet wild-animal characteristics. Like all abused creatures, they were reacting from fear and distrust. They needed gentle care, not more manhandling.

Rusty left the cage and returned with the bundled blanket holding their baby. Seeing her offspring in the clutches of a man, the female anxiously sprang to the cage door as Rusty opened it. “You want him?” he asked. “You’ll have to follow me.” He wasn’t going to fight her, but he figured he could lure her back into her cage with her newborn as bait. “Come on, girl,” he coaxed.

She stood at the cage threshold with indecision in her eyes, looking at her son, and then her mate. Both males were defenseless and needed her. The male tossed his head, seeming to motion her

to leave him. She gazed into Rusty's eyes for a long moment and then turned back, slipping into the straw next to her mate.

"I don't believe it," Rusty said, surprised that her bond to the male was stronger than her maternal instinct. Jones had said the male would not eat, but with his female in the cage, he willingly ate. *They must mate for life, he thought, like wolves and geese, and don't do well when separated. These creatures, whatever they are, they're not mentally or physically equipped to handle captivity.* Sadly, he walked into the cage and laid the baby next to the pair. "I think he's getting hungry." The female quickly grabbed the baby and placed him securely under the male's wing. She sprang up between him and her family, hands up and fingers extended, preparing to claw with her nails. Her intense eyes and admonishing hisses conveyed that she would protect her defenseless males and Rusty no longer intimidated her.

"That's good. You're not afraid of me anymore," said Rusty. "It's the first step to being friends." He backed out of the cage, sat down in the chair, and watched the reunited family. "I'm glad you're happy," he mused, "because Mr. Jones is gonna kill me for putting you together."

When the animal handler left the cage, Kari crawled beside Shail and cuddled Will. Shail covered them with his wing. After a few minutes, he leaned over her and sipped from the nearby water bowl, so weak he puffed with the effort.

*"Rest and recover, Shail," she relayed. "I shall keep*

*watch.*”

With a nod, he placed his head on the straw and shut his eyes.

She nuzzled her selfless mate, who had hidden his pain from her. She glanced at his broken wrist from fighting the men and chain and his drained body that suffered from the lack of food and water. She felt like crying, but resisted, needing to be strong for him and their fledgling. Two weeks earlier, the nightmare began with their capture, and Shail had barely survived the cruelty. Their long journey had just begun. She dreaded what lay ahead.

She looked out from under Shail’s wing at Rusty, short, stocky, and with unruly red hair, Freckles covered his cheeks and pug nose, and he had squinty brown eyes. By human standards, he was far from attractive. With an unpretentious mind, he made it easy to sense his intentions, his longing to touch and control her. Initially, he frightened her. She gazed at him now with new hope, understanding him better. There was not a mean bone in his body, and he had no desire to subdue her or Shail; in fact, he admired their uncompromising nature. The man didn’t relate well with other people, so he sought animals as companions. They accepted him on their own terms. Rusty practiced a type of animal taming called gentling. With such training, the animal was devoted to its master, yet its spirit remained intact.

A beeping sound came from the office. “It’s about time,” Rusty said, rising from his chair. He strolled into the office and returned, studying some papers. “Harpies. You’re harpies. I saw

that picture of a grogin last night and knew something was screwed up. You don't look anything like those cat creatures. I wonder why Jones listed you wrong," he mumbled and returned to his seat. "There sure isn't much Web data on harpies, and this information is over ten years old. Says you're 'highly prized game animals on planet Dora and are hunted for their trophy wings. Average male harpy is six feet high and eighty-pound weight, with a seventeen-foot wingspan. Slightly hominoid in appearance with brown hair and wings, except for extremely rare subspecies called goldens, with yellow hair and wings. A fruit-eating tree dweller. Little is known of the female of this species'. I wonder why there's no picture."

Rusty folded the papers and smiled. "Slightly hominoid," he joked. "Whoever wrote that description never laid eyes on you two. So you're a pair of rare golden harpies. You'd think Jones would take better care of you. At least he has your diet right. I read that grogins are meat eaters."

Rusty glanced at the time and said to Kari, "I'd better skip dinner upstairs and order in until your boy is out of the woods. Dehydration can be serious. Need to keep my eye on him for twenty-four hours. If I knew more about harpies, I'd shoot him up with fluids."

After eating a boxed dinner, Rusty dragged out a mat, portable light, and a reading machine from the office. Shail had recuperated enough that he partially sat up and hissed when Rusty entered the cage and refilled the water and food bowls. Rusty only

chuckled at him. “You’re recovering fast. I might even get some sleep out here.”

The illusionary day ended when the lights faded in cargo. Rusty settled in on his mat with his light and reader. He looked up, noting every time Shail drank or ate. After several hours, Shail managed to stand and relieve himself in the cage corner. He then lay down on his side and extended the bottom wing so Kari and his son could rest on it while covered with the top wing. “Yeah, you’re definitely going to be okay,” Rusty said with a yawn and turned off the light.

Kari snuggled against Shail’s chest and relayed, “*Yes, you shall.*”

## Chapter Six

Shail slowly opened his eyes when lights in the cargo hold came on. He still felt feeble, but his mind was clear, unlike the day before, when he was delusional and had difficulty thinking and responding to Kari. She and Will slept up against his chest. He heard snoring and lifted his head, seeing the red-headed man. He had rolled off his mat and slumbered next to the cage only a foot away. *The fool*, Shail thought. *He believes I am too weak to take life, but I could take his, even now.* He considered reaching through the bars and throttling Rusty but raised an eyebrow, staring at his freed bandaged wrist and the full water bowl. The man had saved him and reunited him with his family.

Shail didn't like Rusty, who was clearly obsessed with taming him, but the man had earned a reprieve. Thirsty, Shail leaned to the water bowl and drank.

Rusty stirred and opened his eyes. Face to face with Shail and his hissing, he abruptly sat up and exclaimed, "Holy shit."

Shail's top wing crashed against the bars, shaking the cage and sending Rusty scrambling backwards, out of reach.

"Wow, you feel better," Rusty said and held his smiling jaw. "You could've grabbed me and didn't. Proves you're no cold-blooded killer."

Shail sniffed at the grinning man who didn't take his threats seriously. Shail intimidated most men. Even Jack was leery, yet this crazy little man wasn't afraid. Irritated with the man's



indifference, Shail showed his teeth and puffed up his feathers to look more menacing.

“Okay, I get it. You’re fierce,” Rusty said jokingly. “Now lie back down. You’re exerting yourself for nothing and need to recoup.” Rusty folded his mat and put it away. “I’ll see *you* after breakfast.” He walked through the warehouse toward the center lift and disappeared.

Shail relaxed and placed his wing over Kari again. She tilted her head and kissed him. *“I think this man will be good for us.”* She crawled out from under his feathers and popped some fruit in her mouth.

Shail stared at her, perplexed. *“Surely, you can sense him. He wishes to place a leash on my neck and treat me like a pet. One of us shall die before this happens.”*

*“Yes. I sensed his thoughts, and I was wary at first, but it is a different taming he wants. Rusty does not wish to rule us, but seeks our friendship. Surrendering your pride is small for the help he offers. And we shall need his help. You cannot fight all of them.”*

Shail sniffled. *“I am no man’s dog. Better this one learns to fear me and keeps his place.”*

*“What will you do when Jack returns and separates us again? He does not want me pregnant with a second fledgling.”*

*“I hope for the strength to fight him off. I do not understand these men. They wish us as a breeding pair, yet keep us apart.”*

Kari took a deep breath. *“It is how animals are bred on Earth. Males and females are mated but never smell, see, or touch each other. It is called artificial breeding. The stud is taught to release his seed into a machine. The female is given drugs that cause her to produce many eggs, and they are removed. Then humans merge the seed and eggs, and the offspring grow in containers, not knowing their parents. Instead of one offspring in a season, there are many.”*

She picked Will up so he could nurse. *“But I do not understand how the senator plans to breed the harpies. A female cannot prevent the taking of eggs, but a male must be willing. I know you would never yield your seed to a machine.”*

Shail lowered his head and stared at the straw. *“Men have already forced me to do this. The senator discovered the secret, which I killed to hide.”*

*“The rape? But how? How could they make you?”*

*“I long to wipe this memory from my mind, but I shall tell you so you understand why I must not survive this journey.”* He swallowed deeply and went on. *“I did not know such things could be done to a male. The hunters of last season did as the senator said. They tied me down and took turns mounting me, lusting as though I were female. Later they forced a small blue seed, a pill you call it, down my throat. I lost control of my urges and became aroused. They stroked me, laughing each time I released my seed. I killed those men for what they did, but more so for what they learned. They found out that this pill could drive a wild harpy to*

*breed in captivity. This is the senator's plan."*

*"Oh, Shail, no wonder you suffer from terrible nightmares."* She hugged him tightly for a long time. Eventually, she pulled away and stood. *"We have to outthink them. The senator wants us apart so I don't become pregnant. If I were, it would delay the artificial breeding."* She looked at him. *"I say we delay it, Shail."*

*"A second fledgling?"* Shail shook his head. *"You nearly died from the first, and your body is still weak. We should not."*

She sat down beside him. *"My body is stronger than yours right now. We must do this in case we survive this trip. And it has to be now, before Jack returns, but can you?"*

*"As long as I breathe, I can with you."* Shail nuzzled her cheek and ran his hand across her nude body. Licking her neck, he fondled her breasts. Kari shivered with his sexual advances and lay down on the straw. Even in his sick and drained state, Shail crawled upon her and rubbed against her body to become aroused. Under the bright lights in the cargo bay, they began bonding. He penetrated her and gently thrust, his wings fluttering with eagerness as his climax built.

Rusty came off the lift and turned a corner around some stacked crates. He stopped dead in his tracks. To his astonishment, the feeble male was copulating with his mate. Rusty crept up behind the boxes. Suddenly, the harpy's large wings flapped hard several times, and his body tensed. The mating was over.

Immediately, the wings drooped and the exhausted male withdrew. He pulled his legs up to his chest and hugged them with his arms, and then cloaked his slight frame with his soft, feathered wings. Tucking his face deep into the yellow down, he closed his eyes.

The female moved away and rebuilt their nest. She shoved the available straw into a circle around her mate and retrieved her blanket-covered fledgling. She nipped at her mate's neck, urging him to respond. He uncurled his body as she crawled next to him and covered his family with an extended wing.

Their elegant movements and animal gestures fascinated Rusty. He tried to creep closer, but the audacious male jerked his head up and sniffed the air. He glared and hissed toward Rusty's hiding place. Rusty stepped out from behind the crates. "Can't sneak up on you," he said, chuckling. "Your nose and ears are too good." Approaching the cage, he was greeted by the ornery male's snapping teeth. "You could act a little grateful. I let you have your girl." As Rusty put some grapes between the bars, the male lunged. Rusty pulled his hand away, unfazed. "For such a handsome fellow, you sure have an ugly temperament." He walked off to tend to the other animals.

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Over the next few days, Shail gave up threatening Rusty. His belligerent behavior toward the man only made him smile. The redheaded man had obviously dealt with bigger and tougher

creatures than one hateful male harpy. Shail recovered enough to walk around the cage and continue bonding with Kari. They mated beneath Shail's wings, even in Rusty's presence.

Harpies regarded mating as a natural animal act, unlike humans, who hid it. A young male often mounted his new mate in the presence of the flock, thus confirming the female was his and she held his seed. The open display ended the courtship of other suitors.

Shail sensed that Rusty was delighted with his swift recovery, but the man had become more cautious when entering their cage to feed and clean. With a forceful tone, he ordered Shail to stay back. Shail responded with hair tossing and sniffing before returning to the nest to guard his family. A routine fell into place that was acceptable to Shail and his handler. Rusty respected him, so Shail didn't attack.

Rusty fell in love with the harpies. The pretty female had delicate features to match her enchanting personality, whereas her graceful, princely male had a fierce, moody disposition. It was obvious that the harpies were intelligent. Unlike other animals, they couldn't be manipulated with food treats. He realized that a true camaraderie with the harpies would take time and patience, especially with the testy male. Its starved body, rope burns, broken wrist, and faint scars from beatings and a healed laser wound below his ribs all added up to terrible animal abuse. Rusty understood why the male was hostile and had turned deadly. To

gain the creature's trust was a challenge.

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Jack woke on the sixth day in his comfortable compartment bed. He reluctantly sat up, knowing he'd need to tube feed the harpy stud. The task would be easy with the creature unconscious, but he dreaded starting the daily chore that would last four months. "Damn that Blackwell," he cursed. "He had to have this lousy blond."

While dressing, Jack recalled his first encounter with Senator Blackwell at his jungle warehouse two years before. "I was told you're one of the best hunters in the galaxy," the senator had said. "I'd like to hire you to catch the galaxy's most elusive animal." Jack went to work for the obnoxious man to trap harpies. Since the remaining flocks were largely on the west coast and islands, he wondered why the senator had his warehouse in the center of the continent. "Harpies are cagey," Blackwell explained. "There are plenty of river flocks here." The senator turned out to be right.

The wise and fast adult males were nearly impossible to catch, but Jack learned their weakness: the easily snared fledglings. With the offspring as bait, he delivered many live adults to Blackwell. The first caged dozen, though, died quickly from shock, despair, and heart failure. At length, the senator's vets concocted the correct formula of heart stimulants and antidepressants that

kept a captive harpy alive.

“Look at them, Jack,” Blackwell had said, indicating his caged harpies. “They’re absolutely gorgeous. To kill them for a crummy feather trophy is a waste. Think of the money people would pay to have one as a pet or sex partner.” Jack was therefore drawn into Blackwell’s scheme to sell the feral animals. Wild adults were hard to maintain and untamable, so the senator decided to breed the harpies artificially and sell their hand-raised fledglings. The young ones would dwell happily in a small cage without drugs or tube feeding and would endure their master’s wishes. The plan was flawed when the vets couldn’t force the males to release their sperm like other stud animals. “They guard it like it’s sacred,” Blackwell cursed.

There then was a breakthrough last year. An ex-con caught a rare golden male and gave it a new anti-impotency drug from Earth. Stimulated by the drug and rape, the harpy helplessly ejaculated. The ex-con’s discovery and night of pleasure with the golden cost him his life.

The beetle swarms and harpy truce delayed Jack and Blackwell’s plans, but with the court ruling, things were back on schedule. Jack expected to retire a wealthy man. Then another problem arose. Blackwell was obsessed with the golden ruler and insisted it be his main stud. “That flashy demon brought three million credits at the auction last year,” Blackwell had said. “The hardy goldens will bring more and survive better than the weak, shy browns.”

Jack disagreed. “That golden is a proven killer and could pass those deadly genes on to his sons,” he argued. “The extra money isn’t worth the risk of producing bad-tempered creatures.”

“Look, that young golden is the most powerful and cunning harpy ever to rule the flocks,” the senator insisted. “Besides, he’s popular with people, and he has to be dealt with anyway. I want him.” Blackwell seemed bewitched by the blond male.

Jack arranged to trap the entire golden family. Never encountering a yellow-haired harpy, he was initially impressed by the bold and exquisite goldens and admired the nervy, slight male that had challenged his men and survived a five-hour tree hanging. Jack had soon learned the downside of maintaining the creature, though. It had quickly injured two men, bitten off Blackwell’s fingers, and strangled Bob, nearly killing the man.

Jack wished he were shipping a submissive brown stud that would lie on the cage floor instead of the yellow-haired monster. For the first time in his life, he was uneasy around an animal with intelligence that had proven to match his own.

He packed up the chains, ropes, and a jug of fruit juice for the feeding tube. “Might as well get this over with,” he grumbled as he headed for the lift.

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As Jack strolled through the cargo bay, he saw the tarp had been removed from the male’s cage. “Damn that kid,” he fumed.



He next saw the female standing in the stud's cage. The stupid redhead squatted by the bars, and the male harpy lay in the nest. "What the hell is going on?"

Rusty stood. "Mr. Jones, I, I had to...", he stuttered as Jack approached the cage. In a flash, the male flew off the nest and slammed into the bars to grab Jack's throat. Jack stumbled out of reach, tripped over a mat, and hit the floor. The fruit juice drenched him.

"Golly, he really doesn't like you," Rusty said and moved to help Jack up.

"Get away from me," Jack growled, rising.

Rusty quickly explained how the female escaped and that he had found the male with a broken wrist and close to death.

"He would have survived."

"No, sir, Mr. Jones. He'd be dead by now."

"You should've called my room and told me she got out and he was bad off."

"Well, sir, to be honest, I hate paperwork," Rusty said. "I'd have had to file a report that the male was neglected and the female's cage is inadequate. That report could be trouble for everyone. You and your harpies could be tossed off the ship at the first port of call. I thought it better if I just fixed things."

Jack frowned. "What did you call them?"

"Harpies. Your paperwork is messed up. When I saw a picture of those cat-like grogins, I knew something wasn't right. I found them on the Web." Rusty retrieved the printout from his

office and handed it to Jack. “See? They’re harpies.”

“So they are,” Jack said, quieter and smiling. “Bet those grogins I shipped have the harpies’ papers.” Jack began to wonder if Rusty was really a simpleton after all. The kid had him over a barrel with the threat of neglect and false papers, all of which would draw attention to the harpies and bring the Dora’s governor down on Jack’s head. Jack chuckled slightly. “Guess I owe you thanks for getting it straightened out,” Jack said and patted the kid on the back. “So how did you manage to treat that wrist without losing your hand?”

“He hisses and puts on a pretty good show.” Rusty grinned. “But I can tell he’s not really mean. He’s proud and don’t like being pushed around.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “Don’t be fooled, boy. That ain’t a show. He did kill those men, and that red tag is right.”

“Maybe the men mistreated him,” Rusty said with a shrug. “All I know is he hasn’t been any trouble, and he’s eating fine for me.”

“He’s eating because his female is with him,” Jack grumbled. “This pair was to be artificially bred at the Washington Zoo. I can’t have her get pregnant. Do you have a tranquilizer gun so we can get her out?”

“Gee, Mr. Jones, I wish you had told me that. They’ve been breeding constantly, and I don’t know their body chemistry well enough to risk a tranquilizer. The ship could be liable, and I’d lose my job.”

“Great!” Jack snapped, knowing Blackwell would be furious. On second thought, to hell with him. He wanted this damn golden, and now he’s stuck with a delayed breeding program. Jack looked at Rusty and grinned. “Fine, kid. Truthfully, I wasn’t looking forward to wrestling with him and getting that tube down his throat. Now I can enjoy this trip. Think you can handle him without getting hurt?”

Rusty’s eyes lit up. “Yes, sir, Mr. Jones. I can handle him. He just needs to be treated with kindness. These harpies are very smart, and smart ones can’t be forced. They only grow more resentful.”

Jack glanced at the pacing male. “He’s smart, all right. That little shithead keeps getting his way. Just be careful. He’ll act docile and then turn around and nail ya.” Jack ambled toward the lift, leaving his chains and ropes.

Shail shuddered with adrenaline and anger as his intense gaze followed Jack until the man disappeared and he heard the lift rise to the floors above.

“It’s okay, buddy,” said Rusty. “He’s gone. You can relax now.” He chuckled. “Man, that big guy is really scared of you.” Rusty slowly extended his hand through the bars toward his Shail’s. Shail flung his hair and seethed with audacity. Glaring at the man, he returned to the nest.

As he stretched out on the straw, Kari relayed, “*Rusty just longs to touch you.*”

*“That touch shall cost him an injury.”*

*“Why are you so hard on this man? He is kind and loves us.”*

Shail jerked his head up and growled telepathically, *“He thinks this is a game, and he shall win when gaining the trust of the deadly beast. It shall take more than kindness to make me yield.”*

*“It is a harmless game, played by a harmless man. You should swallow your pride and give in to him. Deep down, I know you like Rusty. You detest this cage and our captivity. The broken truce, the helplessness to protect your flock and family, and the terrible men and future that awaits—all those things occupy your mind and cause anger. Do not take it out on the innocent desires of a young handler.”*

Shail curled up next to his son and licked him. After a minute, he gazed up at her. *“You bring reason to this madness.”*

*“In the Earth schools, I learned an old saying that helped me: ‘Be thankful for small victories.’”* She ran her hand over his long frame. *“Right now I find great pleasure in stroking you, and in the dark you shall wrap your warm body around me as I lay between your soft feathers. Our cleverness to bond in front of the handler has brought sleep without fear, hunger, or pain. And we have a gentle man caring for us. These small victories should dwell in your thoughts.”*

Shail leaned over and affectionately rubbed his head against hers. *“You see the good, when I only doubt.”*

*“It’s my human half that gives me optimism, and like all*

*harpies, you're pessimistic."*

*"More big words I must remember."*

Rusty walked up to the cage and gazed down at them. "Well, aren't you happy? I'm standing here and not even getting nasty sniffles."

*"You may not want his friendship, but Rusty deserves some gratitude."* She pulled from Shail's arms and stepped to the man.

*"Kari, stay away from him,"* Shail said, but she ignored him. She submissively lowered her head so Rusty could pet her. Shail's eyes blazed at his mate's disobedience, but he remained on the nest. He knew she was right.

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Over the next few weeks, Kari accepted Rusty's companionship despite Shail's objections. This man could help her family, and she wasn't above being treated like a pet, whereas Shail's wild nature, his golden ego, and past abuse kept him at odds with his jailor. Although he no longer threatened Rusty, he still wouldn't surrender to his touch.

Rusty moved his cot out from the office and placed it alongside their cage. When the lights went out in the cargo, signaling the artificial night, he'd turn on his small light and read aloud from his tablet. Kari would leave the nest and recline next to the bars, listening to the old stories. It was a pleasant distraction in an unpleasant situation. Eventually, Shail gave in and moved their

nest next to Rusty's bed. Every night ended with the same moves. Rusty would pet Kari and say goodnight to Shail, always calling him his little buddy. Although tall, a harpy's build was so slender that men often referred to them as small or little. Before retiring to his cot, Rusty would hesitate, the hope in his eyes that Shail would come to him.

During the light hours, Shail would often lie quietly in the straw, staring at the ceiling beams. Kari sensed his troubled mind and the depression he fought for the sake of his family. *"Aron will save your flock, and Governor Waters is searching for us,"* she said while preening his feathers. *"There is so much good that could happen. Even the court may rule in our favor and reverse all this bad."*

*"Yes, I must keep your hope, your optimism."*

*"You remembered."*

One day Rusty approached their cage, having finished with his daily chores. "This will be a great night, guys. I've got a new book, and I managed to steal two apples for you. Here, girl, come and get yours." Kari smiled knowingly at Shail. She turned and faced the redhead. She took the apple and ate a bite.

Rusty held out the other apple toward Shail. "Come on, little buddy." To his and her astonishment, Shail rose, ruffled his feathers, and approached the bars. Rusty's hand trembled slightly, obviously unsure if Shail would grab the fruit or him. Shail raised his head, showing dominance, and calmly accepted Rusty's treat. He leaned against the bars and nibbled but kept one eye fixed on

the man. Slowly, Rusty massaged Shail's arm and whispered, "Good boy, good boy."

Shail glanced at Kari. *"You have many human sayings, but here is a harpy's: 'A tree that bends in the storm does not fall.' Like a tree, I must give way if I am to survive here."*

Rusty's eyes were as big as moons with Shail's acceptance. "I need to steal more apples."

## Chapter Seven

On Dora, Governor Waters paced in his office. “It’s been two weeks since Shail was taken, and not a clue as to where he is,” he stormed to his office staff. “Where could they be hiding him?”

“Governor, we’ve searched the entire continent, even with satellites,” the attorney general answered. “We have to assume the golden harpy is either dead or has been shipped off the planet. We’ve checked all ship manifests in this sector. No harpies listed. If he was taken on one of the small private spaceships that don’t use the Hampton port to land, he could be anywhere in the galaxy by now.”

Ray, the governor’s assistant, added warily, “Even if we found the harpy, we’d be stretching the law to gain ownership. He’s listed as a wild animal, and anyone can take him or kill him.”

“Shail is no animal, not to me,” Waters said. “And I don’t care how many laws I bend or break to get him back. He saved the life of everyone on this planet. He trusted me to protect his family, and I let him down.” He slumped in his office chair. “The minute the court ruling came back, I should have put armed guards around him.”

“I know you’re preoccupied with finding the harpy,” said the attorney general, “but there are other problems you need to address. A small crowd has been picketing the senate house, and it’s starting to turn ugly. Two women were arrested yesterday for egging a senator. They claimed if the senators wanted fowl, they’d



give it to them.”

Waters grinned.

“Another problem,” continued the attorney general, “are these hunters arriving on incoming ships. With the soaring price of harpy wings, they’re coming from across the galaxy. The Outback people say they’re still under the harpy treaty, regardless of the appellate court’s ruling. They threaten to shoot any hunter that harms their harpies. With the treaty nullified, the western continent falls under your control again, and all that land has reverted to the former owners. When they evict the Outback people and the hunters go west, there’s bound to be bloodshed. Governor, it’s the makings of a civil war.”

“I’m aware,” Water said, stroking his chin. “Who owns the Outback lands now?”

“Most of it belonged to timber companies,” said Ray. “Some was private, and the banks owned a fair share.”

“Perhaps we can derail these problems before they come to a head.” Waters turned to Ray. “Go check the old deeds and find out who has title to the western land. Maybe we can homestead those people or negotiate a deal where they can keep their homes at a reasonable rate.” Ray stood and left the office.

The attorney general released a weary sigh. “Land or no land, Governor, those people intend to defend the harpies and shoot any hunter who crosses the river. The Outback residents are a rugged bunch. I think we should consider calling in the galactic army. They’ll keep the peace. If not, there’ll be more than a few

dead and missing harpies.”

“Not yet. The law is against the Outbackers, and right now they’re the only thing standing between the harpies and hunters. If I can convince the banks and timber companies to work with these people and place a private hunting ban on the west, it may appease everyone and protect the harpies. The hunters could be arrested for trespassing and poaching.”

“It’s going to be a tough sell,” the attorney general commented. “These former owners lost the land because of the treaty with the harpies. They have no love for them.”

“They’re businessmen, Fred,” said Waters. “They know that a war is disastrous. It would make it impossible to harvest the timber, and people also don’t instigate or repay pay bank loans with that kind of chaos.”

Ray came back into the room. “Governor, I think you should see these. I only pulled up the timber company deeds so far.” He handed a pack of papers to Waters.

Waters shuffled through the papers and tossed them on his desk with disgust. He turned away from his staff and stared out the window. “It all makes sense now,” he said bitterly. “The final piece of the puzzle. Why the senators want the harpies as animals. They’re planning to exterminate them.”

The attorney general quickly looked at several of the papers. “These deeds are in the senators’ names.”

“Yes,” Waters said with his back to his staff. “They bought up all the deeds to the western outback. Since the deeds were

worthless at the time, they probably got them for next to nothing. The senators are sitting on a win-win situation. If they can wipe out the harpy race before a Supreme Court ruling, it would moot a second treaty. Can't have a treaty without a second party. The senators are guaranteed a court win, and they retain the land, and the timber alone is worth billions. No wonder they're bringing in these hunters."

Waters faced the attorney general. "Shail wasn't some hunter's prize. He was removed for political reasons. He could have held off the hunters and negotiated a second treaty, causing the senators a lot of trouble. Shail said it was greed that disgraces men. How right he was." Waters put a hand to his forehead and leaned on the desk.

"I'm sorry, Sam," the attorney general said. "I know you and the harpy were close. We have to assume he's dead."

Waters nodded and was quiet for some time. He glanced up at his staff. "These money-grubbing senators have a flaw in their well-laid plan. They think the harpies will scatter and hide with no golden ruler to lead them or negotiate another treaty. But the harpies do have a ruler. Aron is a tough customer with little compassion for humans. He may be these senators' worst nightmare."

"The question is, Governor, what side will you fall on?" the attorney general asked. "The senators have the law on their side."

"Legally I must follow our laws, but morally I'll do everything in my power to help our harpy friends. Arrange a

meeting with these senators. It's time we had a little talk."

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Within his country warehouse, Senator Blackwell smiled as he watched an employee open a large crate. Blackwell reached in and took out a laser rifle. "Yes, these are just fine." He tossed the weapon to a burly hunter with a surly expression. "What do you think, Hank?"

The man examined the weapon for a moment. "What's the range?"

"Half a mile."

"Didn't know they made a stun gun with that kind of distance."

"They're the newest thing." Blackwell beamed. "Should bring down a lot of harpies."

"If they survive the fall." Hank laughed. "That's always the problem with stunning a harpy in flight."

"Just bring them down. If half survive undamaged, I'm satisfied. I can sell the wings of those that are crippled or die. Even their wings have tripled in value. Any information on the location of the females? I need them in my breeding program."

"Nothing yet," Hank responded. "Rumor has it they're hiding in the old spaceship buried under a mountain avalanche, but the question is which mountain. Everyone knows it's on the Turner Estate in the northwestern territory, but that estate is thousands of

square miles, and Turner never let outsiders on his property. Nobody knows the exact location.”

“I promised the zoo a female shipment by the end of the month. The males are going to my associate, Jack Jones, in New York. One pair of goldens isn’t enough DNA diversity for my farm.”

“We’ll find that ship and your girls, Senator. Before long, I’ll have plenty of hunters to invade the Outback. Those harpies won’t know what hit ’em when we cross the river.”

“Good. But avoid Terrence. I don’t want any human fatalities; I’m already getting heat from these damn protestors.” The senator’s com buzzed. “Yes?”

“Sorry to disturb you when you’re in the country, Senator,” said his secretary, “but Governor Waters’ office called and wants a meeting with the senators as soon as possible.”

“Does he?” Blackwell said. “Before, that man wouldn’t give me the time of day. He must be getting worried about the feathered friends. Tell him I’m available in a couple of days. Let him wait.”

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The twenty senators filed into the governor’s conference room. “Come in, gentlemen. Take a seat,” said Governor Waters. “This meeting will not take long.”

Blackwell leaned toward Senator Peterson and whispered,

“We’re here so he can plead for the harpies. Good luck with that.”

Waters stood at the end of the conference table. “Let’s do away with the niceties and get right to the point,” he said firmly. “I’m well aware of what you’ve done and why. You plan to annihilate a gentle race so you can have their land. Frankly, you disgust me. But I didn’t ask you here to belittle you.” Waters’ jet-black hair and trim build were conspicuous when he rounded the room. “No, you’re here so I can officially warn you. I know some of you are responsible for the harpy ruler’s disappearance. With him out of the way, it might seem easier to destroy his flock and prevent a second treaty. The fact is, the harpies have another leader. I know him well. He’s not as forgiving or as reasonable as Shail.”

Waters paused and cast a piercing eye at the senators. “Remember, Shail graciously forgave all past atrocities done to him and his flock. He forgave you, Senators, for concealing the truth that caused his race so much suffering, and he still had the honor to save you from the swarms. This brown ruler is very different. He sees only things as black or white. You and your hunters are his enemies, and there’ll be no compromise, no mercy. He seeks revenge for losing the golden family and for the deaths among his flock.”

A low rumble of discussion started among the senators, but Waters went on. “For my part in the bloodshed that will result if your hired hunters cross the river, I plan to do nothing. The galactic army will not be called in, as you may have assumed. The

ruling of the appellate court—the ruling you instigated—allows me to take this stand. This conflict is not one between people that would require the intervention of the army. The harpies are considered animals now, and like all of Dora’s dangerous game, harpies are not responsible if they kill your men. Your court ruling may allow open season on harpies, but the twist is that it also allows them to have open season on their predators. And don’t count on the public’s support. The Dorians are rooting for the harpies.”

Waters returned to the head of the table. “As for the Outback people who occupy your land, again I plan to do nothing. It’s a civil matter that could take years to resolve, but be very careful, gentlemen. If brute force or scare tactics are used on those people, I’ll hold you responsible.” Waters glared from one to another of the group. “And believe me. I’m looking hard for an excuse to set matters straight. That’s all. This meeting is adjourned.”

“Wait, Governor,” one senator called as Waters passed through the door. The governor ignored him.

Senator Peterson lifted an eyebrow, looking at Blackwell. “Maybe these creatures do plan to fight back with this new brown ruler.”

Blackwell breathed deeply. “I told you the golden wasn’t lying to me.”

Life aboard the giant space ship remained relatively calm for Shail and Kari. Rusty catered to their every need, and Shail continued to let the good-natured man pet him. The compromise was small, allowing Rusty think he had tamed a savage beast. He was good to Shail and his family.

Rusty spent his days trying to understand the mysterious harpies. Were they animals, or primitive mortals? Like humans, they preferred to stay clean, and they washed themselves in the small water bowls. Rusty added a water bucket. Despite the cold bay, the male plunged his head in the bucket to clean his hair. He let the water drip down his body and wings, and then he vigorously shook off the droplets.

The female was more delicate with her grooming, wetting herself sporadically. After a bath, they would groom each other, running their fingers through each other's hair to remove the snarls. The female spent hours preening her mate's wings and forcing excess oils down the long feathers with her fingers and mouth.

The little fledgling was blossoming as solid flight feathers replaced his soft down. More and more, he would crawl out of the nest and explore the cage. Rusty was surprised by his quick growth, though he realized that, for animals, expeditious growth was necessary to ensure survival.

Rusty noticed that the harpies' behavior was similar to that



of several animal species. They curled up on their sides and slept like cats, never lying on their backs, and hissed while they used their sharp nails for defense. Yet they nuzzled and nipped one another's necks like ponies while tossing their long hair like a mane. When frightened, they coiled low to the ground and seethed like a cornered snake. They also had bird characteristics, especially in the male. His tiptoe stride and graceful frame resembled those of a sleek, agile heron, but when provoked, he arched and ruffled his feathers, apparitions of a fighting cock.

The harpies, though, were short on human behavior and traits. They were mute, and the only sound they made was a nose snuffle or a hiss created by their teeth. Their blank, beautiful faces were devoid of expression. No smiles or frowns. Only their intense, bright eyes showed feelings.

Rusty became aware of the harpies' acute animal senses. Their hearing, sense of smell, and sight were phenomenal compared with his. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't sneak up on them without detection. Although they seemed naïve, Rusty continued to question their intelligence. They understood some words, so he constantly talked and read to them. Their expressive eyes conveyed that they liked his books. Slowly, he stopped seeing them as unknowing animals and began treating them like eager, young children.

The harpies and Rusty fell into a comfortable relationship. He was no longer concerned with the male and walked confidently into their cage. Some days, the male greeted him with a gentle

nuzzle while Rusty massaged his neck. Other days, the harpy would sniffle and shake his hair to show he wanted to play, and a friendly tussle between man and harpy determined who would land in the straw. The quick, airy harpy always managed to overpower Rusty. He figured the game must be some kind of rough-and-tumble competition between male harpies. He'd acknowledge defeat, delighted that the creature accepted him as a companion.

A few weeks later, Rusty entered the cage, and the golden male gave a friendly sniffle. "You watch, girl," Rusty said to the female. "He's not going to knock me down today." Suddenly, the male's eyes flashed, and he seethed a low, deadly sound and arched his wings. Rusty recognized the act of aggression and cautiously backed toward the cage door. "Easy, buddy," he said nervously. "What's wrong with you?" The female seized her fledgling and fled to the nest. The male lowered himself on top of his family, covered them with his extended wings, and continued to create a steady, hostile hiss. Rusty heard the slight mumbling of distant voices. "You're better than watchdogs," he said and left the cage to see who had entered cargo.

Rusty saw Jack and a woman strolling toward the harpy cage. By their stagger and slurred voices, he knew they were intoxicated and had probably come from the ship lounge.

"They're in that cage ahead," Jack said to the lanky woman hanging off his shoulder. With multicolored stripped hair, heavy makeup, and a scanty dress with a low front, she was trying for youthful, but it wasn't working. She appeared to be Jack's age,

mid-forties. Rusty quickly deduced she was one of the prostitutes that took up permanent residence aboard and made a living picking up customers in the bars.

“They look like birds,” she exclaimed on seeing the large yellow wings.

Jack laughed. “They ain’t birds, honey. They’re called harpies. Hey, Rusty. How they doing? Still behaving for you?”

Rusty nodded uneasily. “They’re doing good, eating, and not giving me any trouble. But I thought you didn’t want anyone to see them?”

“We’re deep in the wormhole now,” said Jack, “I’m not concerned with their paperwork. I was telling Candy about them, and she wanted to see them.” He grabbed a cleaning rake that rested against a crate. “Stand back. The male is a nasty son of a bitch.” He chuckled and poked the wing through the cage bars. The male’s response was instantaneous. He sprang from the nest and flew at him, hitting the bars. Jack jumped backwards and laughed.

“Shouldn’ mess with him when I’ve been drinkin’. Damn thing is fast. Well, Candy, what do you think? Told ya he was handsome, but mean as hell.”

“He’s not mean if he’s treated right,” Rusty said in a disapproving tone.

The woman’s red lips were parted as she watched the male pace the cage, angrily tossing his glossy hair. “My God, handsome doesn’t come close,” Candy exclaimed. “I’ve never seen anything like him.” She gawked at the harpy’s six-foot streamlined frame,

his child-like face, and long, flowing wings that swept across the straw as he glared and hissed at Jack. “Look at those big, blue eyes,” she stammered. “He’s the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen.”

Jack laughed again. “That’s the real beauty of these harpy studs. Women go ape over ’em. This one’s headed for Earth so we can sell his offspring to girls like you. I’m gonna get rich off this scheme.”

“They’re going as pets?” she asked.

“Pets, but more likely they’ll be used as sex toys.” Jack smirked, running his hand across Candy’s rear. “These studs are supposedly capable of breeding nonstop.”

“Can I buy this one?”

“Honey, you couldn’t afford him,” he said. “He’s insured for four million. Besides, this male is straight from the jungle, untamable, and vicious. He’s killed a few men, and even tied down, he managed to chew off a couple of the senator’s fingers before we left.”

Rusty interjected, “He’s not vicious, Mr. Jones, if he’s treated with respect. I’ve even taught him to come when I call.”

Jack sneered at Rusty’s comments. “You didn’t teach that harpy a damn thing. He understands every word we say.”

Candy eyed the male speculatively. “I bet I could tame him, and then we’d find out if he has an inexhaustible sex drive.”

Jack looked at the leggy woman and chuckled. “You might be able to seduce men, but you’d never get this male to mount you.

The senator already tried. He hired hookers and got nowhere with harpies. Those studs know the difference between their females and a woman. Save your money for one of his tame fledglings.”

Candy glanced at Kari in the straw nest. “That’s his female? She looks like a woman.”

“Yeah, it’s a damn shame they don’t have wings.” Jack sighed. “That’s why the zoo is going to produce only male fledglings.”

“How do you know if a female is a harpy or a woman?”

“Honey, when you’ve seen enough harpies, it’s obvious. They’re like the boys. Slender little bodies and elf faces. I can spot one a mile off, plus pick one up, and they’re light as a feather, half a woman’s weight.”

“Sounds like a weird come-on, Jack,” Candy teased, “picking up every small woman to see if she’s light.”

“Might work. A woman will scream bloody murder if you grab her, whereas a harpy will just shake and hiss. But a DNA monitor confirms they’re animal.”

“If a male won’t breed with women, how do you know the fledglings will?”

“They’ll breed,” Jack said and smiled. “There’s a drug called Vican that forces a hell of a performance out of ’em. Some hunters caught this stud last year, raped him, and gave him the drug. He got so confused and turned on that he humped for eight hours. ‘Course he ended up killing those hunters. Anyway, Candy, that’s how I’m gonna use the other male shipment. Put them in gay

sex clubs, drug them with Vican, and prostitute them out.”

At that, the male harpy threw himself at the bars to get at Jack.

“See, Rusty,” Jack said, backing off. “He understands every word and doesn’t like my plans.”

“I don’t either,” Rusty mumbled to himself.

Candy took Jack’s arm. “What a fascinating idea, prostituting these harpies. Let’s go to my room for another drink. Since I’m in the business, I could give you some tips.”

“Sounds good,” Jack said, and they left.

Rusty looked sadly at Shail. “My poor buddy. No wonder you’re so hostile.”

The male’s distressed eyes glanced at Rusty before he slunk back to the nest.

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The following morning, Rusty sat in the employee dining room, eating breakfast, when Candy strolled to him. “Hi, Rusty,” she said. Rusty shyly nodded. “Jack told me the harpies eat fruit, and a client gave me a basket.” She handed Rusty a bag. “I just love those beautiful creatures.”

Rusty opened the bag and grinned. “Apples, that’s their favorite.”

“I hope they enjoy them,” she said, and sashayed out of the cafeteria.

After breakfast, Rusty returned to cargo. “Look what I have for you,” he said and handed an apple to the caged harpies. He went about cleaning the other animals as the harpies settled on the nest to eat the rare treat.

Shail stretched out next to Kari and took a bite of the apple. *“These taste strange.”* He wrinkled his nose and sniffed the fruit.

Kari ate several bites. *“They’re different because they’re fresh picked. You’ve had only the soft, half-spoiled ones.”*

Shail dropped his apple and jerked hers away. *“This food is not right. It smells of poison.”*

Kari worriedly looked at him. *“Shail, I feel dizzy and sick to my stomach.”* She curled up in the straw.

Alarmed, he grasped her in his arms, but he began to feel the same symptoms. His head reeled, and he shook it frantically to stay awake. He felt off balance and hissed desperately to alert Rusty.

Rusty rushed to the harpy cage and stared at the female’s lifeless body in her mate’s arms. The male trembled and made a panicked snuffle, a plea for help.

“Easy, buddy. I’m coming.” Rusty fumbled with the key remote to open the cage. The male collapsed when Rusty stepped into the cage. “What the heck is going on?” he exclaimed and nervously petted the male.

“He’s all right, Rusty,” Candy said as she and Jack strolled

to him. "They're tranquilized."

"You drugged them!" Rusty ranted as the male harpy panted and struggled to rise.

"Candy and I have a bet," Jack said and gathered the ropes and chains that lay near Rusty's office. "She thinks she can tame that stud."

"The female must have eaten more," Candy said. "A couple of more minutes, and he'll be out, too."

Jack entered the cage and kicked the male's fluttering wing. "Yeah, he's helpless. Let's move the female."

"You're separating them?" Rusty asked. "Don't do it, Mr. Jones. He won't eat and will go nuts without his mate and his son."

"Either help or stay out of my way," Jack said with a sneer. "Now open her cage so I can put her in."

"I'll move her," Rusty answered. He picked up the female, noticing that Jack was right about her weight. Rusty watched Jack secure the male's wrists behind his back and tied his ankles together as the harpy stared fretfully up at Rusty. "She'll be okay, little buddy," he said, trying to reassure him before reluctantly leaving the cage.

Candy snatched up the fledgling and cooed to it. "You're such a little doll. I'm buying one like you." The fledgling responded with a soft hiss and squirmed in her arms to reach his father. Candy followed Rusty and placed the fledgling next to his sleeping mother. The baby nuzzled her face to wake her, and when he failed, he crawled between her arms for protection. Rusty



covered the little harpy and female with a blanket. He could not resist kissing the female lightly on her cheek.

When Rusty returned to the male's cage, the harpy was unconscious and Jack was binding his wings together, making sure he was defenseless. "Okay, Candy," Jack said. "He can't move. Give him the antidote."

Candy took a bottle from a small case and opened a capsule under the harpy's nose. "This works pretty quick."

Jack took a step back.

In a few minutes, the harpy slowly opened his eyes. His breathing increased, and he looked around desperately for his family. He sniffed toward the distant cage and exploded, thrashing wildly in the ropes.

"Easy, little buddy, you'll hurt yourself." Rusty bent down to stroke the stressed harpy, hoping to calm him. The male lunged, nearly sinking his teeth into Rusty's hand. Rusty yanked his hand away and fell backwards in the straw. The savage attack had left Rusty shaky, and he had trouble rising.

Jack laughed. "I don't think your little buddy likes you anymore."

Rusty covered his mouth and felt ill. Weeks of patient, gentle care to build the harpy's trust was gone in minutes, with the human betrayal. "I've never seen him like this. He's so angry," he said, watching the harpy snap, hiss, and toss against his bonds, resembling a crazed rapid dog. "Mr. Jones, if I can't touch him, you and your friend don't have a prayer."

Jack thumbed his jaw, studying the seething harpy. “Rusty has a point. Let’s forget it, Candy. The damn thing is too dangerous.”

“He is nasty,” she said, “but I’m not walking away just because you’re afraid.” She reached in the case for another drug and approached the frantic harpy that snapped his teeth at her. “Hold his head, Jack. I want to keep my fingers.” Jack grabbed the harpy’s hair from behind and held him while Candy loaded a pill into a shooter and forced it far back into the harpy’s throat. “Okay, let him go.”

Jack released the male, and they stood back and watched him shudder and toss against the ropes and chains.

“I thought you liked him, Candy,” Rusty said despondently.

“I do. I can’t wait to touch him.”

Ten minutes passed, and Candy said, “He stopped gripping the chain, and his hands are going limp. The drug is working.”

The male stopped struggling and submissively lowered his head in the straw. Jack prodded him with his foot. The harpy trembled slightly and no longer threatened.

“Can he function on that drug?” Jack asked.

“Perfectly,” Candy answered. “The barbiturate doesn’t hamper his body, only his mind. Removes all aggression. He can still run, fly, and mate. He just can’t be hostile. This drug was made for prisoners, but I’ve got a connection. If I think a client might get rough, I slip him some.” Candy leaned over the harpy and stroked his hair. “See, it works on harpies. He’s like a baby

now. Even you can pet him, Jack.”

Jack reached down, and the harpy cowered but allowed him to stroke his head. “I’ll be damned,” Jack said with a grin. “That stuff knocked the fight right out of him.”

Candy went back to her case. “Now let’s find out if what they said about Vican is true.” She pulled out a large container of the small blue pills. “How much do you think he weighs, Jack?”

“Soaking wet, eighty pounds, ninety tops.”

“I’m giving him a quarter of a dose,” said Candy. “If he humped for eight hours while those jerks raped him, he was overdosed. I bet the poor thing went crazy, trying to relieve the sex drive, and he was probably terrified, unable to control his body.” Candy ran her hand over the male’s head. “Don’t be frightened, my little beauty. You’ll enjoy it this time.” She put a pill fragment on her fingertip and slipped it into his mouth.

Candy glanced at her timepiece. “It won’t take long for him to get aroused.” She reached under the harpy and fondled him. She glanced up with a wide smile. “A quarter of a dose is perfect for him.” Stripped of his defiance by drugs and filled with sexual lust, the harpy pulled anxiously against the rope to sniff Candy’s large breasts in her flimsy top. “I believe you’ll lose our bet, Jack.” She smirked. “He’s ready. Untie his ankles so he can breed.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this,” Rusty said, upset. “You’re forcing him to breed?”

“His sperm is the only reason this damn thing is still alive,” Jack said as he released the harpy’s legs from the ropes. “Once

he's at the zoo, he'll be artificially jacked off by machines for the rest of his life, so he'd better get used to it."

"Really?" Rusty swallowed hard and shook his head.

Candy lay down on the straw, pulled up her short skirt, and stroked the male's shaft, encouraging him to mount her. He shivered and panted with excitement as he sniffed, licked, and nuzzled her. Uncomfortable and disturbed, Rusty withdrew and observed the breeding from a distance.

Shail knew it was wrong but couldn't control the desire to breed. The woman's experienced hands worked him into a frenzied state. He eagerly climbed on top and penetrated her. He dug his feet into the straw and lunged against the unfamiliar, solid body. He heard Jack chuckle, but he wasn't distracted. His only thought was to release his seed.

As Shail's head hung over the woman's shoulder, he sensed her preferences. Since male harpies had animal instincts that perceived a female's desires, they were naturally good lovers who performed until she reached gratification. An unfulfilled female could become a resentful partner. Shail stopped plunging deeply as he detected Candy's cravings. He nibbled on her breasts and moved to short, sporadic thrusts. He continued until he felt her well up and her legs tense. Sensing her climax, he lurched deeply, his bound wings fluttering, and allowed his own.

Shail's questioning eyes gazed at Candy to seek approval. "Good, you did good," she gasped, pushing his locks aside to give

him a kiss. “God, did you do good!” He placed his head on her bosom, and she petted his hair. “You’re such a sweetheart.” She sighed and slid out from under him.

Shail shook his head, trying to regain a sense of his old self. He couldn’t understand how his tenacity and courage had been stripped away, making him gentle and obedient. He shouldn’t have bred the woman or allowed Jack to pet him, but he was unable to resist. Feeling helpless and worried, he placed his head on the straw.

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Rusty approached the cage as Jack and Candy stood over the harpy, talking.

“He did all right, then?” Jack asked.

Candy wiped her brow. “All right?” she puffed. “Men could take lessons from that creature. I haven’t been turned on like that in years.”

The harpy pulled his legs up against his chest and huddled. His wings pulsed against the ropes, and he tried to wiggle free of the ropes that bound his wrists behind his back. In defeat, he stared up with begging eyes at the humans, obviously hoping they were satisfied and he’d be freed.

“What are you going to do with him, Jack?” Candy asked.

“Put the female back in his cage and turn him loose. Rusty is right about this male. He’ll starve if he’s alone, and I’m not

wasting the time and effort to tube feed him.”

Candy smiled. “Jack, you sitting on a gold mine and don’t even know it. If you turn him loose, he’ll never fall for a second baited apple, so forget about getting our hands on him again. This ship is loaded with lonely rich women who’d pay a fortune to have sex with him. If he’s kept on drugs, we could make a killing.”

Rusty began to laugh. Jack and Candy turned and curiously looked at him. “I’m sorry. It’s just kinda funny,” he said. “You’re going to convince those ladies in first class to come down to this cold cargo bay, lie down in the cage straw, and have sex with a strange winged animal. And they’re going to pay for it?” He chuckled again.

“Yeah, it might be a tough sell,” Jack said. “This male is good looking and might be a great lay, but getting customers won’t be easy.”

“Jack, darling,” Candy said, wrapping her arms around his neck. “You’re a hunter, but I’ve sold sex for over twenty years. That’s why you need me as a partner. I do the selling and supply the drugs, plus I have a nice two-room suite. Just let me have him, and we’ll split the profit of the tricks.”

“How are you going to control him and get him to eat?” Jack said wearily.

“If he stays on the barbiturate, he’ll be easy to control, and he’ll eat when I tell him.” Candy gleamed. “The only problem I see is housebreaking.”

“I don’t know, Candy.” Jack hesitated. “This harpy is not

some unruly puppy. He's stronger than he looks, and a man-killer."

"Well, I'm not a man, and you've told me that harpies are very passive with women."

"The brown-winged harpies at the senator's warehouse were gentle, but this is a golden, huge difference. They're famous for their aggressive nature."

"Untie him, Jack. Brown or yellow wings, it doesn't matter. He'll behave on my drugs." Candy slipped a rope around the harpy's neck as Jack unfastened the ropes and stepped quickly out of its cage.

Candy jerked the rope, beckoning the harpy to rise. "Come on, get up. We're going for a little walk." He rose and ruffled his feathers. She smiled at Jack and Rusty. "He's rather tall when you stand next to him." When she pushed the cage door open, Jack started to object. She hushed him and paraded the obedient harpy around the cargo hold.

The male suddenly caught the scent of his unconscious mate and pulled toward her. Candy panicked. "No! You're coming with me," she screeched and jerked on the lead, nearly snatching him off his feet. Startled, the male skittishly backed away from her. She was losing control by keeping him on a long rope. He flapped his wings to free himself from the screaming woman and her choking rope. He lifted off the floor to seek the ceiling beams, while Candy struggled to hold him down.

Candy may have been an expert with men, but Rusty saw she had little experience with animals. Her rashness had frightened

the harpy. He quickly stepped in. "Let me have him before he gets away," he said and took hold of the rope. He gave it a few short jerks, rather than one steady pull. "Stop that now," he ordered with a firm tone. "Come down. Come down, buddy." The sporadic pulls conveyed Rusty's wishes and made the harpy realize he was not in a battle. A few more light tugs, and the male landed beside Rusty. "That's my good buddy." Rusty showered him with soft pats of approval before handing the rope back to Candy. "Be gentle," he said, "and coax him with a steady hand and voice. He's not used to a leash, and you scared him. These harpies are like nervous flighty birds, even on your drugs."

"Thanks, Rusty," Candy said and petted the harpy. "I'm sorry I scared you, baby. Come on." A few more lessons, and she confidently walked the male harpy around the cargo bay.

"Take him past his female," Rusty suggested. "Once he sees she's fine, he'll stop wanting to go to her." Candy took Rusty's advice and let him sniff his mate. When satisfied that his female was only sleeping, he followed the woman to avoid conflict.

Jack walked up to Rusty. "You're pretty good at training harpies and hookers," he acknowledged with a smile.

"Please, Mr. Jones, don't let her take him."

"One night won't hurt," Jack said. "He does seem tame now. If he stops eating, I'll bring him back down."

Candy walked the harpy to the two men. The male lowered his head to rest it on Rusty's shoulder while keeping a wary eye on



Jack. "There's no doubt he likes Rusty."

"I'm impressed with your drugs," said Jack. "I'd never believed this devil could be handled. I like your offer, Candy, and could definitely use the credits made off him. But it's a risk. What if the drugs wear off while he's in your room? You saw how he was before being doped up. Hell, even Rusty couldn't touch him."

Candy flung her hair back. "I know how much he needs. Besides, these drugs are addictive. After a few days, he'll be begging for a dose. Just let me have him tonight, and you'll see. By the time this ship reaches Earth, we'll have made a fortune with him."

Rusty began to worry. Jack was about to let this prostitute take the male from cargo. "I believe it's against regulations to keep a wild animal in your room, especially one with a red tag."

Jack reeled around to face him. "Are you trying to blackmail me, boy? Either you keep your mouth shut about the harpy, or I'll hire another handler at the next port. The male will be chained down and tube fed, and who knows what'll happen to the female with a new guy? As you know, it gets awfully lonely in cargo. You like these harpies? You decide."

Rusty sighed as he stroked the tall, nuzzling male. "Can I at least visit him and make sure he's okay?"

Jack smiled. "Of course. He's valuable and obviously fond of you. I'll even pay you extra credits for a daily inspection."

"I'll do it for nothing," Rusty answered quietly.

"All right, Candy. We'll try it for one night, and it better be

profitable. I could catch some heat over this.”

“Don’t worry, Jack. He’ll be fine, and at a thousand credits a pop, he’ll make us rich and be a perfectly trained stud for the zoo. Everyone wins. Hold his rope, Rusty, while I get my case.” Candy returned with her case and a fancy gem-studded collar and leash. “I bought them last night in the gift shop, and they weren’t cheap.”

Jack grinned with a head shake. “You planned this all along.”

She smiled cunningly, secured the collar on the male’s neck, and took hold of the leash as Rusty removed the rope. “There, doesn’t he look pretty? Those blue stones match his eyes. Rusty, you better take him up to my room. He behaves better for you.”

Rusty begrudgingly led the harpy to the lift. Jack and Candy followed. When Rusty stepped into the closed lift, the harpy’s eyes widened and he hesitated at the threshold, apparently nervous with the enclosed space. He flapped his wings and pulled on the leash, refusing to step inside. Behind him, Jack yelled and waved his arms, which sent the harpy leaping into Rusty’s secure arms.

“Just like loading a horse,” Jack said and shut the door behind him.

They reached Candy’s room level. She stepped out in the hallway to see if anybody was there. “The coast is clear.” She grinned and headed for her room while Rusty and the harpy

stepped off, with Jack trailing. The reluctant harpy stayed close to Rusty and skittishly glanced back at the hunter, who urged him along with his mere presence. Once the group was in Candy's cabin, she asked Rusty to take the harpy into the bedroom. "See if you can get him to use the toilet. It's going to be a long day and night."

Rusty took the male into the bathroom. The harpy sniffed at the toilet and then, to Rusty's surprise, urinated in the bowl. "He's housebroken," Rusty called. Candy stared quizzically at Jack.

Jack shrugged. "Hey, this harpy was in captivity last year. Someone obviously trained him."

"That takes care of one problem," Candy said. "Lock his leash to the bedpost, Rusty."

"Come, buddy." As Rusty secured the leash, the harpy climbed on the bed, curled up, and from the cover of his wings stared out at Jack.

Candy sat down and stroked his head. "That's my good beauty," she soothed. She glanced at Jack and Rusty. "You can leave now. We'll be all right."

After the men left, Candy smiled at the harpy, but his response was a despondent snuffle. His distressed gaze spoke volumes. "I don't give a shit if you're miserable," she said with a sneer. "That stupid hunter and kid might be concerned about your welfare, but I don't care if you die. I plan to work you day and

night until your pretty little body gives out.”

Toward lunchtime, Candy changed her colorful hair to black and put on her most conservative dress. She left her cabin for the ship’s upscale dining room, hoping to seek potential clients for the harpy. She wore a big smile, thinking about the money her new pet should earn. She had started turning tricks when a teenager, and the tough, degrading job left her with little compassion for man or beast. At forty-eight years old, she knew her looks were going and her future seemed grim, but stumbling upon Jack and his creature had been a windfall. She purposely did not tell Jack the health hazards for his harpy. Laboring constantly, the slight creature could suffer a heart attack, and withdrawal from the drugs was horrific, even life-threatening. *It doesn’t matter*, she thought. *I’ve suffered enough. Now it’s that creature’s turn.*

## Chapter Eight

Seth, a powerful flock leader, stood on a steep cliff overlooking the vast green ocean. A strong breeze whipped at his long dark hair, sending it over his ginger-brown wings. The light was fading into the jungle horizon, and soon he'd leave this former home. To the south lay Hampton, the capital of Dora. Its twinkling lights increased with the approach of night. Seth had lived his entire life on the eastern coast, just on the outskirts of this large city, but with the truce and promise of peace last season, he had relocated his flock to the western outback.

Aron had sent him back to these familiar lands to search for the golden ruler. For many lights, Seth and his flock scrutinized every building, but it became apparent that Shail was not in Hampton.

Seth's younger brother, Seajay, appeared, gliding on the ocean's updrafts, and landed on the cliff beside him. *"All have looked, and he is not here. We return to the river?"*

Seth nodded. *"We help Aron prepare for the coming hunters."*

Seajay kicked at the ground. *"I do not understand, Brother. Why did you humble yourself in front of all and lick Aron's feet? You now follow him as though his wings were gold. You are older, stronger, and wiser than him and have done well to protect your flock. We should retrieve our families and once again hide in the shadow of this city where no hunter found us. Aron lacks your*

*experience, and I do not trust his judgment.”*

Seth placed his hand on his brother’s shoulder. *“The golden said that the time to hide is over. The flocks must unite. With numbers, we defeat our enemies. Scattering makes each harpy, each flock weak. Those are the words I follow. And though younger, Aron is calculating and fierce. Which of us is stronger shall never be known, for I shall not fight or defy him. Go tell the flock this darkness we return to the west.”*

After an hour, more than three hundred male harpies gathered on the cliffs. Only the light of crescent moons lit up their brown wings. Seth gave a nod, and his flock sailed into the star-filled sky, beginning their journey to the Outback. Like giant bats, they navigated low over the treetops with the cloak of darkness concealing their movement. The harpies were hunted animals again and avoided human contact.

At dawn, Seth landed on a wide tree limb covered with orange moss. His flock would rest and hide during the day. With night, they would continue the journey. He sniffled softly to his two sons, and they lightly perched on the same limb. When he curled up in the moss, they sought the security of their father’s wings. Among the communal harpies, strong family ties lasted a lifetime. Seajay joined his nest of huddling males as Seth watched the rest of his flock settle in with other sleeping companions.

Before shutting his eyes, Seth nuzzled each male’s cheek and realized that Seajay spoke true. Unlike most harpies, his flock and family had flourished during the time of slaughter. By living

near the largest city, an improbable place for a wild harpy flock, he knew hunters would not seek them there.

The western and river harpies weren't as fortunate. Hounded by hunters, most were orphans who grew up not knowing their fathers, uncles, or brothers. They were a combination of mismatched families filled with survivors of the game butchery. Seth worriedly licked Bloom, his youngest black-haired son, and wondered if their good luck would last with the coming war. He snuggled against him and fell asleep as the sun rose.

The harpies emerged from their nests in the late afternoon. They ate berries and nuts and drank from a small stream while they waited for nightfall. Seth watched Bloom tussle with another male in a mock challenge. He arched his glossy black wings and flew at his opponent, knocking him down. Seth nodded with approval, realizing Bloom was nearing maturity and would soon take a mate. Already the females eyed him because of his striking good looks and rare black hair and feathers, inherited from a human grandfather on his mother's side. Seth's other son was three seasons older with brown wings and had a mate and fledgling daughter. Although a harpy's lifespan averaged seventy years, more than half the males were killed by hunters before reaching the full wing span of an adult. Even fewer lived as long as Seth, who was thirty-eight years and considered an older male. These were the sad statistics of a game animal. Even the young fledglings had fallen under the human invasion.

Seth softly hissed to his flock as the sun disappeared into

the treed horizon. The time had come to resume their flight. By morning, they would reach the river and Terrance. There, Seth and his flock would join the large male gathering.

The warm glow of dawn came from the east when Seth set down at the Terrance airport. He spotted Aron in a circle of males and approached the new brown ruler. Aron gazed at him with questioning eyes. Their harpy telepathy wasn't needed to relate that their golden harpies were not in Hampton.

Aron breathed deeply at the disturbing news. *"Send some of your flock males half a flight north to the river bend and keep watch. The rest shall remain here."* He handed Seth a portable communicator. *"One of your males must know its use and speak the human words of warning."*

*"I learned the use of a com,"* Bloom offered. *"And I can speak the human sound."*

Seth took hold of his youngest son's dark wings. *"Your life is ahead of you, and guarding the riverbanks is dangerous. I go. You stay with Seajay and your brother. Seek their wings for cover."*

*"Father, you still treat me as a fledgling."*

*"Your fierceness is as rich as your black wings,"* Seth said and nuzzled his son's neck. *"But you stay. My wish is for my bloodline to live on in you."* Seth flew with eight of his males north, and he glanced over his wing at Bloom in the distance. With this war, would he see him again?



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All the flocks had returned to Terrance after weeks of probing the human dwellings for Shail. Aron was devastated with the loss but hid his feelings. A harpy ruler could not appear weak. Several days later, a young harpy flew into Terrance. The adventurous adolescent had strayed from his flock and gone on searching alone. The youth handed Aron a tiny yellow feather. Aron held it to his nose and detected Shail's scent. "*Where did you find it?*"

"*A light's travel east of the river,*" the young male answered, "*It lay under a blue tree near a large dwelling, empty of humans.*"

Aron realized that finding Shail's feathers in the Outback would not be unusual, but Shail never would have been in this location unless taken there. "*Show me.*"

He and the harpy flew more than two hundred miles to reach the abandoned warehouse and tree. Aron dismally stared at the rope that hung from the blue tree. Gazing upward into the tree limbs, he shuddered when seeing the gashes the rope had created in the blue bark. The evidence was clear. A harpy had hung on the rope and thrashed wildly in a desperate struggle for his life.

"*The feather laid there, Master,*" the young male said, motioning beneath the rope.

Aron fell to his knees and pressed the slight feather to his nose, inhaling Shail's scent for the last time. Tears ran down his

cheeks with the knowledge that his beloved yellow-haired brother had experienced a slow, agonizing death.

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A month had passed since the golden harpies were taken. Aron paced the floor in the Terrance airport. Ted sat on a desk and silently watched the brooding brown ruler. Since finding the feather, Aron was inconsolable and had grown increasingly bitter.

“When shall they come?” Aron ranted.

“Sounds like you want the hunters to come.”

“I do. I want those hunters to suffer as Shail suffered, as I suffer from his loss,” Aron growled. “I long for revenge, and waiting torments me more than the fight.”

“Finding Shail’s feather doesn’t mean he’s dead. Waters had the police search the senator’s warehouse and found nothing, no rope, no DNA, no buried body or bones.”

“I saw the rope and have the feather. Shail was there.”

“I don’t doubt you, but it’s possible he survived. I’m hoping he and Kari were taken away and they’ll come back to us someday.”

“Always humans have this hope. Harpies have animal blood and live in the here and now. When caged, we cannot foresee we might be freed, so we die.” Aron stopped pacing and leaned against the wall. “Ted, I am glad you have hope, for I have none. If the hunters did not kill Shail, even he could not survive

such long captivity. He would defy the men and end his life before submitting.”

“But Shail is with Kari, and I know her. She’s one stubborn girl.” Ted smiled. “She’d make him survive. Kari is part-human. She has hope.”

“Keep your hope for both of us.”

The airport door flew open, and Mark walked in. A huge, toothy grin appeared through his heavy beard. “How’s it going, boys?”

“Just waiting for something to happen,” Ted responded.

“Well, I just got word. The shipment of laser guns finally arrived in Hampton. A few of the guys and I are taking our hovers to fetch ’em. That makes two hundred guns. Enough for any hunters who dare show up.”

Aron moved from the wall. “Is this amount enough for all in my flock?”

“Afraid not,” said Mark. “From the looks of your boys, there’s at least two thousand. I’m guessing one in ten can get their hands on a weapon.” Mark held up his fingers to show Aron the numbers. “But it’s still plenty. How many hunters can there be?”

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Senator Blackwell sat at his office desk and glanced at the calendar. The golden harpies had been shipped to Earth five weeks earlier. He angrily pushed the communicator keys. Soon, Hank

appeared on the rising screen. “Hello again, Senator,” said the crusty hunter without enthusiasm.

“When the hell is this hunt going to start?” Blackwell barked. “It’s been over a month.”

“Like I told you last week, my men are stuck at the Oden port along with the extra hovers. It’ll be another three weeks before the ship is repaired and gets here.”

“I can’t wait that long,” Blackwell said with irritation. “Time is money. I promised the zoo a female shipment. The males have to be caught or killed before the court case. I’m working on a deadline.”

“Well, what do you want me to do?” asked Hank. “You’re the one who wanted two hundred hunters and fifty hovers. Right now I have half. This first strike has the element of surprise. Afterwards, it’ll be lost and harder to find harpies. With fewer men to bag them, the smaller your shipment. Besides, the governor warned us the harpies might attack. I’m in no hurry to walk into a fight with limited firepower.”

Shail’s threats had led Blackwell to hire an exaggerated number of hunters, but he had grown annoyed with the golden’s intimidation. “Harpies can’t fight, and even if they did, what are they going to do? Beat your hovercrafts with their wings? I’m sick of wasting time. Just go after them.”

“All right, Senator.” Hank shrugged. “It’s your shipment. We’ll get as many as we can. The heat sensors will be installed in the rest of the hovers by Tuesday. We’ll hit them first thing

Wednesday morning.”

“Good. My spaceship will meet you at the warehouse, and I’ll be there to inspect my catch. Try to get some females. The harpies probably think the danger is over, and if so, the females have rejoined their males.”

“See you Wednesday.”

The connection ended.

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Candy took the passenger lift to the ship’s top floor. She found the posh first-class dining room full of wealthy customers. She scanned the room like a bird of prey seeking gullible pigeons. Normally she focused on men, but today she looked for unattractive single women. She spotted a likely group cheerfully eating lunch. One had a small dog on her lap. She meandered to their table.

“What a darling little Yorky,” Candy exclaimed, bending down to the pooch. “May I pet him?” The woman smiled and nodded. Complimenting the woman’s mutt was a surefire way to make friends. After being introduced, she and the woman became engaged in a lively conversation about animals.

“I wish you could see my pet,” Candy said. “He’s gorgeous and very rare.”

“What kind is he, Candy?” asked a woman named Beth.

“He’s a harpy.”

Racheal, a young, heavy woman, commented with skepticism, “Harpies don’t exist. They’re fabled monsters from ancient Greek mythology with ugly half-bird, half-human bodies. They were all females, noisy and considered thieves. It’s in the tales of Jason and the Argonauts.”

“Racheal is a walking encyclopedia. All she does is read,” remarked Monica, primping her black curls with thick fingers that bore large gemstone rings.

Candy quickly deduced that Monica was the wealthiest woman at the table. “I assure you I do have a harpy in my room. He does have bird wings, but he’s no monster. He’s beautiful and mute, and the only thing he’ll steal is your heart.” She knew that she had hooked the women and needed only to reel them in. “Come to my room this evening, and I’ll show him to you.”

The harpy had sparked the women’s interest. Life aboard ship became boring in-between spaceports, and they agreed to meet in Candy’s room for drinks and to see her mythical creature.

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Returning to her cabin, Candy saw the harpy hadn’t lain quietly on the bed. He had tried unsuccessfully to escape. The sheets and pillows were scattered on the floor from his fighting the now-disfigured bedpost, and the expensive leash bore tooth marks. Items on the end tables were shattered from the powerful flapping wings. The curled up harpy innocently stared up at her.

“Bad boy!” she screeched. “Jack is right. You are a devil. Look at this mess.”

He nervously tucked his face under his wings. She remembered Rusty’s advice: be tactful around this hypersensitive creature. She straightened the room and took the male for another bathroom visit. After turning on the shower, she was glad he willingly stepped under the warm water. After washing and drying him, she groomed him. She sprayed a glittering sheen on his lush hair and applied makeup to his eyes, so they were even more radiant. She returned him to the bed and re-dosed him with the controlling barbiturate. “No woman with a pulse could resist you now.”

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The six ladies promptly showed up at Candy’s cabin, eager to see her pet. “He’s tied up in the bedroom,” Candy said. They walked in and gazed at the bed covered with a heap of yellow feathers. “Come on, baby. Come out so these nice ladies can see you.” The harpy lifted his perfect little face from under his wings. He flung the shimmering locks from his big eyes and sheepishly gazed at them.

“My lord,” one of them murmured.

“Is he a male?” Beth asked. With long eyelashes, full lips, and small nose, his features were so pretty that he could have been female.

Candy laughed. “He’s all male, believe me. Here, I’ll get him up so you can see his body.” She detached the leash from the bedpost and gently tugged. “Come on, Beauty. Stand up.” The harpy uncurled his lanky, bronze frame and slid off the bed. He ruffled his feathers and stood. The women’s mouths gapped open when seeing his lean-muscled, unclothed torso. “Now isn’t he fabulous?”

The women were speechless, gawking at the stunning male. They moved closer, surrounding him. He swallowed deeply and shuddered.

“Don’t crowd him,” Candy said, “After all, he is part-bird and can be flighty.”

Racheal broke the awe of silence. “I was wrong about harpies. They do exist. After lunch, I searched for them on the web and found they’re from a small jungle planet called Dora in the Oden system. They’re listed as wild game and hunted for their wings, but the information never mentioned they were so human looking and beautiful.”

“Actually, I’ve named him Beauty,” said Candy.

“Fitting, but it doesn’t even begin to describe him,” said Sara, a thin, polished woman in her forties. “I’ve never seen anything so striking. Can we touch him?”

“Of course,” said Candy. As the women stroked his wings and body, she explained that although harpies were wild animals, this one had been caught and trained. She pulled his penis from beneath the straight blond hair and displayed it. “Nicely hung, and



he knows how to use it.” She smiled. “His sole function is to perform sexually for women.”

The harpy shuddered again but did not resist the handling.

“He’s frightened,” Racheal said and stroked his head. “He not happy here, chained to a bed and forced to have sex with women.” The harpy lowered his head to her shoulder and nuzzled his face into her neck.

“Look. It likes Racheal,” said Monica. “Half a man is better than none, honey.” She giggled and stepped closer to the harpy. He suddenly sprang onto the bed, ripping the leash from Candy’s hand. He hissed at the large woman as she held up a feather and laughed. “Just checking to make sure this creature is real.”

“Monica, you’re a bitch,” fumed Racheal. “There’s blood on the feather.” The other women joined in and chewed out Monica.

Candy didn’t care about the plucked feather that caused the harpy pain, but she was nervous about losing control of him. His fretful eyes stared at them as he backed against the headboard. “Easy, Beauty,” she said and slowly reached for his leash. The harpy partially extended his wings, preparing to fly into the walls. “Ladies, give him space so he’ll settle down.”

Racheal put her arms up to him. “Come, Beauty. I won’t hurt you.” After a minute, he stepped down from the bed into her clasp.

With Racheal distracting him, Candy grabbed his leash and coaxed him to curl up again on the bed. “Now you’ve seen him.

Any of you ladies care to try him?" she asked. "If he's not the best lover you've ever had, I'll give you a hundred credits."

The women chuckled at Candy's wager as Racheal sat down next to the harpy and caressed his head and hair. Candy held her breath, the moment of truth. Had the alluring creature and her sales pitch sold them?

"I'd like to try him," said Sara.

"Sara, you're not serious." Beth said.

"What can it hurt? I haven't been with a man in four years, not since my divorce." Sara cupped the harpy's cheek in her hand. "He isn't a man, but maybe that's better. No expectations, complications, or humiliation. I think he's just what I need."

Candy grinned at her first customer. "Ladies, help yourselves to my bar in the living room, and I'll instruct Sara on how to use him." The women left with excited voices, amazed that one of their friends had chosen to sleep with the Dora creature.

Candy quickly slipped the blue pill into the harpy's mouth. "It makes him more accommodating," she explained to Sara. "In ten minutes, stroke his shaft, and he'll respond. He's very gentle." She left and joined the others.

*Yes, I have become gentle,* Shail thought, worried about the mind-altering drug that had stripped him of rebellion. Candy had given him the second drug, the dreaded blue pill that caused his sex organ to stiffen and created the uncontrollable urge to release his seed. He watched the woman slip out of her dress and felt

terrified with the manipulation. Who he once was, was gone.

“I must be out of my mind,” Sara muttered. Still in her slip, she sat down and ran her fingers through his hair. Shail gazed up at her. “Such sad eyes, Racheal is right. You shouldn’t have to breed a bunch of dejected old women.”

Shail placed his head against her thigh and sensed her kindness and the sympathy for him. She was also uneasy about having sex with him or any male. After a few minutes, the drug’s effect took hold and he was focused on breeding, but he would have to move slowly with this apprehensive female.

Although invisible to humans, Sara’s emotional scars were clear to Shail. Damaged and betrayed by a husband who left her for a younger female, she would require tender cuddling and caressing before accepting him. He started with faint kisses and worked his way up to her neck. All his responses reflected her desires. His nuzzles, slow kisses, and gentle fondling hands made her yield, and she reclined on the bed and surrendered. When it was over, he sensed her delight.

She kissed his lips. “Thank you, sweet boy, for giving me confidence again. Life is worth living.”

She dressed and opened the bedroom door. “Your bet, Candy,” she said and handed her the hundred credits.

“He was all right, then?” Candy questioned.

Sara glanced back into the bedroom at Shail. “There are no words to describe him. He showered me with soft kisses, and if not for his fluttering wings, I never would have guessed he wasn’t a

man.”

“Kisses?” Candy questioned and stared at Shail. “That’s new. He’s never kissed me, but I’m not big on kissing anyway.” She smiled at the other women. “Anyone else?”

“I’ll go next,” said a woman named Terry.

Candy took her into the bedroom. As soon as she touched Shail, he detected she wasn’t tormented and insecure like Sara. She rubbed his shaft, forcing quick arousal. This female was vivacious, and she wanted the same in a partner. Instead of soft kisses, he nipped at her neck and penetrated her ear with his tongue. When she heaved and panted hard with excitement, he shoved her into the breeding position and mounted her. He pumped rapidly until she moaned with pleasure. Finishing, he sniffled and tossed his hair to show dominance.

Terry giggled with his fiery performance. “You truly are the perfect lover.” She beamed before leaving. Shail heard her gloating about him in the other room.

“He was fantastic,” Terry said. “I get terribly stimulated when a guy plays with my ears, and it’s like the harpy read my mind. He breathed and tongued my ear, and I came before we even did it. He’s incredible.”

“No soft kissing?” Monica asked.

“He was nothing like what Sara described,” Terry said. “He was pure animal, rough and biting. He had me so turned on, I could barely breathe.”

“Can Beth and I go in together?” asked Flo, the oldest

woman in the group. “It’s a little intimidating to be with your creature.”

“Of course,” Candy answered. “Let me re-dose him, so he has more stamina.” Instead of one blue pill, she gave Shail two. “It’s going to be a long night, my little beauty.” She patted him harshly on the head and invited the two middle-aged ladies into the room.

When the door closed, the two older women were anything but intimidated. “Candy claims he has a resilient sex drive,” Beth said as they gazed at Shail. “Let’s find out.”

Shail quickly realized the classy ladies were really ruthless vixens intent on running him ragged. They didn’t want a gentle lover or a feisty partner. Their minds conveyed that he was a stud animal that could be exploited and controlled. The double drug dose gave them such a creature.

Shail savagely leaped on one and began to copulate. The second woman tightly held his leash while spanking and fondling his rear. Stimulated, he released his seed, but in a few minutes he was aroused again, because of the drug overdose.

“Okay,” puffed the woman under him. He was harshly jerked off and forced to gratify the second female. After an hour of brutal sex, his body and hair were soaked with sweat and he gasped from exertion. These older women found pleasure in dominating a young male and kept Shail sexually frantic, knowing no man could or would endure such treatment.

“Stop him, Beth. Take him off,” said Flo. “This little fool

will pump until his heart stops.” Beth tugged on his leash. Breathing hard, he looked at them, bewildered, wondering what he had to do next.

“I’ve never in my life climaxed four times,” said Beth. “He’s not an animal. He’s a god. Go get a wet towel from the bathroom so we can cool him down. He’s earned some nurturing.”

Drained of seed and endurance, Shail collapsed on the sheets. The women pampered him with cool towels and drinking water. They happily emerged from the bedroom, gave Candy her credits, praised her pet, and arranged for a future date.

Monica stood, twirling Shail’s feathers. “All right, I’ll try your skinny beast,” she said and tossed a hundred credits on the coffee table.

From the bedroom, Shail stared with mistrust at the malicious woman who had yanked out his feather. Monica was four times his weight and could do damage.

Candy must have thought the same thing. She was not concerned about Shail but knew Jack would be furious if his prize was harmed. “He’s probably too tired, since he’s been at it for hours.”

“And I sat here all those hours while you bragged about your insatiable creature. Is that a lie now?” She dug in her purse and dropped a stack of credits in front of Candy. “A thousand credits if your male trollop satisfies me.”

Candy wet her lips, looking at the money. “Fine, but don’t pluck out his feathers or hurt him. He’s worth more than a

thousand credits.”

Shail lay stretched out on the bed, lacking the strength to curl up, when Candy stepped to him and whispered, “Jack said harpies breed for days. That better not be bullshit.” She grabbed his hair, jerked back his head, and using a pill shooter, crammed more of the perturbing sex drug down his throat. When Monica entered the room, his eyes widened with alarm. He sniffled to his mistress for protection, but Candy ignored his plea.

“Just be patient with him,” she said to Monica. “Your four friends worked him pretty hard.”

“Sure, I’ll be patient,” Monica answered and ushered Candy out. As she removed her clothing, Shail curled up in a defensive ball and hissed softly. “Don’t like me, do you?” She smiled. “You need a lesson in manners.” She grabbed his leash and jerked him up. He gagged with the stranglehold and scrambled to get his limbs under him. His animal instincts weren’t needed to know this woman was a tyrant, and she had found the perfect target. In the past, men with her sadistic nature had not lived long when crossing paths with Shail.

Shail attempted to flee from the bed. Using the long leash, Monica snatched him backwards and he hit the floor. She flipped him over and climbed on his back, pinning his wings and limbs down with her legs. She throttled him with the gem collar and crushed him with her weight. He gasped for breath and clawed at the floor to be free. After several minutes of suffocation, he stopped struggling and helplessly urinated with the approach of

death.

Sapped of resistance and barely conscious, Shail felt himself being picked up and callously dropped on the bed. He choked and coughed as he watched her through a blur of frightened tears.

“Hiss at me again, and I’ll really hurt you.” She wrenched him up to his hands and knees so she could grope and tug on his sex organs. Like a puppet on a string, he endured the painful stimulation.

Shail’s telepathy conveyed that if he defied her, Monica would maim or kill him. She was wealthy and could afford to cover his animal worth. He saw the cause of her meanness. Throughout her life, she had been homely and overweight, so men rejected her. She had a one-sided relationship that ended with the man conning her out of money. Unlike Sara, who became insecure with betrayal, Monica turned cynical. She despised men and was venting her hostility on Shail, who was defenseless.

The sex drug took effect, and Shail could not prevent his arousal. Monica smiled at his hard shaft. “I’m going to enjoy you,” she said and lay down beside him. She ordered him to perform. He dutifully crawled on and penetrated her. Once mounted, she wrapped her thick legs around his waist, holding him in place, and dug her meat-hook nails into his back.

Shail frantically copulated to avoid injury, but nothing pleased the slave driver. He nuzzled her neck, begging for mercy, but to no avail. Her trunk-size legs crushed his slight body as she



raked his flesh.

At this late hour, Shail's meekness started to subside. The calming barbiturate was wearing off, bad luck for Monica. His confidence returned, and he became provoked with the abuse. Despite the crushing legs and digging nails, he withdrew and hissed angrily.

"Damn it, keep going," Monica ordered and clawed his shoulder. The final attack unleashed his rage. Although male harpies were normally gentle with women, he had had his fill of the callous female. He gripped Monica's throat and squeezed.

The panicked woman attempted to throw him off, but Shail was stronger than her. Her eyes bulged, and she choked and wheezed for air. Shail sensed her frightened thoughts that she had made a big mistake by bullying the wrong male. He was not only physically powerful, but perilous. The more she thrashed and fought back, the tighter he applied the suffocating grip, giving her the same punishment she had inflicted on him. Finally, she surrendered and wept.

Shail shoved her onto her stomach and mounted her again. Overdosed with the sex drug and depleted of seed, he pumped hard, feeling like he was going mad. In frustration, he bit down on her neck and instinctively sucked up her iron-rich blood that gave him vigor and would combat the sedative and his weariness.

His animal nature took over, and he regressed back to his harpy's ancestors, the loca eagles. Locas were vegetarians, but during mating season loca males had fierce battles, fighting to the

death for a female. The winning male would ravage his defeated opponent by ripping off his wings and sex organs. He then feasted on his victim's blood to regain the endurance to breed and the strength to fend off other rivals.

As a ten-year-old fledgling, Shail had witnessed the rare loca regression when two male harpies from different flocks had fought over a female. After days of combat, the losing harpy collapsed with fatigue. The battle-weary winner urinated on his rival, claiming him as a possession. He then mauled his neck, drank his blood, and ripped out his flight feathers for his bonding nest. The accosted male, flightless and weak from blood loss, lay by the nest for days and served as a source of nutrition for the dominant male, who renewed his stamina for breeding. After the pair bonded, the captive male was freed. He slumbered off into the woods to re-grow his feathers and heal his wounds and damaged pride.

Although no harpy was killed or permanently disfigured, the savagery had shocked Shail. He was further alarmed that the flock leaders did not interfere. Aron's father had told him that although uncommon, the occurrence was the animal way in harpies. "When an exhausted and injured male is under duress and expected to mate, he can regress to loca cruelty."

Shail had sworn he would never stoop to such atrocious behavior, but now he had. His worn-out body ached, and his mind was agitated from abuse. The frazzling drug compelled him to breed, but he lacked the strength. With Monica's iron-rich blood,

he could complete the mating. Instinctively, he bit her and sucked up the blood, in-between straining to deliver his seed.

Meanwhile, Monica's dormant sexuality was responding to the fierce attack. Shail detected her building climax. Her moaning excited him further. He thrust violently until she climaxed, which triggered his simultaneous discharge.

He dropped on the bed beside her and saw her smiling face. Only a domineering, brutal male could gratify this woman. He closed his eyes and dwelled on these strange human females. Their minds were complicated and twisted, unbalancing their natural instincts. With annoyance, he shoved Monica out of his nest of sheets. He made a low, sizzling hiss, chastising her. No female ruled him.

She gazed up at him from the floor. "You truly are amazing." She rose and stepped into the bathroom to clean up and dress. Before leaving, she turned to him. "You haven't seen the last of me, Beauty."

"How was he?" Candy asked when Monica entered the living room.

"Your vicious little beast is well worth the money. I'd like to use him again."

"Vicious?" Candy questioned with surprise and checked her watch. She leaped off the couch and hurried into the bedroom. Shail sat with his legs tucked under him among a tangle of blood-stained sheets and licked a shoulder wound. Seeing Candy, he showed his teeth to warn her away.

“Take it easy, Beauty,” she said and cautiously approached. In a flash, he extended a wing and slapped her hard in the face with his flight feathers. “Shit,” she cursed, holding her smarting cheek.

Shail stood at the end of the leash and arched his wings. With each breath, he released a riled, seething sound. The drugs were gone from his system, and he bordered on rage from being mistreated and used.

“Racheal, could you come here?” Candy called nervously. “I might need your help.” Through the open door, Shail saw that the other women had left.

“My God, look at the claw marks on him,” Racheal cried. “How could she do that to him? I’ll get some wet towels to treat him.”

Shail was so infuriated that he was prepared to attack anyone within reach. Despite his hostile demeanor, Racheal stepped to him. “Please, Beauty. There’s no place to go, no sense fighting. Let me help you.”

Shail made a low growl aimed at Candy, who stood out of wing-striking range. He gazed into Racheal’s eyes and sensed her concern for him. He lowered his head and wings and relented. Her words were true. Escaping from the leash, cabin, and ship was futile, and in his weary, drained state, Jack could overpower him. Racheal coaxed him to lie down. He placed his head in her lap and shut his eyes, allowing her to treat his scratches with the cool cloth. The stress gone and feeling secure with Racheal, he fought to stay awake.

He dozed for a minute, but that was all it took for Candy to seize the opportunity. By the time he smelled her perfume and jerked his head up to retaliate, she had given him the drug. He made a despondent snuffle and sadly rested his head against Racheal, knowing he'd be under Candy's control again.

Monica entered the bedroom with a fresh cocktail. "I see he's calmed down."

"I told you not to hurt him," Candy screamed.

"Don't get your panties in a wad. Most of the blood is mine." She dug into her purse and handed Candy more credits. "Three thousand should cover the damages. We'll be talking again," she said and left the cabin.

Shail had coupled with all the women except the youngest, the large girl named Racheal. She caressed his back under the wings, and her touch conveyed her love for him. When she tried to rise and leave, he coiled his body around her and hugged her waist.

"He certainly does like you, Racheal," Candy said. "Do you want to try him?"

Racheal's plump cheeks blushed with the question. "Oh, no, he's too handsome and wouldn't want me," she said shyly. "I just want to be his friend."

"Friend?" Candy questioned. "It's an animal, dear."

Racheal lifted her head of drab brown hair and gazed at Candy, perplexed. "But he's not an animal. Can't you tell? He's a mortal with emotions and intelligence."

Candy laughed. "You did the research on harpies that said

they're game animals."

"That information is wrong."

"Whatever. I have to meet someone in the lounge. If you want to stay and keep the harpy calm, I'd appreciate it."

"I'd love to, Candy."

Shail lifted his head and watched Candy leave, knowing that Jack was *the someone* in the lounge. The drugs had worked. One stripped him of resistance. The other filled his mind and body with the irrepressible urge to breed. In the course of an evening, he had proven to be a money-making machine and would stay trapped in Candy's bedroom.

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Shail woke with his body pressed against Racheal's back. His arm was draped over her large frame, and a wing covered her with feathers. Although she looked nothing like his slender, beautiful race, she was harpy-like with her gentle nature and strong intuition. She had sensed his feelings and knew who he was. She was his age, unlike the other women, and he could smell her ripe egg that begged to be fertilized. He had also felt her devotion for him. In this horrible place, he would need this girl's protection. He leaned over and nuzzled her neck to wake her.

She turned and looked up at him. "You're so unbelievably gorgeous."

He rubbed against her and was aroused without the Vican

drug. He licked and nipped her tenderly, the foreplay when a male harpy sought a female for bonding.

With his advances, she cringed with the fear of a virgin who was unfamiliar with a courting male. He slowed down and lightly kissed her lips and begged with his eyes.

“You do want me,” she whispered. He responded with another kiss and rubbed his cheek against hers.

Although men weren’t attracted to Racheal, Shail was. Her mind and soul pleaded to be loved, and her fertile body beckoned his male instincts, stimulating the desire to breed, instincts humans had lost in their civilized world.

With kisses, nuzzles, and fondling hands, he slowly seduced her into giving in. He nipped at her neck, forcing her to spread her legs so he could enter. He hastily copulated in an effort to summon his remaining seed. Her doubts returned, and she attempted to push him off, but Shail nipped her neck, reprimanding the skittish female. “*You belong to me now,*” he relayed into her mind. Her reservations vanished. Their mating was far more profound than the simple act of sex. Theirs was a harpy bonding—a commitment more sacred than a human marriage. Racheal’s psyche responded. She was his forever. For the first time, the harpy telepathy was transmitted between a human and harpy.

After prolonged coupling, Shail made a nest by tugging on the sheets and pillows and then cuddled against his new mate. Racheal stroked the shoulder-length hair as he wrapped his frame

around her. "I love you so much," she whispered and kissed his cheek.

He watched her drift to sleep and detected her dramatic transformation. Hours before, Racheal had been a timid, dejected girl. By showering her with his love, she flowered with petals of contentment and self-assurance.

He pondered his decision to take a second mate. In harpy society, it was not uncommon for a male to have several female mates. Males had been hunted, causing an imbalance in the sexes, female harpies outnumbering males three to one. Jealousy did not exist, so many females shared a male's nest and his seed, and some females took men for mates, but no male would bond with a woman because the cross could not produce a fledgling. Yet, Shail had. Once again, he broke harpy custom and made a human woman his mate.

He recognized that the drugs compromised his willpower to resist her, but he had also promised Kari to survive the journey. Alone, he would fall to depression with the oppressed breeding conditions. Racheal would give him the stability to live on. For the sake of his family, he needed the girl. He wondered about the future of this paring. When the drugs were gone and he was reunited with Kari, his true love, would he still be devoted to this barren girl? In the dimly lit room, he clutched her like the solid tree in one of Dora's raging storms. She would ground and protect him, so he would not blow away.



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After meeting Jack at the lounge, Candy returned to her ship cabin and found Racheal and the harpy sleeping peacefully in the bed. Rather than disturb them and possibly create a problem with the nasty male, she opted to sleep on the couch. Her blemished cheek still hurt from his wing smack, but the money that the harpy had earned more than compensated for the minor injury.

She rose early in the morning and tiptoed back into the bedroom, not surprised that the harpy and girl still slept. It had been a long night, especially for the male. She opened her case and decided to double the harpy's barbiturate dosage, to quicken his addiction. When she administrated the drug into his arm, he groggily lifted his head and seethed at her.

"You'll stop that shit before long and be begging for the drug," she whispered.

He lowered his head back on the girl's breast and hugged her.

Racheal stirred and partially opened her eyes. "Hi, Candy," she muttered.

"It seems my harpy's grown fond of you."

Racheal turned to look at him and ran her fingers through his blond hair. "He made love to me all night."

Candy raised a puzzled eyebrow, knowing the stimulating drug that prompted the harpy to mount women had worn off after Monica. "He must really like you."

“He does, and I love him.” Racheal slipped out of his arms and rose from the bed. “I’d better go. My aunt is probably concerned that I didn’t come back to her cabin last night.” She gathered her clothing and went into the bathroom. The harpy sat up and stared anxiously in her direction. With the barbiturate taking effect, the male had stopped threatening Candy and was docile.

“It’s a good time to feed you.” Candy sat down on the bed and offered him fresh fruit, but he turned away, refusing the food. As Rusty had warned, the male would not eat if separated from his family. “Eat it,” she growled, pressing a slice of apple against his tightened lips. “Open your mouth, damn it.”

Racheal emerged from the bathroom. “May I try?” she asked. Amazingly, when Racheal offered the apple, the harpy wolfed it down.

“Maybe I should let you groom him as well, before you leave.”

“I’d love to.”

Candy noticed that not only did the harpy eat for the girl, he also was not brooding and nervous. He nuzzled and caressed her while she praised and kissed him. They took a shower together and appeared more like a newly married couple than master and pet.

After feeding and grooming the harpy, Racheal left the cabin. The male curled up in a ball with his face tucked into a wing, clearly unhappy.

Candy’s com buzzed. A woman caller had heard about the harpy from Monica and wanted to use the creature. Word about the

fabulous stud was quickly spreading among the wealthy female passengers. Candy informed her that the cost was one thousand credits for a half-hour visit, ten times the amount she charged men for time with herself. The woman did not quibble with the cost. A half-hour with a perfectly sensuous and intuitive lover was priceless.

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When the bright overhead lights in the cargo bay came on, Rusty opened his bleary eyes. In the nearby cage, the female stared down at him and his mat. Throughout the night, neither of them had received much sleep. After he had helped Candy and Jack take her mate upstairs, Rusty had returned to find her anxiously pacing the cage straw. No matter what he did or said, she would not calm down. He gazed up at her, noting she wore one of his old shirts that he had stuffed into the cage to provide the harpies with a warmer nest. Wearing clothing, she might be mimicking Rusty or feeling insecure with him without her mate's protection. Unlike other creatures, the harpies were intelligent and mysterious, difficult to understand.

He clamored from the mat and stood. He reached through the bars to pet her head, and she hissed and backed away. "I'm sorry. I know you're mad at me for taking your boy away, but better me than Jack. That bully might've hurt him." He sighed when she glared at him and kept her distance. "As soon as I feed

and clean down here, I'll go up and make sure he's all right. Okay?"

She stopped pacing and curled up in the nest with her son.

A few hours later, Rusty entered the female's cage. He knelt down and caressed her head. "I'm going now. I'll make sure he's being treated right."

Rusty strolled down the long hallway to Candy's room and knocked on the door. She opened the door with a smile that quickly faded to a frown. "Oh, it's you."

"Is he okay?" he asked.

"He's fine, happy," she said impatiently. "He's eating, behaving, and screwing everything in sight. You don't need to come here anymore."

Rusty stared the floor. "His female is pretty upset. She paced the cage all night and hasn't eaten since he left."

"Not my problem," she said and started to shut the door.

Rusty put his foot in the doorway. "Can I at least see him?"

"Only for a few minutes. He has an appointment in a half-hour."

Rusty entered the bedroom and cheerfully greeted the curled-up male. "Hey, little buddy." He sat down on the bed, but the male barely acknowledged him. "He doesn't look happy."

"That's irrelevant," Candy said, "so long as he keeps my customers happy. You should be pleased, Rusty. With the right mix of drugs, I've proved that male harpies will breed with women. These creatures are better off serving as sex toys than as

wild game. Jack told me some gruesome hunting tales about hanging live harpies by their wrists and whacking off their wings. It sounds terribly painful.”

Rusty gently stroked the male’s head. “If given a choice, he’d probably rather be free and risk the hunt than be locked in here and drugged.” The harpy lifted his head and anxiously sniffed Rusty’s hand. “He smells his mate on my hand. He misses her.”

“Like I really care,” Candy said with sarcasm. “He’s mine till we reach Earth.”

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Throughout the next week, Shail was booked constantly with various women. To save time, Candy increased the Vicin so he would remain in a constant state of arousal, despite the torturous, harmful effect. He sensed her greed and the lack of compassion for him or anyone.

By the fourth day, he was hooked on the barbiturate. When the drug began to wear off, he would shake, sweat, and pull on the leash toward her case, begging for his reward. If Candy withheld treatment, he knew Monica was the next female. Highly irritated and hair-pulling stressed, he gave the big woman the rough sex she enjoyed. Afterwards, she doled out the money to Candy, paying extra to use him. Shail had little knowledge or contact with women prior to this capture, but he was fast gaining an education. Human females could be just as cruel as some men.

Shail lay on his stomach with one arm hanging off the bed. He had serviced six women in a three-hour period and was wiped out. He cringed with the sound of the living room door opening for another guest. Instead of female voices, he heard a man's voice and lifted his head. It was Jack.

"How is he?" he asked.

"You've seen your share of the credits."

"Yeah, that's what concerns me, Candy. To make that much money, he's obviously being overworked. I keep reminding you he's valuable. I don't want him broken down." He stepped into the bedroom and gazed at Shail.

"See?" Candy said. "He's a little tired, but fine."

Jack sat down next to Shail. "How ya doin', boy?"

Shail was so desperate for help that he placed his head on Jack's knee and licked the man's hand.

"He's gotten awfully friendly."

"It's the barbiturate. I knew he'd turn him into a puppy once addicted." She sat down alongside Jack. "I'm glad you stopped by. I'm thinking about expanding his clientele to gay men. I've met several rich ones and told them about the harpy. They were very interested and willing to pay a fortune for him."

"No way," Jack said and stood.

"But you plan to use the brown-winged males in the gay bars on Earth."

"This is a golden harpy, not some gentle brown. The last men who climbed on him died. Even on drugs, he could go berserk

and kill those fags, and then we'd be facing manslaughter charges for exposing a deadly pet to passengers. The money isn't worth it."

The days passed, and Shail slowly declined. No living thing could maintain the same hectic pace. He despondently lay on the bed and rose to the task when snatched up by his leash. His pitiful demeanor changed only for Racheal. He would ruffle his feathers and toss his hair to impress her before taking her into his arms. Candy had no choice but to tolerate the attachment. Without Racheal, he wouldn't eat.

The days turned into weeks, and Shail suffered from exhaustion. He could hardly rally his strength for Racheal. The long hours weakened his body, and the crippling drugs impaired his mind. Growing delirious and numb, he lost his telepathy and silent harpy language. Disoriented, he could not transmit his dream essence to Kari. The only connection that remained to the harpy pair was the occasional transfer of their scent on Rusty's hands.

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Kari heard the elevator and knew it was Rusty returning to the cargo bay after his breakfast. He soon appeared, rounding a large crate with his ever-present smile.

"Look, girl, I have fresh raspberries for you," he said, walking toward her cage. "And they weren't cheap."

She stared through the straw flakes at the sweet young man

with a long back, short legs, and crop of unruly red hair. He knelt beside her and placed the bowl of berries near her face. She lacked the desire to eat or the gumption to even lift her head off the bedding.

“Please eat,” he begged. “I’m so worried about you.”

Instead of grasping a berry, she drew his hand to her nose, hoping to smell Shail, but detected only human odors, food, cleansers, and the other animals.

“I’m sorry. Candy wouldn’t let me see him again, but I know he’s okay.”

She breathed deeply, perceiving the man’s thoughts and lie. Rusty did not know if Shail was okay. For more than a week, he had not touched her husband. She watched Will gobble up the rare treat of berries while she cursed the vow of silence she had made to Shail. She was part-human and had been raised among them. She could stand up and raise holy hell for being caged like an animal and possibly free her family. The senator had told Jack to kill Will if she or Shail spoke to people, but she had a friend in Rusty. He would protect her fledgling with his life. She partially opened her mouth, but no speech came out. She would keep her promise but wondered if Shail had kept his, swearing to survive this journey. Her mate was absent from their powerful telepathic dreams, raising her concerns. Either he chose to shut her out from the horrors he faced, or the drugs disabled his telepathy. There also existed the possibility that alone and unstable, her mate had broke his pledge and ended his life. A small tear ran down her face.



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Late morning in Candy's cabin, Racheal finished feeding and bathing her harpy lover and told Candy she would return in the afternoon. She opened the door to leave and noticed a short red-headed man in a ship employee uniform, standing in the hallway.

"Excuse me, miss," he said. "I don't want to sound offensive, but did you see the harpy?"

"Yes, I just fed him some apples."

"Apples are his favorite." He grinned. "I'm so glad to hear he's eating and all right."

"He's a little tired." She frowned with puzzlement. "How do you know he likes apples?"

"I used to take care of him down in cargo. This may be a strange question, but did you wash your hands after you touched him?"

Racheal wondered if she should end the odd conversation. "No, I didn't."

"Would you mind going to cargo with me? His mate is down there, and she's desperate to smell his scent on your hands."

"Beauty has a mate?" she asked, baffled.

"A mate and a son," he said. "Will you please go with me? It's very important."

Speechless, Racheal could only nod. It had never occurred to her that the love of her life could have a family.

“By the way, my name’s Rusty. This is the way to the cargo lift.” They entered the lift, and Rusty chattered on. “He must really like you if he lets you feed him. It took me weeks to gain his trust. His mate misses him terribly and stopped eating, but if she smells his scent, then she’ll know he’s alive. It’s an animal thing. Those poor harpies have been failing ever since Candy and Jack separated them, but those two are interested only in the money. The last time I saw the male, he was out of his mind from too many barbiturates and sex drugs, and he was drained from breeding too many women. I’m really worried about him.”

“He’s on barbiturates? Candy told me they were vitamin C shots, because harpies need sunshine and he wasn’t getting any in her cabin.”

Rusty chuckled. “That woman sure comes up with some whoppers. Of course he’s doped up. There’s no way he’d willingly breed with women. I wish you saw him when he lived in cargo. He was fearless. He’d fling his hair and crash into the cage bars, defending his family. Now he behaves like a frightened sheep. It’s a darn shame what Candy has done to him.” The more Rusty talked, the more ill Racheal felt.

They entered the cargo bay and approached the cage. Racheal wanted to turn and run rather than know the truth.

“Here she is,” Rusty said. “Female harpies don’t have wings, and they resemble women. Come on, sweetie. Come see this nice lady. She has your boy’s scent on her hands. You’ll see he’s okay.” He coaxed the female from the straw nest.

Wearing a tattered man's shirt, the female harpy cautiously approached the bars as Racheal held out her hands. The harpy sniffed slightly and backed away. Her big blue eyes seemed bewildered, and she returned to the nest.

Racheal stared at the lovely, petite female. She gasped for air. "So much like him," she said quietly, her eyes moistening. "She's beautiful and flawless." The little cream-winged fledgling then crawled to Rusty so the man could playfully ruffle his blond hair.

"Yeah, all these gold harpies are pretty. This little guy is the spitting image of his dad, don't you think?" Tears flowed down Racheal's cheeks.

"Hey, are you all right?" Rusty asked.

Racheal put her hand to her mouth and moved from the cage. "Just give me a minute," she muttered. Everything the animal handler had said was true. Beauty had to be drugged to have sex with women—with her. How else could Candy get him to breed homely women, when his mate could pass as a gorgeous model? She felt her heart had been ripped out. Her love affair was a mirage. Racheal leaned against a crate and wept.

Rusty crept closer. "You love him." He glanced at the equally distressed female harpy. "She's not happy either. I've made a terrible mistake, bringing you two together. I'm sorry, Racheal."

Racheal shook her head. "Don't be. The truth is always better. I was just so sure he loved me like I loved him." She

collected herself and realized that her lover was being abused. He had clung to her because she was his only friend. Her feelings of rejection turned to anger, and she went back to the harpy cage.

“I’m not sure if you understand me,” she said to the female harpy, “but I’m going to help your husband and bring him back to you. I owe him for that.” She turned to Rusty. “Tell me everything you know about the harpies.”

Rusty and Racheal sat down on facing crates. He relayed all he had learned about the harpies, from the first day he found the male starving, up to Candy and Jack’s prostitution scheme. He handed her their paperwork, which showed a Dora senator as their true owner.

At length, Racheal stood up to leave. Rusty said, “I don’t know what you can do. Jack said he’d replace me with some brute caretaker if I caused trouble. I’ve kept my mouth shut to protect the female harpy and her baby.”

“I travel with my aunt,” Racheal said. “She’s the widow of the ambassador in this sector and carries a lot of influence. She’ll know how to help the harpies.”

“Racheal,” Rusty called as she walked toward the lift, “like I said before, if the male eats out of your hand, it proves he likes you.” She smiled a brokenhearted smile.

Racheal rode the lift to the top level of the giant passenger ship. Only the master suites were on that deck. “There you are,” said her aunt as Racheal entered the sumptuous cabin. “I was just sending Ralph to find you. You’ve been eating like a bird for

weeks, and I want you to join me for a real dinner this evening. Quickly dropping weight on this fruit diet is unhealthy. And you can tear yourself away from Sara and your friends for one night.”

Racheal bit her lip, staring at her stout, regal aunt. “I haven’t been with Sara. I found someone, and I’m in love with him.”

Her aunt smiled in surprise. “A boyfriend? No wonder you’ve neglected me. That’s wonderful, Racheal. Sit and tell me all about him.”

“He’s not a man, Auntie,” Racheal said slowly.

Her aunt frowned but remained quiet and listened to Racheal’s accounts concerning the golden harpy.

“Will you help him?”

Her matronly aunt released a gasp. “You poor dear. You’ve become so desperate, you’re sleeping with a beast.”

“He’s not a beast!”

“I don’t care what he is. I want you to stay away from that prostitute and her winged creature. The Roth family’s reputation is at stake, and I’ll not have you shame it with this scandal.” She added to her lecture, “Sara is older and should know better. I can’t believe she’s also involved in this sordid matter.”

“Kick me out of your cabin without a dime; I don’t care. I’m not staying away from him.” Racheal had never been so bold, or had never felt so committed. She saw the shock her outburst had produced. “Auntie, please,” she said softer. “I don’t know what Beauty is, but he’s given me something I’ve never known before.

I've spent half my life as your travel companion and never asked for anything, but I'm asking now. Please help him."

"You really do care about this creature?" she said, and Racheal nodded. "I spend a lot of time and money on other charities. I suppose I can take the time and help you with yours. Besides, I can't tolerate animal abuse." She pressed a button. "Ralph, notify the captain. I wish to speak to him immediately."

"Yes, Mrs. Roth," answered Ralph's deep voice.

"Thank you, Auntie. When you see Beauty, you'll understand."

In a few minutes, Mrs. Roth's large bodyguard-assistant appeared in the doorway. "The captain will be here in half an hour."

"Thank you, Ralph," Mrs. Roth said to the black man and turned to Racheal. "Go clean up your face up and look presentable. Lord knows what the captain will think of you and your story."

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Mrs. Roth did not have to wait long for the captain. To displease her had repercussions. The captain entered her suite, looking trim and sharp in his bleach-white uniform with a large grin on his face. "Good day, Mrs. Roth, Miss Racheal," he said pleasantly. "I hope you're enjoying your stay aboard our ship."

Mrs. Roth regally rose from her chair. "I was," she snarled, "until I found out your deluxe star cruiser is loaded with drugs and

prostitutes and exploits a helpless animal with erotic sex acts.”

The captain’s smile vanished. Racheal repeated the harpy’s story to the captain. After listening gravely, he said, “This is very disturbing. I’ll have my lieutenant look into it right away.”

“Your lieutenant?” Mrs. Roth snapped. “I expect you to handle this yourself, and immediately.”

“Of course, you’re right,” he apologized. He pressed the button on his private com. “Have a vet or the ship’s doctor, some guards, and the cargo animal handler meet me now on level H, room 604. I’ll be there in ten.”

“I’m coming also,” Mrs. Roth said after his call. “I want to make sure the creature is handled with the utmost care.” She turned, facing Racheal. “Plus I’m eager to see the animal that has stolen your heart. Ralph, I need you.” The large man promptly appeared. The captain led her, Racheal, and Ralph down the hall to the lift, profusely thanking her for bring the unpleasant matter to his attention.

“Yes, yes,” her aunt said impatiently, ignoring his transparent attempts to charm her. At the door to Candy’s room, a doctor, Rusty, and two guards waited. The captain knocked.

Candy’s eyes filled with apprehension when she saw the captain and others. “Can I, can I help you?” she stammered.

“It’s been reported you’re harboring a dangerous animal in your cabin, and it’s being abused,” said the captain, “also that you may have some illicit drugs in your possession.”

“Not at all. I have a pet harpy, but he’s gentle.” She glared

at the red-headed man. “Rusty, what have you been telling these people?”

“Blame me,” Racheal said. “I informed the captain.” The group entered the cabin as a woman, not quite dressed, left the bedroom. One of the guards moved to grab her.

“Let her go,” the captain ordered. He followed Racheal into the bedroom with Mrs. Roth at his heels.

The animal lay on the bed, panting. Too tired, he had let one of his wings extend to the floor. “What the heck is it?” the captain uttered and cautiously approached the half-bird, half-man creature.

“It’s called a harpy, sir,” Rusty answered.

The harpy coiled his body in a protective ball of feathers and trembled. “He’s terrified with so many people surrounding him,” Racheal said and rushed to him. He buried his face in her side. “It’s okay, Beauty. They won’t hurt you. It’s over now. You don’t have to breed with women anymore.” She kept him calm while, under the captain’s orders, the doctor scanned his body for drugs.

“I’m not a vet,” the doctor said, “and I don’t know anything about these creatures, but my blood test shows he’s full of narcotics and sexual stimulants. The levels are dangerously high. I’m amazed he’s still functioning. He should be comatose or in cardiac arrest.”

The captain turned to Candy. “You’re in trouble, young lady.” He turned to a guard. “Take her to the brig, and I want this



creature returned to cargo.”

“Begging your pardon, sir,” said Rusty. “I don’t think cargo is an option right now. It’s very cold down there and risky for a sick tropical animal like this harpy.”

“I have to agree with the animal handler,” said the doctor. “His vitals are weak, and he has a low blood count. He’s probably addicted to the drugs and needs to be closely monitored during withdrawal. Unfortunately, something this exotic can’t go to sick bay. He’d upset my patients.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do with him?” asked the captain.

The men discussed the best way to deal with the dangerous, sick harpy as it clung to Racheal’s waist. “I’ll stay with you,” she whispered and stroked his head, “wherever they put you.”

Mrs. Roth held her jaw and stared at the creature, incredibly beautiful even in his pathetic state. She understood why her niece was taken with him. “I’ll take him,” she said to the captain. “I have an extra bedroom. After he recovers, he can go back to his cage.”

“Mrs. Roth, I can’t allow that,” the captain said. “This creature carries the red tag of a man-killer. By policy, it must be caged. I can’t allow you to put it in your cabin.”

“Can’t? That word is not in my vocabulary, Captain,” she remarked. “I’ll pay your animal handler to look after him. My assistant will deliver a signed release absolving you and your ship of liability. Can you carry him, Ralph?”

As Ralph reached for him, the harpy's eyes filled with fright and he scrambled across the sheets to the headboard and stood. With his back to the wall, he hissed and fluttered his arched wings to intimidate. Ralph grabbed for his legs but was kicked in the face.

"Please, Beauty, calm down," Racheal pleaded.

Rusty moved in, and between the two of them they managed to restrain the harpy. "Easy, little buddy," he soothed, holding his head hair so he couldn't bite Ralph. "Don't fight us." Rusty glanced at the captain and awkwardly explained, "He's only acting like this 'cause he's scared of men and doesn't trust them."

"Mrs. Roth, really," the captain said, watching the harpy's frenzied behavior. "He's vicious. You don't want this wild thing in your suite."

"As the boy said, it's only frightened," her aunt said. "Can you carry him, Ralph?"

"No problem, Mrs. Roth," Ralph said and grinned at the handsome harpy that was cradled in his arms. "He's as light as a feather, really."

The captain started to protest, but Mrs. Roth cut him off. "Thank you, Captain, for your prompt assistance in this matter. I believe we can handle him from here."

The captain rubbed the back of his neck. "Doctor, Rusty, go with them and make sure the harpy is no trouble. Tie it up if you have to. I don't want it hurting anyone."

"He won't harm us," Racheal said and unfastened the leash

from the bedpost. Mrs. Roth swept out of the room, followed by Racheal and Ralph holding the harpy. The doctor and Rusty trailed them down the hallway.

Shail's fear had provided him with a short burst of adrenaline to fight back in the bedroom, but it didn't last long. Frail and overpowered, he yielded and lay limp as a baby in the dark-skinned giant's arms. He gazed up at the hallway ceiling that drifted past and heard Rusty and Racheal's reassuring voices as they walked alongside the big man who carried him to a new place with new masters. The drugs clouded his mind, but he still detected the black man's thoughts and cravings. Ralph longed to ravish him. Shail trembled with the notion and wondered if things had gone from bad to worse.

The parade of people followed the stout old woman to her suite. In the spare bedroom, the man laid Shail on the bed. He curled up in a tight ball and kept his alarmed eyes on the man called Ralph and ignored the doctor, Racheal and, Rusty. They told him he was safe, but he didn't feel safe.

Mrs. Roth came in to inspect her new houseguest. "I can see why you like him, Racheal," she said. "With his looks, he could seduce any woman. Take good care of him, Doctor." She left the room with Ralph. As soon as the black man was gone, Shail relaxed. He tucked his head into a wing and fell into a deep, troubled sleep.

Racheal relined beside the harpy and caressed his back. “He’s out. Poor baby is exhausted.”

“Sleep and rest is the best thing for recovery,” the doctor said. “And keep him well fed and hydrated. A lot of liquids will help. Buzz me if he becomes stressed. I can help relax him with other drugs, but for the most part, he’ll have to detox on his own. The next few days will be difficult. Those were powerful barbiturates, and when he comes down, he’ll likely go a little crazy, so make sure he’s restrained.” He ran his medical monitor over the harpy’s body and shook his head with disgust. “There’s enough in him to subdue an elephant. These harpies must be extremely resilient. If he were a man, he’d be dead from an overdose.”

Rusty left Mrs. Roth’s cabin, bent on reassuring the female harpy in cargo. With her male’s scent on his hands and clothing, she would know he was alive. She sniffed Rusty while he explained that her mate was no longer with Candy and was receiving good care. Her eyes brightened, and to Rusty’s delight, she nibbled on the dried fruit. He gathered up some rope and returned to Mrs. Roth’s cabin. In the spare bedroom, he found Racheal alone with the harpy.

“Do we really have to tie him?” she asked when Rusty stepped to the male harpy with the ropes.

“Honestly, Racheal, I don’t know how he’ll behave during withdrawal. You’ve been with him when he was doped up and

meek, but I've seen him smash into the cage bars to kill Jack. And it wasn't an act. His slender build might look harmless, but he's very strong and agile. I've play-tussled with him in his cage, and he whipped me every time." He leaned over and tied the sleeping harpy's wrists and ankles to the bedposts. He straightened with a sigh and stared down at the harpy. "I'm not afraid of any animal, have handled the biggest and baddest, but with him, I'd run rather than face this harpy in a real fight."

"It's hard to believe. He's always been so gentle."

"Once he's gone through withdrawal, he'll probably be okay," Rusty said. "He's smart and reasonable. If you're good to him, he's fine."

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Shail slept for five hours but woke in a cold sweat, trembling. In turning to lie on his other side, he found his wrists and ankles were tied to the bed. He struggled against his bonds, causing Rusty and Racheal to leap from their chairs and go to him.

"I'm here, Beauty," Racheal said and applied a cool wet towel to his forehead.

"Better call that doctor, Racheal. The drugs are wearing off."

The doctor arrived, and Rusty held Shail as he was given another drug, but it did not relieve the torment. His body shook violently, and he felt like he was losing his mind. He tossed in the

bed sheets and tugged on the ropes. He panted and pleaded with his eyes, begging for Candy's drugs, which would stop the anguish.

Minutes later, his body tensed and went into convulsions, thrashing out of control. Delirious, he vaguely heard frantic human voices. Racheal screamed at the doctor to help him. Every inch of him burned with searing pain, and he dwelled on breaking free, even if he died trying. Rusty had failed to tie his wings. Shail flipped onto his stomach and wildly flapped his long back limbs, bashing feathers against the walls and furniture. Pictures, lamps, and everything that wasn't nailed down hit the floor. Rusty stepped in to restrain him, and Shail turned his head and lunged. His teeth barely missed Rusty's throat, but a powerful wing thrust caught the animal handler and sent him crashing into a small table and two chairs.

The racket brought Mrs. Roth and Ralph into the trashed bedroom. Shail's wings battered the walls as he twisted on the bed that was littered with small broken feathers of his own making. The doctor examined Rusty's bloody face while Racheal pleaded with Shail to calm down.

"My God!" Mrs. Roth exclaimed. "Doctor, do something with him."

"I'm not getting near it," the doctor said. "Look what it did to that poor handler."

"Want me to hold him down?" Ralph asked.

When the big man moved toward Shail, he went berserk.

He beat his wings and rammed his head with full force into the wall, aiming to break his own neck or crack his skull.

“Stop, please stop, Beauty!” Racheal cried.

Shail shook his stunned head, looked at Ralph, and spread his wings to hit the wall again.

“Get back, Ralph!” Rusty yelled. “You’re upsetting him more.” Ralph backed away, and Rusty turned to Mrs. Roth. “I’ll get his mate. She’s the only one who can calm him. This ain’t withdrawal. It’s a suicide.”

Mrs. Roth nodded, and Rusty hurried from the room.

Shail’s hostile gaze stayed focused on Ralph as he hissed loudly, warning all to stay away, including Racheal. When they kept their distance, he savagely chewed on the ropes binding his wrists and tasted the blood from his head wound that ran down his face.

Rusty soon returned, holding Will and with Kari on a leash. He released her, and she stepped to Shail. He was so rattled and out of his mind that he arched his wings and hissed at his own harpy mate. Kari dismissed his threats with her own hiss, chastising him to behave. She crawled on the bed and wrapped her arms around his neck. Immediately, the arched, battered wings drooped and he placed his sweaty head against her breasts, shaking. He couldn’t mentally relate to her but sniffled apologetically. Using the sheet, she wiped the blood from his face and showered him with nuzzles and kisses.

“He’ll be all right now. She’ll keep him calm.” Rusty

placed their fledgling on the floor, picked up a water bottle, and stepped to Shail. “You need to drink, little buddy. It will help get rid of those drugs.” When he coaxed Shail’s head up by the chin, Shail aggressively bared his teeth. “Stop that now. You’ve done enough damage to me and this room.” The handler forced him to drink and praised him for behaving.

“You’re very committed to that creature,” Mrs. Roth said.

Rusty grinned, despite a swollen face and bloody shirt.

The old woman continued, “Maybe now I can get some sleep. Come along, Ralph. We’re not needed.”

The doctor departed with them, leaving only Rusty and Racheal in the room.

Kari held Shail’s sweaty, feverish body as he breathed hard and quivered, but the stress lessened with her at his side. Rusty encouraged him to drink and wet down his warm body with cool towels.

Racheal sat in a chair, keeping her distance, and watched Shail respond to Kari’s nuzzles and nips. “He really loves her,” she said dismally.

\*\*\*

The next few days were hard on Shail, but Kari’s presence kept his insanity and despair at bay. Racheal maintained a constant vigil, sleeping at night in a chair. Kari’s glare kept her away from the bed, so Rusty handled Shail’s needs. Only Will crawled to



Racheal and accepted her petting.

By the third day, Shail's drained body trembled slightly and was damp with a mild fever. Most of the time he slept, curled up, and Kari left him briefly to tend to their fledgling. During quiet time, Rusty read to them, explaining to Racheal that they enjoyed stories. She smiled and related that she was also a book lover.

That evening, Rusty munched on a sandwich as Racheal leaned against the wall and gazed sadly at Shail.

With the drugs gone, Shail's telepathy returned, so that he could finally communicate with Kari. "*I missed you and Will,*" he relayed silently.

"*You missed me so much that you took another,*" Kari said, glancing at Racheal.

"*I am sorry.*"

Kari took a deep breath. "*That girl is deeply in love with you.*" She climbed off the bed and approached the large young woman.

"Rusty, she's going to attack me," Racheal said nervously.

"I don't think so. She just wants to check you out," he answered, but Shail sensed the man's uncertainty. Rusty inched next to Kari, a protective move. "Be nice, girl."

Kari came face to face with Racheal.

"Please take her away," Racheal pleaded. "She knows I slept with her husband, and she's going to claw me."

Rusty chuckled. "She's not a jealous woman. Animals don't think like that. Besides, if she wanted to hurt you, she would

have ambushed you when you slept in here.”

Kari slowly reached up and caressed Racheal’s head and hair. Racheal’s hazel eyes widened, but she didn’t move. Kari then stood on tiptoes to brush her cheek against the woman’s face.

“Pet her, Racheal,” Rusty said. “Show her you like her, too.”

“She’s not mad at me,” Racheal said and stroked Kari’s long, soft hair.

Shail watched the exchange between his two female mates. Like Rusty, he had also been unsure if Kari would acknowledge her or lash out. A male harpy normally seeks permission from his mate before bringing a second female into their nest. Because of the circumstances, he had bonded with Racheal without Kari’s approval. “*You are not angry with her, but with me,*” he said when Kari returned to the bed.

*“I am not angry with either of you. She promised to help you and reunite us, and she did. I am grateful to her. And you also kept your promise to survive this journey. Without her, you would have died. But now that the danger has passed, will you honor the commitment to this woman?”*

*“I do not know, Kari. The bond was made with drugs, fear, and the lack of will to resist. This is not the time or place to take a second mate, and one who cannot bear my offspring.”*

*“Love knows no time or place. Have you become so heartless that you would cast her aside now that she is not needed? She is fragile, and the rejection would destroy her.”*

*“But I do not love her as I love you. I was wrong to bond with a woman.”*

*“You had no choice, Shail. This Racheal has strong instincts. She knows your love is for me, yet she is content to remain at your side and accept your crumbs of affection. Your mind is full of doubt, but not of her. Our unstable future haunts your decision. Do not reject her, a girl who would die for you. If I can accept her as my sister, you should keep her as your second mate.”*

Shail looked at her, puzzled. *“You feel strongly about this.”*

*“For once, my senses are stronger than yours. Trust them. Female intuition compels this choice.”* Shail nodded and nuzzled her cheek.

“They seem pretty content tonight,” said Rusty. “I think I’ll turn in early for a change. Buzz me if you need me.” He playfully ruffled Shail’s hair and petted Kari. “You two, behave for Racheal. Don’t cause trouble, or they’ll put you back in cargo with me, and this place is far nicer than that small, cold cage.”

After Rusty left, Racheal seated herself in the large overstuffed chair that she slept on. “I’m so glad you feel better, Beauty.”

Kari left the bed and walked to her. Racheal’s uneasy eyes shifted to the door. Kari blocked her escape, and Rusty wasn’t there to protect her. Kari slowly extended her hand, and Shail sat up, tossing his hair as a summons to the girl.

“You want me?” Racheal asked. His snuffle was an unmistakable yes. Kari took Racheal’s hand and gently led her to the bed. Shail’s two females rested beside him, and Will snuggled between them. With a sweep of his wing, Shail covered his extended family.

\*\*\*

The next morning, Mrs. Roth strolled into the harpy bedroom to find her niece. She was shocked to see Racheal sound asleep in the male harpy’s arms. The female harpy and her baby rested securely against her. “Racheal,” Mrs. Roth thundered, waking them all. “You can’t sleep with these creatures.”

“They want me,” Racheal said with a smile. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“It’s outrageous, not wonderful,” Mrs. Roth fumed. “Obviously, it was a mistake to bring these harpies up here. He seems healthy now. It’s time they return to cargo.”

“If they go, I go with them,” Racheal said with resolve.

“What has gotten into you? Has this winged creature taken over your mind? You can’t stay in cargo.”

“Can’t?” Racheal questioned. “As you have often said, that word is not in my vocabulary. Wherever the harpies go, I go.”

Mrs. Roth was silent. She stared at the harpies, and then at her niece. “This male’s aggression seems to have rubbed off. Twice now you have defied me.”

“For the first time, I know who I am and what I want in life.”

Mrs. Roth stepped to the bed, and her wrinkled hand cupped the male harpy’s youthful face. “He is breathtaking.” She withdrew her hand and looked up at Racheal “If they’re staying, I want changes. Tell that animal handler to take those ropes off him, and have Ralph put in a permanent order of fresh fruit. Any guest of mine will be comfortable.”

“Oh, Auntie, thank you.”

Mrs. Roth looked at the male harpy. “I should thank him. For years, I tried to instill a backbone in you and failed. He gave it to you.” She felt something on her leg and saw the baby harpy tugging at the beads on her gown. “This little guy needs toys. I’ll have the gift shop bring some up.” The baby scrunched up his tiny nose and sniffled for affection. Mrs. Roth’s heart melted. She bent over and caressed his blond locks. “He looks like a little cherub with those wings. In all my life, I’ve never seen a cuter baby.”

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Rusty knocked at the Roths’ suite door. Racheal let him in.

“How’s our boy today?”

“He’s great, Rusty. The doctor was here earlier. Beauty sniffled a little but let him examine him. The only problem still is with Ralph. Every time he sticks his head in the room, Beauty jumps up, raises his wings, and hisses violently. It’s a full-blown

confrontation. For some reason, he hates Ralph.”

“Animals can be leery of what they don’t know,” Rusty said. “I’ve known dogs who hate children, horses that feared men. Maybe there are no black people on Dora and Ralph’s color is setting him off.”

“It’s a shame,” she said. “I can tell that Ralph is infatuated with Beauty. He’s gay, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know.” Rusty chuckled. “He comes across like a big tough guy. I’m betting the harpy senses that Ralph has designs on him, and that’s what’s upsetting him. You’d better keep them apart. Ralph may not believe it, but that scrappy harpy could take him out.”

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With Ralph no longer entering the bedroom, Shail was lulled into a false sense of security. Although the zoo and Earth awaited him, he pushed his unpleasant destiny to the back of his mind, and like any animal, lived in the present. With his two females under his wings at night and the days spent playing with his son, he began to relax. The fresh fruit, spacious warm bedroom, and shower were far superior to a miserable cage.

Racheal gradually changed, not only in spirit, but also in appearance. The day she met Shail, she had stopped eating the fattening foods that filled a void in her. She had found a life she cherished. The unwanted pounds disappeared, and she spent time

grooming to please her mate, slowly blossoming into a beautiful, confident woman. She treated Kari like her quiet little sister, and their fondness for each other was obvious. Like Shail, Racheal lived in the present and hoped her fairy tale would never end.

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As the ship sped through vast reaches of space, the horrors that had started the journey were replaced with happiness for the golden family. On Mrs. Roth's birthday, Racheal grudgingly agreed to leave the harpies for the night and celebrate in the ship's dining room with the captain and several distinguished guests. The old woman was eager to show off her lovely niece to the other passengers.

After Mrs. Roth and Racheal left, Ralph unlocked the bedroom door. Since cradling the dazzling male harpy in his arms, he had bided his time. The male performed sexually for women; it needed only some retraining to accept men. Ralph figured what harm could come by holding it down for some quick sex? It was just an animal.

When Ralph entered, the male leaped to his feet with arched wings. He flung his locks, and his hisses were meant to discourage Ralph and abolish his presence from the room. Instead, Ralph took a step toward him. "I've been waiting to get my hands on you."

Ralph took a moment to admire the male's intoxicating

face and sensuous nude body. Opening his pants, he revealed his intention to his winged target. "You'll learn to like this." He moved sideways to separate the male from the female and baby on the bed, planning to grab and pin the male to the floor. Ralph had held the lightweight harpy and never considered him dangerous. He just put on a good show with his idle threats.

The male stopped hissing and stood as still as a statue, glaring at him. Ralph took another step closer, and the harpy sprang into action. He flapped his wings and fluttered. With both feet, he kicked Ralph square in the chest and sent him tumbling backward. Before he could recover from the blow and rise, the harpy leaped on Ralph's back. The male wrapped an arm around Ralph's throat while his other hand clutched his chin. As a bodyguard, Ralph recognized the hold. The harpy intended to snap his neck.

Ralph felt the harpy's vigorous tugs to dislodge his spine and knew he was in serious trouble. He rolled on the floor to jar it off his back, but the rugged thing clung like bark on a tree. In trying to wrestle the arm from his neck, Ralph found that the willowy harpy was incredibly strong.

The harpy jerked Ralph's neck again to cripple or kill, but with Ralph's frantic measures to remove the creature, the harpy was slightly off balance and failed to dislocate the vertebrae. He held on and deftly shifted his hold.

Off to his side, Ralph saw the female harpy desperately tugging on her mate's wings to stop him. The male ignored her and



finally gained an uncompromising grip and twisted.

Ralph managed a guttural sentence. "Please, I'll never bother you again."

The male loosened his hold and hopped off Ralph. He stared up into the harpy's eyes that burned with audacity. A low, snake-like seething escaped his lips, warning Ralph he would die next time. Ralph scrambled backwards and stood up only when his back was to the wall. Coughing, he hastily sidestepped to the door, backed out, and slammed the door shut. He locked it and fell into a nearby chair. Rusty had warned him that the harpy was lethal and to stay away from it. Until now, he had not believed it.

"Damn thing nearly killed me," Ralph gasped and held his wrenched neck. For an hour he slumped in the chair, shocked that the slight harpy had subdued him. Few men could. As the fright and humiliation wore off, he reflected on the female harpy and her motives to stop her mate. "If I had died, her male would surely have been destroyed. The captain would order it, despite Mrs. Roth's objections. But could harpies know such things?" Mrs. Roth and Racheal returned from dinner. Ralph dared not mention the embarrassing incident.

Days later, Ralph entered the harpy's bedroom to convey a message to Mrs. Roth. Amazingly, the male harpy didn't threaten him. Instead, it arrogantly raised its head and gave him a piercing stare. Ralph grimaced and gave it a slight nod.

Ralph later questioned Rusty about the red tag and learned the harpy had killed four men after it had been molested. Ralph

realized he had been lucky. Abandoning his sexual desires for the harpy, he became an ardent admirer of the feisty male.

## Chapter Nine

Ted awoke to the musical alarm in the Terrance airport. He rubbed his eyes and glanced out the window. A faint gray light signaled the approach of dawn. “Just once, I’d like to sleep in.” He had moved a bunk into the airport so he could monitor the communicators in case of a hunter attack. Pushing his brown curls aside, he gazed at the cutout press picture of the golden harpy family. The photo had been taken at the Turner Estate when the fledgling was a few days old. His eyes focused on Kari. He had befriended her on his voyage to Dora. Never had he fallen so fast and hard for a girl who could never be his but he would love all the days of his life. He kissed the tip of his finger and touched her image. “I know you’re still alive,” he whispered. For a month and a half, he followed the same morning ritual.

Slowly Ted rose, knowing that Aron would soon arrive. Although the brown harpy appeared civilized, a closed room still intimidated him. Ted had volunteered the nightly vigil to spare his wild friend from claustrophobic panic. Sluggishly, he approached the coffee machine and punched a button.

As he brought the coffee mug to his lips, the door opened and Aron strolled in. He dropped several large orange fruits beside the machine. “These are better for you than the black water.”

“Coffee; it’s called coffee, Aron. And keep your fruit. I’ll stick with this black water.”

Soon, Ted was sipping and Aron nibbling as they watched

the sunrise through the open door. The com buzzed. “Didn’t you tell your boys to check in later in the morning?” Ted griped while walking to the desk.

Aron flipped back his brown locks and responded, “My harpies know humans are bad tempered when awakened. It is not they who call.”

Ted pushed the com key, and a harpy appeared on the screen. “Aron told you to call when the light is high in the sky,” he barked, using words a harpy could understand.

“But they come!” the harpy exclaimed. Aron leaped in front of the screen, his wings nearly knocking Ted over.

“Where?” Aron asked.

“The river bend,” the harpy said. “Half a light’s hard flight north.” He raised his hand four times. “This many metal birds come.”

“Four hands,” Ted said with shock. “That’s more than twenty hovers.”

“Flee and hide,” Aron told the harpy. “I shall be there before mid-light.” In one bound, the brown-winged leader reached the door.

“Wait, Aron,” Ted called and ran after him. Once past the threshold, Aron was airborne and winging north over the jungle. For a moment, Ted watched helplessly from the landing strip. He then rushed back inside and hectically pressed the communicator keys.

Mark, half-awake, appeared on the screen. “Hunters

crossed the river two hundred miles north!” Ted yelled. “There’re at least twenty hovercrafts.”

“I’ll be there in ten. Place a multi-call to the other men.”

“Hurry, Mark!” Ted said. “Aron has already gone.”

Aron flew low over the shadowy trees and called silently, “*It is time.*” Although he saw no harpies, he sensed them below. Soon, hundreds of wings rose into the dawn sky to follow their ruler. Aron soared north along the banks of the great river that divided the continent. His large flock knew the battle against hunters had begun.

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Seth crouched in an enormous tree with the harpy who had called Terrance. Several members of Seth’s flock also waited. A mile down river, twenty-three small hovercrafts crossed the water and fanned out over the western jungle.

Seth nervously watched the hunter invasion, aware some of his males hid in that area. He saw a male take flight just short of a laser gun’s striking distance. Seth fluttered above the tree, anxious about the harpy’s escape. He heard several searing weapon blasts and saw the male’s wings collapse. His limp body plummeted into the trees.

Shaken, Seth quickly descended. “*Their weapons strike farther than before,*” he relayed to his males. “*Scatter west and*

*seek shelter. We cannot out-fly them.*” The four harpies took off through the dense forest.

Seth saw seven hovercrafts change direction and head straight for him. Their heat-seeking devices had picked him and his harpies up on their screens. He waited for as long as he dared, and then flapped straight upward through the treetops to entice the hunters away from his males. Two laser blasts zipped past him. He jetted north over the river, staggering his flight with dips and turns to make an elusive target. Glancing back, he saw all seven hovers in hot pursuit.

A giant freighter emerged northeast of the river and attempted to cut Seth off. He flapped hard, zigzagging as laser blasts came dangerously close, his wings, he knew, were no match for the speed of the large craft.

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“Hank,” the pilot called. “Look at this crazy harpy. It’s flying in the open over the river.”

Hank chuckled through his scraggly beard. “It ain’t crazy. That’s a flock leader trying to draw us off his bucks. Zero in on him. I’ll bring that trophy down myself.” As the freighter drew closer, Hank fixed his rifle scope on the large male and muttered, “Man, you should see the wingspan on this baby. They’re light brown. Sucker has some years on him. Get on top of him.” He fired three times before he finally hit the elusive harpy.

Stunned, the male fell to the forest floor. The freighter hovered over his body until one of the smaller crafts arrived. "He's next to that red tree," Hank communicated to the smaller hover's pilot. He radioed the other crafts. "You idiots," he yelled, "get back to where you first spotted him. This big buck was deliberately diverting us so his flock could get away. Find them." The six small crafts veered south.

From the floating freighter, Hank watched two men below drag the lifeless winged body to their transport and tossed it in the back. "Is he okay?" he asked their pilot.

"He's got a few scrapes, but the monitor shows nothing's broken, and the stunning didn't hurt him."

"Good. Meet us at the river," Hank ordered. "That shoal is the only place to land this." The freighter swerved off as he grinned at the men inside. "Haven't bagged a trophy like that in twenty years."

Ten miles west of the river, a heat-seeking device picked up the form of a third harpy hidden among thick ferns. Four hovers cornered him, but the harpy chose to stay put rather than risk flying. One hover landed, and three men rushed out to flush him from the trees. The terrified young harpy had no choice but to bolt. He sprang from the foliage into the air, and the sound of laser guns echoed through the forest. The harpy dropped to the ground.

"Nailed him!" a hunter yelled, racing to the unconscious creature. Several men stretched out his wings and examined him for injuries before placing their catch in a hover.

The pilot radioed Hank, "Got another one, but it's an adolescent."

"That's okay. He's still worth a bundle." He turned to his men in the freighter. "Well, this is as easy as popping zels. Figured it was bull that these critters would fight back." The huge freighter set down on the wide shoal of the riverbank and waited for the smaller crafts to arrive with the stunned game.

Hank beamed as he walked to the craft that held the bagged flock leader. Another hunter approached him with the unconscious teenager flung over his shoulder.

"Throw him in a cage toward the front of the freighter," Hank told the hunter. "We'll fill it up first." He turned to watch his men pull the large male out by his arms. "Easy, boys. Don't damage those feathers," he said. "This buck is worth a small fortune." The men spread out the wings, and he measured their length with a laser beam. "Nineteen feet, three inches, and he's six-foot-three. Through the scope he looked damn big, and his cocky behavior proves he's a dominant male. They act like a decoy to save his males. The senator's gonna pay extra for this prize."

The freighter com buzzed again. "Got another one southwest of you," said the pilot. After a few hours, the long-distant rifles stunned seven harpies. Five were undamaged, but two had not weathered the fall. One had died instantly of a broken neck, and the second had a mangled leg and wing.

Hank scrutinized the harpy's injuries, judging him unfit to be shipped to Earth. "Put him in an outside holding cage," he said.



“After we strip his wings and gut him, we’ll have a little barbeque for lunch. Roasted, these fruit eaters make good eating and taste like sweet pork.”

Seth gradually recovered from the laser stunning and woke to find himself caged with four other males inside the large metal bird. He stared out the freighter’s back door and saw his crippled flock member in the small cage. The frightened harpy flopped his damaged wing and hobbled desperately on a broken ankle. The men dug a pit in the sandy shoal, filled it with dried wood, and started a fire. For entertainment, several hunters jabbed the harpy with sticks, so he’d frantically throw himself against the bars. When the coals burned brightly, they proceeded to the slaughter. Securing the harpy’s wrists, they hung him from a nearby tree, where he twisted and struggled, his face and body shiny with sweat. For half an hour, he furiously flapped until shock set in. He flinched when the men sliced open his wing tips to drain the blood, prior to removing the feathered limbs and cutting off his sex organs.

Seth paced, hissed, and rattled the cage bars as he watched the horror. Outside, the men ignored him, focused on the hanging harpy that gasped in pain. A large bearded man, obviously the men’s leader, gutted the shivering harpy frame. The male’s green eyes closed with the last heartbeat. The men lowered the body and laid it on the coals.

Seth stopped hissing and stood quietly. Appalled with the

men's cruelty, he could barely breathe. His eyes became moist as he stared at the cooking corpse. Seth had protected the male since birth, watched him grow from a clumsy fledgling into a handsome, daring adult with a newborn fledgling of his own.

The other caged males trembled and huddled at Seth's feet. Through their long, silky hair, their frightened eyes gazed up at him. He lowered himself and extended his wings to give them camouflage. *"I can no longer defend you."*

Seth noticed a shaking teenager curled in the cage corner, paralyzed with fear. The young male was not a member of Seth's flock, but Seth made an acceptance snuffle. The teen crawled to his wing cover, and Seth nuzzled him.

Two men walked into the freighter to check on their catch. One man kicked the cage bars and watched the panicked harpies flutter and nestle around Seth. "They look like a bunch of scared kids," the man commented.

The teenager could not handle the stress. His eyes rolled back, and he collapsed on the cage floor, trembling as he stared in a trance. "Hank, the small one is down," the man called. Seth bent over and nipped at the teen's neck to revive him.

"Starting already, damn harpy depression," Hank said. "Drag him close to the bars so I can drug him before his heart stops." The harpies scattered, leaving the teen as two men reached into the cage. Using the teen's hair and a wing, they pulled him close to the bars, where Hank injected an antidepressant and stimulant. "Even this half-grown buck is worth fifty thousand."

Seth hissed fiercely at Hank. He pulled the teen away from the men and covered him with his wings.

“For a brown, he’s got some courage,” Hank said to the two men. “I’d love to keep his light-brown wings. These days, they’re rare.” The freighter com started buzzing. “About time they got another one.” He strolled to the front of the craft to answer the call.

Pushing the com key, Hank heard a man’s excited voice before his image appeared on the screen. “There’s hundreds of harpies,” the man shouted.

“Bring ’em down before they scatter.”

“Scatter, hell! They’re coming at us, Hank. God! We’re surrounded. The engines are—” The com screen was suddenly blank.

“Get in here,” Hank barked at the pilot. “Find the location of that last transmission.”

The com buzzed again. Another panicked hunter screamed, “The harpies! They’re all over us. They’re jamming the engines! We’re going down!”

“Where are you?” Hank asked. Before the man could answer, the communicator went dead again. “Get us airborne now!” Hank yelled at the pilot.

The engines fired, and the hunting party scrambled aboard. The freighter lifted off the ground.

Another communiqué came in. “Hank! The harpies are attacking the hovers!” yelled a pilot. “We’ve seen seven crash.”

“Where are you?”

“We’re just southwest of your location and heading your way.”

The freighter rose above the river, and Hank viewed the colorful landscape. To the south and west of the river, smoke billowed above the treetops from the wreckage of downed crafts.

“One of them must’ve set fire to the trees,” said the freighter pilot, pointing to a rising brown cloud.

Hank looked through the binoculars and saw eight hovers racing toward the freighter. Behind them trailed a massive brown cloud. “Shit! That ain’t smoke,” he exclaimed. “Those are wings! Get us the hell out of here.” The freighter headed over the river into the eastern continent. Hank watched the enormous harpy swarm overtake and consume one craft at a time until all eight vanished. “Where’s the rest of ’em?”

“There’s none on radar,” said the pilot. “Wait. There’s two left a little north, but the harpies are gaining on them. They’re close to the river.”

“Just two?” Hank said in disbelief. “Get us to the warehouse.”

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The giant harpy flock hit the small hovers from behind and below with a fast and furious attack. Aron knew that their sheer numbers would put the hunters on the run, and a man could not

take deadly aim in a fleeing craft. If his target trailed, a hunter would have to lean out the door and risk a fall or else damage the rear engine with a blast. Since hovers were designed for pursuit, they gave the chasing harpies an advantage.

The harpies that were armed were told to target the pilot. If the man ducked and hid, then others would swoop up underneath the craft and jam sticks into the engine. The disabled hover would spiral to the ground, followed by harpies bent on killing any survivors. Aron vowed no lenience for the seasoned harpy slayers.

The battle, well-rehearsed, was over in less than an hour. Twenty-one hovercrafts lay smoldering and destroyed, and eighty-seven hunters were dead. Aron stopped his attack at the river. Two small crafts and a large freighter made it across. Keeping to the truce, Aron had promised to kill only the hunters caught on the harpy land.

Aron ordered two harpies to discreetly follow the escaping enemy craft to learn where they came from. He descended on the last downed hover and carefully approached it.

A hunter stumbled through the mangled door, and seeing Aron, he scrambled to his feet and bolted into the jungle. Aron extended his wings and slowly flew over the hysterical man. With one powerful kick, he knocked his victim to the ground and perched on a stump, watching him like a cat toying with a mouse. The hunter tried to catch his breath and rise while Aron waited for the hunter to retreat again.

Instead the man pleaded, "Please don't kill me."

Aron curiously tilted his head, fluttered off the stump to the ground, and approached. A twinge of compassion rose in him, as he would feel for any trapped creature facing death. “How many harpies have you killed with that same plea for mercy in their eyes?” Unknown to the hunter, it was a test of honor.

“None!” the man cried. “I’ve never been here, never killed a harpy.”

“Lies,” Aron seethed, noticing the man’s shifting eyes and sweaty palms. He grabbed the hunter’s arm to further sense him. “I am not a stupid human, but a harpy who detects your thoughts. Your mind tells me of four. Two were fledglings. Your own false words condemn you, but know the truth might have saved you.”

“Please don’t,” whined the man. “All right, I admit it. I killed four, but I promise I’ll never kill another harpy.”

“This promise, I shall help you keep.” Aron flung the man around and grasped him from behind. With a swift, powerful jerk, he snapped his neck. The hunter crumbled into the soggy black dirt, twitched for a moment, and was still.

For a long moment, Aron stared at the dead man as a sick feeling rose from the pit of his stomach. He backed away and braced himself against the stump’s rotting wood. He shuddered while trying to catch his breath but became physically ill and vomited. This light, he had killed eleven men, ten with a laser weapon, and this one with his bare hands. He wiped his mouth. “I have become like them,” he anguished with teary eyes. The slaughter of men ripped at his soul, because it went against the

very nature of his race. Harpies were gentle beings who cherished and protected life. He knew that others in his flock suffered as he did.

Aron flew to the riverbank where his flock gathered. They had pulled the slain, charred harpy from the fire and milled around in confusion. He walked to the partially burnt carcass and knelt down as one of his males approached.

*“How many lost?”* Aron asked without looking up.

*“Seven, Seth and three of his eastern flock were captured, along with a river adolescent that flew north to seek his father. One of Seth’s males hid his heat by lying beneath a sleeping dragon. He witnessed the taking. Two are dead—this slaughtered male, and one that died of a broken neck in a fall.*

*“And with the attack?”*

*“None killed,”* said the male. *“The hunters used stun weapons. Only two fell and broke their wings.”*

Aron finally stood and gazed at the large flock. They ambled around in a dazed and confused state. Like Aron, they did not celebrate their victory but grieved the loss of honor and peace of mind, for they had murdered like humans.

He raised his wings to address the two thousand. *“Weep freely, my brothers, for I have. Yes, we have killed and lost our passive souls, but there is no shame in our deeds. Dwell not on the dead, but think of your families. You have saved them. We are harpies, guardians of the jungle. We did what we must.”*

Aron lowered his wings and took a deep breath, knowing

his little speech did little to console them and heal their distress. The male flock had been forever changed. He noticed a black-winged male flying frantically through the trees. The young harpy dove and dipped into the dense forest like a hummingbird in search of nectar. His erratic behavior suggested madness. Another harpy relayed, *“Master, he is called Bloom, Seth’s youngest son. Though told his father was taken, he still seeks him.”*

Aron spread his wings and flew to the distraught male. “Alight, Bloom,” he ordered and landed on a limb. Bloom obeyed and settled alongside him. His face and long black hair glistened with sweat, and he panted with stress. Aron gazed into the bewildered pale-green eyes of the gorgeous male. *“He is gone. Accept this.”* He sighed and took the trembling youth into his arms. Bloom grasped Aron’s waist and whimpered.

A brown harpy joined them on the tree limb. *“I am Seajay, Seth’s younger brother. I shall see to my nephew.”*

Aron nodded. *“His mind is fragile with heartbreak. He needs great care.”* He released the overwrought male, and Bloom crumbled at their feet, curling up into a tight ball on the wide limb.

Seajay nodded, staring down at Bloom. He lifted his gaze to Aron. *“My brother admired you. He thought you wise and fierce for your years, but I had my doubts.”* He paused with a deep breath. *“This light, you have proven to me and all others your worthiness to reign. With Seth gone, his eastern flock falls to me.”* He dropped on one knee and lowered his head. *“I am yours, Master.”*



*“Two of my bravest follow the metal birds across the river. If Seth can be rescued, it shall be done. There is still a chance.”*

Seajay bit his lip with a nod.

Aron heard many hovercrafts coming from the south. He flew back to the river shoal and watched the Terrance men land. Ted and Mark were the first to jump out of their transports.

“Where are the hunters?” Ted excitedly asked the surrounding harpies, but they did not respond.

Aron strolled through the flock toward the men. Each harpy bowed his head and moved aside to give him a wide berth, treating him with the respect of a golden. Like Seajay, their misgivings about Aron’s ability to rule were gone. Aron approached Ted and Mark as other men left their crafts and joined them.

“Where’re the hunters, Aron?” Ted asked again.

Aron turned to the western jungle. “Follow the smoke trails that rise from the trees. You shall find their bodies.”

“My God,” said Ted. “Did you kill all of them?”

“Two small hovers and a large escaped across the river. As promised to Waters, we did not pursue them. The rest fell under our wings and received the same mercy shown to us.”

Mark massaged his bearded chin. “Twenty-something hovers holding three to five men. That’s pretty damn impressive for alleged animals.”

The men muttered to one another in disbelief. The full gravity of Mark’s words hit them that this was no minor skirmish with a few hunters, but a war between the species, and the once

timid harpies had demonstrated their intent to win.

Feeling the human disquiet, Aron lifted his wings and glared at them, questioning the Outback men's allegiance to the harpies.

"Lower the limbs," Mark said to Aron. "They're with you, just a little surprised at the numbers." He turned to the men. "If any enemy came to take your home and kill your family, you'd do the same as the harpies." He took Aron's hand and held it above their heads as a symbol of triumph. "To our friends, the harpies and their great victory," he shouted. The men clapped and cheered.

Aron's fear of reprisal abated. He saw that humans did not share the same loyal brotherhood as harpies. They were surprised but lacked feeling for the dead hunters. He pulled free of Mark's grasp. "We do not rejoice in these deaths," he said quietly. "Our choices were none."

"Did you lose any harpies?" Ted asked.

Aron held up seven fingers. "Two died, and the rest captured. Our dead stay where they fall. Harpies take comfort that our flesh gives life to others, but I know the human need to bury their lost ones. If the dirt heals the sorrow, we shall help you gather the bodies."

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In the afternoon, the Outback men and harpies collected the hunters' remains and placed them in the small hovercrafts bound

for Terrance. Ted sat in his hover and turned on his com to notify Governor Waters of the human disaster. “It’s unbelievable, Governor. The harpies killed every hunter caught in the Outback. So far, we’ve counted eighty bodies.”

“Eighty,” Waters said with surprise. “I knew Aron’s revenge would be harsh, but I had no idea. Damn those senators; I warned them that this could happen.”

“Aron kept his word. His flock didn’t pursue the men who made it back across the river. Maybe this will put an end to the harpy hunting.”

“Possibly, but it probably just delays it,” Waters said. “If the Supreme Court rules in the senators’ favor, and the court likely will, then it’s only a matter of time before the harpies are exterminated. The senators could make the Outback into a big hunting preserve, and despite the danger, men will pay to bring down a rare game animal. There aren’t enough harpies to endure an endless onslaught. I’ll order some freighters to Terrance to pick up the dead. I’m not sure how the Dora people will react to this calamity. It could go either way.”

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As evening approached, the hunters’ remains were unloaded at the Terrance airport. The harpies scattered to find their soft nests. The whole planet did not have enough moss to comfort them that night.

Aron stood at the port and watched the men line up the bodies and cover them with blankets. Long rows of corpses awaited the government freighters.

Mark walked up to Aron and placed a consoling hand on his shoulder. "I've seen my share of war and am more hardened to this scene," he said, gazing at the covered corpses. "Aron, you had to stop them. Running and hiding wasn't an option. It would've only invited more hunters here. Now they'll think twice about hunting harpies."

"Reason says my decision was right, but my flock is in deep mourning. We are peaceful tree dwellers that eat fruit. We do not kill one another or animals. Our nature has been changed for the worst. The hunters lost their lives, but we have lost our honor."

"War changes people. I've known soldiers who suffered like your harpies, but you've sent a clear message, and the danger is over. The men are calling their wives and arranging for them to come home. The fruit factory must be built before the harvest. It's time to move on."

"Is the danger really over? I think not. The humans can return to their old lives, but we remain hunted and must be cautious. The senators shall find another way to destroy us."

"I hope you're wrong for a change," Mark said. "I'll stay and guard the bodies from wild animals until the freighters get here."

"I also stay and wait the return of two harpies. I sent them across the river to follow the hunters who escaped. I must know

the place where our enemy gathers and if my captured harpies can be saved.”

“Good idea, see what we’re up against in case the sons of bitches come back. We might have a long night ahead of us.” He walked to an outside bench and sat down. Aron curled up on the ground near Mark’s legs. The man gently patted Aron’s back. “It’s going to be all right, my friend.”

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As the hunters’ freighter traveled east, Hank glanced down at the five pitiful harpies that his men had caught in the Outback. They bunched together in the cage corner under the large wings of the alpha male. “So you timid beasts can fight,” he mumbled, largely to himself. He knew better than to go back for his men. If any had survived the crash, the harpies had probably killed them.

The pilot called from the cockpit to him. “I picked up two of your small hovers on radar. They must’ve made it across the river. They’re trailing us.”

“Just two,” Hank said and dropped into a seat. He stared dismally at the empty cages. He had heard that the harpies might attack, but he had hunted too many in the past to believe it. Now he faced the staggering truth.

The freighter reached Senator Blackwell’s warehouse and landed in the grassy meadow beside a small spaceship that would transfer the harpies to a star cruiser at Oden Space Port. Through

the window, Hank spotted Senator Blackwell hurrying toward the freighter with an eager grin. Hank opened the side door and stepped out.

“I thought you’d be gone for days,” Blackwell said, beaming. “The hunting must have been good.”

Hank didn’t answer but walked to the freighter’s rear door and opened it. “Here are your harpies, Senator,” he said with disgust.

Blackwell’s grin disappeared with the sight of the empty cages. He stepped inside and saw the harpies in the forward cage. “Five? That’s all you caught?” He whirled around. “Are there more in the small hovers?”

“Hardly, since your small hovers are gone.”

“What the devil do you mean, gone?”

“Gone, fucking destroyed, along with the men in them,” Hank retorted. “The governor said in the press that the harpies would fight back, but instead I listened to you, a goddamn politician.”

Blackwell’s eyes grew big, and he backed away from Hank. “What happened?” he asked, quieter.

“We caught these five, and then the harpies ambushed us. There must’ve been a couple of thousand of them. They had weapons and knew how to use them, along with knowing how to bring down a hover. I’m figuring eighty-seven of my men are laying out there dead.” The two trailing hovercrafts appeared over the jungle. “Here comes what’s left of your fleet.”

The small hovers landed near the freighter, and the men slowly crawled out. “It was a total massacre,” one man said solemnly to Hank and Blackwell. “I used binoculars and watched two hovers go down. When the survivors staggered from the wreckage, the harpies swooped down and killed them. We thought we were goners, but once we crossed the river, the harpies stopped chasing us.”

Blackwell glanced at the five caged harpies in the freighter. “I’d love to butcher those harpies right now, but they’re worth more alive. Let’s load them so my ship can rendezvous with the next Earth-bound cruiser. I need to recoup something from this disaster.”

“Yeah, let’s get this over with,” said Hank to his men. When Hank, the senator, and three men entered the freighter, the largest male rose and stepped away from the others that crouched on the floor. The handsome male dropped to his knee, tossed back his auburn locks and tilted his head back to expose his throat. He was performing the act of submission to a hunter, done in the hopes that they would slit his throat, according him a quick, honorable death.

“That big one has nerve, said Blackwell.

“Yeah, he’s a flock leader. He has attitude and tried to lure us off his boys. His light brown wings mean he’s at least thirty. I want two hundred thousand, or else I’m keeping him. And I want the money now, before they’re loaded.”

“Fine,” Blackwell said with a sour expression as he wrote

out Hank's credit voucher for the harpies. "He'll fetch more on Earth."

The men dragged each harpy out of the freighter cage with their wings flapping. They were stripped of their sashes and given drugs to keep them alive. A chain was shackled to one of their wrists, and like cattle going through a chute, they were forced into cages aboard the small spaceship, too traumatized to resist. Unlike a golden harpy, the browns lacked defiance or experience in combating men. Only the large male hissed and swatted his wings at the men. Four men were required to subdue and force him into a cage.

After the harpies were locked on board, Hank and the other men walked to the warehouse and returned with their travel bags. Blackwell looked surprised when seeing Hank's bag. "Where are you going? The hunt isn't over."

"You gotta be kidding," Hank said with disbelief. "All those men died, and you expect us to go back and catch more harpies? First off, this isn't good ol' boy hunting where you sit around the campfire sipping bourbon after bringing down frightened prey all day. Those harpies are smart and dangerous. Your lousy pay isn't worth the risk. You've got yourself a war, Senator. You need mercenaries, not game hunters."

"But I have deadlines to meet," Blackwell said anxiously. "I've invested a lot in the harpy breeding program, plus I could lose my land."

"Like I give a shit," Hank said. "By the way, we're



catching a ride on your ship to Oden. There are plenty of planets with game that don't shoot back. Good luck, Senator." He and his men boarded the small spaceship with the harpies. Beyond the warehouse, the senator stood alone in the meadow and watched his ship blast off.

On the edge of the jungle, Aron's two trusted males had seen the five harpies being transferred to the ship before it departed.

The two males returned to Terrance and reported to Aron how Seth and the others had been drugged, chained, and then placed on a metal bird that traveled to the stars.

Aron realized they spoke of the same meadow and warehouse where Shail's feather had been found. The man and his ship might have also taken the golden family. Oddly, the information was a source of wild hope. It could mean that Shail was not killed on Dora but had been loaded on a starship like the brown harpies, and the man would not bother to ship the weaker browns if the strong golden male had perished. Shail might still be alive.

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Senator Blackwell's hovercraft rose above the trees and began the trip back to his home in Hampton. He slumped with his face in his hands, recalling Shail's vow and warning. "Prepare the

graves for your hunters.” The memory came crashing back like a lightning bolt. Blackwell realized the day marked the deadliest hunt in the planet’s history.

He wearily placed a call to Senator Peterson. “It was a catastrophe,” he moaned. “Eighty-seven dead hunters and twenty-one hovers lost. The remaining hunters have quit. You laughed when I told you the golden promised to kill my hunters. It’s not a laughing matter now.”

Senator Peterson was quiet for a moment. “Eighty-seven? It’s hard to believe. Our esteemed governor made it clear he’s not calling in the Galactic Army, but with so many dead, he might change his mind. If he still refuses to bring in the army and protect Dora citizens, the Senate should start impeachment proceedings. He’s willfully disregarding people’s lives on this planet. Surely the public will back us.”

“An impeachment would take half a year, and several more months for the Galactic Army to arrive. There isn’t time,” Blackwell said. “Meanwhile, we’ll be up for reelection and a clown could run against us and win. By then, the Supreme Court will have ruled. We’ll be jobless, penniless, and landless if the harpies win in court. We can’t take that chance. The head hunter recommended mercenaries to fight this battle.”

“That’s not a bad idea. They’re cheap, and the bounty on a harpy’s wing is considerable. It will take four months to organize an army, considering star travel. They’ll arrive during the height of the wet season. When the rains quit, we could be ready. Of course,

that puts an end to your harpy breeding. They've got to be completely wiped out."

"That's okay," Blackwell said. "I need to salvage only a dozen females to make my farm work. If we lose in court, I'll put all my harpies down."

"Still think they'll make good pets?" Peterson said. "They die in captivity, and now they've proven to be dangerous."

"The hand-raised fledglings will be fine and bring a fortune," Blackwell said. "About this mercenary army, I'm not about to pay for this alone."

"I agree. To wipe out every harpy quickly, we'll need plenty of manpower. It's time the other senators pitch in and shared the expense. I'll arrange a private meeting in a few days."

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The battle of hunters and harpies was the talk of the planet and even appeared in the galactic news. People on other planets were astonished that the winged creatures had killed so many armed hunters in a single sweep. Federal officials arrived on Dora and demanded Governor Waters admit the army to subdue the harpies. Waters countered that the hunters had been warned and had willingly accepted the risk. He stood firm in his refusal to hunt down the man-killers, backed by law that the harpies were just game animals. The federal government could not compel him, especially in view of his support by the Dorian populace.

The Dorians were delighted with the harpy victory. The foreign hunters were not their friends or neighbors. They were enemies of their beautiful, beloved harpies, who had saved them from the beetle swarms. The government officials were bewildered by the residents' outpour of loyalty to the animals. Equally baffled were the Dora senators. Most of them had expected a public outcry about the slain hunters, but instead the people showed increasing support for the harpies. The protestors at the senate house doubled, and organizers started a petition to pressure the Supreme Court to rule for the harpies' rights and the return of their land.

International reporters arrived in Hampton to cover the story of the little jungle planet and its rare species of half-human, half-bird creatures that stood alone and had defied the powerful human machine that conquered all creatures on all planets.

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One evening, the twenty senators met at Senator Peterson's home. "This is turning into a nightmare," one senator voiced.

"Yes, we stand to lose everything—even be run off the planet," exclaimed another.

Peterson stood up. "Calm down, gentlemen," he said. "This is only temporary. It can be turned in our favor. I've issued a press release to all the papers. It states that only two harpies accidentally died when they were stunned and fell into the trees. The eighty-seven men entered the Outback with only stun guns and cages.

Their intent was to catch harpies and place them in a zoo, so the beautiful species could be preserved. Our governor has not placed the harpies under the endangered species law. Unfortunately the campaign to save harpies failed, but after all, the harpy is an ignorant, wild animal.”

One senator laughed. “Do you really believe the public will buy that bull? Governor Waters already explained that listing them as endangered would hurt the harpies in court. It would be a legal admission that they’re animals.”

“Waters has his side, and we have ours,” Peterson commented with a smile. “In another month it won’t matter. The story will die, the press will leave, and the Dorians will forget about the harpies. In the meantime, we need to take action to get rid of these damn creatures.” He went on to explain his and Blackwell’s plan to hire a mercenary army.

“I’ll be broke,” one senator lamented. “An army with weapons and hovers will cost a fortune. Even these court costs are adding up.”

Peterson said, “Right now, we’re land rich. I say we offer the mercenaries parcels of Outback land in exchange for their service, plus they can sell the wings for additional pay. If they fail to rid the west of harpies, they lose and it costs us nothing. It will be an incentive to exterminate harpies, and it benefits us. The land will be colonized. The colonists will have to buy food, clothing, and materials from our stores and towns. When the fighting is over, we’ll have a built-in economy.”

“What about the Terrance people and others in the Outback communities?” asked a senator. “We still have to deal with them.”

“That’s the true beauty of this plan,” Peterson said. “We simply sign their land deeds over to the mercenaries. The Outback people won’t have a legal leg to stand on. It’s like killing two birds with one stone. A mercenary army will rid us of harpies *and* homesteaders and make our land profitable.”

The senators discussed risk, costs, and chances of failure, but in the end agreed with the plan.

The following morning, Peterson met with Blackwell. “I’ve advertised on the universal web for mercenaries, and the response has been tremendous,” Peterson said. “They’re jumping at the opportunity to own a little piece of paradise. After the rains, we’ll have an invincible army at our disposal.” The short, stubby Blackwell grinned and lit a cigar.

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Mrs. Roth sat in her favorite living room chair and watched the male harpy wrestle with his little son on the carpet. The male nuzzled his fledgling’s stomach as the baby tugged on his father’s long hair. When the baby grew tired, his father gently licked him until he was asleep, and then the male curled around him and caught a quick nap.

Mrs. Roth sighed happily. “He certainly is a devoted father.”

Racheal was putting a loose fitting dress over the female harpy's head. She smiled at the male. "He's devoted to all of us."

Mrs. Roth gave the harpies the run of her entire suite. She was fond of the pretty female and her darling playful baby that kept her constantly entertained. Her favorite, though, was the fearless, handsome male. Like Racheal, she had grown to love him. She enjoyed when he stood his ground and browbeat Ralph or any man who entered her cabin. Nothing intimidated him, much like her. The mysterious harpies behaved like animals, yet she saw glimpses of their intelligence and scrutinized them to determine if they truly were animals.

In the tranquil cabin, and surrounded by adoring humans, Shail's body and tormented mind quickly healed. He relished his life with his extended family, yet he held to the commitment to end his life rather than face the cages on Earth.

Kari, however, grew increasingly unhappy with his decision. She was part-human and lacked the fatalistic harpy blood. She still hoped that they could survive Earth and eventually gain their freedom. She regretted her promise to be silent and was renegeing on their suicide pack.

One quiet evening in the bedroom, their argument came to a head and Shail put his foot down. *"I should live so men make slaves of my sons?"* Shail said. *"My death delays the senator's plan and benefits you and Will. I hold you not to our death promise. You are strong with the optimism and can survive*

*captivity. I cannot and shall not.”*

*“The captivity I can survive, but not your death. Please, Shail, let me speak to Mrs. Roth and Racheal. They are our friends and love us. Mrs. Roth is a powerful woman. She will protect us if she knows the truth.”*

*“The truth that we are not ignorant animals, but her equals who have deceived her?” Shail cupped her cheek with his hand. “Kari, you must trust me. I have sensed the old woman’s mind. If you speak, she shall feel betrayed and no longer love us. Better she believes we are innocent and need her protection.”*

*“But what about Racheal? She will help us.”*

*“In trying to help us, she shall tell the captain and others that we speak and are mortals. The senator threatened the death of our son if we talk. I shall not risk Will’s life. The Earth court proclaimed we are animals. The human papers say we belong to the senator. Neither of these women can change those facts. To use your voice is too dangerous.”*

*“I will not speak, but before long you will.”*

Shail tilted his head, puzzled.

The following morning, there was a knock on the cabin door. Shail was stretched out on the floor with Will, nibbling on a bowl of fruit. He rose as Ralph left his desk to answer the door. “Come in, Captain.”

Mrs. Roth sat at a table and sipped her coffee. Racheal and Kari were in the bedroom but came into living room after hearing the knock.



Shail nudged Will with his foot. “*Go to your mother.*” Sensing the urgency in his father’s telepathic voice, Will sprang up and raced into Kari’s arms.

“*Up,*” he pleaded, using the silent harpy language. Though he was only months old, his mind and body were equivalent to a two-year old human baby. His tiny, meek voice entered his parents’ minds as he conveyed his needs to eat or be held. Of course, the humans were not aware of the mental exchanges. Kari picked him up as he stared at the strange man in white clothing.

Shail’s sniffled, and his family retreated into the bedroom. He stepped in front of the doorway to guard them. He raised his head, tossed his locks, and seethed at the man, warning him away. Shail detected no evil in the captain, but he was distrustful of strangers, especially one who commanded the giant star vehicle.

Racheal saw his antagonistic gestures and moved to his side. She clasped the fancy leash he still wore. She tugged on the leash and whispered, “This is not the time to act out.”

“Captain, what a nice surprise,” said Mrs. Roth. “Have a seat. Would you like some coffee?”

“No, thank you.” The captain’s fretful eyes stayed fixed on Shail, regarding him as though he were a vicious dog. He cautiously joined Mrs. Roth at the table. “He’s not going to attack me, is he?”

“Of course not,” Mrs. Roth said with a chuckle. “He’s just a little high strung and leery of new people.” She turned to Shail and snapped, “Stop that hissing and hair tossing. You have the

poor captain squirming.”

Shail lowered his head and fell quiet. Racheal petted him with approval.

“See? He’s very obedient.”

“He does seem to listen to you,” said the captain. “I stopped by because I’m worried about your safety, housing these creatures in your cabin. I received this Dora article and thought you should be made aware.” He gave the communiqué to Mrs. Roth. “A few days ago, harpies killed eighty-something hunters on Dora.”

As Mrs. Roth read the article, Shail looked up with interest.

“Those were wild harpies, and those hunters invaded their home. Further, this male is tame and would never harm us. He’s staying with me,” Mrs. Roth said, dismissing the captain’s concerns. “But now that you’re here, I’d like the name of the Washington Zoo director. I’m interested in purchasing these harpies. Racheal and I are attached to them and could give them a good home.”

“Really, Auntie?” Racheal said, grinning. “You’re going to buy them?”

“I’d like to find out if it’s possible. The thought of them caged in a zoo is upsetting.”

“These harpies would be lucky with you as their owner,” the captain said. “I’ll have my clerk get you the information. I must tell you I saw the harpies’ insurance policy. They’re insured for six million credits. Apparently, these blonds are very rare. The animal

exporter, Jack Jones, has been concerned about their care and complains that they should be returned to him. There wasn't enough evidence to link him to the prostitute and drugs. And we're a pleasure cruiser, not a police station."

"The nerve of that scoundrel," Mrs. Roth said. "This male nearly died under his care. You tell Mr. Jones I'll give him a reason to be concerned if he persists. I'll have his animal export license pulled, and he could face animal cruelty charges when we reach Earth."

"I'm sure that will dissuade Mr. Jones, and as captain, I'll make sure the harpies stay with you until the end of our voyage." His smile covered his wish that this old battleaxe and the winged varmints were off his ship.

Shail detected his hostility and hissed. Racheal pulled on his leash to quiet him, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"Yes. Well, I must return to the bridge," said the captain nervously. "I hope you're successful in their purchase." He warily rose from his seat and left the suite.

When the captain had gone, Racheal rushed to her aunt. "Auntie, you've made me so happy. I've been dreading the end of this voyage and losing the harpies."

"Don't get your hopes up, dear. I said I'd find out if it was possible to buy them, but six million? I never thought I'd spend that much on a pet." She looked Shail. "Come here, you little stinker." He stepped to her and dropped to his knees so her old hands could massage his neck. "You and I both know that

patronizing captain doesn't care for us. You are worth having."

Shail left the women and entered the bedroom. "*I have heard good news,*" he said to Kari. "*My harpies killed many hunters, proof Aron leads the flock well. Also, Mrs. Roth wishes to buy us and spare us from the zoo.*"

*"This is wonderful, Shail. Will you speak to her now and explain everything? Surely she'll grant our freedom and return us to Dora once she learns you're the harpy ruler."*

*"If she becomes my true master, I shall break the vow of silence."*

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After ten hours, Ralph finally established a com call from the ship to Earth. Late at night, he woke Mrs. Roth and said that the zoo director was on the com. She threw on a robe, fluffed her hair, and sat down at the desk. On the screen was a thin man in his fifties.

"Mrs. Roth, it's a pleasure to meet you," said Dr. Green, director of the Washington, D.C., Zoo. "I've always admired your activism."

"Do you know why I've contacted you?"

"Yes, the captain informed me you're caring for our harpies. I want to thank you."

"Yes, but did he tell you why they're in my care? Your animal handler nearly starved the male to death, and then gave him

addicting drugs and used him like a sex slave.”

“I heard about that deplorable incident. Mr. Jones will no longer handle the precious creatures when they arrive, I assure you.”

“I watched the male suffer unmercifully with withdrawal,” said Mrs. Roth. “Given you and Senator Blackwell are his owners, responsible for his well-being, pardon me if I’m not feeling very assured. I’d like to purchase the harpies. Then they’re guaranteed of having a good home.”

“Mrs. Roth, I’m afraid that’s not possible. Here at the zoo, we specialize in saving endangered species from around the galaxy. Those golden harpies are the last breeding pair. Even on Dora, there are none left in their jungle. Because the male’s yellow wings are extremely valuable and considered a prized trophy, the golden harpies have been hunted to the brink of extinction. Senator Blackwell is a great admirer of harpies and an advocate for reviving the magnificent golden bloodline. That’s why he captured and shipped them to us. To sell them as pets would be criminal and a great loss to the animal world. I can tell you the senator wouldn’t sell them at any price.”

“He has a price. They’re insured for six million credits,” Mrs. Roth said. “Inform him I’ll give him seven.”

“Mrs. Roth, let me explain. We plan to clone the harpies and artificially breed the male to other female harpies to diversify the line. It’s the fastest and most productive way to preserve a species. The profits from the fledglings would be in the billions.

Once we secure the male's sperm and female's eggs, I'm sure the senator would sell you their fledgling. You'd be the first to own a pet harpy."

Mrs. Roth frowned. "I don't want to separate the baby from his parents, and I'm appalled you'd consider it."

"Even a puppy leaves its mother for a new master."

"You obviously know nothing about harpies," she said, trying to suppress her anger. "They're extremely intelligent and very devoted to one another. They're nothing like a dog. Do you plan to house them in a kennel as well?"

"You're getting the wrong idea," Green said. "The harpies will be maintained in a large aviary, similar to their jungle, but safer, and receive the best of care. They'll live out their lives in luxury and be admired by the public. This is the best thing that can happen to them."

Mrs. Roth glanced at the time, knowing space calls had limited connections. "So you say. I'll be visiting your zoo to check on them." The call ended before the director could respond.

Mrs. Roth wearily rubbed her forehead, considering Racheal would be terribly disappointed. She walked through dimly lit cabin that simulated nightfall and opened the door to the harpies' room. On the bed, her niece and the little female slept under the male's wings. The fledgling, as Dr. Green had called him, snoozed against the male's back. His tiny body was curled up and covered with his creamy yellow wings, mimicking the way his father slept. Although she had entered the room quietly, the male

lifted his head and gazed at her.

She smiled sadly and whispered, “You’re such a good boy, guarding your family.” She brushed the blond hair from his bright eyes. “I know you’re not an animal, but I can’t change things. I can’t keep you, Beauty.” She glanced at Racheal. The dumpy insecure girl of a few months before had been replaced by a poised, beautiful woman. “She’ll miss you, and so will I.”

The harpy breathed deeply and then nuzzled Mrs. Roth’s hand. She left the room with no doubt that he had understood every word.

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The following morning in the ship cabin, Shail rested on the floor, holding his chin as Mrs. Roth told Racheal the bad news. To soften the blow, the old woman explained that their harpies were the last pair of goldens, and the zoo breeding was necessary to save the species. They would be well cared for, in a large aviary.

“It’s not right,” Racheal blubbered. “They don’t need to be caged to reproduce. They have a son and will have more.”

Shail suddenly sensed something about his human mate that he had missed. He looked to Kari, and she raised an eyebrow. She had known all along. He sprang to his feet, arched his wings, and sniffled at Racheal.

“What has gotten into him?” asked the startled Mrs. Roth. “Did something spook him?”

Shail seized Racheal's hand and pulled her toward their bedroom.

"No, Beauty," Racheal said, resisting him. "I'm talking to my aunt now."

Shail tossed his hair and hissed at his disobedient mate, for the first time showing aggression toward the women.

"Racheal, be careful. He's not himself," said Mrs. Roth. "Where is Ralph when I need him?"

Racheal glared at Shail. "All right, I'll go with you, but stop your nastiness. You're scaring my aunt." She let him draw her into the bedroom. "Now what's the problem? Do you want a shower? She entered the bathroom and turned on the water.

Shail shut the door behind them and touched the Off button.

Racheal stared at him, mystified. "How did you know to do that?"

Shail clasped her shoulders and breathed deeply. "I am more than you believed. My name is Shail," he said quietly.

Racheal's eyes grew wide. "You can talk."

"Yes, I chose not to speak before, because silence is safer when caught, but now my words must come. You carry my offspring."

She nodded. "I, I just learned this morning."

There was a knock at the door. "Racheal?" said her aunt. "Are you all right?"

"Do not tell her of me," Shail whispered.



Racheal gathered her wits. "I'm fine. He just wanted a shower."

"Well, he'd better stop that aggressive behavior, or he'll find himself back in a cage." Her grumbling voice receded into the living room. "I won't have him acting like a mad cat."

"I knew you were intelligent," said Racheal happily. "But how did you know I was pregnant?"

"Your thoughts tell," Shail said. "It is how harpies relate to one another. The drugs harmed my instincts, but my harpy mate, Kari, detected your offspring. This is why she brought you into our nest."

"When you were sick, I missed my period," she mumbled. "But I thought the change in diet..." She looked up, beaming at him. "I can't believe it, Shail. Your voice is so soft, and you speak English so well." Her grin faded. "I must tell my aunt that you can talk. It proves you're no animal and don't belong in a zoo."

"No. To tell others would not save me. Your courts know we mimic the human sound, yet judge us as animals. Senator Blackwell has threatened to kill my son if I speak and ask for help."

"Monster!" She cursed. "I won't tell anyone. I promise, Shail. But there has to be some way to free you."

Shail placed his hand on the side of her face. "There is, but it shall be hard. I want you to leave me, knowing we may never meet again."

Racheal's face froze with horror. "I can't leave you."

You're my family. I—I could visit you at the zoo with our baby until I figure a way to get you out.”

“I do not wish to see my fledgling through cage bars, and this treeless Earth is no place for our young. You learned I am the only remaining yellow-winged male, but I am more. I am the ruler of the harpies. If my family does not survive captivity, you hold the last of my kind. I want you to go to my jungle and raise our fledgling among the flocks so there is another golden ruler some day.”

“You said it was hard.” She hugged and held him for a long time. “I’m not afraid to go to Dora and raise our baby alone. But not seeing you again...that’s the unbearable part.”

“If you wish to prove your love for me, this is the way. The governor of Dora is my friend. Tell him I still live, but trust no other. My harpies are at war with the senators, which is why Senator Blackwell captured us. If not for his greed of my offspring, I would be dead, but his plans might have changed with the hunters’ deaths.”

“If you’re in danger, I can’t go to Dora.”

“You must. You have already helped me, Racheal. This rare gift, a fledgling created from the bonding of a woman and harpy, has filled my heart with hope that all is possible. You take with you part of me and a symbol of our love. My fledgling shall heal your loss.”

Racheal swallowed hard as the revelation of the short conversation sank in. “You cared about me when no man would,

and this gave me the confidence to do anything. I love you so much it hurts, but I'll do as you ask and go." She rose up on her tippy toes, and they kissed.

"Thank you, Racheal," he whispered. He opened the door, and they went back to the living room. Rusty had arrived for his afternoon visit and was reading to Kari, who sat in a large chair with her legs tucked under her. Mrs. Roth encouraged Will to flap his little wings and jump off her footstool, while Ralph worked on correspondence at the desk. His eyes shifted toward Shail before Ralph returned to his work. Shail gazed at the humans who loved him. He brooded on the thought that nothing lasted.

He gripped Racheal's hand and sensed she was feeling the same sadness. In a few more weeks, everyone in the room would not be in her life.

"Racheal, I do have some good news," Mrs. Roth said. "Ralph discovered that a man I chaired a charity with is on the zoo board. Unfortunately, I'll only be home for a few weeks, but I could arrange some private visits for you and the harpies. You can stay in my home, and the zoo is close."

"No, Auntie, I'm not getting off the ship when we reach Earth. I don't want to see the harpies in a cage. I'm taking the return flight to Dora and have decided to live there." Everyone in the room turned to stare at her.

"That's ridiculous," Mrs. Roth blurted. "You've never traveled alone, and Dora is an obsolete jungle planet that's barely civilized. It's no place for a young lady with your breeding."

Racheal walked over to her concerned aunt. Kneeling in front of her, she took her hand. "It's true. I never had the courage to do such a thing before." She glanced at Shail. "But after being with him, I feel like I can take on anything. I'm twenty-seven years old, and it's time I spread my wings. I'm going to Shail's home and live with his harpies."

"Shail? Who the heck is Shail?" her aunt asked.

"A prostitute named him Beauty. While it's truly descriptive, Shail is more dignified."

Rusty stood up. "Don't worry, Mrs. Roth. Racheal will have me for company on the ship, and if she wants, I also have some vacation time coming. I'll go with her on the shuttle to Dora. I'd love to see the wildlife on the harpies' planet."

"That would be great, Rusty," Racheal said, oblivious to the fact that the red-headed man had grown fond of her.

Mrs. Roth's eyes grew moist. "Oh, Racheal, I'm getting so old. I may never see you again."

Racheal hugged her. "Someday you'll understand why I'm doing this. Just promise me that you'll check on Shail and his family, make sure they're being treated right. I do love them and you so much."

Kari stepped to Shail and relayed, "*You chose to send her away with her unborn fledgling.*"

"*Yes. To remain, she might help us on Earth, but better her fledgling is raised in our jungle and the flock has another ruler.*"

Kari's sad eyes reflected her understanding. He did not

believe they would ever return to Dora.

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Dr. Green sat impatiently at his desk. His call finally went through to Senator Blackwell on Dora. “Senator, I had a com call two days ago about your golden harpies.”

“Did they survive the journey?” Blackwell asked.

“Apparently, they’re fine and living in the best cabin suite on the star cruiser.”

“How did Jack Jones manage that?”

“Jones didn’t,” Green grumbled. “I received a call from a Mrs. Roth, who has the suite. Your idiot, Jones, made a mess of things. He and a prostitute drugged the stud and then forced him to breed with the women passengers to make a few credits. They were busted, and the male nearly died from an overdose. Mrs. Roth has the whole harpy family. That old woman is big trouble. She’s rich, high in society, and politically connected. She wanted to buy the harpies, and I turned her down. Now she wants to visit them at my zoo.”

Blackwell sneered at the screen. “I have my own harpy problems, Green. Smooth things over with this bitch until you can get the male’s sperm and DNA. Then put him down. His noble little act influences men, and his looks can seduce any woman. I can’t afford anyone, including Roth, helping him return to Dora. Those wild harpies are causing enough grief without adding that

blond to the mix.”

“Yes, the story about Dora’s harpy problem made news on Earth,” Green said. “I’m having my own doubts about taking these creatures. You want me to spend time and money on them and then fight bad publicity, convincing customers that they’re not man-killers, but desirable pets. This could flop.”

“Damn it, Green, those were wild harpies, being led by a crazed flock leader.” Blackwell leaned back in his chair and said calmer, “By nature, harpies are gentle. I guarantee these hand-raised fledglings will make excellent pets. When you see that golden male, you’ll realize the potential. He’s gorgeous, and the demand for his sons will be tremendous.”

“I suppose,” Green said, “but I’m in the business of raising wild animals. A bottle-fed lion cub makes a cute pet until it matures and eats its owner. Some animals can’t be domesticated.”

“Well, apparently a little old lady has domesticated that murderous golden male.” Blackwell smirked. “Fine, think of them as expensive lions. If they fail as pets, they can be re-marketed as game animals. Hunters will pay a fortune for a harpy trophy. You’re in a win-win situation. Concerning Jones, he’s the most qualified person to handle the stud. I can’t contact him, since a com call will leave a trail to that ship, but tell him to kill the male and make it look like an accident. I’ll cut you and Jones in on the insurance claim.”

“That would be nice,” Green said, “but don’t count on the insurance. The data confirm that harpies are fragile and prone to

shock and heart failure. Your stud could die when it's given its all at the breeding machine."

"He'll survive," Blackwell said. "I'm only shipping five brown males, because of the hunting disaster. Tell Jones not to sell them. I'll make more if they're used for prostitution in the clubs."

Green nodded, and both signed off.

## Chapter Ten

Most passengers on the ship were enthusiastic at the approach of Earth, which was not the case in the Roth suite. Shail and Kari prepared for lasting goodbyes with the humans when the voyage ended.

Shail grew increasingly nervous and jumped up, startled with every knock at the door. One of those knocks would be Jack's. The captain's orders, Mrs. Roth's influence, Rusty's devotion, and Ralph's admiration, none of it mattered. No one could step in and stop Jack from taking the harpies. Shail was on his own to defend his family.

"He seems to know he's going soon," Mrs. Roth said to Racheal. "This is so upsetting, it's making me ill. My lawyers have exhausted every legal option for me to keep the harpies, but my hands are tied. Senator Blackwell's ownership papers are binding, and he controls their future."

The following day, Shail lay in a soft tangle of sheets and lifted his head from his feathers to witness a true morning filter through the port window. He sniffled at a dawn that had been lost to him. The piercing rays from Earth's sun flooded the cabin. He reminisced how his flock once revered him as the Prince of Dawn, his bright leadership sparing them from the dark human oppression. He was no prince now, but a caught thing, soon to experience a new jail and jailor.

Shail rose carefully, drew his wings from the sleeping



females and his son, and walked through the bedroom toward the port window. He stared at the brownish-gray planet. Surprisingly, Earth was similar to his home. Its waters, blue as his eyes, covered a large portion of the sphere, much like Dora's green ocean. He watched as the giant ship slipped into an orbit. Kari woke and moved to his side.

*"It does not seem bad from here,"* he relayed.

She leaned her head against his arm. "Please, don't leave me, Shail," she whispered.

He didn't answer, but sighed with his coming decision, to choose death and put an end to the senator's breeding plans or choose life and be with Kari and Will but face the misery of captivity.

A light tug on his flight feathers conveyed that Will was at his feet. He reached down and picked up his son so he could see out the window. Will pointed toward the planet and communicated, "*Ball.*" Mrs. Roth had provided his little fledgling with numerous human toys.

*"Yes, a big ball,"* Shail relayed. His eyes watered as he clutched and nuzzled his innocent son, who was unaware of what the ball meant. After the ship had orbited the planet, Racheal joined her harpy family in a quiet moment. They heard the engines die as the thrusters engaged, and then felt a slight bump as the ship docked at the giant spaceport, located between Earth and its moon. An endless parade of shuttles and small spacecraft came and went. Before long, one would come for the harpies.

“There you are,” Mrs. Roth said, walking into the room. “Ralph personally went down to the kitchen and brought up breakfast. He didn’t want the waiter to knock and upset Shail.” She bit her lip to fight the tears. “That silly big man was crying when he arranged their fruit.” The dignified old woman wiped her moist eyes and cleared her throat. “Well, come on. Let’s all have a nice breakfast together.”

Shail picked at the fruit, not having an appetite. Mrs. Roth sipped her coffee in silence. Racheal did not eat and went from Shail to Kari to Will to her aunt. Ralph had finished packing Mrs. Roth’s items and sat in a large chair. Shail sensed all the grieving hearts in the room, but oddly his instincts drew him to Ralph. For the first time, he nestled on the floor near the man and allowed him to stroke his head. Ralph’s touch transmitted the deep love he felt for Shail.

A sharp rap at the door caused Shail to spring to his feet with raised wings.

“This is it,” Ralph said and slowly rose. He opened the door. Jack stood on the threshold, and behind him were four men in green uniforms.

“I’m here for my harpies,” Jack announced. “These men are from the Washington Zoo and are here to help me subdue them.” He boldly stepped into the cabin with a tranquilizer gun in hand as Shail arched his wings and seethed a low hiss. “There he is,” he said to the men. He raised his weapon, but before he could take aim and fire, Shail flew into him and hit him in the chest with

the full force of a shoulder and wing. Jack was hurled backwards and crashed into a small table and the wall. Shail rolled to his feet and leaped on the stunned man's back, positioning his arms so he could snap Jack's neck.

The zoo employees froze, astonished by Shail's swift and deadly attack. After a few moments, they recovered and rushed to Jack's aid. Several grabbed Shail's wings and pulled him off the hunter, but with his furiously flapping wings, he broke free of their hold. He fluttered in place, suspended a few feet above the floor. The strong gusts created from his beating wings knocked over everything that wasn't fastened down and sent papers into the air. The confined cabin appeared to be in the throes of a tornado. Like an eagle with lethal talons, Shail turned his wrath on the men.

The four men were in a blur of yellow feathers that held striking wings, fists, and feet. Two men went down immediately from powerful kicks, a harpy's main clout in a fight. The other two backed off after being hammered with wing whacks and punches they never saw coming. Dazed and hurting from Shail's fluttering six-limbed body, the men were forced to retreat. They retreated, bloody and bruised, and huddled in the doorway. Shail lit on the back of a couch and seethed a warning.

Shail heard a pop and felt a sting hit his back through the feathers. He whipped around and saw Jack on the floor with the weapon pressed to his shoulder. The hunter's smirk of conquest infuriated Shail. He dove off his perch and landed on Jack, determined to throttle the life out of him. The zoo men used the

distraction and jumped Shail. They wrestled with his wings and limbs as he squirmed under their crushing weight.

“Hold him down!” one man shouted.

“Damn! He bit me,” another cursed. Their voices were charged with exasperation from the fight. After Shail was pinned to the floor and totally helpless, Jack pulled out his ropes to tie his limbs.

“Get off him!” Racheal screamed. “You’re hurting him.”

“Hurt him?” said one man sarcastically while wiping his bloody nose.

“You heard the lady,” Ralph said and leaped to Shail’s defense. He knocked the men off Shail, but focused on Jack. The giant black man snatched Jack up by the neck and slammed him against a wall. Jack’s eyes bulged and his feet dangled as Ralph choked him with one hand. “You harm this harpy again, and I’ll find and kill you.”

Gasping, Jack managed to utter, “I won’t.”

Ralph released him. Jack shrank to the floor, coughing. Ralph turned his six-foot-five brawny frame to the others. Intimidated, the men backed away.

Shail managed to sit up, but he felt the doping effects of the drug. His head spun with dizziness, and his limbs were wobbly. He tried to shake off the feeling but soon collapsed. He trembled with fright and gazed up at Ralph for help.

“Goddamn them,” Ralph muttered and bent down to Shail as he feebly fluttered his wings and floundered under the drug’s

hold. “Easy, Shail. Rest easy,” he said and stroked his head to console him. Shail grasped the man’s large hand and squeezed a thank you. Ralph sighed. “I wish I could do more for you, but the fight is over now.”

Shail glanced at the men and knew the fight was far from over.

Racheal knelt down and rested Shail’s head in her lap. “Is he all right? Is he hurt, Ralph?”

Ralph glanced at the battered men and huffed. “He’s in better shape than them. He’s just scared.”

“I love you, Shail,” Racheal said with a whimper.

Shail felt her wet lips on his mouth as he fought to stay awake.

A skinny, well-dressed man stepped into the cabin. “If I hadn’t witnessed this altercation, I never would have believed that this slight creature could be so dangerous.” He looked down at Shail. “A few more minutes, and he’ll be unconscious. Then we move him.”

Kari had watched her willowy husband fend off five men, but her mate was out cold and she was on her own. She clutched Will, backed defensively into a corner, and braced to resist them.

Jack coughed and slowly stood. He nodded at Kari. “That’s the female, Mr. Green,” he said in a raspy voice. “She resembles a harmless little woman, but that harpy bitch is as vicious as her mate. Given a chance, she’ll claw the hell out of you.”

“I think my men can handle her,” said Green. Three of the men moved toward Kari, but Mrs. Roth brought the action to a close. She had stood in her bedroom threshold and watched Shail combat the men. She stepped into the living room, ready for battle.

“Dr. Green,” she roared. “Is this how you intend to treat the harpies, bully them into submission?”

Green whirled around. “Mrs. Roth, I apologize for this fiasco,” he stammered, “but I had no idea this creature would put up such a fight.” He surveyed the demolished room. “The zoo will gladly pay for the damages.”

“I don’t give a damn about the damages. I’m appalled by your men’s brute force.”

“Mrs. Roth, please, I’m equally shocked,” Green said. “My staff and I were misled. We planned to tranquilize the harpy and let him quietly fall asleep. We’re professionals and take pride in carefully handling wild animals. All documented Web information states that harpies are gentle. We never expected him to attack.”

“You should have expected it,” she ranted. “Your men barged into my suite unannounced and threatened him. Any male worth his salt would defend his family.”

“Yes, yes, you’re so right,” he said. “This was handled badly. I don’t want the harpies harmed any more than you do. I assure you this won’t happen again.”

“I’m learning your assurances mean nothing.” Mrs. Roth said, her glaring eyes fixed on Green. “So let me assure you, if

these harpies are mistreated at your zoo, you'll be dealing with me, and Dr. Green, I'm far more trouble than this harpy."

Jack broke in. "You want me to also tranquilize the female, so there's no trouble?"

"She doesn't need a tranquilizer," Rusty said as he entered the cabin. He stopped beside Racheal and Ralph and knelt over Shail. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah, just knocked out from the drugs," Ralph said. "But Rusty, you should have seen this little badass. He whipped the shit out of Jack and those guys."

Rusty looked around at the disheveled suite and the bloody, puffy faces of the men. "Apparently it was a heck of a fight, but I'm not surprised. This harpy is tough." He rose and walked to Kari, who crouched in a corner. "Come to me, girl. We don't want any more trouble."

Kari rushed into Rusty's gentle arms, grateful not to face the drugs and men. He slipped a thin lead loosely around her wrist. She could easily have pulled free of it, but where would she go? Aware of Shail's self-destructive state of mind, she did not want to be far from him. She followed Rusty to Green.

"I'm the animal handler in cargo," Rusty said. "If you'd notified me when you came aboard, I could've brought the harpies to your shuttle without stress or a fight. Plus you took a risk when the male was tranquilized. Harpies are prone to heart attacks."

Green ignored the redhead's lecture and focused on Kari and Will. He bent down and ran his hand over Shail's soft wing. "I

was told they were gorgeous but had no idea.” He looked up at Rusty. “You tamed him to behave like the female?”

“He’s not tamable,” Rusty said. “He behaves because he’s treated with respect, and we’re friends.” He turned to the zoo employees. “I hope you guys keep that in mind.”

“Well, we need to leave,” Green said, straightening. “My shuttle is in short-term docking.” He faced Mrs. Roth. “Thank you again. I promise I’ll take good care of the harpies.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” she said.

Two men moved toward Shail, and Ralph blocked them. “I carried him in here, and I’ll carry him out,” he said and tenderly picked up Shail. Kari, Rusty, and Racheal were only a step behind them, followed by Jack and the four men. All trailed Director Green down the corridor to the shuttle bay. Only Mrs. Roth stayed behind. She lowered herself into her favorite chair and picked up a small yellow feather from the floor. Holding it to her face, she cried.

As they walked, Racheal asked Kari, “Can I hold Will just one last time?” Will eagerly hopped into the young woman’s arms and licked the tears from her cheeks. Her grief clearly confused his budding instincts.

The group walked down the virtually empty corridors, since most passengers had left the enormous starship for shuttles to Earth or the entertainment within the spaceport. With Green leading the way, the group strolled down the ship’s departure ramp to the bustling port. Bars, casinos, restaurants, and shops lined the



jammed walkways. Everything illegal on Earth could be found there. Kari realized that if she was alone, she could easily slip Rusty's leash, disappear into the masses, and be free, but the thought was ridiculous. She would never abandon her family.

"Check that out!" shouted an onlooker to his friends when seeing Shail in Ralph's arms. "Jesus! It's got wings." Others in the crowds pointed and stared with open mouths and wide eyes with their first glimpse of a male harpy.

Dr. Green and the group finally reached shuttle bay and stepped aboard the private zoo craft that held two cages. "Lay him in that cage," Green said.

Ralph stepped into the cage and placed Shail on the plastic fiber that resembled straw. Before rising, he stroked Shail's blond hair and whispered, "I'm gonna really miss you."

"Put her and the baby in the other cage," Green instructed Rusty.

"You're separating them?" Rusty exclaimed.

"Only while they're in quarantine," Green said casually.

"Mister, I wasn't born yesterday," Rusty ranted, "and I've placed plenty of animals in quarantine. It ain't necessary to separate the pair. This stinks of Jack's bullshit."

"That's right." Jack stepped in. "I advised Mr. Green to separate 'em. It's safer for the female and fledgling when we deal with the male."

"You mean safer for you." Rusty sneered and turned to Green. "These harpies are social creatures and can't be caged

alone. Without his female, the male harpy will go down with depression and starve himself to death.” He glanced at Jack. “But I’m betting this clown failed to mention that.”

“Who you calling a clown?” Jack tightened his fists.

“Wanna do something about it?” Rusty challenged the taller hunter.

Ralph moved next to Rusty and smiled at Jack. “Yeah, do something, anything. I’d love to step outside with you and have a private discussion on harpy care.”

Before the dispute came to blows, Green interceded. “Gentlemen, please. If the female can keep her mate happy and healthy, then I want her with him.” Kari sensed Green’s concerns, and they were about Shail’s welfare. He was focused on keeping Mrs. Roth content.

“It’s a mistake,” Jack said, shaking his head. “Mr. Green, you saw it took five of us and tranquilizers to bring that male down. He’s a proven killer and should be handled like one. He needs to be chained inside his own cage; otherwise, your zoo boys will pay a dear price.”

Green frowned at the hunter as a sign to shut up. “Put her and the baby with the male,” he said to Rusty. “You and Mrs. Roth handled these creatures with no problems. We intend to treat them the same way. Mr. Jones is a hunter, not a caregiver.”

Rusty smiled, pleased that he had won the argument. “Come on, Kari. I’ll put you with Shail.”

Kari balked at the cage door and eyed the congenial Dr.

Green. He could deceive humans, but not a harpy. She sensed his cold, calculating nature and that she and her family were nothing but merchandise.

Rusty frowned, watching her reaction to Green. “It’ll be okay. Go to Shail.”

A young zoo handler stepped to her and Rusty. His dark wavy hair hung over a bruised cheek and darkening eye—injuries inflicted by Shail. “I’m Keith. I’ll be taking care of the harpies at the zoo. May I try?” Rusty reluctantly handed him the leash. “Come, Kari, Shail needs you.”

Kari detected the compassion in Keith. A glimmer of hope rose in her, knowing that he would be good to them. She took Will from Racheal’s arms and quietly followed the zoo handler into the cage. Released from the leash, she crouched next to Shail and licked his bleeding knuckles.

Nervously, Will nuzzled his young father and tried to wake him. When Shail did not respond, Will’s eyes watered and he looked to his mother for answers.

Kari stroked Will’s little head. *“These men made your father sleep, but he shall rise again and protect you.”* Will crept under Shail’s wing and waited.

After Keith locked the cage door, Rusty pulled him aside. “These harpies have tremendous instincts, better than a dog’s. Judging from Kari’s reaction to you, you must be an okay guy. Don’t separate them, Keith. I swear to you, the male will die.”

Keith nodded. “I’ll try, but it’s really not up to me.”

Rusty put his arm around Racheal, who openly cried, and led her off the shuttle. Ralph took a deep breath with one last look at Shail.

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The shuttle began the three-hour flight to Earth. Jack walked to the harpy cage. “Now that those meddling pains in the ass are gone, we need to get the female and baby out of there before he wakes up.”

“But you heard the ship handler,” Keith said. “They’re better off together.”

“I know more about harpies than that stubby redhead,” Jack said, “and what I say goes.”

Green took Jack by the arm. “May we speak privately?” He led Jack away from his staff to the front of the shuttle. His polite tone turned abrasive. “I don’t know what rock Senator Blackwell found you under, but let’s get things straight. The harpies are no longer in your care, if you can call it that. I’m well-informed about the prostitute and the male’s drug addiction that nearly killed him. To top things off, your stupidity got Mrs. Roth involved. That woman is political poison. So crawl back under your rock and keep your trap shut. My staff is unaware of what lies ahead, which is why I assigned the harpies to that gullible amateur, Keith. I don’t need an experienced employee running to the zoo board questioning my coming decisions.”

Jack smirked at the pompous pencil pusher. “Sure, I’ll shut up, but you might have some regrets when you’re at the kid’s funeral. That male is not only dangerous, but a calculating son of bitch.” He chuckled. “But that’s okay, Mr. Green. I won’t hold it against you when you’re begging for my help.”

“It’s Doctor Green.”

Keith called from the rear of the shuttle. “Dr. Green, the male harpy is regaining consciousness.”

“I’ll be right there,” Green said pleasantly. He and Jack strolled to the harpy cage.

“He’s a little wobbly, but he’s been nuzzling his son,” Keith said with a broad smile. “They act like animals, but sure look human, except they’re prettier than us.”

“I did some research on them,” said Green. “Mentally, they’re on a level with primates.”

Jack flopped in a seat and laughed. “Primates? That harpy is going to have a field day with you fools.”

Green looked at Jack with annoyance. “I’ve consulted with Mr. Jones, and he’s convinced me that they should be separated now. Tranquilizing the male again is risky and could cause a heart attack. We’ll be starting the sperm collection right after quarantine.”

One of the older employees scratched his head. “Begging your pardon, Dr. Green, but the procedure with a new animal is to let it adapt before hooking it up to a breeding machine.”

“I’m aware of standard practice,” Green said. “But these

harpies are extremely fragile, and they're on loan to us. Their owner fears that the male could die before his sperm is secured. We can't have a diverse and healthy harpy population with only cloning." Green pulled at his jaw. "I don't like this aggressive program, but we have no choice."

"I'll take her out," Keith said and stepped inside the cage. The petite female, uncannily resembling an alluring girl, was curled up in the straw beside her mate. "Come, Kari," he said as the lethargic male hissed in desperation. When Keith reached for the seemingly timid female, she raked his arm with her nails.

Jack's chuckled as blood ran down Keith's wrist. "I warned you about that feral little cat. Want me to grab her?"

"I'll get her," Keith said and squatted near her. "Come, now," he said, but this time he moved slower. She hissed and snapped at his fingers, but he kept talking softly until she cowered. The male harpy frantically shook his head to regain his faculties and angrily seethed as Keith placed the leash on the female and coaxed her to rise. The fledgling scrambled out from under the wing, clearly uncertain if he should stay with his sire or join his mother. The female picked him up, ending his confusion, and followed Keith to the other cage.

Jack rose from the bench. "Better get those restraints on him before he recovers much more." Several men stepped into the cage. Still too feeble to fight back, the harpy hissed and his wings flopped pathetically in the bedding. Two men held him down as two more placed light plastic restraints on the male's wrists and

ankles, with the other ends attached to the cage bars. The ties would keep the male in the center of the cage and away from the bars. To disable the harpy, they needed only to pull on the restraints until his body was stretched tightly across the cage floor. Rendered helpless, he would be easy to handle and feed.

An hour into the shuttle voyage, Jack noticed that the male had fully recovered from the tranquilizers. He stood up, flapped his wings, and pulled on his bounds. When the light chains failed to break, he savagely gnawed on the hard plastic in-between his angry hisses aimed at his captors. Green's men sat in their torn, blood-spotted uniforms and stared quietly at him through swollen eyes.

Jack moved to Green. "From the look of your men, I don't think they're eager to deal with him again. You might consider castration after collecting his sperm. He'll be a pussycat without his balls."

"The breeding machine will break his spirit, and besides, the senator has other plans for him."

Shail overheard the conversation between Jack and the zoo director, called Dr. Green. He looked to Kari, and she lowered her eyes. "*You heard them. My journey ends here. Do not ask me to change my mind.*" He tugged harshly on his chains once more and lowered himself into the fake straw.

*"Please don't give up, Shail. Mrs. Roth will visit the zoo and protect us, and when Racheal reaches Dora, she'll tell*

*Governor Waters we're here."*

*"There is no time for such things."*

*"But I need you. Think of Will and me."*

*"What you need and love shall be gone. You are strong, Kari, like your father. You can survive until rescued someday. I cannot, and I shall not live as a broken creature serving men who plan to make slaves of my sons."* He took one long, hard look at her and then curled up, tucking his face into a wing. He inhaled the chemical-smelling straw and waited for a distraction. After a while, he heard the shuttle thrusters kick in and felt the braked descent. He lifted his head from his feathers as the men strapped into their seats and observed the landing. The time had come.

Kari stared at him with fretful, watery eyes. *"Please, Shail, don't do this."*

He turned away from her and focused on his heart. As long as he could remember, he could feel and hear each heartbeat and was capable of controlling the pace. He now dwelled on the most terrifying thing imaginable: the massacre of his flock and the death of his family. With full deliberation, he concentrated on ominous thoughts, causing his heart to beat faster and faster.

Most harpies brought on their suicide when facing a lifetime in a cage, but Shail had already survived such a horror. To induce a heart attack and his death, he had to absorb the broader loss of all and take the blame. He had failed them. His fast-beating heart throbbed hard, and after several minutes he felt a sharp pain hit his chest, and then came the grim, pricking numbness in his left



arm. He closed his eyes as his body quivered once and was still.

Kari rattled and banged on the bars to get Keith's attention. With mounting hysteria, she crashed her whole body against the cage.

The men were flabbergasted, and Keith ran to her cage. She reached out, but he jumped away to avoid being scratched again. "Easy, Kari, we're just landing. Don't be scared."

She breathed hard and pleaded with her eyes as tears streamed down her cheeks. She reached out and made a grabbing sign toward Shail, who lay face down in the urine-wet straw. In a few more seconds, she would be forced to scream at the idiot handler.

Keith turned and looked at Shail. Despite the racket from his panic-stricken mate, Shail didn't budge. "There's something wrong with the male!" He unlocked the door and knelt to roll Shail over on his back. "He's not breathing! I can't feel a pulse!" Blowing into Shail's mouth, he started CPR.

"Damn him," Jack voiced and rushed to his tote bag. He dug through his clothing, pulled out a heart stimulant, and ran back to the cage. He yelled at Keith to get out of his way. With the heart stimulant in hand, he jammed the injector into Shail's chest. "Come on, little sucker."

In a daze, Kari slumped to the cage floor and watched the frantic men try to save Shail's life. Will fearfully crawled onto her lap, and she hugged him, realizing she had committed the

unforgivable. She had betrayed her husband's trust.

Shortly, Shail twitched and took a deep breath. He slowly opened his eyes and gazed up at Jack.

"You almost made it," Jack said with a grin. "Lucky your little female warned us." He gave Shail a second injection of an antidepressant so he would be unable to recreate the heart attack. Jack left the cage, but Keith remained. He stroked Shail's head. Shail rolled to his side and stared blankly into the bedding, seemingly unaware of the human contact.

Jack massaged his jaw and watched Shail's behavior. "Better put a suicide watch on him," he said to Green. "That male would never allow a strange man to pet him. It proves he's finished and has his mind set on dying. This heart-stopping stunt is common among brown-winged harpies, but I never figured this blond would pull it." He pursed his lips. "You and I, along with Blackwell, are wasting our time. These high-strung harpies aren't meant for captivity. Even this rugged golden has crashed. Harpies are good for only one thing, hunting."

Kari sensed Shail's mind as Keith washed and groomed him. Foremost in Shail's thoughts was that his one chance to end his life had been foiled, knowing drugs would prevent a second attempt. He felt tired, tired of fighting and living. He had totally succumbed to the harpy depression, a hopeless, doomed feeling that left him weak. His gaze shifted to his mate. "*Why, Kari?*"

*"Because I love you."*

*"If you truly loved me, you would have let me go."* He shut

his eyes and refused to communicate with her further.

She lowered herself into the straw and kept her vigilance over her depressed husband. She felt his anger, and for the first time, some regret that he chose to bond with a half-human female. A full-blooded harpy would have stood by her mate and his decision to die. Kari's optimistic human side had caused her to alert the men and save him. She was also the daughter of no mere human. Her father, John Turner, was a man among men, strong, powerful, and highly respected. He instilled a stubborn will and courage in her. In her heart, she knew she had made the right decision. Her fiery husband had survived twenty-seven seasons, but he unlikely would live to twenty-eight without her help. As Shail became weaker, she had to pick up the slack if they were to survive Earth.

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The shuttle landed inside an airport on the outskirts of D.C. When the doors opened, Shail lifted his head and was met by Kari's gaze. *"I know you're unhappy with me,"* she conveyed, *"but I'm not sorry for what I did."*

*"You should be. By saving me, you have condemned our offspring to the cage."*

They were transferred to the quarantine section, where they were monitored and received preventative shots. Shail slept most of the time. Even with the anti-depression drugs, he lacked energy

and his body ached.

Keith, their new handler, immersed himself in Shail's care. He bathed, groomed, and massaged him while offering him tempting morsels of fruit. Shail ignored the food and was so docile, he couldn't muster a hiss of resistance. He could only gaze longingly at his family in a nearby cage. His young handler was aware of his desires to be with Kari. Through the daily human contact, Shail sensed Keith's worry, his mind plagued by Rusty's warning not to separate the pair. Without his mate, Shail would die.

After several days, Shail and his family were transported to the zoo. When the truck door opened to the outside, he stood up in his cage and gazed toward the sky, but his eyes met a cloudy see-through dome a mile high. He surveyed the landscape that was covered with huge gray buildings and smelled the stale air that lacked the odor of trees and life. He shook his head and dropped into the synthetic straw. Aboard the spaceship, he had taken real straw for granted and now missed it. Was nature truly absent from this planet? He swallowed deeply and relayed to Kari, *"It is worse than I imagined."*

*"This is not permanent. It is only part of our journey."*

Their cages were rolled toward a large building. Once in a corridor, Shail's cage was pushed into a room as Kari's continued. They were truly separated, unable to see and smell each other. Shail became frantic and wildly flapped his wings and jerked against the restraint.

“Easy, Shail,” Keith said anxiously. “Don’t force me to tranquilize you.”

Shail stopped pulling on the chains and panted with the outburst. His eyes became moist as he looked around the large room at the other cages occupied by strange animals. He was unfamiliar with the creatures, but they shared his mindset. They, too, were miserable and frightened. He collapsed on the bedding and curled up.

Keith brought him fresh water and food and begged him to eat. “Come on, Shail, just take one bite.”

Shail sniffled and rolled over with his back to the food, demonstrating that he had no intention of cooperating.

Keith held his head, feeling frustrated and overwhelmed. Dr. Green had made him solely responsible for the precious harpies, but Keith realized he was unqualified for the job. He recently graduated from college and had been an apprentice zookeeper for less than a year. His charges were domesticated goats, gentle and easy to maintain. Even then, he had been under the watchful eye of Gary, a veteran supervisor at the zoo. Keith found himself alone and out of his league with the temperamental harpies. Gary and several of his co-workers had also questioned Keith’s assignment, because of his lack of experience with animals. Further, the harpies were so exotic that no instruction book existed on their care.

He squatted near Shail’s cage and gazed at the large yellow

wings shrouding the slender body with flawless humanoid features. “If it were up to me, I’d put you with her. Jack said you’d turn vicious, guarding your family, but I’d rather risk a pounding than have you starve like this.” He was bothered by the need to separate the pair but also did not understand the urgency to collect the male’s sperm. The female was confirmed pregnant. The zoo had plenty of time to let the harpies settle in and acclimate to their new surroundings. Keith would soon face the hectic chore of tube feeding the male, adding more stress to himself and the harpy.

“Rusty said you were friends,” he said quietly. “I’d like that, too, but it’s more likely you’ll end up hating me.”

Dr. Green walked into the room. “How is he?”

“Not good,” Keith said, standing. “He just lies there and gets up only to relieve himself. He hasn’t drank any water or eaten in three days. I’m pretty concerned, Dr. Green. The ship handler predicted the male would deteriorate without his mate. Now it’s happening. The female is also a nervous wreck. She paces the cage constantly and doesn’t eat much. The fledgling is the only one doing okay.”

“I don’t want you to fret over these harpies, especially the male. Frankly, we don’t expect him to survive and become a display animal. It’s against zoo policy to maintain a proven man-killer, but he’s here because he’s the only golden male of breeding age. After we’ve collected his DNA and sperm, he’ll most likely be comatose and have to be destroyed. It sounds callous, but one animal’s misery and death will preserve the species. The vets

arrive this afternoon and will evaluate him and then hook him up for the sperm extraction. As for the female, better she learns to adjust without him.”

“If he survives the machine and is still sound, what will happen to him?”

Green rubbed his chin. “Dangerous animals are normally castrated to curb their aggression, but his owner, Senator Blackwell, informed me that neutered harpies suffer from shock and quickly die. The machines should break him and make him docile. If that’s the case, he might be put with the female to keep her company until she gives birth. But any sign of belligerence, and he’ll be destroyed. We’ll have to wait and see. I know he’s restrained, but still be careful around him.”

After Green left, Keith stepped into the cage and petted the despondent harpy. “Did you hear him, Shail? You might be with Kari again. You just need to behave like this.”

The male half-heartedly snapped his teeth at Keith’s hand. Keith jerked away. “Wow, guess you don’t like being told what to do. That’s okay.”

Shail had sensed Keith’s concerns and also realized his new handler was kind and sympathetic for the animals in his care. Unlike the experienced, take-charge Rusty, Keith was insecure and powerless in his position to help. Shail laid his head down and let the man caress him. He needed to focus on the vets and how to fight them off.

Several hours later, Shail heard several men's voices as they walked down the hallway toward the room. He seethed quietly, perceiving the threat. Keith moved out of his reach. When the door opened, Shail sprang to his feet and hissed at the six men. Dr. Green, Jack, and two veterinarians in white coats and their two assistants stared at him.

"And here's the male, Dr. Moss," Green said to the middle-aged veterinarian with a robust frame and dark beard. "As you can see, he's not timid like the female."

"He's stunning. I can definitely see the bird blood," Moss said. "Raised head, arched wings, and on his tiptoes for an attack like a fighting rooster. He's also a little flashier than his mate, another bird trait. In many species, the male has louder colors and fancy plumage to attract a female. He's definitely a handsome creature."

"If you plan to stand around and admire him, I've got better things to do," Jack grumbled.

"Yes, let's get started," said Green. As Green and Moss watched, Jack, Keith, and the other men tightened Shail's chains until he was pulled down and lay stretched in the straw. Only his flapping wings hindered the five men. They entered the cage, restrained his wings and gagged him. When they carried him out of the cage, Shail's courage changed to fright. He was taken down the hallway to the examining room and placed on his back on top of a metal table. He trembled and gazed up at the surrounding machines, equipment, and hovering men. He struggled to roll on



his side in the unnatural position that exposed his stomach and sex organs. Resting on his wings was painful. Even Dora hunters knew not to place a male harpy on his back. Besides damaging the feathers, a timid harpy turned frantic and fought the position, as Shail did. Four men held him down while he was strapped in place.

Jack chuckled. “Male harpies freak out when you put them on their backs.”

Dr. Moss examined Shail’s wing joints. “I can see why. His body is putting pressure on his shoulder joints, and it hurts, plus he probably feels more vulnerable. Another bird trait; they don’t rest on their backs. We’ll soon find out if he’s a true chimera.”

“A what?” Jack asked.

“A chimera—an individual of diverse genetic constitution,” said Moss. “In this case, a hybrid that’s part-bird, part-human.” Moss glanced at Keith, who stroked Shail’s head. “Don’t touch him anymore, son. We need an accurate reading.”

Shail panted in the gag and his eyes widened with terror as a large metal monitor with flashing lights hovered over his head. Moss stood nearby and analyzed the data on a screen.

“His hair is made of the same fibers as his wings. With its thick, shiny sheen, it doesn’t become greasy like a human’s. His feathers stay clean when the oils are shaken through them. I’m betting harpies are prone to head tossing.”

“Yeah, they do a lot of that,” Jack said, “especially when they’re mad.”

“This creature’s senses register high in perception. It’s

unbelievable. In comparison with a human, they're phenomenal," Moss said. "The eyesight is as keen as a hawk's. Hearing and smell...they're in the same range as a dog's. Their small facial features are deceiving." Moss removed the gag and placed a tongue depressor near Shail's mouth. Instinctively, he bit at it. "Got humanoid teeth, I see." He glanced at the other men. "No meat eater's fangs. But didn't the web info claim that harpies are mute?"

"Yes, but that information is outdated," Green said. "Up until last year, the harpies were thought to only use their teeth to make a hissing sound, but now some are known to mimic human speech."

"Yes, their vocal cords are exactly like a human's." Moss turned to Jack. "You've witnessed a talking harpy. Do they speak to one another?"

"I've never seen a harpy talk to another harpy, but some do speak to humans. Most of them are too stupid to learn our language. Hell, they don't even yell when they're butchered."

Moss frowned at Jack. "Mr. Jones, for a harpy expert, there's a lot you don't know about these chimeras. They're far from stupid. Look at this MRI, Dr. Green. This portion of the harpy's brain—the site of intelligence—is larger than a human's. We speak to communicate, but they seem to communicate with telepathy. Compared to them, we're the inferior species." Moss looked long at Shail. "He's trembling because he can sense our minds. I can't believe the harpies have been classified as animals."

“Doc, you’re mistaken,” said Jack. “I’ve hunted plenty of harpies, and they behave like all other wild animals.”

“Perhaps it’s environmental,” Moss said. “Even a child raised among animals will act like an animal with no human guidance.”

Dr. Green spoke up. “Once the harpies are domesticated, they can possibly be re-evaluated. While your assessment is interesting, I’m more interested in saving the species and raising the fledglings.”

“Your domestic fledglings will be influenced by humans and possibly lose some of their senses. This is a wild harpy with his true nature intact. If he dies, the information is lost. The zoo pays me to assess every creature, so I’d like to proceed and learn all I can about him.” Dr. Moss turned to Keith. “Would you be so good as to fetch some of the female’s bedding?”

Keith left but returned in minutes with a handful of the imitation straw. Dr. Moss placed it near Shail’s nose. Smelling Kari, he anxiously sniffed the straw. “He’s a very devoted little fellow. The chemicals in his brain changed drastically when he smelled his female. They went from fear to longing. I surmise that harpies are monogamous and mate for life. The chemical is constantly present and more potent in the harpies than in humans.”

Keith informed Moss, “The animal handler who took care of the harpies on the ship said the male would die without his female. He’s already stopped eating.”

“Yeah, harpies take bonding seriously,” said Jack. “I’ve

killed males and left their body after I got the wings. I've come back days later and found a dead female wrapped around the carcass. These harpies know how to stop their hearts."

The scanner reached Shail's chest. "This explains the heart attack," Moss said. "He has a unique blood hormone that is also a rare defect in humans. Under extreme distress, their hyperactive hormone can stop the heart. You've heard the saying, 'scared to death.' It happens to humans with this abnormal defect, but it appears prevalent in harpies. Luckily, the drugs he's on quell the activation of hormones. I see why harpies are fragile and don't do well as captives."

"I'll be damned," Jack said, "I thought that heart attack was deliberate."

"It might be intentional," Moss said. "With an advanced telepathic cortex, a harpy could, conceivably, create a heart attack." He continued with the examination. "Amazing. His heart is enormous—at least a third larger than a human's."

"Is that such a big deal?" Jack asked.

"As a matter of fact, it is," said Moss. "A larger heart can pump more oxygen through his body. He's virtually inexhaustible, compared to his human counterpart. I bet he could fly hundreds of miles without breaking a sweat. He's not just birdlike, but could be called a superhuman."

"Good," said Green. "If he's inexhaustible, maybe we can get more sperm out of him."

"Dr. Green, this is a highly intelligent and sensitive

creature,” Moss said gravely. “I’m having my doubts about the sperm extraction. It could send him into shock or turn him into a vegetated idiot.”

“His owner and I are willing to risk it. It’s more important to save the golden harpies from extinction, so get on with your evaluation.”

Moss raised an eyebrow and proceeded to examine Shail. “He has extra joints in his feet that allow him to clasp a tree branch. That is why he tiptoes, rather than walks like a man.” Dr. Moss paused and looked up at Jack. “In your experience, Mr. Jones, you said the harpies were docile, but this one is treacherous.”

“The brown-wings I caught were timid,” said Jack, “but goldens are fighters, this blond especially. He’s the first harpy to kill men.”

“His aggression could be genetic, just like a pit bull dog tends to be more vicious than a poodle. His yellow-winged ancestors probably had fearless temperaments, so besides feather coloring, he inherited their nature. But there’s plenty of physical evidence that abuse created belligerence in this young male. There’s a healed laser wound to his intestines. Someone did surgery and cut out the damaged sections. His wing was once broken. The cause appears to be from another laser blast, not a fall. His wrist was fractured, and the scars on his wrists and ankles look like rope burns. Even more disturbing are these rectal scars from a violent sexual molesting. I’d say he’s clearly suffered in the hands

of men.” Moss glanced again at the screen. “Eighty-six pounds with a six-foot length. His bones are light like a bird’s, and most of his density is in the muscles.”

“That’s about right,” said Jack. “I’ve picked up plenty of harpies, and they’ve all weighed less than a hundred pounds.”

“Well, Dr. Green, he’s in perfect health, with a high sperm count. He’s an excellent breeding candidate. How many units do you plan to harvest?”

Green eyed the harpy. “Two thousand.”

“Two thousand!” Keith exclaimed, “It’ll drive him mad, and probably kill him.”

Moss scratched his beard. “Your young man is right, so I take it you’re not interested in preserving this male.”

“He’s already killed several men and injured my staff in a scuffle aboard the ship. I don’t want any more hurt, so his welfare is not a high priority.”

“I see,” said Moss. “It will still take three weeks, and that’s working him constantly. Most owners who want this quantity from a prize bull or racing stallion usually euthanize the animal. It is an economical solution—not designed to maintain a stud.”

At that, Shail crashed his head hard against the metal table. He was able to do it twice before Keith caught his head and held it. “Get some blankets,” he yelled, holding Shail still. “He’s trying to kill himself.” They placed a folded blanket under his head and applied more straps. Keith’s shirt was blood-stained from Shail’s head wound. He gnashed his teeth toward the vet assistant who

tried to treat his injury.

“Is he all right?” Green asked.

“You don’t care,” Keith responded bitterly, “as long as his body is still functioning.”

Green glared at the insubordinate. “Watch it, Keith, or you’ll find yourself unemployed.”

Keith lowered his head and stepped back.

“It’s a minor injury,” said the vet assistant.

Dr. Moss nodded and prepared the harpy for the artificial breeding. One of the vets strapped slender gray containers to each of Shail’s arms and pushed some buttons. Shail twitched at the slight sting in his arms.

Moss explained the procedure to the others. “This injector will provide the proper dose of stimulants for his heart every few hours. It’s good for a week. The other one is a mild sexual stimulant to keep the blood present in his shaft and sustain an erection.” He turned to the men. “Without a tranquilizer, I’ll need you to hold him down when I insert the suction tube.”

The men put their full body weight on Shail, whose eyes watered with the painful invasion. “This tube will keep his testicles empty and force his body to produce sperm. In a few days, we’ll be extracting five times the amount normally generated during breeding. I’ll set it for every half-hour, with a night break so he can recover.”

“No break, Dr. Moss,” Green said. “I want him used up quickly.”

Moss sighed as he inserted small wires into the base of the penis. Their pulsing would enhance stimulation. Next, a lubricated vibrating sleeve was applied for mechanical masturbation.

Shail stared with horror as his body was transformed into a living machine. He shook to avoid their pricking needles and clinging equipment but was held securely. When they punctured his bladder to insert a urine tube, his loud hiss nearly became a screech.

“He’s hooked up properly,” Moss said. “Let’s see if we can get a release out of him.” He pushed several buttons and waited.

Immediately, Shail felt a warm, pleasant pulsing from the wires as the moving sleeve stimulated him. The urge to copulate was overwhelming, but he was determined not to give up his seed. After a few minutes, the pulses and motion of the sleeve became painful. He struggled to escape.

“Ten minutes,” Moss observed. “He has a lot of willpower. I’ll increase the pulses and get him started.”

The shock hit Shail, and he leaped in the straps. His muscles tensed, and he hissed loudly with rage. He fought the sharp pain for another ten minutes, focused on his future sons.

Moss shook his head. “Never seen an animal with this much resistance— but then maybe he’s not an animal. I’ll insert a rectal vibrator to stimulate his prostate gland. It’s used to obtain sperm from comatose men.”

Shail felt the irresistible desire to ejaculate but refrained.



He stopped moving, shut his eyes, and took slow and deep breaths, forcing himself into a hypnotic trance.

“Dr. Green, I have to object,” Moss said after another ten minutes had passed. “We’re dealing with an extremely advanced species here. No animals, and very few men, have this kind of concentration. We need to reconsider this breeding.”

“Nonsense,” Green fired back. “Jones, choke him.” Jack seized the harpy’s neck and cut off his air.

The frenzy of strangulation broke Shail’s meditation and induced sexual stimulus. He ejaculated into the tube.

Green grinned. “It’s documented that choking can induce sexual excitement in men, and the harpy is part-human. Ancient history has shown that men hanged in the gallows die with an erection, and sometimes ejected.”

Shail’s tense body deflated on the table, and his stressed eyes stared up at the men. The suction tube depleted him. His semen moved down the see-through tube to a freezer beneath the table. He sniffled toward the men and then closed his eyes.

“I must protest,” Moss said. “All the evidence suggests he’s an intelligent mortal. His willpower to resist is proof enough.”

Green took Dr. Moss aside. “The courts have ruled that harpies are animals, and as an animal, his life is in my hands. If you interfere, the zoo may have to find a new veterinarian. It would be a shame if your clinic lost its only client. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly,” Moss said with disgust and returned to his staff

and Shail. “Let’s hook up his feeding tube. We still have a tiger that needs a tooth extraction.” They forced Shail’s mouth open and pushed a tube down his throat.

Shail gagged and struggled briefly to remove it, but his will to fight back was fading. He quivered, and sweat moistened his hair and aching wings. Keith tried to soothe him with a cool towel.

“There’s little you can do for him, son,” Moss said quietly. “Keep the fruit mixture coming, because he’ll dehydrate from sweating and with the loss of fluids. Remove the rectal vibrator twice daily to collect feces. Aside from that, the machine does the rest.”

“You know this is not right, Dr. Moss,” Keith whispered, out of earshot of Green and Jack. The veterinarian only grimaced and left with his staff. Shail heard the slight humming from the machines and felt the stimulating inserts. He no longer resisted. His body torqued in submission, and he gave up his seed.

Dr. Green, content with the second collection, left for his office, and only Jack and Keith remained. Shail viewed the two men, and their thoughts were worlds apart.

“He was so brave on that ship,” Keith said. “Now look at him.”

Jack laughed. “Boy, your loyalty is misplaced. This little hellion would strangle you, if given the chance.” He poked Shail’s ribs.

Shail managed a muddled hiss around the feeding tube.

“Don’t do that!” Keith growled. “He’s suffering enough.”

Jack grinned mischievously and prodded Shail again. Angry, Keith shoved Jack away from the table. Caught off guard, the hunter tripped on a cord and hit the floor. He clambered to his feet and flew into the young zookeeper. Jack punched Keith in the jaw, and he tumbled to the floor. He sprang up and slammed into Jack's gut with his shoulder. The blow sent both men crashing over a low table covered with equipment. Instruments flew and glassware shattered as Keith and the rugged hunter fought.

Jack, no stranger to barroom brawls, had the advantage over the young city-dweller, but Keith's rage drove him. The skirmish ended with several devastating slugs to Keith's stomach. He doubled over and fell to his knees. He gasped for breath and coughed.

"Stay down, kid," Jack huffed, wiping the blood from a split lip on his sleeve.

Keith glared at Jack. "Don't touch my harpy."

"Your harpy?" Jack shook his head, grabbed his tote bag, and strolled out of the room.

Jack walked down the corridor that led to Green's office. "His harpy," he grumbled to himself. "What the hell is wrong with these guys?" He understood why women loved the harpy. The alluring creature was a female magnet, but he couldn't comprehend why men like Rusty, the big bodyguard, and now Keith became so stuck on the winged monster. He knew the harpy had not spoken to them and actually hid his intelligence. These fools didn't know the

harpy as Jack did. They only saw a defiant, caught creature. Maybe that was enough to spark their loyalty. “That golden ruler plays the part of a naive animal, and it’s working for him.”

Jack recalled he had initially admired the harpy as the slender male dangled from a tree at the senator’s warehouse. After hours of fighting the ropes, the harpy proved he had a lot of heart. Jack’s feelings changed, though, when Shail attacked him. “That golden’s been lucky, but he’s finally getting what he deserves.”

Jack stepped into Green’s office with a swollen lip and torn shirt. Green looked up from his desk. “What happened?”

“A little disagreement with Keith over the harpy,” Jack answered, dropping into a chair. “You’d better watch that kid. He’s getting too attached.”

“I’ve noticed,” Green said. “I picked him because he lacks experience. Thought Keith would be easy to control and wouldn’t ask questions. My veteran keepers would have a fit with the stud’s radical treatment. A zoo is not supposed to slowly torture a creature to death, but the senator does pay well. He’s blaming the golden for stirring up the harpies that killed his hunters on Dora. Under no circumstances does the senator want that harpy back on Dora. After the sperm collection, the harpy is to be killed, preferably with the insurance paying. He’ll cut us in for handling it.”

“The male will probably die of stress on the table. If that happens, kiss the insurance goodbye. They won’t pay if they can prove he was overworked.”

“No, but they’d pay if those wires accidentally shorted and fried him.”

“I can arrange that.”

“Good. After I get enough semen, I’ll contact you.”

Jack leaned back in the chair. “Now what’s this bull about taking one of my browns? It’s bad enough that there are only five on that incoming ship.”

“The senator says there’s a large flock leader on the shipment. Once the golden is dead, the brown could replace him.”

“That stinks,” Jack uttered. “Leaves me with only four.”

“Could be worse.” Green grinned. “Instead of being here, you could’ve been hunting harpies in the outback a few months ago.”

Jack huffed. “I still can’t believe those harpies brought down hovers and killed the men. More likely those guys were drunk and crashed.” He rose from the chair. “Well, I’m off to New York’s slums to check out the gay clubs—stir up some harpy business. Let me know when you want the golden short-circuited.” He flipped back his ponytail, grabbed his gear, and headed for the door.

“Jones, you may want to get a haircut and shave. New Yorkers turn their noses up at country hicks from uncivilized planets.”

Jack threw a smirk over his shoulder before leaving the office.

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Shail watched Keith stagger from the floor and shuffled to him. He pushed Shail's sweaty hair from his eyes. "I don't know why Green is being so hard on you. There are plenty of dangerous animals here."

Shail sniffled docilely to the young man who had leaped to his defense and took a beating on his behalf. He sensed Keith's frustration to the point of feeling ill that he couldn't help Shail.

As Keith cleaned up the broken glass from the fight, Shail squirmed to be free of the painful wires and tubes. He chewed on the feeding tube in its mouth but soon gave up, finding the hard plastic impossible to tear. The machines, tubes and drugs were running his body, stripping Shail of his basic bodily functions. His decisions to eat, breed, and even urinate were lost. The ruler of the harpies had become a dominated beast that functioned for man. He closed his eyes, no longer dwelling on his future sons or resisting the senator's plans. To fight the mechanical rape would devitalize his body, and the trauma would damage his mind. Shail had no fear of death, but he was terrified of becoming a comatose slave. Last year, he had seen abused harpies come to that end.

Shail focused on the day he had first bonded with Kari. With his arms wrapped about her, they had mated nonstop for two lights. He would have to focus on that exhilarating lust and love to stay mentally sound. He closed his eyes and thrust with the machine, rather than fight it.

At the end of day, Keith checked on Shail once more before heading home and found him notably weaker from the forced breeding. He placed his hand on Shail's warm forehead. "There's no way you'll survive this," he said sadly before leaving the zoo.

An hour later, Shail heard the door open and the zoo director stepped to Shail's table. He massaged his chin and watched until the machines came on and forced Shail to ejaculate. "Good, good," he said with his oily voice as Shail panted with half-closed eyes. "You're not fighting it anymore. I'm going to keep you straining and drained until you yield what I need." On his way out, Green turned off the lights and left Shail to agonize in the dark.

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Keith returned in the morning to find the harpy male barely conscious. It breathed with a hard, deep rhythm, its eyes closed. When the machine came on, the male sluggishly squirmed to comply in his exhausted state. Keith preformed his basic chores and refilled the feeding tube. The liquid flowed into the harpy's mouth, but there was no response to the nourishment, having grown accustomed to the intermittent feedings. Keith had a sick wrenching in his gut as he witnessed the animal's torment, an animal that looked human.

His chores finished with the male, he walked down the corridor to care for the female and fledgling. He entered the room,

and the female was crouched in a nest of straw. The bedding covered the cage floor but bore a well-traveled path, evidence that she had paced all night. She protectively held her son and hissed at Keith. "I won't hurt you, Kari," he said when retrieving her food bowl. He noticed that she was eating less and less. The female added to his worries. He coaxed her to eat, but she merely glared at him. Only the fledgling timidly approached him, out of curiosity. At the end of the day, Keith apprehensively left them, fearing he would be greeted by a dead harpy in the morning.

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Shail toiled to comply with the machines, but on the third night he knew his body could not endure the same pace. He trembled and sweated constantly, even as he felt cold. The lights came on, and once again Green appeared, but he wasn't alone. A clean-cut man in a business suit stood next to him.

"You're looking at a million credits in feathers, Frank," Green said.

Frank ran his hand over Shail's wings and down his wet frame. "So this is a harpy. It's true, they do look human. Instead of just buying the wings, how much for the whole animal? I'd rather take him to my range and hunt him."

"I'm only selling you the wings," Green said and put his hand on the harpy's clammy forehead. "He's in the first stages of shock, and it's doubtful he'll survive this procedure." He ambled



over to a drug cabinet and retrieved a drug to control shock.

“If he does survive, I’ll buy him. I want to be able to say I killed him and not have to make up a fictitious hunting story about his wings.”

Green injected the drug into Shail’s arm. He fingered his chin, appraising Shail’s value. “He’s insured for four million. You could have the whole live package for four and a half, but under the condition you don’t hunt him. Just shoot him in the cage. Then you don’t have to lie to your friends.”

“Not much thrill in that.”

“Listen, Frank, this harpy is nothing like the old feeble zoo animals that are shot when trapped against your fence. He’s killed four men and injured many more, including five of my zookeepers when they tried to subdue him. You aren’t experienced enough to bring him down.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Frank said indignantly. “Besides, a hunting club member told me about his game trip to Dora and how he bagged a brown-winged harpy. He said it was harmless.”

“That was a brown, and this is a golden. Big difference, and it has nothing to do with wing color. It’s like comparing a house cat to a tiger. Golden are dangerous.”

“I’m still not intimidated,” said Frank. “Four and a half million, and we have a deal.”

“All right, considering that he’ll probably be meek and less of a problem when he’s drained of testosterone. Now we’ll have to wait and see if he survives.” The machines came on, and Shail

achieved ejaculation.

“I’ll give you five million if I can take him now.”

Green chuckled. “See that semen? It’s more precious than pearls. Every half-hour, this male potentially makes me millions with his offspring. I’m not about to unhook him so you can have your trophy sooner.”

“Well, keep me informed on his progress. I’ll need a few days’ notice to clear my desk before I take ownership. As before, do you want me to wire the credits into your off-planet account?”

“Of course,” Green said, “Now how about that drink?” The two men left the room, and Shail heard their voices trailing down the hallway. Hunters awaited him if he managed to prevail over the machines.

## Chapter Eleven

Aron rapidly flew across the dark outback, guided by starlight and his animal instincts. Over his wing, he saw the first rays of sunlight creeping into the black sky. He had received a communication from Shail's mother that his mate was in labor. He now raced to the west coast to be at Starla's side and meet his first offspring.

Weeks earlier, Ted and Mark had encouraged him to return to his pregnant mate and that his family's needs outweighed the needs of the flock. The Outback had been peaceful, and most humans believed the war of harpies and hunters was over. Aron had refused to leave Terrance, not sharing their confidence.

A half-season ago, he had persuaded Shail to do the same when his son was due. It was, though, a different time. Harpies lived without fear of an attack. Thinking about his golden brother, he swallowed a lump in his throat and wondered if his friend was still alive. Shail was always on his mind.

As dawn crested on the mountain range, Aron descended upon the large black mountain and landed on a ledge. He hurried through a crevice and entered the dark cave. When he reached the wide expanse of the ancient spaceship, his sister, Lea, met him.

*"You fly too slow,"* she relayed. Her green eyes sparkled in the firelight and displayed her delight.

Aron took a deep breath in relief. The birth had gone well. He moved quickly through the numerous bowed heads of the

females and young and heard their giggles. His nervousness apparently showed. On reaching the corridor that led to individual rooms, he saw Shail's mother, Windy, standing near a doorway.

*"Congratulations, Aron."* She smiled and motioned toward the room, and he rushed inside.

In a moss nest beside a small pit fire, Starla held a newborn harpy. Aron crawled in beside her as both shifted their eyes to the baby. The tiny bare wings verified that it was a male. Aron licked his son, inducing waste, as Starla nursed him.

The first scents and acts of the mother and father would be forever imprinted on the baby and confirm its dependence on its parents while teaching it to keep a clean nest. A birth evoked the animal nature of the seemingly civilized harpies.

Starla rested as Aron, with the jitters of a new father, nuzzled and licked the fragile baby. Engulfed in his father's breath, the fledgling was massaged by Aron's hands and wings. After an hour, Starla took the baby into her arms. *"You shall lick him raw if you continue."* She smiled at his eagerness and inexperience. *"He knows you now, my love."*

Aron dropped his head, slightly embarrassed. *"Before the flock, I am unshakable, but with this tiny fledgling, I am anxious, even pathetic. I love him so much."* He wrapped his frame around Starla and sheltered her and his son with his wing. For the next few days, they would rely entirely on his care.

Aron rose from the nest and placed a few logs on the fire. Stretching his wings, he stared at his lovely mate and son and swallowed deeply.

*“Aron, I feel the heaviness in your heart. You do not wish to go, but must. You protect me and your son more at the river.”*

Aron leaned down and kissed her.

*“What of his name?”*

Aron placed his hand on his son’s head. *“He could be one of our last. I shall call him Freely, and hope he fulfills such a name.”*

*“Freely, a human word,”* she said. *“So much of our survival and demise rests with the humans. It is a good name.”*

Aron left the room, and Windy met him in the hallway. *“Governor Waters called, and I explained you were performing the tradition of acceptance with your new fledgling. He awaits your response,”* she said and handed him a small communicator.

Aron took the com and walked through the crevice to the outside for a better transmission. Rarely did Governor Waters call with good news. As the connection went through, the governor appeared on the small screen. “You were right about the senators. They’re not finished with your harpies,” Waters said. “My assistant discovered a Web notice that came from Dora and was placed by Senator Peterson. He’s advertising for mercenaries.”

“Mercenaries?” Aron questioned the strange word.

“They’re ex-soldiers paid to kill,” Waters explained.

“Those men are the scourge of humanity and are more ruthless than hunters.”

Aron lowered his head and drew in a deep breath. After several long moments, he looked back at the screen. “When shall they come?”

“It’ll take months to organize an army, and considering space travel, the mercenaries should start arriving during the wet season. The senators won’t risk their men and hovers during those severe storms, and weapons and equipment are less effective, so there’s a good chance they’ll attack after the rains.”

“We shall be ready.”

“Aron, there is still the other option. I can place your harpies under the endangered species laws, and they can live in a sanctuary north of Hampton. It’s the only way to protect them.”

“Shail rejected it, and so do I,” Aron said. “We would be judged as ignorant animals, forever losing our freedom. And this protection you offer would not last. Some day your rule of Dora shall end, and the next governor may lack your commitment to harpies. We could become the hunted once again.”

“It is a temporary solution for your safety and could hurt your chances in court,” he said solemnly. “Right now I’m grasping for straws.”

Aron tilted his head. “Straw is no protection. By keeping me informed, you help us.”

Waters nodded. “By the way, congratulations on your son, you must be very pleased and proud.”

“I am, but I wish his birth were in a peaceful jungle.” The transmission ended, and Aron returned to the ancient ship. Windy met him at the entrance. *“It is not over,”* he said. *“The senators seek a new army made of men called mercenaries. Waters believes they shall come with the end of the wet. Most of our females and young live in the forest at the mountain’s roots. Keep them close. They must return and endure the mountain’s darkness again when the enemy comes.”*

*“I thought...”* Windy grasped her mouth and shook her head. *“I so hoped the senators gave up.”* She straightened, and confidence filled her eyes. *“The water and firewood shall be restocked and enough fruit dried to last an entire season. I shall have the old Westend doctor order more drugs so our females can survive their mates’ death.”* She grasped his arm. *“Aron, I trust you to defeat this invasion once again, and do not worry about him. I am a golden harpy, and I vow to protect him with my life.”*

*“We named him Freely.”*

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Director Green leaned back in his office chair as he calculated the male harpy profits. “The money from Frank Reynolds, plus the insurance claim, not bad for one harpy.” He began to figure the fifty percent earnings from the first crop of fledglings. The harpies would indeed make him a wealthy man.

After a week, the blond stud was producing fifty units a

day, but the creature had slipped into unconsciousness, its body functioning like a robot with the machine. Dr. Moss had preformed a full physical on the female harpy and decided her pregnancy was too far advanced to risk termination.

“An abortion on a sensitive, unfamiliar creature could harm her reproductive organs,” Moss had said. “She looks human, but there are vast differences in her body chemistry. Even her shoulders bear a slight hump of extra bones to support wings.”

Reluctantly, Green would allow the female to keep her second offspring, though it would delay the artificial breeding. He could not take the chance of losing the valuable female harpy that, unlike her mate, had irreplaceable eggs. He had collected the DNA from all three goldens for cloning, but without female harpies as hosts, the fetuses could not be reproduced.

Green’s com buzzed. “Yes?”

“Mrs. Roth is on,” said his secretary. “It’s her third call, and putting it politely, sir, she’s rather upset. She wants to know about the harpies.”

“Didn’t you tell her that they’re in quarantine?”

“Yes, sir, but she doesn’t believe it. If you don’t take her call, she threatens to come here.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Put her through.” Mrs. Roth appeared on his screen, and he grinned. “Mrs. Roth, it’s so nice to see you again.”

“Don’t patronize me,” she growled. “Where are the harpies?”



Green's face was puzzled. "I believe my secretary informed you they were in quarantine."

"I checked," she said. "They left quarantine eight days ago."

"Of course they left the import quarantine, but now they're in the zoo's quarantine. They caught a nasty bug, and the vets recommended isolation. They're recovering, and perhaps in a few weeks you can visit them."

"How convenient, especially when you know I'm leaving Earth next week."

"That's too bad," Green said. "When you return, then. They certainly are affectionate and seem happy here. I pet the male every day."

"Really?" she said, calmer. "Perhaps I'm worrying needlessly."

"I assure you they're adjusting well to the transfer. I'll arrange a yearly pass for you and your niece, so you can see them when you return."

"Thank you, Dr. Green," she said, turning off the com.

For a moment, Mrs. Roth stared at the blank screen. "Him and his damn assurances," she grumbled and rose from her chair. "Ralph, get in here!" Her assistant raced into her home office. "Get my vehicle! We're going to that zoo to check on the harpies."

Ralph looked perplexed. "The zoo director gave you permission to see them?"

“I don’t need that little twerp’s consent to see the harpies. They’ll let me in, or I’ll raise one hell of a stink.”

Ralph said no more and rushed out.

“Who does Green think he’s fooling, saying he pets Shail,” she muttered to herself while strolling to the door. “That harpy would bite that man’s hand off.”

After traveling through the Washington downtown traffic, Mrs. Roth and Ralph arrived at the zoo. At the entrance, Ralph studied a map of the exhibits. “I’m not sure where to look. The harpies could be in the ape or bird section.”

“I doubt they’re in either one, and I’m too old to wander these grounds.” She spotted a young girl dressed in a green zoo uniform and ambled over to her. “Tell me, miss, I’m looking for the harpies. Dr. Green told me all about them, and I’m interested in acquiring a fledgling.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the girl answered. “The harpies are not on display yet. They’re in the breeding buildings under quarantine. I haven’t even seen them, but I hear they’re beautiful.”

“Where are those buildings on the map?” Mrs. Roth asked as Ralph showed the brochure to the girl. “I’d like to speak to their handler and get some information on their care.”

“They’re right there,” the girl said, pointing. “Their keeper is Keith Williams. I’m sure he can help you.”

Mrs. Roth and Ralph set off in the direction the girl had indicated and followed a narrow, meandering road. At the end, they stopped before a tall iron gate that held an Employees Only

sign. Beyond were the buildings marked for animal reproduction.

Ralph glanced around. “Want me to climb over and break in?”

“I don’t think your past skills are necessary.” Mrs. Roth glanced at a nearby information booth and walked to it. She smiled pleasantly at the woman inside. “Excuse me, perhaps you could help me. My grandson works in those buildings, and like a ninny, I forgot Keith’s com number. Would you be so good as to call him? I want to surprise him.”

“Of course,” said the woman. “Keith is a great guy, very good with animals.” The woman tapped in the com numbers. “Keith,” she said. “You’re needed at the gate.”

Mrs. Roth and Ralph returned to the building entrance. “Very smooth, Mrs. Roth,” he said. “But how are you going to get this guy to let us in?”

“One fib at a time, Ralph. I don’t like dishonesty, but it takes a lie to expose a liar, and Dr. Green has been lying to me about the harpies.” They watched a young man leave the building door and stroll up the sidewalk to the gate.

“Darn, that’s one of the handlers who took the harpies off the ship,” Ralph murmured. “He knows us.”

Mrs. Roth cleared her throat. “Mr. Williams, I’m sure you remember me. I’m here to see my harpies and make sure they’re receiving proper care.”

“Hello, Mrs. Roth, Ralph,” Keith said and released a loud sigh. “I’m in charge of the harpies, but I won’t say they’re getting

proper care.” The young keeper’s eyes watered as he bitterly explained the torturous breeding machine that was draining the life out of the male harpy. “Director Green says he’s a man-killer and the zoo’s treatment is normal. I disagree. It’s wrong, and I can’t keep quiet about it anymore.”

Mrs. Roth fumed upon hearing his account. “Unlock this gate.”

“I can’t let you in without a security pass.”

“Damn the pass,” she thundered. “You want me to help the harpy or not?”

Keith produced a remote for the gate, and Mrs. Roth marched toward the large building, followed by Ralph and Keith. Once inside, the three made their way to the room that held Shail. The harpy lay on a table with his eyes closed and a feeding tube down his throat. Keith removed a blanket and exposed his wings and frame. Straps held him down, and numerous wires and tubes were inserted in his body for various functions. The once-beautiful harpy resembled a hideous machine.

“Oh, my God,” Mrs. Roth cried and covered her mouth, feeling physically ill. “What have they done to him?” She placed her hand on Shail’s colorless forehead.

“Those sons of bitches,” Ralph growled.

Mrs. Roth turned to Keith. “Unhook him. Unhook him right now!”

“I can’t,” Keith said. “It’s complicated. If I tried, I could make things worse. Only a vet can undo this.” The equipment

hummed, and the harpy tried to comply with the stimulation.

“Turn it off, Ralph,” Mrs. Roth said. “Smash those circuits if you have to.”

Ralph stepped to the collection machine.

“Wait, I’ll turn it off,” Keith said and pushed a button. The apparatus fell silent. “I’ve wanted to do that for a week, but Dr. Green would surely fire me. I’m not concerned about my job, but I do care about the harpies. My replacement might not feel the same way.”

Mrs. Roth patted Keith’s shoulder. “You won’t be fired. Green is the one facing termination.” She turned to Ralph. “Put a call in to Harry Slater.” Ralph pulled out a portable communicator, and Mrs. Roth was soon speaking to Slater. She explained the harpies’ situation and said, “Harry, I expect you shortly, given your concern for animals. I sure you’re not on the board for the prestige of it.”

“No, I’m not. I’ll call Director Green, and I should be there in a half-hour. We’ll sort this out, Mrs. Roth.”

“I hope so.” Mrs. Roth disconnected and asked Keith, “Where are Kari and her son? Green told me they would be staying in a large new aviary.”

“Don’t know anything about an aviary. They’re down the hall in a cage.”

“More lies from that cruel little man,” she snarled. “Take me to her.”

Ralph stayed with Shail as Keith led her down a long

corridor to another room.

Mrs. Roth entered the room and saw Kari. “Oh, you poor dear, I’m here now.” The dainty harpy bounded to her, and Mrs. Roth embraced her through the cage bars and wept. She was angry with Green, but more so with herself. She should have been adamant about seeing the harpies sooner. “I’ll make sure you and Shail are reunited and receive the best of care.” Kari pulled back with a puzzled expression. “You didn’t know? He’s alive, Kari. He’s had a bad time, but he’ll be okay.” Kari gasped with relief and hugged Mrs. Roth again.

Keith watched them with an open mouth. “She seems to understand you.”

“Of course she does,” Mrs. Roth sniped. “You’ve been with the harpies for weeks, and you *should* know them by now. They’re far from stupid.”

“She doesn’t respond to me,” he said and lowered his head. “I can’t even touch her.”

“It’s all right, Keith. Kari and Shail were thrown into a horrible situation. It’s no wonder they don’t trust you or anyone. Be patient and kind, and they’ll come around. Now let’s go back to Shail.”

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Dr. Green’s pleasant morning screeched to a halt with Harry Slater’s com call. “I just finished speaking with Mrs. Roth,”

said Slater. “She’s storming mad about some neglected zoo animals called harpies. Do you know about them?”

“Yes. I spoke with Mrs. Roth and assured her that the harpies were fine.”

“Apparently they’re not. She is with these creatures right now. And you obviously don’t know that woman. Mrs. Roth is on the president’s dinner list and has enough influence to destroy both of our careers. I’m leaving for your zoo right now. By the time I get there, you’d better have resolved this.”

“I’ll handle it,” Green said nervously and disconnected. He hectically punched in the number to the veterinarian clinic. “This is Dr. Green. I need to speak with Moss immediately.”

“Sorry, sir, he’s in surgery,” said a pleasant young woman. “I can have him call you when he’s free.”

“Listen, you silly cow,” he yelled. “I’m the director of the Washington Zoo. Get him now!”

“Sorry, sorry,” she said tearfully before racing from the screen.

In minutes, Dr. Moss appeared. “What’s so damn important that you interrupt my surgery and have my receptionist in tears?”

“You have to come to the zoo at once and unhook the male harpy.”

“I suppose he’s failing,” Dr. Moss said. “I warned you he couldn’t maintain that pace.”

“This doesn’t concern him,” Green said uneasily. “A member of the zoo board received an abuse complaint about the

harp and is coming here to inspect him.”

Moss chuckled. “So it’s you who’s in trouble. I’ll come and cover your ass, but next time you threaten to terminate my clinic, your involvement and abuse of the harpy will come to light. Blackmail is a two-way street.”

“Yes, yes,” Green said wearily and ended the call. He dashed out his office and hopped into a small grounds vehicle. “This is Blackwell’s fault, being in a damn hurry to get the male’s sperm,” he grumbled, driving past the exhibits. “I should have held off until that old bat left the planet. Damn Jones,” he cursed again. “His stupidity got that bitch involved.”

Green arrived at the breeding buildings and stepped from the vehicle. He took a moment to straighten his suit and slick back his hair. Collecting himself, he entered the building.

“I expected you sooner,” Mrs. Roth said as Green walked through the door.

“I had to call the zoo vet,” Green said and stepped to the unconscious harpy. “He’s on his way, and we’ve decided to suspend the sperm collection.”

Mrs. Roth’s eyes burned with rage. “The sperm collection is finished.”

“Mrs. Roth, I explained the artificial breeding was necessary to save the species when there’s only one mature male.”

“And I told you that if the harpies were mistreated, you’d face my wrath. Now you have it, sir. According to your young keeper, you planned to overwork the male until he died of



exhaustion.”

“That’s not true,” Green said. “Keith Williams is inexperienced in the practices and misled you. Furthermore, he’s in trouble for letting members of the public enter these secure buildings, risking the transmission of diseases to the animals, and he turned off the power to the equipment. He’s facing termination.”

“If anyone is terminated, it’ll be you, Dr. Green.”

Slater arrived in the middle of the argument and said the zoo would comply with her wishes concerning the harpies and agreed that the artificial breeding seemed harsh.

“Excessively harsh,” Mrs. Roth said, glaring at Green. “He’s a heartless little monster, and he’s lied to me on several occasions. He has no business running a zoo and should be replaced.”

Green stood quietly and fidgeted in a corner as Mrs. Roth ranted to Slater. With her every word, he saw his aspirations of wealth crumbling, along with his career.

Slater shook his head. “I don’t have the power to terminate Dr. Green. That decision falls to the zoo board, but I’ll make sure there’s a complete investigation into his handling of the harpies, and it will be discussed at the next quarterly meeting.”

“Keep me informed,” she said, brushing off Slater when the vet and an assistant came into the room.

Dr. Moss immediately went to work removing the wires and tubes from the harpy’s body. He performed minor surgery on

the male's bladder that had been injured by the urine tube.

"Is he going to be all right?" Mrs. Roth fretted.

"Hard to say," said Dr. Moss. "He's in a coma from the stress, but according to the brain scan, he appears undamaged. We'll know more if and when he regains consciousness."

"Come on, Shail, wake up," Mrs. Roth pleaded and stroked his head. "You're a tough bird, like me. You can get through this." For the first time, her voice was subdued.

The harpy wrinkled his nose and sniffed as his ears twitched under his long hair.

"He smells and hears you, Mrs. Roth," Keith said. "Keep talking to him."

Encouraged by Mrs. Roth's gravelly voice and strong perfume, the harpy stirred and slowly opened his eyes. He tried to lean toward her, but the straps held him down. When he became aware of the men, he trembled and tried to tuck his head toward a wing.

"Untie him," Mrs. Roth demanded.

"Absolutely not," Green said and stepped in front of the table. "This harpy is dangerous and might attack."

"He's too frightened and weak to hurt anyone," said Moss.

"Even so, he might fly off," said Green. "It would be difficult to recapture him, and I saw the damage his beating wings inflicted on a ship cabin. The zoo can't afford to replace the expensive equipment in this room."

The large black man stepped to Green. "Move, or I'll move

you.” Green scurried away as the man unfastened the straps. The terrified harpy pulled in his limbs and used his shabby wings to cover his body.

“We’ll put him back in his cage while he’s docile,” Green said.

“He’s going back with his family,” Mrs. Roth said, “and that’s where he’ll stay— under the care and supervision of Mr. Williams.” She put her hands on her large hips and glanced at Slater.

Harry Slater looked from Mrs. Roth to Green. “I think the harpy’s fate should rest with the vet. Dr. Moss, what do you think?”

“I agree with the lady. The harpy will recover faster with his female.” He smirked at Green. “I also believe Mr. Williams should take care of them. When the male was brought in here and hooked up, this young man was the only one concerned with its welfare.”

“Then it’s settled,” said Slater. “Mr. Williams can also keep Mrs. Roth and me informed on the harpy’s progress. Is that acceptable, Mrs. Roth?” She nodded and petted the quivering harpy.

“It’s not acceptable to me,” Green said, “I’m *still* the zoo director and in charge here. Furthermore, Senator Blackwell owns the harpies, and we have a contract giving me full authority on their maintenance.”

“Don’t push your luck, zoo director,” Mrs. Roth snapped.

“Besides losing your job, you could face animal cruelty charges and jail. That senator will also be implicated, and his ownership of the harpies will be revoked. Keep messing with me, and I’ll turn your life upside down.”

Green backed away and silently watched Keith pick up the harpy. At first the male fluttered his wings to escape, but with Mrs. Roth’s calming voice, he settled down and lay docilely cradled in the man’s arms. Keith carried him down the corridor to the female’s cage. Green followed behind the others.

The female harpy excitedly leaped toward Keith and her mate. Once the male rested in the bedding, she hovered over him. He feebly put his arms around her, snuggling his face in her side as she hissed at Keith to leave the cage. The fledgling circled his parents and ecstatically flapped his little wings. The baby finally dove between them and licked his father’s face. The male’s scared eyes became drowsy with reassurance. He curled up with his family for some well-needed rest.

Slater, Dr. Moss, and Mrs. Roth gave their communication numbers to Keith and told him to call if there was any trouble with the harpies. The once obscure zookeeper was suddenly a person of importance. Everyone beamed as they watched the contented, beautiful harpies. All save one. Dr. Green bitterly stared from the threshold.

Over the next few days, Shail slept and barely communicated with Kari, his body and mind so drained he could do little. He relayed to Kari that he was sorry for giving in to the machines.

*“You are one small harpy,” she said, “against the humans and machines of Earth. There is no need for guilt. I am overjoyed you had the strength to survive.”*

Keith maintained a constant vigil over his three charges. He massaged and washed Shail while he was too frail and frightened to resist. Eventually, Shail stopped flinching and put his trust in the man. He sensed the man’s concern that once Shail recovered, his behavior would be unpredictable. He could remain a weak, broken-spirited creature or turn into a vengeful, vicious killer. Even Shail was unsure if his courage and pride would return. Because of the unknown outcome, Keith was ordered to place a leather shock collar with a location transmitter on Shail’s neck for the safety of the personnel.

Keith put a water bowl near Shail’s mouth and told him to drink. Lacking the confidence to resist, Shail obediently drank for his master. On the other hand, Kari’s courage grew with the defense of her family. She watched Keith’s every move when he was in their cage. Her aggressive posturing conveyed that she would attack him or anyone else if they harmed her mate.

For Keith, Mrs. Roth's advice of being patient and kind with the harpies started to pay off after a week. They began to accept him. The female stopped hissing and sometimes accepted food from his outstretched hand. The fledgling happily flapped his wings and crawled up Keith's pant leg for attention. But the male still troubled Keith. The pitiful creature ambled about the cage, brooding and lifeless, or slept curled up in a cage corner. Even his little son could not entice his father to play. Longing to be left alone, the male dismissed his fledgling with soft hisses. Keith continued to give Shail the anti-depressant drugs for fear that he would die of a broken heart.

Kari also fretted over Shail. His mind was so shattered, he could barely communicate telepathically. His body had healed, but his soul remained damaged. At night, she heard his soft whimpers of despair. Shail, as always, did not tell her of the abuse he had suffered, but she imagined it was bad. He was born in the wild and fell harder to captivity, but never before had she seen him so crushed. On the ship, he had foretold that if he tried to survive Earth, what she loved about him would be lost. His prediction had become reality. Only an empty shell remained of her once bold and defiant husband. She could not help him; he alone had the power to heal himself.

The days passed quietly, and her mate slowly regained his self-assurance. Kari and Shail learned that Mrs. Roth had departed from Earth on a voyage to the Snead system, and their only

protection rested with Keith.

One day Keith stood in the cage as her tall mate leaned over and nuzzled the man's neck, a common display of acceptance and affection between male harpies. The door opened, and Green walked in, his first visit since Shail was brought there. Upon seeing the director, Shail dropped into the straw and hid.

"He's rather fond of you," Green said, "but still a coward, I see."

"I've tried to bring other keepers here, but he's scared to death of strangers," Keith answered. "I'm starting to think he'll never get over his fear."

"The poor thing," Green mustered. "If he doesn't recover, he's too pathetic to be put on display when the new aviary is finished. Perhaps he should be exposed to the outside and allowed to fly. He might regain some confidence and restore his muscles, especially those in his wings."

Shail looked to Kari. *"Do you sense him, Kari? He is a master of lies, and his thoughts are hard to detect, but I know them. His concern is false, and he sees me as a creature being fattened for the slaughter."* Without touching the man, Kari was blind to Green's true feelings. Shail's acute instincts were superior to hers, but she wondered if paranoia influenced them.

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As the zoo closed the following day, Keith grasped a leash

and approached their cage. “Come here, Shail,” he called, but Shail saw the rope and fled to a corner. “Don’t be afraid. This will be fun.” Shail refused to come but stood still while Keith attached the leash on his collar. “Let’s go,” Keith said, urging Shail toward the cage door. He followed but refused to step over the threshold. He flapped his wings and fought the tugging leash.

“Stop that!” Keith ordered.

Shail flinched at the disapproving voice and nervously glanced at Kari.

Kari sadly watched her damaged husband. His mind held a fragile balance of human reasoning and animal instincts. The abuse had undermined his human logic, and he functioned mainly with his feral blood. Fear was a basic animal emotion vital to survival. *“Shail, you know Keith will protect you. Go with him. Go outside and fly. It is a step to restoring your courage. I believe it shall be good for you.”* She knew Shail’s reasons for wanting to stay inside the cage. He felt secure, and outside his prison, only bad had come. Shail swallowed deeply and stepped from their cage.

Keith led the lanky harpy from the room and down the hallway while constantly encouraging him. “Good, Shail, you’re doing good,” he said. He made a point of talking to the harpies, since Mrs. Roth insisted they understood and Dr. Moss’ brain scan determined extreme intelligence, but Keith had yet to see any evidence. At best, they behaved like trained dogs that responded to their names and limited commands.



At the exit, Keith replaced the leash with a long, light-plastic chain. “Come, Shail,” he said and led the harpy outside to a waiting zoo transport. He secured the chain to the side of a small open-topped vehicle and let a good length of slack fall to the ground. “Okay, let’s see you fly.” He got in, started the engine, and slowly drove up the path to a barren hill as the harpy walked alongside. The hill was the site for the new harpy aviary, but the only indication of construction was a few string markers.

Instead of flying, the harpy jogged nearby. Keith worried that either the male was too insecure for flight or his wing muscles had deteriorated with the long voyage. Out of desperation, he reached back for an old rake and swung it at Shail. The spooked male fluttered his wings and lifted from the ground. “Good boy,” Keith yelled, driving up the hill with the harpy slowly gliding behind him. “This is like flying an old-fashioned kite.” He accelerated, and the harpy kept up with little effort.

A cluster of giant boulders stood at the center of the hilltop surrounded by a dusty plain. Keith followed a long dirt path around the rocks.

From above, Shail surveyed his surroundings under the huge dome. Kari had explained the dome protected humans from the sun’s radiation, whatever that was. His bird blood searched for a forest, but there was none. Only a few scattered trees grew in the vast, massive city. Dismal gray buildings covered the ground, mixed with white stone monuments—reminders of man’s

egotistical nature to conquer all. The structures were so high that they competed in height with the colorful trees of his home.

Shail had seen towns on Dora, but the Earth city left him astonished. Truly, humans were very different from his species. Like ants, they covered and destroyed the vegetation with giant mounds of square rocks; whereas his harpies were like birds, building temporary nests that blew apart in the windy, wet season, leaving no mark on the jungle.

Hovercrafts of all sizes buzzed in the huge city canyons. He shook his long locks, realizing that the land was no place for any wild creature.

He glanced down at the racing vehicle. The pleasant diversion of flight released his competitive golden nature. He sniffled and flapped harder, passing the transport to prove he was the king of speed.

“Man, you’re fast, faster than a hover,” Keith yelled excitedly.

Shail toyed and dipped and heard Keith’s laughter as the transport reached top velocity. Shail could run the old, decrepit vehicle into the ground. Keith brought the vehicle to a stop at the summit and got out to watch Shail circle overhead, his long, outstretched legs acting like a bird’s tail turning, slowing and stopping him in flight. After three wide circles, Shail heard the man calling, asking him to come down. Shail fluttered and landed some distance away. Keith coaxed him closer with the chain, but at the vehicle, he balked and glared at the rake.

Keith glanced at the rake and smiled. "I'm not going to swing it at you again. Come here."

Shail cautiously tiptoed to the vehicle. He sniffled and hissed at the stick weapon, making his handler chuckle. Keith stroked Shail's neck and praised him for doing well.

"You truly are magnificent," Keith said. "With your speed and agility, I can see why you're such an elusive creature for hunters."

Shail tilted his head as if not understanding and then eagerly gazed upward.

Keith answered the silent question. "That's enough flying for one day. I don't want your wings drooping and sore." He drove slowly toward the building, with Shail drifting on the man-made wind currents.

Back at the building, Keith replaced the chain with the leash and led Shail back to the cage. "Dr. Moss said you could probably fly all day without breaking a sweat. I believe it." Released from the leash, Shail drank a little water and slipped into the straw. His son approached him apprehensively.

*"Come to me, Will."* Shail hugged and nuzzled his little fledgling. For too long, he had been self-absorbed in his own misery and neglected his duties as a father. It was time to get over the horrific experience. The freedom of flight had made him happy and improved his mental health.

Over the next week, Keith took the male flying every day. Shail no longer had to be coaxed from the cage, but instead nudged Keith to snap the leash to his collar.

Keith was glad that his diligence was paying off. The harpy's fear faded with the return of his dignity. Director Green stopped by a few times to check on the harpies. Keith reported that allowing the male to fly was building his confidence. At the end of the week, he started taking the female and fledgling on these outings. The female was showing signs of her pregnancy under the worn cloth dress, so Keith kept her in the vehicle on a short leash. The fledgling roamed freely in the transport, eyes glued to his flying father.

At the top of the hill, Keith would stop and watch the baby harpy flap his wings and leap to the ground in an attempt to be airborne. Unfortunately, his small wings still lacked the necessary feather length.

At the close of each day, other zoo employees gathered at the gate to witness the distant harpy show. All wondered when the handsome creatures would be put on display. When Keith left for the night, someone was always waiting to ask him about the winged hybrids. He began to feel like a Hollywood press agent rather than a zookeeper.

After two weeks, Shail had become more brazen with Keith on the excursions. Instead of standing docilely by the parked vehicle, he would pace, toss his hair, and flap his wings. At first

Keith was leery of his threatening behavior, never forgetting that the slinky male was deadly and had easily subdued him and four others aboard the ship. He then figured out that Shail's behavior was a friendly challenge. Keith would rush at him, and the harpy would playfully dodge him, sometimes striking him with a wing or a foot and sending him to the ground, though injuring only Keith's ego.

Keith glanced at the male's shock collar, the only thing that protected him from a lethal attack. "Come here, Shail, and hold still," he said and removed the collar. With tape from the vehicle toolbox, he covered the shock plates. The harpy could have flown away, but trust had grown between them.

"There," Keith said as he replaced the collar on Shail's neck. "I can't hurt you when I press the collar remote, and neither can anyone else."

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Shail fell into the pleasant routine of daily flight and having his family with him, but he kept his guard up. He had learned that nothing lasted. Like the weather, good came with bad, and each new master could bring sun or rain. Kari, as usual, was more optimistic. She tried to reassure him that Mrs. Roth still protected them, even though from far away. He nodded in agreement but did not feel protected. His fears were justified late one evening.

The door opened, and the lights came on. Shail saw Green

enter like a ghoulish creature who came only at night. A man and a woman were with him.

Shail was still leery of Green. He retreated from the nest to the farthest corner and watched the humans. Kari sat up and hissed at Green as Will, lacking the caution of his parents, was curious about the newcomers.

“Here they are,” Green said. “And there’s the fledgling. He’s been raised in captivity and will make an excellent pet, Mr. and Mrs. Howard.”

“He’s adorable,” the woman exclaimed. “Oh, honey, I must have him. The girls at the club will be so jealous.” She looked at Shail standing in the corner. “Is that his father?”

“Yes, he’s the stud we’re using for our first crop of fledglings,” Green said.

“He’s exquisite. Is he for sale?”

“Afraid not, he’s straight from the jungle, and wild. He could never be domesticated for home use.”

“Yes, dear, you’d love to tie him to your bed,” Mr. Howard grumbled, “but we’re here for the baby. Three million is a lot for a pet.”

“It is,” Green said, “but you’ll be the first on the planet to own a rare golden fledgling. You have a few months to decide. He’s not weaned yet, but he’ll be available after the zoo’s quarterly board meeting. I will, however, need a deposit to hold him for you.”

Kari looked from the lavishly dressed woman dripping

with jewels to Shail. *“You were right. We are not safe.”*

The woman stooped down to eye level with Will. “Come here, baby,” she called. Knowing the word “come,” he headed toward her as she put her arm through the bars to pet him.

“Don’t put your hand in the cage,” Green voiced, but too late. Like a cat defending her kitten, Kari leaped toward the bars. With one hand, she sent Will tumbling backward into the straw as her other hand clawed the woman’s arm. The woman screamed and jerked her bleeding arm out of the cage. Green grabbed a towel to stanch the blood.

“What the hell are you trying to sell us?” the husband yelled with his arm around his injured wife. “You said these creatures were gentle.”

“The fledgling is gentle,” Green feebly explained, wrapping the towel around her arm. “I told you in advance that the parents were wild and not to get close to the cage.”

“You’ll pay for this, Green,” the husband retorted. “You can keep your lousy harpies.” He helped his wife up from the floor. “Come, dear, I’ll get you to a hospital.”

“I’m so sorry,” Green uttered as the couple hurried from the room. Before turning off the lights, he glared at Kari. “Your turn’s coming, bitch,” he sneered and slammed the door.

Shail picked up his frightened son to comfort him as Kari paced the cage, shaking with rage. She stopped and glared at him. “Do you understand what’s happening, Shail?” she hollered, using her voice for the first time since leaving Dora. “Green plans to sell

Will and rape me with his machines. He must somehow know that the zoo board will clear him of wrongdoing, and even Mrs. Roth will be no help when he controls us again. Damn it, you *are* a golden harpy. It's time you act like one and defend your family."

Kari's loud, cutting words penetrated to his core. He placed Will on the straw and straightened. "*I shall be as you wish, Kari.*"

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Early the next morning, Keith entered the harpy room with a smile. "Good morning, guys." He frowned when none of the harpies moved off the nest and greeted him, as was normal. The male was curled up, and his female and fledgling were under his wing. He raised his head and his brilliant blue eyes narrowed, glaring at Keith.

"What's wrong with you?" Keith asked when entering the cage to retrieve the food bowl.

Shail now made a low, seething sound that resembled an angry snake. He ruffled his feathers and shook his locks.

Keith nervously backed out of the cage. "What the devil happened to you last night?" The male was clearly provoked and poised to attack. Keith then saw blood spatter on the floor outside the cage. Believing one of the harpies was hurt, he threw caution aside and rushed back into the cage. Shail struck him with his outstretched wing and sent Keith backwards into the straw. The blow was mild, meant to warn, not harm. Keith slowly righted



himself. “Easy, Shail, I just want to see if one of you is injured.” To show trust, he moved his hand toward the aggravated harpy. “Please, Shail, you know I’d never hurt you or your family.”

The male finally lowered his head and let Keith pet him, but his anxious stare conveyed that something had indeed happened the previous night.

The door of the room opened, and Green strolled in. “Keith,” he said with surprise. “I didn’t expect you this early. It’s only seven o’clock.”

“I always come early.” Keith stood up and gazed at the director with mistrust. The bigger question was, why was Green visiting the harpies at this hour? “Something happened to the harpies last night. They’re extremely upset, and there’s blood on the floor.”

“Yes, I know all about it. That’s why I’m here checking on them. The harpies are fine, but unfortunately, I made the mistake of showing them to some friends,” he said, approaching the cage. “The woman tried to pet the fledgling, and—”

Shail launched from the nest to seize Green through the bars.

Keith quickly shoved the charging harpy and foiled his assault. Shail recoiled, hissed, and flapped his wings. For a brief moment, it appeared he would jump Keith.

“Stop that, Shail,” Keith yelled, standing up to the tall, intimidating harpy. “You’re angry about your kid, but don’t take it out on me.” Shail shook his head and released a hissing huff. He

turned away from Keith and focused on Green.

“There, now, take it easy,” Keith said and rubbed the harpy’s neck to calm him. He glanced at Green. “I find it hard to believe he’d hurt a woman.”

“He didn’t. It was the female who scratched my lady friend’s arm.”

“I believe that,” Keith said with a chuckle. “She’s a terror when it comes to defending her baby. She clawed me good.” He smiled and patted Kari’s head. “Didn’t you, girl?”

Green held his jaw, watching Keith interact with the harpies. “You’ve developed a real bond with them, but you need to be careful, Keith. The zookeepers who become complacent and too trusting with their charges end up injured or dead. Wild animals are unpredictable. The male is a perfect example, docile last night, and today he tries to attack me. I want you to keep the remote for his shock collar with you at all times. It could save your life. Also, test the transmitter before taking him outside.”

After Green left, Keith fed the harpies and noted that even the outgoing fledgling was shaken and sought his mother’s arms. “I think I got a half-truth out of that man. He did something last night to scare your baby and make you both hostile.”

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After a few days, Keith and the harpies resumed their daily routine. The com in the harpy room buzzed. Dr. Green’s secretary

appeared on the screen and informed Keith that the director wished to see him in his office.

Green sat at his desk as Keith entered. "I'm still rather concerned about you. You are using the remote when you handle the harpies?"

"Yes, sir," Keith said.

"It's not just for your safety. If the male hurts you or anyone else, he'll be destroyed immediately. It's our policy, and even Mrs. Roth couldn't save him. We don't want that."

"No, sir."

"The other reason you're here is that the female is due for a checkup on her fetus. Dr. Moss will arrive around five when the zoo closes and the male is outside flying. The pregnancy monitor can get a reading through the cage bars, so she won't be touch or stressed, but everything will go smoother if the stud is not in the way. Once it's done, I'll call and you can bring him back in. Don't want you walking in on us with him only on a restraining leash."

Keith nodded and left.

Back at the harpy room, Keith placed a call to Gary, his supervisor in livestock. "How are my goats treating you?" Keith asked with a grin.

"Are you calling to gloat now that you've moved up and are taking care of those fancy harpies?"

"Actually, I need some advice," Keith said. "My boy is back, feisty as ever. A couple of days ago, he tried to attack Dr. Green, not that I blame him. The man did put him through hell

with those machines. What I want to know is if this was an isolated incident, or if he's vicious with others."

"So you need a guinea pig?"

"You got it."

"I'll bring two," Gary said. "My girlfriend, Sally, is meeting me for lunch, and she's been dying to see them."

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At noon, Keith meandered down the path toward the locked gate. Up ahead he saw Gary, his mentor. The forty-year-old's tall, lean frame rested against the bars and reminded Keith of an old-fashioned cowboy, fit enough to wrestle a horse, yet he had a laid-back gentleness with animals. Keith longed to emulate him. With Gary was his long-time girlfriend, Sally. "Thanks for coming over," Keith called.

"Sally's seen your harpies at a distance, but she's been hankering for a closer look," Gary said as Keith unlocked gate and escorted them to the harpy room. Keith watched with apprehension as Shail rose, ruffled the straw from his feathers, and approached the bars to look at the newcomers. He tilted his head with curiosity, but made no threats.

"Oh, Keith, they're so beautiful," Sally said and petted the fledgling through the bars. The female harpy nibbled on nuts and docilely watched.

"Just like I figured," said Keith. "It's Green who sets them

off. They sense something's not right with him.”

“Animals can be funny,” said Gary. “A certain smell, a hat, a nervous twitch can send them into a panic or induce an attack. I’m not a fan of Green’s either; too squirrely and full of shit for my taste, but just because your harpies don’t like him, doesn’t mean he’s up to something. As for your experiment, I have Billy goats with more attitude than these harpies.”

“Yes, your harpies are not only sweeter and prettier than Gary’s livestock, but they smell better.” Sally stood after playing with the fledgling. “Thanks for letting me see them, Keith, but I have to get back to the office. The zoo is swamped with new arrivals, and I need to process their paperwork. I filed the insurance policy on the harpies, and did you know they’re the most expensive animals in the zoo? They’re insured for six million, and the male is worth four.”

“Wow,” said Gary. “For that kind of change, you’d better take good care of them.”

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After the zoo closed, Keith put the leash on the male. The female stood, and the fledgling bounded to the cage door, expecting to go with them. “Sorry, girl,” he said. “Only Shail goes outside today.” He held the fledgling back and led the male out.

At the hilltop, Keith parked the small ground vehicle in the shade of the massive boulders and stepped out to watch Shail fly.

After a half-hour, Shail landed near Keith and gave him a friendly shoulder shove. “So you want to play around,” Keith said with a chuckle. “This time you’re ending up in the dirt.” Shail normally arched his wings, preparing for the rough-and-tumble play, but his intense stare was focused on the distant city. He tossed his locks and made a subtle hiss.

“What is it, Shail?” Keith asked. He then saw what had spiked the harpy’s interest. A small hovercraft flew directly toward them. “It’s just sightseers. No reason to get rattled.” The hovercraft landed a short distance from the boulders, and a heavysset man in a black jacket stepped out. “I’m sorry, sir,” Keith called to him. “This is zoo property, and it’s illegal to land here.”

Shail was not as polite and made his threat known. He arched his wings and hissed loudly as the man smiled and approached them. “For your safety, please return to your hover! This harpy is dangerous, and you’re upsetting him,” Keith voiced and nervously gripped the harpy’s chain, wondering if he had the strength to contain Shail. He was more concerned about the harpy’s welfare if he hurt the man. The man ignored Keith’s warning, and two more men exited the hover, making matters worse. “Back off. Return to your hover,” Keith yelled. “This harpy will attack you.”

“Actually, we’re here for the harpy,” the heavy man said. He drew a laser gun from beneath his jacket and pointed it at Keith. “Just do as you’re told, kid, and you won’t get hurt.”

“Fly, Shail,” Keith whispered and let go of his chain. He

lunged toward the zoo transport and hit the chain release switch. When the man saw what Keith had done, he fired his weapon. Keith felt the laser blast hit his side and crumpled behind the transport. “Go, go, Shail!” he cried, holding his wound.

Instead of taking to the air, Shail stepped between Keith and the man, so livid that he fiercely flapped his wings and shuddered with rage. The harpy was preparing to defend him. “No, goddamn it!” Keith screamed at him. “I told you to fly!”

With an irritated snuffle, Shail leaped into the air. The three men raced after his loose chain that dragged across the ground, but the harpy was too swift. Losing the option of pulling down the harpy, one man fired his laser gun at Shail.

“Don’t shoot it,” yelled the heavy man and obvious leader of the trio. “Find the collar remote! We’ll get him that way.” One man ran back to the zoo vehicle. Preoccupied with the harpy, they overlooked Keith as he stumbled among the mass of boulders and hid.

“Got it,” the man called from the vehicle and pointed the remote at the harpy who soared above them. He pressed the keys and frowned. “The shocks aren’t working. He must be out of range.”

“Go get the stun rifle out of the hover,” the leader ordered the second man. “We’ll bring him down that way.” One guy ran back to the hover. He aimed at Shail and fired.

Shail felt the stun blast that hit his outstretched wing. The

slight sting traveled through his feather veins into his wing muscles. He disregarded the numbing pain and kept his focus on the men below. The heavy man trudged toward the hover and the second man who held the rifle as the third pursued Keith into the rocks. Shail saw his wounded handler try to conceal himself among the boulders, but the stalker was nearing him.

A second blast zipped past Shail's head. Desperate to save Keith, Shail plummeted from the sky in an unnatural spiral. He hit the dusty path on the hilltop, a good distance from the men and rocks. He rolled a little and lay still.

"Got him," yelled the man with the rifle.

"Forget him," barked the leader at the man pursuing Keith. "After the harpy is on board, we'll come back and finish the kid off." The three men climbed into their hover, intending to fly to their prize that lay stunned on the hill.

Once the hover was airborne, Shail stood and extended one wing on the ground so it appeared broken. He gathered the chain in his hands and thought, *Come to me, foolish men.*

As the hover approached, he walked up the path, fluttering and dragging his seemingly damaged wing, to make sure the men fell for the bait. The hover maneuvered closer to get a final clear shot.

Shail was playing one of the oldest tricks in the bird world. Even a small quail knew how to flutter on the ground and pretend it was injured to entice a predator away from her chicks. Acting like a decoy, he lured the men away from Keith. When the hover



was nearly overhead, Shail leaped a few feet off the ground and shot past them. “Shoot him! Shoot him! He was faking,” one of the men screamed.

Shail flew back to the zoo vehicle. Soaring low, he snatched out the rake—the same rake that had once terrified him. He flapped upward as the hover followed. He staggered his flight, becoming a blurry target as laser stuns blew by. When he was nearly a mile up, the blasts stopped. Like all hunters, these men wanted him alive. If he were stunned unconscious at this height, the fall would kill him. He felt the slight tingling shocks through the tape on his collar. A few good shocks would have crippled him without knocking him out, but these men didn’t know that Keith had applied the tape and protected him from this fate.

He glanced over his wing at the men. *You sought to bring me down, but it is you who shall fall.* He folded his wings against his back and plunged into a nosedive. Once past the hover, he fluttered to stop his descent and flew up under the craft. He heard the alarmed men inside.

“Where’d he go?”

“He’s right under us! He’s clinging to the landing gear.”

Shail spotted the small opening in the mechanism that kept a hover airborne and jammed the rake handle into it, as Ted had taught him back in Terrance. The hover engine made a sheering and grinding sound as the whirling blades locked. He frantically flapped, narrowly dodging the plummeting hover and its screaming crew. He fluttered in place and watched as the hover crashed on

the hillside and burst into flames.

Shail rushed back to Keith and found him leaning against a rock. The young man breathed hard and held his blood-soaked shirt and side. With a pale face and shocked eyes, he stared at the burning hover and gasped. “You saved me, Shail.”

Shail knew that Keith had also saved him by taping over the shock plates in his collar, and he risked his life to free Shail’s chain. Shail placed his hand on Keith’s shoulder and gazed with concern at his wound.

“I’ll be okay,” Keith said.

Shail jerked his head up at the sound of approaching transports. The first vehicle held Dr. Moss and Green, but Shail focused on the weapon in Green’s hand. Regardless of the fact that he had protected Keith, he knew how men thought and the consequences of killing them. If Shail returned to the zoo, the men would execute him for being deadly. He gathered up the chain and gently cupped Keith’s face. The young man’s eyes widened with comprehension. “Don’t go, Shail. Stay here. You can’t survive out there.”

With an ever-so-slight head shake, he spread his wings and bounded upward into the sky-less dome. Soaring high above, he watched the activity below.

Keith clutched his wound and looked skyward at the circling harpy overhead. Green and the vet zipped up in another grounds vehicle. “What happened?” Green asked, leaping out.

“There are three men in that burning hover,” said Keith. “They shot me and tried to steal the harpy.”

While Dr. Moss examined Keith’s wound, Green tore through Keith’s vehicle. “Where’s the remote for the harpy’s collar? We need to stun him and bring him down.”

“You can’t shock him when he’s that high,” Dr. Moss said. “He’ll break his neck.”

“I don’t care,” Green said excitedly. “It’s a killer and knows how to disable a hover, just like those harpies on Dora that murdered eighty-seven hunters. I don’t want to be responsible when it destroys a hovercraft full of innocent people.”

Keith watched the hysterical director search his zoo vehicle. “The remote is gone,” he said weakly. “Those men took it, and it burned up in their hover.”

“Then I have no choice but to shoot him down.” Green aimed his weapon and fired at the harpy with the gun set on blast, rather than stun.

“Don’t kill him!” Keith cried out. “He was just protecting me.” He was relieved when Green missed his target and the harpy retreated into the expansive city.

A small ambulance hover landed and transported Keith to a hospital. Gary accompanied him. The authorities arrived and took Keith’s brief statement in the emergency room. They said that the bodies of the thieves were unrecognizable, and their identity would have to be established through the global DNA bank.

As the doctor treated his laser wound, Keith struggled to

rise. "I need to go, Gary. Dr. Green is going to kill Shail. The harpy trusts me, and I can call him down."

"You're not going anywhere except into surgery," said the doctor. "That's a bad injury."

"Lie still and let this doctor do his work," said Gary. "Green excites easily. He's not about to kill that valuable animal. They'll get another remote and track him with the collar transmitter. Once he's at a safe height, they'll give him a good shock and knock him down. Relax, he won't be harmed."

Keith stared up with anxiety. "The transmitter works, but I taped over the shock bands. They can find him but can't bring him down."

Gary frowned. "Why on Earth did you do that?"

"He's suffered enough. I didn't want him hurt again. Have I condemned him to death, Gary?"

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Shail soared high above the city to avoid the numerous hovercrafts that flew over the streets. At such an elevation, the air was chilly. He landed on the roof of a large building and waited for night. Under cover of darkness, he would explore the modern world. It was the harpy way to avoid hunters. He pulled at the collar and chain, but without the keyed remote, they would not come off. He settled down on the hard surface, curled up, and covered himself with his warm feathers. Through the film that

enclosed the city, he watched the sun slowly sink into the horizon. He had hoped to savor a dazzling sunset, but his reward was a dull, colorless sky. He shivered with the coming of night, not used to the cool, inhospitable climate. He sadly realized that no beauty or comfort existed for a tropical creature under the dome. Perhaps the outside was more promising.

Shail decided to search for a way out of the city. If he could find a safe haven for his family, he would return to the zoo and free them. This was his plan, but it held a lot of ifs. He regretted deserting Kari and Will, but better to flee and stay alive for their sake. He detected that Green had no long-term plans for his life. Darkness came, and the air became colder. He crossed his arms and shivered under his feathers.

Over the prior weeks, Shail had noticed the days becoming cooler and shorter, which perplexed him. Dora had long, warm days year round, even during the wet season. With his freedom, Shail began to fine-tune his animal senses. He frequently sniffed the stale air for signs of danger. The atmosphere dried out his nostrils and lips, and he longed for the soothing, moist air of his jungle home.

Late at night, Shail saw that Earth humans were nocturnal; many still roamed the streets under the bright city lights. Tired of waiting for total darkness, he took to the air. His first priority was to escape the vast plastic dome that shielded the city. He reached the high dome and fluttered in place, hitting the wall with his fists. He quickly discovered that it was hard, solid, and impenetrable.

Next he sought a way under the dome. He flew to several isolated locations where the plastic met the ground. In each place, the wall was encased in an ugly, gray stone. The next logical move was to find an airport, but he observed that the hovers never left the city. Crafts from other cities and planets landed outside the dome, and humans and their vehicles entered through a series of guarded gates. Even a small bird couldn't escape through those. With the approach of dawn, Shail realized he was trapped.

Growing a little hungry, he flew from tree to tree in search of food. Instead of leaves, the trees consisted of small pins that hurt his feet, and their pencil-thin branches could not support his weight. Other trees bore small leaves of red, gold, and yellow, but nothing of use to a hungry harpy. He craved the large multicolored fan leaves of Dora that were soft, strong and full of fruits and nuts.

At dawn, Shail flew to the zoo before the humans arrived. Setting down on the breeding building, he called telepathically to Kari.

*"Shail, I'm worried about you. Gary and his girlfriend, Sally, checked on us last night, and I overheard that Keith was shot and you escaped after killing three men."*

*"Those men tried to kill Keith, so I took their lives instead. Regardless of my reasons, I have proven myself dangerous, and Green wants my death. I shall search for a way out of this city bubble. If found, I shall return for you and Will."*

*"Gary is a good man, so do not worry for us. Only protect yourself."*

*“The light rises; I must leave.”* Using his foot, he fretfully pawed at the rooftop. *“Already I miss you and Will.”* Hearing a door open and voices, he bounded into the morning sky. He landed on the ledge of another large building and curled up in a ball to stay warm. He shut his eyes and slept.

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At midmorning, Shail woke to the sound of hovers converging on the building. Seeing three green zoo hovers, he pulled in his wings in an attempt to hide under the ledge, but the hovers zeroed in on his location, seeming to know he was there. With no choice but to flee, he grabbed the coiled chain, pressed his wings tightly against his back, and dove off the building. He shot past the stationary hovers. Just before colliding with the ground, he spread his wings like a parachute and fluttered to break his fall. He flew swiftly between the buildings, nearly colliding with several other hovers that filled the city canyons in daylight. He came upon a grassy area and saw a small foot bridge over a water basin. No one was on the sidewalk or bridge, so he dove under it and hid. He leaned against the stone pilings and caught his breath, confident that no air transport could have possibly followed him.

After a few minutes, he knelt and sipped the nasty water. He then saw the three zoo hovers coming around a building. They headed straight toward the bridge and him. He waited as long as he dared and dashed back into the sky. He felt the vibrating and mild

stings on his neck from his collar. If not for the protective tape over the shock bands, he would crumble into submission. Once again the chase was on, but Shail easily evaded the hovers, which were forced to join with the heavy sky traffic.

Green feverishly pushed the keys on the new remote and cursed in frustration when the shock collar failed to disable the harpy. “Get your laser guns out,” he radioed the other crafts. “This remote must be defective. The shocks aren’t working.”

“Blasts or stuns?” asked one of the pilots.

“Blasts. They have more distance. I don’t care if he’s killed. This harpy is deadly and can’t be loose in the city.”

In Green’s hover, a man sat in the back seat with a flat screen in his lap. “I’m picking up his signal. Up ahead on our right; he’s on the twelfth floor of that parking garage,” he said and looked back at the tracking screen. “Only problem, the building is for vehicles. Our hovers can’t fit in there.” The three hovers circled the giant garage several times in the hope they would flush the harpy out, but it remained hidden among the parked vehicles. The man looked at the screen. “He hasn’t budged. Our circling isn’t intimidating him.”

Green contacted the other two hovers. “Land on the roof and take him on foot. We’ll wait outside and nail him in case he gets past you.”

Two hovers landed on the rooftop of the twenty-floor building, and four zoo employees in green uniforms hopped out as



Green's hover floated outside the twelfth floor. Shortly, one of the men radioed Green. "We're here in the garage," he whispered, "but don't see the harpy. And Dr. Green, there's a lot of foot traffic, people with kids. I'm not comfortable using blasts."

"Fine, switch to stun," Green grumbled. "According to the transmitter, he's hiding between the several vehicles in the southwest corner." With binoculars, Green saw his men with drawn weapons move in pairs as they carefully converged on the harpy's location. The crouched harpy suddenly stood. "There he is! I see him!"

The harpy sprang into the air, but instead of retreating, he flew swiftly above the vehicles toward the two closest men. His outstretched wings caught them in the chest and knocked them to the pavement. When he reached the outside, he somersaulted into the eighth-level floor. He moved so fast, no one had time to fire a shot.

"Son of a bitch," Green raged as the pilot steered toward the eighth level. Green's communicator buzzed, and his secretary appeared on the screen. "What?" he snapped. "I'm busy with this damn harpy."

"Sorry, Dr. Green, but it's important," she said. "The livestock supervisor was here, and he's learned that Keith Williams taped over the shock bands on the harpy's collar. Your request for another remote is a waste of time. Also, the head of security said he downloaded last night's surveillance tapes. The harpy was here. The film shows he landed on the breeding building and left in the

morning.”

“Really?” Green said. “Have security place motion-sensitive cameras on all the rooftops. If we fail to bring him today, tell the guards to meet me this evening with rifles.”

The lethal cat-and-mouse game continued throughout the afternoon. Even with three hovers humming outside the building and Green’s men racing between the floors, the harpy could easily sidestep them. Irritated, Green told his men to call it a day. “We’ll get him tonight.”

At dusk, Shail watched the departing hovers. He flew to the top of a building and curled up for a nap. Late at night, he resumed his search for a way out of the dome. He considered returning to the zoo to check on his family but decided against it. Being consistent was fatal for the hunted. To drink daily at the same watering hole or graze the same meadow, an animal became a reliable target for predators and men. Kari and Will were with Gary, Keith’s previous supervisor, and that man would protect and take good care of his family.

The daylong chase had shown that the zoo men were able to track his movement. He was unfamiliar with the word and mechanics of a transmitter, but he concluded the thing in his collar was leading the men to him. The domed city confined his movement, and the humans could follow his invisible footprints. With these restrictions, he dismally realized his freedom was temporary.

He settled down on a building and tried to remove the collar and long, cumbersome chain. Unversed in the use of tools, he chewed on the chain and rubbed the collar against a sharp stone ledge. With dim morning light suffusing the sky, he gave up and rested. Another long day awaited him.

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A weary Green collapsed in his office chair after staying up all night and checking on the zoo stakeout for the harpy. At dawn, the head of security reported in. “Sorry, Dr. Green, the motion-sensor cameras didn’t detect any activity. Maybe we’ll have better luck tomorrow night.”

Green dismissed the guard with a hand wave. Jack Jones had warned that the golden male was fast, smart, and dangerous, and should be kept chained and caged. Green was learning firsthand. The harpy had made a mockery of Green’s hunt. Besides killing the three thieves, he had hit the two zookeepers in the parking garage with the full force of his wings. Luckily, the men only suffered from lumps, scrapes, and bruises.

Green punched in the com numbers for New York. Jack Jones appeared on the screen as loud music blared in the background. “Those three men you hired to steal the harpy are dead.”

“How did that happen?”

“Keith disarmed the shock collar and freed the harpy’s

chain. When your men chased after it, the harpy got under their hover and brought it down, just like on Dora. Now the creature is loose in the city. I need you back here to catch him before he kills more people.”

“Said you’d be begging for my help,” Jack said with a grin. “That slip of a male is resourceful. Unfortunately, you’ve caught me at a bad time. My browns arrived, and I’m busy setting them up in this night club. You’ll have to deal with the golden on your own.”

“I’ve been dealing with him,” Green said. “Yesterday, three hovers pursued him throughout the city, and I sat up all night with the guards, hoping he’d come back to the zoo. Since the zoo lacks the manpower and hovers to corner him, I’ll have to get the police involved.”

“Doubt the cops’ll help,” Jack said. “I clocked that harpy on Dora. He’s fast; can easily outfly a hovercraft. Plus he’s been hunted all his life, knows how to get away clean. Only sheer luck will bring that one down.”

“How did you catch him on Dora?”

“I baited him with his family,” Jack said. “It’s the only foolproof way to catch a stud. Lots of professional hunters use the fledglings as decoys. Trouble is, the golden is wise to that trick and knows his fledgling is safe at the zoo.”

“He was here the other night.”

“If he came back once, he’ll come again,” Jack said. “I suggest you stop chasing and scaring him. Let him relax, then get a

sharpshooter to nail him at the zoo. That's what I'd do."

"I can't wait until he relaxes," Green barked. "He might bring down other hovercrafts and kill more people."

Jack chuckled. "He's not going to harm innocent bystanders. He's only dangerous if he's cornered and hurt."

"He had no problem attacking and murdering your Dora friends."

"That is strange," Jack said. "Normally, he should've just fled. Something must've set him off."

"Keith Williams was wounded by a laser blast when he released the harpy's chain."

"That explains it," Jack said. "Golden harpies are fearless when it comes to defending their flock. Your kid and the harpy must've gotten pretty close. If you don't get him in a few weeks, I'll fly in."

"A few weeks? I hope to have him before then." Disgruntled, Green disconnected.

Green's next call was to the police department and the sergeant handling the case of the three dead thieves. "Sergeant, I've run into trouble recapturing the harpy. Its shock collar isn't working, and the zoo doesn't have the hovers to corner it. Besides, my zookeepers aren't marksmen. They're used to shooting tranquilizer guns at caged animals. You see my problem?"

"I talked to your injured handler, Williams," said the sergeant. "He claims the animal is harmless and only attacked because the men shot him. Williams says that he'll call it in when

he gets out of the hospital in a week. Makes a lot of sense to me.”

“Are you going to listen to some kid or the zoo director?” Green said. “That harpy is a proven killer. If it attacks again, you’ll have a lot of explaining to do.”

“I suppose you have a point. I’ll send some officers and hovers to the zoo in an hour.”

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By midmorning, Shail had six hovercrafts on his tail as they tracked him through the city. Once again, he took to the parking garages, where man and hover had to separate, to roust him from the vehicles. This time hovers surrounded the buildings, and each held a man with a deadly weapon. Far more footmen penetrated the garages.

Shail leaped off a high building and dove toward the street. A barrage of laser blasts hit the walls behind him. Just over the street, he fluttered stationary. Earth humans screamed and fled, since they had never seen a harpy. He zoomed down alleys to converge with the human throngs again, knowing his pursuers were reluctant to shoot into crowds. More than once he landed among terrified groups of people, hissing to keep them away as he stared up at the irritated hunters floating above him. After resting briefly, he would dart off to another location.

Shail set down near a human eating place and waited for the pursuing blue hovers that had joined the zoo green ones. He

panted and wiped the sweat from his brow. Some people edged closer for a better look at him. “The poor thing,” said a woman. “He’s exhausted.”

Four young businessmen also closed in. “Yeah, he’s beat,” one of them said. “Hell, let’s grab him. He’s nothing but a string bean.”

Another man hesitated. “The paper said he’s dangerous and to stay away from him. Let the police handle it.” The rest smirked and moved in.

Shail arched his wings and hissed aggressively. His eyes shifted from the lame city dwellers to the seasoned police who approached in hovers. The three businessmen rushed him, but he fluttered off the sidewalk. His kicking feet connected with two noses, and a wing brought down the third man. He uncoiled his airborne body and started to set down when a laser shot from above hit his leg. He frantically flew up again and zipped down an alley at full speed. Dust and garbage rose from dumpsters and littered the air in his wake. He was going nearly a hundred miles an hour when he banked onto a side street. He glanced over his wing for the hovers, but none followed at breakneck speed.

The fright and leg injury taught Shail a valuable lesson. He had been lulled into believing that the crowd would lend protection and the men wouldn’t shoot at him. A hunted harpy couldn’t afford to make the same mistake twice. Never again would he let a police hover come that close. He moved to the building tops, where he could see and hear an impending hover. Once the police and zoo

hovers zeroed in on his location and flew in unison toward him, he dashed across the city. They were forced to re-pinpoint his whereabouts. They tried spreading out, but Shail blew through their lines before they could converge on him. Evening brought a halt to the hunt as the chasing hovers disappeared. He realized Earthlings were like Dora hunters and disliked the night hunt.

After an hour of reassurance, he settled down on a building ledge and pulled up his leg to examine his injury. The blast had only grazed him, but the wound hurt and made him lame. He was tired and hadn't eaten in days. To add to his misery, the weather had become colder.

He sniffed the air and smelled the aroma of cooking food. Soaring down to ground level, he landed in a quiet, warm alley. He limped down the cluttered street, the scent drawing him to a building with a dim light above its back door. He saw an old man in tattered clothes digging through a trash bin. The human posed no threat, so Shail crept closer. The man grumbled to himself and pulled a stale slice of bread from the container. Shail sniffled to get his attention, hoping the man would share the food.

The bum turned from the garbage and saw Shail. "Holy shit!" he said with a gasp. He stumbled backward and crashed into more trash cans.

The racket startled Shail, and he fluttered into the blackness. He watched the frightened man scramble to his feet and search the gloomy alley.

"What are you? Who are you?" the man called but got no



answer. “Must’ve been a delusion. Lousy rot-gut wine,” the old guy grumbled and returned to the trash. Shail sniffled from his hiding place.

The man stopped digging and stared hard into the shadows. “Who’s there? Come out, damn it.”

Shail had hidden between stacked boxes, but he slipped into the faint light and tiptoed toward the man.

When the man saw Shail and his yellow wings, his mouth dropped open. “My God, you’re an angel.” Reverently, he fell to his knees and bowed his head.

Shail curiously tilted his head. Only his flock honored him in such a way. He stepped to the man and placed his hand on the human’s shoulder.

The bum looked up at him. “Have you come to take me to heaven?”

Shail was unfamiliar with the word heaven, but perhaps it was a warm, safe place with food. Noting the bread in the man’s hand, he focused on it and sniffled in a begging manner.

“You want this?” The man smiled and handed the bread to Shail. Starved, Shail wolfed it down in two bites.

“You’re hungry,” the man said, rising from his knees. “There’s better stuff than that in those cans. Come on, angel.” He returned to the trash as Shail hobbled behind him. Under the light, the man frowned when seeing Shail’s bloody leg wound. “That’s a blast. Who on Earth would shoot an angel?” He handed the Shail an overripe orange. He eagerly gobbled the fruit, peel and all, and

sniffled for more. The man chuckled. “You come with me. I’ll take you home and feed you good. And I have the stuff to fix that wound.”

Encouraged with the promise of food, Shail followed his newfound friend. As the man led the way through dark alleys, he asked questions, but Shail did not respond. “Seems angels don’t talk much,” he mustered, “or maybe you don’t know English. I used to be an altar boy but forgot my Latin.”

They came to a warehouse district with dilapidated buildings. Up ahead on a dead-end street, a dozen men stood around a fire that burned in a trash can. Shail halted and stared with apprehension at the crude strangers. That many men could easily overpower him in his weary state.

The old man noticed Shail no longer followed him. “Don’t be scared of them. Those boys won’t hurt you.” He walked back to Shail and gently took his hand. “Come on, they’re going to get a kick out of seeing you.”

Reluctantly, Shail hobbled toward the shabby men, their rugged faces eliminated by the small blaze that warmed them. Their low voices and the occasional chuckle filled the dark air. Since harpies were social creatures that dwelled in flocks, Shail longed to be among them, but the wingless distant cousins had unpredictable natures.

“Look what I found in the trash, fellas,” the old man said as he and Shail emerged from the shadows. “It’s my guardian angel.” Some men fearfully backed away, while others dropped to their

knees in prayer. “Get up,” the old man scowled. “He doesn’t care about your problems. He’s my angel.”

The old man led Shail past the men and into an abandoned building filled with rusted machines. Dirty and broken windows rose to an immense ceiling. The men followed the unlikely pair. Shail stepped over trash while uneasily glancing over his wing at them.

Noticing, the old man turned on his heels and growled at the men. “You’re spooking him! Back off, or he’ll fly away.” The men moved away, giving Shail space. He was led to a worn mattress on the floor, and his friend tried to coax him to lie down.

Anxious in a confining building and among so many men, Shail was unwilling to immediately drop his guard and rest. He scanned each face and found that these humans did not see him as an inferior animal, but as something phenomenal and superior. He did not understand their idolization, but felt comfortable nesting among them. He curled up on the mattress and shivered slightly. The old man covered his legs and torso with a smelly blanket and fed him the rest of his bread.

“Don’t feed him that crap,” ranted a one-armed man who wore a frayed green jacket decorated with patches. Shail had seen the same kind of jacket on Mark, the war veteran on Dora. “I got a pack of fresh beans.” The huge man rooted in a corner and produced a sack, and a competition ensued. Each man dug through his stash and offered his food to Shail. They apparently had not heard about the winged creature that escaped the zoo and was

loose in the city.

Shail's mattress soon was laden with a feast of fruits and vegetables, along with various breads and sweets, but he sniffled with disdain at the cooked animal flesh. The old man treated his leg with a salve that gradually deadened the pain.

Well-fed and warm, Shail was soothed by the surrounding muffled voices. He curled up with his overtaxed wings for cover and listened and watched his new companions with drowsy eyes.

In front of Shail's mat, the men sat on the floor and discussed him. A dim solar light revealed their smudged faces. The one-armed veteran said, "Whoever shot him probably put that collar and chain on him. It'll take a cutter to get 'em off. I got a friend who works a garage. I'll borrow one tomorrow."

Shail finally buried his face in his feathers and slept securely, trusting the group of misfits to protect him.

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Shail woke with the dawn and stared at the sleeping bodies that lay around him on tattered bedding and blankets. The men had remained near him all night, their numbers swelling to fifty. He reached for a blemished apple and ate it while the light grew stronger. He never completely understood humans. These men cherished him, yet others wanted him dead. Harpies were not so complex. He took the last bite of the apple and stood up to stretch his wings, wondering if he would face another hard day of furious

flying with near misses or death.

He shuddered in the cold building and suddenly was as still as a statue. From afar he heard the flock of hovers, their engines growing louder with their approach. His anxious hisses roused the slumbering men. They staggered to their feet, puzzled by his frantic hair tossing and sound.

“Somethin’s got him rattled,” said the war vet.

A few minutes later, another man said, “Hear that? Sounds like an army of hovercraft closing in.”

One of the men ran to a shattered window and looked out. “It’s the cops,” he yelled.

“Bet they’re the ones who shot him,” exclaimed the old man.

“Take him out through the back alley,” the war vet shouted to the old man when police and zoo hovers landed in front of the condemned factory. “We’ll hold ’em off.” The men, inspired by a noble cause, mustered their courage and blocked the entrance.

The police broke through the doorway. “There he is,” one shouted, pointing at Shail beyond the homeless men. When several officers raised their weapons, the group of winos, junkies, and bums abruptly rushed them. An all-out brawl erupted as the police, unwilling to shoot unarmed men, fought with Shail’s followers. The police expressed shock that the pack of rabble attacked them. Such a riot rarely happened on Earth anymore.

During the disturbance, Shail and the old man slipped away through rooms of rubble. Shail heard shouts, cries, and stun blasts

as the battle ensued. The pair reached the door to a narrow back alley.

Shail looked around cautiously before stepping outside. Evidently, the police were unaware of the exit. Before fleeing, Shail leaned down and nuzzled the old man's wrinkled cheek.

"You're not just my angel, are you?" said the old man. "You came to inspire all of us."

Shail spread his wings and flew down the alley and around a corner, disappearing into the streams of civilian traffic that cluttered the daytime air.

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An alarm went out across the communicators, alerting more police to the old factory site. The homeless men fought valiantly but were eventually subdued. Medical hovers arrived to treat the injured, and along with them came the media.

Green and his zoo employees sat in their hovers, flabbergasted that the harpy was the cause of the ruckus. A female reporter approached Green, and he explained that the authorities were aiding the zoo in recapturing the escaped harpy. When Green heard that the bums believed it was an angel, he laughed but was actually concerned. The harpy had proved he could incite tremendous loyalty in people, first with Mrs. Roth and the others on the ship, then his zoo handler, Keith, and lastly these homeless men. Green decided to appeal to an even stronger human emotion:

greed.

“The zoo is desperate to capture this dangerous harpy,” he said to the reporter, “so we’re offering a fifty-thousand credit reward for the creature, dead or alive.” Few would befriend or help the harpy with that kind of money at stake.

Green overheard the reporter question a one-armed war vet who had been arrested and placed in the back of a police hover. What did he think of the zoo reward?

“It’s bullshit,” the man growled. “I spent all night with the angel, and he ain’t dangerous. Anyone who betrays him will find himself in hell.”

“Thank you for your account,” the reporter said with a raised eyebrow.

The homeless men were hauled away either to jail or a hospital, but they showed no regret for their actions. They were cheerful and chatted to one another about how the angel had brought purpose back into their wasted lives.

“Now you see how much trouble this harpy can cause,” Green said to the sergeant. “Can we get on with the hunt?”

“You can’t blame the harpy for the conduct of this crazy mob. Most of those men belong in a mental institution,” the sergeant said. “But I do know who to blame if anyone is shot because of your reward. Every trigger-happy fanatic will be in the air. Now your animal has become a police priority before someone is hurt.”

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To Shail, the day seemed endless. Instead of contending with six hovers, he had to outmaneuver twelve. Never had a single harpy been so hunted. He flew through the city with no time to land and rest. Flying to different parts of the city was no longer an option. Wherever he went, a police hover was there to cut him off. Ironically, the only safe place from laser blasts was in the heart of the human air traffic.

Shail noticed that the hovers, like ground vehicles, followed a traffic pattern. In the city canyons, hovers going north stayed on the right, and those going south stayed on the left. He sought refuge, gliding underneath massive hovercrafts filled with people. When a police hover zoomed in behind him, he switched directions and flew directly into the path of oncoming traffic. He easily dipped and dodged the transports that cruised directly at him, but he brought the well-managed sky traffic to a standstill. Sirens blared from the hover's sensors when he raced toward them, warning the passengers of a fatal crash. Several hovers nearly collided after swerving to avoid hitting him.

As a result of Shail's suicide flight, the police were forced to back off. When they did, he resumed gliding along with the civilian hovers.

Throughout the day, he flew slowly above or below the traffic, but as night fell, his cover disappeared. With fewer civilians in the air, he became an easier target. Late at night, the



full force of the police department came after him. He raced frantically through alleys and parking garages to avoid his relentless pursuers. Although he could see ten times better in the dark than a human and was faster than a hover, the playing field became even, because of his opponents' heat detectors, trackers, and multiple crafts. Shail was also a living thing that tired against their inexhaustible machines. Even the chain he carried became heavier, becoming another burden to his false freedom.

With the demanding night, Shail prayed for the dawn and city traffic. Even in the cold night, his body was lathered with sweat from the grueling chase. At one point, many hovers managed to drive him against the city dome, and he saw the bright laser blasts that zoomed past and rebounded from the hard plastic. He managed to drop among the buildings, determined to stay clear of the shelter-less walls.

As dawn approached, he was grateful to have survived another night. Humans emerged from the tall buildings, and he landed to drink from a large, circular fountain. He stared up at huge bronze birds that sat on carved dark stone, evidently a tribute to the great doomed birds that once flew on the planet. Unbeknownst to him, he was at the World War II Memorial. Before long, police hovers merged on him and he was forced to fly. They kept him constantly on the move, so he could not eat or rest. Their plan was apparently to run him into the ground.

It was working. Shail was on his fifth day of freedom, and he had consumed only one good meal and had one night of sound

sleep. He suffered from fatigue and starvation, and his wing muscles ached constantly. With no time to bathe, he was covered with grease and grime. Ruffling his ragged, filthy feathers on a rooftop, he wondered how long before the hectic pace and city would finish him.

During the day, Shail glided among the nonthreatening hovers to save his strength for another hectic night. Looking over his wing, he saw the ever-present police hovers that trailed him. His hope of escaping the city with his family was fading faster than his stamina. His only hope now was to stay alive.

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The morning newspaper displayed a headline, “Angel Inspires Homeless.” The article described the altercation between the police and the down-and-out men defending the escaped zoo animal. Further details explained how the blond half-bird, half-ape had killed three thieves who wounded the animal’s handler. To Green’s surprise, the story was sympathetic to the harpy that had eluded the authorities and had a price on its head, but it also pointed out that the animal was capable of destroying a hovercraft, and it had brought traffic to a standstill. The police were under mounting pressure to capture or kill it.

## Chapter Twelve

Night fell, and with it came the police. Shail flew back to the decrepit factory building, hoping to find his human friends, but the place was dark and vacant. No warming fire or cheerful voices, and no food. Hearing the hovers, he vanished deeper into this poorer section of the city. Its lower buildings and abundant trash offered more opportunity for a meal. He soared low over the rooftops, scanning the ground below and glancing back at the lights of five stalking hovers that maneuvered to cut him off.

Dipping low, he heard a female scream from an alley below. He landed on a ledge and peered down. A terrified young woman desperately struggled against four men, obviously bent on harming her. Although an alien on the adverse planet, Shail's protective nature compelled him to defend her. Crossly seething at the men, he dove off the roof like a hawk bombarding rats.

He hit two of the men in the back of the necks with his feet and drove their heads into the pavement. Satisfied they were disabled, he fluttered in place and focused on the other two men, who released the victim and scrambled away from him.

"What the hell is it?" one man yelled. His partner was too busy running to answer.

Shail set down by the floundering woman.

The man warily helped up one of his injured companions, and they stumbled off down the dark alley. Shail knelt on one knee and gently touched the trembling woman's face.

“They were going to rape me,” she muttered, looking at the remaining unconscious man who lay sprawled nearby.

A police hover suddenly zoomed into the alley and floated above her and Shail. One of the occupants took aim and fired at Shail. The blast passed through Shail’s feathers, and he darted back into the night. The woman staggered to her feet and shouted. “Don’t shoot him! He saved me.”

Shail looked back and saw the police hover land near the woman. Other crafts converged on the alley. From several miles away, he watched the low-flying hovers scour the dismal neighborhood, apparently hunting for the depraved men. His good deed had bought him precious time to find food.

A half-hour later, he glided over a lit rooftop that revealed a patch of green plants. He warily circled before landing beside the raised garden bed. Shail couldn’t believe his good fortune. Like in Charlie’s garden on Dora, the plants were covered with ripe cherry tomatoes. Nervously glancing around, he laid down the coiled chain and ate heartily of the rare red treat.

The rooftop door suddenly swung open, and a large man stepped out. Startled, Shail jumped into the air but failed to clasp the coiled chain. Forty feet out, the trailing chain jerked him back by the collar and threw him off balance in the flight. He choked and hectically flapped his wings to regain momentum. He seized the chain and beat his wings backwards, fighting the restraint like a hooked fish. He then saw that the chain was hopelessly jammed in a crack between the bricks, and his fierce tugging and flailing

wings had further wedged it.

The man quickly assessed Shail's dilemma. He rushed over, looked around for something that would keep himself safe from the wild, flailing animal. A pipe stuck up from the roof, and the man threaded his end of the chain through it. He jerked the chain loose of the bricks and pulled in the slack. As Shail advanced, hissing to menace him, the guy hastily drew the chain through the pipe, shortening Shail's movement. Soon, Shail could flutter only a few feet above the roof as the strapping guy held him down from a safe distance.

Shail became frantic. He was in a tug of war that he could not win, with a strong captor he could not reach. He hysterically flapped his wings and braced his legs, but it did not help. Growing weary and frazzled, he settled on the roof to catch his breath.

The man took advantage of the opportunity and yanked the chain from his end, forcing Shail to fly up and then stand directly over the low pipe. He hissed and arched his wings, partly out of anger and partly out of fear. The guy ignored him and secured the chain to a concrete table support and calmly stepped to him. Shail fluttered to strike out with his feet, and the man grabbed the chain and snatched him from the air. With the chain slack completely gone, Shail hit the roof hard and discovered his neck was pinned up against the pipe. He fought the hold on his hand and knees and battered his wings against the roof.

Jim moved closer to his catch as its wings flopped and

fluttered similar to a wounded dove. Like most residents of D.C., he had read about the zoo reward for the escaped harpy, a flying creature from a little jungle planet called Dora. He grinned and crouched nearby the harpy. “You landed on the wrong roof, boy. The zoo’s offering fifty grand for you, and I need the money.”

The harpy seemed to go berserk. He twisted and scraped his slight body in an attempt to break free, while strangling himself with the collar. His long wings pummeled the hard surface, and small feathers filled the night sky. “Jesus, settle down, boy.” Jim considered retrieving his weapon and putting the poor creature out of its misery. It might be the simplest and kindest thing to do, and the reward had said dead or alive.

The harpy stopped thrashing and looked up at him through sweating blond locks with wide, terrified eyes. Through a partially open mouth, he panted, and his overwrought body trembled.

“Damn, close up you look more like a human than an ape.”

The harpy turned away and returned back to its desperate struggle to break the chain.

“Keep it up, and you’ll hang yourself.” The harpy might have human features, but it behaved like a crazed wild animal. “Better tie you up for your own good.” He hastily walked down the steps to his apartment, grabbed some rope, and returned to the roof.

The harpy eyed the rope and stopped flaying. It pulled in his legs and arms and covered himself with his wings. It glared and seethed quietly at him. Jim figured the harpy had given up and could be handled. “Good, boy, just be calm.” He leaned over the

curled up harpy with his ropes. Instantly, he met the full fury of the harpy's limbs that assaulted his face, groin, and stomach with hard kicks, striking wings, and clawing nails. With only two hands, Jim was outnumbered six to two. A final blow from a powerful wing across his cheek sent him tumbling out of the harpy's strike zone.

Jim slowly sat up and shook his light brown locks. "Shit," he said, astonished. The harpy's submissive behavior was a ploy, meant to draw an adversary close so he could unleash an attack. "You're worse than a goddamn rattlesnake." Jim was six-foot-two and a hearty 215 pounds, and he was an ex-cop trained to take down the worst of criminals, yet the airy winged male had beat the heck out of him, and its neck was fastened down. Jim staggered to his feet and rubbed his bruised face. "You're one tough son of a bitch. Hate to fight you if you were loose."

The harpy hissed a response and recoiled.

Jim approached the harpy from the back to tackle him, but it flipped over and had all his limbs facing him. He knew the harpy's collar had a location disc imbedded in it. For the last several nights, he had listened to his old police scanner and been entertained with the frustrated cop communiqués about the elusive harpy. The police would soon arrive, and it would be wiser to let them deal with the ornery beast. Instead, he took a deep breath and lunged. Fighting off the clobbering feet and fists, he managed to wrestle one wing down and flip the harpy on its belly. With the advantage of kneeling on the harpy's lower back, he drew the flapping wings down and tied them together. He next tackled the

harpy's arms, binding the wrists behind its back and binding the ankle ropes to the wrist ropes. The harpy writhed and hissed in the painful position.

Jim huffed and collapsed against the roof ledge. Bloody, bruised, and spent, he glanced at the harpy, in not much better shape. The creature puffed hard and then lowered his head and closed his eyes. He was finished.

Jim reached over and stroked his silky wet hair. "You had a good run. Made those cops chase their tails and gave me a beating to remember."

The harpy softly seethed.

Jim covered his mouth and stared with indecision. The harpy's slender frame was sweaty, filthy, and battered, proof of how hard he had fought to remain alive and free. Jim could not help respecting the gutsy little guy, who had the whole world against him. "On the news, the zoo director been saying you need to be destroyed. I don't feel right about that." He rose and walked through the rooftop door. In minutes, he returned with a wire cutter. Grabbing the harpy's long hair, he forced the creature's head back. The harpy showed his teeth and snapped at him. "You bite me, I swear," he growled. "Now hold still." He severed the collar, and it fell from the harpy's neck. The harpy closed his mouth and stared up at him with confusion. Jim chuckled. "This is going to be fun, boy." He untied the chain from the table support and dropped it, the collar attached, off the roof. It landed in the alley dumpster five stories below.



Jim lifted the bound harpy into his arms and found him surprisingly light. He hurried through the door and down the steps to his apartment. Roughly tossing the harpy on his old worn couch, he stepped to the window in time to see the descending hover lights. "Here they come," he said and grinned at the harpy. The police and zoo hovers landed on the street below Jim's apartment.

The policemen scrambled from their hovers with drawn weapons and raced into the alley. Two officers jumped into a giant trash bin. One held up the chain and collar. Jim roared, watching the perturbed policemen. "Assholes, they should be arresting criminals instead of chasing you." After thoroughly searching the neighborhood, the police and zoo hovers left.

"Well, let's take a look at you," Jim said to the harpy that squirmed in the uncomfortable position and bonds. He sat down on the couch and attempted to pet him but encountered his angry hisses and teeth.

Jim jerked his hand away. "Christ, you're a mean little cuss, not to mention ungrateful." He walked to the small kitchen, put some tomatoes in a bowl, and returned to the harpy.

The harpy aggressively seethed at Jim's hand. "Hey, haven't you heard you're not supposed to bite the hand that feeds you?" He put the food within the harpy's reach and moved back. The harpy stuck his head in the bowl and warily ate but kept his nervous eyes fixed on Jim

"Let's see what's under all this dirt," he said to the small, smudged face hidden under the long blond hair.

In the bathroom, Jim caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. “Damn, that skinny little sucker beat the tar out of me.” His adrenaline had been so elevated that he had hardly felt his injuries. A swollen cheek lay beneath a blackening eye. Pulling off his shredded shirt, he twisted to get a better view. Lacerations and dark bruises covered his chest and back. His arms were raked with claw marks. “I must be outta my mind. It’s suicide to keep him,” he mumbled and flinched when treating his wounds. Not since a kid had he been on the receiving end of such a pounding. The zoo claimed the harpy was dangerous. Jim had unfortunately learned that assertion was true. Freed of restraints, the slight creature could kill him.

Jim returned to the harpy with warm, wet towels and medication. “You behave, and I’ll loosen those foot ties.” The harpy winced and wiggled as Jim washed his body and doctored the self-inflicted roof scrapes. “Looks like they nearly got you,” he commented when examining the flesh wound on the harpy’s leg and the singed feathers from laser blasts that hit his wings. When Jim pushed aside the harpy’s hair and washed his face, he froze. It was like seeing a ghost. “You look like...you look like Jamie.” He bit his lip, and his eyes grew moist.

“I need a goddamn drink,” he said, coming out of the trance. He abruptly rose, walked into the kitchen, and took a bottle of whiskey from a cabinet. He poured a shot and gulped it down. He then had a second and third, but there wasn’t enough whiskey in the world to deaden the sorrow. After a while, his thoughts

returned to the boyish winged creature on the couch.

He ambled into the living room and set the bottle on the coffee table. The harpy sniffed at the bottle and hissed loudly. “Don’t like my drinking? There’s a line, little shit.” Undeterred with the harpy’s threats, he untied his ankle ropes. “Screw it,” he said and removed the ropes from his wings and wrists. Instantly, the harpy sprang up and perched on the back of the dilapidated couch. He raised his wings and bared his teeth like a rapid canine.

“There, now you can tear me apart.” Jim snatched up the whiskey and flopped down in an armchair. He sipped from the bottle and took a photograph from a lamp table and quietly stared at it.

Shail lowered his wings and his guard when seeing that the man would leave him alone. The scent of whiskey unnerved him and brought back his worst memory in full force. The previous time on Dora, three men, drunk on whiskey, had raped him. He inquisitively slanted his neck and studied his newest jailer. Unlike Rusty or Keith, this man was older, with a tall, brawny body, and he was mentally and physically tough, the kind that would rather die than back down. He more resembled the hunter, Jack, but this man had once had a good heart. Through the touching and washing, Shail had sensed he was a decent guy, but remorse had destroyed him. When he spoke of Jamie, Shail felt the man’s heartache and knew that Jamie was a dead son.

Eventually, the man passed out and began to snore. Shail

stepped from his couch perch with his first thought on escaping, but he found the apartment door and windows locked. He guardedly tiptoed up to the man and looked at the picture of a pretty dark-haired woman and a blond boy of about fourteen years. These two were evidently the cause of the man's drinking and grief. He drank to forget them. Like Shail, he was haunted by his past.

Shail sniffed at the sleeping man, and with a thrust of his wing he struck the bottle. It rolled across the floor. Only after watching the brown liquid flow out did he return to the couch.

The days and nights of hard flying had drained Shail, and the battle with the man had sapped his remaining strength. For the first time in a week, he was clean, warm, well-fed, and resting on a soft nest of cushions. More important, he was no longer hunted, and his frazzled nerves were calm. He curled up on the couch and fell into a deep sleep.

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In the morning, Jim painfully rose from the chair and rubbed his aching forehead. The hangover was familiar, but his body also hurt from the previous night's fight. He gazed at the sleeping harpy and thought, *I must've been drunk to turn him loose*. When he quietly opened the metal cabinet that held hot coffee, the startled harpy was on his feet.

"Light sleeper," Jim said. He ignored the creature and took

a few sips of coffee. He picked up a piece of rope and strolled to the couch. “Let’s go. I need to take you out before you pee all over the place.” The harpy lifted his wings slightly and seethed. Unlike Jim’s old dog, the harpy was far from domesticated. “Look, I hurt all over, and I’m in no mood to take you on again.”

Jim confidently walked up to the standoffish harpy and took his hand, coaxing him off his couch perch. Jim disregarded the creature’s rebellious hair tossing and seething and placed the rope loosely around the harpy’s neck. “We’re going out,” he said and pointed at the door.

The harpy amazingly didn’t resist and followed Jim through the door and up on the roof. Once on the rooftop, the lean male was strong and rested enough to tangle with him and reclaim his freedom. After relieving himself in a potted bush, though, he simply gazed out at the Washington Monument and the Capitol and sniffed the wind.

“There’s nothing out there for you but cold nights, hunger, and men who want to kill you.”

The harpy lowered his head and trailed Jim back to the apartment.

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The trust seemed immediate between Jim and the harpy. After the roof battle, they both gained a healthy respect for one another. For Jim, the willowy creature bore a striking resemblance

to his son. Jim hated to admit it, but he was lonely. His old dog had recently died, and the year before, his wife and child were killed in a fatal hover accident, with only Jim surviving. He had contemplated suicide many times, but instead had turned to alcohol. He lost his friends, and unable to function any longer as a police detective, his career ended.

His years on the force had given him strong instincts in dealing with the public and criminals. He saw that the harpy was not a mindless killer with a price on its head. He was reasonable, with glimpses of intelligence. A soft heart had always been Jim's weakness, so he decided to harbor the harpy that looked so much like his lost boy.

Shail quietly lay on the couch and nibbled on toast, content with the man's company. Just as he resembled Jim's dead son, strangely for Shail, Jim resembled a dead man. Over the last few years, Shail had encountered men of all stripes during captivity and his rule. Many were decent, while others unpleasant. But of the hundreds, only one stood out in his mind. Like Jim, that man was tall, rugged, and middle-aged with light hair, and mentally he had fearless determination and unwavering devotion. Both men suffered from terrible tragedies and turned to alcohol to smother their rage and regret. Of all their similarities, though, what impressed Shail the most was their honor.

Others saw Jim as a washed-out drunk, but Shail's instincts saw the true man, the type of man he had been searching for since

his capture, the kind with the tenacity to truly help him end his nightmare. Abandoning all caution, Shail put his faith and his life into the ex-cop's hands—a man among lesser humans—a man like Kari's father, John Turner.

Shail took his last bite of bread as Jim sat in his overstuffed chair, watching the news on a screen. Shail wondered how far his trust should go. He stepped to the chair and coiled up on the rug before Jim. To show acceptance, he rubbed his head against the man's legs.

Jim chuckled and patted him. "You're an odd one. You look human, yet act like a pet. Guess you're lonely, too." Shail tucked his face into his wings and slept at the man's feet.

After several hours, Shail sat up when Jim leaned over. "There it is," he said and picked up the whiskey bottle that had rolled under an end table. "Wondered what happened to this." He raised the bottle to get the last swallow.

In a flash, Shail sprang to his feet. With a swipe of his wing, he knocked the evil liquid holder out of Jim's hand and sent it crashing against a wall.

"Jesus! What the hell's wrong with you?" Jim barked. "You lost your mind?"

Shail snarled back a hiss with equal animosity.

"Why, you little son of a—you emptied my bottle." Jim rose with a frown and clenched fists, confronting Shail.

Shail glared back and arched his wings.

The man found himself in an argument with his new

roommate. “You’re worse than a nagging wife,” he grumbled and slumped back in his seat. “You don’t want me to drink? Fine, you win.”

Satisfied, Shail lowered his wings. A drunk made a poor savior.

Toward evening, Jim took hold of the rope that hung on Shail’s neck. “Let’s go. You’re not much for conversation, but at least you’re housebroken.” He led Shail to the roof and opened the door. Freezing cold air flooded in.

Shail wrapped his wings around his shivering frame and refused to step out. When he pulled to return to the warm apartment, Jim shrugged. “You better not make a mess.”

Back in the apartment, Shail gave Jim a pretentious glance and walked into the bathroom. He used the toilet, and then the shower. The humans believed he was a lame animal, an ape with wings, and Shail had behaved accordingly. That situation was about to change. Time was running out for him and his family, and he needed the man’s trust and help.

“I’ll be damned,” Jim said.

Shail left the shower and ruffled his feathers. He found Jim in the living room eating a sandwich. He crept up and gave a beseeching sniff.

“You’re so damn smart, make your own,” Jim said and took another bite, further testing him.

Shail stepped into the kitchen and paced in front of the cabinet. He stopped and stared at Jim, wondering how much of



himself he should reveal. After a moment, he opened the cupboard door and took out a piece of bread. He sheepishly returned to the couch and curled up to eat it. He warily glanced up at the perceptive man.

“Stop worrying, boy. I am your friend.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Aron left his mate and new son in the sacred mountain and began the return flight to Terrance. When he soared through the mountain passes, he got an eerie feeling that someone or something was following him. He sniffled with uneasiness and continuously looked back over his wing, but saw nothing. Concerned it might be a silent drome, he increased his speed, but he still sensed the phantom on his tail. He whipped around a mountain crest, folded in his wings, and went into a dive. He crashed through the branches of enormous trees, and he ended his fall before hitting the ground. He weaved around the massive tree trunks until he came to perch on a black mountain ledge. He nervously ruffled his feathers and waited in ambush. His pursuer was so deceptive, it must be an enemy.

From above on the crest, Aron caught a glimpse of something black moving rapidly amid the foliage. *Come out so I shall end you*, he thought and pulled from his sash a small laser weapon. Mark had urged him to carry it, for fear he would meet the same fate as the last harpy ruler. With a weapon, Shail might have killed his kidnappers. Aron saw the shadow move up through the tree cover in search of him. Aron slipped off the ledge and became the stalker. Fuming, he jetted with wings atilt through the dense forest.

A flash of black zipped around several red fan trees. In hot pursuit, Aron closed in. He crashed around a vivid scarlet tree,

ready to fire, but put on the brakes by fluttering backward. It was Seth's black-winged son.

*"Bloom, I almost killed you!"* Aron relayed with an irate hiss. The young male was so startled that his wings drooped, and he fell to the forest floor. He curled up in a submissive ball on the dirt and hid his face in dark locks. Aron landed on a branch above and seethed with anger, but he also shuddered with fright—he had nearly pulled the trigger.

Aron took a deep breath when gazing down at the shaky ball of feathers that held the beautiful but foolish youth. He reflected on another harpy, also extremely handsome and irrational, who had constantly unnerved Aron with his crazy, life-threatening stunts, but that harpy had yellow wings. Aron floated down and landed beside Bloom. *"Rise,"* he sternly commanded. Between the black hair and feathers, Bloom stared up with terrified green eyes. He uncurled his body and humbly stood.

*"Why, Bloom?"*

*"I long to be near."*

Aron raised an eyebrow and tucked the weapon back in his sash. *"I thought you a threat, with your sneaking and longing."*

Bloom lowered his head. *"I regret causing your fear."*

*"Yes, I feared, not for my life, but for yours. We shall go now."* Both harpies flew up through the branches until they reached the top of the tree canopy, where they resumed the trek east. After some time, Aron sensed Bloom's contentment. *"Why do you wish to be with me?"*

*“You are the only male who is strong and brave like my father. I miss him.”*

*“Seth is very strong and brave. We once faced each other in a challenge.”*

*“Who won?”* Bloom relayed excitedly.

*“Neither. It was a stand-off and never finished, but your father and Shail would reluctantly fight to the end.”* Aron looked over his shoulder at the setting sun. He was in no hurry to return to Terrance and the stress of leadership. *“We shall sleep here tonight.”*

Aron soared down to a small stream with Bloom on his wing tip. He landed and leaned down for a sip of cool water. Bloom imitated his every move. *“I saw the purple fruit upstream. Go gather some for our dinner.”* Bloom’s eyes sparkled, and he leaped into the air.

Aron shook his head with memories of his youth and the treasured moments with his adopted blond brother. Bloom was similar to Shail, and apparently, Aron had now adopted another, a daring young male who sought love and guidance. He gazed upward at the trees. *“We males plant our seeds, but we rarely live long enough to enjoy the tree’s shade. Shall there ever be a time when fathers raise their sons?”* he wondered. The coming war was a constant worry, and the stress had doubled with his son’s birth. Would his fledgling end up like Shail and Bloom, orphaned by the cruelty of men?

Bloom returned with the fruit, and Aron sought refuge in a

large clump of comfortable moss that lay between the fan branches. After eating his fill of the long strip of purple fruit, he curled up in the nest. Bloom rested nearby in another tree. Aron glanced at Bloom and sighed. He lifted his wing and sniffled. With this invitation, Bloom leaped across the expanse and curled up next to him. Allowing a strange male to bed down with him was the ultimate gesture of acceptance. Although Aron was only twenty-nine, ten years older than Bloom, he acknowledged him as his protective elder.

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The wet season reached its height and drenched Dora. For the Terrance humans, it was a miserable time. They forged through constant rain and muddy streets in an effort to stay clean and dry. The fierce hurricane gusts wreaked havoc on their structures, damaging roofs and flipping small hovers at the airport. Ground travel was safer, but even the terrain vehicles met rivers of water and gargantuan fallen trunks in the roadways. The small, sleepy town came to a halt, its resident humans hunkering down until the dry. Even the jungle fruit could not be picked or shipped from the newly built packing factory.

The harpies, on the other hand, passively sat in the trees wrapped in their warm, waterproof wings and watched the frantic humans scurry about. They didn't understand the fuss over wind and water. Like all wild animals, they calmly accepted the

torrential rain, knowing it was vital to sustain their forest.

Ted stood in the doorway at the airport and watched the downpour. He saw two harpies soaring through the rolling dark clouds. The harpies dropped in elevation and flew through the haze of droplets toward the airport. The brown and black wings distinguished the pair, and Ted knew it was Aron and Bloom, whose ebony wings and hair were unique among harpies.

Ted smiled as the two approached. The two males, he noticed, had become inseparable, the motive obvious. Both had shared a devastating loss when the hunters took Shail and Seth. Aron and Shail were as close as siblings, and the brown ruler had anguished over the golden's taking, his bitterness turning deadly. For Bloom, the grief of his father's loss had caused the harpy's severe depression.

Ted had observed that the fragile temperament of these harpies was healing with each other's help. Once again, Aron was playing the role of an older brother. He nuzzled and watched over the younger male, and Bloom idolized the brown ruler like a devoted son. Though harpies rarely displayed emotion, Ted saw the beaming lightheartedness in their eyes, their displays of affection, and the playful gestures toward each other.

The harpies landed in front of the door, and Ted jumped back to keep from getting wet. "Would you mind shedding some of that water before you come inside?"

Bloom ruffled his feathers and shook his hair. Aron stepped inside with a pompous raised head and purposely shook the water

off his feathers onto Ted.

“Darn it, Aron, I’m trying to stay dry.”

“This human fear of sky water is puzzling, the running, ducking, and hiding from it, yet humans drink and bathe. Do you not know all water is the same?” Aron’s mocking revealed his good mood, for he enjoyed taunting Ted.

“We’re not afraid of rain,” Ted retaliated. “We don’t want our clothes wet.”

“Man clothing,” Aron said, “another human mystery.”

“We don’t enjoy parading around half-naked with a sash on our hips.”

“I understand the need to hide your bloated bodies and small sex organs. The clothing fools women into marriage.”

“Oh, please,” Ted said and turned to Bloom. “I used to like him, before he got his crown. He’s become more arrogant than Shail.”

The black-haired harpy stared at the floor and didn’t comment.

Aron walked over to a desk holding the communicator. “I did not come to speak of inferior humans and their odd ways, but to learn if Waters called.”

“Inferior. That’s a new word.” Ted smiled and turned serious, “No. The governor hasn’t called with any news on the mercenaries.”

“The wet soon ends, and with it comes an end to the peace. I shall cross the river and learn if the enemy awaits.”

“Waters is keeping track of the mercenaries on incoming ships. So far, there hasn’t been that many.”

“What he knows and what is there might differ.” The tall brown ruler started toward the door with Bloom.

“Hey, who taught you your new word?”

Aron turned in the threshold. “Mark says his humans are inferior to my harpies.” His eyes twinkled as he stepped out into the rain.

Ted yelled after him. “Aron, don’t forget that humans lie, including Mark.”

Aron thrust his head back in the doorway. “And that is one of the many reasons humans are inferior.” In a flash, both harpies vanished into the mist.

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At midnight, Aron crept through the heavy downpour. His soaked wings brushed past the thick shrubs as he tiptoed toward an open meadow. On the fringe of the forest, he crouched behind a large fern with another harpy and gazed at the senator’s warehouse. If they moved closer, they would be detected by the heat sensors.

“*So many,*” Aron said grimly. Hundreds of temporary dwellings had sprung up in front of the warehouse on the once-vacant field. Small lights burned dimly inside each tent, displaying the human shadows. Each shadow represented a harpy killer. The



promise of free Outback land and the soaring price of harpy wings had attracted hundreds of mercenaries from across the galaxy. The senators had indeed built their own army.

“Yes, their numbers grow every light,” said his harpy spy. “They come in small ships from the stars, even their hovers and supplies.”

Aron understood why the governor was not aware of the men. They were avoiding Hampton port and coming directly from space to this place. He wondered how many more would arrive. With the vast amount of men and equipment, the fight would be different from the one five months earlier against the hundred unprepared hunters. He was truly worried. His harpies were up against overwhelming odds. *We may not survive this*, he thought sadly. He moved back into the jungle with the other male.

Bloom was waiting and sensed his distress.

*“It is not good, Bloom. There are many, too many.”* He faced the brown harpy. *“Keep count and stay safe.”* He spread his wings and flew up into the dark, rainy night, with Bloom at his heels.

In the predawn hours, they reached the great river that divided the continent. Aron looked down at the twinkling lights in the peaceful town of Terrance. He glided to a stop before Ted’s home near the airport and knocked lightly on the door.

“Come in,” Ted said and rose from a living room chair. Aron ruffled his feathers and shook the water from his long hair before stepping into the house with Bloom. “You two look like

drowned rats.”

“Rats?” Bloom said with a tilted head.

Ted smiled. “Earth animals. It’s a saying. So what did you find out?”

Aron stepped to the fireplace and gazed at the small blaze. “The senators have their army. There are more mercenaries than the governor knows. They come on the senators’ spaceships. I fear we shall not win this fight.”

“How many, Aron?”

“Their numbers are more than my male flock.”

“That’s over two thousand,” Ted said with a stunned voice, “and they’re trained soldiers. My God.” With the bleak news, he fell into a chair and stared dismally at the floor.

“I should have known,” said Aron. “My father and his father before him spoke of this doom, the great human army that senators would bring from the stars to destroy us. Shail hoped that peace and understanding would prevent it, but now it is here.”

Ted rose from the chair. “What are you going to do, Aron?”

“With the light, I shall ask the people of Terrance to leave our land. You must go too, Ted. I value all your lives, and to stay, you die with us. The harpies shall face this threat alone.”

“Bullshit,” Ted snapped with his hands on his hips. “I’m not leaving. End of discussion.” He pushed past Aron and opened a closet. He removed a foul-weather jacket and a traveling sack. “Despite this lousy weather, I’m flying to Hampton to round up more men. The sons of bitches owe you, Aron. If Shail hadn’t

saved them from the beetle swarms, they'd all be dead. I just hope those easterners don't have short memories. Plus the governor needs to know what's going on." Ted walked into his bedroom and hastily threw extra clothing into the sack.

Aron leaned against the doorway and watched him. "Do you remember the night we met?"

Ted stopped packing and frowned. "Yeah, Hampton right after Shail's auction last year. We were in that little park with Kari, Mr. Turner, and Charlie."

"Turner told me you would be a good friend to the harpies. I wonder how he foresaw the truth of such words."

Ted nodded. "Kari's dad had his faults, but he was a great man. Before anyone, he also foresaw the peace between harpies and men." He flung the sack over his shoulder. "Don't worry, Aron. I'll get more help."

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The people of Washington, D.C., were oblivious to the fact that Dora's harpies faced extinction, but they had become obsessed with the fate of a blond harpy who escaped the zoo and eluded the police. Stories of him fluttering beneath their vast dome sparked interest, both pro and con. His rescue of the woman from would-be rapists brought another headline.

Dr. Green ordered a press conference, desperate to squelch the creature's growing popularity. "The police saved that

frightened, confused woman,” he told the reporters. “The harpy scared off her attackers so it could have her for itself.” Relying on the ten-year-old Web data, reporters confirmed that the zoo director’s statements were accurate. Green reiterated that the game animals had a long history of kidnapping and molesting the women colonists of Dora. “That harpy has killed seven men. For the public’s safety, he has to be destroyed.”

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Shail stretched out on the comfortable couch as Jim tapped the keys on his computer. “Sure isn’t much information on the Web about you,” he commented. “It says most harpies have brown wings, and those yellow feathers of yours make you a pretty rare subspecies. Also, goldens have fierce natures.” He lifted an eyebrow, glancing at Shail. “Already learned that the hard way.” He leaned back in the chair. “The most recent article is about those eighty-seven hunters the harpies killed on Dora. Apparently, you’re not the only harpy who can bring a hover down.”

Over the last few days, things had been tranquil between Shail and the man. Jim had stopped drinking, since it upset Shail, and he admitted he didn’t miss it. He also had a new purpose for living, trying to figure out a way to reunite Shail with his family at the zoo without endangering his life.

“This web information is crap,” Jim growled, slamming the lid on his computer. “The senator who wrote it was obviously

prejudiced against harpies, like that jerk running the zoo.”

Shail watched Jim, whose frustration matched his own. He wanted to speak to the man and tell him his story and the story of his race, but he had learned that revealing his sound and intelligence could have an adverse effect, and he still questioned whether the man could really help him and his family. Even the powerful Mrs. Roth had failed to protect him.

Shail buried his face in feathers and indecision. Of all the humans encountered since his capture, Jim was the most promising. Unlike Keith and Rusty, the man had no adversarial employer who ruled him. Shail decided that before long, he would talk to Jim and reveal all.

A week passed. Shail grew more anxious and impatient. Instead of lying around, he paced from window to window, ruffling its feathers. At night, he stopped sleeping on the couch and curled up at the bottom of the man’s bed. Sharing a nest demonstrated trust between males.

Shail closed his eyes and focused on Kari. If he and his mate dreamed of each other, they could have a brief telepathic connection. Kari relayed that she was well and that Keith had returned to care for her. Shail briefly told her of Jim, a good man who protected him. He woke at daybreak with his mind at ease.

That morning, Jim sat up on the edge of the bed and looked at Shail. “Tonight, I’m letting you go.”

Shail tilted his head.

“Don’t give me that puzzled look. You understand more

than you let on.” He stood and stretched. “The cops are limiting their search. Probably figure it’s futile without the collar transmitter, so you should be okay. Besides, you’re getting antsy, cooped up in this little apartment. Can’t even spread those wings without breaking something.”

Jim walked into the kitchen, with Shail following. As Jim poured coffee, Shail ignored the bowl of fruit and retrieved some bread from the cabinet. “Toast and jam again? Must be your favorite.”

Cup in hand, the man sat down before his communicator. Since a harpy could not sit in a chair without damaging his feathers, Shail ate his breakfast on a rug by Jim’s feet.

Jim pushed the com keys. “Now stay down there,” he ordered. “If this guy sees you on my screen, we’ll both end up in a cage.”

The call went through. “How’s it going, Dan?” Jim asked the man on the com.

“Busy,” Dan answered. “Wish you were back. My new partner is an idiot.”

Jim chuckled. “Sorry about that, but I’d like to pay the precinct a visit. I need to use the computer for Web information on another planet.”

“You know civilians can’t have access to that computer. There’s privileged information on private files.”

“You think I’ll exploit some big shot?” Jim laughed. “I’ve gotten my act together, haven’t had a drink in over a week, and this

is important. Come on. For old times' sake.”

For a long moment, Dan didn't respond. “All right. Tomorrow night. That's when I'm working again. Meet me out front at ten.”

“Thanks. I owe you.” They disconnected, and Jim glanced down at Shail. “Now I'm going to find out all about you.”

Evening came, and Jim put the rope back on Shail's neck and led him up to the roof. “You don't deserve to be treated like a prisoner. I'm letting you go and taking a chance that you'll come back.” He slipped the rope off Shail's neck. “Okay, boy.”

Without so much as a nod or a backward glance, Shail leaped into the dark, cold sky. He flew directly toward the zoo. Although the dream telepathy related that Kari was well, he missed her terribly. He landed lightly on the zoo breeding building, but a faint sound unnerved him, and the hair on his skin stood on end. The humming came from newly placed boxes attached to the roof. The sound was inaudible to human ears, but his acute hearing detected the buzzing. He sniffled at the unfamiliar noise and fled into the night. Free of pursuing hovers, he spent the night investigating an escape from the dome city. Unsuccessful, he returned to Jim's building at dawn. The roof door was ajar, so he slipped inside and found the apartment door slightly open. He crept into the warm, calming room and found Jim asleep in the bedroom.

“You came back,” Jim uttered with a groggy voice as Shail crawled onto the bed. “Good boy.”

At the zoo, the head of security reported to Green in the morning. “The motion detector camera caught a glimpse of the harpy. He was on the breeding building last night, but something scared him. The guards on duty didn’t have time to get off a blast.”

“So he’s finally got up the nerve to return to his female,” said Green. “I’ll be working with your crew tonight.” After the guard left, Green told his secretary to have Mr. Williams report to his office. Keith arrived shortly.

“Your male harpy has come back,” Green said. “The guards saw him on the surveillance cameras.”

“Really? He’s all right, then,” Keith said with a relieved smile.

“Apparently so. Do you really think you can call him down? I hate to kill him, especially since it may create bad publicity for the zoo.”

“Yes, sir,” Keith answered. “He’ll come if I have his female with me.”

“Okay,” Green said. “This is your opportunity to get him back unharmed.” Keith left his office. Green was concerned about the public outrage if the animal was killed, but moreover, he didn’t have faith in his security guard’s aim. Bypassing his secretary, he punched in another com call. A man appeared on the screen, and Green said, “It seems you might get your golden wings after all.”



The following night, Shail followed Jim to the roof. “I’m going out,” Jim said, “but I’ll leave the doors unlocked so you can get in.”

This time, Shail nuzzled the man’s neck before leaving.

“Okay, okay, let’s not get too mushy.” Jim rubbed his neck, apparently uncomfortable with the gesture from a male that resembled a man.

Shail took off for the zoo but stayed clear of the buildings. He landed in a tree and called silently to Kari.

Keith remained at the zoo with the female harpy and fledgling throughout the night, hoping that the male would return. The security guards would call him once the cameras zeroed in on the harpy. The little pregnant female lay curled up asleep with her son as Keith watched a portable entertainment screen.

The female harpy suddenly became alert and stood. She anxiously paced the cage.

“What is it, girl?” Keith asked. “Is he out there?”

She answered with a snuffle.

“Okay, let’s go out and see. Not surprised that our boy is too clever for those guards and cameras.” Keith slipped a leash on her and picked up a second one, in case the male had come. He left the fledgling in the cage, because he would have his hands full handling the two excited adults.

Keith and the female harpy stood outside under a light. “Come, Shail,” Keith called out into the still night. He knew that

the guards were watching him on the surveillance screens and probably wondering why he was outside.

Shail shuddered with indecision as his former handler continued to call his name. Reason told him it would be wiser to stay away and remain with Jim, but his animal blood stirred with the sight and smell of his mate. After more than two weeks of separation, his desire to be with her was strong and urgent. Following his need and the compulsion to protect his family, he abandoned logic and sailed down from the tree. He landed in front of Kari and Keith.

He embraced Kari, and they nuzzled each other, oblivious of Keith. He chuckled, put the leash over Shail's neck, and tugged gently. "Come on, you two. It's cold out here."

Kari began to follow the man, but Shail hesitated at the threshold with the loss of freedom. He arched his wings and made a low, threatening hiss toward Keith, who attempted to coax him inside. The lengthy independence had restored Shail's wild nature, and he was no longer tame or obedient. "*I must go in, Shail. Will is alone and unprotected,*" Kari relayed.

Shail swallowed hard and lowered his head. He followed her and Keith back to the cage. Seeing his father, Will spread his tiny wings and hopped up and down excitedly. Keith opened the cage, and before Shail could enter, Will leaped into his arms. The happy reunion was immediately interrupted when Green and the security guards entered the room.

“Stay out until I get him caged,” Keith yelled with panic at Green.

It was too late. Shail released his son and raised his wings, seething at the man who had caused him so much pain. He abruptly flew at the zoo director, aiming to kill, as Keith struggled with his leash to stop him. A guard fired his weapon, and Shail dropped at the director’s feet.

“What have you done?” Keith cried, staring at the male’s limp body.

“He’s not hurt, only stunned,” Green said and pushed the unconscious harpy over with his foot. “See? He’s breathing fine.”

The female harpy sprang at the zoo director, but Keith managed to grab her before her nails sank into Green’s face. Keith placed her in the cage with her son.

“These damn vicious harpies,” the rattled Green stammered.

Keith bent over and examined the stunned harpy. He gently folded in his wings and picked him up to place him in the cage.

“Not her cage,” said Green. “Put him in a cage in the other room. He needs to be quarantined for a few days. God knows what disease he might have picked up on the streets. I don’t want the female or fledgling sick.”

Keith nodded, since it seemed like a reasonable request. He carried the male down the hall and placed him in a cage. He ran a monitor over the harpy’s heart to make sure the stunning had not

had an adverse effect.

Green stood by and watched. “No wonder we couldn’t find him,” he said. “Someone caught him and removed his collar. And they cleaned and fed him. Last time we spotted him, he was thin and filthy.”

Keith knew the director was partly right. Someone had taken care of the male, but in view of the harpy’s rebellious nature, he had more likely found a friend, rather than a jailer.

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Jim returned late at night to an empty apartment. He slumped in his chair and reflected on the amazing information he had learned from the precinct computer. With access to the Dora newspapers, he read every article pertaining to harpies, starting with the previous year’s auction of the last golden male, to the blond harpy ruler saving the planet from the beetle swarms that led to the treaty between the humans and harpies. He then read about the more recent kidnapping and likely death of the golden harpy family. The last article spoke of a looming conflict between the harpies and senators.

Jim now understood why the eighty-seven hunters were killed. It wasn’t a mindless animal attack, but a true war, with the very survival of the winged race at stake. The conflict was not just a battle of blood, but also a court battle between Dora’s governor, who was trying to regain the harpies’ rights and their land, and the

senators who commandeered the Outback by obtaining the land deeds and having the treaty nullified.

Jim stood up and paced. “My blond has to be this golden ruler. He behaves like a little aristocrat, with plenty of arrogance and attitude.” He stopped pacing. “That sneaky son of a bitch, he not only understands every word I say, but can talk.” Jim wondered how the harpy had ended up in that zoo. With more answers came more questions. Jim glanced at the time. “Where is he? We need to have a sitdown.”

Jim woke in the morning and discovered that the harpy had not returned. He grew worried about his friend named Shail.

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Keith was also worried when he arrived at the zoo the following morning and found the male’s cage empty.

He burst into Green’s office. “Where is he?”

“Watch it,” Green warned. “When the zoo board clears me of those false charges, you’ll find yourself on the street.”

Keith calmed. “Where is the male harpy?” he asked, quieter.

“I said when he first arrived that the zoo wouldn’t keep him if he hurt someone. Well, he killed three men. We can’t have something that dangerous here.”

“But he did it to protect me,” Keith protested. “Please tell me you didn’t euthanize him.”

“No, we sold him to another zoo that was willing to take the risk. Where he is, is not your concern. I suggest you go back and attend to the female. She’s probably upset.”

Keith wondered if Green was telling the truth and that Shail was still alive. He strode back to the harpy building. “God damn it, I should have never trusted Green and called Shail in.” He cursed. “Someone was taking good care of him, and now he might be dead.”

## Chapter Fourteen

At the Terrance airport, Aron stood among the rain puddles in the landing field and gazed up at a clear lavender sky. Beside him was Mark. Although they were both tall, eye level with one another, Aron looked like a tree stem alongside the trunk of the large, burly man. Aron sniffed the wind. “The great storms are over. Our enemy soon comes.”

“You can’t be sure,” Mark said.

Annoyed, Aron shot him a harsh glance.

“All right, maybe harpies can predict the weather. If you’re right, I’d better alert the men.”

Another man, who had replaced Ted, stuck his head out the airport door. “Mark, the governor is on the com and wants to speak with you.” Aron and Mark hurried into the building.

Waters was on the screen. “More bad news,” the governor said with a sigh. “An hour ago, a large freighter landed inside the Hampton Port. The cargo is small hovercraft. Three hundred and twenty, to be exact, and the senators are on the invoice. If Aron’s numbers are right, you’ll be up against approximately six hundred hovers and two thousand men. The harpies and your men will be slaughtered if they face that army.”

“Any suggestions?” Mark asked.

“The Outback people need to stay home and not confront the mercenaries. The harpies should come to the east. I can protect them here. It’s the only way to avoid bloodshed.”

“So we’re supposed to lie down and take it like cowards?” Mark growled. “The senators plan to throw us out of our homes and gun down the harpies. You and your easterners can conveniently forget that the harpies saved this planet, but we can’t. The people of the Outback are willing to put our necks on the line for them.”

“I’m well aware we owe the harpies a huge debt of gratitude,” Waters barked back, “but my hands are tied. You’re sitting on the senators’ land. Legally, I can’t stop the mercenary army or prevent them from killing the harpies as game animals. If you fire on the mercenaries, they can return fire in self-defense. The answer for now is to give up your homes—they’re not worth dying for—and have the harpies move to the eastern park north of Hampton. It’s safe from hunters.”

“Sounds like ancient history,” Mark stormed, “when the Indians were driven to small reservations to dwindle and die.”

Aron stepped in front of the screen, separating the two angry men and ending the heated battle of words. “I speak now,” he said quietly to Mark.

Mark moved away from the communicator. “That lousy politician ain’t going to help you, Aron,” he snarled loud enough for Waters to hear.

“Thank you for telling of these new hovers,” Aron said politely. “Shail said we shall not hide nor flee. I follow his words. If the male flock fails and dies in this battle, perhaps our remaining females may go east for protection, but I fear it shall be few. Even



with your drugs, many females shall not survive their mate's death. For us, a broken heart is as deadly as a human weapon."

"Please, Aron, hold off fighting them and wait until the court decides," said Waters.

"I am only a jungle creature," Aron said, "but I understand that the far off courts do not favor us, just as we shall probably lose the forest battle. If our fate is to die, we shall die with our honor and freedom, not confined to a park under man's rule."

Waters urged him to change his mind, but Aron refused. The governor finally gave up, and the transmission ended.

Mark leaned over a map of the continent. "By the time they unload those hovers in Hampton and get them to the warehouse, I figure we may have seven days before their army crosses the river." He held up seven fingers. "We need to get their numbers down before they move. We have plenty of fuel for more Molotov cocktails. Your harpies could drop them on the senators' compound during the night and do a lot of damage."

"I promised not to cross the river and cause harm."

Mark looked up and frowned. "Fuck that promise," he growled. "This is war, boy. Do you want to win?"

"Yes, but there are other ways without breaking a vow."

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Senator Blackwell and Peterson stood next to the warehouse as the hundreds of hovers descended on the meadow.

“Here they come, sirs,” said a bald-headed man with a mustache and steel-blue eyes. “Some hovers don’t have the heat detectors, but it won’t take long for my men to install them and screen the blades to protect them.”

“How long, Major?” Peterson asked the mercenary.

“Three days, sir,” the major responded, “and we’ll be ready to roll. Your animal problem will be eliminated in no time.”

“Good. I’ll inform the other senators. I’m sure they want to be here and see their investment before you take off.”

“Yes, sir.”

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Darkness came to the jungle, but not to the meadow where the senators’ army camped. Floodlights lit up the field of tents and hovers. Blackwell walked among the men who sat around campfires eating and joking as others worked on the hovers, weapons, and equipment. No one was concerned about the coming conflict. The mercenaries considered themselves eradicators of pests. Like exterminators hired to kill rodents, they believed the mission held little risk. Many brought laser saws to clear the jungle trees on their newly acquired Dora land. Once the harpies were gone, the jungle would be their next target. To build their homes, they would conquer and civilize the untamed Outback.

Blackwell retired to his bunk in the warehouse, confident that the mercenaries would succeed. Late at night, the camp

became dark and quiet. Only the embers of smoldering campfires gave off a dim glow. A tremendous roar echoed through the nearby trees, jolting Blackwell from sound slumber. He stumbled outside the warehouse to the panicked soldiers that had fled their tents. They felt the seismic tremors on the ground that signaled the approach of something elephant-size large. “What the hell is that?” one man yelled.

The roar of Dora’s largest reptile was unforgettable to a local. “It’s a red dragon,” Blackwell screeched, but the men could not grasp the danger. In minutes a dozen red reptiles, similar in looks and nature to an Earth T-Rex, were upon them. The reptiles were oblivious to the men, tents, and hovers, but had an issue with one another. They angrily flared the crests on their heads that attested they were territorial males. Blackwell was not only shocked, but baffled that the dragons had chosen, of all places, to gather and fight with one another at the campsite.

A fierce battle erupted, with biting fangs and flaying tails, as the enormous lizards fought for dominancy and the right to breed an elusive female. Tents were smashed, and the lightweight hovers were flipped and crushed. Panicked men screamed and ran to avoid the thrashing mammoth bodies. Several men fired their laser guns to no avail, for the blasts only wounded the animals and added to their rage. In the middle of the camp, two of the largest lizards grasped each others’ necks and went into a frantic death roll. Their colossal bodies tumbled end over end, annihilating fifty lined-up hovercrafts. The quiet camp collapsed into chaos.

“Light fires,” Blackwell shouted to the major. “It’s the only thing that will drive them away.”

The major yelled orders to the men. They tossed tents, clothing, firewood, and fuel, anything that would burn on the campfires. In minutes, the fire pits grew into huge flames. Seeing the surrounding fires, many of the younger lizards broke off their challenges and fled back into the jungle. The two dominant males, however, were in a fight to the finish. They continued to wreak havoc, despite the men’s efforts to scare them. Finally, one weakened with suffocation as its opponent bit down on its throat, crushing its windpipe. After a few minutes of furious thrashing, the enormous reptile died. The victor’s thunderous roar was heard for five miles as it stood on its back legs and challenged the surrounding males while sending a courtship call to the females.

In the shadows on the edge of the camp, Aron stood with Bloom on a high tree limb and watched the mayhem of bringing the forest giants together. Earlier, a dozen of his harpies had located each male dragon, and acting like a lure, they had enticed the dragon to the mercenary camp by dragging a tree fan drenched with a female dragon’s heat scent. *“These soldiers thought they had found paradise,”* Aron said. *“Now they learn our jungle is perilous. Some may flee in fear, while others shall have doubts about staying and fighting for this land. And with many of their hovers destroyed, the danger for us is less.”*

*“You are wise to let the dragons fight our battle.”*

*“Our loss of the jungle is also the dragons’ loss, for these men shall eliminate them, too. Let us return to the river.”*

*“I wish to stay here and give warning when our enemy leaves for the river.”*

Aron looked at him, perplexed. *“Two harpies do this dangerous task.”*

*“You long to protect me, like my father.”* Bloom ruffled his black feathers. *“Each night, I wake with regret. If I had been with him at the river, I might have saved him.”*

*“You would not have saved your father, but only added to the hunter’s catch.”*

*“Maybe so, but I must face this danger to feel worthy, to rid myself of this remorse.”*

*“Soon, the threat shall be upon us,”* Aron said. *“I tell you, as I often told Shail, do not rush to meet death. It shall come, but better later, after a full life.”*

Bloom lowered his head with disappointment.

Aron sighed. *“If this helps you heal, I shall allow it. But this is no game, Bloom. The harpies depend on your warning.”*

*“I can speak the words and know how to use a com. I near adulthood, and my wings are long and fast. I shall not fail you.”*

*“You are still a teenager. No taunting, dipping, or fancy flying. When the enemy comes, you fly as fast as you can to the river.”* Aron cupped Bloom’s face and nuzzled his cheek. *“I have grown fond of you. Be careful, my little brother.”*

Aron sniffled, and another harpy landed on the limb. *“Bloom joins you and helps tell the movement of these men. Teach him your ways of caution. I wish a new count of men and hovers now that the dragons have been here.”* Aron spread his wings and flew back to Terrance with the small band of harpies that had coaxed the giant reptiles to their enemy’s encampment.

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Senator Blackwell stood by a demolished hovercraft among the smoke trails of dying campfires. The dawn had revealed the full extent of the devastation the reptilian raid had caused.

Senator Peterson walked to him, shaking his head. “I can’t believe this. Of all the places those lizards chose to fight. The other senators are arriving in a few hours, and they’ll be furious. They expected to sell these hovers after the harpies were gone.”

“It’s a hell of a setback.” Blackwell pulled out a cigar and lit it, contemplating. “But this calamity wasn’t bad luck. I believe the harpies brought the dragons here.”

Peterson frowned. “Blackwell, you give harpies too much credit. They’re not smart enough to plot an attack, much less move red dragons.”

“You forget they moved billion of beetles to the ocean so the swarms would drown. Manipulating a few reptiles would be far easier. The golden promised to bury my hunters, and he did, and I’ve since learned he escaped the Washington Zoo. The police with

all their high-tech equipment can't catch him." Blackwell wrung the hand with his missing fingers. "Harpies are deviant and smart. Our mistake has been underestimating them."

"The golden has proven to be more trouble than he's worth. You still plan to breed and make pets out of harpies?"

"Of course. I have the golden's sperm and DNA, so he's not needed anymore. I've instructed the zoo director to eliminate him as soon as possible. It's essential that threat doesn't find his way home."

"I'm not worried about him," Peterson said, "but this new harpy ruler is a growing concern. If that brown really coordinated the lizard attack, we have a real problem."

Blackwell puffed on the cigar and nodded. "Waters did warn us about him. I've learned his name is Aron, and the golden is his adopted brother. Since they were raised together, the golden's calculating and vicious nature probably rubbed off on the brown. Our mercenaries need to realize they're not hunting doves."

The major walked up to the senators. "Well, what are the damages?" asked Peterson.

"Sir, one hundred and sixty-seven new hovers were demolished beyond repair."

"That's half," said Blackwell.

"Yes, sir," the major said. "We parked the new hovers close to the camp for safety, and unfortunately that's where the destruction took place. The older, privately owned crafts were mostly undamaged, since they were scattered around the perimeter."

I also have more discouraging news. There were three fatalities, and thirty-two injured.”

“It could have been worse,” said Blackwell.

“Yes, sir,” the major said, “but the worst part is that these men are volunteers—not under military orders. There’s talk of leaving. Since they’re being paid with land, some are having doubts about living here with deadly animals, and they don’t want to make the investment.”

“How many?” Peterson asked.

“Sir, three to four hundred cowards may abandon the mission.”

“That’s just great!” Blackwell growled. “What more can go wrong?”

“Sir, even with the losses, we still have seventeen hundred men and over four hundred hovers. I believe the task force is large enough to meet our objective and eliminate the harpies.”

“I think you’re right, Major,” Peterson said. “The harpy flock and a few untrained town people are no match for your troops. When can you be ready?”

“By the end of the week, sir,” said the major. “All repairs should be completed, and we’ll be under way. We’ll build fires around the camp to keep out the animals.”

Blackwell turned his attention to some departing hovers filled with mercenaries who had their fill of Dora’s treacherous wildlife. He realized that the brown harpy ruler defeated his hunters, and he had now won another round against the



mercenaries. Blackwell dropped his half-smoked cigar in the dirt and crushed it with his shoe.

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Before leaving to fly east for the dragon strike, Aron had summoned every male harpy with a wingspan of ten-feet or more to gather on the river, north of Terrance. The males included the adolescents and adults who served as a lookout along the river and ocean. Even those guarding the sacred mountain were replaced with fledglings that could fly and bring food and firewood to the hidden females. Aron knew exactly where his enemy would strike. The senators' massive force of men and machines did not need to sneak into the Outback. They would make a beeline west and cross the river two hundred miles from the city, following the same route the hunters had taken earlier. The where was known, but not when.

At daybreak under a pale pink and golden sky, Aron returned to the Outback and lit on the tallest tree. Below was his giant flock of 2,500 males, their brown wings masking the fan trees. Several flock leaders joined him, and he conveyed the strength of their enemy. With a forlorn gaze they stared at their males, knowing many would die.

Aron saw that the teenagers had banded together near a stream. They nervously ruffled their feathers and nuzzled one another as their wide eyes betrayed apprehension of the coming conflict. Normally the flock of 500 young males would be prized and protected by the adults, since they were the future sires of the flying race, but with desperate times came desperate measures. If

the war was lost, the harpies had no future.

Aron flew to the youngsters and landed on a stump. *“Rest easy, I do not wish you to fight. I ask only that your wings fly swifter than the metal birds.”*

A brazen teen raised his head and stepped to Aron. *“I’m not afraid. I wish to fight and kill men.”*

Aron recognized the cocky youth as one of Shail’s favorites. He had acted as a messenger during the golden’s imprisonment in the hunting range.

*“I said you shall flee,”* Aron relayed sternly.

*“If Shail were here—,”* the teen began.

In a flash, Aron dove off the stump. He kicked the young male’s stomach and sent him to his knees, coughing. *“Shail is gone, but if you long to fight, start with me,”* he growled and arched his wings.

The teen looked up, terrified, seeing that the dominant male was challenging him. He scrambled backwards and spread his wings into the dirt to show submission. *“Forgive me, master.”*

Unlike Shail, Aron had no tolerance of brash young males, whose foolishness was their undoing. This strict lesson in obedience might save his life.

The humbled teen crawled to him and placed his head at Aron’s feet.

Aron seethed. *“Defy me again, and you shall know no mercy.”* Overhead, he saw a lone harpy flying rapidly toward Terrance. He was the male who had been ordered to take the new

measure of the enemy. Aron flapped his wings and followed him to the airport. Upon reaching the landing field, Aron was surprised to see so many hovers that had arrived during his absence.

Aron set down at the airport building and heard the loud chatter of humans inside. When he opened the door, the men became silent. They moved aside when he walked to Mark's desk. The harpy messenger stood before Mark, holding a white tree limb with small slashes in the bark. Each slash represented an enemy soldier. The underside showed the number of hovers. Mark stopped counting and smiled. "So how'd your mission go, Aron?"

"The new amount shall tell you."

Mark finished counting one side and looked up, astounded. "I'll be damned. Four hundred and forty-five hovers, down from the six hundred and twelve of last week. How did you pull it off?"

"We brought the great lizards to the senator's camp, and they crushed the hovers. The soldier numbers shall also be less. Some were hurt, but many more fled in fear of our jungle." The room once again filled with the men's anxious voices. Most were unfamiliar to Aron. "Who are these?"

"I put the word out in the Outback," said Mark, "and asked every capable man to get here and help the harpies. Most of them traveled all night. Come meet them." Mark led Aron through the crowded room. "These guys are from Port Deland and Webb's Chapel on the south coast."

A short, grisly man stepped forward. "So you're the tough brown who's standing up to those senators," he said with a

toothless grin. “We’re with ya. Owe you harpies for stopping those swarms and saving our families and homes. Most of us southerners are fishermen, but we got attitude. Those mercenaries wanna kill harpies? They’re in for a good ass-kickin’.”

Aron lowered his head to show gratitude.

Mark grinned. “Men are flying in from every little town. Those guys over there just arrived from Westend.”

Aron stepped to the Westend men and recognized the old man with silver braids who lived on the Turner Estate. “Charlie, I am pleased you are here.” He placed his hands on the man’s shoulder. “I see that your arm wound has healed.”

“It’d take more than a laser blast to stop this stubborn Indian,” said Dr. White, who was also in the group. “Ever since the goldens were kidnapped, he’s been on the warpath and itching for scalps.”

Charlie grimaced at Doc and shook his braids. “A five-hour trip with Doc, and I am ready to shoot someone,” he muttered. “Just tell us where you want us.”

“Mark tells the men,” Aron replied. “I speak with the harpies.”

Charlie’s sad eyes gazed up at Aron. “Any word on Kari or Shail?”

“We found Shail’s feather in the east. It tells they may have been taken and not killed.”

A small grin crossed Charlie’s wrinkled face. “So there’s a chance.”

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A few days later at daybreak, Aron impatiently ruffled his feathers and paced inside the Terrance airport before Mark's communicator, awaiting news. On the floor, men slept on their mats as others bunked outside in tents or the hovers on the landing field. The men began to stir and talk quietly as they watched Aron.

"He sure is jittery," one man commented.

"He's got plenty reason," said another. "Any day now, those mercenaries will strike."

Aron waited for Bloom's dire transmission, but also still hoped to hear from Ted. Weeks earlier, he had left for Hampton to rally the easterners into helping the harpies, but there had been no word from him. Mark predicted they wouldn't show up. Their homes were not at stake, and they had no close ties to the harpies that dwelled in the western outback. With the battle drawing near, the time was nearly gone for the east to support the harpies.

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Perched comfortably in a high tree, Bloom had a clear view of the army camp. This morning seemed different. The soldiers woke before dawn and gulped down breakfast. They then began to load weapons into their hovers. Bloom saw the man called "Major" leave the warehouse and shout orders. "We leave at oh-seven-

hundred. Be ready.”

Bloom dove from the limb and landed deep in the brush. He pressed a sequence of numbers on the small com to reach the Terrance airport. Aron appeared on the screen with Mark standing beside him. “They pack the hovers. The major said seven, they leave.”

“Return now,” said Aron.

Bloom glanced at the brown harpy that had kept vigilance with him. “He goes, but I shall remain. We must be sure they take flight.”

Aron breathed deeply. “When the first hover lifts from the ground, call again and leave. You must be out of reach of their weapons.”

“I see the worry in your eyes,” Bloom said softly. “Do not fear. I shall see you at the river.” The com link ended.

Mark straightened and turned to the men. “This is it. The mercenaries are packing up and taking off in a half-hour. Tell the men that are camped outside and those in town to get ready. Load up the weapons, and don’t forget to wear your yellow bandanas.”

The men scrambled to their feet and raced outside to alert the rest of their small ragtag force of farmers, fishermen, store clerks, and other citizens. Except for Mark, none had training in combat. Aron stood by the doorway and watched them pack their weapons into every kind of aircraft. The landing field was littered with small hovers, shuttles, and up to large timber freighters.

Everything that could fly in the western outback had convened at the Terrance airport. Although a mismatched collection aircraft, the transports bore one thing in common. Each had a yellow streamer attached to its landing gear. The yellow banner was a symbol of hope for the men and would allow the harpies to recognize a friendly craft. For Aron, the yellow banner represented the golden wings that once flew over the jungle.

The two old men from the west coast calmly strolled to the doorway and Aron. “Look at those excited young guys,” said Doc. “They can’t wait to go off and fight. Men killing men to save harpies. I wonder what John would say to this.”

“John died protecting Shail.” said Charlie. “If he were still with us, he’d be leading the charge.”

Aron knew that John was Kari’s father. “I believe he would. Turner was very brave and became a good friend to the harpies.”

Doc slipped on his yellow bandana and said with a sigh, “Guess we’d better get moving, or these fools will leave us old geezers in the dust.” Holding their weapons, the old men walked to their hover.

Charlie glanced back. “When this is over, I hope to see you.”

Aron nodded.

The anxious men stood near their transport, talking with emotionally charged voices as a large flock of harpies stood silently in the trees that bordered the landing strip. All awaited the

warning call from the lone black-winged harpy.

As the sun crested on the treed horizon across the river, Aron heard the buzz of an incoming call. He flinched and leaped inside. Mark hit the connect button on the communicator, and Bloom appeared on the screen.

“They come now,” Bloom said.

“Fly fast, Bloom,” Aron urged. The com went dead, and Aron turned to Mark. “Now we learn who shall survive.”

The two stepped outside to the awaiting crowd of men and harpies. Mark announced, “They’re on their way and should hit the river by noon. We need to be in place.”

The men ran to their crafts. Aron spread his wings and soared toward the jungle. Thousands of brown wings erupted from the multicolored trees to blanket the pink sky. Before one hover lifted off, the giant shadow of harpies vanished to the north.

Once again, Aron and the large flock flew along the riverbank, heading for the same wide shoal where the hunters were killed. Besides being a direct flight from the senator’s warehouse, the gravel shoal was the perfect landing spot for an army to set up camp and hunt the harpies. The dense jungle offered little for a multitude of descending hovers. Aron and Mark knew that mercenaries’ sheer force of their numbers gave them confidence, and they would hit the harpy flock head on with one big sweep. If the mercenaries deviated and crossed the river in another place, it could be a problem.

The flock reached the shoal that created a sharp bend in the



river and flew past it. They descended on a northwestern bank, concealing themselves in the massive trees and ferns. The Outback men would land on the shoal. Aron lit on a tree limb overlooking the river and his flock. As they milled around and waited, he detected their growing terror and reluctance to kill.

He made a long, angry hiss, getting his huge flock's attention. "*Wipe this fear and doubt from your minds,*" he growled telepathically to them. "*Wipe the remorse of killing from your hearts. This light shall tell if we see another. Your harpy fright shall end us.*" He tossed his long locks and breathed deeply to calm himself. "*Draw from the human blood that lies deep in your past and become strong, shameless killers. To win, we must be like our enemy. We must be men. To do not, your families shall die.*"

Aron heard the approach of his allies as they landed on the shoal to the south. He flew to talk with Mark one last time.

As the last of the hovers landed and silenced their engines, Mark asked, "Are they ready, Aron?"

"They must be."

"Okay," Mark said and pressed Aron's hand. "Good luck."

Aron brushed off the human handshake and took the tall, burly man in his arms. In true harpy friendship, he embraced and nuzzled Mark's rough, bearded neck. "May you also have this luck."

"All right, Aron," Mark whispered. "You're making me look bad." He stepped back. His cheeks flushed with

embarrassment, he surveyed the other men's expressions. "Getting hugged by a pretty male will have these guys talking. They don't know about this harpy affection."

"Now they know," Aron said. "Be careful, my human brother." He took off and returned to his flock, landing in a high tree that overhung the river. An hour later, he stood up straight and tilted his head to the east. A distant humming rose through the trees. "*They come,*" he relayed to one of the males. Immediately airborne, the male flew fast down river. In front of Mark and the outback men, he tilted his wings up and down.

"That's the signal," Mark shouted to the men. "The mercenaries will be here shortly."

"I don't hear anything," said a man beside Charlie.

"Harpies hear sounds that we can't," responded Charlie. He stepped to his hover and Doc. "You drive. I'll shoot."

"Why should you have all the fun?" Doc grumbled as he climbed into the pilot seat.

"I'm the better shot, and I only have to think about my little Kari to pull this trigger."

The flock detected the tremendous buzz from hundreds of imminent hovercrafts. The noise alone normally would cause most harpies to flee, but they ruffled their feathers and stayed. Aron sailed down to the band of terrified teens. "Soon, you shall do as taught and draw our enemy to you. When I say, fly swiftly to the northwest and hide in the safe mountain passes until this fight is over." Aron left them and returned to his high perch. Although

watching for the enemy hovers, he also worriedly scanned the horizon for Bloom, who should have already arrived.

Finally, Aron saw the massive swarm of flying machines and swallowed hard. Ahead of the mercenaries appeared to be a large black bird that dipped and dove in and out of the treetops. The sounds and flashes of laser blasts came from the pursuers of the teasing creature, but it was no bird, but Bloom acting as bait. He was drawing the army up river away from the shoal, so the Outback men and the adult harpies could attack from the rear.

Aron shuddered with anger and anxiety. *Reckless, like Shail*, he thought. He signaled to a harpy prepared to light a fire, and then turned to the teenage flock. *“Fly, and do not look back.”* Five hundred adolescents rose up and fluttered over the river in plain sight.

Aron looked back for Bloom and gasped, seeing Bloom’s wing go limp from a blast. The young male desperately flapped his other wing to stay airborne, but it was futile. The black wings disappeared when he plummeted into the trees.

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“Got him,” the major sneered.

“I’m sighting a large flock upriver north of the bend,” radioed a mercenary.

“North unit, cut them off and we’ll close in,” shouted the major on the com to his squadron. Immediately, one hundred

hovers changed direction and were after a second harpy decoy.

Aron waited until they came closer. *“To the mountains. Now!”* he relayed to the adolescents, and immediately they streaked northwest as the mercenaries raced after them.

The Outback men heard in the tremendous roar of a multitude of hover engines, and the jungle echoed with hundreds of laser blasts. The terrifying noise coming from around the river bend silenced the cries and songs of all wild creatures.

“Those poor little harpies,” Doc said quietly to Charlie. “Sounds like a lot of them.”

“Are you afraid?” Charlie asked as they waited for Mark’s signal to attack.

“I’d be crazy if I weren’t,” said Doc, “but we both have lived good, long lives. No regrets if I die today.”

At Aron’s nod, 300 adult males approached a small fire. With one hand, each lit a torch; in the other hand, each held a bottle of fuel, the Molotov cocktails that Mark had concocted and shown them how to use. *“Let it begin,”* Aron relayed. *“Destroy the harpy killers.”* The harpies rose into the noonday sky and charged after the mercenaries, who in turn pursued the flock of teenagers. Easily overtaking the unsuspecting hovers, the harpies descended on them from above and dropped the lit bottles of fuel. Seventy of the enemy hovers burst into flames and crashed into the jungle. Taken by surprise, the enemy forces were again thrown into chaos.

The assault happened too swiftly for the major to grasp the

full extent of the damage from the barrage of harpies. “Break off the chase and regroup,” he shouted. “The heat detectors are scanning over a thousand downriver.” The northern unit could not regroup, though, as most had been destroyed and the rest were fleeing the harpy bombardment. Since the harpies were above and behind them, the mercenaries had difficulty firing on their assailants. Hovers were designed for the chase, and its engine was mounted in the back. A passenger’s view of a trailing harpy was not only obstructed, but a misplaced shot from behind could hit the engine and bring the hover down.

The major saw a massive flock rise from the trees and rapidly fly south. “Follow me. We have them on the run,” he ordered. Led by the major, a hundred hovers took up the chase. Aron guided his flock downriver with the stalking mercenaries at their rear.

Mark, at the helm of his floating hover, saw Aron and his harpies flying low over the water toward them. “Here they come,” he yelled.

The major and his troops flew in hot pursuit of the flock and blew past Mark and the Outback men. Going at top speed around the river bend, the mercenaries did not see the fifty-odd hidden sky craft until it was too late. Once again, the mercenaries were at a disadvantage as the Outback men converged on their tails and fired their weapons. The mercenary hovers were dropping at an alarming rate, and the organized military group fell apart. The major’s frantic orders went unheeded. It was every man for

himself.

“Blast that pilot, you old fool,” Doc yelled when they engaged the opposition.

“Well, get up to him,” Charlie growled.

As the harpy flock winged south over the river, Aron glanced back and saw the Outback men and enemy were now engaged in individual sky battles. He tilted his wings and turned his males to confront the mercenaries, even though his harpies would suffer more losses with a head on attack. Each harpy armed with a laser gun zipped in and around the hovers, aiming for the craft’s engine or pilot.

Concealed in the tree cover, the remaining flock of 1000 exploded from the trees and joined their ruler in the battle. Aron looked toward the distant western mountains and saw the last glimpses of the teenage flock. No hounding hovers followed them. Breathing a sigh of relief, he turned his attention back to the hectic fight. Some of the mercenaries landed on the riverbank and chose to shoot from the ground.

Aron descended on them like a demon out of hell. Flying straight at them, he fired his weapon. Panicked by the speeding, blasting harpy, most of the men turned and ran for the trees, only to be cut down by Aron’s fire. The mercenaries soon learned that trees offered no shelter from creatures that could glide sideways between the trunks and had the sight and speed of a hawk.

A frantic soldier on the ground radioed the major. “It’s like trying to shoot at a bat that’s shooting back. They’re too damn

fast.”

After slaying the foot soldiers, Aron surfaced from the jungle on the wide span of the river. The battle appeared won. The remaining mercenaries were retreating. Overwhelmed by the harpies and yellow-bannered hovercrafts, they raced back across the river. Aron, panting, fluttered in place to watch.

From the eastern jungle, he heard a nightmarish hum in the distance. A second battery of the senators’ hovercrafts was clearing the treetops to rendezvous at the river with the first wave. The harpies also heard the new threat of several hundred hovers and four large freighters. Petrified by the giant pack of new hunters, they left the open river and dispersed to the safety of the trees.

The men of the Outback saw the massive group of enemy hovers. They, too, realized they were up against impossible odds. “Damn,” Mark cursed. “That first wave was sent to draw us out.”

Like the harpies, the men scattered and retreated into the western jungle.

“Come on, Doc, let’s take them,” Charlie yelled.

“Are you nuts?”

“What? You’d rather croak in bed?”

Doc smiled. “You’re one crazy Indian.” He turned their small hover back toward the river to confront the solid mass of flying machines, deserting the Outback troops.

As Doc skirted the adversary hovers, Charlie fired and hooted like a young Indian on the warpath. Fighting for a worthy cause, neither feared death in the winter of their lives.

Aron landed on the riverbank and saw the two old men take on the senators' army alone. He leaped into the air and flew rapidly to join them. Darting through the center of the squadron, he fired into each hover he passed. Laser bursts erupted from the hovers, but Aron was so swift that the mercenaries were caught in friendly fire, so eager to kill this gutsy harpy, they were blasting each other.

Aron dove down and came up to attempt a second run. The lightning blasts ripped through his wings, and he smelled his own burning feathers. He tossed his hair toward his flock and relayed, "*I proudly die defending my mate and son.*"

His message and example sent a chill through the flock. As the last brave effort of a dying winged race, the flock rose from the jungle and headed directly into the face of the enemy.

Inspired by Aron and two old guys, the men of the Outback also raced back toward the river and fight. The yellow-bannered hovers were outnumbered four to one, and they were soon streaming and crashing into the river and jungle. The dark river waters mirrored the struggle of wings and machines, with the smooth surface images broken only by the ripple of falling harpies and hovers. The large freighters set down at the gravel shoal, and more mercenaries poured out to shoot down the flying foes.

Aron saw his harpies being annihilated by foot soldiers. Angrily, he flew north and snatched up a torch and two fire bombs. He took direct aim on the freighters that sheltered the mercenaries. Flying twenty feet above the ground, he lobbed a lit bomb into the open doorway of a freighter. The freighter exploded into flames.



The ghastly screams from men on fire gave Aron the shivers. Leaving the holocaust behind him, Aron zeroed in on a second menace. He lit the fuel-filled bottle and dropped it on top of the freighter. With one long sweep, he wiped out two freighters, along with a hundred of the paid killers. His vengeful rage seemed to give him a bulletproof edge.

“Good job, Aron,” yelled Doc from his hover as the old men came alongside him. He nodded, happy to see that Charlie and Doc were still alive. He broke off from them, drew his laser gun from his sash, and dove down on the nearest enemy craft. He blasted the engine and watched it spiral downward into the water. With a large splash, the river claimed another. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he heard the distressing sound of more hovercrafts coming from the east.

A third squad of hovers moved rapidly toward him, causing Aron’s eyes to water. Sadness replaced wrath as he realized he had failed his flock, and worse, his family. A tear ran down his cheek when he closed his eyes and imagined the death of his infant son. The harpies could not win. He sniffled and threw himself back into the hopeless battle.

Flying directly between two enemy hovers, he was so close that his wings slapped the sides of both crafts. He took deadly aim and shot both pilots before anyone aboard could fire on him or control the craft. He flew above them and watched the hovers spin out of control and smash into each other, going down in a tangle of metal.

After witnessing Aron's daredevil attacks on the freighters and the two hovers, the major barked to his pilot, "There's that nervy bastard. Go after him." He radioed to three other hovers close by. "Follow me. I'm on the tail of the harpy ruler, and the senators said they'd pay extra to kill this one."

Four hovers concentrated on Aron. Rounds of blasts zipped past his head and singed his wings. He dove straight down, did a mid-air flip, and came up under them. He fired at two of the craft engines at close range. Sparks flew, and metal melted. In a moment, the machines were silent and fell swiftly.

A blast grazed Aron's shoulder and wing, causing him to drop his laser gun. He recognized the shooter. The hairless major had shouted orders at the senator's warehouse and was obviously their leader. The major and Aron squared off, each determined to take out the other.

Ignoring the pain from his injury, Aron flew under and up to perch on the landing skid of the major's hovercraft. As the major aimed to fire a second blast, Aron reached through the open window and grabbed his weapon. They fought for control of the laser gun as Aron fluttered alongside the floating craft. Using his foot like a hand, Aron opened the hover door. Pressed against each other, Aron detected the major's stunned thoughts that he had seriously underestimated the tenacious and intelligent harpies. They grappled for a minute, and Aron bit the man's hand. He lost his grip on the weapon, and it fell into the trees.

"Shoot him! Shoot him!" the panicked major screamed to

the pilot.

Before the pilot could respond, Aron flapped his wings backward, jerking the major through the hover door. The major's eyes bulged with terror before Aron dropped the screeching man a hundred feet to his death. The horrified pilot sped off to avoid being the next victim.

Aron watched the pilot's hover travel toward the river as the new assailants emerged from the eastern jungle. Their number exceeded three hundred. "We are lost like the loca eagles," Aron muttered, reflecting on his ancestors, who had also been wiped out by mankind. He flapped his tired, blood-soaked wings toward the next adversary.

He heard a multitude of blasts and saw that the oncoming crafts were firing on the major's retreating pilot. With a barrage of discharges, the man's hover took a nose dive into the eastern riverbank. Aron spotted the yellow banners under the transports and recognized the small red hover leading the pack. It was Ted.

Aron breathed a huge sigh of relief and coasted up to Ted's open window. "You came!"

"Told you I wouldn't let you down," Ted yelled over the engine noise. He frowned, seeing Aron's sweaty and blood-splattered body and wing. "You look like hell, Aron."

"I am good, very good," Aron responded, and his lips curled.

"So you can smile," Ted commented with his own wide grin.

The ally transports had joined the river battle and were blasting the mercenaries out of the sky. After briefly engaging the eastern men, the mercenaries saw they were outnumbered and deserted the battle. The soldiers aboard the two remaining freighters dropped their weapons and stood with hands in the air. More emerged from the jungle to surrender. Ted and the harpy allies landed their crafts on the shoal to round up the captives.

On the riverbank, Ted and Aron stood and watched. “What should we do with them?” Ted asked.

Aron gazed at the gathering prisoners, numbering in the hundreds, and thought about Shail. He had put his personal feelings aside, the anger and revenge, and chose tolerance with the humans. That wisdom made him a great ruler. “Let them go,” he said quietly. “Let them return to the stars.”

“They just killed a lot of your harpies.”

“They are not the cruel hunters that lusted for our deaths. These men did not know us and fought only for a home. I shall show mercy, if they promise not to return. Our true enemy still lies in the east.” He watched as the men loaded their wounded in the freighters for the trip to Hampton.

Doc landed on the shoal with Charlie. The old doctor went back to his calling, treating the injured men and harpies that were brought to the encampment.

Charlie walked over to Ted. “How did you get these easterners to come?” he asked.

“That was Governor Waters’ doing. He held a news

conference and talked about how much the Dora people owed the harpies. Nobody thought it did much good until I went to Hampton Port to leave. All these men and their transports were waiting. We kept our departure quiet, thinking we'd surprise the senators' mercenaries."

"It was a surprise all right," Charlie said, "both for the harpies and us, since we were nearly done in."

With a heavy heart, Aron left the shoal and soared over the jungle as dusk approached. Countless trails of smoke rose from the trees. Peering down, he saw the fanned out brown wings of many dead harpies that lay scattered on the forest floor. Other harpies were picking up their crippled and maimed brothers. Doc would have his hands full giving first aid and dispatching the wounded to the Terrance hospital.

Aron searched for two he cherished. Finally, he spotted the familiar downed hovercraft and dove toward it. He approached the silent, smoldering craft. Inside, the man's large body lay with a laser wound to his chest. He knelt and placed his hand on the forehead of the bearded dead man. "You got your wish, Mark," he said with tears. "You died a proud warrior fighting for a noble cause, rather than as a retired old man." Aron lowered his head. "But I lost a true friend."

Aron rose, left the honorable man's corpse, and continued his search. He flew across the river to the site of Bloom's descent. Breathing hard with apprehension, he expected to mourn another. Floating down, he saw blood smeared on the leaves. "Bloom!" he

called.

*“Here. I am here, Aron,”* relayed a listless voice. Aron saw the handsome face peer out from under a layer of dead fan leaves. The young harpy had hidden in case the enemy came looking for him.

Aron rushed to his side. *“Why did you not flee as told?”* he fumed while hectically tossing the foliage off Bloom to reveal his limp broken wing.

*“You know why. The enemy needed to cross the river north of the bend and away from our flock and Outback men. I risked no more than any other.”*

Aron lifted him. Bloom had gained the confidence of a mature male and no longer needed the coddling of an adult.

*“Did we win?”* Bloom asked as Aron cradled him and spread his wings.

*“Yes.”*

Aron landed near Doc and laid Bloom down. His worried eyes conveyed his concern to the doctor.

Doc scanned the black wing. *“Clean break; he’ll fly again.”* He noticed Aron’s blood-soaked wing and shoulder. *“Let me check that.”*

*“No. Take care of my flock.”*

*“I don’t take orders from anyone, much less a harpy. Now hold still. You want that wing to rot and fall off?”* he grumbled and ran his scanner over Aron’s injury. *“Flesh wound. You’re lucky. It missed the bone and artery. I can treat you back in Terrance.”*

Aron turned away and bleakly gazed with moist eyes at the many maimed and dead bodies strewn along the shore. He had lost many he loved.

Charlie stepped beside him and patted his shoulder. "It's over now," the old man said quietly. "You and your harpies have won your freedom."

"Have we?" Aron asked. "After we defeated the hunters, I heard the same words from a worthy man, one I admired. Mark lies dead in the jungle, proof his words were wrong." Aron tossed back his locks and stared skyward. "This war is like fighting a great beast. We have wounded it, but it returns to the trees to heal and fight once again. Only when we stop its heart shall it no longer be a threat."

Charlie looked up at him. "You speak of the senators?"

Aron nodded.

## Chapter Fifteen

For the second morning, Jim woke to an empty apartment and was growing increasingly worried about his handsome winged friend. Viewing the media machine of the local news, he had the answer. A small article reported the recapture of the harpy that had disrupted the city for weeks. A one-line sentence said that the dangerous harpy had been shipped to another zoo. In disgust, Jim tossed the machine on the couch. The capture should have ended the harpy chapter in his life, but his instincts as a detective aroused his suspicion. He wasn't ready to close the book on his brave, winged buddy.

At his old precinct, he had used the super computer that provided in depth information on events on other planets. He learned about harpies that came from the obscure jungle planet of Dora. The residents cherished the creatures, especially the blond ruler known as Shail.

Jim was bothered by many incidents surrounding his feathered roommate. The zoo director claimed the harpy was deadly and placed a price on his head, yet Jim found the male docile, and even affectionate, unless provoked. The attempted theft of the harpy also didn't add up. Why would three men risk it? Earthlings knew little about the creatures, and even less of their value. Then there was the political drama around the kidnapping of the golden family. The yellow-winged ruler had made peace with the humans by saving them from the deadly swarms of beetles. The



threat he still posed to the senators, especially with the looming war and court case, was obvious. *Given the rarity of golden harpies, the one I caught has to be Shail. He also fits the profile of a monarch, full of arrogance and attitude,* he thought. He's been battling against the odds. It's time someone got in his corner.

With a cop's determination to right a wrong and help a victim of foul play, Jim stepped up to the challenge. He pressed some com keys and was soon speaking to a woman at the Washington Zoo.

"Sorry, sir," the woman said. "The male harpy is no longer here. It's been relocated to another zoo."

"I'm aware of that," Jim replied. "Which zoo has it?"

"One minute," she said and placed him on hold. "Sorry," she said, returning to the screen. "I don't have that information."

Jim thanked her and disconnected. "Everything around that harpy stinks," he growled.

Arriving at the Washington Zoo an hour later, he inquired again about the harpy, but no one knew the male's location. If he wanted answers, he would have to assume a role of authority.

To the zoo receptionist, he stated with an official air, "I'm Jim Comm. I'm investigating the attempted harpy theft. I have some follow-up questions for the handler involved in the incident."

The receptionist, apparently taking Jim to be another police detective, answered promptly. "That's Keith Williams. I'll call him."

Shortly afterward, an average-looking young man with

wavy brown hair appeared in the office

“Just a few more questions, son,” Jim said to Keith. “Tell me about the theft again.”

Keith repeated the story. When finished, he said, “I’m confused. I was told the case was closed since the thieves were killed.”

“It’s a follow-up. I need more details. Who knew that you took the harpy out flying in the evening?”

“Everyone at the zoo,” Keith answered. “I usually took the female and fledgling, too.”

“But not on that evening?”

“No, sir,” Keith said. “The female was scheduled for a pregnancy scan. It was luck that she and her baby weren’t there.”

Jim raised his eyebrows, knowing that luck did not play well in detective work. “Do the vets usually put in late hours when it’s not an emergency?”

“Not usually,” Keith answered. “Dr. Green ordered the scan while the male was out of his cage. Shail is very protective of his mate and baby.”

“Who named him Shail?”

“Some women on the passenger ship took care of him and called him Shail, but Senator Blackwell of Dora owns him. The senator might’ve put that name on the harpy’s shipping papers. The harpies are on lease to the zoo.”

“It’s a strange name,” Jim said, smiling with the confirmation that the zoo harpy, his winged roommate, and the

kidnapped golden ruler were one and the same. And Senator Blackwell was the guilty party. “So back to this pregnancy scan. The decision was Dr. Green’s?”

Keith nodded.

“Tell me about the male’s shock and transmitter collar. Why didn’t the shocks work?”

“I did that.” Keith lowered his head. “The harpy suffered plenty when he was hooked up to the breeding machines. I didn’t want him hurt again, so I taped over the shock bands. Dr. Green wasn’t happy about it.”

“Really?” Jim questioned. “But the disabled collar prevented the theft and allowed the harpy to defend you.”

“But without the shocks, Dr. Green couldn’t catch him.”

“I suppose that’s a concern. The male is said to be dangerous.”

“That’s a lie. He’s gentle and has a sound mind, unless he’s attacked.”

“Apparently, you and Dr. Green have a difference of opinion on the male’s temperament. How did they manage to catch him?”

“He wasn’t caught. Shail’s too fast and smart,” Keith said. “He came back to the zoo on his own because he missed his family, and like an idiot, I coaxed him inside. Someone was taking good care of that harpy, and right now I don’t know how he’s doing.”

“You really like him.” Jim grinned.

Keith stared seriously at Jim. "Like I said, Detective, he saved my life."

Jim realized the young handler was a storehouse of information, and his fondness for the harpies was an additional plus in helping Jim accomplish his objective. "Getting back to the theft, you said that the three men searched the vehicle for the remote that controlled the shock collar. How do you suppose they knew about it?"

"Not sure. All the zoo employees know about the remotes and shock collars. They're used for handling dangerous animals."

Jim rubbed his chin and asked, "Which zoo has Shail now?"

"No one knows except Dr. Green. I asked, and he refused to tell me." Keith gnawed his lip. "I'm beginning to think Dr. Green is lying about sending Shail to another zoo, and he really put him down. A lot of people were rooting for the harpy when he was loose. If it came out that Green killed him, he and the zoo would get a lot of bad publicity. Green never liked Shail anyway."

"You really think Dr. Green would kill the harpy?" Jim asked. "I've heard the creatures are scarce and valuable."

"They are. Shail was insured for four million," Keith answered, "but the zoo has his sperm and DNA on ice, so he's not needed as a stud anymore."

"Four million," said Jim with surprise. "Seems like a lot for an animal."

"Not really. He's the last golden adult, and a prized game

animal. My last supervisor said hunter demand drove up his price.”

Jim began to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. The attempted theft of the male by the three men while the female was gone, Green’s claim that Shail was dangerous that urged the police to shoot him down, even the reward for a dead escaped harpy all added up to a legitimate insurance claim that would benefit Senator Blackwell, and probably Green. Like Keith, Jim believed that Shail was in grave danger. He patted the young man’s shoulder. “I don’t believe the harpy’s dead. If Dr. Green destroyed him, no one could collect on the insurance. I’d like to see the female harpy, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” said Keith, “but I have to warn you, she’s not real friendly to strangers.”

They walked past the exhibits toward the breeding buildings.

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Kari, clutching her son, slipped into the straw and stared out nervously at the stranger, a big brute of a man with light brown hair.

“See, Detective,” Keith said. “She’s shy, but if you grab for her, she’ll claw the heck out of you. She got me good the first time I tried to touch her.”

The man stared at her in amazement. “No wings? She looks like a gorgeous young woman.”

“Everyone says that,” Keith said with a chuckle.

The man moved closer to the cage. “She might not have wings, but with her big eyes and delicate features, she resembles a harpy. In fact, she and her mate look so much alike, they could pass for twins.”

Keith turned from the cage. “I didn’t think the police got that close to him.”

“They didn’t.” He crouched to be eye level with Kari and said quietly, “Shail is as beautiful as he is fierce, but he’s gentle when he trusts someone.” He smiled wide. “And he definitely loves bread and jam.”

Kari looked incredulously at the man and moved undaunted to the cage bars. Sniffing the man’s jacket, she detected Shail’s scent. Shail had said when he was loose in the city, he found a kind man who cared for him. Through the cage bars, she clasped the man’s hand to get a better sense of him. This was the man.

“My name’s Jim, and I’m going to help you,” he said. “I know you and Shail can speak and are far more intelligent than you’ve let on. Somehow, I’ll find Shail and reunite you. Do you understand?”

Kari nodded slightly to the man who wore his honor on his sleeve.

“Good,” Jim said, standing up.

Keith stepped back and stared at Jim. “You had him. You took care of Shail and removed his collar, didn’t you? Are you really a cop?”

“I used to be a damn good one. Shail landed on my apartment roof, and his chain got snagged in some bricks. When I tried to wrestle him down, he knocked the crap out of me.” He chuckled. “Learned quick that he wasn’t pet material.” He became serious. “From what I’ve learned about Shail and what you told me, I think his life is in danger. It stems from threats back on Dora and the insurance. Four million is a pretty good motive to commit fraud, but to collect, the harpy has to be stolen or his death must appear accidental.”

“You think Green’s involved?”

“Oh, yeah, everything points to him and his senator friend, Blackwell. Now I have one final question for you, Keith. You care about these harpies. The question is, how much?”

Kari’s thin young handler frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Are you willing to go out on a limb, risk your job, and break a few laws? There’s a war brewing between the harpies and the senators on Dora and a court battle between them here,” Jim explained. “Shail isn’t the only one at risk. Senator Blackwell is no friend to the harpies. If things go badly for him, he and Green may end the harpy breeding program and collect on the insurance for the entire family. I need to get her and the baby out of the zoo and find Shail, but I can’t do it without your help.”

Keith gazed at Kari. “I’m in. Tell me what to do.”

Kari fought the lump forming in her throat. For the first time in weeks, she felt the welling up of joyful hope. She understood why Shail had put his trust in the determined and

capable big man. His looks and noble character were reminiscent of her father's.

“Is there any way of learning where Shail is?”

Keith thought for a moment. “I have a friend in the zoo office— Sally,” he said. “Maybe she could find out.”

“Call me if you learn anything,” Jim said and handed him an old card. “I’ll follow the money trail. If Green is profiting from the harpies, there must be a record.”

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Shail's chest throbbed from the painful stun blast, and his body felt cramped. Beneath him, the floor vibrated with the humming sound of a large hovercraft engine. Slowly opening his eyes, he found himself inside a small shipping cage with his wings protruding between the bars. The smell of fresh air confirmed he had left the domed city and its stale atmosphere.

“Hey, Frank, the harpy is waking up,” said a man's deep voice.

Hearing the man, Shail jolted to full awareness. In a defensive mood, he pulled in his arms and legs and covered his body with feathers. Five men sat on benches around his cage and gazed down at him. The new men added to his endless parade of owners, some good and some bad, that he endured since leaving his jungle home. Shail noticed they were clean cut and wore fashionable sportswear. They smelled like flowers, and their soft



hands were immaculately manicured. They seemed harmless, but not relying on appearances, he sniffled toward them to sense their intentions. No caring or mercy dwelled in their thoughts, only lust for his death and wings.

“He’s coming around,” said another.

Shail recognized the voice. Green had called him Frank. When Shail was hooked up to the breeding machine, he had listened to the two men who discussed his purchase for a hunting range. Shail foresaw his fate. Green had sold him as a game animal.

“Frank, you said this harpy was vicious,” one man said, “but it’s hiding under its wings and seems lame. Are you sure we got our money’s worth?”

“He’s a golden harpy, Ed, and known to be treacherous,” said Frank, “but he’s been in captivity for months. For the money I paid, he’d better not be tame.” He picked up his laser rifle and, using the barrel, jabbed Shail’s ribs hard through the feathers. Shail flinched and hissed at him. “See, he just needs some prodding to get him riled.”

Frank, Ed, and a man named Larry took turns poking Shail’s defenseless back, laughing when Shail angrily gnashed his teeth and seethed as he twisted frantically in the confining cage to deflect the hurtful thrusts. After an hour of torment, he had reached a frenzied state. His locks dripped with sweat, and he panted and shook with nervousness. Realizing he entertained the men on the monotonous hover trip, he conceded and curled up in a tight ball.

Under his quivering wings, he quietly endured the prods.

“He’s had enough,” Frank said. “Don’t want to hunt a coward.”

“So when do we hunt him?” asked a man named Tim. “It’ll be nearly dark when we get to your lodge.”

“I’m not supposed to hunt him,” Frank said. “Under the agreement I made with Green, the harpy is to be stunned in this cage and then hung by his wrists so I can harvest his wings. Green says the animal is deadly, and I don’t have the experience to hunt it.”

“So we’re traveling all this way,” said Tim, “and spent a fortune, so we can butcher it?”

“I picked up his cage, and he’s light, maybe eighty pounds,” said Ed. “Besides, he looks like a skinny teenager. He doesn’t seem dangerous.”

“He’s dangerous, gentlemen,” said Frank. “To date, this harpy has killed seven men that we know of. But I agree. I didn’t pay three million for a pair of wings. Tomorrow morning, we’ll hunt him. I want my adrenaline pumping when I drop this baby.”

All the men excitedly agreed except a large, heavy man named Tony. “I don’t know,” he mustered. “I’m not afraid of the little guy and enjoy these hunting trips with you boys, but I’m just having issues with killing the harpy. Except for the wings, he looks awfully human. He’s even pretty. I’m not sure this is right.”

“You developing a man crush, Tony?” Ed asked with a chuckle.

“That’s the beauty of a harpy hunt,” said Frank. “These creatures resemble young men, but they’re really stupid animals. It’s like legalized murder without the crime or remorse.”

Shail listened to the men and thought they would soon discover which of the species is stupid and who would be hunting who. He heard a beeping in the cockpit and felt the large hover descend. He lifted his head from the feathers.

Frank rose. “We’re here. Need to turn off the automatic pilot and land.” He walked to the front of the hover. Shail felt the bump as the hover set down. The men opened the door and climbed out. Through the opening, Shail saw a clear blue sky over barren land. Tony and a man they called Ed lifted his cage and carried him outside. He shivered in the strong, cold wind.

“Hey, this little guy is cold,” Tony said. “He might freeze in that hunting range tonight.”

Shail glanced up at the big man with dark, curly hair as two carried his cage. Tony was the only man who felt empathy for him.

“He’ll be all right,” Frank called and trudged through thick sand toward his large lodge.

Shail sat up in the shifting cage and stared out at the treeless land. The ground was a pale brown, unlike the rich black loam of Dora. The only foliage was low-lying brush that lacked shade or nourishment. He breathed deeply, and the arid atmosphere claimed the moisture in his sinuses, causing them to ache. The land was truly inhospitable for a tropical creature accustomed to plenty of water. Was all of Earth a desert outside of the domed cities? If

so, no harpy could survive here.

The men carried him inside the lodge and set his cage down. Shail stared at the walls that displayed dozens of strange animal heads, obvious trophies of many hunts.

“Here’s where I’m hanging his wings,” Frank said, motioning to a vacant space over the large stone fireplace. “Think they’ll fit?”

Shail sniffled and fluttered his feathers.

“The harpy said no, Frank.” Tony chuckled. “He’s kind of cool with his big eyes and little snorts.”

“Don’t get attached. It’s not human or a puppy,” Frank said. “The sun is going down. Let’s turn him loose. He’ll get used to the range, and hopefully, tomorrow’s hunt will last longer.”

They took the harpy’s cage outside through the back door and placed it on the ground. “Set your lasers to stun, in case he tries to jump us,” Frank said. He cautiously opened the cage door and stepped back.

Shail crawled out of the cage, ignoring the men and their weapons. He stood and calmly surveyed the huge ten-acre enclosure, knowing this wasn’t the time or place to attack.

“Jesus, he’s rather tall,” said Ed.

“Scat,” Frank yelled anxiously.

Shail brazenly remained and glanced at the men with arrogance. His blatant behavior was meant to unnerve them and plant seeds of doubt and hesitation for the coming hunt.

“You cocky son of a bitch,” Frank growled and fired his

laser gun in the air. Shail, not wanting to press his luck, leaped into the sky and darted toward the sunset. At the back of the range, he landed on an outcrop of large boulders and watched the men return to the warm lodge. He found a crevice that offered shelter from the nippy desert wind and curled up. At nightfall, Shail slipped back to the lodge. A trail of smoke rose from the chimney, and through a thick plastic window, Shail saw the men followed the same ritual as most hunters, heartily eating, drinking, and partying before a big hunt.

He left the lodge to explore the hunting range, quickly learning that a pursued animal would have difficulty concealing itself there. Between the lodge and small hill of rocks was a broad expanse with scattered low shrubs. Across from the boulders, a skimpy forest of plastic trees surrounded a small pond of stagnant green water. The sides and roof of the vast range were made of metal screening impossible to break. He tried digging under it, but like the dome, he found that the bottom was imbedded in hard gray stone. There was no escaping.

Late at night, Shail soared to the lodge, which was dark and quiet. He landed next to the building and approached an old, banged-up terrain vehicle parked under an outside light. Opening the back door, he saw the cargo area, stained with dried blood. He concluded it was used for hunting and to carry dead animals from the range. The dry fall winds were so cold that he crawled inside the vehicle for warmth. Folding his wings tightly against his back, he snuggled down into a large storage compartment and covered

himself with a tattered loading pad. He shut his eyes and slept soundly.

Shail had been hunted all his life and had conquered his fears. The five naive Earthlings were no match for him. In the morning, they would climb into the vehicle's front seats and he would ambush them from behind. He waited for the dawn.

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The sun rose, and by mid-morning the men finally emerged from the building. Shail listened to their energized voices as they scanned the range. The sounds trailed off as they sought him on foot, with no intention of using the terrain vehicle.

As the day wore on, Shail remained hidden. The men never searched the vehicle, probably assuming he would not know how to open doors and hide inside. By late afternoon, they returned to the lodge.

"How did he escape?" asked Ed. "We checked the chain link, and there are no holes in it or under the cement."

"He's still in here," Frank said with frustration, "just one step ahead of us. Tomorrow, we'll split up and corner him."

"I'm beat and ready for dinner," said Tony.

"You're always ready for food," Ed said, and they chuckled.

Shail heard the door close, and their voices grew muted from inside the lodge. He emerged from the vehicle and stretched

his wings. "There he is," one man exclaimed, and the rest rushed to the window. Shail teasingly ruffled his feathers and flew into the trees.

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On the second morning, Shail stood on the highest boulder with his wings wrapped tightly around his frame, relishing a breathtaking sunrise of pink and gold. Despite man's efforts to destroy the planet, beauty still existed for the wild at heart. When the light became higher, he descended into the dusty plastic trees to wait for the men. Once again, he avoided consistency and did not return to the old vehicle. The hunters had said they would split up, which gave him the advantage. He could disarm two men, but five together would be risky. After scrutinizing the men and their hunting tactics, he stood poised to strike. Unbeknownst to them, they had become the hunted.

Through the howling wind, Shail heard their distant verbalizations as they left the lodge. "Maybe he's hiding in this vehicle," Tony said, opening the door.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Frank. "Harpies are jungle animals and know nothing about doors." Not convinced, Tony looked in all the empty compartments.

The men set off on foot again. "In a few hours, I have to return to the lodge," Frank said, "and handle a merger over the com. This hunt should have ended yesterday. It's cutting into my

schedule. Ed and Tony can check the trees. Larry, Tim, and I will search the boulders. He'll be cornered with no place left to hide." The men separated into two groups and slogged across the loose sand.

"I'm glad we're going to the trees today," Tony said to Ed. "I had my fill of rock climbing." They cautiously entered the artificial forest, with lifted eyes fixed on the above branches. After covering the forest, they took a break and sat down on a smooth boulder facing the pond.

"He's in the rocks," Ed grumbled. "Frank will get him and add another trophy to his lodge."

Instead of looking upward for Shail, the men should have focused on the most unlikely of places. Dora consisted of a large freshwater ocean, and its jungle continent was deluged during the wet season, so like ducks, harpies thrived in water and were excellent swimmers.

Shail had submerged himself in the murky green pond, counting on the hunters' ignorance of harpy hunting. His body and wings were completely camouflaged, and only his face was exposed in weeds near the bank. Careful not to create a ripple, he flicked a small stone into some bushes. Tony and Ed jumped up and turned their weapons toward the noise. With the men's attention diverted and their backs to Shail, he moved like a silent crocodile.

Tony gripped his weapon and peered into the forest. "Do you see any—" Before he finished the sentence, Shail leaped from



the water, grabbed the backs of the men's necks, and slammed their heads together. Tony was knocked unconscious, but Ed wasn't as lucky. As he tried to fight Shail's hold, Shail jerked the man's neck back and to one side. Hearing the snap of a broken spine, he released the man. Ed slipped from Shail's wet arms to the ground and was still. The attack had been so swift that neither victim uttered a sound.

He kicked at Tony's large, comatose body. The man was out cold and was no longer a threat. Shail picked up the laser guns and tossed one into the pond. The scuffing sound of shoes on stone told him the location of the other three men. *These Earthmen were warned*, Shail thought. *Green said they lacked the skill to hunt me.*

Shail lay down and coated his wet body and feathers with the dry sand, creating a second camouflage. He crept quietly through the rocks to waylay the three men. With the approaching war on Dora, he had learned to use a weapon, making his next kills easy. He crouched between boulders and watched the two of the dull-witted men stalking the rock crest. Once again, they concentrated skyward as if hunting game fowl. Before opening fire on them, Shail waited for Frank, the third man, to appear. He was the ringleader, the decision maker who brought Shail there to kill him, and he became the most targeted quarry.

Frank had said he had to return to the lodge. Shail realized he had gone and was not with the other two. With the men closing in on him, he could wait no longer. He peered over the boulder and took aim at the closest man, the one named Larry. The laser blast

hit his chest, and he crumpled with a mortal wound.

Momentarily frozen with shock, Tim stared in horror at his buddy's open eyes and still body. In desperation, he fired sporadically in Shail's direction. Shail carefully aimed the weapon, and a blast hit the man's arm. Tim screeched in pain and ducked behind the rocks. Shail stood and watched the wounded and terrified man retreat and race toward the lodge. A second blast from Shail's weapon struck his leg. He limped and stumbled across the open flat land to reach safety.

Shail arched his wings, poised to fly and finish him off, but reconsidered. He folded his wings against his back. "Better his wounds and words shall tell others it is unwise to hunt harpies." He shook off the sand and watched Tim pound frantically on the lodge door. Frank opened it and helped him inside.

Shail flew to the tallest boulder and saw Tony emerge from the trees. The wide man staggered through the loose sand in an attempt to reach the building. Shail sprang from the rock and landed in front of him. When Shail pointed the weapon at his head, Tony squealed, sounding similar to a human pet pig. Despite the cold, the man sweated profusely. With his huge balk trembling, he dropped to his knees and his terrified eyes looked up at Shail. "Please don't kill me. Please don't kill me," he blubbered. Blood dripped down his face from the head injury and mixed with tears on his fat cheeks. The crotch of his pants became wet with urine. He fell to his hands and vomited. Barely able to catch his breath, he pleaded, "I promise I'll never hunt again."

Shail seethed with disgust, never seeing a more pathetic human. He flipped back his long locks and walked toward the trees, deeming the man unworthy of his kill.

Tony gathered his courage and looked up. He saw the harpy sauntering back to the trees and realized the creature had spared him. He scrambled to his feet and jogged as fast as he could back to the lodge. Bolting through the door, he saw Tim lying on the blood-soaked floor with Frank leaning over him. Tony dropped to his knees beside the two men, panting and shaking.

“Where’s Ed?” asked Frank.

Tony was so shaken with fright that he could not answer. He held his bloody head and wept.

“Goddamn it, Tony!” Frank screamed. “Where is Ed?”

“Dead!” Tony yelled back. “He’s dead,” he said with more control. “The harpy broke his neck. He’s lying by the pond with his head twisted backwards. It’s horrible.”

Frank slumped on the floor. “You were armed. How could this happen?”

“He was so fast and quiet, we never saw him coming,” Tony said between sobs. “We heard a noise in the bushes, and next thing, I’m waking up beside Ed’s body with my skull caved in.”

“Larry’s also dead,” Tim said and grimaced with his leg and arm wounds. “The harpy blasted him with a laser gun. He must’ve got it from you or Ed. You were lucky, Tony, to get past that creature and make it back here.”

Tony wiped his eyes. “I wasn’t lucky. Halfway here, the harpy stopped me and put the gun to my head. I said I wouldn’t hunt again, and he let me go. Do you think it understands English?”

“Who cares what the damn thing understands. We need to get Tim to a hospital,” Frank said. “The closest one is in Flagstaff.”

“I’ll call the police and an ambulance,” Tony said and rose. He took a step toward the desk communicator.

“No police,” Frank said. “At least not until I clean up this mess and get rid of the harpy.”

Tony stared at him suspiciously. “What is going on, Frank?”

Frank rubbed his forehead and glanced with anxiety at his two injured associates. “The harpy is part of an insurance scam. I was supposed to kill it, take its wings, and dump the body by a main road so the cops could find it.”

“Seriously?” Tim said. “You involved us in fraud?”

“Look, it was a sure-fire plan with little risk. The harpy was slated for a China zoo, but Green sneaked it out of shipping so it would appear to be lost or stolen. I get the harpy’s wings, Green makes several million off us, and the harpy’s owner collects four million on the insurance claim. Everybody wins.” He shook his head. “It was the only way I could get a live harpy.”

“You got him, all right,” Tony said. “Got more than you bargained for.” He paced the floor. “So not only is my head

splitting and I also lost two friends, I could go to jail if the cops find the stolen harpy. This is bullshit, Frank.”

“I can fix it,” said Frank. “Just give me time to straighten things out. If I’m charged, I’ll lose my business. CEOs can’t have criminal records. When you get to the hospital, be vague. Say you were injured in a hunting accident, but the details are foggy.”

“I don’t like it,” Tony said.

“You wanted that big account? It’s yours if you do me this favor,” Frank said. “If I’m busted, you can claim ignorance. You didn’t know the harpy was stolen property.”

“That’s the truth,” Tony growled. “I knew nothing about your harpy scheme.” He massaged his jaw in thought. “All right, I’ll play along. Help me get Tim to one of the small hovers. They’re faster than the big cargo.” The two men carried the injured man outside to a two-man hovercraft. Climbing into the pilot seat, Tony said, “Frank, you should have listened to that zoo director—killed it when it was caged. On the trip over, you, Ed, and Larry poked the harpy to get him riled. Those two are dead, but the harpy let Tim and me live. A word of advice: don’t step foot on that range, Frank. You’re on his hit list.”

Frank nodded. “Could be. I’ll call you when I get things worked out.” He watched the hover lift off, thinking his hobby of game hunting teetered on destroying his life. The harpy had not only killed and injured his four friends, Frank could also lose everything and go to prison. He rushed back to his lodge. First he

checked all the window and door locks. The heavy, plastic, blast-proof windows and doors were designed to protect lodge guests. Although he was secure in his impregnable building, Frank felt petrified. Tony's assertion rang true. If not for leaving the range to place the merger call, he would probably be lying dead beside Ed and Larry. He hectically placed a call to Green. "What the hell did you sell me?" he said when Green appeared on the screen.

"What's wrong?"

"A disaster. The harpy killed two of my business associates and injured two others. I'm alive only because I was in my lodge when it attacked. Now it's loose in my range."

"You freed the harpy?" Green raged. "I told you to kill him in the shipping cage before you cut off the wings. The entire D.C. police department hunted that harpy for weeks and couldn't bring him down. What made you think you could?"

"All right, I made a mistake. What now?" Frank said. "There are two corpses on my range, along with an armed harpy, and he knows how to use a weapon."

"He shot the men?"

"He shot Larry and broke Ed's neck with his bare hands. A blast wounded Tim, and Tony had his head bashed in. Damn thing's a killing machine. The authorities aren't involved yet, but Tony and Tim are on their way to the Flagstaff hospital, so it's only a matter of time. How am I going to explain all this?" Frank whined. "And who's going to deal with the harpy? If I go to jail, you're going with me, Green."

“All right, calm down,” Green said. “I’ll be there tonight and fix things.”

“You’re going to kill the harpy?” Frank asked.

“No, but I know someone who can.”

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Shail flew to the fence and shot at it repeatedly with his laser gun. Although the metal melted slightly, the fence was blast-proof. Giving up on escaping, he walked over to an odd plant with thick green leaves and oblong balls of red fruit. Three nights had passed since his last meal, and he was hungry. He sniffed the fruit and judged it to be edible, but tiny pins protected the food. Carefully plucking the cactus blossoms, he peeled the skins and was rewarded with a sweet dinner. He sought a rock ledge that blocked the blustery weather and curled up under his wings for warmth. He lightly dozed, sound sleep being impossible. Killing men triggered revenge in others, who would come after him soon. In the middle of the night, he heard an approaching hover. The enemy reinforcements had arrived.

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Frank paced the lodge and nervously peered out the windows. He had flinched at the sound of the harpy’s laser blasts. As night approached, the range became quiet except for the howl

of the haunting desert wind.

He finally saw Green's hover lights as the transport landed, and the skinny zoo director hopped out in a huff. Frank walked out to meet him.

"Help me carry this crate," Green said. He opened the back of the hover and pulled out a small cage.

Frank grabbed one of the cage handles. "What is it?"

"A harpy."

Frank scoffed. "You brought another one? Isn't one of these creatures enough trouble?"

"I know what I'm doing," Green said as they walked toward the lodge. "Jack should be here shortly. He's a harpy hunter from Dora, and he'll take care of the harpy. And I suggest you do as he says."

They set the crate down near the fireplace. Frank peered through the narrow slots. "It's a baby."

"It's bait."

An hour later, a high-speed hover set down, and Green and Frank strolled to the craft. A tall, brawny man with a ponytail climbed out. "This is a long fucking ride from New York," Jack grumbled and stretched his back. "Did you bring them?"

"The fledgling's inside," Green said, rubbing his chilled arms. "But the chimp is still in my hover. It weighs a couple hundred pounds and is too heavy to lift without a robot."

Jack turned his attention to Frank and sized up his expensive hunting attire. "Fancy duds," he said with a chuckle.



“You must be the city slicker who thought he could hunt a golden. I imagine the harpy had a picnic with this chump and his friends.”

“I’m no chump, and in fact, I’m the CEO of a large corporation,” Frank said defensively.

“Well, Mr. CEO, it’s gonna cost you a half a million to make your harpy troubles go away. And I want the voucher before I leave.”

“I have little choice but to pay you,” Frank said.

Jack grinned. “Okay, let’s go catch the little varmint.” He walked into the lodge and snatched up the fledgling’s cage. Green opened the back door to the range, and Jack carried the cage outside. Green and Frank followed with drawn weapons as Jack set the crate near the building under an outside light.

“For two days, four friends and I searched for him in daylight,” said Frank. “It’ll be impossible to find him in the dark.”

“Don’t plan on looking for him.” Jack’s eyes narrowed, staring at Frank and Green’s weapons that they nervously held. “Put your blasters on stun. I don’t need you jumpy assholes shooting me by mistake.” He un-holstered his pistol from his belt and adjusted the setting to blast. “I’m the only one doing the killing here.” He opened the cage and pulled out the fledgling. The fledgling shook his blond locks and hissed, showing its baby teeth. It braced its arms and legs against the big man’s chest and flapped its tiny wings, trying to break free of the man’s hold. Jack laughed. “Spunky little sucker, just like his father.” He seized a wing and held the baby out by the limb. In the painful hold, the fledgling

wiggled and made short, frantic hisses. Jack harshly shook the baby until it urinated and became submissively limp.

“You shake him much more,” Green said, “and you’ll break his wing or rip it from the socket. Not to mention he’s trembling and going into shock.”

“Sometimes you have to torture, and even kill the fledgling to catch the father. Is that going to be a problem?” Jack pressed the gun barrel against the fledgling’s skull.

“I suppose not. I’ll have others,” said Green. “I just hope it works.”

“The stud is already here, just beyond those lights,” Jack said coolly. “Com’ on, you little bastard,” he called out into the arid breeze. “Your kid is almost finished.” He jiggled the fledgling again, and its limbs and head flopped like a lifeless doll. Out of the shadows, the male harpy burst into the lodge floodlights and landed ten feet away. With spread wings, he hissed violently and his large blue eyes burned with rage. In his hand he gripped the laser gun that had killed Larry and wounded Tim.

“Drop it,” Jack said, “or I’ll kill your boy. You know I’m not bluffing.”

The harpy tossed the weapon in the sand and paced back and forth in front of the men, tossing his long locks and ruffling the feathers on his arched wings. He seemed poised to explode. His hard stare and deadly hiss were aimed at Jack.

“Jesus Christ,” Frank murmured and staggered backwards against the lodge door. He gripped the knob for a fast escape but

couldn't take his eyes off the harpy. With the backdrop of blackness, the harpy's shimmering yellow hair and wings illuminated like a fire. Frank was in awe, equally terrified and fascinated with the devilishly elegant harpy. He realized that no other game animal could compare.

"Green, open his shipping crate and get back," Jack yelled. "The damn thing is so pissed, he's ready to attack and beyond caring if he dies."

Green hectically opened the cage and fled to Frank and the lodge door.

"Get in there," Jack ordered the harpy, "or I swear I'll shoot your son."

The harpy took a step closer and hesitated.

"Don't even think it. You're not fast enough to stop me from pulling this trigger."

Shail angrily seethed at Jack. The man was using the same method to catch him for the second time. To save his son, Shail would gladly yield or die, but save him for what? Will faced a bleak future, living on this miserable land as a human pet or worse. If Shail attacked Jack, he and Will would surely die, and maybe that was for the best.

Will lifted his small blond head and gazed at Shail. "*Please help me, Dad,*" he said with his soft telepathic voice as tears streamed down his round little cheeks. "*The man is hurting my wing, and I am scared.*"

With parental instincts that overpowered all other reasoning in harpies, Shail could not resist Will's pleas. He lowered his head and wings and stepped to the shipping crate. Ducking down, he crawled into the same cage that had brought him to the range.

Jack kicked the cage door shut. "Lock it, Green."

The zoo director bolted the door and breathed a sigh of relief. "My God, that was tense." Jack tossed the fledgling into Green's arms, and they gathered around the cage to inspect Shail.

Ignoring the men, Shail stared up at Will in Green's arms and relayed, "*I love you, son. Remember I shall always love you.*"

"*I want you. I want your wings,*" Will responded and struggled against the man's arms to reach his father.

"*My wings are no longer yours or mine. I fear this is our last night together. The men shall return you to your mother. My wish is that you grow into a strong and noble golden that protects the flocks.*"

Will stopped tussling and brushed the tears from his eyes. "*I shall, Dad. I shall protect Mother, too.*"

Shail gave his son a slight nod before Green placed Will inside the smaller cage.

"I'll put the fledgling inside the lodge," Green said. "This cold weather has it shaking." He lifted the cage and took it through the doors.

With Will gone, Shail slammed his body against the bars and aggressively hissed at Jack and Frank.

“I can’t believe you caught him by just holding his baby,” Frank said.

“Yeah, but that little trick wouldn’t have worked for you,” Jack said. “The harpy would have sensed your hesitation and taken you down in a heartbeat. Next time, chump, know your game.”

“There won’t be a next time,” Frank said. “I’m done hunting and want this nightmare over.”

Green stepped back outside “Let’s get on with it. I need to get the fledgling back to the zoo before it’s missed.”

Jack pulled a knife from his belt and grinned. “I’ve been waiting a long time to hang and strip this one.”

“And you’ll wait a little longer,” Green snapped. “Use your head. The harpy’s blood and feathers will take more explaining. We need to set up this hunting scenario and get the other animal out of my hover.”

Frank remained by Shail’s cage as Green and Jack left for the hover. They soon returned with Jack carrying a large garbage bag slung over his muscular shoulder. He opened the bag under the lights near Shail’s cage and dumped out a dead furry black creature with hands and feet. Shail took a whiff of the animal and detected a vague human stench, too elusive for a man to smell. Shail concluded the animal and mankind had shared the same ancestry and bloodline.

“Why do we need the chimpanzee?” asked Frank.

“He’s part of your story,” Green said. “You and your friends were hunting the chimp. He attacked and broke one man’s

neck and injured the other one. Chimps are strong and can easily snap bones, and they're smart enough to accidentally fire a laser gun. That's how it wounded and killed your other two friends before you shot it. You got it?"

"You think the police will buy that story?" Frank asked.

"Earth cops don't know squat about wildlife," Jack said, heaving the chimp once again over his shoulder. "They'll buy it." He walked to the old terrain vehicle and tossed it in back. "We'll put the chimp's footprints around the dead men and place a laser in its hand." Jack laughed when looking inside the vehicle compartment. "Here's one of the places your harpy was hiding." He plucked a small yellow feather from the compartment and held it to Frank's face. "Chumps," he said and slammed the back door.

"Harpies can open doors? How could I have possibly known?" Frank asked.

The three men climbed into the vehicle and headed to the back of the range.

Shail watched the vehicle lights flood the dark desert. He soon heard their distant voices as their solar lights moved among the rocks. When they returned, Shail knew he would soon be as dead as the innocent chimpanzee. He shivered in the chilly wind and pulled his wings close for warmth. Twisting his neck, he placed his face into the plush feathers that protected his body from the cold and provided him with flight. "They shall not have my wings."

Shail grabbed a handful of feathers and ripped them out of

his wing. Blood dripped from the ends of the long flight feathers, but he gritted his teeth with the pain and continued to jerk feathers from both wings. Before long, his small cage was covered with soft yellow down and flight feathers. The self-mutilation would be Shail's last act of defiance. His wings would be worthless and no trophy for the humans.

The outside light revealed the mayhem of his destruction. Blood from his quills splattered his back and shoulders, and his wings ached from their deep wounds. The wind blew the smaller feathers out from between the bars, and they came to rest against the lodge. Shail heard the approaching vehicle.

The vehicle pulled up to lodge, and the headlight beamed on the white against the building. "Did it snow?" Frank asked.

"That ain't snow," Jack growled and climbed out. "That nervy little son of a bitch. Trouble right to the end."

"Feathers? He destroyed his own wings," Frank exclaimed and picked up a handful.

"Take him out into the desert and kill him, Jack," Green said. "Before you go back to New York, dump the body by a road so someone will find it. I have to get back to D.C. before the zoo opens."

Green stepped into the lodge, and soon his hover lights traveled east. Frank and Jack gathered the feathers and put them in a garbage bag. "We'll never get them all," Frank said.

"The wind is carrying most of them off," Jack said. "If the cops question you about the feathers, just tell 'em you hunted a

swan. Like I said, your civilized cops don't know nothing about wildlife and can't tell one feather from another. Let's load the harpy."

Jack grabbed the cage handles and took Shail through the lodge and out to his hovercraft. After placing the cage inside, Jack slammed the door and Frank handed him a credit voucher for catching and disposing of Shail. "Hop in," he said and slid into the pilot seat. "His wings are rubbish, but I'm still gonna hang him. For what he cost you, you might as well get some satisfaction and watch him suffer."

Through the hover window, Frank gazed at Shail. "He beat me at my own game and is caged only because he's a devoted father. I won't get any satisfaction watching him die. Besides, I need to stay here and call the police." Frank turned and walked back to the lodge.

Jack fired up his hover and glanced back at Shail. "Well, my little harpy ruler, you're mine now. Any last words, Shail?"



## Chapter Sixteen

Senators Blackwell and Peterson solemnly climbed into a large hovercraft for the trip to Hampton. As the transport rose, Blackwell looked out the window at his warehouse and the meadow that had held a hundred tents. In the center of the field was a colorful pile of twisted hovercrafts, victims of the giant red reptiles that had come in the night. The mangled hovers would eventually be claimed by the jungle. Several of the surviving mercenaries were loading their belongings into transports for the trip off Dora. The men were the last of the senators' grand army that had come to destroy the harpies.

Blackwell turned away from the window in disgust. "What a disaster!"

Peterson shook his head. "I never would have guessed the Hampton citizens would aid the harpies. When we get back, I'll arrange a meeting with the other senators and talk about our options. For one, the courts are in our favor. Meanwhile, I hope your zoo director has caught and killed the golden."

"I haven't heard yet."

"Keeping him alive as a stud was insane," Peterson said sarcastically. "You should've killed him immediately. He's responsible for this defeat. A brown might lead the flocks, but the blond encouraged the harpies to fight and inspired human loyalty."

"He vowed to destroy me," Blackwell murmured. "So far, he's keeping his word."

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Peterson stood in his lavish living room before the group of twenty distinguished senators. “We are all feeling the financial crunch,” he said, “but we must discuss other alternatives to eradicate the harpies. Senator Blackwell and I have talked about several methods, and as you know, Blackwell has studied these creatures at length.”

One senator interrupted and rose from a couch. “Give it up, Peterson. The harpies destroyed our army, and the whole planet backs them. I’m not spending another cent on extermination. If the Supreme Court rules for us and we keep the Outback, I’m selling my land. With the money, I’m moving off this planet. Hell, my own neighbors hate me, and we’ll never win re-election.”

“And who is going to buy your property, Jackson?” Peterson asked the senator. “With roaming flocks of deadly harpies occupying it, settlers won’t touch it, and neither will the timber companies. The lumberjacks will be killed if they cut the trees. No, gentlemen, we have to get rid of the harpies, unless you’re willing to leave Dora penniless.”

Voices rumbled throughout the room with men talking about their dilemma. “All right, Peterson,” Jackson said, sitting back down. “What have you and Blackwell cooked up now?”

“We have a solid court case,” Peterson said, “but I’ll let Senator Blackwell explain his harpy eradication plan.”

The stubby Blackwell rose from his chair to address the men. “I agree we took harpy intelligence too lightly,” he said. “The first attempt was under the misconception that harpies were timid, ignorant animals. As a result, eighty-seven of my hunters perished. The second attempt with mercenaries assumed that the harpies stood alone, but unfortunately, the public felt it owed a debt of gratitude to the beetle-killing creatures.”

Blackwell strolled to the center of the living room and continued, “I propose a different approach, based on a harpy’s weakness. It’s well known that these creatures have a fragile temperament. Without drugs, they die of stress and heart attacks when caged. Losing a mate is even worse. They suffer from depression, and most perish from grief. So far we’ve targeted the males, but I suggest we change strategy and attack the females and young.”

“But we can’t find them,” said a senator.

“We know they’re hiding in the northwestern mountains,” Blackwell said. “Chemical spraying is the answer. Unlike the male flock that resides near Terrance and can’t be touched, the females dwell far away from people. A male harpy lives to protect his family. If his female and young die, most males curl up, stop eating, and wither away from despair. It’s a cheap, effective way of eliminating the entire species.”

“You advocate spraying all those mountains?” stated an outraged senator. “The environmentalists would have a field day, and the public would want to hang us.”

“They already want to hang us,” Peterson said. “Gentlemen, this isn’t a popularity contest. Two years ago, the chemical spraying ban was lifted because of the beetle swarms, and it’s our luck that it’s never been implemented again. We’re breaking no laws by spraying our land. The chemicals will kill every animal in the mountains, but the other species will recover. In one night, several large freighters could release the odorless gas. The females are hiding in an old spaceship, but they have to breathe. The harpies won’t know what hit them until it’s too late.”

The room broke into discussion on the proposed plan.

One senator approached Blackwell. “So you’re giving up domesticating and breeding harpies?”

“Absolutely not,” Blackwell said. “After the females are dead, I plan to take a freighter to the mountains. Those distraught males will be floundering around in shock and can be collected as easy as butterflies. They can then be drugged and shipped to Earth.” Blackwell grinned. “As we speak, I’m building customer demand. Several of my brown males are being used sexually in a New York nightclub that caters to homosexuals. With their pretty faces, exotic wings, and large penises, they’re in high demand. I already have harpy orders from other clubs wanting them for entertainment. And if a harpy stops functioning sexually, the hunting ranges will gladly buy them. With a few hundred more males, I can expect enormous profits. I plan to expand to female customers when my first crop of golden fledglings is ready.”

“Sounds interesting,” said the senator. “Maybe I’ll join

you in this venture and get my own butterfly net. I need to recoup my losses.”

“So, gentlemen,” Peterson said. “I take it that we’re in agreement on the spraying?”

The senators motioned that they accepted the new plan.

“Good, I’ll order the chemicals and hope they arrive before the Supreme Court convenes. After the harpies are gone, we can concentrate on evicting the Outback settlers.”

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Keith anxiously waited for the zoo to close so he could call Jim’s apartment from an outside communicator. He had talked to Sally, who had located the shipping form on the male harpy.

“Hello, Jim,” Keith said, communicating from a small café. “I got the information on Shail, but things are looking more suspicious. I think you’re right about Dr. Green’s involvement. He leased the male to a China zoo, but Shail never arrived. The zoo there listed him as lost and started a search. According to my supervisor, Gary, animal crates are often loaded on the wrong shuttle. Recently, two animals were lost for three days in shipping.”

“With thousands of transports leaving that airport, it’d be easy to register the harpy in cargo and sneak him out,” said Jim. “There’s not much security in those export warehouses. A week has to pass before a theft claim is issued and the police are called

in.”

“Any information on Green’s accounts?” Keith asked.

“Not yet,” Jim answered. “I should have it by tomorrow. We need to move the female harpy and her baby out of the zoo, and soon. I just learned about a big battle on Dora between the harpies and the senators’ mercenary army. My old partner at the police precinct has been keeping me updated on off-planet news concerning the harpies on Dora. The details are still sketchy, but apparently the senators lost the fight. Senator Blackwell might cut his losses and collect on his insurance for the whole family. I’m not sure if I can help Shail, but I can at least save his mate and son. Think you’re up to it?”

“I’m ready,” Keith answered.

“Tomorrow morning, I’ll meet you at the zoo gate. I want to talk to the female again. She may have information that could help me find her mate.”

“I’ll be there at eight, but don’t expect much. She wasn’t in the same room with Shail when he was taken, and except for hissing, she doesn’t make a sound.”

“Keith, I’ve learned that harpies can talk. I think she and Shail have remained silent because it’s to their advantage; allows their enemies to reveal their thoughts and intentions.”

Indignant, Keith said, “I’m not their enemy, and they haven’t uttered a word.”

Jim smiled. “True, you’ve been a good friend, but you were never in a position to help them escape. I can. I was a cop for

twenty years and have the connections to make it happen. See you tomorrow.”

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The following morning, Jim met Dan outside the police station before going to the zoo. Dan handed him a disc. “I could get in hot water for giving you this.”

“Thanks,” Jim said and placed the disc in a small reader. “I know you’re not one for bending the rules.” The disc scanned Dr. Green’s private off-planet accounts. “I’m helping a friend and looking into a case that might involve insurance fraud. Whatever I find, you’ll get the credit.”

“I’m happy to bend rules if it keeps you straight and off the booze. You were a great detective, Jim, before...”

Jim looked up from the machine. “Before Lilly and Eric were killed?”

Dan lowered his gaze.

“One last favor?” Jim asked. “Get all the information on a Frank Reynolds. Accounts, businesses, land holdings, occupation.”

“Will do.”

Jim gave him a nod and strolled down the sidewalk to his vehicle.

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Jim arrived at the zoo and headed for the breeding buildings. Keith stood by the metal gate and said anxiously, “Something happened to them last night.”

“What?” Jim asked as the gate opened and he entered the restricted area.

“Not sure, but the female is a nervous wreck,” Keith said as they walked to the building. “When I went in the cage, she cowered in a corner and hissed at me, and the fledgling started trembling. One of his wings is drooping and looks injured, but I can’t examine it without getting clawed.”

Jim and Keith strolled into the harpy room. Immediately, the female grabbed her son and dove into the straw to hide. “See?” Keith said, anguished.

Jim squatted near the cage. “Kari, what happened to you and your son? I can’t help you and Shail until I know what’s going on.”

Kari resisted and softly hissed at Jim. Her eyes watered with tears, and she lowered her head. Her harpy sniffles became the low sobs of a woman’s.

“Open the cage,” Jim said to Keith. Jim stepped into the cage and knelt beside her. “There now, there now,” he said gently and embraced the petite female. “You and Shail have been very brave throughout this abduction, but it’s time to confide in others and trust me.”

She looked at him and whispered, “I promised Shail I wouldn’t speak, but now I’m not sure if he’s—” She buried her face



into Jim's chest and cried. "I think they killed him."

He stroked her long blonde hair. "Who killed him? I need to know everything."

Kari pulled back and swallowed hard. "Green. He came here after the zoo closed and shot me with a tranquilizer gun. When I woke, my son, Will, was gone. Just before dawn, Green returned. Will was terrified, and his wing was sore. He said a bad man hurt him so Shail would go into a cage."

"That doesn't mean Shail's dead."

Kari shook her head. "It's the things Shail said to Will, that this was their last night together, that he loved him and wanted him to protect the flocks when he's grown." She gasped with a sob. "He said his wings were no longer his. Shail wouldn't say such things to his young son unless these words were his last."

"Jesus," Jim said and took a deep breath.

"You know the sorrow of last words. I sensed your broken heart."

Jim nodded. "I lost my family recently." He looked down at the little fledgling that clung to his mother's legs for security. "Do you think Will knows where he and Shail were? Can he describe it?"

Kari picked up Will, and using silent harpy talk, she asked, "*This place where the man took you, what did it look like?*"

Will sniffled, and tears wet his cheeks. "*My wing still hurts, and I want my father.*"

*“Will! You are a golden harpy and must be brave like your father. Answer my questions. What did you see?”*

Shaken by Kari’s angry voice, he wiped away the tears with the fold of his wing and thought for a moment. *“It was dark. All dark with little lights, like on the ship.”*

*“Did you see any buildings, a city, like on top of our hill?”* Kari asked.

*“No hills or city, just one building in the cold and dark with noisy dry air that blew hard.”*

*“Good,”* she said and stroked his head. She turned to Jim. *“He is still learning our silent language, but he describes it like space with a clear black sky of stars. He saw one building, but the land was flat, empty with a cold, dry wind.”*

Jim massaged his jaw. *“If he saw stars, he wasn’t in a domed city, and considering Green’s traveling time, he could have been halfway across the continent. Windy, flat, and dry sounds like a desert.”* He turned to Keith. *“Have you ever heard of a Frank Reynolds?”*

Keith shook his head.

*“I checked into Green’s accounts, and he recently received three million credits from Reynolds in a private account,”* Jim said. *“And Reynolds has given him money over the years in smaller amounts. I’ll call and see if there’s anything to this money coincidence.”* He flipped out his portable com and called Dan at the precinct.

*“That’s funny you asked about Reynolds,”* Dan said on the

small screen. “It just showed up on our computer. Yesterday, the guy had a freak accident at his hunting lodge in Arizona. Two of his business associates were killed, and two others were injured. They were hunting a chimpanzee, of all things. The darn thing broke one guy’s neck. Reynolds managed to kill the animal, and the police out there closed the case. Reynolds is clean, not even a traffic violation, and wealthy. Got several established businesses in computers.”

“I’m interested in that hunting range. Where exactly is it?”

“It’s in the Arizona desert. I’ll punch in the coordinates.”

“Thanks,” Jim said and disconnected. “Sounds like the place where Green took your son.”

Kari had followed every word. “Yes, and it was Shail who injured and killed those men. When it comes to breaking a man’s neck, he is very efficient.”

“I believe it.” Jim turned to Keith. “Reynolds paid Green three million, and it wasn’t for a chimp. I’m heading for that hunting range.” He took Kari’s hands. “When I get back, I’m taking you and your son out of here, with or without Shail. Things aren’t going well for the zoo director and the senator, and desperate men make desperate decisions. You and your son could be their next target.”

“I can’t leave without Shail,” Kari said.

Jim cupped her chin. “Shail would want his family safe, and your staying here won’t help him. Let’s just pray he’s still alive and I find him.”

Jim left the building, and Keith walked up to Kari. “You don’t trust me like you do Jim.”

“I am grateful to you, Keith. You saved Shail from the breeding machine, and again when the thieves tried to take him. You are a good friend, but also my jailer and must follow Green’s orders.”

“I understand.” Keith smiled weakly. “It’s different with Jim. He’s a take-charge guy that won’t back down to anyone. He can help you. I’m glad Shail found him.”

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At the airport, Jim rented a top-of-the-line jet-powered hovercraft and pushed it to its top speed on his way to the desert location. After four hours, he arrived at Frank Reynolds’ hunting range. With an aerial view of the desolate place, he saw the large lodge that opened in back to a ten-acre enclosed cage. He landed the hover and climbed out, noting a Crime Scene tape used in the police investigation. He strolled around the building and fence as a bitter fall wind tugged at his jacket. He saw something caught in the fence. Walking to it, he plucked out a yellow feather from the chain links and noticed dried blood on the quill. He caught his breath. A large trash bin sat a distance from the lodge, and he walked over and peered inside. Clusters of bloody feathers spilled out of a black garbage bag and resembled a large bird carcass after scavengers had finished with it. He sadly picked up a few feathers

before returning to the hover. Although the body was absent, he concluded that he had found Shail's remains.

Jim flew the hover back to the zoo and met Keith at the gate. He relayed what he had found, and they walked to the harpy building.

Kari's eyes were filled with questions when he entered. He did not say a word but presented her with one of the yellow feathers. Her hand trembled as she took it. Crawling on the straw, she buried her face in her arms and quietly wept.

"We'll take them out of the zoo tomorrow," Jim said to Keith. "She can stay at my apartment until I can make travel plans for her and the boy. I want you to go to Dora with her."

"Dora?" Keith said.

"Someone should make the trip with her. I'd go, but the fact is, Keith, when the harpies go missing, they'll blame you. You're better off on Dora. You can travel as a couple with the baby."

Keith breathed deeply. "You planned this all along."

"I planned it when I found Shail's feathers. After the zoo closes tomorrow, I'll walk Kari and her son out like they're my daughter and grandson. The zoo won't miss you or the harpies till the following morning. Give me your photo ID. I know a connection for travel documents. I'll arrange for the tickets and clothing."

"You think it will work?" Keith asked.

"It has to."

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That night, Keith packed his meager necessities. He sold his remaining possessions to a college friend and mailed a note to his parents explaining that he would be gone for some time. The following morning, he returned to the zoo. He noticed at once that Kari was despondent. She lay limp in the straw, holding the feather. Growing concerned, he administered a dose of antidepressants and stimulants. She, like Shail, had fallen rapidly into depression. He packed a large amount of the drugs for the trip.

Kari stared up from the bedding and clutched her sleeping son. "I feel better. The drugs are helping," she whispered. "Before we go, will you do something for me? One last thing for Shail?"

"Of course. What do you want me to do?"

"Destroy Shail's seed and DNA. He would be relieved if men couldn't make slaves of his sons."

With a solemn nod, Keith walked down the hall to a room where animal semen and DNA were stored. In a freezer, he found the vials labeled for the golden harpy. He opened the units over a sink of running water and watched the contents wash away, thinking about the suffering Shail had endured for them. He went back to Kari and clasped her hand. "It's done."

The rest of the day dragged on as Keith worried and waited for the zoo to close and Jim to arrive. A half-hour before closing, Jim appeared at the gate with a paper bag. Keith let him in, and

they hurried to the harpies.

“Hope they’re the right size,” Jim said and handed the bag of clothing to Kari. “They belonged to my wife; just couldn’t part with them.” She slipped a loose dress over her pregnant body and bundled her fledgling in a blanket to conceal his little wings. She picked up Will and followed Jim out of the breeding complex. They walked past the animal exhibits, behaving like sightseers, and exited the zoo without notice. Keith shadowed them from a distance, expressing his usual goodnights to the other employees. He then rendezvoused with them at Jim’s apartment.

“I got the paperwork early, so we leave in an hour,” Jim said. “Here are your tickets for the shuttle out of O’Hare to the spaceport.”

“O’Hare? Why Chicago?” Keith questioned.

“Too risky to leave from D.C. and leave a trail. The cruise ship departs the spaceport three hours later. By morning, you’ll be in space and on your way to Dora before anyone discovers you and the harpies are missing.”

“A trip for three is pretty costly.”

Jim lifted an eyebrow and smiled. “A cop’s entire life savings.”

Kari lay curled on the worn couch and closed her eyes as Will played nearby on the floor. After finding an empty bottle under the couch, he spun it like a toy. Keith glanced in her direction. “I’m pretty worried about her. She’s severely depressed, and finding those feathers at the hunting range has made it worse.

She's leaving still not knowing if he's dead or alive. Depression is fatal for harpies."

Jim walked to her and sat down on the edge of the couch. "Keith is very concerned about you."

"I know. I'm sorry," she said and drew in a deep breath from the fabric. "I smell him."

"Yeah, he slept on this couch, and later at the bottom of my bed. His scent was strangely sweet."

"Like a kitten," she said with a small, rare smile. "When a male harpy sleeps alongside another male, he's made a commitment of loyalty and friendship. Of all the men we encountered, he chose to trust you, Jim."

Jim chuckled. "I don't know why. We got off on the wrong foot and had a hell of a fight that left me black and blue."

"The reason he picked you is obvious to me. Shail has many human friends on Dora, but he respected only one. You are very similar to that man." She glanced at the empty whiskey bottle in Will's hands. "That man's wife died, and he drank heavily to drown the grief, and yet, like you, he had honor, courage, and stubborn devotion to protecting loved ones and fighting any injustice. He was killed when he jumped in front of a laser blast to save Shail's life. That man was my father. You see, I'm half-human."

"It makes sense now why Shail warmed up to me. You mentioned earlier that I knew the sorrow of last words. I held my dying son when we spoke ours. He and my wife died in a hover



crash. Afterwards, I became a miserable, angry drunk and lost my job, friends, everything. Then your noble little Shail came along and snapped me out of it. I may be helping you, but I was on a downward spin and Shail saved me. You can't put a price on that. Are you going to be okay without him?"

She placed one hand on her pregnant stomach and the other on Will's head. "I must survive for the sake of his offspring."

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An hour later, Jim, Keith, and Kari, along with Will, were flying toward Chicago in a hovercraft. "This is not over yet," Jim said. "I'm going after Green, and I'll make him pay."

"I would be glad if Green went to jail," Kari said with melancholy. "It's my human side, since harpies are rarely gratified with vengeance."

Late at night, they reached Chicago's airport. Keith, Kari, and Will got in line to board the shuttle for the space station, and Jim waited with them.

"Sure hope Dora has a zoo where I can find work," Keith joked.

"Dora has a zoo, but it holds no harpies," Kari said softly. "Harpies are not animals to the people there." She wrapped her arms around Jim "Thank you again." She disappeared into the shuttle with Will.

Keith turned to Jim. "There's a Mrs. Roth who took care of

the harpies on the ship to Earth and helped them at the zoo. She's away on a trip, but when she comes back, maybe you could look her up and tell her that Kari and her baby are safe. Mrs. Roth depended on me to take care of the harpies." Keith lowered his head. "Guess I let them all down when I called Shail back to the zoo."

"Keith, you didn't betray him," Jim said. "You called him in to protect him from the police. You couldn't have known Green's plans. Right now, you're freeing his family. Shail would appreciate that." Keith grimaced and shook Jim's hand before he went aboard. Soon the shuttle engine fired as the craft lifted off, taking Kari and Will home.

## Chapter Seventeen

As Jack's hovercraft raced across the barren land, Shail coiled up in the loose feathers that covered his cage floor. He gazed at the fine yellow hairs attached to quills that had once held his blood. He had bathed, groomed, and oiled them to promote strong, healthy growth, but soon they would drift on the wind as the sad legacy of a creature that had once lived and flown freely. His thoughts drifted to Kari and the wish he could have lived to raise his sons, typical regrets of a doomed father.

Jack glanced over his shoulder at him. "If you thought pulling out half your feathers would save you from hanging, you're mistaken. For the trouble you've been, you're gonna suffer when I take your shabby wings. Besides, it'd be wrong simply to shoot the last golden ruler."

Shail buried his face in feathers and ignored Jack's rambling.

The lights of the hover lit up the desert ground as Jack searched for a structure, tree, anything that would hold eighty pounds of thrashing harpy. Jack grinned and slowed the hover. "This ranch house looks abandoned. Should work." He landed the hover and got out.

Shail lifted his head, and through the hover window he watched the man inspect and shake the dried wooden beams. Jack opened the hover rear door and removed Shail's cage and several ropes.

As Jack stared down at him, Shail sensed the big man's anxiety. Handling a man-killer alone made him extra cautious, and he was thinking about stunning Shail before taking him out to the cage. Shail was determined to die with dignity, not fight the man or savagely toss on a rope for his last breath. He placed his wrists outside the cage so Jack could bind them.

"I'll be damned," Jack said and tied the wrists together. He then bound his wings and ankles. Shail did not hiss or struggle, but peacefully rested his head in the yellow down. "What the hell is wrong with you?" He jerked Shail out with a long rope and dragged him a short distance to the old wooden building.

Jack tossed the rope over a beam and hoisted Shail up by his wrists. When he freed the wings, he expected frantic flailing from a hanging harpy, but Shail remained passive. He extended his tattered wings and waited for the slaughter. At Senator Blackwell's warehouse, he had thrashed wildly and flapped his wings for hours when strung up under a jungle tree. Jack scratched his head in bewilderment, never having seen a calm, lynched harpy. "When I cut you up, you'll move," he said while applying tourniquets to the wing joints.

Normally Shail's wingspan would exceed seventeen feet, but the absence of most of his flight feathers diminished the length by half. Jack took his knife and sliced the arteries in the wing tips, and blood spurted. Shail's only movement was his heaving chest, caused by the hanging position that crushed his lungs.

Despite the suffocation, painful ropes, and throbbing cuts,

Shail stared across the wasteland at a waking sun. He sniffled softly, treasuring the coming and going of light. As the pale purples, pinks, oranges, and gold flooded the horizon, he was grateful—grateful not to meet his end as a broken creature confined in a dark, dreary cage.

Even as Shail's head drooped from the loss of blood and air, his half-closed eyes stared past the hunter at the sunrise. He thought, *I have lived hard and known love in this short life. I am ready to die.*

“Damn you, Shail,” Jack growled in frustration and seized his prey's testicles in preparation of castrating him. The harpy remained still, without even a slight flinch of resistance.

Jack gazed up at the poised harpy as the sunlight fell on the sleek, muscled frame. The lemon-yellow wings and blond hair took on a deep golden hue. Jack had never witnessed such raw courage and found himself admiring Shail. He finally understood why Shail ruled and had won fierce devotion among men. “You're one of a kind,” he muttered.

Another thought occurred to Jack. If he killed the golden, he would end up with a harpy skin wallet and some worthless wings, but alive, Shail was far more valuable. “Change of plans,” he said and lowered his knife. He stepped to his hover and retrieved a liquid bandage and the drugs used on his browns to prevent heart attacks. The bandages applied to the wing tips stopped the blood flow, and he released the tourniquets. He

slapped a drug patch on the harpy's back where it could not be removed, cut the rope and lowered him down. The harpy collapsed on the sand and stared up, clearly puzzled.

“That paranoid senator and Green want you dead, but screw them. I got my own agenda,” he said when putting Shail back into the cage. “You proved on the ship that you're a moneymaker, and harpies are in short supply.” Keeping the deadly harpy was tempting fate, but the rewards outweighed the risks. Subdued on drugs and restrained, Shail could be used sexually like his browns. The depraved riffraff and the wealthy thrill-seekers that frequented the unsavory New York clubs could not get enough of these exotic creatures.

Jack inspected the rundown shack and considered that the missing golden might bring the authorities to a nightclub that openly exploited harpies. He needed to stash Shail until the investigation was over. He carried the cage into the decrepit building. “You and I are going to be partners,” he said with a chuckle, “you getting the shaft, and me getting rich.” He tossed a water bottle and a box of crackers into the cage. “That should hold ya until I get back.” Jack strolled out of the building and climbed into his hover, heading back to New York.

Shail heard the hover engine grow distant and eventually gave way to the whistling desert wind. He chewed on his rope bonds, and before long his wrists and ankles were free. Jammed in the low, cramped cage, he slammed his body against the bars but

finally gave up. Even if he escaped the cage, he could not fly without wing feathers, and he would surely die of thirst if he tried to walk out into the hostile land.

He curled up and cloaked himself with his ravaged wings. They lacked the flight feathers and warm down that protected his bare skin. Even the plucked feathers slowly disappeared from the cage, scattered by the cold gusts that whipped through the open doorway, broken windows, and partially missing roof. The ranch house offered little shelter for a tropical harpy. With the fall of night, his shivers rattled the cage.

As the sun rose, Shail still trembled in misery. He sipped from the water bottle and ate some crackers but slept most of the day. When he failed to sense Kari in his telepathic dreams, he became anxious. She had to be heavily drugged. He refused to consider the other reason, that she was dead.

Two days became three, and Shail deteriorated. He was cold, yet his skin was hot to the touch. His joints ached, and he coughed often as his lungs filled with fluid, giving him little rest. Dwelling all his life in a sultry jungle, he had never suffered from sickness. Besides his feeling bad, the experience scared and confused him.

Thoughts of suicide crossed his mind. He considered smashing his head against the bars but fought the inclination. The long captivity with Kari had finally made him optimistic, and he rejected the harpy fatalism. Too many times he had faced death and despair, only to survive and live another worthy day. He pulled

his legs to his chest and huddled for warmth under his shoulder-length hair. He dozed and dreamed of Dora, flying over the vast, colorful, treed horizon with Aron, and landing at his nest that held his family Kari with their two sons, and Racheal with her baby. When he woke, his eyes were moist with homesickness.

By the fifth day, he had weakened to the point of incapacity. His chest heaved as his lungs labored for oxygen. The water and food were gone, and his lips were parched. He sensed his slight, shaking frame could not endure much longer. He stopped struggling for life and slipped into unconsciousness.

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Jack steered his hover over the southwestern desert to revisit the deteriorating ranch house. As he had predicted, the police had come to the nightclub, inspected his harpies, and interviewed him and others about the missing golden male. Satisfied that it was not there, they left and Jack was crossed off the suspect list. He could now retrieve the golden. The police would hardly make a second visit concerning a stolen zoo animal.

Jack landed the hover near the building. Once he was inside, his smile dissolved into a frown of concern. "Damn it," he cursed when he saw the sick harpy. The comatose creature's shallow, wheezing breath was the only sign of life. Pulling the harpy from the cage, Jack cradled him in his arms. The golden was burning up with fever. He recalled Rusty's warning that cold



temperatures could be fatal to the tropical harpies that lacked body fat. The loss of his warm feathers had added to his vulnerability. Because of Jack's stupidity and neglect, he might lose the precious golden that was ravaged with illness and teetered close to death. "Goddamn it, should have covered his cage and given him a blanket."

Jack picked up the limp frame, hurried to the hover, and wrapped the harpy in an old quilt. He jumped into the hover and raced against distance and time to save the male.

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Shail woke as warm fluid was forced between his lips. His eyes focused, and he saw Jack's grinning face and instinctively made a sizzling threat with his teeth.

"Never thought I'd be happy to hear that hiss," Jack said to the thin middle-aged man. "So you think he's going to make it, Doc?"

"He's definitely showing improvement," the vet said. "Three days ago, he was more dead than alive."

With two men leaning over him, Shail struggled to rise, but his lethargic body would not respond. He curled up helplessly in the synthetic straw bedding and stared out of his cell into the damp, dark room that reeked of mold. The stale air suggested he again was under the city dome, but his eyes widened when he detected the familiar essence of a fellow harpy. He eagerly

stretched his neck to locate his race brother. A hacking cough and a shooting chest pain quickly replaced his enthusiasm.

“Put the oxygen mask back on and keep him covered with that heating blanket,” said the vet.

Jack approached with a clear, plastic visor, but Shail snapped at it. “Hold still, or I’ll tie you down.”

Shail defiantly shook his head, but even the slight effort to resist made him heave and gasp for air. Too ill to fight back, he accepted the mask and quickly breathed easier.

“No sooner awake, and he’s already giving me grief,” Jack groused.

“I see what you’ve been talking about. There’s no fear in those blue eyes. He’s nothing like your timid brown-winged harpies.”

“It’s like comparing an eagle to a dove. Golden harpies are known for their fearless temperament, and this one is lethal.” Jack stood and followed the vet out of the prison cell. “I don’t mind spending the time and money to get him well, but if he recovers and I can’t handle him, I’ll have to put him down.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll stop by for another blood test to check his white count. Keep him warm and quiet so the antibiotics can do their work. Pneumonia is serious, even in this day and age. The fluid injections are making him feel better, but he’s still a very sick little fellow. Try to get nourishment and liquids into him. It will help with the dehydration.”

Shail heard footsteps descending stairs, and a small,

colorfully dressed man with fake orange hair approached his cage bars. “Oh, our fabulous canary is finally awake,” he squealed.

“Yeah, he’s awake, so don’t touch him, Rob,” said Jack. “Even in his sickly condition, he’s capable of wringing your scrawny neck. I’ll take care of him from here on out.”

“Oh, pooh,” exclaimed Rob. “I so enjoyed nursing this doll back to health, and us girls love to play with dolls. But Jack, you’re such a sweetheart to be concerned about me.” He batted his false eyelashes at the tall, rugged hunter.

“I don’t give a shit about you,” Jack responded. “I’d just miss your money and club.”

“You’re such a brute,” Rob said. “It’s why you outdoor boys are so hot.” He bent down and was face-to-face with Shail. “Hi, sweetie, feeling better?”

Shail seethed through the mask, feeling antsy with the strange, high-pitched man that feigned female gestures. Jack obviously detested him.

Rob turned to the vet. “So tell me, Doctor, when can we put our beautiful canary to work? My customers have heard about him and are eager to see him.”

“Not for a month,” said the vet, turning to Jack. “Mr. Jones, what you do with these harpies is your business, but I’m warning you. This one could relapse and die if he’s stressed. Even healthy, these harpies are difficult to maintain. They’re too delicate for bestiality.”

“Doctor, you have it wrong,” Rob said. “Our harpies love

being here.”

“Save that speech for the customers,” said the vet. “They’re so doped up, they’re barely aware of what’s going on. Some would consider it animal abuse.”

“Don’t go growing a conscience on me,” Jack sniped and handed the vet a wad of credits. “Let’s not forget I found you stitching up pit bulls after those illegal dogfights. Harpies aren’t listed on the law books, so we’re not committing any crimes. I’d like to keep it that way.”

Nodding, the vet took the money. “I once was a respectable vet with a thriving practice, but pets became unaffordable.” With a raised eyebrow, he shoved the money and his humanity in a back pocket. “One thing, the underworld does pay well. See you in the morning.” He opened the door and climbed a staircase that led to the sound of street traffic.

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Shail huddled in the blanket and shivered. His body throbbed with a dull pain, and he felt sluggish, too frail to ward off any adversary. He watched the bizarre man named Rob and sensed his peculiar desires, the same desires he had detected in Ralph. Shail could not understand why they sexually craved him like most men craved females. Although the gay man seemed harmless, he made Shail uneasy. He closed his eyes and reflected that many men, even his worst enemies, had said he was beautiful, but the

men like Rob had lust mixed with their admiration. Were they confused? Despite his slight frame and youthful face, he was clearly a male.

Rob's perfumed scent grew stronger. Without opening his eyes, Shail lunged and snapped at the reaching hand. Rob let out a blood-curdling scream and jerked his nipped wrist out of the cage.

Jack roared from the other side of the room. "I told ya. You're lucky the mask took the brunt of that bite."

"He really is vicious," Rob wailed. He clutched his injury and fled up the stairs.

"Still a demon," Jack said, stepping to Shail's cage. "Enjoy it. Before long, those homos will break you." He dimmed the lights before leaving the room.

Shail laid his head down, preparing to sleep, when he heard a telepathic voice.

*"He bit the small man,"* it said.

Shail tossed the blanket off and struggled to sit up. Scanning the shadowy room, he saw more prison cells lined against a wall on the opposite side of the large basement. Each cage held a curled up body that rested in the bedding. *"You are harpy?"*

*"We were,"* came an answer. *"We now are but objects that pleasure men."* The shadows uncurled and stood, taking the form of five male harpies.

*"I see him! He does have golden wings and hair,"* exclaimed an adolescent male. *"He must be our ruler, who was*

*lost to us.”*

*“I am he,”* Shail answered. He heard a low hiss coming from the largest male.

*“This sickly blond rules no more,”* growled the large male. *“I am the flock leader here. Be glad, golden, that bars separate us, for I would drink your blood and mark you with my urine before you service me like a female.”*

*“It is true, then,”* Shail said sadly. *“You are not harpies anymore. Men have twisted your minds and taken your honor. But know I am the dominant male of the flocks, all flocks. If it is a challenge you seek, you shall have it. Only with my death shall my body be yours.”*

Provoked, the big harpy flew at the padded bars as the other males fled to the backs of their cages. He tossed his dark locks and seethed. *“For one so weak, your talk is brave.”*

*“It is a golden’s talk. Who is this brown that dares to challenge me?”*

*“I am Seth, of the eastern flocks. Your rule has brought us to this hell, a hell of no light, freedom, or flight, a perverse life where males mount males. I shall have my revenge, Shail, when you lie under my fluttering wings.”*

*“I once knew a noble flock leader named Seth who would give his life to protect his harpies. You are not he.”* He lowered his head in the bedding and breathed deeply. He recalled how hate and revenge consumed him after the three men had molested him. He had briefly experienced their hell. He shuddered with the

realization he might again face his worst nightmare—the rape he had tried so long to forget. Would he survive the despair this time?

Shail listened to Seth's angry hissing and had nearly dozed off when the meek teenager's voice called to him. "*You are still my golden ruler.*"

Seth arched his wings at the young male. "*You shall regret those words.*"

The teenager said no more.

To argue in defense of the adolescent was futile. Seth lacked reason, and malice consumed his mind; besides, words could not resolve a dispute between male harpies. It would take a clash of feathers and flesh.

Hours passed, and Shail woke to footsteps on the floor above and the clamor of men's voices. A terrible weird music played, the volume so loud that the walls vibrated.

The lights came on, and Jack appeared. Shail sat up and clearly saw the five brown harpies. The adolescent and three others trembled and hid in the bedding. Only Seth stood by the bars and waited.

Shail watched Jack go to the first cage and order the harpy to come out. When the male hesitated, Jack pressed a hand-held remote. The harpy jumped with pain and leaped at the bars. When Jack attached the leash, Shail saw the electric shock collar on the harpy's neck.

Jack treated the shaking harpy with drugs. The same sedatives and sex stimulants had taken away Shail's willpower and

driven him to copulate on the ship. Jack led the harpy upstairs and soon returned for a second one, then the third. Finally, he strolled to Seth's cage. "Eager, aren't you, boy?" he said, patting the big male.

To Shail's surprise, the two seemed fond of each other. Jack clipped on the leash as Seth affectionately rubbed his head against the man's upper arm before trailing him out of the cage. As they drew near, Shail scrutinized the formidable flock leader. His chocolate wings had turned light brown, proving he had lived forty or so seasons. He was also taller and more muscular than Shail. Seth sniffed at him, and Shail responded with a low seething. Goaded with the defiance, Seth flew at the cage bars with loud hisses, ignoring Jack's tugs to control him. Shail tossed his head, threw off the oxygen mask, and stood. He arched his wings, not intimidated, and made a sizzling sound with his teeth.

"Wow, you two have serious issues with one another," Jack said, clearly surprised with the aggressive rivalry between the alpha males. With the leash, he pulled Seth away from the bars before the violent threats escalated to physical contact. "Come on, boy. He's too sick to fight you now, but—" Pausing, he rubbed his chin and gazed at Shail. "Maybe you're just what I need to knock that golden off his throne." To display territory, Seth urinated toward Shail's cage. Jack petted and calmed him before taking him upstairs.

*"He was not always so,"* relayed the remaining teen. *"When we first came here, Seth protected us and resisted the men.*



*They took him away, and he was gone a long time. When he came back, he was nearly dead. He does not fight humans anymore.”*

The young male looked over at Shail. *“Do not challenge him, master. His cruelty is worse than a man’s.”*

Jack returned and led the teenager past Shail’s cage. The young harpy sheepishly followed and glanced at Shail with frightened, dead-green eyes. Shail saw the scars on his pale, bony frame, and his broken-quill wings drooped with lack of energy. The teen shook his drab hair to hide a torn ear.

“Come on, you sorry piece of meat,” Jack said, jerking the teen’s leash. “I’ll be lucky to get half-price for you.”

Shail made a loud, contemptuous hiss.

“Shut up,” Jack growled.

The man and harpy disappeared up the stairs, and the lights went out. Shail lay down in the dark, empty room and listened to the human voices that filled the nightclub. The laughing and shouting unnerved him and made sleep impossible.

After a few hours, the lights came on with Jack’s return. He held in his arms the barely conscious teenager. Shail sat up and detected the odor of humans on the harpy. Callously, Jack dropped the faint harpy on a center table, hosed him off, and tossed him into his cage before leaving the basement.

The young harpy lay still for some time but eventually pulled in his limbs and covered himself with his wet, frazzled feathers. Shail, distressed that he couldn’t help him, lay down to battle his own illness.

As the night wore on, the upstairs sounds lessened and each harpy was brought back listless and drained. Only Seth was energetic as he descended the stairs. Jack seemed more guarded with him now. The irritated male tossed his hair and hissed at the slightest tug of his leash. The drugs and sex had made him hyper and belligerent. He lunged at the other harpy cages, and Jack ordered him to settle down. Jack glanced at the teenager. "Guess I'll let you blow off some steam."

The other brown harpies hid in the corners of their cages. Unbeknownst to the man, the teen had enraged Seth when he had pledged his loyalty to Shail. Jack unlocked the cage door of the young male and released the large stud. The adolescent submissively crouched in the breeding position of a female.

Horrified, Shail watched one male violate another. Seth truly had become a monster. The teen's shabby wings fluttered in agony under the thrusting male. Seth viciously bit into his victim's neck and wings, craving the energizing blood. When drained of seed and abused on the ship, Shail recalled he, too, had regressed and attacked Monica, but her injuries were minor compared to the teenager's. If not separated soon, Seth would kill the smaller male with his brutal assault.

"Get off him," Jack yelled and pressed the remote that controlled Seth's collar. Hit with a shock, the aggravated large harpy bared his teeth at him but continued to rip into the young male. Only after several high intensity shocks did Jack get Seth under control and retrieve him from the adolescent's cage.

Blood trickled down Seth's chin, and he glared at Shail, relaying only one message: "*Soon.*"

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Over the next few weeks, Shail slowly regained his strength. He walked around his small cell, but he was still plagued by a wracking cough. He observed that nightfall brought the sound of music and men, which struck terror in the small flock. The teenager was also recovering from his injuries. Fearing reprisal from Seth, he no longer communicated with Shail.

Jack and Rob stood in front of Shail's cage when the music came on. "It's Saturday night, and there'll be a large crowd," Rob said eagerly. "We should put him on display."

Jack responded, "I'm not stressing him if there's nothin' in it for me."

Rob chewed on his red nails and gazed scrumptiously at Shail. "All right," he said. "Ten percent of the gate."

"For twenty, your boys can look at him all night."

With Rob's nod to the terms, Jack opened the cage. "Let's go," he said, holding a leash and a remote that controlled a new shock collar that had been placed on Shail when he was still feeble.

Shail hissed, coiled in the bedding, and refused to rise. He then felt the electric sting on his neck. He flapped his wings and tugged at the collar. The small exertion brought on his uncontrollable hacking.

With Shail disabled by the cough, Jack walked into his cage and attached the leash. “Let’s try this again.” He jerked the leash, but Shail stubbornly refused to stand. Jack gave him another shock. A battle of wills ensued. Shail lay in the straw, gasping for breath between spasms of coughing, but he wouldn’t concede an inch.

After the fourth shock, Rob broke in. “Stop it, Jack. He’ll die before he gets up and follows you.”

“I knew this son of a bitch was untamable,” Jack ranted and stalked into the cage. He snatched up Shail and threw him over his shoulder. Worn out, Shail could not resist as he was carried upstairs to the noisy bar.

Hung over the hunter’s large shoulder, Shail managed to take in the uncanny room. Ultraviolet lights caused objects to take on an alien color. Jack placed him in a long, clear-plastic container on a platform and slammed down the lid. Men quickly gathered around his eye-level cage.

“Is this the new one?” someone asked.

“Yes,” Rob said. “Isn’t he gorgeous?”

Shail’s adoring audience congregated around the see-through cage and gazed at him like he was a goldfish in a bowl. Initially he seethed and pushed against the lid, but even in good health he could not have escaped. He settled down and stared at the outlandish humans. Their unnaturally colored hair was in shades of purple, green, or blue and framed their painted, grinning faces. Their clothing was equally odd: glittering, lit-up, and changing

color as they flaunted, kissed, and tapped on the plastic cage to get Shail's attention. He wondered if the lack of nature caused the men's strange desires, or perhaps there weren't enough females on the fruitless land. He sensed that their gentle minds were akin to doting women who longed to touch him.

"Your homos are out in numbers tonight," Jack commented to Rob.

"Don't call them that," Rob whispered. "You'd be surprised that many of them are well-respected businessmen. My club gives them an outlet to dress up and express themselves."

The backwoods hunter shook his head and left to retrieve the other harpies.

"Look, Jack's bringing out a brunette," one man screeched.

Shail strained to see the harpy, but the crowd blocked his view. He caught a glimpse of a flapping wing as the hoard merged on the helpless male. Shail buried his face in his arms and dismally closed his eyes. He was amazed that the harpies still functioned, but the drugs probably kept their madness and shock at bay.

As pale sunlight filtered in through the windows, the crowds thinned. Several drunken men lingered around Shail's cage. Jack came over and opened the display lid. "Don't touch him," he said when the remaining men moved in. The intoxicated men ignored his warning, and their probing hands sought Shail's body.

Shail, hissing with fright, ironically sprang from the enclosure into Jack's protective arms.

“Get your hands off him,” Jack barked at the men as Shail clung to the man’s shoulders and buried his face in his ponytail. “Easy, Shail,” he said quietly. “This ain’t no place for us country boys.” He stroked Shail’s head and carried him toward the basement.

Shail sensed that Jack was also miserable in the club, and on the nature-less planet. Only money kept him there. Turned loose in his cage, Shail slid under the blanket and peered out.

“You’ll get used to this,” Jack mumbled, and as was his ritual, he went off to get some sleep.

Shail snuggled down in the bedding and thought, *Someone shall die first.*

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“I’ve put the customers off for three weeks,” Rob complained. “It’s Sunday night, and they expect a show.”

Jack glanced at the recovering teenage harpy. “I reckon he’s well enough to be used.”

Shail asked the teenager, *“What shall be done to you?”*

*“We are placed together in a large cage. Since I was not born of Seth’s flock, the others use me like a female for the men’s pleasure.”* When Shail seethed at the account, the teen added, *“Do not worry for me, master. I am used to this treatment.”* The teenager bore the neck scars of an enslaved male.

Shail turned to the other males, outraged. *“You shame me.*

*You shame our race, for you are the lowest of creatures. Know that the young one now falls under the protection of my yellow wings. Assault him again, and you shall face me.*”

Seth snickered. *“Worthless threats from a worthless ruler.”*

*“Seth, I have never made an empty threat.”*

Jack went to the golden’s cage with a leash and remote. Opening the door, he stood at the threshold. “Let’s go, Shail,” Jack said. “Time to put you on display.”

“Give it up, Jack,” Rob said. “He’ll never come.” To the men’s amazement, Shail lowered his head, a sign of submission, and walked to Jack.

Rob smiled. “Maybe those shocks did tame him.”

“Maybe,” Jack said. Suspicious of Shail’s docile behavior, he set the collar remote on the highest shock setting and then opened the cage door. In a flash, Shail fluttered his ragged wings, giving him enough lift to strike Jack’s chest with both feet. The powerful kick sent Jack falling backwards to the floor, and he lost his grip on the remote. As he struggled to rise, Shail leaped onto his back. He wrapped one long leg around Jack’s waist, hinging the foot behind his other leg in a figure four maneuver as his arms clutched the human neck in a sleeper hold. Despite being sick, he was using his remaining strength to kill the man. Rob pulled on his wing, but one thrust from the feathered limb sent the club owner crashing against the table.

“The remote,” Jack gasped as Shail’s long frame held him like a constricting snake, impossible to unclench. “Get the

remote!”

Shail felt a tremendous jolt to his neck. Hissing, he turned to Rob, who held the remote. He released Jack, straightened, and focused on attacking the small man.

“Oh, my God,” Rob screamed when he saw he had become Shail’s next victim. Panicking, he pressed the shock key. Ceased by the stinging pain, Shail collapsed and flipped wildly on the floor as Rob steadily pressed the key. Shail’s wings fluttered and his body tensed before he lay twitching and barely conscious.

“Stop! You’re killing him,” Jack managed to say. Coughing, he scrambled to his feet. “Give me that,” he barked, snatching the remote from the hysterical man.

“I’m sorry; I’m sorry,” Rob cried, “but he was after me.”

“Asshole, a couple of high-voltage shocks is plenty to knock down a harpy,” Jack grumbled and checked Shail’s pulse.

Despite the numbing pain, Shail sensed Jack’s thoughts with the touch. The man was angry, but frightened more so. Despite being sick and weak, Shail would have killed him if the two of them had been alone in the basement.

“I’ve had my fill of this sneaky bastard.” Jack grabbed a tie and bound Shail’s wrists. After carrying Shail upstairs, Jack placed him in a large cage in the center of the club. “Now you’re going to get it,” he said and fastened the wrist ties to a bottom cage bar.

Shail began to recover from the powerful shocking. He halfway sat up, resting on an elbow and shook his head to regain his wits. From the teenage harpy’s account of this cage, he knew



what lay ahead.

Rob strolled up to the cage as Jack gazed down at him. “Are you sure about this, Jack? Those harpies, especially the big one, will tear him apart. He’ll be covered with scars.”

Jack rubbed the back of his wrenched neck. “I don’t give a shit if they kill him. This goddamn golden has attacked me for the last time.”

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Like patrons at a boxing match, the customers paid admission to watch the Sunday night harpy show. They were surprised that the sacrificial lamb was the new yellow-winged harpy. They gathered around the cage and stared at Shail, helplessly restrained on the floor.

“He’s so precious and pretty,” one commented and reached through the bars to pet him. Proving that looks were deceiving, Shail lunged to bite him.

“Keep your hands off him,” Jack said. “He ain’t tame like the others.”

When the club was packed, Jack and several employees brought out the other harpies. They were led to the large cage and released inside under Shail’s insolent stare. Jack held Seth. “Okay, big fella,” he said, unclipping his leash. “This is your chance to put that golden in his place.” The employees shuffled from the cage as the crowd closed in to watch.

With a smoldering gaze, Shail focused on the small flock of five and tossed back his hair. *“Touch me and die,”* he relayed and made a low, threatening hiss.

Intimidation kept four of the males huddled in a corner, but Seth paced before Shail, returning an agitated hiss. *“You are weak and tied. It is you who shall die.”*

The teenager leaped between the two of them. *“Seth, you mustn’t. He is our golden ruler. Take me, please take me, but do not harm him.”*

*“You cling to a fledgling’s dream,”* said Seth. *“The golden rule is dead. Move aside, or suffer my wrath with him.”*

*“Do not come between us,”* Shail said to the young male, *“but know you are the only harpy among them.”* The teenager submissively backed into a corner.

Rob and Jack stood near the cage and watched the four harpies cluster in a cage corner. Even the large male appeared reluctant to strike. Rob chewed a fingernail and muttered, “I don’t understand. The blond is tied up and helpless, yet those harpies seem like they’re scared to death of him.”

“It’s their nature to fear a golden,” Jack said, “but my big brown will get him. He’s just building his nerve.”

Seth arched his wings and shook his hair, gestures of a male challenge. Shail was motionless, with a poised, raised head and a cold, hard stare. For a few minutes, a standoff of glances ensued between the two adversaries.

The crowd of men heckled, spurring Seth to attack. He

pounced on Shail, knocking him to his back, and pinned him. While Shail could have kicked, bitten, and struck him with his wings, he was passive and still. Seth was perplexed that Shail, face to face with him, did not struggle under his weight. To encourage a fight, he sank his teeth into a yellow wing. Shail responded with a gentle lick to the side of Seth's face, behaving like a female who willingly yielded to a mating. To verify the acceptance, Seth bit his shoulder, but Shail made no attempt to fend him off. Satisfied, he eagerly mounted him.

With the large brown's head and neck over his shoulder, Shail nuzzled his cheek and said, "*You are my brother, Seth. I love you and do this for you.*" Shail felt him relax and concentrated on breeding to relieve the drug effect.

Seth rubbed against him to stimulate an erection and sensed no deception in Shail's mind. He truly loved him. For the first time since his capture, Seth felt the warmth of compassion. Prior attacks on the other harpies had revealed only their pain and terror.

Seth's hatred began to dissolve and was replaced with the euphoria of being loved. Closing his eyes, Seth let Shail transport him from this terrible place into the imaginary closeness of his faraway mate. Around him were his little sons. Bloom's black wings nestled under his. A tear rolled down Seth's cheek.

Shail sympathetically licked the droplet. "*You are now with them, my brother.*" With the vision and memory, Seth's mind filled with peace and he became a harpy again.

Seth lifted his head and stared into Shail's eyes. "*Thank*

*you, master. I am ready.*” He lowered his head back across Shail’s shoulder.

Both harpies were motionless for several minutes, with the brown wings resting on top of the yellow. The crowd eagerly waited for the big male to copulate with the smaller blond. Suddenly, a man screamed, “Blood! There’s blood on them.”

“Shit,” Jack cursed. “That golden antagonized him for weeks. Rather than breed with it, the brown must’ve killed it.” He pressed Seth’s collar remote to remove him, but the shock had no effect. He tried again, and the big male still didn’t move. “What the fuck is going on?”

Finally, the men saw an indication of life under the fanned-out wings. Shail slid out from under Seth’s dead body and sat up. His mouth dripped with blood, and he shook to remove it from his chest and wings. Ignoring all others, he mockingly gazed at Jack.

“You son of a bitch,” Jack growled when he saw the throat of his favorite brown harpy. The jugular vein was bitten through, and the big male had bled out without a struggle. Jack figured that the large brown was so stimulated by the drugs that he probably never felt the bite.

Shail, though, knew the truth. Seth had willingly given up his life, longing to end the madness and destroy the monster that had grown within him.

Shail sniffled, displaying his dominance to the four harpies. They fell to their knees and reverently lowered their heads to him.

“Get out of my way,” Jack said and shoved men aside to

reach the cage door. Outraged by the death of his most productive harpy, he leaped into the cage. The brown harpies cowered in his presence as Shail arrogantly stared up at the livid man.

Jack marched to him and pulled out the remote. “You had your chance, but I’m done with you.” Tethered by his wrists, Shail coiled up and covered himself with his wings, preparing to be shocked to death.

The young harpy jumped to his feet. “*He is our ruler. We must protect him.*” Before Jack could press the key, the teen flapped his wings and landed on the man’s back. Jack tried to throw him off, but the other males sprang to Shail’s defense. Overpowered, the man fell into the straw, and the once-docile flock became a rabid pack. They bit, clawed, and pounded the human flesh, venting their pent-up rage from the cruelty they had suffered. The hysterical club patrons shrieked, witnessing the barbaric mutilation of the hunter from Dora. Jack had no chance to fight back or escape.

Rob raced to the bar for a laser gun. By the time he returned, Jack’s dismembered, bloody body was unrecognizable. The harpies lunged at the bars to attack Rob and the other men. The blond’s influence had transformed the gentle harpies into savage man-killers that could never again be trusted to perform. Rob swallowed hard and adjusted the laser gun to a blast setting. Aiming it, he systematically fired into the head of each harpy. When he finished, brown wings covered the cage floor.

Half in shock and trembling, Rob stepped into the cage and

aimed the weapon at the last live harpy. Shail angrily gnashed his teeth at the man, hoping to die, too. He was finished, had suffered enough in his life. Rob took a step closer, with the laser pointed at Shail's head.

"Don't kill him!" called a voice from the crowd. "I'll buy him." Rob hesitated and looked out into the dark, packed room at a man making his way through the crowd.

Shail stretched his neck to see but was more focused on the voice. It sounded familiar. Through the translucent light, he recognized Ralph, Mrs. Roth's bodyguard, among the sea of faces.

Ralph reached the cage and thrust a piece a paper through the bars. "Here." He puffed with anguish. "It's a credit voucher for fifty grand. Just let me have the harpy."

Rob glanced into the earnest eyes of the huge man, and then at the voucher, a tidy amount for an animal with worthless wings that was about to be destroyed. "Honey, this harpy is a killer. Why would you want him?"

"He won't hurt me," Ralph said. "Please, just take the money."

Rob lowered the weapon. "Sweetie, if you want to live dangerously, he's yours. But no guarantees, he's not only vicious but is suffering from pneumonia."

"I don't care. I want him." Ralph hurried into the cage. He swallowed hard when stepping around the dead harpies. He looked at the slain animal exporter that Ralph had throttled aboard the ship. Jack's face was a bloody pulp, identifiable only by his

distinctive ponytail.

“I’ll stun him so you can pick him up,” Rob said and adjusted the setting on his laser.

“No, he doesn’t need to be knocked out.” He bent down eye level with Shail. “It’s me, Ralph. I’m taking you out of here, Shail.”

Shail sat with his legs tucked under his frame and calmly let Ralph cut the ties on his wrists. He sadly gazed at the lifeless elegant bodies with blood-soaked wings that would never fly again. He looked up at Rob and seethed. The club owner fearfully stumbled backwards to the cage door and gripped his weapon.

“Okay, Shail, let’s get out of here,” Ralph said. Shail was more than ready to go and extended his arms toward his dark savior. Ralph tenderly swooped him up. Shail wrapped his arms around Ralph’s neck and buried his face against his large chest for security.

“The cops will be here any minute,” Rob said. “You’d better hurry and get your pet out of here.”

Ralph carried Shail over the dead bodies and out of the cage. The crowd parted to let him pass. They gawked at the strange pair—the giant black man and the slender, pale creature with the drooping yellow wings. Once outside the club, Shail nuzzled Ralph’s neck as the man carried him down the quiet street.

“You’re finally happy to see me.”

Shail closed his eyes and affectionately rubbed his head against the big man, relieved that the man had rescued him. The

nightmare was over.

Several of Ralph's friends left the club and jogged to catch up with them. "Ralph, wait for us," one called. Ralph paused on the sidewalk.

"I can't believe you bought him," one exclaimed. "He's gorgeous."

"Yeah, talk about an impulse buy," said another. "You don't even have a cage for it."

"He doesn't need a cage. I know this harpy," Ralph said. "On my last voyage, we took care of him and his family in Mrs. Roth's cabin. It's pure luck that I went with you guys tonight and found him. If not for the harpy show, I never would have set foot in that filthy club."

"I've been to the harpy show, and those creatures are trained for sex," one man said. "You are going to share him with us?" He reached over and fondled Shail's rear. Shail snapped his teeth and drew away, clenching Ralph tighter.

"Get your stinking hands off him," Ralph barked. "You're upsetting him, and that upsets me. You don't want to do that."

The four men backed away from their big, irritated friend. "My God, Ralph, you're awfully touchy," one of them said. "Is he a pet, or your lover?"

"Neither," Ralph snapped and marched away from his baffled friends. Shail drew back and worriedly looked into Ralph's eyes. "I do love you, but I promise no one, including me, will ever abuse you again."



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Ralph placed the harpy on the rear seat of his vehicle and drove through the big city. After some time, Ralph turned into the parking garage of his mother's apartment building. He parked and opened the back door, wondering if Shail would stay with him or fly away. The harpy climbed out and extended his useless wings, answering Ralph's question.

"Jesus, what son of bitch did that to you?" Ralph grimaced at the gaps in his feathers. The harpy was grounded and vulnerable. He coughed, and his breathing was labored. Even with solid feathers, he could not fly far, too frail with illness. "I'm going to take care of you," Ralph said and massaged the downtrodden harpy's shoulder. "Your feathers will grow back, and you'll get well."

Ralph watched the sad little harpy shiver in the cold night air and walk toward the elevator doors. Bewildered, Ralph followed him. "Guess you know about garages. I have to warn you, I don't live alone. But you'll like this old lady, and I know she'll love you."

They entered the apartment, and after a short tour the harpy stepped into the bathroom and turned on the shower, to Ralph's surprise. In the warm water, he ruffled his feathers and washed the dead harpy's blood off his body. For a wild jungle creature, the harpy seemed right at home with modern

conveniences. After the glorified birdbath, he crawled onto the soft bed in Ralph's bedroom and curled up to sleep. Ralph covered him a light blanket and watched his chest heave and rattle, broken only by a severe cough.

Ralph chewed his lip in anguish. "You really are sick." He hustled to his com in the living room, and despite the late hour he placed a call. His skinny cousin appeared on the screen, groggy with sleep. "Harry, I'm sorry to call so late, but I need a big favor."

"Do you know what time it is, Ralph?"

"I have a friend with pneumonia. He needs your help."

"Pneumonia," Harry said. "Get him to a hospital."

"I can't," Ralph said, "and I can't bring him to your office. When you see him, you'll understand."

Harry scoffed and asked with a ridiculing tone, "What are you involved in now, Ralph?"

"I'm not in trouble; haven't been since Mrs. Roth hired me. Please, just come over to Mom's and treat him."

"All right." Harry sighed. "I'll stop by in the morning before I go to my practice. How is your mom doing? I imagine she misses your father."

"She has her good and bad days, but she's glad I canceled my trip with Mrs. Roth and am staying here a while."

"Your being there forces her to get up and get on with life. That should help with the grief. I'll see you in the morning."

Ralph thanked him, and they disconnected.

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In the middle of the night, Shail woke with a hacking cough. He caught his breath and noticed that Ralph slept on the other side of the large bed. The man was concerned with Shail's failing health and damaged wings, but Shail had more pressing troubles. He was growing increasingly distraught about his family. Since leaving the hunting range, his telepathic dreams had failed to contact Kari. He initially thought she might be drugged, but the ongoing failure of communication had him fearing the worse alternative, Green had killed her. If capable of flight, he would have flown from Ralph's apartment and returned to the zoo, believing he had been brought back to the dome city of Washington, D.C.

Shail uncurled his body and gazed at his wings. They were cleansed of Seth's blood in the shower, but no amount of water could wash away his remorse for killing a fellow harpy. Longing for comfort, he crept across the bed to Ralph. He, like all harpies, had slept beside others most of his life. From birth, it was his parents, and then at age five he was orphaned and had found shelter under the wings of Aron's father. In maturity, he and Aron were nest brothers until his bonding with Kari. Tormented, miserable with illness, and feeling a little lost, he nestled against Ralph's back. He closed his eyes and listened to the man's pumping heart and strong, steady breath. With the reassuring sounds and body warmth, he fell asleep again.

Shail slept, curled up against Ralph's backside, but woke in the morning when the big man stirred. He lifted his head from his feathers as Ralph rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"Hey," Ralph said with a surprised smile, noticing Shail snuggled against him. With a sigh, he stroked Shail's head. "You must be pretty lonely to sleep next to me." He sat up and swung his legs off the bed. "I wish you could tell me how you became so neglected and ended up in that club. Maybe I'll get some answers from the Washington zoo. I'll give them a call today." Shail's eyes brightened. Ralph's call might also remedy Shail's concerns for Kari. Were she and Will still there and alive?

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Ralph took a quick shower and dressed, knowing his doctor cousin would arrive soon. In the kitchen, he made coffee for himself and fixed the harpy's favorite food, toast and jam with some sliced oranges. He placed the plate of food on the bed in front of Shail. The harpy sniffed the food but would not touch it. He coughed for a minute and then coiled his body into a ball and covered himself with his ravaged wings.

"Jesus, what happened to you?" he muttered and recalled how the slight male had gained Ralph's respect after attacking him in the ship cabin. That spirited, fearless creature was gone. He was not only ill, but had lost his fiery temperament. Rusty had said that harpies suffered from depression without their mates. Typically,

they stopped eating and could go into shock or have a fatal heart attack. With Shail refusing to eat, Ralph worried that his lethargic condition might be more mental than physical.

Harry arrived, and Ralph brought him into the bedroom. “What is it?” Harry asked, gawking at the unusual half-human, half-bird creature that hissed at him. Ralph explained that Shail was a wild native of a jungle planet.

Seeing that his cousin was leery of Shail and his bared teeth, he said, “I’ll hold him while you examine him.”

Harry ran a monitor over the tense, winged patient. “His lungs have fluid, but not bad. If he were a human, he’d heal with bed rest and antibiotics, but it’s hard to say with something this wild. He seems awfully stressed. Sometimes a relaxing setting is the best medicine.” Harry put his instruments away and looked up at Ralph. “Where did you get him?”

“It’s a long story.”

“A story that’s in today’s news,” Harry said with a raised eyebrow.

“It’s in the paper?” Ralph released Shail, who quickly covered himself with feathers. “What does it say?”

“The article is about some winged animals called harpies. Four of them murdered their handler at some shady nightclub last night. The article mentions that harpies also killed a large number of men on their native planet, and the Washington zoo obtained a family of rare and treacherous golden harpies, but the animals were stolen. Your blond pet fits their description.”

“I didn’t steal him.” Ralph rose and paced the bedroom. “I bought him from the club owner after the other harpies killed the handler.”

“Jesus, Ralph,” Harry exclaimed. “I can’t believe you brought something this dangerous into your mother’s home. He might be sick and harmless now, but what are you going to do when he recovers and is strong enough to attack?”

“He wouldn’t hurt us.”

“Nevertheless, he’s stolen property. You could go back to prison, Ralph. The zoo is offering a reward. Do yourself a favor and take the money before you’re arrested or you and Aunt Edith are murdered in your sleep.”

Ralph wearily rubbed his forehead. “I’ll never send him back to that zoo, especially if the news says that his family isn’t there. I’d appreciate it if you don’t tell anyone about him.” He noticed that Shail had begun to tremble. He sat down on the bed and stroked his head to comfort him.

Harry sighed loudly. “He is very pretty and might seem like the perfect companion for you, but put aside your desires and consider your mother. She doesn’t need this headache. I’ll let myself out.” He strolled out of the bedroom.

Ralph heard the front door close. “I know why you’re upset. You understood that your family was stolen from the zoo.”

“Ralph, are you still here?” called his mother from another room.

Ralph stood and went to find his mother. He entered the

kitchen and saw his elderly mother at the table, sipping coffee. “Oh, good, I heard the door close and thought you’d gone out.”

“Mom, we need to talk.” He joined her at the kitchen table and discussed the golden harpy.

“Harry thinks you should get rid of him?”

“I can’t,” said Ralph. “Shail needs my help, and I won’t betray him.”

“I guess you’d better introduce me to your flying friend, and then you better pack.”

“Pack?”

“Ralph, use your head. Your so-called gay friends and everyone in that club saw you take the harpy, and by now they’ve probably read the same article as Harry. They’ll turn you in for the reward. I think you should take the harpy to your grandfather’s cabin in the glades. The creature will mend faster with trees and tranquility, plus no one will find you two down in Florida.”

Ralph recalled that he had given the club owner a credit voucher with his name on it. He and Shail had to disappear, fast. “The cabin is a great idea, but you’re coming with us. Shail needs pampering, and he gets along better with women than men.” The trip would not only benefit Shail, but help his downhearted mother take her mind off her recent loss.

Edith grinned. “I haven’t been in those swamps in years. It might be fun.”

“Come on, Mom,” Ralph said. “I want you to meet Shail. He’s the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen.”

The old, thin woman rose and patted Ralph's back. "I figured as much."

They walked into the bedroom, but it was empty. Ralph frantically searched the apartment and saw the half-open front door. He raced up the hallway and looked down the stairwell, but found no harpy. He glanced at the elevator, made a dash for it, and pressed the button to the parking garage.

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When Ralph and the other man left the bedroom, Shail dissolved into tears. He decided that his family's theft and the lack of dream telepathy with Kari meant his family was dead. Like his own abduction from the zoo, Kari and Will were stolen and killed for the insurance. So devastated that he could barely catch his breath, he slipped off the bed and ambled toward the door. Life was not worth living.



## Chapter Eighteen

Another golden harpy suffered the devastation of having lost her mate. Kari held Shail's feather and lacked the will to rise. During the first weeks of the voyage, she was stable, but as the worry of recapture faded, the reality of Shail's death sank in. Keith gave her the antidepressant drugs and urged her to eat, but she slowly deteriorated. Out of frustration, he yelled at her, "Think of Will and your unborn baby. Live for them." But Shail was her life.

Dismally, she watched her son play on the cabin floor. His bright blue eyes and plucky wrestling with Keith's leg were reminiscent of her handsome mate. Will was old enough to sense his mother's thoughts. "*Do not leave me, Mom. I need you,*" his little voice begged as he hugged her. Will's need was the only thing that kept her going.

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Jim had become a man with a mission. The ex-cop was determined to put Dr. Green behind bars for killing the harpy. Little would be accomplished by confronting Green, so he sought his co-conspirators, the most likely was Frank Reynolds, the owner of the Arizona hunting range. Pretending a business interest, Jim made an appointment with Reynolds at his D.C. office.

"Please have a seat, Mr. Comm," said Frank in his swanky surroundings. "What can I do for you?"

Jim tossed several yellow feathers on Frank's desk. "Tell me about these."

Frank apprehensively picked one up. "They're feathers," he said, shifting in his seat.

"Harpy feathers that I found at your hunting range, plucked from a stolen golden harpy."

"Nonsense," Frank stammered. "They're swan feathers. I hunted the bird several weeks ago."

"Come on, Mr. Reynolds," Jim said. "Any idiot knows that swans are white, and there's no bird on this planet with a three-foot yellow feather. A lab can easily prove that these belonged to the harpy. Now, do you want to tell me about the three million credits you transferred into Green's off-planet account?"

"That was for a chimp."

"Three million for a monkey," Jim mocked.

Frank frowned. "You're not a cop, who are you?"

"A friend of the harpy."

"And what's this friendship going to cost me?" Frank asked.

"This isn't blackmail," Jim said. "You and Green are guilty of insurance fraud, receiving stolen merchandise, and possibly manslaughter. You exposed your associates to the harpy, knowing it was a man-killer. If you don't want to sing, I'm sure your hunting buddies will. Either way, you'll pay for killing the harpy."

"But I didn't...I didn't kill him," Frank stammered. "I bought him, but I didn't know he was stolen or dangerous. Over

the years, I've gotten several unwanted zoo animals from Green."

"I'm getting tired of your bullshit," Jim growled. "You knew the harpy was stolen. Why else blame those hunting deaths on the chimp?"

"All right," Frank said, rattled. "But I swear I didn't kill him. I gave him to a Dora hunter named Jack Jones. When he took the harpy, it was alive."

"What about the feathers?"

"The harpy did that. It plucked out its own feathers so the wings would be worthless. We didn't hurt him. Hell, we couldn't touch him. He killed two of my friends and injured two others. Jones lured him back into a cage with his fledgling. I was so upset I gave that murderous creature away. That's all I know."

Jim was finally hearing the truth. Reynolds' story was consistent with the fledgling's and explained his injured wing. "Where did Jones take him?"

"Out in the desert," Frank said. "Jones was supposed to kill him and dump the body so the police would find it and the insurance would pay off. Jones lives in New York and won't return my calls or Green's. We don't know what that guy did with the harpy."

"I'll be in touch." Jim stood and left the fancy office.

He returned to the precinct and met with his former partner, Dan. He told him the whole story, including how he had caught the harpy on his apartment roof and how Reynolds, Green, Jones, and a Dora senator named Blackwell had planned the insurance fraud.

“Jim, did you take the female and baby harpy from the zoo?” Dan bluntly asked.

“If I did, I’m not about to fess up.”

Dan took a deep breath. “Fine, I’m not pushing that one. Right now, the zoo handler who took care of the harpies is the prime suspect. He disappeared along with the harpies on the same night.” He flipped on his computer and did a search. “Jack Jones, Jack Jones, no listing of a residence for him in New York. I’ll keep on it. If he’s there, he’s bound to show up.”

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The days passed, and Dan kept Jim informed as he built a criminal case against Dr. Green and Frank Reynolds and continued to search for Jack Jones. The heavy man named Tony readily disclosed Frank and Green’s involvement with the male harpy.

Keith Williams, the harpy handler, was initially suspected in the zoo theft of the female and baby, but in light of the projected insurance fraud, the police shifted their focus to Dr. Green. For millions in credits, perhaps Keith Williams had been murdered, along with the golden harpies. Although Green was innocent of stealing Kari and Will, he was taking the heat.

“How’s it going?” Jim asked Dan in a com contact.

“Slow, and still no word on Jones,” Dan said. “We’re trying to tie Green to the hover crash at the zoo that killed the three thieves. Green’s involved, but unfortunately, your male harpy

killed Green's accomplices. We're hoping Jones can tie him in."

"No word on Shail?"

"We still haven't found his body," Dan said. "That critter must have been something to get you so involved, not to mention sober."

"He was something. The first time we met, that skinny sucker kicked my butt." He chuckled. "And you know few can do that." His tone grew serious. "Dan, I have to find him, dead or alive. His harpies and the people of Dora loved him and deserve to know what happened to their ruler."

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Jim sat in his apartment drinking his morning coffee. His eyes focused on something yellow drifting across the floor. He reached down and retrieved the tiny feather. "Such a waste." He sighed. Four weeks had passed since Shail had flown off his apartment roof and vanished into the night. Jim reflected on his own son. Most likely, the boyish-looking harpy was also dead. He glanced at the kitchen cupboard that held a whiskey bottle. "Not till I know for sure." His communicator buzzed, and Dan appeared on the screen. *This is it*, Jim thought with apprehension. They found his body. He pressed the connect key.

"I located Jack Jones."

"Does he have the harpy?"

"Jones is dead, just came over the wire. He had some

harpies in a gay sex club in New York, and get this, the harpies killed him.”

“Do you know whether one has yellow wings?”

“You’d better hope not,” Dan said. “The club owner shot all the harpies before the police arrived. I talked to the officer handling the case. The harpies were used for prostitution, and apparently it turned them vicious. They ripped Jones apart. I asked about the yellow-winged harpy, but the police didn’t notice wing color—too much blood. The officer said he’d never seen anything like it. They may file charges against the club owner for harboring dangerous animals and abusing them. Trouble is, there are no laws concerning harpies or the use of them.”

“What’s the name of the club? I have to find out if Shail is one of the dead harpies.”

“You’re wasting your time. The harpy carcasses went the way of roadkill—to the incinerator.”

“Someone in the club would have noticed that blond. I’m going anyway.”

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In the New York apartment complex, the elevator rose to the garage that also housed hovercrafts. At the twentieth floor, Ralph and Edith exited and searched for Shail. In a panic, Ralph raced through the parked transports but froze when he saw the harpy teetering on the ledge of the tall building. As Shail gazed out

at the vast city, Ralph crouched and quietly crept toward him. Shail smugly glanced over his wing at Ralph. Sneaking up on the harpy was nearly impossible, with his superior senses of hearing and smell.

From his hunched position, Ralph straightened and stepped out from behind a vehicle. “You shouldn’t be here, Shail. You’re sick, and this cold weather isn’t helping. And someone might see you.”

The harpy’s eyes watered and turned to focus on the street below.

Ralph grew nervous, realizing Shail was contemplating suicide, his wings useless to save him from the fall. Beaten down with illness and cruelty, he had reached his end with the loss of his family. Ralph was too far away to grab him and hoped to talk him down. “Please don’t jump. Things are bad, but they’re bound to get better. I’ll do everything I can to find Kari and your son.”

Shail made a scoffing snuffle and shook his head.

“What about Racheal?” Ralph said, grasping for reasons to stop him. “She called Mrs. Roth on her ship and said she was pregnant with your baby. You have another family. Don’t you want to live for them?”

Shail turned from Ralph to Edith, who approached from his other side.

“Is this your friend, Ralph?” she asked and walked to Shail. “He *is* very beautiful.”

“Mom, stay back. He’s getting ready to jump.”

Edith dismissed Ralph's warning. Next to Shail, she gazed out of the parking garage. "Isn't it a lovely view? That's the Empire State building. It is centuries old. Lately, I've come here often. I'm like you, Shail. I also lost my mate several months ago and miss him terribly. Some days, I don't even want to get out of bed."

Edith's rambling distracted the harpy and allowed Ralph to edge closer. He lunged and managed to catch Shail's legs. Shail flapped his wings and punched and kicked Ralph as he was dragged from the building edge. Ralph wrestled and pinned him to the floor, but the harpy was so frail he could not put up much of a fight. A spasm of coughing sapped his remaining strength, and he lay limp and panting under Ralph's weight.

"Don't be so rough, Ralph," Edith yelled. "The poor dear is sick."

Ralph picked him up and cradled him in his arms. Once again, he was carrying the mistreated harpy to safety.

Shail looked up at him and spoke, "Yes, again you hold and help me, but this time you must let me, Ralph," his soft voice implored. "I do not wish to live. If you love me, you shall do as I ask."

Ralph was so spellbound that Shail could talk, he could not respond. After a moment, he gathered his thoughts. "I do love you, loved you from the start. That's why I can't let you die."

"Human love is selfish," Shail said with a sigh. "Like Kari, you think of your own loss instead of my suffering."



Edith pulled off her shawl. “Here, Ralph, cover him up. Half-naked in this freezing weather, it’s no wonder he’s ill.” The threesome started toward the apartment. “I thought you told me he couldn’t speak?”

“Apparently, I was wrong.”

In the apartment, Ralph placed Shail on the bed and Edith heaped a heavy blanket on him. “I’ll make your birdman some nice chicken soup.” She winced and stopped short at the door. “Oh my, he’s not related to chickens, is he?”

“I don’t think so, but harpies are vegetarians.”

“I’ll make tomato soup,” she said and left the bedroom.

“I have no desire to eat,” Shail said. “I cannot sense my mate, and now I learned why. She and my son were stolen from the zoo and killed for a thing called insurance. And Racheal is far away and forever lost to me. I have tried to survive so I can again protect my family and flock. I have no purpose now, and the pain is too great.”

“You don’t know for sure that your family is dead. They might still be alive. I’ll make you a promise. Once you’re well, I’ll get you back to Dora and your harpies. Racheal and her baby need you.”

“I am so tired, Ralph. I have no desire to heal on this treeless land.”

“Not all of Earth is treeless. I’m taking you out of the dome cities to a place with forests and wildlife. While we’re there, I’ll try to find out about Kari and also make arrangements for your trip to

Dora. It's going to be okay."

"You would do that for me?"

"I'd move mountains for you."

Shail's eyes grew big. "You are a strong man, but mountains stay."

Ralph chuckled.

Shail clasped Ralph's large hand. "Harpies can sense human thoughts, but the thoughts are stronger through touch. Your promise to send me home is true. For the sake of my flock and my human mate and our offspring, I shall try to endure."

"Why didn't you talk sooner?"

"Silence is safer in captivity. I had reached the end of this journey, so falseness was no longer needed."

"But on the ship, we were good to you and your family," Ralph said. "You should have trusted us and spoken."

"Senator Blackwell, our owner, threatened to kill my son if we spoke. And I sensed we would lose Mrs. Roth's kindness. She would feel deceived that we had made her believe we were less."

"You're probably right about her. That old woman hates being hoodwinked." Ralph stood. "I'd better get packed so we can get out of here. The zoo wants you back."

"Not back. They want my death."

Ralph glared. "Over my dead body."

Ralph readied the traveling bags as the harpy sipped tomato soup and quietly listened to Edith talk about the Florida Everglades. “You’ll love it, Shail,” she said. “It’s warm and green and still has some wild animals. The increasing hurricanes and flooding from climate change spared the park from developers. Too costly to elevate it and expand to Miami. That’s another domed city.”

By the afternoon, they were in the vehicle and traveling out of New York. The harpy lay on the back seat, hidden under a blanket. “Once we hit the highway, you can sit up,” Ralph said. “If I’d rented a hover, we’d be there faster, but that would leave a paper trail.”

“All this drama is so exciting,” Edith exclaimed. “I haven’t traveled this far on land since my honeymoon. Your father and I were so poor back then, we couldn’t afford to fly.”

They journeyed by day and took breaks at night so Shail could leave the transport. After several days, they reached south Florida and the Everglades.

“We’re almost there, Shail,” Edith said happily. “I’ll fix you a big bowl of swamp cabbage at the cabin.”

Ralph chuckled to himself. From the start of the trip, his mother had talked nonstop to the harpy. Shail’s elegance and exotic look charmed all women, and Ralph’s mother was no exception. His alluring blue eyes stayed focused on her as he occasionally nuzzled her wrinkled hand. Taking care of the harpy was the therapy she needed. With Shail, it was hard to judge his

feelings, since he rarely spoke and lacked facial expressions, but he was calm and nibbled fruit during the journey.

At dusk, they finally turned off the highway and onto a narrow dirt road that ran through a pine and scrub oak forest. Ralph glanced back at Shail, glad to see his face pressed against the window in excited anticipation. “We’re almost there, Shail.” Ralph pulled up to an old wooden cabin that faced a marshy lagoon. Shail stepped out and inhaled the humid air. He stared at the cypress and oaks that surrounded the building. “Trees!” he said, his first word all day.

“Do you like it?” Ralph asked. The harpy nodded and ruffled his feathers like a happy bird, freed of a cage. “Go ahead and check it out. Mom and I will unpack.” The harpy immediately waded into the lagoon and fluttered his wings to bathe.

“Watch out for alligators,” Ralph said with concern. When Shail tilted his head with puzzlement, he explained, “They’re big water reptiles.”

“I shall watch and hope to meet them.” Shail shook off the droplets and started toward the woods.

Ralph was beginning to realize that sometimes Shail interpreted words literally. “I meant alligators are dangerous.”

“Not to me,” Shail answered and disappeared into the swampy forest.

“Don’t worry, Ralph,” Edith said, “that boy is in his element.”

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For the first few days, Shail remained close to the cabin. He watched Ralph fish, and Edith cooked her favorite dishes. When darkness fell, Shail curled up at the foot of Ralph's bed and slept soundly, but with first light he sought the freedom and solitude of the marshes and small forests. Before the week ended, Shail's absence was daylong and he returned at sundown to eat and sleep with his dark human friends.

Slowly, his cough disappeared and his body took on a glow of health. His pale skin turned a deep tan, and daily exercise restored his lean muscles. The long confinement on the ship and Earth had left his remaining feathers dingy with broken quills, but regular baths and preening brought a luxurious sheen to his wings, and the absent flight feathers were rapidly growing back. Even his dishwater-blond hair gave way to bright sun-bleached locks. Shail's transformation stunned Ralph. Initially smitten, the man now seemed obsessed with him.

Shail was not disturbed but pitied Ralph, who longed for a relationship that could never be. Shail's appearance not only changed, but the exposure to nature also healed his troubled mind. He felt more confident and content. Gazing at the beautiful sunsets filled his heart with joy and gave him the inspiration to live another day.

When Shail failed to return to the cabin one night, he found an upset man in the morning.

“I want you to stay in the cabin at night,” Ralph ordered.

Shail tossed his hair and glared. “No man controls me, Ralph. You are my friend, and I wish not to hurt you, but as you once learned, I can.”

Ralph slumped into a kitchen chair and scoffed. “Don’t need that reminder. It’s hard to forget when a harpy nearly throttles you to death, and you’re strong enough now to do it again. I just get worried about you out there.”

Edith joined her son at the table. “Ralph, I know you care about Shail, but he’s not a pet and not human. He’s as wild as the wind and can’t be harnessed. You need to give up the notion that he’ll become part of your life.”

Shail placed his hand on the big man’s shoulder. “She knows me and speaks true.”

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After a month, Shail’s flight feathers had grown to full length and he stopped being a prisoner of the ground. He maintained his friendship with Ralph and Edith, dropping in every few days. His diet became the glade food of blackberries, acorns, sugar cane, and cattail shoots. Occasionally at night, he flew to the outskirts of Miami and raided an orange, mango, or avocado tree. He adapted completely to the Everglades and ceased to rely on Edith’s food. He returned to the cabin only to cure his loneliness.

Shail was gone for ten days and returned to his human

friends in the evening. He opened the cabin door to find Ralph more upset than angry.

“Where have you been?” he barked. “We thought someone had caught or shot you.”

Shail lightly stepped inside. “To think such is foolish. Earth humans have tried and failed. My downfall has come only when protecting my loved ones.” He sadly lowered and shook his head. “And this risk grows unlikely.”

“Well, where were you?” Ralph asked.

“I traveled north to the mountains, searching for Kari, but learned this land is large and holds many covered cities. I can speak but do not know the talk of signs. Can you tell me which city holds the zoo?”

“You poor dear,” Edith said and hugged Shail. “You’re devoted to fly so far.”

“I can show you on a map,” said Ralph, “but Kari may not be in Washington anymore. Mrs. Roth should be back soon. She has the connections to help you with the search and get you back to Dora and Racheal.”

“I must know Kari’s fate before I leave. Otherwise, the torment shall be unbearable.”

Ralph projected a map on his computer and showed Shail the zoo’s location as Edith set a bowl of cornbread on the kitchen table. “Ralph, tell this skinny white boy to give his feathers a rest and stay for dinner. I just happen to have made his favorite dish tonight.”

“I shall stay,” Shail said, “but not for the food. I, too, have missed you.”



## Chapter Nineteen

Senator Blackwell tapped the Disconnect button on his communicator. “Where is that guy?” he grumbled to himself. His trans-planet call to Jack Jones had again failed. He touched another button to contact his secretary in the outer office.

“Yes, Senator?” she responded.

“Put a call in to Director Green in Washington. Set it up for two o’clock tomorrow, Earth time.”

“Yes, sir. Do you want to reset the Jones number?”

“Forget that jerk.”

Jones and Green were responsible for his harpy investment on Earth, and neither had sent word or credits in some time. The monthly voucher was overdue on the brown harpies in the club, and the insurance claim on the golden male’s death should have been settled by then.

The following day, Blackwell’s call connected with Green. No sooner had the zoo director’s image appeared than Blackwell ranted, “Where’s my insurance money?”

“Still with the insurance company,” Green fired back, “and I doubt you’ll ever see it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I had planned to call with the bad news. The authorities are all over the case of the missing male. I’ve learned someone tipped them off, and they suspect fraud. I could lose my job and face jail over your harpy scheme. The breeding program is in the

toilet. The female and her fledgling disappeared from the zoo along with their handler, and the handler neutralized the male's sperm and DNA. Even if the female is recovered, her eggs can't be impregnated, and forget cloning. We don't have the female hosts."

"As far as harpy DNA and sperm, you can use the large brown stud that Jones has in New York."

"Apparently, you haven't heard." Green snickered. "I called the New York club last week to find out where Jones dumped the golden male's body. It was never found, and that was holding up the insurance claim. The club owner informed me that your Dora hunter is dead. His harpies ripped him apart, and the animals were destroyed. Blackwell, all your harpies are either dead or missing."

Understanding Jones' failure to return calls, Blackwell wearily rubbed his forehead. "The golden female and fledgling can't come back to Dora. An heir to the ruling family would be disastrous."

"The zoo is offering a reward for them. If by chance the female and baby are recovered, what should I do with them? Their papers are in your name."

"Kill them," Blackwell said. "There's too much of a risk."

Green nodded, and the transmission ended.

Blackwell sank back in his chair. The harpies had defeated his army and were too hazardous to be used as pets, sex partners, or anything else. His expensive experiment was over. "The only good harpy is a dead one," he mumbled.

He reluctantly placed a local call to Senator Peterson. “You were right about the harpies. They can’t be tamed. I’ve given up on my breeding program.”

“What happened?”

“The five brown harpies that I sent to Earth turned vicious and killed their handler. The handler supposedly killed the golden ruler, but as yet no one has found his body. And I just learned his female and fledgling were stolen from the zoo. God knows who has them. The police suspect fraud, so the insurance company is refusing to pay off. It’s a mess.”

“Damn it, Blackwell,” Peterson ranted. “You should have killed all those goldens when you had the chance. We can spray and kill every brown on the planet but still lose the Outback if one golden survives and comes back here.”

“I know, I know,” Blackwell answered. “I’ll try to tie up that loose end. After the lethal gas kills the female flock, we need to re-spray the despondent males, just eradicate the whole species.”

“The chemicals arrive in a few months, but it could be close to the court date,” Peterson said. “Waters’ lawyers managed to move the harpy’s case up the docket, blaming it for a civil war on Dora. Those creatures have to be gone before the case is heard.”

“Creatures?” Blackwell said. “If anything, we’ve learned they’re not animals, but intelligent mortals. Thankfully, the judges and courts haven’t figured that out.”

Jim arrived in New York in the afternoon and caught a transport to the notorious ghetto where erotic sex clubs had become the new rage. All types had sprung up in the large city, and the police paid little attention to their shadier operations. It sickened him that Shail had ended up in such a place. He located the gay section and searched for the club that boasted the harpy entertainment. Paying admission, he entered the dark building and was soon talking to the flamboyant club owner called Rob.

“I still have nightmares about killing those beautiful creatures,” Rob said, “but seeing what they did, I had no choice.”

“Was there a blond with yellow wings?” Jim asked.

“No,” Rob answered with a nervous grin. “Our harpies had brown hair and wings.”

Jim stared at the club owner’s shifting eyes. His body language suggested that the gay man was hiding something. He had probably heard about the theft of the golden harpies and knew he would be in trouble if he admitted he had had Shail. “Thanks for your time,” he said on his way out the door.

That evening, Jim returned when the club was in full flower. The flashing lights embellished the costumes of its patrons, creating a surreal atmosphere. The screeching music seared his ears, and he fought the desire to leave. Mixed drinks along with illegal drugs lay openly on the tables. In the dim light, prostitution could be glimpsed in dark corners. It was worse than he had imagined.

To avoid solicitation, he seated himself at the bar. A transvestite in a sparkling purple gown took the stool beside him. She smiled seductively at him and brushed back her pale green hair.

“Baby, you look a little out of place here,” she said in a hoarse, deep voice. “If you’re lonely, I could help you. Rugged men are so sexy.”

“Actually, I came to see the harpies,” Jim said. The scantily dressed bartender approached and asked him for his drink order. “Coke, and something for the lady.”

“Sexy and a gentleman. I’ll have a cosmos,” she told the bartender and turned toward Jim, her hair becoming red and her dress blue. “I’m sorry, baby, but the harpies are gone. I’m surprised you didn’t see it on the news.”

“I’m from out of town. What happened to them?”

“I was here, had a front row seat the last night they were here.” She pointed to a large cage in the center of the room. “The harpies were in there when they attacked Jack, their handler. It was awful. They ripped the poor man to shreds.” She took a long sip from the martini glass. “To make matters worse, the club owner shot those gorgeous creatures. Rob’s a fool in a way, killed off half his clientele at the same time. This place used to be packed.”

“Was there a blond harpy with yellow wings?”

“The canary? That’s what we called him. He started the bloodshed when he killed the largest harpy. Jack was so angry, he jumped in the cage and started kicking the blond. The other harpies

went crazy and attacked Jack. He never stood a chance.”

Jim knew the canary was Shail, and Rob had shot him. He swallowed the last of the soda and thought about ordering a whiskey. “Shame the blond is dead. I came here to see him.”

“The canary’s not dead. Rob sold him to a stunning black man before the cops showed up. The guy paid a lot of money for him. He picked up the little yellow bird and carried him out like a baby.”

Jim breathed a sigh of relief. “This black man, do you know him, know his name? Ever seen him before?”

“You ask a lot of questions. No offense, baby, but you come across like a cop.”

“I’m not a cop. I’m interested in finding the harpy because he was my pet, but he escaped.” Jim waved to the bartender to refill her drink. “Anything you can tell me may help.”

“I understand the loss. With his looks, that creature was irreplaceable.” The transvestite’s hair turned blond, and her dress became short and black. “I’ve never seen the black guy before, and he wasn’t your typical gay. He was big, like a body builder, and was dressed nice in an expensive suit. He looked out of place here, like you. He bought the harpy with a credit voucher. Hey, that voucher should have his name on it.”

“Yes, it would,” Jim said and stood up to leave. “Thanks for your help.”

“Going so soon? We were just getting acquainted.”

“I’m eager to find my harpy.”

“Well, be careful, baby. Your blond is vicious. He was tied down and still managed to bite out the throat of the big harpy when it jumped him.”

Jim paid for the drinks and threw her a grin. “That sounds like my canary.”

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Jim strolled to his rental vehicle, smiling. Shail had not been killed in the desert or the nightclub, but had been sold to a polished black man. The gay man was unlikely a hunter, but probably wanted Shail for sex, rather than a fancy pet. Although disturbing, Jim had to look on the bright side. Shail was most likely still alive.

Back in his hotel room, Jim placed an intergalactic call to Kari’s spaceship. In leaving Earth, she had been depressed and could use good news. At six in the morning, the com buzzed as his call went through. “I think Shail is alive,” were Jim’s first words when Keith and Kari appeared side by side on the screen. Kari covered her mouth and choked up with tears of joy.

“Where is he?” Keith asked.

“I’m not sure, but I’m on his trail. He wasn’t killed at the hunting range. He was taken to New York, and I learned that some man bought him with a credit voucher. I’ll find out his name tomorrow.”

“I’m glad you called,” Keith said, glancing at Kari in the

background. “She hasn’t been doing well and stopped eating.”

“Put her back on.” When Kari appeared, he said, “What’s this I hear about not eating?”

Kari wiped the moisture from her eyes and cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, Jim. It’s hard to explain harpy depression. It’s suffocating. Moving, eating, even breathing takes effort, and we just want to die when we’ve lost our mates.”

He gazed with sympathy at the pretty female. “I promise, Kari. I’m going to find him and get him back to you.”

She forced a little smile. “I said you remind me of my father. Back when harpies were hunted on Dora, Shail was captured and put up for auction at a hunting range. My father told me the same thing. He promised to get him back to me, just like you.” The communicator buzzed the end of the transmission. “Thank you, Jim.”

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Jim called Dan in D.C. and asked him to trace the credit voucher given to the club owner for the harpy sale. “Sounds like you may be close to finding the harpy,” Dan said, “have you considered the consequences? Senator Blackwell will regain ownership. If you keep the harpy, you could be charged with possessing stolen property. Maybe you ought to leave well enough alone and let that black guy keep the harpy.”

“That’s not going to happen. Can the senator be tied to the



insurance fraud?”

“Possibly, but he’s on another planet. I doubt the D.A. would pursue him. The worst that could happen with the fraud is that Blackwell loses the insurance claim. If he gets the harpy back, he’ll probably kill it for its valuable wings. The creature is too dangerous to be sold and hunted.”

“You’re probably right. Let me know about the voucher.”

The following day, Dan called. “His name is Ralph Graham. He must’ve wanted that harpy bad; paid fifty-grand for it. Here’s his D.C. address.”

“If he lives in D.C., why was he in New York?”

“Don’t know, but you’d better watch out with this guy,” Dan said. “He’s got a rap sheet, been arrested for assault and spent two years in prison for nearly killing a guy. He’s thirty-two and huge, six-five, and weighs two hundred and seventy. In the last five years, he hasn’t been in trouble and is employed as a bodyguard and assistant. One more thing, he’s listed himself as homosexual, probably the reason he wanted the male harpy.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m afraid that might be the case.”

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Jim found Ralph’s D.C. apartment, but he was never home. The building superintendent explained, “His apartment is robotic. It’s cleaned, and all bills are paid automatically. I’ve never even met Ralph Graham. He travels a lot, and our records show that he’s

on a ship headed for the Snead system.”

“Your records are wrong,” Jim said. “He was in New York two weeks ago.”

The man shrugged. “Hey, I don’t care, so long as the accounts are paid.”

Jim staked out the apartment. The neighbors had rarely seen the elusive tenant. Weeks passed with no sign of Graham or the harpy. One morning, Jim noticed an old woman struggling with a package as she entered the adjacent building. “Can I help?” he offered.

“Why, thank you,” she said. “My delivery chamber is broken.”

They entered the building and took the elevator to the top floor. “By any chance, do you know Ralph Graham? He lives in the building next door but never seems to be home,” Jim said as they shot upward.

“I do know Ralph. I met him in front of my building when a scoundrel tried to steal my purse, and Ralph stopped him. He’s a wonderful man. Occasionally we meet and talk about his travels, but right now he’s staying in New York with his mother. His father passed away a few months ago, and he cut his last trip short so he could care for her. Why do you want to find him?”

“He may have unknowingly purchased stolen property,” Jim answered. “Don’t want him to get into trouble.”

“Oh dear,” she mumbled. “I certainly hope you can reach him.”

“Me, too.” Jim could not wait to put the bag down in her apartment. He had a solid lead on Graham.

Further investigation revealed Edith Graham’s New York address, but it proved to be another dead end. Both Ralph Graham and his mother had abruptly disappeared. No neighbor, relative, or friend knew where they were. After a week, Jim was discouraged and put aside the search, returning to his D.C. home. He hoped Graham would slip up and somehow disclose his location.

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As the weeks passed, Jim grew more and more apprehensive. He wondered if he would ever find Shail, but one day Dan called. “Still want to locate Ralph Graham?”

“You know where he is?”

“Florida,” Dan answered. “He placed a com call to a ship that’s returning from the Snead system. He’s in the Everglades at a cabin in his grandfather’s trust. Do you think he still has the harpy?”

“I’m about to find out.”

The following day, Jim packed his bags. As a cop, he had learned to control his emotions when investigating the most horrendous of crimes, but if he found Shail tied up and molested, he wondered if his restraint would prevail. He holstered his laser gun. At the airport, he rented a small hovercraft and planned to arrive in the Everglades for an early-morning surprise.

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In the old cabin, Shail hopped on a stool for dinner. Instead of his normal nibbling, he gulped down a delicious cornbread muffin.

Edith laughed. “That’s better than cattail shoots. After we eat, let’s sit on the porch and watch the sunset. I’m not sure how many more we have.”

Ralph rose from the table. “Yeah, Mrs. Roth should be here any day. I left word I had urgent business, and she’ll call me when her ship docks. Shail, I didn’t mention you or your problems. Better to tell her in person.”

On the porch, Ralph, Edith, and Shail watched the golden sunset, laced with pink and lavender clouds. “The sky here is beautiful, like my home,” Shail said as Edith reclined in her familiar rocker and Ralph sat on the edge of the rickety deck. Shail folded his wings and curled up next to him. As Ralph stroked his blond hair, Shail sensed the man’s distress. Their time together would soon end.

“Do not be sad, Ralph,” Shail said quietly. “I am harpy and belong with my kind. Even if I stayed, I could not love you like a mate.”

“I know, but I’ve never felt like this before. It hurts to even look at you.” He chuckled sarcastically. “I’m just a big fool.”

“You are not a fool, but a friend who saved my life and

gave me back my hope. You shall always be in my heart.” As the sun slipped behind the cypress trees, Shail stood and ruffled his feathers. “My nest of Spanish moss waits in a great oak tree,” he said, having learned the names of the flora and fauna in the Everglades.

“Rather than sleep alone, you could stay here tonight.”

“I sleep not alone. A raccoon and her young dwell in the tree and seek my caressing and play. An owl and an old possum also share the branches. Although I come from a different land, these Earth animals sense I am one of them. I shall return in the morning for news of Mrs. Roth.”

Shail took flight, his thoughts on the stout old woman. Would Mrs. Roth still help him after learning the truth? He had behaved like a mute, unknowing animal and hid the fact he could speak and had the intelligence of any human. She disliked liars and had little patience with people. She might turn her back on him, angry he had deceived her.

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At dawn, Ralph woke to a hard rap on the cabin door. He stumbled out of bed and looked out the window. A middle-aged white man stood on the porch. In plain clothes, the guy did not look like the authorities, and Ralph figured he took a wrong turn and was lost. When Ralph opened the door and spied the stock of a laser gun under the man’s jacket, he wished he had been more

cautious. “Can I help you?”

“Ralph Graham?” he asked.

“Who wants to know?”

“I’m here to collect the harpy that was stolen from the Washington zoo—but I’m sure you suspected as much. Why else hide out in the Glades?”

Ralph assumed the man worked for the zoo, the insurance company, or was a bounty hunter looking to claim the reward. If a cop, he would have flashed his badge. “I don’t know anything about a harpy, whatever that is.”

“You’re not a very good liar.” Jim held a small yellow feather to Ralph’s face. “Found this on your deck. That creature always manages to lose a few. We can make this easy or hard. Either way, the harpy leaves with me.”

Ralph was not one for words. Before the man could draw the gun, he lunged and knocked him to the ground. The two wrestled. Ralph, being younger, larger, and stronger, thought he had the advantage when pinning the stranger down. A jabbing elbow and knuckle sandwich knocked Ralph off him. Surprisingly, the man was tenacious and a good scrapper. A hard blow to Ralph’s stomach sent him into the dirt.

Edith screamed from the doorway. “Don’t hurt my son!” Ralph struggled to his feet and threw himself back into the guy.

Startled, Shail sat up in his moss nest when he heard the distant hum of an approaching hovercraft. He scrambled to his feet and soared upward to see it. In the predawn mist, the hover lights traveled just above the treetops and descended near the cabin, several miles away. He swooped down and glided over the swampy ground and around the small clusters of trees, heading for his human friends. When he heard Edith's cries, he furiously flew up into the exposed sky, no longer concerned with concealment. He fluttered above the cabin and peered down at the two men locked in combat. He zoomed down and landed near them.

"Get out of here, Shail!" Ralph shouted as he knocked the man to the ground.

"I've had enough of this shit," the man growled and pulled his laser gun, aiming it at Ralph. "Now get back." Puffing, he looked at Shail. "If you've harmed this harpy—"

"He did not, Jim." Shail walked between the two men. "He is a friend, like you."

"You know this guy?" Ralph asked, baffled.

"Yeah, he knows me," Jim grumbled and lowered his weapon.

Shail gripped the white man's upper arms in camaraderie. "You are a determined man. I knew you would seek me."

"Yeah," Jim said and slowly sat down on the porch edge to catch his breath. "Ever since the zoo reported you stolen, I've been busting my ass to find you." He smiled at Shail. "I see you finally decided to talk."

“Together longer, we would have spoken,” said Shail.  
“You earned my trust.”

“Earned it?” Jim said with a lifted an eyebrow. “Spoken like a smug little ruler, but I’m glad you’re okay.”

Ralph eased down on the deck beside Jim. “Man, why didn’t you say from the get-go you were Shail’s friend? Could’ve saved us a few bruises.”

“Sorry, but I didn’t know what I was walking into. I hoped to browbeat you into giving him up.”

“You would’ve had to kill me.”

“Yeah, Shail is an odd little character, but his nobility grows on you.” Jim chuckled. “Besides us, a lot of people on his home planet are willing to fight for him.”

“Let’s go in,” Ralph said, standing.

Ralph and Jim sat at the table talking and drinking coffee as Edith made breakfast. Shail curled up in an overstuffed chair and quietly listened to their tales, how they had met and grappled with Shail and later became his friends.

“He’s the last golden male and the ruler of the harpies,” Jim explained. “There’s a war raging between the senators and the harpies, and Shail is very important on Dora.”

Shail lifted his head and spoke for the first time. “How do you know of me and my home?”

“I used to be a cop and make it my business to know before I waste my time trying to help someone.”

Shail’s eyes grew big with realization, and he leaped from



the chair. “They are not dead. You took them. You took Kari and my son from the zoo.”

“I did,” said Jim. “Rest easy; they’re safe. Your young zookeeper and I smuggled them out before Green could hurt them. Right now they’re on a ship with Keith, heading for Dora.”

Shail fell to his knees, and his long feathers quivered on the wooden floor. “I have no words.”

“Brother,” Ralph said. “That’s the best news you could’ve given this harpy. He nearly committed suicide thinking they were dead, and for weeks he’s been flying across the southeast, trying to learn what happened to them.”

“Apparently, harpies take commitment very seriously,” Jim said. “Kari was depressed until I told her that Shail was alive.” He told them about the battle between the senators’ mercenary army and the harpies and how the Dorians had come to the harpies’ defense and together they had defeated the senators. “A few days ago, I read that the galactic Supreme Court has agreed to hear the harpies’ case and decide if harpies deserve human rights. The senators had bought the land deeds to the Outback, but to keep the land, they’ve got to win in court or eradicate the harpies.”

Disturbed, Shail stepped to the table, his eyes narrowed. “They killed my harpies for land?” He shook his head. “To quench their greed, I would have given them the land and spared my flock the bloodshed.”

“Too bad those assholes didn’t know,” said Jim, “but the damage is done now.”

Shail paced in front of the table and stopped. “The battle moves from the jungle to court. To lose, my harpies shall always be hunted. Governor Waters said the court and judges are here, on this planet Earth.”

“True,” Ralph said, “The Supreme Court isn’t far from the Washington zoo.”

“I must go to this court so they see who they judge.”

“Not a good idea,” Jim said. “Blackwell legally still owns you, and on paper you’re considered property. If you showed up in court, you’d be caged or killed before the case began. And Ralph and I couldn’t protect you.”

Ralph nodded. “We’d better stick to our plan, Shail. We’ll get you off Earth as soon as possible.”

Shail arched his wings in anger, and he glared at them. “You think me a coward? I rule the harpies and cannot flee when the future of my flock is at risk. I would rather face a cage and death than fail them.”

Jim shrugged, and Ralph bit his lip, lowering his gaze to the table.

“Well said, Shail.” Edith put her hand on her hips and turned to the men. “What’s the matter with you boys?” she growled. “You should know he won’t back down. There must be a way to get him into that courtroom.”

“Witness protection is out,” Jim said. “It applies only to humans.”

“Mrs. Roth might know a way,” Ralph said. “She’s well

connected in D.C. I'm expecting her any day now.”

“All right,” Jim said. “We’ll wait for her call and hope for the best.”

Ralph realized that the fate of the harpies rested in the hands of the young golden male and a cantankerous old woman.

## Chapter Twenty

On Dora, the small space shuttle set down within the domed port. Racheal swept back her long hair and stepped from the craft. Rusty carried her bags and followed her through the large enclosure that bustled with people, arriving and departing on ships. Racheal and Rusty made their way around the port workers who maneuvered cargo with loaders and stepped outside. They gazed at quaint dwellings and multicolored trees that lined the streets of Hampton, the capital city of the planet.

“It’s so lovely, Rusty,” Racheal said as she stared at distant hills that revealed the immense, vivid jungle. “Shail’s home is splendid and beautiful, just like him.”

“Look at those red birds. They have arms,” Rusty exclaimed like a boy in a toy store. A blue-winged lizard flew past, lit on a massive flower, and snatched up an insect with its long forked tongue. “The genetics are incredible with six-limbed critters. No wonder Shail has wings.”

“I now understand why Shail told me to come here. It’s the perfect place to raise our baby.” She sighed and held her pregnant waist. “I just wish he and Kari were with me.”

Rusty took her hand and gently squeezed it. “They’ll come. Don’t give up hope.”

She forced a small smile, grateful for Rusty’s friendship. Without him, the journey would have been unbearable and lonely. “Let’s find Shail’s friend, the governor. Hopefully, he can help

bring them home.”

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Governor Waters leaned back in his office chair with his legs stretched and studied paperwork until his secretary buzzed him. “Governor, there’s a woman and man here who wish to see you. No appointment, but they claim to have information on the golden harpies.”

“Send them in.”

Waters rose as a young woman with sweeping dark hair strolled into his office. Radiating with poise and elegance, she wore a loose-fitting garment that revealed the slight hump of her pregnancy. She was followed by a dumpy red-headed man with a freckle-covered face. After introductions, Waters asked them about the golden harpies.

“I know Shail,” said Racheal. “He’s my husband, and I’m carrying his baby.”

Waters swallowed deeply. “He’s alive, then?”

They explained how they had become acquainted with Shail and his family aboard the passenger ship and the details of the journey, how they and Mrs. Roth had interceded and saved Shail from the cruel care of Senator Blackwell’s handler, Jack Jones, and Candy, a prostitute.

When they finished, Waters stood and paced the room. “So the last you heard, Shail was in the Washington zoo. Excuse me for

a minute.” He leaned over his desk and spoke to his secretary. “Put in an urgent call to my lawyers on Earth, and don’t worry about the time there.” Turning back to Racheal, he said, “I wish I’d known this sooner. I might have been able to release him and Kari from the zoo.”

“I don’t think so,” Racheal said. “My aunt carries a lot of influence in Washington but couldn’t help them. Her attorneys investigated the senator’s ownership papers and concluded that as long as Shail was listed as an animal, he couldn’t be freed.” She looked at her lap and said sadly, “Shail wanted me to keep my pregnancy secret, but on the way here I broke down and told my aunt. She’s returning to Earth to try to help him.”

Waters scratched his head. “Actually, your pregnancy is quite a surprise, given that Shail is a full-blooded harpy.”

“Shail was equally surprised, since no offspring has ever been conceived with a male harpy and a human woman. Ours is the first.”

Waters returned to his seat. “It’s understandable why Shail wanted his baby kept secret. It’s the politics of this planet. You’re carrying a golden fledgling, possibly the last one, if Shail and his family are lost. Your baby would become the next ruler of the harpies and be a threat to the senators’ plans. I suggest you stay in Hampton under my protection.”

“No, our baby will be raised in the jungle with the harpies.”

Waters gazed at the refined, beautiful woman in expensive garb. “The harpies live in the Outback, and that’s a rough place.

Even the small settlements lack many modern conveniences.”

“I can do without.”

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Ted stood in the doorway of the airport building and watched Aron and several male harpies. Although they made no sound, they were communicating in their silent language. Ted heard the buzzing com and stepped inside. “Hi, Governor,” he greeted the image on the screen.

“How are things in Terrance?” Waters asked.

“The fruit harvest is over, and our first shipment leaves soon. Everybody’s excited, even the harpies—though half the time it’s hard to tell, with them. Other than that, things have been quiet.”

“Is Aron around? I need to speak with him.”

Ted yelled to Aron, and soon the harpy appeared on Waters’ screen. “The court?” Aron asked.

“Our case is on the docket, but no date has been set. I’m calling because I have good news about Shail. Yesterday, a woman arrived on Dora and told me that Shail and his family made it safely to Earth.”

Aron tossed back his head and closed his eyes. Harpies rarely displayed emotion, but he was clearly relieved. After a long moment, he shifted his gaze back to Waters. “This is good news.”

“The information is old, but it’s a starting point to getting

him back. He was taken to a zoo, and my lawyers there are checking it out.” Waters hesitated and rubbed his jaw. “Another thing. This woman wants to live with your harpies in the Outback. She’s pregnant and claims Shail is her mate and the father of her baby.”

“She lies,” Aron said with a sneer. “Harpies do not take women mates, and no fledgling can come from that bond.”

“I believe her, Aron.”

Aron ruffled his feathers and said, calmer, “Shail has done what others would not. Fearing the end of his golden bloodline...” He flung his long locks back. “Send her. I shall know if she speaks the truth.”

\*\*\*

The following day, Racheal arrived in Terrance. On vacation from his ship duty, Rusty accompanied her on the last leg of the journey to her new home. They stepped from the governor’s hovercraft and gazed at the small landing strip. In a nearby field sat a row of banged-up freighters and smaller aircraft. The place seemed deserted, with no people or harpies. Waters’ hover departed, and the only remaining sound came from the surrounding jungle, the eerie cries, clicks, hoots, and buzzing of animals, birds, and insects.

“Not much of a welcome,” Rusty said and looked around. “I wonder where everyone is. Waters said this place lacked modern



conveniences. Those hovers over there are antiques. Racheal, are you sure about staying here?"

"Look." Racheal pointed at a brown-winged harpy who flew out of the jungle. He landed several yards away, folded his wings, and gazed at them with suspicious green eyes.

"He's gorgeous, like Shail," Racheal whispered to Rusty as the lanky harpy approached.

"He's bigger than Shail."

With a raised head, the harpy sniffled and finally spoke. "You are the woman who claims to carry Shail's fledgling?"

Racheal nervously nodded.

"May I touch you?"

She nodded again.

The harpy placed his hand on her belly. "You loved him very much."

"Yes," Racheal said, fighting the moisture in her eyes. She did love Shail, and yet, she had deserted him to an unknown fate on Earth.

The harpy removed his hand from her stomach. "I am Aron, Shail's nest brother. I sense the regret, but know your fledgling brings great hope to the flock. The harpies shall honor and protect this golden offspring. Come. A dwelling among your kind waits."

"I prefer to live with the harpies. I think it would please Shail."

"Shail is pleased with you, for he took you into his nest and

made you his mate.”

After meeting Aron, Racheal’s reservations vanished. In the lush, spectacular land among the beautiful and insightful winged mortals, her baby would flourish. The human charades did not exist among the harpies, and she, too, would be happy there.

Aron turned his attention to Rusty and raised his head. “You think me less, short man?” His green eyes glared with hostility, and he tossed his locks and arched his wings. After the time they time spent with Shail, Racheal and Rusty recognized the signs of a provoked harpy. Rusty placed their bags on the ground and cautiously backed away.

“I didn’t mean any disrespect,” Rusty stammered as sweat dampened his forehead.

Racheal stepped between Aron and Rusty. “He’s my friend. Rusty wanted to make sure I arrived safely.”

Aron ignored her and focused on the man. “To answer your question, yes, I am animal, but better than you, human.”

“Yes, you are,” Rusty said. “I was gawking because I’ve never seen a wild harpy in his natural habitat. You’re so alert, intelligent, and agile. If Shail was like you, I was wondering how men had managed to catch him.” He dropped his head. “I’m sorry. I’ve always studied animals.”

“You say study, but your true desire is to tame and handle.” Aron gripped Rusty’s shoulder and lowered his wings. “I detect your longing is harmless, but your thoughts alarm us. Friendship cannot be conquered; it is built on trust. Open your heart, and the

creatures shall accept you.”

The dazzling harpy turned and walked toward a small building. Relieved, Rusty picked up the bags again. “My God, he knew exactly what I was thinking. I knew animals were perceptive, but never realized how much. Explains why the wild ones are leery of people.”

Racheal frowned. “You really think harpies are animals?”

Rusty shrugged. “He said he was animal and has all the characteristics, but with human intelligence. I’m not sure what they are.”

As they strolled to the building, a vehicle drove into the airfield and a lanky man with curly hair jumped out. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” he called and walked to them. “I planned to meet your ship but lost track of time. Aron is probably pissed at me.” He smiled and offered Racheal a bouquet of flowers. “Welcome to the Outback. I’m Ted and oversee the Terrance airport. You must be Racheal and Rusty.”

Racheal took the flowers and shook Ted’s hand. “We were initially concerned, but Aron greeted us.”

“I doubt that was a warm reception,” Ted said sarcastically. “He can be testy with new people, but he grows on you. Normally the whole town and the harpies would be here to welcome Shail’s mate, but the governor suggested we keep you under wraps for your own safety. If those senators learned about you and Shail’s baby...” He lifted an eyebrow. “Just say it wouldn’t be good. Here, let me carry your bags.”

They walked to the building, where Aron confronted Ted.

“You are late.”

“Knew you’d be mad,” Ted said. “I was getting her house ready in town and stocking it with food.”

“She does not wish for a house. Prepare your hover for a trip west. She shall dwell with the female harpies in the mountains.”

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The following morning, Aron stood alongside Ted and his hovercraft. Nearby, Racheal and Rusty hugged a heartfelt goodbye. Ted would take her to the west coast, and male harpies would fly her to the sacred mountain that covered the wreckage of an ancient spacecraft. There, she would live with the female harpies. Although peace had come to the Outback, Aron did not trust it and continued to keep the females and young concealed and out of danger.

In the afternoon, Rusty would catch the shuttle back to Hampton. He had explained he would rejoin the luxury passenger ship on its return flight to the Oden system. Aron watched Rusty and Racheal’s tearful farewell. He felt the heartache in the red-haired man. Unbeknownst to the woman, Rusty had fallen deeply in love with her. Aron glanced at Ted, who was similarly attached to Kari. Both these men loved Shail’s beautiful females, but they respected and admired the golden ruler. Aron’s telepathy discerned

many private emotions that he kept to himself. To expose these frail human yearnings would be dishonorable.

Racheal climbed into Ted's small hover. The four-hour flight over the jungle was breathtaking, like gazing at an endless rainbow. Unlike the east, the tall, colorful fan trees were centuries old and massive enough to hold a house. To the north she could see mountains, shimmering like black diamonds above the forest.

"You're going to love Windy," Ted said as he piloted the hover. "She's Shail's mother, and a real sweetheart. But if you're unhappy there, Windy has a com. Call if you need me to come get you."

"Thanks, Ted, but I feel I'm finally home."

They reached the west coast, and the emerald ocean sparkled in the noon sun. Ted landed the hover on a long stretch of white beach. Within minutes, two male harpies emerged from the woods, both with lean, flawless frames and beautiful child-like faces. Seeing more harpies, Racheal realized they did not have diverse features like humans. They were all gorgeous, comparable to tropical birds. After thanking Ted, she was swept up into the arms of one of the males. He reassuringly nuzzled her cheek, probably sensing she was anxious. He leaped into the sky, and the second male picked up her bag and flew ahead of them. After an hour, the harpies landed on a high mountain cliff, where a lovely blond female who bore a remarkable resemblance to Shail greeted her. No doubt she was Windy, his mother.

“I am so happy you’re here,” Windy said and embraced Racheal. “We have had a long season of sorrow, but you have made every harpy heart sing again.” Her smile surprised Racheal, who had never seen Kari, Shail, or any harpy show emotion with a grin. Windy took her hand. “Come, Racheal. I detect your weariness from travel and your pregnancy. After you eat and rest, you must tell me of my son and his family.”

“I will,” Racheal said, realizing that she was indeed tired. Windy took her through the crevice, and they entered the old spaceship. Hundreds of female harpies and fledglings dropped to their knees and lowered their heads to Racheal. “Why do they bow to me?”

“Shail is the harpy ruler and is treated like royalty. As his mate, you are, so to speak, like a queen and shall always have their respect.”

“I don’t feel I deserve it. I’m not even a harpy.”

Windy turned to her. “You don’t know?”

Racheal stood, baffled. “Know what?”

“My son bonded with you when your egg was ripe. He took you into his nest, and Kari accepted you as a sister. This would not happen to any other woman. My son sensed what I sense. You have the nature and gentle mind of a harpy, and your telepathy is strong, capable of feeling his emotions. Racheal, you have special gifts.”

“I thought I knew Shail and everything about harpies, but since meeting you and Aron, I’m finding I’m still learning.”

She followed Windy down a long corridor to a separate room. In the center burned a small pit fire, and beside it a pretty brown-haired female bowed when they entered.

“This is Lea. She shall tend to your needs,” Windy said and left the room.

“I am so sorry you have to stay in this dark ship,” Lea said, “but we’re still at war with the senators. I didn’t know what you like to eat, so I sent a male to a small town for human food—bread and dried meats.” She shrugged. “And pickles. I was told that pregnant women crave this food.”

“That’s so sweet of you, but I can do without the meat. Being with Shail and Kari turned me into a vegetarian.” Racheal sat down on a moss nest near the fire and picked up one of Dora’s rare fruits. “Tell me, Lea, did you know them very well?”

“Not so much Shail,” Lea answered, “but most common harpies do not know him. He is like a star; brilliant and untouchable, something we admire from afar. But Shail and my brother Aron were raised together and are very close. Before Shail’s rule, fathers raised the fledgling males in the jungle. Other females and I were raised by our mothers among the humans, to hide our true identity.”

Racheal realized that Lea’s upbringing was the reason she talked and acted like a human girlfriend.

“To save our race,” Lea went on, “this separation was done, but Kari and I were great friends. She was like my sister. I miss her terribly.”

“I miss all of them. Kari was also like a sister to me. Maybe you and I can have the same friendship.”

“I would like that. The war has claimed many of my loved ones, including my mate. He died trying to stop Kari’s kidnappers. Our golden mother took me into her nest and nursed me through my sorrow, but now you have come.” Lea timidly looked at Racheal. “I doubt I shall have my own fledgling, but I’d love to help you with yours.”

“Of course,” Racheal said. “I had no idea how bad things have been for the harpies.”

“Yes, but many believe the danger has passed.”

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Aron lay in a tree nest overlooking the river as the dawn crested on the horizon and dark shadows of the trees took shape. He lifted his head from the feathers and noticed the slight ripples of a huge mogel. On the bank, a playful grogin kitten swatted its paw at a fern, unaware of the stalking eel. Aron’s loud warning hiss sent the kitten fleeing into the brush and foiled the eel’s plan for breakfast. Aron stood and surveyed the jungle with his thoughts on his mate and son in the western mountains. How long must he endure the separation? Bloom still slept in the nest. His broken wing had mended, with strong black feathers replacing the damaged ones. “*Wake,*” Aron relayed and nudged him with his foot.



Bloom opened his drowsy eyes and yawned. *"It is too early to rise."*

*"Although handsome, you are lazy, Bloom. No female shall want you."*

*"I am not worried. To have a black-winged fledgling, many females wish to bond for my seed."*

*"Lazy and as arrogant as a golden,"* Aron said. *"Rise. We shall test your wing with a long flight."*

Bloom eagerly jumped to his feet. *"Where do we go?"*

*"To the senator's warehouse,"* Aron said. *"Although other harpies watch it, I wish to see for myself that it is still without men."*

After eating nuts for energy, Aron and Bloom crossed the eastern riverbank and soared low through the tree cover. Flying in daylight over enemy land, they were on full alert. Every so often, Aron would glance at Bloom and his wing action.

*"It is healed, Aron. Do not be concerned."*

*"So you say, but your pride keeps you from complaining."*

After hundreds of miles, they landed on a tree branch that overlooked the abandoned warehouse. In the meadow beyond lay the heap of demolished hovers, victims of the red dragons.

*"Empty still,"* said Bloom. *"The Outback humans believe the fight is over. Maybe they are right."*

*"Maybe, but I have a feeling, an itch under my wing that cannot be scratched. It warns me that the senators are not finished."* He pulled the small com off his neck and hung it over a

tree limb. *“We shall stay several lights so you may rest your throbbing wing.”*

Bloom gazed downward and did not argue.

Around midnight, Aron woke to the low buzz of his com. The unusual late call screamed of an emergency. Anxiously, he leaped to his feet and pushed the answer button.

The governor’s grave face appeared on the screen. “Aron, I want you to move your harpies to Hampton right now. They can stay in the jungle north of the governor’s mansion.”

“What has come?”

Waters held his chin and fretfully shook his head. “Bad news; real bad,” he said. “My staff has been monitoring the off-planet order, and by chance they intercepted a memo that was sent from the space station in Oden. Senator Peterson placed a large order for lethal gas. The gas can’t be seen or smelled, so a large hovercraft could release it at night and no one would know. The senators wouldn’t dare target your males near town, so I think they plan to spray the mountains. It’s a gas that will kill your females and young.”

“When?”

“The shipment is due to arrive in a few weeks, but it’ll probably be brought to Dora on one of the senator’s private ships, bypassing the Hampton port. That’ll make it impossible to find and seize. There’s no fighting this, Aron. You need to move your harpies to the east, where they’ll be safe.” The screen went blank and silent. “Aron? Aron!” the governor yelled into the com.

A young black-haired harpy appeared on the screen. “He has gone.”

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In Florida, Ralph’s com buzzed with a call from Mrs. Roth. She informed him that she had returned to Earth and was at her Washington home.

“I’ll be at your house tomorrow.” Ralph turned off the com and looked at Jim and Shail. “Showtime.”

Shail picked up Edith’s cream scarf from the back of a chair and asked, “May I have this?” Edith nodded. “On Dora, male harpies wear something similar to show we are equal to humans.” He tied the scarf loosely around his waist. “It is time to prove I am more.”

That evening, Ralph and his mother loaded up in Jim’s rented hover for the trip to Washington, D.C. Shail chose to fly on his own journey. “It may be my last chance to use my wings,” he said before bounding into the darkness.

Jim, Ralph, and Edith traveled all night, and though they didn’t see Shail, they knew he was close by. At dawn they arrived at the Reagan National Airport, just outside Washington’s dome. Shail curled up on the back seat of Jim’s vehicle and was covered with a blanket. They smuggled the harpy into the city and headed straight for Mrs. Roth’s home.

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“Come in, Ralph,” Mrs. Roth said and took Edith’s hand. “Mrs. Graham, we’ve never met, but I was sorry to hear of your loss.” She gazed up at the tall, middle-aged white man who stood behind Edith.

“This is Jim Comm,” Ralph explained. “He’s a retired detective.”

Mrs. Roth gave Ralph a puzzled look. Before she shut the door, Shail fluttered down from the roof and landed in the doorway. “You again,” she said. “Ralph, I imagine he’s the urgent business you wished to discuss.”

“Shail needs your help, Mrs. Roth,” Ralph said.

“No surprise, this feathered creature always seems to need my help.”

“Lady, if you don’t want to help him, that’s fine,” Jim snipped. “Let’s go, Shail. I’ll get you back to Dora.”

Mrs. Roth stepped in front of the doorway. “You and the harpy make a good pair, an impatient man to match his moody winged friend. That’s refreshing. Mr. Comm, you slipped the female who resembles a woman and her baby out of the zoo when no one was looking. This male with his large wings will be slightly more difficult, especially since the authorities and ports are searching for the stolen harpy. Despite your macho commitment, you don’t have the connections to succeed. Shail will be recaptured before he makes the space station, so take a seat.” Her eyes shifted

to Ralph's questioning frown. "You're wondering how I know? I got an interesting com call from that young zookeeper, Keith, while on another ship. He explained a lot, including Mr. Comm's involvement."

Jim, Ralph, and Edith sat down in her lavish living room as Shail stood poised with his hands on his hips and his ever-present defiant gaze on his face.

Mrs. Roth strolled around him as he stood like a majestic statue. His dark tan covered the long, muscled body, highlighting the light blond hair, yellow wings, and cream scarf. He truly was an impressive creature. "The Everglades suits him. He's never looked so handsome." She stopped before him and stared up into his piercing, big eyes. "But I believe Shail owes me an explanation."

"I owe you nothing," Shail said with an insolent tone. "You helped an abused creature, and it gave you purpose and pleasure. The reasons I hid my voice and intelligence are my own. You are angry I deceived you, angry about my bonding with Racheal and our coming fledgling. You think I should be sorry. I am not."

"I think I liked you better when you kept your mouth shut." With a head-shaking chuckle, she looked at the harpy standing as bold as brass. His words were as fierce as his actions, and he could not be browbeaten. He was also shrewd, knowing she lacked respect for those who groveled. She sat down in an overstuffed chair. "I had hoped for an apology, but that's not you, is it? Come sit by me."

Shail walked to her chair and sat down on the rug beside it. She stroked his glossy hair. “You’re an insolent little demon, and I’ve missed you.” She turned to Ralph, “Would you be a dear and fix us some coffee? I assured Racheal that I’d get her husband home, and plotting might take some time.”

Jim explained to Mrs. Roth all he had learned: about the harpies, the senators, the war, and the pending case before the Galactic Supreme Court. “Shail wants to testify and prove his harpies deserve equal rights, but it’s tricky. Once he enters that courtroom, he’ll be seized and returned to the zoo. Green has claimed he’s deadly and needs to be put down. Senator Blackwell will probably agree, given all his harpy troubles on Dora.”

Mrs. Roth leaned back in her chair. “I might be able to pull some strings and avoid that.” She punched in some numbers on her table com. Soon, a woman appeared on the screen. “Hello, Paula. I was wondering if Jeb could spare a few minutes for me this afternoon.”

“Welcome back, Mrs. Roth,” the woman said. “He’s rather busy today, but I could schedule a visit before dinner tonight. Say at six?”

“That’s fine. I’m bringing a friend named Shail.”

Jim glanced at Ralph. “Is she talking to who I think she’s talking to?”

“Yeah, the White House.”

The day passed as the group waited for six o’clock. Ralph, Jim, and Mrs. Roth tried to coach Shail and expressed the

importance of the galactic president, but he did not seem impressed. "I understand," Shail said. "He rules the humans like I rule the harpies."

"Yes, but there are a lot more humans," Ralph said.

Shail tilted his head. "Does the number one's rules, make him a better ruler?"

Mrs. Roth chuckled. "He's got you there, Ralph. This meeting will be interesting." She turned to Shail. "He's not better than you, and I should know."

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Mrs. Roth and Shail climbed into the back of her spacious vehicle, and Ralph drove, with Jim in the front passenger seat. At the appointed time, the vehicle pulled up at the gate of a white brick mansion. Shail stared at the enormous building and the many dark-suited gatekeepers. Ralph gave Mrs. Roth's name, and they permitted her vehicle to proceed. As she stepped from the transport, followed by the harpy, the agents looked skeptically at the scantily dressed winged creature that trailed her to a large waiting room. "I'll explain your situation," she said. "Have any thoughts on what you're going to say to the president?"

"No," Shail answered as he looked at the old portraits. Mrs. Roth wondered how the meeting would go. The harpy did not seem to realize the enormity of the meeting, or he didn't care.

Finally, the president came into the room, followed by

several agents. The vice president and his two aides also came in, having learned about the nearly nude, barefoot creature with large, yellow wings. “What have you brought me, Maggie?” the president asked.

“This is Shail,” Mrs. Roth said. “He’s called a harpy and could use your help.” She turned to Shail. “Say hello to the president.” The harpy did not speak but politely shook hands with the distinguished, middle-aged leader and vice president.

“A harpy? I thought they were female beasts out of Greek mythology,” the president said with a chuckle. With a wave of his hand, he motioned her to have a seat. “Okay, what’s his story?”

As Mrs. Roth explained Shail’s dilemma and plight, the harpy ignored her and the men. He roamed about the room inspecting the statuary and other items. He stopped at the window and stared at the fountain and lawn, seemingly oblivious to the discussion.

When she finished, she asked, “Now, Jeb, does he really look like an animal?”

The president looked over his shoulder at Shail. “Not any animal that I’ve ever seen. He’s very striking, looks like a work of art.” He called to the harpy. “Are you an animal, Shail?”

“Yes,” Shail said. “Though I carry human blood, my nature is more like an animal’s, since harpies lack the cruelty in humans.”

“You think we’re cruel?”

“Animals kill to survive, for food, and the right to breed. Humans kill for anger, fun and greed. Is this not cruel?”



The president seemed puzzled, trying to size up the harpy. He turned back to Mrs. Roth. "Maggie, he obviously has some intelligence, but he seems ignorant of his situation. I recommend that he not testify. He freely admits that he's an animal, which would utterly prejudice his case. And I can't help him. I have no influence over the Supreme Court."

Shail wandered up to the president. "You think I am like a child. Now I question your wisdom."

"I forgot to mention," Mrs. Roth said, "his instincts suggest he's telepathic."

The president stood and was eye level with the harpy. "You do realize, Shail, that I am the leader of billions of people. I don't think my wisdom is in question."

"It should be. A leader who dwells among enemies is not wise."

"Shail," Mrs. Roth said with disapproval as two agents left the doors and moved swiftly to protect the president from the possible threat.

The president waved them back and asked, "You're my enemy?"

"Not I. Whether you live or die is not my concern." He nodded toward the silver-haired vice president and his two aides at the door. "These three plot your death. In two lights, your hover shall fall from the sky and be lost to the ocean." He glanced at the vice president. "When I touched his hand, I saw the longing in his mind. He wishes to rule."

“Outrageous!” The vice president jumped up. “Take this blasphemous creature out of here and lock it up,” he ordered the security agents.

As two men seized Shail’s arms, he leaned toward the vice president. “You show anger to hide your fear and lies, but you cannot hide your feelings from a harpy.”

“Let him go,” the president said, and the agents released the harpy.

An agent went to the president. “Mr. President, we’ll have Hovercraft One inspected immediately.”

The vice president asked nervously, “Jeb, you’re not taking this creature seriously?”

“You’re sweating, Paul,” said the president. “If you’re innocent, why are you worried?” He walked up to the harpy and took him aside. “What else do you know, Shail?”

“Your thoughts?” Shail asked quietly. “You dislike Mrs. Roth but need her money. You hoped to end our meeting soon, since it keeps you from a pretty yellow-haired woman, and she is not your mate. You also fear—”

“That’s enough.” The president took a deep breath. “Amazing; you really can read minds. Can all harpies do this?”

“It is how we relate to each other. Before learning your words, I sensed only human feelings. Now I understand the talk in their minds.”

An agent rushed into the room. “Mr. President, I just got a call from the port. An explosive device was discovered on your

private hovercraft. It was set to go off one hour after the engines fired, when you would be over the Atlantic.”

The president beckoned to his Vice President. “You planned to kill me?”

“The harpy planted the bomb in the hover blades,” retorted the frazzled vice president.

“Preposterous!” Mrs. Roth chimed in. “Shail has been in Florida up until this morning, and since then he’s been with me every second.”

“If the harpy was guilty, why would he confess?” the president asked the vice president. “Only my staff and you knew I planned to take that trip in two days. Furthermore, the harpy never mentioned the blades.” He turned to the agent. “Where were the explosives found?”

The agent glared at the vice president, “In the blades, Mr. President.”

The president pointed at the vice president and his aides. “Get them out of my sight. I want a full investigation.” Several agents escorted the three men from the room.

Shail wandered to the window again and leaned against the sill, placid and unmoved by the drama that had unfolded.

Mrs. Roth rose from the comfortable couch and smugly asked, “Still reluctant to defend the harpy, Jeb?”

“I owe him my life,” he murmured, with his gaze on Shail. “He’ll be placed under government protection. I’ll call in some favors and have the harpy case moved up on the docket. Notify

Governor Waters' lawyers that I intend to testify for him." He walked over to the harpy. "I want to thank you, Shail. You are wise, and I'm going to help you prove it."

"You are a good man who seeks peace and fairness. To not warn you of the danger would be dishonorable."

"You're right about another thing. Humans are cruel to have allowed the hunting of harpies. You're an incredible being."

Mrs. Roth boldly strolled out of the White House, shadowed by Shail. Ralph and Jim eagerly waited at her vehicle.

"How did it go?" Jim asked Mrs. Roth.

"He was marvelous."

## Chapter Twenty-One

Aron flew rapidly through the dark eastern skies, spurred by uncontrollable rage. He had left Bloom behind at the warehouse, and his new destination was Hampton, home of the senators. The concerned words of the governor played over and over in his head. “The gas will kill your females and young.” All along, he was plagued with a feeling that the senators planned further harm. The feeling was now fact. These bloodthirsty men still intended to wipe out his flock. He had promised no harpy would attack east of the river, but he cast the promise, along with his honor, into the wind. He was determined to kill the nest of snakes and end the threat for good.

At daybreak, he briefly paused at a stream to drink and dip his sweaty frame into the cool water. He took flight again, but rather than travel high in the open sky, he flew low in the tree cover. By law, harpies were animals and pricey game trophies. Any moron with a weapon could shoot him down. He had to be cautious in the east. In the afternoon, when the jungle was the hottest, he stopped and napped a few hours. Before going on, he gulped down more nuts for energy. On the third evening, darkness descended on Hampton, and so did Aron. He glided over the city’s posh neighborhoods toward Senator Blackwell’s home. After Shail’s disappearance, he and his harpies had spied on the residence of the senators, hoping to spot the golden family. He knew each home well. The governor had told him that Senators

Blackwell and Peterson were the ringleaders of the war, so they became his first target.

Aron landed on a high branch overlooking Blackwell's large, gated dwelling and watched two security guards posted out front. The iron fence and guards protected the homeowner from trespassers, criminals, and destructive reptiles, but they could not prevent the attack of a vengeful harpy who could sweep down undetected from the night sky.

Aron stared across the dark lawn at the second-floor window, where the senator slept. He took a deep breath to calm his fuming nerves and considered his next move. With the cool, dry weather, only a flimsy screen kept out insects and small, airborne animals. Flying from the tree, he fluttered and lit on the windowsill. He quietly pushed in the screen and slipped into the shadowy bedroom. The stubby, balding senator slept on a wide bed with a middle-aged woman.

Aron took a step closer to the man but stopped when he smelled a familiar fragrance. He turned from the bed and crept across the room to locate the source. A full season had passed since he had inhaled the yellow-feathered scent. On a fireplace mantle was Shail's picture, surrounded by his feathers and a clump of blond hair.

When Aron approached, a motion sensor brought the picture to life. He watched in horror as Shail dangled from a tree branch by his bloody wrists. The lathered nude body heaved for breath, and the pain-filled eyes closed. The golden harpy was

exhausted after an apparent long struggle to be free. In defeat, Shail tossed his head back, allowing the manhandling and butchery. A tall hunter punched his bladder, forcing him to urinate. Senator Blackwell then stepped into the picture. Grinning, he placed his hand on Shail's wet ribs while his other hand exposed Shail's sex organs from under the blond pubic hair.

Aron shuddered and wiped the tears from his eyes. He stepped away from the fireplace, bringing stillness to the photo. He glared at the sleeping man and gave a low, deadly hiss. "For you, my brother." He moved to Senator Blackwell's bedside. Placing one hand over the man's mouth, he hopped on his chest while seizing the thick human throat. The senator's eyes opened wide. Seeing that he was in a harpy's clutches, he attempted a muddled scream. "Wake your female," Aron whispered, "and she dies with you." Aron nodded, detecting Blackwell's thoughts. "It is good you think of Shail and his promise to destroy you. I now fulfill his vow." He throttled the thrashing, gasping man, and after a few minutes Blackwell was still.

Aron sniffled at the dead senator and glanced at the woman. Surprisingly, she had slept through the slaying. He returned to the mantle and took Shail's feathers and hair. He placed a lone yellow feather on the senator's chest to signify the harpy's revenge. He then slipped out as silently as he had come.

He flew to another large dwelling and landed in a tree. Through a window, he saw that Senator Peterson was awake and working in his study. A high wall surrounded the home, but there

were no security guards in sight. Aron floated down to the front door and knocked in the human manner. Dogs barked inside.

When Senator Peterson opened the door, he saw Aron and attempted to shut the door again. Using his flapping wings to increase his strength, Aron shoved the man backward and burst into the foyer. In a panic, Peterson commanded his two German shepherds, “Get him.”

The dogs growled and barked, but Aron’s hisses and large, arched wings intimidated them. When he fluttered and leaped toward them, the guard dogs yipped and fled out the open front door. Aron turned to Peterson.

“What do you want?” Peterson said, backing away. “I’ll give you anything.”

“What I want you cannot give, unless you can make dead harpies fly again.”

“You’re him! You’re the brown harpy ruler.”

“A rule forced upon me without our golden male,” Aron snarled. “Shail was forgiving. I am not. Your mistake to take him and replace him with me shall cost you your life.”

“Wait! I didn’t take Shail. Blackwell did. I promise I won’t harm any more harpies.”

“Your promise is as solid as a deadly *gas*, and Blackwell grows cold as we speak.” In a blink, Aron flew at Peterson and sent him crashing into a small table. Before the man could recover, Aron was at his back and grabbed the man’s head and chin. With a swift, powerful twist, he snapped his neck bones. He released his



hold, and the corpse collapsed on the floor.

Aron pulled a second yellow feather from his scarf and placed it on the man's body. He stepped outside, and the dogs sheepishly approached. He patted their heads and gazed up at the stars. "Enough," he said. Akin to an angel of death, he spread his long, dark wings and sailed out into black sky.

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Aron slowly flew west toward home. He had left the two yellow feathers on the dead men as omens for the remaining senators. If they failed to heed the warning, he would return and kill all of them.

After several days, he reached the warehouse and found Bloom waiting. In his hand was the small com. "*Waters has called many times. He is upset and longs to speak to you.*" Bloom said. "*What have you done?*"

*"I did what Shail should have done long ago when he learned the senators were at the root of harpy hunting. Like a storm, I have exposed the roots and toppled the tree."* He took the com from Bloom and pressed the keys to Waters' private line.

The solemn governor appeared on the screen. "Did you do it, Aron? Did you kill Senator Blackwell and Peterson?"

"Why do you ask, when you do not want to know the answer?"

"Will there be others?"

“Tell those senators that if one more harpy dies, they shall suffer the same fate. We shall be watching them from every tree, roof, and dark sky in their city.”

“You promised me that you would not harm anyone east of the river.”

Aron glared, and his voice took on a mocking tone. “Your courts say I am an animal, not bound by promises and your law.”

Waters ran his hand through his black hair. The dark circles under his eyes conveyed his fatigue. “You’re right about our laws. I can’t charge an animal with murder. But some people here are paranoid with this war moving from the Outback to their back yards. I’d like to reassure them that the killing is over. If more senators die, I’ll be forced to come after you.”

“Come if you wish, Waters.”

“I guess that’s an empty threat. I’ll tell the senators that if they want to stay healthy, they’d better leave the harpies alone.”

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With the murder of senators Blackwell and Peterson, the remaining senators lived in fear. They hid behind iron-barred windows in their barricaded homes and stared out at the forbidding jungle. Every tree and shadow held a potential threat of a lethal harpy. Aron was guilty of slaying two senators, but for once the law was on the side of the harpies. An animal could not be charged with a crime. Even if Governor Waters wanted to arrest Aron, he

doubted he could. The harpy was too resourceful and had outmaneuvered hunters all his life. The governor learned the location of the deadly gas and sent a ship to intercept it, ending that hazard. For the first time in a year, Aron felt confident enough to let the female harpies leave the sacred mountain.

The only lingering threat was the pending court case. If the harpies lost it, they would remain targeted animals. Aron knew that hunters would not dare come to the Outback during his lifetime, but he worried about his son and the future of his race. These far-away judges held the harpies' destiny.

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Shail stayed at Mrs. Roth's luxurious home in D.C. Although pampered by the old woman and her staff, he would have preferred the freedom of the everglades. At night he slipped out to soar beneath the dome, usually ending up at Jim or Ralph's apartment. These men kept a welcome open window, and Shail found comfort at the foot of their beds. He had tangled with both men and gained their admiration, but Shail was no longer the fierce golden ruler from Dora. Too many hardships, too many times of mustering his tenacity to fight another battle had left him drained. He felt like a shadow of who he had once been and lost in this alien land.

One morning, Shail returned to Mrs. Roth's house and as normal entered from the kitchen terrace. At the early hour, he was

a little astonished to find Mrs. Roth there.

“I figured you’d fly in soon,” she said. “So how’s your policeman friend?”

“Jim is well,” Shail answered and popped a few grapes into his mouth. “Why do you wake with the rising sun?”

“I’m expecting a call soon.”

Shail’s eyes lit up. “You think of my harpy family.”

“Shail, you’re no fun.” She scoffed. “Surprising a harpy is nearly impossible.” She sat down on a stool beside him. “I’ve noticed you’ve been a little low and thought seeing and speaking to Kari would cheer you up.”

“You have done much for me. I should have thanked you.”

“Humility doesn’t suit you, or me. I should be grateful that you turned my Racheal into a confident and happy woman.” The communicator buzzed, and she answered it. “It’s for you.”

Shail bounded to the screen and stared at Kari from an inconceivable distance. Elated, neither could muster a sound at first.

Kari finally said, “I’m so glad to see you. I’ve been so worried.”

“Do not worry. I stay with Mrs. Roth, but soon I go to court and hope to prove my harpies are worthy. Whether I succeed or fail, I shall leave for home.”

“I love and miss you so much.”

“I too,” said Shail.

“These com calls from ships are short, but I want to show

you something before we're disconnected." She held up her arms and revealed a newborn fledgling. "Your second son, Shail, but I haven't named him. I thought we could do that together."

"He is beautiful, like Will."

Will popped his little head in front of the screen, blocking Kari's image. "Look, Will. It's your dad," said Kari's voice.

"Dad, I fly this far." Will extended his little arms and wings to show distance.

"You speak the human words."

"Keith teaches me."

"Will, you are my oldest," Shail said sternly. "While I am gone, you must protect your mother and new brother."

"Yes, Father, I promise," Will said, nodding.

Kari came back on the screen, and Shail sighed. "I should be there, teaching him to talk and fly."

"You will teach him much more, Shail. From you he will learn to be a noble, brave, and fair golden ruler." The com buzzed, signaling the end of the transmission.

Shail stared at the empty screen that matched the emptiness he felt. Mrs. Roth patted his shoulder. "You'll be with them soon." She grinned. "Now be happy. You have a new son, and that's wonderful news. If the lawyers weren't coming this morning, I'd give you some sherry and we'd celebrate, but even sober, you'll probably be a handful for them."

Jim left his apartment and arrived at Mrs. Roth's home before Ralph and Governor Waters' four lawyers. As a cop, Jim had seen his share of the courtroom and hoped to aid Shail in his defense. He thought about the harpy and foresaw trouble. At times, Shail had the condescending attitude of a little prince who refused to take orders from anyone. At other times, Shail's wild nature took over and he would hiss rather than speak or he became elusive and quiet. He was so complicated and mysterious that no one could predict his behavior in court. Jim worried the harpy would baffle the judges and the case would be lost.

Jim sat in the living room and expressed his concerns to Mrs. Roth. Shail added nothing to their conversation. He was curled up on a couch with his face tucked under a wing, acting more like a pet than an intelligent being. With his moody behavior today, he would be a problem for the lawyers.

Ralph arrived at the same time as the four attorneys. Mrs. Roth introduced Shail to his defense team, but Shail only lifted his head and gave them a slight nod before tucking his head back into his feathers. Everyone took up chairs as the lead lawyer talked about the case. "We learned this morning that the harpies' case has been moved up, due to the president's travel schedule and his intent to testify," he said. "We go to court in two days, so we don't have much time to prepare him."

Another lawyer eyeing the ball of yellow feathers asked, "He can speak, can't he?"

“Of course Shail can speak,” Mrs. Roth snipped. “Do you know anything about your client? Perhaps that’s why you lost in appellate court.”

“Unfortunately, we’ve never met a harpy,” commented the lead lawyer. “We’ve based the case on scientific facts, Dr. Dave Watkins’ testimony that harpies are not animals, and information from Governor Waters, but with the president as a new witness to a harpies’ intelligence, we’ll have a stronger case.”

Jim sat back and listened to the discussion. With Mrs. Roth’s encouragement, Shail pulled his face from the feathers and gazed at them, but he remained quiet. When questioned, he was vague and barely nodded. As Jim feared, Shail’s behavior caused frustration and nervousness in the lawyers. “Shail, you must answer these men’s questions,” Jim voiced in irritation.

“They speak plenty for me,” Shail responded, “and these are not the men who judge me.”

The lawyers left more worried than when they had arrived, saying they had no idea what Shail would do in court. “Our only consolation is the harpy, despite his wings, looked human and can talk.”

After the four attorneys left, Jim addressed Shail, shaking his head. “For Christ’s sake, Shail, why didn’t you talk to those men?”

“You are upset with me.”

“Upset? Hell, I’m angry you pulled that silent act,” Jim growled. “Don’t you understand this is important, and those

lawyers were here to help you?”

“I understand, but better to close my eyes than to challenge them. What they say and wish me to say is not true.”

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Two days later, the case began. In the courtroom, Jim and Ralph sat in the audience. Shail and Mrs. Roth were seated behind Waters’ attorneys. Across the aisle was the senators’ team of lawyers. Five judges filed in and took their place on the bench, overlooking all. The chief justice in the center was the first to speak. “Counselors, we’ve reviewed your briefs and the transcripts from the appellate court,” he said. “Due to relevant circumstances, such as the Dora civil war and the assassination attempt of the president, we will allow the testimony of the new witnesses omitted during the appellate hearing. We’ll start with opening statements from both sides.”

The senators’ lawyers presented their case, and the first in a series of subjects was the harpies’ DNA. “A chimpanzee’s DNA is ninety-eight percent the same as a human, yet they are classified as animals. The harpies have only sixty percent,” a lawyer stated. “Harpies do not use tools, whereas even chimpanzees use a stick to dig out termites. These Dora creatures live in tree branches and eat fruit. It’s well documented that humans separated from the apes when they stood upright and began to consume protein-rich meat, which led to a problem-solving intelligence. Harpies have no



language except to mimic human speech like a trained parrot; left on their own, they are mute. A meat diet, tool use, and language are basic fundamentals that distinguish civilized mortals from animals. The harpies fail on all accounts. Despite their human features, they at best are equivalent to an ape.”

Shail sat with his legs tucked under him on the long wooden bench, bored with the morning proceedings. Presently he lay down, pulling up his limbs and covering himself with his wings.

The senators’ attorney jumped at the opportunity. “Look at it, Your Honors,” he said. “This is supposedly their gifted ruler, yet it behaves like a sleeping dog with no knowledge of these proceedings.”

Waters’ counsel objected, but the damage was done. The judges saw the harpy’s naive animal behavior.

The senators’ lawyer closed by discussing the beetle swarms on Dora. “True, the harpies destroyed the swarms and saved the planet’s human population, but that’s the nature of those creatures. The harpies’ cousins, the loca eagles, are known for killing and eating beetles, which kept the swarms under control. The Dora people, out of gratitude, voted to give the harpies human rights and land, but gratitude shouldn’t play a part in your decision. The harpies are a hybrid animal and should remain so. They do not merit being reclassified as a civilized mortal with human status.”

Now Waters’ lawyers presented their side of the case. The lead lawyer played the old disc that Kari had discovered in the

sacred mountain. The origin and ancestry of the harpies was revealed when the disc related how stranded spacemen mated with loca eagles. “Harpies carry sixty percent of our DNA and are our brothers,” he began, “but DNA is no measure for intelligence.”

The judges were handed a copy of the treaty between harpies and humans, bearing Governor Waters’ signature. “These harpies weren’t merely killing beetles. The treaty proves that the harpy ruler had made a conscious and calculated decision to save the humans so the hunting would end and his harpies would gain equal rights.” The lawyer maintained that the harpies were very human in intelligence, nature, and appearance. Concluding his statement, he called his first witness.

Shail sat up and watched the president take the podium. The president related how the harpy’s telepathy had uncovered the hidden plot of his assassination. He ended his testimony by asserting that Shail was extremely smart and equal to any man.

A senator’s lawyer stepped forward to question him. “So, Mr. President, because of the harpy’s instincts, it was able to detect your vice president’s intentions?”

“That is correct.”

“The harpy is as gifted as any bomb-sniffing or cancer-detecting dog,” the lawyer said.

“Shail is no dog,” the president asserted.

“But you said he used his instincts, animal instincts. I have no further questions of this witness.”

Next, Shail was called as a witness. He stood and gazed

down at his lawyers seated at the table. “I sense your fear that I shall—” He lifted an eyebrow, questioning the words. “*Clam up?* Lose the worry; I shall speak.”

Shail stepped to the podium in full sight of the spectators and press, causing mumbling and a few gasps of awe. The judges tilted their heads and whispered to one another. Ralph nudged Jim and said, “He’s definitely swoonworthy. Even the judges are impressed.”

“Yeah, he’s a regal, good-looking sucker,” Jim whispered. “He’d just better impress them with his intellect.”

At the podium, Shail ruffled his luxurious feathers and flung locks out of his expressionless face. The chief justice banged his gavel, bringing silence to the courtroom.

Waters’ lawyer approached with an anxious smile. “Can you say your name?” he asked in a sweet, high-pitched voice, as if talking to a small juvenile.

“Shail.”

“Good, good. Now Shail, is there anything you wish to tell the judges?”

Having known plenty of trial lawyers, Jim had heard that the first rule of examination was not to ask your witness a question unless you know his answer, but the stymied lawyer was steering blind with the enigmatic harpy.

Shail pointed at the opposing counsel. “I agree with those men.”

Waters’ lawyer looked like he would faint. Shail had

concluded with the senators' lawyers, who claimed he was an animal, and his statement had demolished their case. "I need a recess, Your Honor."

Even the chief justice looked flabbergasted. "Didn't you prepare him? Doesn't he understand the proceedings?"

The attorney explained that his witness had been uncooperative.

The opposing lawyer spoke up. "I move for a dismissal, Your Honor, on grounds that their client freely admits he's an animal."

"He doesn't understand," Waters' lawyer protested.

Shail gazed at the chaotic courtroom of arguing men. "I do understand," he said softly.

The chief justice ordered silence and waved the lawyers aside. "What do you understand, Shail?"

"I understand you judges hold the fate of my harpies and must decide if we are worthy of human rights."

"That's correct, Shail," the chief justice said and turned to the attorneys gathered before his bench. "He seems sound. Take your seats." When they had done so, he addressed Shail. "Why would you state that you agree with the opposing counsel?"

"Their words hold more truths of a harpy. Honor and truth are important to the harpies. We are different from humans, but does different make us less?"

"That's what we're here to decide." The chief justice smiled. "But Shail, if you're part-human, as I am given to

understand, why would you agree that you're an animal?"

"For many reasons."

"Your Honor," Waters' lawyer interrupted, "do we need to go on with these questions? They're killing our case."

"You opened the discussion," the chief justice stated. "Go ahead, Shail."

Shail took a deep breath and nodded toward the senators' lawyer. "That man said harpies live in trees like animals. I ask which is better, the animal that lives in a tree, or the human who kills the tree and destroys the jungle for his home? It was said we have no talking language. This is true. We sense each other's thoughts and have no need of your pitiful sounds."

"Pitiful?" the judge questioned.

"Human talk cannot be compared with my instincts and silent way. Your ruler agrees, since it saved his life."

"Yes, the president is very taken with you," said the chief justice. "Continue, Shail."

"My animal eyes see farther than a human. I can hear and smell things that humans cannot. Our bird wings give us flight that is faster than your hovercrafts. These animal traits make me a harpy, yet my lawyers said I must deny them. I cannot."

"But you also seem very human."

"My body looks human," Shail said, "and I have learned your words so I can mix with your kind, but I am unlike you. It is our nature that truly separates us. Some animals kill for food, for mates, or in defense of their offspring, but no animal kills for

pleasure or greed. Humans have a long history of wars where you kill your own brothers. I have never understood this behavior, though my flock and I have suffered from it. Since coming to our jungle, humans have hunted, tortured, and slain my harpies. They have violated our females, slaughtered our fledglings, and hung my males from the trees to die a slow death for their trophy wings. As a captive, I have been caged, starved, and beaten. I have been shot by your weapons, know the sting of a shock collar, and men have tied me down and used me like a female. Yet you wonder why I reject my human blood? Harpies are gentle and do not have the nature of humans I have encountered.”

“That’s truly terrible. Is there anything else you wish to add?”

“Governor Waters told me you are fair men, and the lawyers call you ‘Your Honor,’ so you must be honorable. I ask that you not judge me by my blood, my talk, where I live or what I eat, but judge me on what good men value. Judge me for my honor. Despite the many cruelties to my flock and me, I kept my promise and saved your humans from the beetle swarms. I speak the truth now, though I risk failure in this court. Are we animals? Yes, but I believe we are more than equal to your kind.”

The chief justice leaned back in his chair and stared for a long moment at the harpy. “You give a very compelling argument.” He looked to the senators’ lawyers. “Are there any questions from opposing counsel before this witness is excused?”

The lead trial lawyer for the senators stood. “Yes, Your

Honor,” he said and approached Shail. “Let me get this straight. You admit that you’re an animal, but you have honor. Is that right?”

Shail tilted his head in puzzlement. “You ask me questions I have already answered. Did you not understand my words when I understood yours? Perhaps it is you who lacks intelligence.”

The courtroom broke out with chuckles.

“Answer his question, Shail,” said the chief justice.

“Yes. I am an animal with honor.” Shail extended his hand to the lawyer. “Touch my hand, and we shall learn which of us deserves the most respect.”

The lawyer chuckled. “Ridiculous.”

The chief justice massaged his chin. “Interesting experiment; shake hands with the harpy.” The lawyer did and quickly crammed his hand in his pocket. “Well, Shail?”

“This man compared me with a dog, but I have touched dogs and learned they are loyal and hold more honor than him. He thinks of an old woman who came to him last light and asked about her dead mate’s wealth. Instead of helping her, he lied and kept her money.” He pointed at the attorney’s partners. “He has also been false and cheated these men who trusted him. The proof rests in a London account.” Shail turned his penetrating stare on the lawyer. “Shall I shame you more?”

“No!” The wide-eyed lawyer backed away from Shail, clearly rattled. “He’s lying,” he sputtered. “This harpy is lying. No more questions. I’m done with this witness.” He glanced at his

incensed partners, and instead of returning to their table, he hustled from the courtroom.

“Thank you, Shail. You’re excused,” the chief justice said. “Due to the bloodshed on Dora and the urgency of this case, we shall render our verdict tomorrow, but I’d like to say a few words to counsel on both sides. You have based the case on deciding whether these chimeras or hybrids called harpies are human or animal. I think Shail eloquently answered that question. This is a case of comparing apples to oranges. They can’t be compared. The issue before us should have been whether this intelligent and unique species deserves equality. This is a preeminent case that will affect future rulings, like the abortion issue that raised the question of when a human fetus gains rights. Some intelligent animals have earned the right to live in peace, but this case asks when does a superior animal deserve the exact same rights as a human? As the harpy put it, he is more than equal to us and shouldn’t be treated as less. We’re adjourned, counselors.”

Mrs. Roth patted Shail’s arm. “You did real good.”

One of Waters’ lawyers turned and grinned at them. “I think so, too. The chief justice really liked him. But it’s still difficult to know how they’ll rule as a body.”

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Shail paced back and forth in Mrs. Roth’s home, with no interest in sleep or food. The future of his flock rested in the hands



of the five judges. Mrs. Roth tried to calm him, but he wearily said, “Perhaps I should have lied.”

For the first time in his life, Shail questioned the telling of truth. Sensing the judges’ minds, he could have won the case if he had claimed to be a man born with the defect of wings. The lawyer was correct when he said that the judges liked him, and they were willing to grant his flock protective human rights, but only if he disguised his true nature. Now Shail was unsure of their decision, since the judges were uncertain. They didn’t seem to know what to do with the strange winged race.

Shail flung open a window and leaped into the darkness. He landed lightly on a windowsill of Ralph’s apartment and climbed inside. Ralph woke when Shail crept onto the bed and rested beside the man.

“Shail?” said Ralph’s drowsy voice. “I’m glad to see you.”

“I need your closeness this night.”

Ralph gathered Shail’s feathers into his arms and stroked the harpy’s head. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

Nestled against Ralph’s massive body, Shail closed his eyes and eventually slept.

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The following morning, Shail and Mrs. Roth returned to the courtroom. Ralph, Edith, and Jim sat in the back to watch. One of Waters’ lawyers glanced across the aisle at the empty table of the

opposing counsel. “Wonder where they are,” he commented. “The judges are due any minute.”

A side door opened, and the judges filed in, taking their places on the bench. Their faces conveyed annoyance at the vacant table. Suddenly, the back courtroom door flew open and a single lawyer rushed in. “I apologize, Your Honors, for being late,” he said. “May I approach?” The chief justice nodded, and the lawyer walked to the bench, along with Waters’ attorneys.

Shail leaned toward Mrs. Roth and whispered, “It is over.”

“Not yet, Shail,” she said. “The judges have to render their verdict.”

“Their answer is known to me.”

“Your Honors,” the lawyer said. “The senators of Dora wish to withdraw from this case. I would like to submit a statement on their behalf.”

“Any objections?” the chief justice asked Waters’ group.

“No, Your Honor,” answered the lead lawyer.

“Speaking as the concerned body of the Dora senators,” the lawyer read, “we withdraw from these proceedings. Furthermore, we recommend to the Galactic Supreme Court that the harpies be reclassified as mortals with equal human rights.”

“Any explanation for this change of heart?” the chief justice asked.

“No, Your Honors.”

“Step back,” said the chief justice. “We shall take the senators’ statement under consideration, but it will not affect our

ruling. As I stated yesterday, this is a very complex case. It comes down to two basic questions: what separates humans from animals? And which category fits the harpies? The attorneys have based their arguments on scientific evidence. When did our human ancestors separate from lower forms? Science explains that it happened when humans stood upright and ate meat, leading to a problem-solving intelligence. Tool use, language, and farming followed. Eventually, our species emerged into civilized mankind. Since then, the human race has dominated over the animal world, and animals are viewed as property with no rights.

“Now we have these chimeras derived from the cross of humans and loca eagles. By tradition, their behavior, lifestyle, and even DNA establish them as animals with human features. Thus the appellate court ruled that harpies are property and not entitled to human rights. This court would be inclined to agree, but the appellate court did not hear the harpy’s testimony, which raises valid questions and disturbing revelations.”

The chief justice stopped and shook his head. “It’s appalling that this handsome, advanced species was subjected to such indignity and cruelty. As the harpy questioned, does his difference make him less? He asked to be judged for his honor, and might have added his wit. In all fairness, he makes a strong point.

“When the harpies agreed to the treaty and saved Dora humans from the beetle swarms, they demonstrated their intellect, honor, and consideration, just as Shail did when he saved our president. This harpy has displayed the very definition of humanity

by his actions and beliefs. Does this harpy have a conscience, a soul? I believe he does.”

The judge continued. “With our civilization swelling to other planets and mingling with other species and our science expanding in genetics, the old distinction of human and animal is obsolete. It cannot apply to creatures from other worlds or genetically engineered chimeras or a species that is created by mix breeding like the harpies.

“Therefore, it is the ruling of this court that a new category be formed, and it shall be based on the attributes that men admire and strive for: intelligence, honor, and humanity. Species meeting these guidelines shall have equality with humans.” The judge glanced at Shail. “Will the plaintiff please rise?” The attorneys and Shail stood up and faced the panel of judges.

“It is this Galactic Supreme Court’s decision that the harpies conform to this new category. Apart from the fact that harpies are both animal and human, this species has proven its integrity and is granted human rights.” The chief judge smiled at the harpy. “In other words, Shail, your harpies are no longer property. They cannot be caged like pets or hunted like game. Any treaty or contract between harpies and humans is binding. This court is dismissed.”

Amid the bustle of the courtroom, a loud cheer came from Ralph and Jim. Mrs. Roth hugged Shail, and his attorneys shook his hand.

A tall man approached Shail. “The president wishes to

“speak with you.”

“I would like to see your ruler again,” Shail said.

One of Waters’ attorneys asked the senators’ lawyer, “Why did the senators drop the case?”

“They wanted to appease the harpies,” he said, nervously glancing at Shail. “Senators Blackwell and Peterson, who started these proceedings were murdered, and a yellow harpy feather was found on their bodies. It was a warning for the other senators. Apparently, your clients aren’t gentle.”

Shail offensively raised his head. “When a destroyer must be destroyed, we can put aside our gentle nature. You see, we can behave like humans.”

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Shail met with the president on the following day. “I’d like you to work for me,” the president said. “You’d be paid well for your special talents.”

“A harpy has no use of pay, and this land of machines is no place for me. I long only for my family, flock, and jungle.”

The president sighed. “I didn’t think you could be convinced, but I had to try. I’ve arranged for a battlestar cruiser to take you home. You should be back on Dora within a month. It’s the least I could do for you.” He offered his hand in friendship, and Shail grasped it. “A simple thank you can’t express my gratitude.”

“Our handshake tells me all.”

\* \* \*

Shail spent his last night on Earth at Mrs. Roth's home among his human friends. Although it was a night of celebration, he sensed the grief in their hearts. Ralph was especially upset, and Mrs. Roth tried to console him. "You'll see him again when we visit Racheal," she said as they watched Jim and Shail talk in the kitchen.

Ralph's eyes watered. "I'm not so sure. I have a feeling I'll never see him again."

"I'm going to miss you," Jim said and glanced into the living room at the black man with his face in his hands. "Perhaps not as much as Ralph. The poor guy has it bad for you."

"Yes, he mourns my going. And you? Shall you go back to the grief and whiskey?"

"You're always pretty damn blunt," Jim said with a grin. "I don't plan to. The job I set out to do is done. Director Green has been detained for insurance fraud, theft, manslaughter, and a long list of crimes. The gay club owner has also been charged with manslaughter and animal abuse. And Senator Blackwell is dead. A harpy apparently took care of that one for me. I'm thinking of taking on private eye work."

"I shall tell you what I think. Walk away from Earth and your heartache. Come with me to my jungle. It shall heal you, just as I hope it heals me."

"A vacation?"

"No, a lifetime. Once you dwell beneath the trees and

breathe the fresh air, you shall never return to this soulless land.”

“It might be good for a while, but I’d probably get bored.”

“You shall not be idle,” Shail said. “The harpies own half of the land, but humans also dwell there. I need a tough man who knows human laws and can make our people obey them. And he must be one I trust. You are that man.”

“That’s a hell of a tempting job offer, police chief of the Outback.”

“It is easy work, since the harpies sense humans who wish to live on our land. Only the good are allowed to stay. But still, a human authority must be present so the good remain so.”

Jim was deep in thought. “All right, you’ve got yourself a cop. I’d better get home and pack, if I want to catch your shuttle in the morning.” After explaining to the others, Jim left to get ready.

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In the morning, a dark presidential vehicle with a police escort drew up in front of the Roth home to take Shail and Jim to the space shuttle. They would fly to the spaceport located between Earth and its moon and board the battlestar cruiser.

Before Shail slipped into the vehicle, Mrs. Roth hugged him. She cleared her throat and wiped away emotional tears. “Now don’t forget to tell Racheal that Ralph and I plan to be on Dora in six months. I’ll be eager to see her baby. Oh my, do you think it could have wings?”

“All male harpies have wings, but this is the first bonding of a harpy and a woman. The answer is unknown.” He turned to Edith and embraced her. “Thank you for helping me. I shall miss you and your cornbread.” After saying farewell to the women, he stepped to Jim and Ralph, who were shaking hands. Jim climbed into the vehicle, leaving Shail and Ralph gazing at one another.

Shail’s giant dark friend openly wept. “Will I see you again?” Ralph asked with a snuffle.

Shail slightly shook his head.

Ralph broke down, blubbering and crying.

“Do not weep, my big friend,” Shail said. “In time, the pain of this parting shall go, but know I shall never forget you. Ralph.”

“I love you, Shail,” Ralph said as his mother put her arm around him.

Shail sighed deeply. “I free you to love another.”

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The shuttle arrived at the space station, and Shail and Jim were escorted on board the large military ship that made numerous trips to the Oden system. One day in their shared cabin, Shail told Jim the story of John Turner, Kari’s deceased father.

“Turner gave his life for mine,” Shail said. “You are very much like him. This is why you had my trust.”

Jim smiled warmly. “Kari said that, too.”

“She would see her father’s commitment and honor in



you.”

Jim leaned back in his bunk and commented, “My wife always complained that I was stubborn.”

“That, too, was Turner’s nature.”

“Your harpy instincts are amazing. You know me better than me.” Jim chuckled.

“Right now, I sense your anger and grief leave and your heart is open to love again. Perhaps you may find it in your new life on Dora.”

“Is that so? I could say I’m not interested in finding love again, but arguing with a harpy is pointless.”

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Two weeks into the journey, a crewman knocked on the door of Shail and Jim’s cabin. “We received a communiqué from Governor Waters on Dora,” he said and handed Jim the note.

Jim read it out loud to Shail. “The governor says that the treaty has been reenacted and the Outback belongs to the harpies again. He’s meeting you at the Oden Spaceport to take you home on his private ship and mentions the whole planet happily awaits your arrival.” He folded the note and smiled. “Sounds like a lot of people have missed you.”

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The month-long voyage ended at the Oden spaceport. Shail and Jim left the cruiser, and at the end of the clear connecting tunnel to the port, they found Governor Waters waiting. He clasped Shail's shoulders. "I wanted to accompany you on the last leg of your journey home. I'm so happy to see you."

"No happier than I." Shail introduced the governor to Jim, and they made their way through the bustling port that resembled a large city. After walking several blocks, they entered the docking bay that held the governor's small ship.

Once aboard, Waters and Jim sat down in a plush cabin as Shail reclined on the soft carpeted floor. A large basket of Dora's exotic fruit and nuts rested on the nearby coffee table. "Help yourself, Shail," said Waters. "I know you've been missing this food."

"I have missed too many things to tell." Shail popped some red berries into his mouth, savoring the long-lost taste.

The ship engines fired. Using thrusters, the pilot steered the ship away from the port and into space, destination the small worm hole to Dora.

The ship underway, Waters' assistant provided refreshments while the governor talked. "I received a transcript of the Supreme Court hearing. My lawyers said that without your testimony, the case would have been lost. Apparently, the judges were taken with your blunt honesty, besides being dazzled with your telepathy and looks."

"Yeah, Shail stunned everyone in the courtroom," said Jim.

“It also probably helped that the opposing counsel withdrew from the case. We later learned that Senator Blackwell and Peterson were murdered, and the other senators got frightened and abandoned the suit.”

“The senators not only dropped the case, but also resigned from office and signed their land holdings in the Outback over to the harpies.” Waters looked at Shail’s questioning eyes. “It was Aron. He killed those senators after learning they planned to import a deadly gas to kill his flock. The war was very bad. A lot of good people died, and Aron lost hundreds of harpies. I don’t think he could stomach one more harpy death.”

Shail nodded. “How is he?”

Waters sighed. “No one knows. He turned his rule over to your mother and disappeared into the jungle. Windy returned to Terrance, and she and I reenacted the treaty. Last week, the federal government approved it. As for Aron, he hasn’t been seen since.”

“It is not our nature to kill,” said Shail. “When we must, harpies suffer terrible guilt. To have lost so many under his rule, Aron carries a heavy burden. I understand how he feels.”

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As the small spaceship descended over Hampton, Shail looked through its window and noticed the huge crowd of humans that crammed the streets. On the buildings, male harpies lined the rooftops. “They’re here to welcome the return of their golden

ruler,” Waters said. The ship landed inside the city’s giant port. Shail exited the craft with Jim and Waters and found his family waiting. His eyes grew misty when he gazed at Kari cradling their new son. Will clung to her leg, apprehensive in the noisy port. Alongside, Racheal held a small bundle wrapped in harpy cloth. Overwhelmed, Shail froze, having dreamed of this moment. Will saw his father and lost his fear. He let go of his mother and flew into Shail’s arms. Shail hugged and nuzzled his little son before stepping to his mates. He set Will down and embraced Kari, burying his face in her hair. Seeing, touching, and smelling her, he sniffled back his tears.

“It’s over now, Shail,” Kari whispered and kissed his cheek. “You truly are home.”

Shail swallowed to get a grip of the emotions that churned in his gut. In front of the governor, Jim, and port workers, he hoped to maintain his dignified poise. He pulled back and gazed down at his second son. “He is so fine, Kari.”

“He is like Will. Your sons resemble you, but wait until you see Racheal’s baby.”

Racheal stood with a lowered head, and he stepped to her. “Why this fear and shame in your mind?”

“I’m sorry,” Racheal said. “Our baby is a female, and she’s not...”

“Hush,” he interrupted. “The golden line must have females to endure. Let me see her.” Racheal bit her lip and pushed the cloth off the blond infant. Shail’s eyes widened, and he became

breathless. “She has wings!”

“I’m so sorry she’s not normal, Shail.”

Shail examined the creamy yellow down on the wings that encased the tiny female’s body. “Lose the shame. You have given me the rarest of gifts, a beautiful daughter who can fly. I am very happy with her.”

Kari smiled and nudged Racheal. “I told you he’d love her.”

“But how can this be?” Shail asked.

“Doc explained genetics,” Kari answered. “He said it was only a matter of time before female harpies were born with wings. Apparently, your golden ancestry has reached the point where it’s pure harpy, unlike the browns, whose females bond with men every few generations. Since the male’s traits are strongest in a daughter, she has your wings. Doc thinks that if I had a daughter, she’d probably have wings, too.”

“Then we must have some daughters, too,” he said with a faint smile. He noticed Lea, Aron’s sister, standing beyond them and gave Kari a questioning look.

“Lea has been staying with us at my father’s home, helping us with our fledglings,” said Kari. “Racheal and I want to make her a permanent part of our family.”

“You want me to take a third mate?” Shail said with a raised head. “It is the male who chooses his mates, not his females.”

“Lea has no fledglings, because her mate was killed

protecting Will and me,” said Kari. “You need more fledglings to restore the golden bloodline, and you’re more than capable of satisfying the three of us. Besides, Lea is a full harpy. She won’t argue with you.”

Racheal added, “And Kari and I love her like a sister. Once you know her, you’ll love her, too.”

He shifted his gaze to the ground. “I am sensing that to reject this bond shall bring resentment to my nest.” With a head toss, he motioned to the petite female harpy with waist-length brown hair. Lea humbly stepped to him and dropped to her knees. “Rise, and do not bow to me if you are to be my mate. Do you wish this, Lea?”

Lea rose. “I do not deserve to rest under a golden’s wings, but if we bonded, I hope to please you and give you worthy fledglings.”

Shail cupped the pretty harpy’s cheek, detecting her submissive nature, the longing to pamper him, and she was so devoted, she would follow him into fire. “I accept you. When I return to the Turner Estate, we shall bond.”

Shail then smelled his mother’s scent. He whipped around and saw her emerge from behind several boxes of cargo. He rushed to her and hugged her tightly. “I never thought I would see you again.”

“Yes, I feared we had lost you, too.” The blood bond of mother and son created the strongest telepathy, and he knew she felt his suffering and saw how the men had finally crushed his

defiant spirit. She released him and stared into his eyes, drained of fight. “But I have lost you, haven’t I?”

Shail nodded toward the port window and the awaiting outside crowd. “They believe I shall reign over the Outback and flocks again. I cannot. I am no longer a strong, dominant male who can guide and protect them, and I have no desire ever to confront humans again. With this peace, I wish you to continue to rule until one of my fledglings come of age.”

She nodded. “We shall get you help.”

“Mother, you cannot mend that which is gone.” He glanced over his wing at Jim, who appeared a little lost. “But I have brought you help. He is a man I trust, and I have hired him as the chief of police. He shall enforce the human laws in the Outback.” He called to the ex-cop, “Jim, I want you to meet my mother.”

Jim strolled to them and set down his bag. “Hello,” he said and clasped Windy’s hand, nervous sweat dampening his shirt. “I see where Shail gets his good looks. I mean, you don’t look old enough to be his mother.” He shifted from foot to foot. “I mean, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine. I have learned you saved Kari and my grandson from the zoo and paid for their journey to Dora. My son tells me you are to be the new chief of police of the Outback. You’ll be residing in Terrance, where I live.”

Shail stepped away from couple, smiling inwardly. They were the same age, mid-forties, and obviously were taken with one another. He walked back to his family.

Kari looked to the exit doors. “Those people and harpies have been waiting for hours to see you, Shail.”

With a nod, Shail picked up Will. He walked outside and stood on the top step before the crowd of thousands. The humans cheered loudly and clapped. The harpies knelt and bowed their heads. Will clutched Shail’s neck because of the commotion. “*Do not be afraid, son. It is their way of showing admiration. Someday, you shall rule and have their love, too.*” He cleared his throat and raised his hand to quiet the anxious crowd. “I have few words,” he said, forcing his soft voice to be heard, “except it is good to be home and among you again. Many people here and in the Outback helped my harpies during the fighting. For that I am grateful.” He looked up at the perched males on the buildings. “I am also pleased that my flock mustered its courage and defended our freedom and home. I now look forward to lasting peace between harpies and humans.” The crowd applauded, accustomed to his short speeches. He scanned the harpies, but one was missing.

Kari moved to his side. “*He waits for you beyond the city. Go to him, Shail. Aron needs you as much as you need him. A hover will fly us to the Outback. You long for the trees, and there will be plenty of time later for us.*”

Shail set Will down and kissed each member of his family goodbye. He spread his wings and eagerly sprang toward the sky. He flew rapidly over the buildings but slowed when he reached the colossal, colorful trees. In moments, Aron was flanking his side. Shail nodded to the brown harpy. Aron responded by closing his



eyes. Since small fledglings, they knew each other's thoughts and feelings. Conveying their happiness at their reunion was not necessary. Shail inhaled the fragment fresh air and the sound of singing birds and squawks that rose above the jungle like music to his ears. His eyes moistened, beholding the breathtaking landscape of trees. After an hour of quiet gliding, he glanced at Aron. *"Many times I have dreamed of this, being here, flying with you."*

*"I, too, had the same dreams, but lost hope they would come true."*

At dusk, Shail looked down at a small stream. In unison, they tilted their wings and landed for the night. Along the bank, enormous trees bore yellow fruit. Shail plucked one of the ripe fruits and reclined on the bank. *"The trisom trees bear fruit again. Was I gone so long?"*

*"A whole season that I long to forget,"* Aron said. He waded into the water and bent down to drink.

Shail felt Aron's numbing sorrow, the rage that had destroyed his gentle nature and the guilt of watching harpies die under his leadership. Like all brown harpies, Aron lacked Shail's golden tenacity, the will to get up and keep fighting after being knocked down. *"You saved my harpies, Aron."*

*"Many were lost, too many."* Aron meandered out of the stream and stood before Shail. *"I failed you and the flock. Waters wanted us to flee and hide until the court ruled. We should have."*

Shail tossed the fruit aside and rose. He gripped Aron's shoulders. *"Neither of us knew the outcome of the court, if we*

*would be free or slaves. I chose to fight rather than flee. You followed my wishes. These deaths rest upon my wings, not yours.”*

*“You were gone. I was here. I could have chosen a different path.”*

Shail arched his wings in anger and shouted, “Stop this, Aron! Put the blame where it belongs. The senators brought war upon us.” He lowered his wings and took a slow breath. He relayed silently, *“A harpy gives his life to protect his family. This is our way, has always been our way. Those males died doing as expected. Do not dwell on death, but life, the lives of our fledglings. They are forever safe. Take comfort in this knowledge.”*

*“I have missed your wisdom.”*

*“Wisdom comes from experience. I would have preferred ignorance.”*

As darkness fell, they sought a wide, moss-covered branch and curled their bodies around each other, sleeping like single males once again. In the middle of the night, Shail trembled and flinched with nightmares. He woke with Aron clutching and nuzzling him. *“Shail, you are not in danger now.”*

Shail sat up. *“I did not mean to wake you.”*

*“You act strong, yet you are more damaged than me. Your dreams betray your suffering in captivity.”*

*“I suffered but am more tormented by my deeds. I killed a harpy. Men destroyed Seth’s mind and soul, but I stopped his heart. I fear I shall never find peace again.”*

*“We are broken harpies, both longing for the comfort of*

*death. What shall become of us, Shail?"*

*"I do not know."*

## About The Author



Susan Klaus was born in Sarasota, Fla. and has had an extensive career with animals from a business selling rabbits as a child, to a pet groomer of 30 years, to exhibiting dogs in obedience trials, to breeding show cats and founding the Fiesta Cat Fanciers Club, and has bred and raced Thoroughbred horses. Currently, she is raising rodeo bulls. She was the owner of Lil Critters Pet and Grooming Shop in Sarasota and Lil Critters Grooming Shop in Bradenton and for 10 years she worked at The Animal Health Center.

She has been published and featured in several magazines including *Cats*, *ELL*, and *SRQ*. She wrote her first novel, a fantasy about mermaids in 1982. In 2004, she wrote and self-published *The Golden Harpy* that received rave reviews in the press, *The Venice Gondolier* saying "...could easily compete with some of today's best sellers." It was followed in 2007 by *The Golden Harpy II*, *Feather Lost on the Wind*. In 2005 she founded and is still president of The Sarasota Authors Connection Club, presently 230 members and is the web radio host and co-producer of *The Authors Connection Show* with 15 million listeners in 148 countries. In 2009 she rewrote *The Golden Harpy* and re-titled it *Flight of the Golden Harpy*, and it won the Florida Writers' Royal Palm Literary award for Best Science Fiction Manuscript of 2010. She also penned her first suspense/thriller novel, *Secretariat Reborn*. In 2012 *Secretariat Reborn* was purchased

by Oceanview Publishing and is due out Oct. 1, 2013, and *Flight of the Golden Harpy* was optioned by Tor and will come out in 2014. She is now working on *Shark Fin Soup*, the sequel to the *Secretariat* novel, and another suspense/thriller, *A Murder in Sarasota*, based on a true story.

Besides writing and animals, her hobbies have included sailing, fishing, scuba diving, raising orchids, and painting. She is a member of Fl. Thoroughbred Breeders and Owners Ass, Fl. Wildlife Ass., National Wildlife, The National Audubon Society, Sierra Club, Defenders of Wildlife, Mystery Writers of America, International Thrill Writers, Fl. Writers Ass., and Sarasota Fiction Writers. She is the mother of two children, Christopher and Kari Klaus and resides in Myakka City and manages the Matrix Ranch that is co-owns with her son.