Lena’s Story

Bye, Bye, Bye

Chapter 6

I wasn’t sure what to make of the boyband. Every instinct told me that they were powerful and dangerous so I needed to watch them carefully. But Sam and Ramon were both good natured and well-mannered, and Granny Mae ended up inviting them to lunch. James…well, James helped Granny in the kitchen and folded all of our cloth napkins into swans. While helpful and even sweet, he approached every task with the same attitude he exuded while taking care of Jerry’s corpse. So while I was wary of Sam and Ramon, James scared me a little. Edda also kept a close eye on him, so I didn’t feel like I was being too paranoid.

“I’d like to stay while you question your witch,” Sam said. He had his hands folded in his lap, the very picture of calm and patience as he waited. It was kind of weird, really. Young men his age tended to fidget. Ramon certainly kept moving about the room. Yet Sam was serene, his face open and friendly. He didn’t want me to know how much he wanted to stay. Interesting.

“Why?” I watched his face and his eyes. Some people could manage to lie with one, but not the other.

“I saw a lot in Jerry’s mind that I didn’t like,” Sam said. “If there’s any possibility that this kind of thing is going on up in my neck of the woods, I want to end it. I need to know what to look for.” He leaned forward, his eyes sharp. “If there is a way to help you stop it elsewhere, I’d like to help as much as I can.”

“You don’t trust us,” Ramon said from his spot by the window. “That’s okay. We understand. But information sharing would be helpful, wouldn’t it?”

I glanced at Edda. She shrugged. “Fine.” I glared at them both. “But that means if you hear so much as a whisper in Seattle, we get a call.”

Sam smiled. “Of course.”

Tally was roused from her rest to eat, because even I could admit she needed some solid meals and because we needed to question her. Multitasking—it’s the Valkyrie way. She could nap more, later. She obviously needed it.

Tally had showered and was wearing clean clothes when she sat down, but she was still pale and the skin under her eyes bruised. Her rest so far had been a drop in the bucket. She didn’t seem overly curious that there were more of us at the table. Instead she methodically ate the soup that Granny Mae set in front of her.

I waited until we were all seated and eating before I looked at Grant. Tally would be more likely to answer anything he asked. She knew him and trusted him. Let’s be honest, she also liked him a heck of a lot more than me.

“Anything you can share,” Grant told her gently, “would be helpful. They know you can’t tell a lot, but whatever crumbs you can give us would be great.”

Her spoon paused mid-stir. “I won’t say anything that might get her hurt.”

“I know,” Grant said, shooting me a warning look.

“That won’t get who hurt?” I asked.

“My baby sister,” Tally said. “She’s only eleven. I won’t say anything to endanger her.”

“That’s why you’ve been working for them?” Edda asked. “Because they have your little sister?”

Tally’s hand was shaking too much to hold on to her spoon. She set it down, putting her hand over her mouth as she choked back a sob. “Five months. They’ve had her for *five months.*” Grant handed her his napkin, still folded like a swan. She took it, unfolding it, and dabbing at her eyes. “I haven’t heard from her in three weeks. Now with Jerry’s operation a bust, and you guys coming in—I have no way to contact her.”

“Did coming with us make it worse?” I asked.

Tally shook her head. “They would consider me compromised if you hadn’t.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I know it would be better to go back. They have no reason to keep my sister now. But I can’t. They’ll kill me. What good would I be to her then?” She gulped a breath, steadying herself. “I’ve tried it their way. That didn’t work—they just kept stringing me along.” She looked up, her face a monument to grief and frustration. “That’s what they do, you know? They drain you dry of all use, then discard you.” She gripped her mug with both hands. “The things I’ve done for them.” Two tears rolled silently down her cheek, but she dashed them, pulling herself together. “No, I’ve tried it their way. So now we’ll try it yours.” Tally stuck me with a firm glare. “I know one little witch is not your priority and you have no reason to do me any favors. But she’s just a child. Please do what you can to help her.”

I felt a pang of sympathy for Tally. We may not like each other, but I understood her position. “Of course. Believe it or not, Edda and I—we’re not monsters. Tell us about your sister.”

Tally’s mouth twisted down. “I can’t. Can’t say her name. Can’t even carry a picture. Part of the geas.”

“Don’t try, then,” Edda said. “‘I’ll get online when we’re done. See what we can dig up from public records.”

“Tell us what you can,” I said.

Tally couldn’t give us much. She’d found a note in the mailbox with a lock of hair. The note hadn’t actually been mailed, but placed inside with the rest of her mail when no one was looking. “My mother passed away a few years ago.” She didn’t say any more, but waited for me and Edda to catch up.

“Meaning your sister was in your care,” I said. “Unless there was a father?”

Tally’s smile was faint. “My mother never did have much luck with men.”

Well, that gave us a starting point, at least. If we looked up Tally’s address, we could figure out where she lived and search her place…no. We couldn’t. They’d be watching Tally’s place as soon as they got wind of what happened at the ranch. I didn’t want to tip our hand or get Tally’s sister killed. If she was still alive. We had no proof either way, so we’d hope for the best for now and plan accordingly.

The ransom note had told Tally a place and a time. She had to go alone, and she rather naively did. Backup was always a good idea. Always. But she was scared for her sister, and I gathered that Tally didn’t have anyone to really lean on in this kind of situation. I was momentarily very grateful for my half-Valkyrie sisters. I always had backup. And drinking buddies.

Tally couldn’t give us much more about the actual abduction. Her sister wasn’t at the meeting. She couldn’t say who was, only that they had a deal for her. They needed her to be their lackey and in return, her sister lived. That was all she could tell us. Tally didn’t hesitate—she quit her job, removed her sister from school, telling everyone there had been a death in the family. She had some money in savings to pay for her mortgage, though that was dwindling. Until then it was like Tally and her sister had just disappeared.

The room was quiet for moment when she was done speaking as we all digested the short and heavily redacted tale she’d offered.

“It’s a lot of fuss for a little witch,” James said, his posture perfectly straight in his chair. I bet he could teach deportment classes. Do people still teach that sort of thing?

Tally’s eyes flashed. “My sister—”

“Is not the witch I’m referring to,” James said smoothly. “You. Why you? There are lots of witches. It’s not an uncommon magical race. You don’t even have a coven as far as I can tell, otherwise they would have been your backup.” His silver eyes examined Tally as he spoke and I’m certain they didn’t miss a damn thing. “Yet they went through a lot of effort. Kidnapping is a risky venture. Long term abduction? Lots of things can go wrong. If they just needed a witch, I’m sure there are some that had easier leverage. So why you? What’s so special about you?”

“Tally works with runes and wards,” Grant answered for her. “It takes power, but more than that it takes study. Not a lot of witches take it on as a specialty because it’s so time consuming to learn, and it’s easier to just go along with whatever their natural talent is—like plants.”

“The kind of operation we’ve been dealing with uses a lot of wards,” I said. “They need to keep the animals contained, the fights have to stay in their arena, etc. A rune witch would be very handy.”

When Tally didn’t say anything, Grant added, “And last I checked, Tally was the best in the state.”

“Best on the west coast,” Tally corrected with a small but miserable smile. “I haven’t seen you in awhile.”

“What are you going to do now?” Sam asked.

“Edda found a lead on a dealer. We’re going to try and get our hands on a fighter. Grant will have to pose as our buyer, someone who wants in on the enterprise.” I leaned back in my chair. It was going to be risky and slow. I hated this business so much and I needed to be careful. If I let the rage make my decisions, I would make poor ones.

“They’ve done their best to segment their chain of command,” Edda said. “We have to go along one link at a time instead of thundering in there and raising chaos.” She sighed. “Slow and steady is not the Valkyrie way.”

James stood. “Show me the information you have on the contact. I will see if I can shed any light there.” When Edda crooked a brow at him, James just looked at her authoritatively. I couldn’t really see James shrugging. Too pedestrian for him.

“James has very unsavory contacts,” Sam said. “It’s one of the things we love best about him.”

“The thing I love best about him is his cooking skills,” Ramon said.

“It’s always food with you,” Sam murmured. Ramon shot him a knowing look.

“Okay,” I said. “James look at the laptop. We leave in the morning. So do what you need while you can.”

“I’m going with you,” Tally said. Her chin was stubborn, like she was expecting an argument. She wasn’t going to get one from me.

“Of course you are. I don’t trust you enough to leave you here, not with Grant going with us. We’ll have to keep you hidden, but you’d be more useful on the road with us than rusticating here.” My eyes met Edda’s. She knew what I wasn’t saying. It would be easier to protect Tally if she was with us. Geas or no geas, I couldn’t see the people we were going after would be fine with loose ends. They would find a way to silence her permanently as soon as they had the chance.

An hour after lunch, Sam and his back-up singers made their leave. As they were walking to their car, Jonah, my apprentice, walked up with Azzy, Grant’s ten-year-old niece, Wuf, and Steve. The boys froze as they caught sight of Steve.

“Is that…?” Ramon’s eyes went wide.

Sam looked back at me. “Can we greet them?”

I asked Steve. My head filled with murky light and a discordant tune. Steve was cautious about the trio as well.

“No quick moves,” I said.

Sam walked up to the unicorn, his palm out, his face lit up like the sun. How could someone so full of death magic be so…

“Innocent,” Grant said softly. “Despite all he’s seen and done, there is a corner of his heart that is childlike and full of hope. He’s a good person, though he has every reason not to be.” Grant’s expression had a far-off cast to it. Ah, he was doing his Cupid thing and reading their emotions.

“I didn’t think unicorns would be so big,” Ramon said. “Or badass.” Steve raised his head and preened.

“What’s their names?” Sam asked Jonah.

“The unicorn is Steve.” He patted Wuf’s big head. “And this is Wuf. He’s a waheela.”

Ramon reached out a hand, palm up like Sam was doing, offering it for Wuf to sniff. He was very brave. Wuf was like an unholy union between polar bear and wolf. Though Wuf’s head was canine in shape, his features were broader and almost prehistoric looking. He was sized closer to a bear, now that he’d filled out from a steady diet of good food and care. His last owner captured, starved, and beat him so he would fight in underground cage matches. His white hair was mostly grown out, darkening at the edges to a nice bluish silver. Except where it was growing over scar tissue. Those hairs were coarser and a brighter white. He was built for cold climates and wide open spaces, and instead he was hanging out at a weird farm in Oregon.

Wuf sniffed Ramon, tilted his head, and snorted. Then he butt his giant head into Ramon’s chest. He smiled. “Aw, I like you too, buddy.”

I looked over to see Sam hugging Steve. His eyes were closed, his face full of wonder. “My sister is going to be so jealous.” He looked up at Steve. “I wish we could take a picture.” Sam pulled away, his hand tracing a scar on Steve’s side. He looked over at Ramon, who had a similar look of confused anger on his face. I knew that look. He’d found Wuf’s scars. There were a lot of them. It was one thing to know intellectually, that creatures were being made to fight. It was another to be confronted by the evidence of the pain and hurt they went through.

“The fights?” Ramon asked.

“Steve’s are from his undercover work,” Jonah said. “But Wuf and I were both rescued from one of the fights.” My apprentice rubbed Wuf’s ears. “Wuf didn’t have a choice, then. But now he’s like Steve. He wants to help the others.”

Sam reached over and scratched under the waheela’s chin, but looked at me. “You need anything—anything at all. You call us.”

I nodded. Sam and Ramon piled into the car, leaving James standing in front of Steve and Wuf. He was carefully pulling on leather driving gloves and staring at the two creatures. He murmured something I didn’t catch and gave a slight, but graceful bow to both. Then he got in the car and drove away without another word.

“Interesting fellow,” I said.

Edda snorted. “You have no idea. Full of information, too.”

“He knew the dealer?” I asked.

“Yeah, and didn’t think much of him. Open disdain.” She smiled. “I’ve made contact. We have a date with a bad man in Northern California.” She smacked my shoulder. “Tomorrow we ride, sister.”

“It’s about time,” I grumbled.