

Swallowing the Serpent's Tail

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I didn't want to like this woman-child. She was just another assignment as far as I was concerned. Get in, do my job, and get out. End of story.

Only the story didn't end where I'd expected. The good ones never do. And never in my wildest nightmares did I expect to be the one to save the day.

Me. A harpy. Go figure.

My real name is Aello, but you can call me Stormwind. Until this assignment I was damn proud to be a harpy. I'm good at what I do – the best nagger the Furies ever had or ever will have. So, what am I doing stuck here at the far end of Napa Valley, USA, surrounded by the stench of new grapes and old wine?

It's spring 2013. Should be an interesting time – the 21st century's barely revved up – but somehow things got messed up a millenium or so ago. According to my new ward Ria, who's all of eleven going on three hundred, technology's the new religion and Zeus and Apollo are considered myths.

Can you imagine calling Zeus a myth to his face? Someone must've had rocks in their heads to try to pull that one off.

Ria lives on a small farm, around fifty acres. The place used to be a large dairy farm but all the good land's been sold off. Cows are gone. Fences need mending.

And the rest of the place? To put it nicely, the joint's falling apart.

And so's the family inside.

It's five in the morning and the world is waking up. Damp air pours over the windowsill, bringing with it the taste of morning dew laced with orange blossoms.

"Time to get up, Ria," I whisper. I give the girl lying under the thin forget-me-not quilt a gentle nudge. I really hate to wake her, but the alternative could be ugly. Real ugly.

When Jason's Argonauts vanquished the harpies, they thought they were doing the world a favor. Maybe they were right; maybe not. Depends on your point of view. You see, by vanquishing us fine-feathered females, Jason set us free. No longer do we do our nagging with

claws and wings; now we infiltrate minds.

The Furies expanded their harpy herd. First there were three, now there are lots of us. We're everywhere the Furies think we're needed.

Why they thought this little girl needed nagging, though, is still beyond my comprehension.

Dark hair curls around my ward's face. At least she looks like an eleven-year old when she's sleeping. The stress is gone from her forehead and the circles around her eyes aren't as dark.

At first it was easy to do my job. Her father had already started the process. "Little bitch" was the extension of "big bitch." A toy he coveted, but hadn't yet brought out to play. All I had to do was build on the insecurities and self-abuse system he'd set in place.

But I couldn't do it.

Thank the gods for small favors.

I've done some nasty things in my time – all in the line of duty, of course. Snatched food from king's mouths, crapped on their tables, even torn out a few strands of hair here and there. After all, harassment is a harpy's prime directive.

But the world is different now; too much time has passed since the UberGods played with the mortal folks. The lines aren't so black and white – no more poking out eyes or slicing off tongues. They still keep an eye on things Earth-side, though. Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea – the gods got their fingers in all the pies. Keeps things entertaining.

It also keeps me employed.

The relationship we harpies have with our wards can be called a lot of things, but I prefer to think of it as a sort of symbiosis – I get to do my job and the ward gets to suffer his or her share of guilt. The extent of the crime determines the ultimate outcome. My last ward jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge, consumed by his own guilt, you might say.

Like the serpent swallowing his tail – what comes around goes around.

But with Ria I knew right away something was wrong. This little girl wasn't guilty of anything except living. Somehow the Furies had made a terrible mistake and there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

"Come on, bee girl." A harder nudge this time. "Before he wakes up."

"Leave me alone," Ria mutters, her voice filled with sleep. For what must be the millionth time I wish I could fulfill her request, but I continue to nag. I have to. It's my job.

Another nudge. Another moan.

The house is close to a hundred years old, walls and roof built during a time when insulation was a blanket wrapped around a block of ice in the barn. The roof leaks when it rains. The walls hold pipes and wiring, providing a barrier to the eye. But nothing holds back the noise.

Or the fear.

Footsteps thud down the hall. The sound stops outside Ria's door. Sleep forgotten, she bolts upright, eyes wide, clutching the thin quilt to her equally thin chest.

No, no, no, I pray. Not today. We hold our breaths as one, waiting, waiting for the door knob to turn, praying that it doesn't, but knowing that it will.

Just like it always does.

The four-poster bed is high enough Ria can hide underneath, but we tried that once. We've also tried the closet. And the bathroom.

There's only one escape.

"What are you doing, Frank?" Ria's mother. Her words slur, but not from sleep.

"Mind your own business, whore."

"She is my business. Not yours. Come back to bed and leave the girl alone."

Silence. Somewhere in the walls a rat gnaws, a rhythmic grating noise that stretches even my nerves thin.

The doorknob settles back into position.

We breathe in silent relief.

A door slams, shaking walls and rattling the oval mirror.

Chaos threatens to break through the walls. A scream. Another thundering crash. Then light footsteps in the hall, running, running.

"Under the bed," I order, but Ria rushes to the door instead. I want to reach out, stop her, but there's nothing I can do. In this non-corporeal existence, a harpy's strength lies in her voice. We nag, we tease, we berate – with the sole purpose of causing inner conflict.

The doorknob turns. Ria pulls it open. I close my mental eyes and prepare for the worst.

But the worst isn't what I expect. Instead of Frank crashing through the door with heavy fists and heavier lust, Ria's mother Mary staggers naked into the room. Years spent with the heart of a raptor fine-tuned my sense of smell and I scent the gore before I see the red-streaked skin.

Mary slams the door closed, twists the lock, collapses.

“Go,” Mary gasps. “Get out before . . .”

And then she’s gone, her spirit rising through the ceiling like a wisp of smoke.

Sorrow floods Ria’s soul, freezing her into place beside her mother. She can’t move. Can hardly even breathe. I feel her struggle as if it’s my own. Want to take her pain into myself and make it all better.

She’s only a little girl.

These are not harpy thoughts, harpy feelings. I’m trapped inside with all this grief and pain. Let me out, I cry, but for once my voice is silent.

We are together, bonded, until Judgment Day. The only way we can be separated is when I’m recalled.

Or when Ria dies.

Suddenly, I realize Ria’s death is not an option.

“Up,” I scream inside her head. “Do what your mother says.”

Ria glances around the room, startled.

“Out the window.” This time I try to keep my voice a bit calmer, but it shrinks to a whisper again. “Window!”

Ria rises. She stares in the mirror and for a moment I see two faces – hers, tear-streaked and filled with confusion; mine, wrinkled and ugly as the hag I used to be – and then the two faces blur.

Heavy footsteps in the hall. Stumbling at first, then steady. Resolute. Once again, they stop outside the door. The knob rattles.

“Get going!” No nudge this time; a shove. Desperate measures and all that.

Ria runs across the room, bare feet slapping soft on the chill oak planking.

Curtains billow as she clambers through the window. I hold my breath. Hear the key in the lock. Watch the doorknob turn, gray dawn light from the open window gleaming on the gouged metal, then – snick. The latch clicks free and the door swings open.

But it’s too late.

We’re already gone.