

## Boxing Match

Sleep came for Mike, but it was far from restful. Unable to properly enter the Dreamscape again, he tossed and turned in his bed, his brain unwilling to let things rest.

His first thoughts were on Cecilia. He could see her now, trapped inside a silver cage in the middle of a glen surrounded by waterfalls. Breaking the lock on the cage, he stepped inside only to have her melt like wax in his arms and slide through holes in the floor.

“Cecilia,” he cried out, her name slurring as if spoken in slow motion. Heat licked the back of his neck, and he turned around to see his home on fire.

*I told you, Caretaker! I told you!* The shadow hissed, before burning up like a piece of paper and drifting away on the wind. As the flames crawled into the cage and consumed Mike, his body would go numb and the dream would start over, the smell of fire and brimstone clinging to his nostrils.

After hours of his brain doing this to him, he finally gave up on sleep and rolled out of bed.

“Lily? You there?” He half expected her to poof into existence. She had said she was going to watch him more carefully while he slept. Clearly the dreams themselves had taken place outside of the Dreamscape, which meant he clearly didn’t qualify for Demon Dream Insurance LLC.

His phone, which he forgot to charge, informed him that it was a little after twelve in the afternoon. He plugged the phone in on his nightstand and got dressed before heading downstairs.

Beth, Yuki and Tink were already sitting in the front room, and the goblin sprang to attention.

“Finally, husband up. Find out what’s in box now?”

“Box?” Mike blinked, the events of last night slowly filtering through the haze of his dreams. “Oh, right. Yeah, I need to eat something first.”

“Ugh.” Tink rolled her eyes and picked up a sledgehammer she had set on the floor, then dragged it out of the room, moping the whole way. “Call Tink when open box!” she hollered before storming out the back door.

“She’s in a mood,” he commented.

“She got up early and has been watching the boxes with the rats.” Beth arched an eyebrow. “Apparently she has a bad feeling about one of the boxes.”

“The one that’s moving?”

Beth and Yuki looked at each other.

“About that. The moving box isn’t moving anymore.” Yuki grinned at him, revealing a pair of sharp canines. “It broke free of the duct tape sometime last night.”

“Oh shit, where is it?”

“It’s... still in the dining room.” Yuki stood up and Beth joined her. Beth was holding a few sheets of paper in her hands.

“What are those?” he asked.

“Guesses at what’s in the boxes. We have a full inventory from the storage unit, so technically we know what it could be.” She handed the sheets of paper over. “By eliminating what was sold off versus what wasn’t, and crossing off what is too big to go in the box, the remaining list is what we could be looking at.”

“Okay.” Mike looked down the list. “You’ve only crossed off a few things.”

Beth rolled her eyes. “I’m a lawyer, not a psychic. This missing stuff was a huge pain in my ass, and so much of it is still out there, and we have no idea what Unearthly Delights sold. So yes, I only crossed off a few things.”

“Yeah, sorry.” He ducked past her and walked into the dining hall. “So let’s just go ahead and...”

Mike never finished his thought. The first thing he saw was that the rats had doubled in number, all of them holding miscellaneous weapons of some sort. The second thing he saw was that they were all looking up.

“Oh, fuck me.” He lifted his gaze toward the box that now rested on his ceiling and promptly dropped the papers he was holding.

“Well, what do you think?” Beth scooped up the papers. “I know I’m curious.”

“I think I’m going to need some coffee.” He turned to look at her. “Please tell me that the list has an enchanted ceiling fan on it? Or maybe a chandelier? Something that belongs there?”

Yuki giggled. "C'mon, let's get some food in you and then open up that box."

"I... shit. What about research on the faerie queen?"

"Mike, you have a cardboard box on your ceiling." Beth put her hand on his shoulder. "Sofia is going through those books right now with Ratu in the study, so don't worry about it. Take care of whatever this is first."

"I knew it had been too quiet around here." Scowling, Mike moved into the kitchen and pulled a box of Eggos out from a secret location in the freezer and tossed a pair of them in the toaster. Coffee had already been made, so he poured himself a mug and drank a third of it before his Eggos popped up.

"Anything about our latest guest?" he asked Beth as he slathered butter on his breakfast.

"Oh, he's interesting. But nothing useful, so far anyway." Beth grinned. "I've been keeping an eye on him all morning. He's been busy chatting it up with the centaurs. They've been trying to figure out what's killing the bushes out front, apparently the unique climate of the geas means that conventional knowledge no longer applies, and they're all fascinated. Sulyvahn is the talkative sort, apparently."

"Hmm." Peanut butter went on top of the butter, and he slathered it all in syrup. Since he was in a hurry, he flipped one waffle on top of the other to make a sandwich out of it.

"I don't know how you can eat that," Beth commented. "Too many carbs all at once."

He shrugged and took a big bite, savoring the taste of melted butter and peanut butter. Mike still felt oddly strung out by his bad dreams, and having a mysterious box on his ceiling officially had him on edge. Still, putting some food in his belly was already helping.

Why now, though, he wondered. The last month had been peaceful, but things were suddenly happening all at once, and he half expected a giant to stomp its way into his front yard and take a huge shit on his house while Tink tried to smash its toes in with her hammer. He pictured the little goblin running back and forth, swinging her club and spitting out a symphony of swears before climbing up the giant's leg hairs and biting it on the nuts.

He choked on his Eggo.

Yuki smacked him on the back, and he coughed it back up, then chewed it better before swallowing. "Thanks."

*"Itashimashite."*

"Beg pardon?"

"She said you're welcome." Beth poured herself a cup of coffee.

"You speak Japanese?"

"I speak context." Beth smirked. "Still not a psychic. Just a lawyer."

"And a damn good one, probably." When Beth frowned, he put his hands up in self-defense. "No, I just meant that I haven't really used you in a regular lawyer kind of way. Other than signing some paperwork and preventing magical home invasions, I have no idea how good you are at actual litigation-type stuff."

"A fair observation. I'll let you off just this once, counselor." She smiled and took a sip of her coffee.

Mike shoved another bite of Eggo in his mouth, chewed carefully, then swallowed and turned to Yuki. "Why aren't you working on your tarot cards?"

"You have a box on your ceiling."

"You're curious about what's inside, aren't you?"

Yuki shook her head. "Nope. I'm supposed to keep you out of trouble. Ratu did a brief inspection this morning and didn't detect anything dangerous."

"Her actual word was 'interesting,'" Beth interjected. "She didn't detect anything interesting and declared that she thought you could handle it."

"But we won't know until you open it, so it's my turn to watch you." Yuki bowed her head.

"Ah." Mike slammed the rest of his breakfast, then worked his way through his coffee. After being locked in an extra-dimensional wardrobe last month, the house had discussed heightened security for him, particularly if weird things started to happen. His mysterious shipment definitely qualified as weird. "Well, I guess we should get this show on the road, then."

“I’ll get Tink.” Beth left him alone with Yuki while he put his plate in the dishwasher.

“So, I know this is a sensitive subject, but... any idea what Emily put in storage?”

Yuki shrugged. She had been locked away in her tower when Emily had died and the house had reset, which meant that she still had her memories from before the reset. Everyone else only regained them if Mike discovered something or somebody new. “Hard to say. Between how much stuff has gotten broken and how much is already missing, I really don’t know what she could have gotten rid of. The rats came after I did, and they moved quite a bit of stuff around. “I will say that a magic box that has done its best to come home on its own is beyond me.”

“Ah. Well, thanks anyway.” He finished his coffee and rinsed the cup out before putting it on the drying rack. “Shall we?”

“Yes.” She followed him past the small kitchen table and into the dining hall. The rats were still watching the box on the ceiling intently, and Mike took a seat at the table and waited.

Beth and Tink showed up and sat down. Tink was covered in dirt, but he didn’t bother asking what she had been up to. Beth set Jenny down on the table, the doll’s vacant eyes staring across the room.

“Should we open the other boxes first?”

“Your call,” Beth told him. “Let’s itemize what we have, though. Make sure stuff goes where it needs to instead of making a big mess.”

“I miss the good old days when we could just throw stuff in the trash if we didn’t want it.” He picked up one of the boxes that had been stacked against the wall. Tink slid him a box cutter, then readied her hammer.

“Here goes.” He could feel the whole room tense up, and he pushed the blade of the box cutter into the thick tape that had sealed the box shut. He moved slowly, half expecting something to jump out at him. Satisfied that he was probably safe, he put the box cutter on the table and opened the flaps.

“Oh,” he muttered, staring at the pile of styrofoam popcorn inside. He was going to have to feel around with his hands. Shaking his head in disgust, he stuck his hands inside and felt around, his fingers closing on something hard.

“What’s behind door number one?” he asked in an announcer’s voice, and pulled the object free.

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Dana watched Tink go into the house with Beth, a small frown on her face.

A minute ago, they had been testing one of the drones using a magical stone as a power source. The drone had behaved perfectly for about fifteen seconds, then started chasing Tink through the yard, ignoring its remote. The goblin had taken a nasty fall into one of the potted plants, shattering the pot with her thick skull and covering herself in damp dirt.

With a deluge of angry words in goblin, Tink slid the goggles over her eyes and picked up a chunk of pottery. Her aim had been perfect, and she smashed one of the rotors.

The drone spiraled out of control, rising up while spinning. A strong breeze caught it and carried it across the yard while Dana frantically tried to land it before it landed in someone else’s yard. The drone seemed to respond somewhat to altitude controls, but only intermittently.

On its way down, the drone caught on the edge of the large iron gate in the back of the yard, then tumbled into a death spiral on the other side. That was when Beth had arrived and asked Tink to come with her.

Dana walked up to the large iron gate and put her hands on her hips. The stone wall wasn’t great for climbing by any means, and if Tink had been here, she could have easily given the goblin a boost (or the other way around—Tink was quite strong). Grabbing the gate with both hands, she gave it a shake.

It didn’t budge. The old lock on it had some rust, but looked otherwise functional. She sincerely doubted that Mike had the key to it, though. They had never had any reason to check out the woods behind the house, and she certainly hadn’t seen a key lying around that looked nearly as big as the keyhole was on this particular lock.

“C’mon,” she muttered, sticking her arms through the bars. The drone was still several feet away from her outstretched hands.

The drone itself wasn’t important, but the magical stone inside of it was. She hated to even take her eyes off of it, worried that some passerby might pick

up the drone out of curiosity. She pressed her face against the bars, looking along the edges of the forest behind the house.

There were no trails to be seen, and no signs of life either. It seemed odd to her that so many houses backed to this forest, but nobody was back there. It seemed like the perfect place for an afternoon stroll. The gate was made of thick bands of iron with decorative spikes at the top beneath a brick arch. The arch wasn't high enough for her to fit through the gap, but if she scaled the gate, she could easily get on top of the wall instead.

She put her hands and feet on the gate and started to climb. When she was halfway up, her foot slipped off of one of the bars and she fell backwards, the iron spike at the top she was using as a handhold bending until she slipped. She fell flat on her back, the wind getting knocked out of her.

Standing up, she coughed a few times in an attempt to get her lungs to function properly. She didn't need the air to breathe, but did need it to talk. Several moments passed before the pinching sensation in her chest vanished.

Scowling, she looked at the top of the gate and saw that none of the spikes were bent.

That was odd. She could have sworn she felt it bend. Shrugging, she tried again. This time, she was far more careful about where she put her feet, which was good, because she nearly slipped twice.

Near the top, she put a hand out to grab onto the brick wall and pulled herself up.

"Ha!" She wouldn't let an old, rusty gate defeat her. Twisting around, she dropped onto the ground and started looking for the drone.

It was gone. Puzzled, she walked back and forth along the brick wall.

*It should be right here.* Dana turned to look at the wall and froze.

There was no gate on this side. It was just a solid wall of brick.

"I... that's..." Logically, she wanted to debate the reality of what she saw, but she had already seen far weirder things. Turning to look at the forest, she saw that the forest itself was different as well. Instead of closely grouped trees and thick vegetation, she was looking at a large area with a path that ran through it, as well as a few benches along the path. People walked along it even now, but

nobody seemed to pay her any attention. On the other side of the clearing was the forest itself, now suddenly over a hundred yards away.

Looking around, she spotted what looked like a makeshift step stool by the wall. Some rocks had been stacked, and when she stood on them, she got a good view of the back of the house. It took her a couple of jumps, but she made it up and onto the wall.

“Super weird,” she muttered to herself, then dropped down onto the other side. She was expecting to land on the soft grass of the backyard, but was surprised when she landed on the hard concrete of a sidewalk. The suddenly stiff landing caused something in her leg to pop, and when she stood up, her leg was at a weird angle.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” She looked around, realizing that she was now out in front of the house. How had that happened? Hopping over to the entrance, she was relieved when she passed between the lions without any issue, and was greeted by the sight of a pair of centaurs talking with a man in black.

“Um, hey.” She waved for their attention, and the centaurs immediately recognized her. “Could I get a little help?”

“Oh, now you’re a fascinating lass,” the stranger said, and she realized that this must be Sulyvahn. “What on earth happened to ye?”

“Broke something, probably.” She indicated her leg. One of the centaurs helped her over to a stone to sit on, and the other one examined her, then declared he could set the bone. The process wouldn’t hurt, but it would be tough to do.

“Oh, I’m not talking about that.” Sulyvahn knelt down next to her, his eyes on her breasts. “You’ve got the divine spark in ye, I can see it. But no heartbeat. Are you a member of the undead?”

“Yeah, it was a pretty fucked up Monday. Could you step back please?” She shooed him away, and one centaur held her down while the other twisted her leg back into place. The bones realigned, and she felt a chill spread through her as the break repaired itself. That was an injury that meant she was going to have to feed sooner rather than later. Already, a gnawing sensation formed in her belly.

“Now tell me, lass, how did ye come to be in such a predicament?”

“My name is Dana. Don’t call me lass.”

“Beggin’ yer pardon, Miss Dana.” Sulyvahn gave a slight bow. “I meant no offense. I’ve not met such a creature as yourself, one with her faculties still intact. I’ve rarely seen such a feat.”

“Wait, you’ve seen this before? Hold on a second.” She stood up, testing her leg. It seemed to be fine. She thanked the centaurs, and they went back to their gardening duties. “Have you met someone else like me? An undead that could think for herself?”

“Not quite. The few I’ve met like ye have been the cursed ones, men and women of great power who refused to move on. But you don’t seem to have the aura of a lich, Miss Dana.”

“I’m definitely not a lich. But out of curiosity, what are you?”

“I’m a dullahan, la—Miss Dana.” He grabbed his hair by the hand and pulled, revealing a black mist that flowed from the hole in his neck. “It’s my job to make sure lost souls get to the afterlife.”

“Great. Can you help my soul cross over?”

“Eh... not that I’m aware of. I can only affect the dealings of a soul that isn’t anchored to this world I’m afraid. I imagine trying to ferry you over would be like trying to raise the bottom of the ocean by giving it a good yank.”

“Shit. Sorry, I’m actually in the middle of something right now. Nice talking to you.” She walked past the dullahan at a fast pace, more pressing concerns on her mind. How had she ended up in the front yard? What had happened to the gate? Passing through the house, she heard the others talking in the dining hall, but kept going down the hall to the backdoor. Once she stepped outside, she saw Naia standing in her fountain, gazing toward the gate.

“Oh, there you are.” Naia gave her a wave. “I was down in my spring and came up just as you hopped the wall. Are you okay?”

“I’ve been better.” Her leg clicked when she walked now. “Do you know why I ended up in the front yard?”

“You can only get in through the front. If I had known what you were doing, then I would have warned you.”

“The geas, I’m guessing?”

Naia nodded. "The whole world can't be blocked off, but the back of the house has been sealed. It's why the Society didn't come over the gate out back during their last assault. They could only come in the front."

"Then why the hell do we have a gate?" Dana pointed at it.

"I... uh..." Naia's eyes immediately went blank. "I have no idea."

"Well, do you have a long stick or something? Wait, nevermind." Dana walked into the garage. "Tick Tock, I need you!"

The mimic, disguised as a recliner, came bouncing across the garage only to stop at her feet, its footrest lolling about like the tongue of a dog.

"My drone crashed on the other side of the gate. Do you have an arm long enough to reach it?"

Tick Tock's leg rest opened and closed like a mouth, so Dana closed her eyes. When she opened them, the recliner had become a mannequin with an arm that went nearly to the ground. At the end of its wrist was a large claw that looked like something out of a crane machine.

"Awesome, let's do this." She walked into the yard with the eerie mannequin in tow. Tick Tock could replicate most objects it was familiar with, but only things with mechanical parts. Luckily for her, the shapeshifter had quite the imagination.

"There it is, do you see it?" She reached the gate, and the drone was thankfully still there. Tick Tock squatted down and pushed its arm through the narrow slot of the gate, reaching for the downed drone.

As the mimic's arm moved between the bars and toward the drone, the leaves in the forest began to rustle. An ominous wind picked up, blowing through the gate itself, causing Dana's hair to blow away from her face.

In the distance, behind the trees, something large began to growl.

"Hurry, Tick Tock." The shadows in the forest darkened unexpectedly as Tick Tock's claw closed on the broken drone. The trees rustled their leaves, and whatever was growling was moving closer, the trees shifting at its passage. A dark shape stepped into view, and the sunlight itself seemed to bend around it.

Dana grabbed the mannequin around the waist and pulled. Tick Tock fell backward, the drone in hand, and the shadow beast suddenly vanished from sight. The trees were no longer rustling, and the forest was still once more.

“Sorry, Tick Tock.” She helped the mannequin stand and brushed the dirt off its body. “You okay?”

The mannequin nodded.

“Let’s get you back inside.” She picked up the drone and walked to the garage. Tick Tock followed her in and quickly turned into an upright piano that rolled across the floor and came to a stop next to her desk.

The mimic played a few notes.

“Yeah, I’m okay too, thanks for asking.” She sat at her bench and examined the busted drone. Luckily, the stone was still there. She removed the stone and the harness and put it in her toolbox. “Any idea what that was out there?”

Tick Tock played a series of notes that sounded roughly like the words *no idea*.

“Yeah, well me neither. Any ideas on marrying science and magic to make this drone work?”

Tick Tock played a similar tune.

“Yeah, I’m out of fucking ideas, too.” She tossed the drone on the ground.

Tick Tock played a bunch of notes, and Dana turned around with a frown.

“Hey, watch your mouth. Who’s been teaching you language like that?”

Tick Tock went silent, then softly played the opening notes to *Moonlight Sonata*.

“No, no, don’t change the subject. Was it Lily? Tink? I won’t be mad, I just wanna hear—”

A loud explosion rattled the garage, and dust fell from the rafters above. The ground shook for several seconds, and Dana put her arms over the piano to protect it from debris.

Once the world settled, she turned around and looked at the garage. A few cracks had appeared in the concrete floor, and she hoped that her little apartment underneath was okay.

But that could wait until later.

“Stay here,” she told the mimic, and stepped outside the garage, her eyes scanning the house. Windows had cracked, and a few shingles had fallen free, but nothing seemed seriously damaged.

“Oh!” Naia stood in the fountain, her hands over her mouth. She was looking at the roof of the house, so Dana stepped back, eager to see what Naia was looking at.

Once she saw it, she couldn't help but agree.

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Mike sat at the table, frowning at the collection of objects they had unpacked.

With the exception of the box on the ceiling, they had unpacked everything else. A pair of silver candlesticks and some ornate drapes were the only thing that seemed to have any value, but the rest of the items looked like someone had gone on a thrift store shopping spree.

“I don't get it.” Mike picked up a throw pillow. “Who packs a pillow? None of this stuff has any value whatsoever.”

“Are you sure you don't detect anything magical?” Beth asked Yuki.

“Nothing. At all. This is just ordinary stuff.” Yuki set down a small wooden statue of a man holding a net full of fish. “I don't recognize any of it either.”

“But it's on the list, right?”

Beth shrugged. “The list is very specific, but most of this would fall under the miscellaneous category they have. The candlesticks are on there, as well as the drapes, so we know we have stuff from the house.”

“Tink? Anything?”

The goblin was going through a small stack of clothing, which amounted to little more than some tube tops and booty shorts. “Tink see nothing useful.” She held the tube top over her own chest, stretching the fabric. “Clothes too big for Tink, too small for dead girl.”

“Definitely too small for Emily, right?” he looked to Yuki for confirmation.

“Indeed.” Yuki picked up one of the tube tops. “Emily was far curvier than this.” She stretched one of the tube tops and fired it at Tink, who slapped it out of the air.

“Wait a second.” Mike looked at the collection of items on the table. He could almost see it now, if he were to rearrange the items. Curtains, a blanket, pillows, even a set of clothes. “This looks almost like a bedroom set.”

“Oh!” Beth stood up and moved to a different position along the table. “I think you’re right. Look at the colors on the pillows, they match the drapes. There’s a small blanket that matches as well. Still...” she picked up a broken watch. “I’m not certain what’s going on with the junk drawer vibe.”

“Seriously, look at all these pens.” Mike grabbed the stack on his side of the table. Some of the pens had business names on them, and a couple even still had chains attached. Jenny, active now, was busy building a mock log cabin out of them on the corner of the table. “So, we’ve got a bedroom set and someone’s trash pile.”

“And their piggy bank,” Yuki announced, picking up a quarter. There was a bunch of loose change scattered through the boxes, and they all had a small stack in front of them. “Might be enough to order a pizza later.”

“Tink wants pineapple,” the goblin declared, and both Yuki and Beth groaned.

“So... if we have the contents of a room, and someone’s belongings...” Mike lifted his eyes to the ceiling.

“Then perhaps somebody is actually inside that box.” Beth finished. “But what?”

“Tink have bad feeling about box.” The goblin slid off her chair and picked up her hammer.

“Yuki? Still not getting anything?”

“No. It’s weird, because the box is clearly magical, but I’m not detecting anything off of it.” Yuki squinted at the box suspiciously. “I get an angry feeling just by looking at it. It feels... wrong, somehow.”

“Okay, then I guess the real question is how should we open it?”

The moment the words were out of his mouth, the box fell straight down, landing neatly in front of Mike. It had been taped shut with multiple layers of packing tape. He tried to pick up the box, but it was extremely heavy.

“Um...” he looked at Beth. “Who has the box cutter?”

“It’s under the blanket.” Yuki pulled the blanket off of the table, and neatly caught the box cutter before it could hit the floor. “Here.”

“Sure you don’t want to do the honors?” he asked, taking the cutters.

“No thanks.” The room was already growing cold, and frost had begun to accumulate on the table in front of her, and she held up one hand to reveal that her fingertips were now claws. “I need to be ready.”

“Aw, geez.” He touched the blade to the tape on the box and paused. His gut would tell him if something meant him harm, and right now, he felt fine. The tension in the room was palpable, and when he slid the razor blade through the tape, he could tell that everybody was holding their breath.

He expected something to burst out, Jack in the Box style, or even a burst of fire, lightning, or smoke as he opened a portal to another dimension. Instead, the box sat there, waiting for him to peel back the flap.

“That was anticlimactic.” He lifted the flap and looked inside.

“Well?” Beth asked.

“It’s... it’s...” He looked up at her. “A door handle.”

“And?”

“That’s it.” He stuck his hand inside and pulled the piece of metal out. “There’s nothing else in the box.” He grabbed the box and shook it with his spare hand. It wasn’t even heavy anymore.

“That doesn’t make sense.” Beth came to his side and looked in the box. “None of this makes sense.”

“Why would Emily pack up a—” the handle became hot and leapt from his hand, then blew a hole through the wall, taking chunks of plaster with it.

“Shit!” Everyone stood up and rushed to the front room. The handle was spinning wildly around the room and bouncing off of the walls with a heavy clang.

Yuki summoned up a barrier of ice for them to hide behind, and the handle clanged off of it several times before launching itself into the office.

“Death!” He didn’t know if the grim reaper could be hurt by such a thing, but he had given up on logical assumptions weeks ago. “Heads up!”

They all ran to the office, and Mike leaned around the corner. Death sat calmly at his table, his cup of tea in one hand and his pot in the other as he tilted his skull to watch the flight path of the door handle.

“Mike Radley, what is this strange device? It is acting—” the metal handle struck Death’s teapot, shattering it and spraying tea everywhere. Covered in what smelled like chamomile, the grim reaper rose, fire burning deep within his eye sockets.

“I didn’t want to do this, but you’ve left me no choice.” Death’s voice was little more than a hiss, and he pulled his cowl up and tilted his head from side to side, the bones popping within.

“Death, be careful!” Mike hollered. Was Death going to summon his scythe or something? He half expected the specter to summon his scythe and slash the handle in half, or cast it straight into Hell.

“I do not need to be careful, Mike Radley.” Death passed around the table, and the door handle ricocheted harmlessly off of his skull. He stopped briefly at the doorway to appraise everyone. “I am simply going to make myself some more tea.”

“But... I thought... you sounded so mad.”

“I *am* angry, Mike Radley. I now have to make my tea one cup at a time, and that is *quite* annoying.” Death passed by all of them, and Yuki snorted, her hand over her mouth.

“What did he say?” Beth asked.

“Nothing important.” He watched the handle bounce around some more, knocking books off the shelves and scattering Death’s maps around the room. Suddenly, it halted in midair and glowed red hot, showering the floor with sparks.

Tink bolted around the corner and swung her hammer through the air. The moment before impact, the handle fired itself straight into one of the bookshelves, splintering the wood and embedding itself in the wall behind it. Tink’s swing went wide, and the hammer splintered the floor on impact.

“Fucking, cock-eating piece of shit...” she started, but Mike tuned her out. Smoke was pouring out of the bookshelf now, and he worried that the books would catch on fire. The last thing he needed was another fire in the office.

“Yuki, quick!” He and Beth ran for the shelf and began pulling books down. Yuki stood in the center of the room and blasted the shelf with her magic, trying to cool the room down before it ignited. Frost formed in a giant ring around them as the heat kept ice from forming.

A constant fountain of sparks now emerged from the door handle, and Mike finally grabbed the book shelf and pulled it down, spilling books across the floor. Beth stood across from him, her hands shielding her eyes. He couldn’t help but notice the odd shadows the light cast across her body, or how her nipples stood at full attention in the chill of the room. With her arm folded up, her breasts were now pressed together, revealing an ample amount of cleavage.

*Focus!* He turned back to the handle just as Tink attacked it anew with the hammer, her goggles over her eyes.

A sound like thunder filled the room, and the goblin was blasted into the opposite wall, holding only the handle of her hammer. The room was now like a sauna, and the office disappeared into the mist.

“Tink!” Mike took a deep breath to call for her again, but choked on the thick steam.

“Tink fine,” the goblin grumbled from somewhere behind him. “Broke hammer, but okay.”

A hand grabbed his and pulled. He followed, and was pulled out into the living room by Beth, who was in turn being pulled by Yuki.

“Tink!” he shouted back into the office. A green figure crawled out of the steam and collapsed on the floor with a grunt. When he knelt by her side, she dramatically flopped onto her back.

“Husband do mouth to mouth,” Tink whispered, then pushed her goggles up to reveal closed eyes. “Tink probably die. Maybe.”

He rolled his eyes, but leaned in to give her a quick peck on the lips. She grabbed him by the back of the head with both hands and held him in place as her tongue darted into his mouth. Caught off guard, he tried to sit back, which resulted in Tink biting his lower lip as she popped free.

He rubbed his lip and stood, shaking his head.

“Tink saved!” the goblin declared, then stood up and flexed her biceps before throwing herself at him and pinching his butt. “Husband is Tink’s hero.”

Over his shoulder, Mike heard Beth laugh.

“The steam is clearing,” Yuki announced. She was crouched on the floor, and several rivulets of ice ran from her fingertips into the office. She was clearly cooling the air with her magic.

“Let’s go see what sort of mess we’re in for now.” He took the lead, only to have Tink rush ahead of him. She pulled her goggles down and scrutinized the metal handle that was now embedded in the wall.

“Not hot,” she declared, then grabbed the handle and pulled. “Stuck good.”

“Why would a door handle fly through the house and embed itself in the wall?” Beth wondered, her chin in her hand. “I don’t get it.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to get.” Mike leaned in close to inspect the handle. It was a nicely twisted piece of black metal, which reminded him of the door handle of a fancy downtown restaurant he had once eaten at. It was bolted neatly into the wall, which was somehow untouched by the heat it gave off earlier. “I have a handle on the wall now.”

“For what, though? Is the whole house gonna tilt?” Beth stood by his side now. “Is that the ‘Oh, shit’ handle for your home?” She grabbed onto it and gave it a pull. “It must be in a stud.”

“Please. Don’t even suggest things like that. Sometimes I think the house is listening. Now that you’ve said it, I’m going to find myself crawling down the stairs at two in the morning just to grab this handle to keep from falling out of—” to emphasize his point, he grabbed the handle and pulled.

A loud boom shook the house, and the ground rumbled beneath them. A nearby bookshelf toppled, and Beth let out a scream. Tink grabbed on to Mike’s leg and held on for dear life as the wall behind the handle glowed like a tiny star, the plaster burning away beneath it. Two beams of light came from the wall and moved in a large rectangular pattern.

He felt like he had been plugged into a wall socket, and a golden glow surrounded him, rushing down his arm and into the wall. His fingers tightly gripped the handle, and he felt his entire body heat up.

A tone like a church bell sounded, and the shaking stopped. He fell to his knees, and his fingers released the handle. He looked at the palm of his hand, where he had gripped the handle so tightly that the twisted pattern of the metal had been left behind.

“Is this... is this a portal?” He stood and took a step back, looking at Yuki. “It’s gotta be, right?”

“I don’t think so. It looks like an ordinary door.” Yuki frowned. “I don’t understand. Does it go outside?”

“No go outside,” Tink muttered from the floor. Mike helped her stand. “Stay inside. Tink remember.”

“Tink remembers what?”

“Tink show you, understand from out here.” The goblin bolted toward the front door and Mike followed. When they walked outside, he let out a groan.

Where the front porch had been extended to include the gazebo, a giant section of the house now stood, and the gazebo had been ripped completely off its foundation. Across the yard, a few centaurs had appeared already, weapons ready, and the jabberwock lifted its head from the bushes, the roof of the gazebo falling off of its head. It snorted and lay back down, vanishing in the bushes.

He walked out into the yard and turned around to look.

“Okay. I know for a fact that wasn’t on the list.” On the left side of his house was a turret that was slightly larger than the one on the right side of the house. This one looked dirty and faded, as if someone had cleaned the entire house but neglected this portion.

“I don’t... I just...” Beth tilted her head. “Do I hear moaning?”

Yuki’s ears twitched, and her cheeks reddened. Mike listened intently and heard the sounds of a woman grunting in pain beneath a section of porch roof that had toppled off the house. He and Tink moved toward it and lifted the section up to free the trapped woman.

Underneath, Abella stared up at them in embarrassment. In her hand was her tablet, the screen cracked all the way across. She was frantically tapping it with her other hand, but obviously the screen’s sensor had broken, and the porn she had been watching continued to play unhindered. A headphone jack dangled

from one of her ears, and she plugged it back into her tablet, the sounds of moaning disappearing.

“Um, I was on the roof when this appeared.” Abella looked over her shoulder at the house. “I fell down, and, uh...”

“It’s fine.” Mike knelt down by her. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just a bit embarrassed.” Her cheeks darkened, and she stood. She let out a sigh, then handed the tablet to Mike. Through the large crack on the screen, a woman was getting pounded by two separate guys. “I don’t know how to make it stop.”

He chuckled, and did a force shutdown on the tablet. “I’ll get you a new one, once this is all sorted.” He turned his attention to the new addition to the house. “Tink says she recognizes this. How about you?”

“I do, but...” Abella’s features pinched. “I was never allowed inside. That’s all I really know about it.”

“Tink knows, she can show husband.” The goblin grabbed his hand, but Mike held his ground.

“Hold up. Let’s check on everyone else first, make sure there isn’t serious damage anywhere else. Then we can check it out.” Why had this addition’s appearance been so violent? And how had Emily packed away a portion of the house? Why send it away?

Those were questions he intended to find out, but before he did anything else, he crossed the yard toward the sundial. Several of the bushes had been flattened by chunks of his porch, and when he got to the dial, he gave it a good twist. If he had learned one thing from his time in the house, it was to make sure the defense system was active before going somewhere new.

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She opened her eyes, quickly scanning the room. It seemed empty, and she was on the floor. Instinctively, her hands went to her throat, and she relaxed when she realized nothing was there.

*What was that about*, she wondered. Letting out a big yawn, she stretched, feeling all of her limbs pop, then stood. How long had she been asleep? And where was she? The room she was in had a large window that overlooked the large yard, and she walked toward it.

Down below, she saw a small group of people talking to each other. Pressing her face against the glass, her attention was caught by one of them. It was a man, and he moved through a maze-shaped garden to turn a sundial. He had a weird aura about him, almost as if he was a movie star, and the spotlight followed him around. It was strange to contemplate a complete stranger in such a manner, but everything about her situation seemed odd to her, so she looked around the room some more for some answers.

Her best guess was that it had been some kind of music room. Other than hardwood floors and a large, broken harp, she had no idea what else it could be. This should have troubled her, but now she realized something even worse.

She had no idea who she was. Looking down, she saw that not only was she naked, but large portions of her body were covered in dark, silken fur that closely matched the color of her skin. Her belly was white, though, and she ran her fingers over it, marveling at how soft it was.

Wait, no, not completely naked. Her fingertips caught on a pair of lycra shorts that closely matched her fur. Moving back to the window, she tried to catch a glimpse of her reflection, but it was too bright outside to get a reflection off the glass.

She heard movement beneath her, and realized that the crowd of people had moved back inside of the house. Using her hands, she felt around the window, hoping to find a way to open it and climb out. There was something about the house that she didn't like, a fear response that told her to run, but the window was painted shut.

Could she break the glass? She looked at the harp. It was far too heavy for her to pick up, and even if she did break the glass, the strangers would likely come to investigate. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she moved silently across the room to the door. Fearing that it would be locked, she gave it a tug.

The door slid open, catching briefly in its frame. She stepped into the hallway, grateful that nobody was there. Moving stealthily, she saw that she was in a hallway that terminated in a door if she went straight, but turned into a flight of stairs if she went right.

A strange smell caught her nose, and she sniffed. Her eyes narrowed on a room at the end of the hallway, and she stared for several seconds, her instincts demanding that she go check it out.

Something brushed against her back and she flinched, then spun around. The hallway behind her was empty.

Something touched her again.

Spinning wildly, she caught it out of the corner of her eye. She tumbled around, both hands grabbing for it, and finally managed to catch it just as she rolled onto the floor.

“What the hell are you?” she croaked, holding the furry object in her hands. She had pinned it under her back while falling, and when she pulled on it, she felt painful pressure just above her butt.

*I have a tail?!?* She let go and stood up, watching the protuberance swish playfully back and forth and barely resisting the urge to grab it

*What’s wrong with me?*

The stairs creaked, and she ducked around the corner, crouching down near the ground. A woman walked past, putting her hair up in a ponytail, and she was followed by a slightly shorter woman with a large, thick tail of her own.

No, wait. It was multiple tails. *What is going on here?*

She slid along the wooden floor, down the hall, ready to scramble away at a moment’s notice. From the stairway, she could see the front door below, which was currently blocked by a goblin and several large rats. They weren’t looking her way, so she slunk up the stairs, staying low.

The two women had gone into a room down the hall, so she moved the other direction into what appeared to be the master bedroom. It was scarcely furnished, and the bed hadn’t been made.

She moved toward the dressers and opened them, hoping to find some clothing that would fit. Unfortunately, this room belonged to a man, and the clothes were far too big for her. She held a pair of his pants up, the waistline reaching above her breasts.

What about the window? She looked outside and scowled. Down below was a beautiful woman standing in a fountain. She just couldn’t catch a break.

Footsteps approached, so she hopped over the bed, then slid beneath it without making a sound. Easily able to roll over, she watched a pair of legs come

through the door. It was the man from outside, and he sat down on the bed, then grabbed something off the nearby nightstand.

“Let’s see. New tablet, new screen protector... yes, I want the waterproof one...” He was mumbling to himself, and tapping his fingers on something up above.

“Mike?” Another pair of legs appeared. It was the woman from the stairs. “Yuki went down to the Labyrinth to fill Ratu in on the situation.”

“Sounds good. Couldn’t send a fairy?”

“Didn’t see one. However, it looks like there’s a new room down the hall from mine.”

He chuckled. “How is this going to affect my home’s value? I mean, I know I still have to pay taxes on this place, but at what point does somebody look and realize the number is too low? Like, I sort of get Google Earth playing catchup on satellite photos, but is the geas paying back taxes for me, too? Like, it’s one thing to alter the flow of information, but now money is just appearing if that’s the case, right?”

“I’m kind of tempted to look into it, now that you brought it up. Anyway, I’m headed downstairs. Dana came in and told me that the house has some damage out back, so she’s going to look into it, but Tink refused to go help her until she showed you the new rooms, so... see you soon?”

“Yeah, let me just finish ordering a new tablet for Abella. My phone just updated and now I have to put my card number in again.”

“Aren’t you worried she’s rotting her brain with that thing?”

“Stone doesn’t rot.”

“Aren’t you worried she’s weathering her brain with that thing?”

He groaned. “Seriously, that was just gross. I’ll be down in just a second.”

“See you soon.” The woman left, and he let out a sigh. He tapped for a little bit longer, and she wondered how long he would be up there.

She didn’t have to wait long. Mike stood and something slid off the bed and onto the floor. It was a rectangular piece of metal with a cracked screen.

“Shit,” he muttered, and bent down to pick it up. “At least it was already—” His bed was at just the right height that when his face appeared, his eyes darted up to meet hers.

She extended her claws and scrambled out, growling deep within her chest as her claws scratched deep grooves into the floor. Mike backpedaled, blocking off the path to the door.

“Whoa, hey, who are—” He didn’t get a chance to finish, because she darted forward, her clawed fingers slashing through the air. She was fast, but he was somehow just a hair faster, and she slashed open his shirt, drawing a thin line of blood.

“Easy, easy!” He put both hands up, and she grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him toward her. Even though she was much smaller than he was, she was easily able to put a lock on his wrist and twist him around, shoving him against the bed frame. He fought to remain on his feet, but she was crawling all over him now, doing her best to scratch and bite.

Buried beneath the animal instincts was an understanding of the human body, and how best to break it. She fell to the ground and hit him behind the knee, taking him down. Before he could get up, she slid one arm across his throat and used her other arm to pull it back.

He smacked at her arm, and tried to stand. She squeezed harder, knowing that the flow of blood to his brain was interrupted. How many seconds did he have left before going down? Once he went limp, should she keep squeezing, or make a run for it?

Something hard slammed into the side of her head, and she sprung free, hissing. Standing over Mike now was a goblin roughly the same size that she was.

“Tink fuck you up,” the goblin swore, then ripped off her goggles and tossed them to the woman who had followed her in. She held up her hands and snarled, revealing razor sharp teeth.

“I’d like to see you try.” Her voice cracked when she spoke, and had a slight lisp to it. Had she always sounded like that?

Tink was fast, but she was faster. She dodged the first couple of punches, and then deliberately took a poorly thrown one in the shoulder to get in close and smash a fist into the goblin’s face.

She howled in agony, clutching her injured hand. Her whole hand throbbed, and she couldn't straighten some of her fingers.

"Goblin have hard head. Tink teach you." The goblin grabbed her by the fur around her collarbone and yanked, slamming their heads together.

The world briefly dimmed, but she wasn't out of the fight yet. Now that they were close, she grappled the goblin onto the ground, trying to twist an arm behind her back. The goblin, who was surprisingly strong, forced her way out of the hold.

She growled, and slashed out with her claws. Tink took the hit, her dress tearing in the process, then landed another punch to the face that knocked her silly.

"Stupid kitty cat. Tink beat all nine lives out of you, then make you into a rug!"

Shaking her head, she charged forward and tackled the goblin to the ground where they became a bundle of hair, teeth and nails. Shrieks of rage came from both of them, and the other woman tried to break them up, but took a nasty slash to the arm and backed away.

When Tink bit down on her tail, she twisted around and used her claws to gouge Tink in the eyes, blinding her. She used that moment to break free. With a powerful leap, she crossed over the bed and landed by the window. It slid open easily, and she scrambled onto the ledge, looking down. The fall didn't look too bad, and she could probably outrun the woman in the fountain.

So she jumped.

A powerful hand grabbed her painfully by the scruff of the neck, her legs dangling over the ground below. She squirmed, flailing her arms around wildly in an attempt to get away.

"Hey, stop, you'll fall. Hey, knock it off!" The woman who spoke to her had a slight french accent, and she was able to twist around enough to catch just a glimpse of large stone wings, followed by the concerned face of a statue.

She was being held by a gargoyle.

Adrenaline surged through her body, and she fought even harder to escape. The pain behind her neck was terrible, and she thought her skin might rip, but she had to get away.

The gargoyle sighed. "Okay, then. Whatever." The monster cocked up her spare fist and swung it, the impact immediately twisting the whole world sideways.

Darkness swallowed her whole, carrying her away on a symphony of silence.

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Cecilia's cage was constructed of pure silver. Not only were the bars close enough together that she couldn't hope to squeeze through them, but the floor was made of silver, too. Just the act of walking across the cage would cause her pain, but luckily she had a swing to sit on. It was a simple wooden plank, attached to the ceiling by ropes. Maybe the queen had given it to her to be kind, or maybe as a depressing reminder of her time on Earth at the Radley estate.

It was always hard to tell with the faerie queen.

On Earth, she could only see vague outlines of the world, brightened by the spirits of the creatures that walked it. Here in the Otherlands, the world itself was made of magic, and she was able to view the world as it was normally seen.

The court of the faerie queen was luxurious. She had built the court into the base of a mountain, and three different streams terminated in waterfalls that fed the pool that surrounded Her Majesty's throne room. Behind the falling water was where servants and vassals waited until they were called. A series of stepping stones led to the central platform, and it was here that the queen sat on a solitary throne.

Today, however, court was not in session, and the only sound she heard was the steady rush of water into the pool. Her cage had been placed on a stone just behind the queen's throne. None of the other fae dared to even look Cecilia's way, terrified that some of the queen's anger may become misdirected.

She wondered how long it had been on Earth. The flow of time between the worlds was constantly shifting, and the light here was unnatural. Assuming that the faerie queen only held court once a day, then she had already been here for three years. That could mean an hour in the real world, or maybe even fifty years, she wouldn't know until she returned.

*If she returned.*

The room filled with a sense of foreboding, and the faerie queen stepped out of a ball of light on the other side of the room, walking slowly across the rocks

on bare feet. Golden hair cascaded down her back, tumbling around all six wings that protruded from her shoulder blades. The wings themselves were made of white light, and they blinked out of existence, transforming into a sheer, silken cloak that dragged along the ground.

“Good morning, *a leanbh*.” The queen walked up to Cecilia’s cage. “And how are you this day?”

“I am well, Your Majesty.” Cecilia bowed her head in reverence.

“Oh, good. I would hate to hear that you felt otherwise.” The queen tilted her head. “I do wonder though. Do you still think often of him?”

“I do, Your Majesty.” Cecilia fought to keep a smile from forming at the thought of Mike. “Every moment.”

“Interesting. You pine for him, though he has made no effort to come retrieve you.” The queen sat on her throne, which hovered above the ground. It rotated so that she could face Cecilia. “My spies are watching him, you know. He has no interest in coming for you. I won’t be cruel and tell you that he is glad you are gone, but I will say that he knows that you are here, and simply can’t be bothered. Knowing this, do you feel any different?”

“No, Your Majesty.” It wouldn’t do any good to lie, the queen would know. “I still love him like I have loved no other.”

“Clearly.” The queen rose and paced outside of Cecilia’s cage. “And why do you suppose that is? Is it the piece of his soul that festers inside of you? Is it the whimsy of human emotions you are ill equipped to handle? Tell me, *a leanbh*.”

“I don’t know, Your Majesty.” Cecilia lowered her head. “My time with him was brief, but it has meant more to me than the entire time I have walked the world of Man. It started so simple, as a curiosity, but something happened.” Even she wasn’t sure what. His magic had done something to her, something that shouldn’t have been possible. A piece of his soul had swapped places with her very life force. The *sidhe* didn’t have souls in a traditional sense, which meant that Mike had unknowingly become part faerie.

It was hard to figure out which angered the queen more. The idea of a banshee falling in love with a human, or that human gaining access to faerie magic.

“Hmm.” The queen regarded her coolly, as she did every time they had this discussion. Sometimes it was days, or even months between these chats, and the queen would occasionally pontificate for hours before getting to the point.

Cecilia held her breath, waiting for the question that was coming.

“Would you like me to fix you?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

“As you wish, silly child.” The queen smirked and turned her throne around. Raising her hands, she clapped twice, and the day’s proceedings began with selkies flying through the waterfall and bringing the queen news of the outside world.

Cecilia sat in her cage, her gaze on the court. The queen could fix Cecilia, and return her to her prior state. However, by doing so, Cecilia would forget everything that had transpired since her last trip here, when she had ferried Emily’s soul across. She would forget about Mike, who she sincerely doubted would just sit around if he found out she was being held against her will.

The queen’s other option was to simply wait until Mike died. On his death, his soul would depart, and that part of Cecilia he carried with him would return.

Cecilia dreaded this day as well. Not because it meant she would never be with Mike again. The idea of never being with Mike again broke her heart, but she was consoled by the fact that he would forever be beyond the queen’s wrath.

No, what scared her was how angry the queen would be when she discovered that the tiny piece of Mike’s soul had taken root, like a seed. Unlike the other girls, Cecilia’s entire being was composed of Old Magic, which was little more than raw potential. It was said that nature abhors a vacuum, and the roots had spread, and what had started as something else was now becoming much, much more.

Cecilia was slowly growing a soul of her own. She swung back and forth on the swing and closed her eyes, her thoughts on Mike.

“*A chiste is a stór,*” she whispered. “Please... stay away.”