

## Oregon Trail

It was almost noon when a small retinue of rats tracked Mike down at the bench by the back gate with Cerberus. Cerberus, in human form with a spectral chain around their neck, bared their teeth at the rats. They stopped when Mike patted the center head. He had discovered a few months ago that the center head was like the alpha of the pack. The only reason that they were grumpy was that they knew Mike was leaving.

“You be good while I’m gone,” he told the hellhound as he stood. “No barking at the fairies. No growling at Tink. Lily is fair game, though.”

This last one got a sheepish grin from the center head. Though they considered Mike their boss, Lily was definitely second-in-command due to her demonic nature. There was no way they would ever consider doing such a thing.

“Master come home soon?” They asked. Each head took a turn with each word, the speech slightly stilted as a result.

“I will come home when my business is done.” He gave Cerberus a hug, then kissed each forehead. “I’m counting on you to protect the house.”

Cerberus backed away, their features solemn as they nodded. The large chain fastened around their necks retracted into the Underworld as they walked through the iron gate. Once on the other side, the spectral chain vanished and Cerberus reverted to their true form in a flash of crimson flames. They let out a howl and ran into the mist of the Underworld as Mike closed the gate and locked it.

When he made it to the top of the yard, Dana was waiting for him next to Naia’s fountain.

“How is she this morning?” he asked.

Dana frowned. “She’s fine, but...it isn’t pretty.”

“You look like you’re ready for an adventure,” he said. With Eulalie unable to go, Dana had been the first to volunteer to guide him. Ever since dying, her memory was perfect, which would help them find the cabin in the woods. “Is that...Tick Tock?” He was referring to the backpack she wore.

“No, Tick Tock is staying here,” she explained. “As long as he has the you-know-what stored away, it makes more sense to keep him here.”

Dana was referring to the Grimoire of Morgana Le Fey. The magical text was full of powerful spells and its rumored existence alone had caused multiple attempts to break into his home. The mimic had been instructed to swallow the damned thing if anyone tried to take it. He had been tempted on a few occasions to just ask Tick Tock to do it, but he wanted Ratu to search its pages before he did. If it really was one of the most powerful magical texts ever, it might hold the secret to bringing Dana back to life.

“That’s really smart, I’m glad you thought of it. So...what are you bringing?”

“Spare change of clothes. For myself and—”

“Me.” Quetzalli stepped out of the garage, her purple hair nearly iridescent in the sun. A silver horn sat in the middle of her forehead, and beneath it was a streak of either dust or cobwebs. “If Dana is coming, then I am too.”

“There may be a fight,” he warned her.

“I’m no stranger to a fight.” She winked at him. A dragon stuck in human form, she was able to manipulate electricity and could speak about storms for hours. “My horn has grown half-an-inch in the last three months, so my control is getting better.”

To elaborate her point, she held her hands apart and he watched tiny streamers flow back and forth between her palms. He opened his mouth to say something, but Dana put her hand over his lips.

“I know what you’re going to do,” she told him. “And if you make an electricity joke, I will punch you.”

He held up his hands and tried to wipe the smirk off his face. “Okay, that’s fair. I’ll keep it to myself.”

“Now that’s actually shocking,” Amymone said from up in her tree.

“Could you zap her?” Dana asked.

Quetzalli frowned. “No. Wood is a poor conductor.”

“Go, go,” Naia told them before leaning out of her fountain to give Mike a hug. “You’ll only encourage her if you pay her any attention.”

Up in the tree, Amymone laughed, then looked down at Mike. “She’s not wrong. Make sure you come home, okay?”

He nodded, and they all followed the rat to the front of the house. Out front, Tink had constructed a small shed off to the side of the house. A pair of centaurs stood next to it, and one of them held out a scroll and a small bag for Mike.

“From Zel?” he asked. They nodded, and he took the bag and put it over his shoulder. It rattled with potions inside, which brought a smile to his face. Last time Zel had sent him off with potions, things had become very interesting.

“Tell her thank you for me.” He debated having them tell her he missed her, but figured it might be inappropriate for them to pass that to their chieftain. Zel was constantly busy, but he was no different. As a change from taking care of the house and its occupants, this little excursion was already beginning to feel like a small vacation.

Reggie stepped out of the shed and put his crown on. “We just finished. You will need to crawl through the hole. The cabin is abandoned, but the only place we could manage a portal was in the cellar. The building is a bit unstable.”

“It’s not gonna fall on me, is it?” Mike picked up the backpack he had stuck there early this morning. Inside it was a spare change of his own clothes and some food that Sofia had prepped for him. There was also a compass, a multi-tool, and other supplies he had packed for emergencies.

Reggie shook his head. “It shouldn’t, but I doubt it makes it another winter.”

“Good to know.” Mike picked up the coat he had set next to his bag and put it on. He saw Quetzalli do the same thing, then looked at Dana.

“No coat?” he asked.

“Why bother?”

“Fair point. I guess we’re just waiting for Yuki.”

The front door opened and the kitsune stepped outside. She wore a white fur coat that went down to her knees, and a pair of fur-lined boots. Once off the porch, she crossed the yard and stood next to Mike. Yuki placed her hands on her waist and grinned. Her canines looked as if they had been recently polished.

“Excited?” he asked.

“Very.” She placed an arm around his shoulders and smiled. “Been awhile since I’ve seen somewhere new.”

“That makes both of us.” He looked around at everyone that had gathered. Cecilia waved to him dreamily from the front porch while Tink scowled at him nearby. The little goblin wasn’t happy to be left behind, but he felt like he was in good enough hands with Yuki. The snow-covered forests of Oregon would give her a huge advantage.

“Oh, don’t worry little goblin.” Lily stepped out of the house, but had already shape-shifted into Mike. “You can always snuggle with me at night.”

“Fucking horny bitch,” Tink muttered, then ran up and hugged Mike around the waist. “Husband come home safe or Tink be really mad, bite husband real good this time.”

“Oh, I know you will.” During an intimate moment this morning, she had bitten him on the neck hard enough to leave a mark. When he let her go, she moved over to stand with Kisa, who was sitting on the stairs. Next to her was Lily, a mirror image of himself. “As for you, try to behave.”

“Of course I will,” Lily told him in his own voice. “Cause I’m a boy scout. Be prepared, right? Now where are my bitches at? We’re gonna be fucking for days!”

“That’s not what I sound like,” he muttered.

“C’mon, bro, it’s all good.” Lily threw her arms around Mike and gave him a good squeeze. She lowered her voice to a whisper. “I’m going to knock everybody up while you’re gone, just you watch. I’ve got enough of your baby juice packed away to make mommas out of all of them.”

“What?” His mouth was suddenly dryer than it had ever been.

“Gotta go!” Lily stuck out her tongue and walked back up to the front door. “I’ve got a date with a kitty cat.” When she looked down at Kisa, the cat girl nodded and slid the silver bracelet onto her wrist.

Mike groaned as they went inside. He knew he could trust Lily, but she wasn’t making it easy for him.

“Mike?” Beth walked up from the garden with Sulyvahn in tow. “Are you leaving now?”

"I am." He gave her an awkward wave. "Hopefully this goes better than last time."

She grimaced. If the roof was still attached when he came home, he would consider it a win.

"I guess that's that," he said, then opened the door to the shed. A cold blast of air came through it. "So let's—"

Abella landed with a thud in front of him, causing him to jump.

"I'm going too," she said, her dark eyes glittering.

Mike blinked in astonishment. "I thought you couldn't leave the house."

"I cannot," she told him. "Unless the Caretaker is in danger. I believe that you are walking into danger right now, therefore I am going with you."

"Abella, I—" He looked over at Beth, hoping she would interject. Without Abella, the home's strongest defenders would be away.

"I know what you're thinking," Abella said. "The home will be fine without me. It can be rebuilt. You cannot."

*Famous last words*, he thought.

"They have the centaurs, and the lizard." She added while gesturing at the Jabberwock. "And Lily is almost as strong as I am. In fact, this place is more well guarded than when you first moved in. And if someone should actually breach the house, I'm sure Ratu and Asterion would show up to help as well."

He thought about arguing with her, but to what end? She had already made up her mind and he wasn't sure he could convince her otherwise.

"We'll need to be careful," he informed her. "Apparently the cabin is a bit unstable."

"I'll go last," she said. "You've made a wise decision."

He looked over at Yuki, then back at Abella. The two of them alone had been enough to fight off a possessed Jabberwock, he couldn't imagine an obstacle they couldn't handle.

"I guess it's time then." He looked at the house, then at Beth. "Call me if there's trouble."

She nodded knowingly. "You do the same." Once he was through the portal, the plan was to have the rats close it. If something drastic occurred, the shed could be destroyed, which would accomplish the same thing.

When he tried to go first, Yuki shoved him out of the way. Her tails swished behind her as she crouched down to go through the hole that had been chewed into the wood of the shed. On her way through, she summoned a ball of light in her hand, then cast it into the dark room ahead. It illuminated a dirt cellar decorated with wooden shelves that were covered in a thick layer of dust.

"Me next." Dana pushed her way past him, followed by Quetzalli. He received a nasty shock from her in passing. Shaking it off, he crouched down to go through the opening and felt the temperature drop.

Once in the cellar, he turned on his phone's light and looked around. Yuki had already found the stairs, and had opened the hatch up above them, which let in some light. She and the others were on their way up when Abella squeezed through the portal.

The gargoyle grunted, then popped through. The wall vibrated, and the portal shimmered for a second, but it held. When Abella stood, her wings wrapped around her body like a cloak.

"And?" he asked, expecting her to retreat through the opening. He didn't know if the house would simply call her back, or demand she return.

"And you should go first," she said. "In case the stairs collapse." Her brow was furrowed as if in concentration.

He nodded, then headed up. The cabin was drafty, and he saw that the cabin was empty. The others had apparently gone outside. The front door was missing, which accounted for the chill. Behind him, the sound of creaking wood filled the air, so he made haste to get outside as well.

The others were waiting, their eyes on the forest. He assumed by their relaxed postures that they were away from prying eyes. Behind him, the cabin groaned in protest as Abella crossed the living room and stood in the frame of the door.

"So which way from here?" Yuki asked him as Abella stepped out of the cabin.

“That way,” both he and Abella said, pointing to the northwest. For him, it was like a lure, an attraction that told him exactly where he needed to go. “You feel it too?”

Abella nodded. “It is like the house. I have an urge to fly there right now.”

“You can go ahead if you want,” he told her.

“My place is by your side.” She moved next to him, then bowed her head. “Not that you had a choice, but thanks for letting me come.”

He said nothing. His feelings about her presence were mixed, and he was afraid that he would put his foot straight in his mouth. Though grateful that she was by his side, he was well aware that she was the home’s bouncer, and hoped that nobody came around looking for trouble.

So he smiled at her. Maybe her decisions weren’t what he would have picked, but he wanted to make sure she knew that he was still on her side. The air was much colder here, so he slipped on a pair of gloves and tightened the straps on his bag. Once finished, he took Abella by the hand. Her grip was strong and welcoming.

“Let’s go for a hike,” he said, then led them into the forest.

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The rats took about an hour to close the portal, but Beth stayed to watch until they were done. The structure would remain until Mike was back. The last thing they needed was an emergency, and portals could only be chewed into enclosed spaces. It had something to do with how reality folded, but when Reggie had described the process to her, the details had mostly gone over her head.

She checked her phone, then looked out at the yard. Last time Mike had left, they had been attacked by vengeful spirits. The sunny weather did little to cheer her, as she was painfully aware that Mike had taken the home’s heavy hitters with him. If something happened that required brute force, she felt ill-equipped.

“Lass?” Sulyvahn came around the side of the house, a bucket in one hand and a trowel in the other. “Ye be lookin’ ill.”

“That obvious?” She was suddenly aware of the heavy tension that had settled into her neck. It was stress, and her usual coping mechanism of wine and orgasms wasn’t an option.

“Aye.” Sulyvahn reached into the bucket and pulled out a rose. “This one reminded me of ye. Beauty and thorns, all rolled in one.”

“Thank you.” She took the flower and inhaled its aroma. The yard smelled like a floral boutique ever since the equinox ceremony. She had watched in awe as the entire yard came to life at once, the flowers blooming and the various flora expanding in size. It had been like watching a time-lapse video.

“Maybe it’s nerves.” Sulyvahn set the bucket down. “I know ye be fearin’ fer the home.”

Cecilia manifested up on the porch. The banshee was sitting on her swing, and her white skin was almost blinding in the bright light of day.

“The home will be fine,” Cecilia told her. “He won’t be gone long. I’m always watching, I’ll raise the alarm if I see something.”

Beth smirked. “I know you will. If you two will excuse me, I have some work I should be doing.”

Suly gave her a dramatic bow as she left. Once inside, she walked into the office and sat down with a groan. While it was true that she could find something to do, she wasn’t in a position to concentrate on any task.

The room connected to the office was a sitting room full of Egyptian artifacts, Death walked out of it holding a cup of tea in one hand and a children’s book about pyramids in the other. Upon noticing Beth, he set the book down on her desk.

“Would you like some tea?” he asked.

“Yes, please.” She looked up at him. “Even you can tell how stressed I am?”

“Hmm?” Death studied her for a moment. “I was offering for the sake of etiquette, but you do look troubled. I’m thinking maybe a lavender blend.”

“Sure, thanks.” She watched him go back into the study, then looked down at the book he had left. It claimed to have a reading level perfect for third-graders, and when she opened it, she noticed that Death had been scribbling in the margins.

“Pyramid.” She tapped the word that Death had circled. A line connected the word to a triangle he had drawn on the side. Flipping through the book, she saw that he had made notes, particularly in the chapter about death rituals.



Clearly something had caught his interest, which was a far cry better than booty pics of Tink.

It suddenly occurred to her that someone had taken those pictures.

“Hey there, hot stuff!” Lily/Mike walked into the room, her legs far apart as she waddled. “Sure is hard walking around with these massive fucking balls in here, am I right?” To emphasize her point, she unzipped her pants and pulled out a set of testicles that would have been perfectly at home on a trailer hitch.

Beth laughed. Lily gave the testicles a poke, which caused them to make a sloshing sound.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Beth asked, trying hard not to blush. Even though she knew it was just Lily screwing around, she was still looking at a weird version of Mike’s ball sack.

“Told Mike I was gonna knock everybody up. Can I borrow your phone?”

Dubious, Beth handed over her cellphone while Lily rested her giant nutsack on the desk. Her tail appeared and took the phone, holding it away from them so that Lily could snap a few pictures.

“Try to look impressed or something. We should send these to Romeo later and try to squeeze a laugh out of him.”

“You’re incorrigible,” Beth told her, but made her best surprised face with one hand just over her mouth.

“I’ll look that word up later,” Lily told her, then snapped a few. Death walked in as the pictures were being taken, only to do an immediate U-turn back into the office.

Beth and Lily laughed. Mike’s features melted away so that Lily looked like herself. “You looked like you could use a laugh.”

“I did. Nerves, I guess.”

“Nah, it’s not just that.” Lily leaned back in her chair. “You’re the head honcho now, the man of the house. You’ve got responsibilities to meet, and you’re hoping to avoid what happened last time. Which, by the way, totally not your fault.”

“This isn’t a confidence thing. The house just feels surprisingly empty is all. If something goes down, are there enough people to help?”

“Hmm. The way I see it, the king has left the castle.” Lily leaned forward in her chair with a smirk on her face. “But remember that the queen is the one with all the moves. It’s been quiet for months, and if anyone is watching, we just have to confuse them until he gets back.”

“I guess.” Beth leaned back in her chair as Death reappeared in the door.

“My apologies,” he said, then set a cup of tea in front of Beth. “You seemed to be busy.”

“We’re just setting up a prank for Mike,” Lily explained.

At the word prank, the fire in Death’s sockets blazed.

“Oh, I do enjoy a good prank! Please let me know if there’s anything I may do to assist you!” He put his bony hands together and tapped his fingertips excitedly.

“Er, yeah, no problem.” Beth took the tea and sipped it. “Thank you.”

Death excused himself, leaving Beth alone with Lily.

“So you gonna ask?” Lily said after a few minutes of silence.

“About?” Beth had zoned out, her thoughts on the others. She now wondered if Lily had been talking.

“Your woman problems.”

Beth felt heat flood her face and she tried to hide behind her teacup, but only succeeded in spilling some of it on herself.

“Don’t try to deny it. You look like a woman who spent all day on horseback.” Lily leaned back in her chair far enough to hump the air for emphasis. “Big difference between well fucked and fucked up.”

“How could you tell?” Beth asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“It’s in the way you sit.”

“I see.” She really hoped that Lily was far more observant than the others. It was an embarrassing topic of conversation in the best of times and she didn’t want the whole house knowing about her issue. She went to sip some of her tea, wondering how much to tell the succubus.

“If I had to wager a guess, it’s that our resident size queen has finally stretched herself too thin.”

The comment had been deliberately timed, and Beth spit her tea out and coughed. Lily laughed, a satisfied look plastered on her face.

“Ah, that was worth it. I’m right, though, aren’t I? You’re all fucked out.”

Beth wiped the tea off her chin and frowned.

“Lily. Keep your voice down,” she muttered.

Lily shrugged. “I mean, if you don’t wanna talk about it and continue to be party to sexual repression—”

“LILY.” Beth mimed a lock and key over her mouth. “I’ll talk, but shut the fuck up.”

A literal tiny padlock appeared through Lily’s lips, holding her lips together like a macabre piercing.

“Your theatrics aside, yes, I’m having some trouble downstairs.” She detailed her gynecological issues with the succubus, not expecting her to be of any real help. It was at least nice to have someone to confide in.

Once Beth was finished, Lily pulled a key out from between her breasts and unlocked the padlock.

“Sounds rough,” she said. “Can’t say I have the same issue, for obvious reasons. I’m surprised you haven’t talked about this with the nymph yet.”

“Frankly, I didn’t want to talk about it with anybody.”

“Naia isn’t just a water fountain with benefits. I bet she could give you all sorts of tips and tricks, but that’s besides the point. She’s also a natural healer. She was practically the only thing holding Romeo together for the first month or so.”

“But how do you heal...” It suddenly occurred to her that it didn’t matter, and she felt dumb for not thinking about it before. With Mike gone, she could use Naia’s tub in private.

“Go ahead,” Lily said, waving toward the door. “Don’t sit on a sore cooch just to keep me company.”

“Thanks.” Beth was almost to the door when she noticed Kisa sitting in the corner.

*Oh God.* “How long have you been there?”

“Long enough to tell Lily that incorrigible means that she’ll never improve her behavior.” The grin on Kisa’s face made Beth think of the Cheshire cat. “I’m supposed to stick by her side, remember?”

Lily laughed. “This little black cat is starting to grow on me.”

Mortified, Beth ran up the stairs and to Mike’s bedroom. Once the door was closed, she walked into his bathroom. The tub inside was several feet across and could easily fit a few people.

“Naia?” she asked.

“Beth.” The faucet turned on, and the tub filled a few inches. Naia’s head emerged from the water, though emerged wasn’t quite right. The nymph herself was made of water, so it created the illusion that the tub was magically five feet deeper. “Do you need something?”

After a brief explanation from Beth, Naia filled the tub up with steaming hot water. Beth took off her clothes and climbed into the bath, sighing as the warmth seeped into her skin.

“This already feels good,” she said. “I’ve only got a shower in the bath I share with Yuki.”

“You should ask Tink to put in a tub,” Naia told her. “Though it wouldn’t have the same perks or be as large as this one.”

“Why not?” Beth ran her hands along the cool surface of the rim. “Wouldn’t it just be some additional pipes?”

“A bit more than that. Here, lean back.” Gentle hands appeared from beneath the water and pulled Beth against the side. Naia manifested beneath the surface, creating a nymph body pillow beneath her torso. Beth closed her eyes as Naia gave her a scalp massage.

“The pipes that connect my bath to the spring aren’t just regular pipes,” Naia explained. “They are made from a special kind of material brought in for this exact purpose. Nymphs are bound to their springs, unable to leave their

boundaries. Therefore, the pipes were made special from bits of my spring and other materials.”

“Like some type of magical compound?” Beth asked. The fingers in her hair soothed her, and her whole body was tingling. In fact, she could feel the aches and pains in her pelvis leaving her.

“Not a bad way to think of it. Powerful fae magic plus some metal I’ve never heard of, and then some minerals from as far down as my essence goes.” An extra set of hands now worked the kinks in Beth’s neck. “Feeling any better yet?”

Beth explored her vulva with her fingers. Some of the tenderness had already disappeared. “I am, thank you.”

“You know, there *is* a way we could fix this problem for you permanently.” A third set of hands now rubbed her shoulders while a fourth set began working her feet. “So that you wouldn’t have to worry again.”

“I’m all ears.”

“I could give you the gift,” Naia whispered, her voice like velvet. “Bless you like I blessed Mike.”

Beth’s eyes opened. “Like a soul exchange?”

“Yes. You are already the next Caretaker in line, and you are right for this house. I feel safe enough offering it to you.”

She mulled it over. By going through the process with Naia, she would be inexorably linked to the nymph forever, and therefore the house. “Would I have magic like Mike?”

Naia laughed. “Nobody has magic like he does. But yes, you would have some magic of your own. For one thing, your body would be able to keep up with your sexual adventures. No more soreness. In fact, you will always be as wet as you want to be. That isn’t really a trick Mike can use.”

“I guess not.” Did she really want to be like the others? It felt weird so casually deciding to part with a little bit of her humanity in exchange for the magic that Naia offered. However, the possibilities being presented would also put her on a more level playing field with everyone else. As of right now, she was the only true human in the house.

The moment that thought crossed her mind, she felt all the threads of her insecurities knit together. It wasn't so much that Mike was gone and had taken the others. It was the fact that she felt inadequate, was still an outsider. Even something as simple as the banshee scream was a trick in Mike's arsenal. All Beth really had was a monster kink and a law degree. Neither of these was very useful in a fight.

"Are you sure?" Beth asked.

"The fact that you hesitate to even accept such a gift tells me that I'm right about you." Another set of hands were massaging her calves now. "And I can also promise you that the process is quite enjoyable."

Beth chuckled. "I'm sure it is. But I guess what I really want to ask is whether I will still be me? Afterward, will I be a different person?" She thought of how the magic had eventually corrupted Emily. It wasn't a path she wanted to walk on.

"In a way," Naia replied. "It will be no different than the first time you had sex. You will still be the same person, but what *will* happen is that certain doors will be open to you. It will be your choices that define how you walk through them, and that is when you may become someone else. It will be your choice."

Beth closed her eyes. She knew that she could trust Naia, but this was a big moment.

"I accept," she whispered in excitement.

More hands touched her now. They massaged her breasts, her hips, and even teased her labia. She let out a tiny moan as the warm water encased her body. Though her upper half was above the tub, the water climbed her skin until it was just below her chin.

The hands pulled her down beneath the water, and she opened her eyes in time to see Naia's face in front of hers. The nymph's blue eyes were ablaze with light as she put her hands on Beth's cheeks.

"And now we shall become one," Naia told her, and pulled her in for a kiss.

The water surrounded Beth completely, and she realized that she was now breathing through Naia's mouth. Each breath made her mouth tingle in a way that reminded her of inhaling cold air after sucking on a mint. The invisible hands had pushed her legs apart, and unseen digits toyed with both of her openings.

She moaned into Naia's mouth, their tongues now twisting around each other. Beth's body felt like it was on fire, trying desperately to mix with the cool water that surrounded her. This created a buzzing sensation that resonated through her entire body.

*Breathe me in.* Naia's voice came from inside her head.

Beth took the deepest breath she could. Her lungs tingled, the sensation spreading through her entire chest and upper arms. The fingers toying with her labia were now vibrating against her clit, and she spread her legs wide at the sensation of pressure against her vagina.

*Take me in.* The swirling water around them glowed green and blue, and a pair of thick water tendrils pressed against Beth's crotch. She opened her legs and let them push inside her. Pressure was building on her asshole, so she reached back and pulled her buttocks apart to give Naia better access.

Once the amorphous water was inside her, it began to expand. Beth gasped and let out a low moan, but Naia's tongue had become water as well and moved down her throat.

There was a moment of panic when Beth realized that there wasn't any air to inhale. The water penetrated her now in all three openings, and she started to fight as her vision went dark around the edges. Her whole body tensed as an immense orgasm built, but the fear of drowning was taking over.

*Trust,* Naia told her. *Trust me.*

Having little choice, Beth inhaled. The water filled her lungs, but it was as if she was breathing cold air. Her eyelids fluttered as a sense of peace came over her, and then it no longer felt like she was breathing at all.

*It's like I'm drowning,* she thought.

The water filled her body, rushing inside of her. Naia's laughter filled her ears as her whole body thrummed with sexual energy. She was on the brink of coming, but something held her back.

*Open yourself to me.* Naia's voice came from everywhere at once, and the room filled with blinding light. When it receded, Beth realized she was no longer in the bathroom.

She was hovering in a field of stars. Her hair drifted around in front of her face, and when she went to tuck it back, she saw that her arm was translucent.

“Where am I?” she asked.

“With me.” Naia appeared in the void, her body made entirely of water. The runes on her body were glowing bright, the light too intense to look at directly. “I’m surprised your consciousness is in here. Do you recognize this place?”

Beth nodded. When her soul was being filtered to rid it of Oliver’s influence, she had been in a similar place. “Am I just a soul right now?”

“You are,” Naia answered. “And you’re about to become so much more.”

When Naia pressed herself against Beth, she could feel the two of them merge together. For a moment, she felt like she was in two places at once, touching herself and being touched.

“The human body is roughly two-thirds water,” Naia whispered to Beth as their souls continued merging. In the back of her mind, Beth was dimly aware of her body being stretched and distorted by the water as it forced its way inside of her. “And in a moment, it will all be replaced with me.”

The humming in Beth’s body reached a crescendo and she came. One of the distant stars exploded, sending pink and purple light out into the universe.

“It isn’t just a spiritual swap,” Naia explained as her soul encased Beth’s and continued sinking in. “I can change you from the inside. Take what’s already there and improve it. I am the magic, and the magic is me.”

The light from the exploding star reached them, and Beth came again. This set off another supernova nearby.

“For a moment, we will be one.” Naia had vanished, her voice now coming from Beth’s lips. “And as I fill you with my light, so shall you fill me with yours.”

“NAIA!” Beth gasped, and another star exploded. The wave of energy stretched her out, but before she could regain her shape, she came again. Another blastwave twisted her about, and she groaned as another one twisted her up.

*We are mixing, Naia told her. We are the water. Together, we flow.*

Beth cried out Naia’s name as the two of them swirled together. She was now without shape or form as she let the magical waves wash through her. Her consciousness expanded as they mixed and became one.



*I can see who you are, Naia told her. I can relive your life.*

Memories rushed through Beth's mind, ranging from her childhood to now. She was a teen, holding her breath beneath the ocean. She was an adult, walking across the stage at graduation. It was her first night in her apartment, and her fingers hovered over the latch of a briefcase carrying her secret stash.

*Yes! Naia's voice was filled with excitement. Let me see it! Let me feel it!*

Hours upon hours of memories swirled around them of Beth finding different ways to pleasure herself. Dildos of different shapes and sizes, each one stranger and more monstrous than the last. The time Beth mounted one to a pillow and came so hard she ruined the case. The tentacle shaped dildo she tried to fuck in the bath. The time she caused a dildo to fold and it broke in half.

*Oh, that sweet frustration, you seek its release!* Beth was now experiencing the memories as if she was there again, only the sensations were overlapping each other. Her first time with the Delightful Dragon was overlapped with her first time fucking Asterion. Now she was with Suly as he bent her over the sundial and fucked her hard from behind. Now it was the time two weeks ago when she had fingered Asterion's ass while blowing him, hoping to tease some extra cum out of his cock.

"More!" Beth cried. "I want to feel more! I want to feel it all!"

The memories became like water and swirled around them. The stars in the sky were exploding so fast now that Beth and Naia were condensed into a sphere of sex, energy, and light by their energy.

*Let us become one!* Naia's voice was full of exultation, and Beth could see the nymph's past unfold. She was now there for all the times that Naia had sex with Mike, then backward to Emily, and then the next Caretaker before. Every sexual encounter overlapped with each other as pleasure pounded through her very core.

One last memory caught her attention. Naia was standing in the woods by a burbling spring when a figure stepped from behind a nearby tree. It was Amymone's tree, and the dryad by the figure, a look of excitement painted onto her face.

"I accept," Naia said.

"I'm glad." The voice was soft, and Beth couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. Their features had been blurred away, as if someone had rubbed a

thumb over paint before it could dry. When they held a hand out for Naia, the nymph took it. Power rushed through her body and she let out a cry as the nearby ground erupted and the house pushed its way up through the soil. Amymone cheered in excitement as the ground swelled and pushed nearby trees away.

The memories disappeared, and it was just Beth and Naia now. The two of them had become one, a swirling mass of magic that sat alone in the dark. There was a single moment of silence, and Beth realized that she could no longer tell where she ended and the nymph began.

In that moment, they had become perfectly balanced. Then, with a single pulse of magic, Beth's ears were filled with the sound of roaring as it all came apart. The sensation stole her breath, and forced heat through her body. Naia started moaning Beth's name over and over again as the energy built between them.

With one final scream, they came. The universe became nothing but light, and then the two of them separated.

Back in her body, Beth realized that she was in the air. Her body was in a reclined position and surrounded by a watery sphere. Her belly was distended, and she screamed as the orgasm from the soul exchange caused her to tense up and spray water out of her body. This water gradually coalesced into Naia, who proceeded to press herself against Beth.

"That's right, come for me!" Naia demanded as her magic raced through Beth.

Beth obeyed, and the watery orb sprayed outward in every direction, soaking the walls and floor of the bathroom. She fell, but was caught by jets of water that lay her gently down in the tub. Her whole body shook as she tried to grab something, to brace herself as one last orgasm pushed itself free.

Her hands found Naia's, and their fingers locked together as Naia pressed her lips to Beth's. She was surrounded once more, the water of the tub rushing around her to form a giant bubble. Her body was hot and cold at the same time, and steam had fogged up the mirror and windows. Closing her eyes, she whispered Naia's name like a prayer.

When Beth finally opened her eyes, she was above the water. The light that came in through the windows seemed brighter and more vibrant. It was like someone had adjusted the color and saturation hues of the whole world. Birds

sang in the distance, their song calling to her. She longed to be outside, to feel the open sky above her and the breeze on her face.

“How do you feel?” asked Naia. “I’m very curious. I’ve never experienced such a strong bonding before.”

“Amazing.” Beth’s whole body felt relaxed, as if her muscles had been stretched and put back into place. “Am I...different now?”

“Go look.” Naia gestured to the mirror. Beth stood, her legs wobbling beneath her. From the bath, she gasped at her own reflection.

It was undeniably her, but there were subtle differences. Her hair was now curled perfectly, despite being wet only minutes ago. Her lips had an extra splash of color that complimented her complexion perfectly. And her eyes. They glowed as if she was staring into a bright light.

Naia rose from the water and wrapped her arms around Beth’s waist. She settled her head in the crook of Beth’s neck and smiled at their reflection.

“Welcome to the sisterhood,” she said, then planted a kiss on Beth’s neck. “You’ve been deeper inside me than any other man or woman, by the way. I don’t just say that to anybody.”

Beth snorted hard, then laughed. “I can easily say the same,” she said between her own tears. “Oh my goodness, I feel so light! Like I can do anything.”

“You’ll find there are lots of things you can do now,” Naia told her. “A touch of precognition, a dash of charisma, and my personal favorite...” One of her hands slid down and cradled Beth’s upper pubis. “No more tenderness. You’ll be able to handle anything you put your mind to, within reason. That Delightful Dragon of yours should still be handled with caution. Personal lubricant won’t ever be an issue again, so that should help.”

“Thank you.” Beth leaned her head over so that it was on top of Naia’s. “This gift you’ve given me is...I mean...thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, lover.” Naia helped Beth out of the tub. “I’m afraid we made a bit of a mess, so be really careful—”

Beth felt an icy pain stab her through the stomach. The sensation distracted her, causing her to slip on a wet patch. Her legs shot out from under her, but there was nothing to grab onto and she fell. Instead of hitting her head on the floor, the water on the floor rushed together beneath her, creating a thick bubble

of fluid that acted like an airbag. It sprayed outward in every direction on impact, turning a nasty fall into a soft bump.

“Oh, shit, that was scary.” Beth sat up, now covered in water. “I’m okay though, thanks for the save.”

Naia said nothing. Instead, she stared at Beth from her place inside the bathtub, a look of shock on her face.

“That...that wasn’t me,” she said in a hushed tone. “I tried to manipulate the water, but it was already being moved with magic. Your magic.”

“You gave me water magic?” Beth looked around the bathroom. It was a wet disaster, and even the towels were soaked. She reached out mentally, wondering if she could make it move. All it did was drip off the walls.

Naia shook her head. “That’s just it. That’s not even something I can do.” She bit her lip nervously. “We need to talk to Ratu, right away.”

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The cold air of Oregon bit at Mike through his jacket. The snow on the ground was only a couple of inches thick, but crunched loudly when they walked.

Dana and Quetzalli were in the lead while Yuki brought up the rear. Mike saw that she was swishing her tail over the snow where they walked, and their footprints were vanishing as if wiped from a dry erase board.

Up ahead, the trees parted. There was a hanging fog in the air that shifted away from them as they approached. When they stepped through it, a tingle ran through his whole body.

“We’re inside,” he said. The magic felt similar to the geas, but not quite the same.

“How do you feel?” asked Dana.

“Kinda hungry,” he answered, then pulled a granola bar out of his pocket. When he went to open it, he noticed that the wrapper had been opened already. Curious, he pulled the bar out and laughed. A third of it was gone, and he knew it had to have been Tink.

“May I have some of that?” Quetzalli asked, clutching her stomach. They had been walking for over an hour now, and she was probably just as hungry.

“Here, you can have your own. This one has goblin cooties.” He pulled a couple more out of his backpack, then handed over his water bottle. They took turns drinking out of it while Abella and Dana kept watch.

“Is this like being at the house?” he asked Abella. “It’s not the geas, but it feels familiar to me.”

She nodded, then looked up. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen the forest. Ever since Europe, actually.”

“Were you brought over through a portal?” he asked.

“Freighter,” she responded. “Was a long journey, I had to sit inside of a box.”

“Kind of like Eulalie did.” The mention of the Arachne's name caused Abella to scowl. “You don’t like her, do you?”

Abella’s cheeks darkened. “No, I do not.”

“She seems nice.”

“That doesn’t impress me. Don’t think I didn’t notice how she suddenly couldn’t bring us on this trip. There’s one in the house and one waiting for us at our destination. Nobody builds a trap like the Arachne do.”

“My magic tells me that she is safe.” He patted his gut. “Besides, why go through all this trouble to get me if they could just leave the cabin and snack on some hikers?”

“I haven’t figured that part out yet,” she admitted.

“They’re different.” This came from Dana, who slowed down to walk with them. “The Arachne are killers, but their mother wasn’t. Everytime she laid eggs, she crushed them all because she could tell they would never be able to coexist with humans. Velvet and Eulalie were the only two out of hundreds of eggs that she allowed to hatch because she could tell they were different.”

Abella snorted, then walked away from them to join Yuki.

“She really doesn’t like them,” Dana observed.

“There’s always more to the story than we think,” Mike said. “I’ll admit, the whole spider thing freaks me out. I had a bad experience with them as a kid, and they are kind of being shoved in my face right now.”

"I thought you'd enjoy it," she said.

"How do you figure?"

"Always took you for a leg man." She winked at him.

When he laughed, it was almost like a bark. "Okay, you've got me there," he admitted. "Though it's more the whole package, I guess." He thought about the different women in the house. There really wasn't a pattern among them other than not being human.

"For me, it was hips. Sounds strange, right? But there's something to it. A girl with hips has got some curves to begin with. And don't even get me started on leggings."

"Oh?" Mike snuck a glance over at Quetzalli. The dragon's human form had very voluptuous curves. For the first month she was a human, it had been almost comical to hear her bitch about how parts of her anatomy would keep moving even after she had stopped. "I feel like leggings are one of God's final gifts to mankind," he continued. "A proper pair of leggings can make a housewife look like a goddess."

Dana smirked. "Maybe we could have Tink make us a pair of leggings with eight legs. It would be like immersion therapy or something."

"That would be—" A cold feeling filled his gut and he paused.

"What's up?" Dana asked him.

"Something bad is about to happen." His eyes were drawn up into the trees where he saw movement. He had barely raised his hand to point it out when Abella wrapped her wings around him, blotting out the light.

Someone yelled, and he heard multiple projectiles shatter against Abella's body. When she unwrapped her wings, the tree had been engulfed by a swirling mass of ice. Three squat figures fell out of the tree and landed in the packed snow beneath.

"What was that?" he asked. When he looked over at Dana, he saw that she had arrows sticking out of her chest and shoulders.

"Arrows, apparently. Bad ones." Dana pulled one out and sniffed it, then made a face. "They've been dipped in something nasty."

"Was it just these three?" he asked.

“If so, they were firing them pretty fast,” Quetzalli said as she came over. “I would surmise that—”

The cold feeling hit him again and he tackled Quetzalli to the ground as another volley launched over them. A barrier of ice formed in front of them and Yuki shouted in anger.

Through the clear ice of the barrier, he watched Dana pull a dagger from her pants and flick her wrist. The blade extended to reveal a sword that looked almost like a katana, and was very similar to the one that Sofia carried. The zombie charged into the fray, the sword hissing through the air as she swung it.

“Where the hell did she get that?” he asked, then looked down at Quetzalli. “Are you okay? You didn’t get hit, did you?”

The dragon grinned, her cheeks crimson from the cold. He was on top of her and suddenly aware that his hands had been planted along her ribs. Her breasts were large enough that when they had flattened, they now pressed against his wrists.

“I’m okay,” she told him, then gave him a little kiss on the nose. The resulting shock made him bite the tip of his tongue. “My hero.”

All around them, the forest came to life with the sounds of chirps and hooting, as if a thousand horny owls were vying for his attention. He moved off of Quetzalli and chanced a glance over the top of the barrier. Yuki was summoning four foot long spears of frost that flew up into the trees once formed. Dana and Abella were protecting the kitsune from projectiles. With every passing moment, Dana looked more like a porcupine than a woman.

The cold feeling returned and he looked back in the direction that they had come. A group of the stout little men emerged from the forest, their teeth bared.

“Abella,” he called out as he covered Quetzalli’s ears with his hands. “Ears!”

The gargoyle shoved her fingers in her ears as he took a deep breath and then let out a piercing cry. It was the banshee magic he let loose from within, a hair raising sound that he had practiced for hours with Cecilia’s tutelage. What had once been a loud shriek now sounded like a dissonant blast of more than one voice. Not only was it painful for others to hear, it was also downright terrifying.

The little men panicked and turned to run. A couple of them hesitated, the scream not enough to frighten them off.

Quezalli raised her hands and summoned lightning from her fingertips. When it struck the pair, they let out a howl of agony and fell to the ground, their bodies twitching even after she stopped.

In a moment of respite, Mike reached into his pockets and pulled out a small baggie of ear plugs.

“Time to kick some ass,” he told Quetzalli as he handed her a pair. “It’s gonna get loud, so put them in.”

She grinned, then stuffed the plugs in her ears.

“You may be making a lot of noise,” she shouted with an arched eyebrow. Electricity crackled all along the length of her horn as the air around her crackled with energy. “But I want you to remember that lightning does all the work.”

Above them, thunder rumbled in the clouds. Laughing, they both ran to join the others.

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Velvet yawned, her jaw clicking as she did so. The front door of the house had been barred, and the windows shuttered. Between some of the fierce winter storms and the goblin attacks so long ago, the cabin was perfectly capable of being turned into a defensive fortress for a little bit.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t meant to be manned by only one person. Emery helped out where he could, flying around the house and constantly checking windows for movement.

Bigfoot was out cold on the couch. She had feared that the poison was lethal, but Bigfoot wasn’t most creatures. He had started rambling around midnight in an ancient language that made the air feel thick and heavy. Around two in the morning, he had gotten in an imaginary argument with her father about cheating at poker. Mostly, what he said was nonsense.

At five in the morning, Bigfoot had ripped a gnarly fart that made her eyes water, but had finally settled. Other than the occasional groan, it seemed like the worst had passed.

During this period of time, Velvet had watched as the little people had come out of the woods to inspect her home. They were aware that she was in the cabin and stayed back, but had ransacked the barn. She watched in dismay as



they lost a large chunk of their supplies to the invaders, and had actually cracked the door to take a couple of shots when the opportunity arose.

It was strange that the little people weren't trying to break in. If they knew she was there, why not press the attack while Bigfoot was down?

Something wasn't right, and she thought back to her argument with Eulalie. Her sister had been convinced that some intelligent force was conspiring against them, but Velvet had refused to see it. These people outside her home seemed smart enough to survive, but based on their behavior, they weren't the ones in charge.

So who could it be?

"Velvet?" Emery landed on the frame of the door, his tiny limbs clinging to the wood. "You need to eat something. It's almost dinnertime."

"I suppose." She peered through the window once more. There wasn't any sign of the little people now. Still, she hated to look away.

"I'll keep watch. Take five minutes, go eat and drink. It'll be okay." He shooed her off and she walked into the kitchen to see what he had brought her. It was a raccoon that Eulalie had trapped a couple of weeks ago, tidily wrapped in a web. She opened her mouth wide for her fangs to descend and sank them into the tenderized flesh and drank.

The cocoon in her hands shriveled up like a giant Capri Sun as she drank the meal inside. When she was done, she got herself a glass of water from the sink and was grateful when liquid flowed from the faucet. Now under attack, Eulalie's concerns seemed well founded. Hopefully, the little people wouldn't find out how to ruin their water supply.

"Something is happening out there." Emery frowned, which was almost comical. His long pointed nose hung down over his lips, making him look like a sad little troll.

"What?" she asked.

He didn't have to answer, because she heard it. It was faint at first, but someone was tapping on the walls of the cabin. The sound amplified as others joined in. She peered through the shutters to see that one of the little men was using his spear to poke at the siding.

"Can they get in?" she asked.

“I don’t know,” Emery answered. “But we need to get them to stop.”

“Damn.” She looked over at Bigfoot, who was still asleep. Even if she wanted to run, where could she go? Her uncle still needed time to recover, which was a scary thought as well. Whatever poison was in his system must be potent indeed to have dropped him as fast as it did, which meant it would probably kill her outright.

She went into the kitchen and picked out an old cleaver from the knife drawer. Grabbing the broom from next to the fridge, she met Emery at the front door. “I’m going to need you to make a little noise while I go out through the roof.”

Emery made a face like he was going to argue, but the tapping intensified. One of the creatures was now trying to wedge his spear into one of the shutters. She threw the imp a knowing glance, then reached down toward her spinnerets to withdraw some webbing. Unable to create the intricate webs that her sister could make, it was still strong enough to cocoon a creature.

She used it to attach the cleaver to the broom handle, then gave it a practice swing.

The imp nodded. “How long should I wait?” he asked.

“Count to thirty.” Velvet flexed her legs and leapt up into the loft. From here, she was able to let herself into the attic of the cabin. It was full of mostly boxes from their childhood, things that her parents couldn’t bear to part with. There were also several boxes of canned soup for her father in case of emergencies.

She stopped to touch the corner of one of the boxes. It suddenly occurred to her that the last time the box was opened, her father had been alive. Tears forced their way into her eyes as she tried to sniff them back.

“I am *not* crying over fucking soup,” she muttered, then moved to the hatch that had been bolted shut from the inside. Her father had installed it for their mother and them when they were little so that they wouldn’t wake him up if they went out at night. She put her hand fondly on the bolted passage, took a deep breath, then slid the bolt out of the way and pushed it open.

It moved with nary a sound, and she was out on the roof. The afternoon air was chilled, and her breath was coming in tiny clouds that vanished on the

breeze. Down below, she heard Emery let out a shriek of alarm and start banging on one of the windows.

Her sense picked up one of the little men directly beneath her. She was near the back of the cabin now, and cast a wary gaze toward the tree line. Seeing that there was nobody coming, she chanced a look over the edge. The cannibal carrying the spear was moving toward the corner of the house. His back was to her.

She dropped down from above, then swung her makeshift halberd in a wide arc. When she struck the creature in the head, the blade stuck in its thick skull. It fell with a grunt.

“Plus two to damage, bitch.” She yanked the cleaver out of its skull and used the reflective blade to peek around the corner. Two of them were moving toward the racket that Emery was making, but a third was using its spear to try and force open the shutter that went to her father’s room.

Seeing red, she charged around the corner and sprinted toward the nirumbi forcing open the window. It let out a screech of rage when it saw her, but she sank her fangs into its neck before it could do anything else.

The nirumbi farthest from her cried out, and threw its spear. She used the nirumbi she held as a shield to block it, then drew the Sig and fired. Her shot hit the nirumbi that had thrown the spear in the chest, and it went down. The third raised its own spear, but Velvet swung her makeshift weapon hard enough that it cleaved through the little man’s arm.

The broom handle broke. She pulled the spear out of the nirumbi in her mouth and threw him at his friend. They both fell down, and Velvet used the spear to pin them together at the belly.

“Nirumbi-kabob,” she muttered with a grin, then leapt into the air and onto the roof. A second later, three nirumbi came around the corner to investigate, but Velvet was on her way to the other side of the house. She found two nirumbi nervously circling around the house.

She dropped down from above and fired the Sig. It took four shots this time, but she killed them both and took their spears before fleeing to the roof. By now, the air was filled with hooting as they tried to track her down. A group of them had emerged from the barn, but Velvet kept to the back of the cabin. She snuck back inside and latched the hatch shut.

Down below, Emery was shrieking his little head off, but the tapping had already stopped.

“I bought us some time,” she told him, then picked her father’s rifle from the dining room table. “I’m thinking we can pick a few more off from the roof.”

Emery nodded, then pressed his face to the gap in the window. “Should I make another distraction?”

“Nope.” She moved past him and pulled open the front door. The nirumbi were so busy scanning the roof that she was able to squeeze off two shots before they fled. Her aim with the rifle was far better, and she slammed the door shut and bolted it.

“Disgusting,” Emery remarked as he watched through the window gap.

“Death is never pretty, but sometimes necessary,” she told him. It was a fact that her father had drilled into her since she was little, ever since she could hunt. She had cried the first time she caught a rabbit on her own. The poor thing had looked terrified when she snapped its neck like her mother had taught her.

“They’re eating their own dead.” Emery moved away from the window so that Velvet could look. Sure enough, the two she had shot were getting carved up by their brethren as if they were worried the meat would suddenly go bad.

She debated taking another shot at them, but a small group had formed a semi-circle around the front door. They were holding bows, and she knew better than to mess with poisonous arrows. Maybe if she went up top, she could snipe a couple? Over near the barn, a group of them appeared from out of the forest.

“Shit,” she muttered, then moved over to Bigfoot. “Uncle Foot? Hey!” She tried slapping him into consciousness. “I really need you to wake up right now!”

“Velvet!” Emery’s wings flapped frantically as he backed away from the door. “They’re lighting torches!”

She moved to the window and yanked it open. The nearest nirumbi let out a squawk of alarm as she looked down her sights at a trio of nirumbi who were trying to build a fire out of hay from the loft. Smoke was already climbing from the stack when she fired, taking out one of them before slamming the window shut.

“Uncle Foot!” She screamed as she ran to the kitchen window. When she opened it, she could sense the arrow coming at her and dodged. It passed

harmlessly through her hair and stuck in the fridge. Ducking down, she pulled the window shut as two more arrows came in.

“What do we do?” Emery’s eyes were wide as he hovered before her.  
“Velvet, we need to run!”

“I’m not leaving without him,” she said, looking over at Bigfoot.

“But you can’t leave with him.” The imp screwed up his features. “Maybe if you open a window, I can lead them away?”

“They’re not stupid, they know we’re still in here.” Frowning, she looked through the gap in the window again. Torches were being lit. The idea of leaving Bigfoot behind made her sick to her stomach, but her feelings wouldn’t matter once the flames made it through the wooden walls.

Could the cabin even be set on fire? It was magical in nature, and was bigger on the inside. It was something they had never tested for obvious reasons, and she said a little prayer as the nirumbi let out a cheer and came toward her, their torches held high.

This was her home. It was the only place she had ever known, and now she was going to die inside it.

From the forest, there came a piercing cry that made the hair on her legs stand on end. The sound permeated the house, and Bigfoot shifted uncomfortably on the couch in response.

“What the hell was that?” she asked. It was apparent that the nirumbi didn’t know either, because they turned to look outward, the cabin now forgotten.

The cry came again. This time, it sounded like a pair of voices screaming counterpoint to one another, causing her veins to fill with ice. What dreadful creature could conjure such a sound?

The nearest nirumbi carrying a torch turned toward the cabin and came at them. Its beady eyes glistened in the light of the flames as it drew close.

A dark shape crashed into the nirumbi from above. It was a beast with dark skin and powerful wings that flapped mightily behind it. When the newcomer turned to face the cabin, Velvet realized she was looking at a woman with flattened features and pointed ears. Her skin was made of stone, and her lips

curled up to reveal a pair of fangs. It was a gargoyle, as beautiful as she was deadly.

The gargoyle trampled the nirumbi into the ground with large talons, then paused when a spear shattered on the back of her neck. She turned her dreadful gaze on a nearby cluster of nirumbi and scowled.

“Wha—” Aghast, Velvet could only watch as the gargoyle barreled into the nirumbi. They scattered like leaves, but the gargoyle snagged a pair of them and flew into the sky. Tiny shrieks filled the air when she dropped them a few seconds later.

Fat snowflakes drifted across the yard now, followed by a thunderclap. The weather had rapidly turned, and the air felt electrified. Velvet realized she was holding her breath.

The nirumbi nocked arrows and held them up, clearly tracking the gargoyle. Velvet debated moving to the roof for a better view, but thoughts of this were dashed when icy spears rained down from above. A pair of women emerged from the forest, causing the nirumbi to panic and switch to their spears.

One of the women had fox ears with a trio of tails whirling behind and wearing a thick white coat. She held a shield made of branches that had been tightly woven together. There were a few arrows stuck in it.

The other was Dana. There were easily twenty arrows sticking out of her, and she collected a couple more plus a spear as she charged into the little men swinging her sword and cutting them apart.

The nirumbi had enough. They let out shrill cries as they broke and ran for the forest. Velvet half-expected her rescuers to let them go, but the fox summoned a volley of ice that caused a momentary whiteout. That shrill cry came again, followed by several thunderclaps. Frost covered the windows, preventing her from seeing anymore, and she backed away from the door.

The storm outside raged for several minutes, and she nearly jumped out of her skin when someone knocked.

“Velvet?” It was Dana. “Are you in there?”

Velvet ran to the door and threw it open. Impossibly, her friend had come for her. She would have hugged the zombie, except for all of the arrows sticking out of her.

Dana flicked the sword a few times to knock the blood off of it, then folded it up and handed it over.

“I probably should have brought this back sooner,” she confessed.

“Yes. You should have.” Velvet smiled, then looked over Dana’s shoulder. The yard was covered in a thin blanket of snow, and there were several nirumbi-sized lumps beneath it. The air smelled of blood and ozone, and she walked outside with Emery right behind her.

The fox woman knelt down over one of the lumps, her nostrils flared as she sniffed the air. Nearby, the gargoyle thudded into the ground and rose, her features twisted in disdain, then indifference.

“Thank you,” Velvet said. “You guys saved us. Please, you have to help me, Bigfoot is hurt.”

“Poison?” asked the fox. “I can smell it. I may be able to do something to help that.” She made it to the door and gave a little bow. “My name is Yuki, by the way.”

“Thank you, Yuki.” Velvet watched her walk inside and kneel next to the couch. She turned her attention back to Dana. “How did you get here?”

“Magic rat portal. Will explain later. This is Abella, by the way.” Dana gestured at the gargoyle.

“I will stand watch,” Abella informed them, then lifted into the sky and disappeared.

“You have no idea how glad I am to see you,” Velvet said. “Those weird little guys came out of nowhere and I—”

Movement from around the barn caught her eye and she turned her head, her heart coming to a stop. One of the figures was a woman with a large horn coming from her head, but all Velvet could focus on was the man next to her.

He wore a brown coat and jeans, and was talking with the horned woman. The wind was catching in his hair, causing it to billow ever so slightly backward. Dark brown eyes that reminded her of earth sat just above a smile that made her entire body hot and smooshy at the same time. In her gut, she felt the heat shift from her belly immediately down to her groin. She suddenly felt so heavy, as if the ground were about to swallow her up.

“You must be Velvet.” When he spoke, it was as if his voice wrapped around her like a warm blanket. “My name is Mike. I’m the new Caretaker.”

“Caretaker?” Emery shook in anticipation.

“And you must be Emery. I have something for you.” Mike reached into his pocket and pulled out a shiny coin. “I got this a while ago, in case I made it out this way. It’s a real silver dollar, and—”

“SHINY!” Emery snatched the coin from Mike, then landed on his shoulder as he gave the coin a bite with his teeth. “It’s real silver, Vee, real silver!”

“Uh, yeah.” Velvet’s brain wasn’t forming any words, and she just stared at Mike. It was as if she couldn’t get enough of the very sight of him, and she felt her groin tighten beneath her.

“Not to be that person, but can we head inside?” Dana pulled one of the arrows out of her leg. “Pincushion isn’t my favorite look.”

“Yes, please, come in.” Velvet’s mouth was dry and her hands shook as she led them into the house. As she followed Mike inside, all she could think about was what it would be like to run her hands through his hair, to touch his skin, to feel him up against her body.

But most of all, what their children would look like.