

## Twilight Princess

Mike followed Sofia for nearly half a mile down the phantom streets, his eyes constantly searching the dark corners for any sign of real movement. The shadows that meandered along the buildings were slowly coming into focus and now had dim facial features. Shades of gray had appeared to give further definition to the clothes that the phantoms wore.

“Troubling,” Sofia said, pausing to inspect a young child on the sidewalk. The boy was holding up what could have been a newspaper and shouting silently. “The longer we remain, the more details they have.”

“Which means our new friend is pulling energy from somewhere.” Mike inspected himself and then Sofia. The natural magic that surrounded them both was intact. “It’s not coming from us,” he said. “So I guess that’s a positive.”

“I think that this is a manipulation of the ambient energy of all the books in the room. There is plenty of energy there if you know how to utilize it.” Sofia waved her hand through the child’s head. “Hmm. Slight resistance. My skin now feels tacky. If we wait long enough, these...beings may gain physical forms. What troubles me the most is the state of our actual bodies. Is this a psychic manifestation? Or perhaps a manipulation of the Dreamscape?”

“It’s not the Dreamscape.” Mike concentrated his will and tried to bend reality. It didn’t budge. “And it’s not any sort of astral plane, either.”

“How can you be sure?”

“The Dreamscape and the astral are related. My mastery of one would translate into at least a minimal ability to manipulate the other.” He held out a hand and summoned a spider made of lightning, which he set on the ground. It ran away from them, perpendicular to the direction they traveled.

“You really have mastery of the Dreamscape?” Sofia studied him. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Well, when you have a succubus as your teacher, you get the accelerated course.” Mike didn’t feel the need to explain that a piece of Lily was always waiting for him there, able to assist his efforts. He also wasn’t going to mention the fact that she often dressed as a hot teacher when she did.

“I see.” Sofia studied the sky. “I suppose a pocket dimension is our most likely culprit. The entity in that journal has woven together this place from the memories of the books at hand. If I had my staff, this would be an easy fix.”

“But you don’t. How did that happen, anyway?”

Sofia shrugged. “When the darkness came, I thought I had grabbed it. It was yet another deception. So what is the purpose of trapping us here, keeping in mind that this was Plan B?”

“Plan B?”

She nodded. “The book wished to remain unnoticed and escape confinement. When that failed, it did this to trap us here. We must assume that escape is the primary agenda.”

“You said the book was a journal, right?” Mike scratched his chin and watched what could have been a dog sprint across the road. “Whose journal was it?”

“An aristocrat from the late 1800s,” she replied. “A man named Allen Moore who lived in Mayfair.”

“So Mr. Moore is our entity?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. The journal itself is unnatural and bound in human remains. So we could be facing Moore, or a protective spirit attached to the book. There was no indication it would be so strong, so I wasn’t worried about it.”

“I see.” They continued walking as the facade came into focus around them. Eventually, the road terminated abruptly; the city transitioned to a small village in the forest. Mike stood on the conversion line and noticed that both buildings and trees had been bifurcated sharply, as if two separate scenes had been jammed together.

“We’re in a different book,” said Sofia. “There were hundreds of them in that room.”

“Which means we could be here a really long time,” Mike replied. He noticed that the trees had far more definition than the buildings had, and the villagers walking through the square appeared as if they had been ripped directly

from an old silent film. “I wonder if we need to get to Moore’s journal before we can interact with the entity.”

“That would make sense.” Sofia crossed her arms and squinted at a nearby shadow. It was walking toward them and carrying a basket. She drew her sword from her belt and unfolded it. “Unless the creature is hunting us.”

“Yeah, I absolutely hate thinking that might be the case.” Mike and Sofia stepped aside as the shadow passed between them. When it reached the edge of the scene, the figure vanished instead of continuing onto the cobblestone road of the city. “But I’m not too worried about it.”

“You should be.” Sofia rolled her eye. “We’re dealing with a malevolent entity capable of putting together pocket realities to terrorize us.”

“We have one of those at home,” Mike replied. “We call her Jenny.”

Sofia snorted.

“Also,” Mike added. “If we are dealing with a spirit, I have my ways of handling it.”

“And if it’s a demon?”

Mike shrugged. “I’ve got one of those at home, too.”

“You can’t fuck all your problems away, Caretaker.” Sofia walked toward the middle of the village with her sword held at the ready.

“Hey, it’s gotten me this far in life.” Mike did his best to radiate confidence. If they were dealing with a demon, the best way to lure them out was to present himself as an overconfident target. Now if the entity was a malevolent spirit, he could probably handle it himself without any issue. Even if it was more powerful than he was, Cecilia had his back. He wasn’t sure if their enemy was even aware of the banshee’s presence, but he intended to keep that a secret for now.

They walked through the village and beyond it. The scenery broke again and they were now in a port town, with a massive cargo ship being loaded with boxes. The gray-toned figures moving around ignored both of them, but when one walked through Mike, it felt like he was punched in the gut.

“Oof.” He moved off the path and hunched over, rubbing his stomach. “I don’t like that at all.”

Sofia swung her sword through one of the shadows. It split apart where the blade cut, and the figure continued walking with its upper torso trailing a few inches behind. "What do you make of that?" she asked, then gave her sword a disgusted flick. Black ink splattered on the ground before turning into a mist that chased after the worker.

"Limitation of the reality we're in," Mike said. He watched as the torso reattached itself and the dockworker continued doing his job. "These look like recordings, so I'm guessing we're looking at scenes from the books in the Restricted Section. We're clearly not meant to interrupt them." He was about to say something else when his magic tinged. Somewhere far away, his lightning spider had been destroyed. It could only mean one thing.

The entity had found it. He summoned three more of the spiders into his hand and sent them back in the general direction from which they had come. If the entity hunted them all, it meant that it had a way to track them via magic. Otherwise, it had just gotten lucky. Either way, it wasn't nearby, and didn't seem to have a way to just appear where they were.

"What was that about?" asked Sofia as she took a step toward Mike. A massive cloud of fog rolled between them, obscuring the cyclops from view. Almost right away, Mike felt the distance between him and the spiders he had just summoned shift dramatically. They were no longer nearby.

"Sofia!" He walked forward through the fog, his hands held out to keep him from walking into something. After several moments, the fog thinned out, revealing that he was no longer in the port town. He now stood in what looked like a monastery, lit from above with torches.

"Shit," he muttered. "Cecilia, are you still with me?"

"I am," she whispered in his ear. "I've been hiding inside of your body this entire time."

"Kinky," Mike replied. Apparently the entity controlling this place had a way to shuffle things up. Did it literally shuffle up the pile of books back in the real world? Or was this some sort of massive, psychic effort? What kind of spirit were they dealing with?

The answers wouldn't come from standing around. He turned toward the entrance of the monastery and walked toward it. The large door creaked when he pushed it open, revealing a vineyard cloaked in fog. Wandering through the vines

was a group of monks, all of them working silently as they checked on their grapes. “Any ideas where Sofia might be?”

He felt a chill crawl up his spine as the banshee floated backward out of his body. A few moments later, Cecilia’s teeth nibbled playfully at his right ear. He turned his head in that direction until she stopped.

“That way,” she said breathily. “Her soul is a distant spark.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing I wore my running shoes.” He jogged down the hill toward the vineyard and beyond. With any luck, he would reach Sofia before the entity did.

In the back of his mind, he felt the connection with one of his lightning spiders break.

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“Caretaker?” Sofia stepped forward through the fog, the sword clutched tightly in her hand. She turned in place, hoping to see a structure or maybe even some shadow people. Her gut churned as if seasick. “Mike?”

The thick fog lifted. She was in the rolling hills of a countryside, surrounded by tall mountain peaks. Toward the bottom of the hill was a small cottage with smoke coming out of its chimney. A river turned a small water wheel attached to the building.

“Fucking gods damn it all,” she muttered. Sofia had no way of knowing how much time had passed, but figured it was a good idea to check the structure first to make sure Mike wasn’t there.

It took about ten minutes to walk down the hill. Outside of the cottage, a pair of horses munched grain from a trough near the barn. A solitary shadow goat hopped around outside. Sofia glared at it, but it didn’t react to her presence.

“Mike?” She knocked on the door of the cottage, then pushed it open. Crouching to fit through its frame, she stepped into the building. There was food cooking on the stove, but it didn’t have a smell. A man with a long beard sat at the table, an array of leaves spread out before him. He was busy drawing one of the leaves in a journal, most likely the one that had gotten pulled off the shelf.

Sofia stabbed the man through the shoulder, but he didn't react. Sighing, she yanked the blade free flicked it, which created a makeshift Rorschach test on the ground. This guy clearly wasn't the entity, so she wasn't in immediate danger.

Still, she was separated from Mike, and couldn't help but feel guilty that they were even in this predicament. She was the Head Librarian, and should have been more careful. It wasn't like this was her first time dealing with a possessed book.

Sighing, she closed her eye and took several deep breaths. She couldn't help but be reminded of Agatha, one of her predecessors and mentor.

When Sofia had fled into the Library for safety, she became part of a group of survivors who had struggled to reestablish the sacred order of librarians. Agatha had been the Head Librarian then, an old woman with silver hair that was always pulled back into a bun. She was the last true Head Librarian, properly educated by those who came before her.

Agatha had been a capable leader. It was through her wisdom that the survivors were able to prosper. She had organized outings to allow Sofia and a couple of others to age into adulthood, all while maintaining the functions of the Library itself. Still, despite attempted intrusions by several different organizations, it was a threat from within that had finally claimed Agatha's life.

Sofia tried to shut out the memory of watching the life leech from Agatha's body by a book that had slammed itself shut on her fingers. They had been moving brand new dangerous texts into one of the Restricted Sections when the attack occurred. The Head Librarian's final act was to use the power of her staff to seal away the book's magic, turning both her and the book to stone. To this day, Agatha still stood in one of the restricted rooms, her face twisted up in agony. On that day, Calliope had become the new Head Librarian, but she would only last a decade in the role.

Yelling, Sofia grabbed the table and flipped it, causing the leaves to scatter across the room. They moved as if in slow motion, then reversed course as the overturned table shifted back into position. The man at the table didn't react, but Sofia hadn't expected him to. After all, he was just an echo.

She kicked the front door of the cottage, ripping it free of its hinges. Before the door could repair itself, Sofia was back outside. She booted the goat, causing the phantom to soar over the barn. As she stomped away from the cottage, she

watched the animal tumble back through the air in an attempt to return to its position.

Before it could land, Sofia booted it again. The goat sailed through the air, distorting wildly as it disappeared from sight. She followed the river, knowing that it was a surefire way to avoid going in circles.

Even though her mood was grim, the walk through the woods was oddly soothing. It lacked the sounds and smells of an actual forest, but the gray-scale aesthetic provided plenty of novelty. When was the last time she had casually gone on a hike?

An hour passed in this manner. The river suddenly changed into wood flooring and the forest became a room. Sofia crouched, her body hunched forward as she pushed open the door. The next room was an old kitchen, and a pair of young men were busy peeling potatoes in the corner. Outside the kitchen, a narrow hallway opened up into the interior of a steepled church. A scattering of worshippers were in the pews, their heads bowed in reverence as a priest spoke silently at the lectern.

Taking a deep breath, Sofia found a spot to sit off to the side of the pew. Her feet were a little sore. While her boots were usually comfortable, she wasn't used to long walks on uneven terrain. She watched the priest, fascinated by the amount of detail she could now make out on his face.

After sitting through the silent sermon, Sofia stepped out the front door of the church. If she had to guess, she was somewhere in Italy. She stuck to the path this time and the scene ended abruptly. She was on a boat in the ocean. Unwilling to swim through the water below it, she turned around and walked along the edge of the scene until she was able to go around it.

Her stomach rumbled. It had been awhile since breakfast. At least she was sober now, and hangover free. If she had been trying to navigate this place in such a state, it wouldn't have ended well. If she vomited here, would it inevitably end up in a book?

Roughly four scenes later, she found herself in familiar territory. Even though it had been centuries since she had seen it, the streets of Florence, Italy were always memorable. The scene included the Arno river, which Sofia stopped to visit.

From where she stood on the shore, she could see dozens of fish just beneath the surface of the water. She crouched down and hugged her knees, watching the fish glide beneath the surface of the water. After a minute of this, she found a small tree to recline against and let out a sigh.

“What to do, what to do.” She picked up a nearby rock and skipped it across the water. The stone sent ripples out in every direction, then reversed course shortly before completing its journey and sinking beneath the surface. As the stone shot back toward its origin, Sofia noticed that the water’s hue had shifted from gray to green in places. She stood and watched in amazement as the sky above turned blue, and the air filled with the sound of rushing water. The city of Florence was no longer bathed in shades of gray, its full palette now finally revealed.

The cyclops laughed at the burst of color and pulled off her boots. She waded out into the river, watching with intense interest as the water piled up against her shins in an effort to maintain its flow. After stomping her feet experimentally, she tried to snatch a fish from beneath the water. It squirted free of her hands and moved to resume its original pattern.

A few minutes later, Sofia waded back onto the shore and leaned against the small tree once more. Though she had just been in the water, her feet weren’t actually wet. She slid on her boots and let out a loud sigh. The cyclops was no closer to escaping this place, but her mood had lightened considerably. Seeing Florence as it was perhaps three hundred years ago was a treat in itself, and the river was soothing.

Maybe it would be best if she waited for Mike here. She watched the river flow, her thoughts turning inward once more.

*“This way.” Lukios gestured for her to follow, the satyr’s hooves clacking on the cold marble tile. Sofia followed, her arms piled high with scrolls. They entered the Head Librarian’s study. Agatha stood over a wooden table, her fingers splayed out as she studied the manuscript in front of her. The old woman glanced up at them as they entered.*

*“Put them over there,” she said to Sofia, then shifted her eyes to an empty wooden crate in the corner. The young cyclops obeyed, kneeling down and carefully stacking the wrapped scrolls in the box. She tried to ignore the soft sound of Lukios and Agatha exchanging a kiss. It was an open secret that the satyr and*



*the Head Librarian were a couple, but the two of them attempted to keep things proper while in the company of the other Librarians.*

*Lukios and Agatha exchanged words in a forgotten language, and then the satyr left. Sofia stood at attention, curious why she had been called in to speak with the woman.*

*"Has Lukios explained anything to you?" Agatha picked up a silver cup and sipped from it. The elderberry wine briefly stained her lips the color of crimson.*

*"No, ma'am."*

*Agatha nodded her approval, then turned her attention to the book on her table. "We've lost two more portals this week," she said. "Due to the witchcraft trials in England."*

*Sofia said nothing. She had learned long ago that Agatha preferred silence as proof of contemplation, though she wasn't able to divine the parallel that Agatha wanted.*

*"Chronologically, you are an adult now, Sofia. In your late twenties, if my guess is correct." Agatha smiled. "You've been with us for some time, now."*

*"Most of my life," Sofia replied. Ever since she was a child, actually, but that had been stretched artificially into hundreds of years. "My natural one, that is."*

*"And you've been of service to us during these years. Naturally, you were our first choice for book retrieval duties once you were old enough. It would give you a chance to age naturally while performing a crucial job." Agatha licked her wine-stained lips and set the glass down. "The portals are a sign of things to come, I'm afraid."*

*Sofia waited. The Head Librarian would spell it out eventually.*

*"You are our youngest member for a reason," Agatha continued, then closed the book on the table. "Ever since Merlin closed the veil and the Order took up arms, the world has become a dangerous place for magical beings. We thought this might make it easier to recruit more individuals such as yourself, but mythical beings are naturally leery. Sadly, the Order has also seeded themselves among our candidates. They would so love to take this place and call it their own."*

*The cyclops snarled at the mention of the Order, but soon recomposed herself. She fidgeted with the handle of the blade in her belt, taken from a knight who had tried to kill her.*

*“We are planning on locking this place down in the near future.” Agatha’s face was grim. “Other than a few trusted individuals and organizations, I believe it’s in the Library’s best interests to close our doors to the rest of the world.”*

*“I see.”*

*“I don’t think you do.” Agatha grimaced. “This decision will not happen immediately, but in the next decade as we officially sever ties and recoup our property. Once this is done, you will no longer be allowed to leave. This life was thrust upon you, Sofia, and I want to make sure you have a choice in the matter.”*

*“A choice?” Sofia frowned. “What choice?”*

*“You are an adult now, and a rather formidable one.” Agatha’s gaze dropped to Sofia’s sword. “We took you in that we might save your life. But now? You can stand on your own two feet.”*

*“Are you...throwing me out?”*

*Agatha shook her head. “Slow your thoughts, child. You are jumping to conclusions. Before we close the Library to the world, you must make an important decision. Will you stay here for the rest of your days as a Librarian? Or should you return to the world of men and find your own place there?”*

*“I want to stay here,” said Sofia. “Earth has nothing I desire. This place is the only family that I have. The world of men is not mine to walk and has nothing for me.”*

*The Head Librarian shook her head sadly. “That is something you assume only because you have not yet tried to live in the mortal world. Regardless, there will come a day when I ask you this question again, and I hope you have properly thought about it.”*

*Sofia snorted. She felt that there really wasn’t anything to think about.*

Back in the present, Sofia sighed. She hadn’t thought about that day in a long time, and it was only now that she truly appreciated what Agatha had been trying to convey. Crossing her arms, she scowled at her own feet, hating that

younger version of herself who had been unwilling to even consider changing her mind.

Sofia's magic burst to life, her mind filled with a vision of her immediate future.

*{Claw-like fingers grabbed her from behind, their vicious tips sinking through the delicate skin of her neck, spilling her blood across the damp soil. Sofia tumbled forward, grasping at her throat as the river ran red with her blood. The world grew dark as life fled her veins, leaving her gasping on the ground.}*

Sofia threw herself forward, rolling into a ball as she brought out her sword. Dark claws sank into the wood of the tree, causing it to splinter. A gnarled figure leaned into view, its mouth twisted into a gruesome grin. When it yanked its claws free of the tree, the wood turned black, leached of its colors.

"So you finally decided to show yourself." Sofia raised the blade and waited for the creature to charge.

*{It melted into the ground, becoming one with her shadow. Caught off guard, Sofia wasn't fast enough to react when it burst up from between her legs, lacerating her thighs with razor-sharp fingers. Her femoral artery sprayed blood everywhere, and when she tried to stem the flow, the creature opened its mouth and sank its teeth into her face.}*

Sofia stabbed her sword into the ground just as the entity became one with her shadow. It let out a squeal like a pig, then slithered away. This time, she didn't see where it went. Turning in place, she took a cautionary step toward the river, wondering if the flowing water would prevent the entity's passage.

*{A clawed hand burst out of the soil and grabbed her ankle. When Sofia leaned forward to attack it, another hand shot out from the ground and struck her in the face, blinding her. As she stumbled back, she could feel her flesh being opened in a dozen places as if with razor blades.}*

The hand burst out of the ground and grabbed her foot. Sofia leaned forward and severed the second hand at the wrist with her sword. The severed hand flopped around on the soil for several seconds before hopping up onto its fingertips and scurrying away.

"I can do this all day," she said. "So why don't we speed things along? I'd be happy to end your miserable existence for you right now."

The cyclops watched as the entity stepped out from behind a distant tree. The severed hand leapt up and rejoined with the main body. The entity hissed at her like a cat, and then crouched down on all fours and bolted away.

“Fuck,” she muttered as she attempted to jog behind it and keep up. She got winded after half a mile and groaned when she saw the creature scale the side of a building. Keeping up wasn’t going to be an option, not in this terrain.

Grumbling to herself, she watched in curiosity as the colors of Florence began to fade. The city slowly dwindled into shades of gray.

Taking several deep breaths, she continued running. She might not be able to follow the entity itself, but she could sure as heck follow the colors it had left behind.

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Mike had never taken the opportunity to learn just how long he could run. It wasn’t like he could get away with joining an official marathon without people noticing his presence. From experience, he did know that he could jog comfortably for over an hour without stopping. His stamina was the result of swapping souls with Zel, which also caused his hair to grow extra fast and thick.

Long before he tired, they ran into their first complication: a series of caverns that reminded him very much of pictures he had seen of the catacombs beneath France. While Cecilia was capable of tracking Sofia, she was unable to help him navigate through the hallways.

Mike scattered his lightning spiders, hoping they would help him map the tunnels. In the distance, one of the decoys he had sent roaming was snuffed out. The entity was somewhere between him and Sofia. Determined to catch up to Sofia, he was forced to wait until his magic provided him the fastest route to the exit.

One of the spiders started running in circles, the sign that it was now somewhere new. The other spiders migrated in its direction, some of them being forced to turn around and go back. Mike followed the spider and was stumped when he came to a room piled high with bones.

“What the hell?” He held out a hand full of light. “How do we get through here?”

Cecilia appeared and floated up toward the ceiling. She pointed at a narrow gap large enough for Mike to squirm through above the pile of bones.

“Ugh,” he muttered, then climbed onto the bones and pulled himself onto the ledge. The gap was only one foot tall and a couple of feet wide. He couldn’t see the exit, the tunnel was completely dark only a few feet in. “Can you float ahead and make sure I can fit through the other side? I don’t want to crawl backward through this.”

Cecilia kissed him on the cheek and floated forward. Her body gave off plenty of light to see by, up until she disappeared around a corner. When she returned, she gave him a thumbs up. Mike sighed and continued forward. It didn’t matter how many years had passed, crawling through narrow passageways reminded him of his car accident long ago. The smell of phantom smoke tickled his memories, but he kept his mind on the task ahead.

He squirmed through the tunnel until he was in a cavern with a cot crammed into a rocky alcove. At a desk, a person wearing thick robes huddled over a book, writing by candlelight.

“Why couldn’t more of these assholes have written their memoirs somewhere nice?” Mike grumbled as he maneuvered his body to drop down from the gap in the ceiling. He landed in a crouch, then lost his balance and fell on his butt.

“You told me once that you didn’t care where we were, as long as we were together.” Cecilia offered him a hand, which he took. “Also, there was something about my ethereal beauty being the only light you would ever need.”

“What?” Mike stared at the banshee. “I know I can be cheesy, but that sounds a bit much.”

“You were drunk.”

“Oh.” Mike cleared his throat. He didn’t want to hurt Cecilia’s feelings but definitely didn’t remember saying what she claimed. “Um...yeah, when I was saying those things, I know I meant them on some level, but I, uh...” He noticed that the banshee was smirking. “Are you fucking with me?”

Cecilia nodded, then stuck out her tongue.

He actually laughed, the echo filling the caverns. The tension broke, and he set his spiders on the ground and allowed them to roam. The way out didn’t

require any crawling through tunnels, though he did have to turn sideways to squirm through another gap. Cecilia was able to float ahead of him, her skirt occasionally billowing up to reveal the backs of her thighs. When she looked back to check on him, he couldn't help but notice that she tilted her body forward to give him a better look.

"Things are looking up," he muttered to himself. Instead of leaving the cave, they ended up stepping right into an old library. Tattered books lined the shelves, and a woman stood in the middle of the room with an alchemy table. She was busy mashing something up with a mortar and pestle. Mike sniffed the air, but it lacked any sort of scent. On the floor, his spider was running in circles, much like a dog with the zoomies. He stuck his foot out, and the magic returned to him, humming with satisfaction.

The library was actually some kind of tower in a castle. Mike and Cecilia got lost trying to navigate the stairs and leave the building. The banshee floated up to the top of a parapet and returned to his side.

"We're a bit closer," she said. "It seems like she's stopped."

"First rule of being lost," he said. "Stay where you are until someone can find you."

"That only works if both parties aren't lost." Cecilia put her hands on her hips and grinned. She sashayed her hips and drifted toward him. "She doesn't know that I'm here or that we're tracking her."

"You seem extra flirty today." Mike held out his hand and she took it. "Are you treating this like a date?"

"I'm pretending I have you all to myself." She clutched his arm. "We should keep moving. If Sofia is holding still, we can catch up to her."

"You're the boss."

They exited the castle and next found themselves in an old building that could have been located in Cambridge, England. Of course, Mike was basing this guess entirely off of movies that took place there, but the vibe was accurate. They dodged gray people who walked the paths of the university, then got sidelined by a body of water. The two of them gazed across it, and Mike saw a boat on the horizon.

“She’s on the other side of this,” said Cecilia, then pointed to the left of the boat. “Over that way.’

“I’m not eager to go swimming,” Mike admitted. “Not in there, at least.” On the ground, he had options. In the water? If the entity came for them, there was little he could do.

“Then we’ll go around, *a mhuirnín*.” She pulled him by the hand and led him. It was weird seeing the land abruptly truncated to accommodate swelling waves that never spilled over, the scene reminding Mike of those desktop wave sculptures. Eventually, the waves continued, but the scene they were walking through changed. The dirt path beneath their feet transformed into cobblestones and they were surrounded by small buildings. They were walking through a farmer’s market, the vendors silently hawking their wares.

As if paint had been spilled, the entire scene lit up with color. Mike stopped walking and blinked in astonishment as the world took on more definition. When the color washed over him, he felt a slight tingling through his whole body. Patting at his chest, he turned toward Cecilia.

“Did you feel some...” His words trailed off. Cecilia stood behind him, her hands held up in front of her as she stared in astonishment at her fingers. Though her countenance was still pale, she was no longer a specter. Her hair had turned completely red, and he could see the freckles on her cheeks.

“Mike?” She looked past her fingers and reached for his face. “I can see you, *mo ghraidh. Tha thu bòidheach!*” When she caressed his skin, he could feel the warmth in her fingertips.

“What is happening?” he asked, moving her hands and entwining his fingers with hers. “This place is different now. You’re different. Why?”

“Mike!” Cecilia let go of his hand and ran to the closest vendor. He could hear her footsteps on the ground. “Is this what an apple looks like?”

“Uh...I think that’s a plum.” He walked up behind the banshee. She snatched the plum out of the vendor’s hand and tried to study it, but it yanked itself free. Undeterred, she grabbed an orange with both hands and shoved it in his direction. “Is this an apple?”

He chuckled, then reached past her to pick an apple from the cart. “They look like this,” he said, holding it in front of her face.

“It’s beautiful!” She tried to take it from him, but it was pulled out of both of their hands. Laughing, she took off at a sprint. Mike ran after her, desperate to keep her out of trouble as well as stick by her side. Based on some wooden signs he caught in passing, he was fairly certain they were somewhere in France. Either that, or the small amount of French he had picked up from spy movies was way off base.

Cecilia nearly tripped over her feet several times in her rush to see everything. She picked up more fruits, vegetables, a baguette, and then stopped briefly to pet someone’s horse. The world took on a strange hum, as if trying to come to life. As they navigated the streets, the vibrant colors deepened. Even Mike was caught off guard by just how varied the brickwork on the buildings was in terms of hues.

“Mike!” Cecilia was hopping up and down at the end of an alley. When he caught up, he realized that the banshee had found a large lawn, adorned with flowers. Cecilia cried out and ran across the street, nearly getting creamed by a horse-drawn carriage.

“Hey, wait!” Mike ran after her. Cecilia was on a sloping lawn, and let out a whoop of laughter before tripping over her feet. She tumbled forward, then continued rolling across the grass, her cries of joy echoing everywhere. Mike couldn’t help but smile when he caught up with her.

“Everything looks so beautiful,” she said wistfully, her eyes now on the slightly cloudy sky. Her irises were the deepest green he could ever remember seeing. “Come. Lay with me.”

“We’re kind of on a mission,” he said, but Cecilia grabbed him by the fabric of his pants and pulled. He tilted forward on top of her, their noses almost touching.

“The entity is near,” she whispered, her voice suddenly serious. “I can feel it, like a jagged edge dragging along my skin. Even now, it hunts us.”

“I see,” he replied. He closed his eyes and realized he could feel it as well. It was somewhere off to his right, but keeping its distance. The entity was holding position, likely watching them even now. Why wasn’t it attacking them?

“It’s hunting for souls,” Cecilia whispered. “It is why I currently appear as I do. The creature seeks out souls, and this place is trying to bow to its rules. As



such, my soul has risen to the surface, Yet while my job is to guide them to the afterlife, this wretched thing only knows hunger.”

“So you want to lure the entity out?”

“No,” she replied with a grin. “I want you to kiss me, *chuisle mo chroí*. If that happens to lure the enemy out, then so be it.”

Her eyes sparkled in the light of the false world and he couldn’t help but smile. “This feels naughty,” he admitted as he lowered his lips to hers. “You’re going to get us in trouble with Sofia.”

“I won’t tell if you don’t.” She arched her back, her lips grazing against his. Though her form was currently human, a spark jumped between them. “Now kiss me under this beautiful blue sky.”

Their lips locked, her tongue eagerly exploring his mouth. The wild magic of the Fae shifted against his own and drove the breath from his body. He wasn’t entirely certain what was going on with Cecilia’s magic right now, but his body suddenly ached for hers.

Cecilia rolled him onto his back and sat up, her thighs now straddling his waist. “Don’t worry,” she whispered. “I can handle it when it gets here.”

“Are you sure? You’re different right now.”

“I may look different on the outside, but…” Cecilia slid her hands beneath his shirt. Though her skin was warm, her fingertips still felt chilly. She rubbed her crotch against his, causing his cock to harden. “My insides remain the same.”

The banshee pressed herself against him, her supple breasts squishing against his chest. She lifted his shirt as her hands explored his chest, her fingers lingering briefly to play with his nipples. She kissed him when he gasped, sucking his breath into her body. Their tongues danced as Cecilia ground her hips against his body, his cock now firmly caught between his legs.

She broke the kiss and moved her head back to look at him. Cecilia stroked his cheek and then played with his hair, studying him with an intensity that made him shiver. He arched his back to kiss the top of her breasts, causing a flush of desire to race across her skin and up her neck.

“Mmm, yes, my treasure,” she whispered. “I would feel your lips upon me for eternity if I could.”

“It wouldn’t be a bad way to spend forever,” he said in agreement. “But just to make sure, we should keep practicing.”

She kissed him again, more eagerly than before. He squeezed her breasts through her blouse, then moved his hand to pull the fabric down. The moment her nipples were exposed, her blouse fought him, attempting to cover her back up.

“Ah!” Cecilia broke their kiss and sighed. “I suppose some things never change.”

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “I’m a pro at this now.” He pulled one of her nipples into his mouth and swirled his tongue along the outside. Though her countenance was human, her Fae heritage was still very much in play. His tongue tingled at the point of contact as his magic and hers met. Cecilia was partially responsible for the origin of his unique brand of sexual magic, a combination of Naia’s soul swap and the gifts of the Fae. Constantly evolving, it always seemed to recognize its source, and Mike captured a nipple gently between his teeth and teased it with his tongue. A magical current formed, the sizzling sound audible inside of his mouth.

“I wish I had the body of a mortal,” Cecilia whispered. “Only so I could give myself to you completely.”

Mike grinned at the banshee’s romantic ruminations. He grabbed the waistband of his pants to push them down. Cecilia lifted her hips and helped him, his bare ass now on the grass and his erect cock sticking up under the fabric of her skirt.

“I never get tired of this,” she said, then grabbed his cock through her skirt and stroked it. “Knowing that you desire me, that I make you hard.”

Tiny motes of light squeezed through the fabric and hovered in the air between them. Cecilia giggled and stuck a hand beneath her skirt.

“Sometimes, I wonder what it would be like if I had found you first,” she said breathlessly. “If I didn’t have to share you with the others. We could spend all day doing this.”

“I mean...” Mike wasn’t about to argue. He was a smart man and knew better. “If it had been just the two of us, what would be different?”

“We would travel,” she said. Her fingers traced a circle around the head of his shaft, and she shifted her weight. Though he couldn’t see what she was doing, he felt the thin fabric of her panties get pushed aside. “I would see the world with you and go beyond the boundaries of our home. We would go to the ocean, the mountains, and maybe the desert. There would be exciting new ways for us to make love, both under the sun and the stars.”

He could feel the cool dampness of her labia against his shaft now. She was sliding herself along his cock and spreading lubricant around. He moved his hands along her thighs and squeezed, then continued further until his hands were on her hips. With his assistance, the head of his cock lined up with her vagina, and she began a slow descent onto him.

As if lifted by a breeze, her crimson locks billowed around her. Cecilia bit her lip and grunted as her pussy gobbled him up an inch at a time. She locked eyes with him and whimpered.

“You feel bigger than usual.”

“We can take it slow.” He ran his hands across her butt, then rubbed the tops of her thighs some more. Cecilia took a deep breath and wiggled her hips, which caused him to penetrate her a little bit deeper.

“I feel so different down there,” she confessed. “I don’t know why that is.”

“Let’s find out together.” Mike touched her cheek. “But for now, you’re in charge. Let’s take it slow.”

Cecilia leaned forward and kissed him again, rocking her hips as she did so. Over time, he moved further inside of her until he could go no further. The banshee took this moment to sit up and lean back, pulling up her skirt to reveal her swollen clitoris.

“Touch me?”

“Of course.” Mike used his thumb, teasing the edges of her labia and then running across her clit. Cecilia shivered, her cheeks and shoulders so flushed that her freckles had almost disappeared. He took his time, using magic sparingly. For all he knew, Cecilia was no different than a human woman right now, and he didn’t want to overwhelm her.

After a few minutes of this, Cecilia tightened her thighs around his body and moved his hand away to allow her to lean forward. She pushed hair out of both their eyes and smiled. "I want to be on my back," she said.

They rolled over, Mike still fully impaled between her legs. Cecilia's eyes shimmered like emerald pools, and she put both of her hands on his face.

"Make love to me," she begged. "I want to see what your face looks like when you come."

"As you wish," he replied, then started a slow rhythm. Before long, Cecilia pulled his face to hers and they kissed some more, the banshee moaning into his mouth. When she did so, it caused his own banshee magic to resonate, creating a buzzing sensation deep inside his chest. It felt like the air itself was playing music, and he made sure to keep his movements in tune with the beat.

From the corner of his eye, it looked as if the colors of this makeshift world rippled in time with their bodies. Yet he couldn't look away from the beautiful woman beneath him. There was no sense of urgency as they became lost in each other's bodies. The vibrating sensation between them had intensified, making Mike feel slightly drunk.

"More, my love, more!" Cecilia arched her back. "I can feel you better than ever this day. You're so hot inside of me!"

Mike took a moment to check their surroundings. The phantom people milling around the edges of the park ignored them entirely, and his magic didn't warn him of any impending danger.

"Please!" Cecilia clawed at his shoulders. "I have to know what your cum feels like inside of this body while I have it!"

Not one to leave a lady wanting, Mike moved with a faster rhythm. Streamers or electricity crawled from their conjoined bodies, spiraling away from them in a circle. White droplets of light rose into the sky, as if it were raining in reverse.

"Please," she continued to beg, her eyes locked on his. "Fill me up, *mo leannan*, make me yours forever!"

Mike took a deep breath as the magic built inside of him in order to fulfill Cecilia's desires. When he came, it was fiery and hot. He grunted with every spurt, his legs shaking in response.

“Oh. OH!” Cecilia’s eyes never left his face. “I can feel it, so hot inside my belly. And you! *Tha thu bòidheach!*” She wrapped her legs around his waist and pinned him there, her hips slightly bucking against his own.

Up above, thunder pealed, but there weren’t any clouds. Mike slowed his movements, but didn’t pull out. Cecilia sighed and toyed with the collar of his shirt.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“I sometimes wish I was human,” she said. “That I could be yours and we could grow old together. But if I had been born a human, we never would have met.”

“That is very true.” Mike flexed his cock, which caused Cecilia to gasp. “Maybe you’re more human now, but I’ve always liked you just the way you are.”

The banshee smiled, then twisted her body so that they were lying on their sides. She caressed his cheek and embraced him, her lips brushing against his ears.

“We’re being watched,” she whispered. “I can feel it lurking nearby.”

“What’s the play?” he asked. When she looked confused, he clarified. “What should we do?”

“More of this,” she replied, pushing him onto his back. She grabbed his hands and pulled them to her breasts, then rolled her hips. Semen gushed out of her, pooling in Mike’s lap. “We...continue doing...this!”

Cecilia rode him slowly, yet grinding down on him hard. The motes of light caught in her hair, lifting the strands skyward as if carried aloft in a breeze. While Mike’s hands remained on her breasts, she slid her fingers down his forearms and clutched his biceps for support. She stared down at him, her eyes shimmering with tears, then groaned and arched her back.

When she came, the lights around her changed color and fell to the ground, each drop playing a musical note and splattering like wet paint. Cecilia’s eyes were wide in wonder as she quietly came, her eyes on the vivid tapestry of color that surrounded them. She was gasping for air, her chest rising and falling with every breath.

Mike had never seen such joy in her face.

Cecilia's gaze immediately sharpened on something behind him and she let out a piercing cry. Mike's fingers barely made it to his ears in time to muffle the banshee's wail. Her vaginal canal tightened around his cock as she cried out, her song filling the world with grief and rage as she squeezed a few more drops out of him.

Using his arms to sit up and look past the banshee, Mike saw a dark figure writhing on the ground. It looked almost like an inkblot, the surface of its body rippling as it tried to scramble away from them. As Cecilia screamed, the color leached from her skin, leaving behind only a shock of red hair as she returned to her usual form. She floated off of him, allowing Mike to pull up his pants and scramble to his feet.

"Found you," he muttered as he fumbled with his belt. The entity pulled itself across the garden with tendrils that had hooks on the end. It was easy enough to jog ahead of it and cut off its escape. Mike opened his mouth and let out a banshee cry of his own.

The colors in the garden broke and ran together like paint, pooling into kaleidoscope puddles atop the graying grass. The entity tried to get away from them, but Cecilia was able to float just ahead of its path.

Seeing that Cecilia had things well under control, Mike let out a sigh of relief. However, now that the entity was captured, he had no idea what to do with it.

"There you are!"

Mike looked up to see Sofia jogging toward them across the grass. She also had her fingers in her ears. The cyclops looked at Cecilia, then turned back to Mike. "When did she get here?!?" she yelled.

"Snuck in with me," he yelled in reply. "How do we get out of this place?"

"Like this!" Sofia unplugged her ears and winced at the sound. Raising her sword, she lunged forward, narrowly dodging several hooked limbs to slice the entity in half. It made noise like metal screws dropped in a garbage disposal, and the scene tore like paper. A dark mist formed around the three of them, and was quickly dispersed to reveal the Forbidden Section.

“I finally found you,” Sofia shouted, then picked up her staff. She pointed the crystal at the remains of the entity and a yellow sphere of energy appeared around it, trapping it within. “You can stop yelling, now!” she added.

Cecilia closed her mouth, then grinned. “Gotcha,” she said, hovering near the sphere. Inside, the entity swirled around like hot tar, then pressed its melted features against the surface and raged. “It’s an evil spirit, all twisted and gnarled like a poisoned tree.”

“It’s a wraith.” Sofia turned her attention to the books on the floor and waved her staff. The tomes floated back to where they had come from, sliding into place with shushing sounds. Mike noticed that several of them now had loose pages that fluttered delicately as they moved, their battered covers opening and closing like fish out of water. “Little bastard tried to eat our souls.”

“What do we do with it?” Mike walked up to the sphere. Inside, the dark fluid boiled like hot tar, clinging to the edges.

“We have quarantine procedures. Force it to possess an empty book and then toss it into a hole in the ground.” Sofia folded up her sword and tucked it into her belt. “Library fills it up with cement.”

“Ah, yes. We call that the Jersey treatment.” Mike frowned at the sphere. “We can’t just force it to cross over, can we?”

“It doesn’t have a true soul,” said Cecilia. “It’s an amalgamation of them, stitched together with dark magic. If we were to send it away, it would only have a new hunting ground and may even return.”

Sofia picked up the book the wraith had come from and set it on her cart. “The big mystery here is why that thing was haunting this book. Someone put it there. This isn’t a demon that got trapped in a book of shadows, or the vengeful spirit of the book’s author haunting their magnum opus.”

“Do you get those a lot?” asked Mike.

“We have a whole section of books possessed by their authors. Probably one every few weeks in recent years. Too many people pouring their hearts and souls into writing a book and then getting upset when nobody buys it or appreciates their self-aggrandized genius.” Sofia did a visual sweep of the room, then grabbed the cart with the remaining books. “Sometimes, their soul will

actually inhabit the book before they die. Their body begins a soulless descent into madness.”

“That sounds a bit extreme.”

“I agree.” Sofia turned her attention to the wraith as it hovered behind them in its prison. The malevolent spirit tossed and turned, its mouth open in a silent scream as it clawed at the sphere. “But you have to understand that books are always special. They’re a gateway to another time and place, and their creation almost always takes a tiny part of their creator’s soul. It’s a very special kind of magic that is often misunderstood.”

“I see.” Mike smiled to himself. He used to read far more often in his younger days. Now he was much too busy living in a story of his own to indulge in the fantasies of others. Anyone had spoken with him at length about the same topic, but hearing those words echoed by the Head Librarian herself lent them even more weight. “Do you still read for fun?”

Sofia snorted. “I don’t have time to read for fun,” she replied.

“Is that why you’re so sad?” asked Cecilia.

The cyclops stopped and turned to look at the banshee. “I’m not sad,” she growled.

“I can see your soul,” said Cecilia. “And you shouldn’t lie to the Fae. We have ways of knowing.”

“Fucking Fae,” muttered Sofia as she stomped her way down the tunnel with the wraith in tow. Mike lagged behind so that he and Cecilia were out of earshot.

“Humans don’t really like being called out on their bullshit,” he said, his voice low. “Even though you’re right.”

“She’s not human, *mo leannan*.” Cecilia grinned. “But you’re very sweet to forget.”

Sofia stepped onto the platform and didn’t even look in their direction when the others boarded. The transport moved away from the hidden doorway, which sealed itself back up. Even knowing where the tunnel used to be, Mike couldn’t see any trace of it.



Inside the floating sphere, the wraith twisted about, its glowing eyes occasionally stopping to focus on Mike. He didn't like the malevolent intelligence he saw there, and was reminded of Leeds.

He tried not to think of the Jersey Devil often. The moments were rare when he did so, and it was always in connection with Grace. His daughter was growing up without her mother because of that bastard. This entity was about to be locked away deep in the bowels of the Library, but that didn't mean it would be there forever. What if it escaped some day, and became someone else's Leeds? Why bother allowing such a thing to exist?

His thoughts were dark, and he knew the root cause was his dilemma with Tink. There was no enemy for him to fight, no magnificent battle to triumph over. Instead, they were trying to bypass the natural order of things, and he was well aware the path they walked was lined with pitfalls of damnation.

Cecilia's hand found his own. He half expected her to say something, but she pressed her body against his and just embraced him. The dark thoughts fled, and he found comfort in her arms.

After several minutes of this, he realized something. His home was full of plenty of people who were more than happy to give him their full support. But the surly cyclops in front of him didn't enjoy that same relationship with others. He wondered how much of her solitary nature was based on her job, or even the life that had been forced upon her. While he was sometimes alone, he was never lonely. Sofia, on the other hand, was often both of those things.

Mike gave Cecilia a squeeze and she let go of him. He was about to explain why, but when he looked in her direction, she nodded in understanding. Without another word, he walked across the platform to stand next to Sofia. He slid his arm around her waist and she stiffened at his touch.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Just being here," he said, leaning into her. "For you."

Sofia clutched her staff so tight that her knuckles turned white. He half expected her to push him away, but was pleasantly surprised when she draped her free arm over his shoulders and returned his embrace. Cecilia floated up from behind and pressed herself against his back, making him into a proper Mike-sandwich.

He could feel the angry spirit's dark attention on the back of his head, but it felt distant. They rode back to the lobby together in silence.

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When the platform finally descended to the lobby over an hour later, Mike let go of Sofia and watched as they drifted down to the marble floor below. Rats were everywhere, many of them carrying books or food to their destinations. Eulalie was at the Information Desk, giving out instructions. She looked up at their approach and waved.

"There you are!" She casually leapt over the desk and waited for the platform to land. "You've been gone all day. I was wondering when you would get back."

"Around now," said Mike. He stepped off the platform and moved aside for Sofia and her books. Cecilia had gone invisible again, but he suspected she was close by. This was confirmed when she nibbled playfully on his ear. "Did you need something from me? Where's Grace?"

"She's playing with her Aunt Abella in Naia's fountain." Eulalie made a face. "Aunt Yuki needed a break after her tails got webbed together."

Mike frowned. "Why did Grace do that?"

Eulalie shrugged. "It started innocently. She was tying ribbons in Yuki's tails and Yuki didn't notice that Grace was using her webs instead of previously approved tail decorations. I feel it was a good lesson for both of them. Don't turn your back on a child and don't use webs on your friends and family without permission." The Arachne gave Sofia a sly look, which the cyclops ignored.

"We have some research material," said Sofia as she gestured at the cart, then at the hovering sphere nearby. "That thing needs to be disposed of. If you can have one of your rats bring me a blank journal from storage, I will show you how it's done."

Eulalie was too busy studying the sphere and didn't reply. When Sofia cleared her throat, the Arachne looked away from it. "Excuse me, what?"

"Just bring me an empty journal." Sofia waited a moment, then coughed. "Please."

The Arachne lowered her gaze to a nearby rat, who nodded and took off. “So what is this thing?” she asked, gesturing at the sphere. “When I look at it, I feel...angry. I haven’t felt this mad since...” Eulalie frowned. “Velvet.”

“If it’s making you feel bad, you should get away from it.” Sofia moved toward the Information Desk. “It’s quite powerful, and there’s a good chance it’s trying to get inside your head.”

“But it can’t, right?” Eulalie stuck out her finger and jabbed the sphere. “It’s trapped in this—”

Cracks spiraled out from Eulalie’s fingertips, and the sloshing dark fluid expanded rapidly with spikes along its body, looking very much like an evil pufferfish. Eulalie skittered away from it as it landed on the ground.

“Everybody back!” Sofia whipped her staff around, but the entity launched itself across the room and landed on a rat. The poor thing let out a squeak and was torn apart.

“You piece of shit!” Eulalie let out a howl of rage and sprinted forward. The entity raised bladed limbs and let out a cackle as it slashed out at her. The Arachne was fast enough to dodge the blows, but her efforts to put hands on the wraith were for naught. Its whole body would shift and distort. When Eulalie finally got her fingers on it, the thing slipped free with no effort.

“Get out of the way!” Sofia screamed, unable to use whatever spell she had planned. “Eulalie, move!”

Mike released a banshee cry, but was interrupted when the wraith hurled a book at his face. He was knocked prone by the surprise attack, biting his lip in the process.

Cecilia appeared, manifesting from above and descending. When she screamed, everybody plugged their ears. The wraith bubbled from within, then made a break for it. Mike got to his feet and saw that the wraith was heading for the hallway that led to the Librarian’s Quarters.

*Tink!* Reaching within, Mike summoned a magical barrier that stretched across the hallway. It was a spell he had learned from the Grimoire, the only one he had been willing to take. The wraith splashed across the shield’s surface, then reformed facing toward them. It reached into its torso and threw a book at the

group. Black clouds erupted from its pages, threatening to pull them into yet another pocket dimension.

“Not this time,” said Sofia, using her staff. The black clouds evaporated, revealing the wraith as it flew through the air at the Head Librarian. She brought her staff up just in time to block a bladed assault, then cried out when it grabbed her ankle and knocked her to the ground. Her eye flashed with magic and she let out a scream as the wraith reached for her throat with brutal claws.

When she screamed, it felt final, somehow, the sound piercing Mike to his very core with dread. Without thinking, he leapt forward and sank his fist into the creature’s back, his arm going numb to the shoulder. The wraith spun around, ready to tear him apart, then went still as Mike’s magic locked down around it, binding it in place. His fingers sought out the spiritual threads that bound the thing together. The wraith’s mass swirled in place, and glowing eyes now regarded him with cold hatred.

“Enough,” Mike growled. Using his magic, he grabbed onto the closest thing to a soul that the entity had and pulled. The wraith shrieked in alarm when Mike yanked a thick, goopy thread from its body. It tried to slash at Mike, but he had summoned a magical shield around himself. Instead of fighting Mike, it grabbed at the thread and tried to force it back into its torso.

With the thread outside the wraith, Mike used both hands to pull on it, causing the thread to snap. The wraith recoiled and clawed at its face as the edges of its body frayed and turned to mist that evaporated almost instantly. The entity fell to the ground and flailed, then resorted to hugging its body in an attempt to hold itself together.

Finally, it let out a weak cry and melted away, leaving a stain on the marble that looked very much like blood. Mike looked up at the others and saw them staring back in shock.

“What did you do?” asked Eulalie, her eyes wide with surprise.

“This thing was stitched together with magic and pieces of souls, right?” Mike made a claw with his hands. “I found the soul part and pulled it out.”

“That’s...” Sofia clutched her staff like a protective talisman. “I was going to say impossible, but I should know better.”

“Yeah.” Mike looked at the stain on the floor. “Sorry about the mess.”

A loud clunking sound filled the air, followed by Kisa yelling. Tink waddled out into the hallway, dragging her club behind her.

"You're supposed to stay in bed," said Kisa, who was walking backward in front of the goblin. "Get back there right this second!"

"Tink hear fight." The goblin grinned at Mike and hefted the club, which transformed into a crossbow. "Where bad guy? Tink make big kill!"

"Right there," said Mike, pointing at the stain. "The fight is over already. Don't worry, you're safe."

"Bah!" Tink rolled her eyes and handed Kisa the crossbow. The catgirl nearly fell over trying to hold it. "Tink miss fighting. Tink miss fucking. Tink miss everything!" She waddled off angrily, back down the hallway to her room.

Kisa made eye contact with Mike, and he felt her speak directly into his mind.

*"Please figure this out soon,"* she said. *"She's driving me crazy."* With that, Kisa followed Tink back to her room, grunting as she dragged the giant crossbow behind her.

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Yuki grumbled quietly to herself as she sat on the front porch. Her three natural tails were fanned out in front of her in the sun in an attempt to dry them. She had taken a quick bath with Naia's help, but even with the spider webs missing from her fur, there were still ragged clumps where it had become tangled.

Sitting on the step below, Grace was meticulously running a brush through one of the tails, eager to undo her mistake from earlier. The Arachne had shown plenty of contrition after accidentally ruining the kitsune's tail. When Grace hit a snag with the brush, she stuck her tiny fingers inside the bushy fur to undo the mess by hand.

Behind her, Yuki's golden tails radiated magic in gentle pulses. Though they felt like they were made of fur, they were actually a manifestation of mana and Yuki's soul. They couldn't be harmed and required no actual upkeep.

Sulyvahn was nearby, humming quietly to himself as he helped the centaurs manage the hedge maze. Most of them had already left for the evening, and Yuki got the strangest feeling that the dullahan was hanging around waiting for

someone. To her knowledge, Beth was currently in Oregon, so there was no reason for Suly to lurk around here. It was only an hour until sunset.

“Blech!” Grace tugged on something in Yuki’s tail and pulled out a chunk of hair that was caught up in a glob of webbing. When she held it up for Yuki’s appraisal, the kitsune narrowed her eyes.

“Big sorry.” The Arachne pouted.

Yuki sighed. “I know,” she replied, then patted Grace on the head. “But you did learn your lesson, right?”

“Yes.” Grace picked up the closest brush and resumed stroking Yuki’s tail. “No webs on Aunt Yuki.”

“No webs on family members,” Yuki clarified. “Or furniture.”

Grace bobbed her head in understanding. “Ribbons, only,” she added.

“Yes, ribbons are fine.” Yuki heard the front door open and looked up to see Death standing there with a builder’s belt wrapped around his waist. The Grim Reaper struck a pose with his hands on his waist, then tilted his gaze toward Yuki.

“Good afternoon,” he said, speaking louder than usual.

“What’s with the belt?” she asked.

“Ah, this. I’m surprised you noticed.” Death stared out into the yard as if appraising his domain. “With Tinker Radley in her current state, I have taken it upon myself to maintain the exterior of our home. Have you seen any loose shingles? Or perhaps a stuck window?”

“Um...” Yuki looked at Grace. Even the Arachne looked puzzled. Down in the yard, Suly was frowning in their direction. “Are you sure you should be doing that? You...don’t seem like the handyman type.”

“On the contrary!” Death reached down to his belt and pulled out a hammer. “Tinker once explained to me that this tool is intended for percussive maintenance.” He slid the hammer back into its loop and withdrew a screwdriver. “And this is for Philip’s screws!”

“Flathead.” Grace hopped onto the porch next to Death and pointed at the flattened tip of the screwdriver. She grabbed a different screwdriver out of his belt and held it up. “Philips.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I *did* have a fifty-fifty chance.” Death chuckled. “But these tools alone will enable me to conduct most home repairs. Much like Mike Radley himself, I intend to solve any issues by pounding or screwing them.”

Yuki coughed so hard that she actually choked on her own spit. Grace helpfully patted her on the back, her tiny hands nearly swatting her into the yard. She held up a hand for the Arachne to stop.

“Death, my friend.” Suly cocked his head to one side and grimaced. “Ye cannae do house repairs jus’ on account o’ having a few tools.”

“Which is why I now have all the tools!” Death turned back to the door where a rolling toolbox pushed its way through. Tick Tock flapped its upper lid at everyone and then stuck out a tape-measure tongue. “Tick Tock has agreed to be my helper in this endeavor and is currently carrying the majority of Tinker Radley’s workshop in their belly. Though I do suppose hard to reach places may give us some trouble...” Death scratched at his chin, then snapped his fingers. “Miss Grace! You’ve helped your aunt with things around the house. Would you like to be my helper as well?”

Grace moved toward Tick Tock and knocked on the mimic’s belly. The lid opened, revealing a bright pink hard hat with a spider sticker on it. She pulled the helmet out, followed by a pair of safety glasses. She plunked the helmet on her head, then put on her glasses.

“Looks like you’ve got an employee,” said Yuki.

“Indeed. I—” Death was interrupted by Grace, who was tugging on the arm of his robe. When he looked at her, she held up another pair of safety glasses. He took them from her and put them on. “It would seem she’s looking out for me already. Now if you’ll excuse us, we must do a proper appraisal!”

Death and Grace held hands as they stepped off the porch. Tick Tock had to waddle down the steps on its wheels. Yuki could hear the tools inside of the mimic rattling back and forth. Oddly, she heard a ringing sound, reminiscent of bells. It was most likely a loose socket set, or potentially some brackets rattling around.

The trio moved out together into the yard. Death chattered ceaselessly, all while tossing his hammer in the air and catching it. Grace hung on every word as the two of them walked down the long path to the edge of the property with Tick Tock rolling behind them.

“Now there be an odd trio.” Suly chuckled. “I wonder what trouble will find ‘em?”

“No idea,” muttered Yuki. But she did know one thing. Whatever they did to the house, Tink was gonna be pissed.

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It was nearing midnight at the local park when the water in the pond rippled and a female figure emerged. Her azure skin glowed despite a complete lack of moonlight. She cautiously waded toward the shore, inhaling the musky scent of Earth through her nostrils. Upon reaching the jagged rocks of the shoreline, she stepped out of the water, completely naked.

She sniffed the air again, then crouched down to touch the soil with her fingertips. Scooping the dirt up with a fingernail, she tasted it and made a face. This was a world lacking in magic, a dying world. When she looked up into the sky, she was unable to see the stars she knew were there. The lights from the nearby city had obscured them from view.

It was disgusting. Reprehensible. Destructive.

She loved it.

Shivering in delight, the woman stepped onto the rocks, the stones shifting beneath her feet to avoid hurting her sensitive flesh. Her gossamer hair thickened and wove itself into a tight braid behind her neck. She turned back toward the pond and waited for her counterpart. The Seelie court had chosen her specifically for this mission, but she had also volunteered. The chance to leave the Fae realm behind and see what the mortals had done with Earth in the last few centuries had been a prime opportunity to do something different.

She was also *extremely* eager to meet this Caretaker that everyone was so interested in. The doomsayers were all but in a panic over this man, and there were rumors among the court that the queen herself had some sort of illicit relationship with him. The queen had simply not been the same since her battle with Mike Radley, and the court had come to suspect she somehow maintained a relationship with him. Nobody was entirely sure how this was possible, but if true, it would upend the politics of the Fae realm in quite the dramatic manner.

That was something she certainly didn't want to miss.



The surface of the pond rippled, then exploded in a spray of water as a dark form launched into the sky and disappeared into the trees. Leaving the pond behind, she eventually found her counterpart huddled at the base of a tree. The dark, amorphic figure clutched the bark in long talons, its skin stretching and changing to match the color of the tree.

“Oh? They sent a shapeshifter?” She knelt down and touched the creature. It snapped at her, its numerous eyes looking everywhere. “You have nothing to fear from me,” she said in a scolding tone. “We’re supposed to work together.”

The shapeshifter hissed, then sniffed her hand. When it did so, its features rippled and it took on her form. She grabbed the creature by the throat and squeezed.

“Do not dare wear my face,” she growled, then gave the creature a shove. It reverted back to its previous form, but seeing her own naked body on the creature gave her pause. She looked down at herself and snapped her fingers in realization.

“I knew I was forgetting something,” she muttered, then beckoned to the nearby shadows. The darkness stretched and wrapped around her, transforming into cloth. She stood up straight, now garbed in a proper gown made of shadows. It was a temporary fix, she would need to acquire proper, Earth attire as soon as possible. Since her wardrobe was largely composed of starlight and poetry, it simply hadn’t translated to the mortal realm and had likely been destroyed on the way here.

The shapeshifter whimpered at her feet, then briefly transformed into her once again.

“Wait!” It cried, before she could strike it. “No disrespect intended. I am...newly created. No other forms yet. Need this mouth to speak.”

“Really?” She narrowed her eyes at the beast, but knew it wasn’t lying. “So the Unseelie chose not to send their best, but to create you instead?”

“I am...without bonds.” Her own face grinned back at her, revealing sharp teeth. “Should I succeed, my actions will be seen as mine alone.”

She frowned. “I thought our mission here was to gain the Caretaker’s trust and get close to him. Determine if his actions truly threaten our kind, and then act.”

“Yes!” The shapeshifter nodded. “But to complete the mission, there can be no...impediments.”

The Fae woman chuckled. “I see. My court sent a princess. Yours sent an assassin.”

The shapeshifter shrugged. “Perhaps,” it replied.

The princess licked her lips and frowned at the shapeshifter. She should have expected no less from the Unseelie court. This was absolutely the kind of approach they would choose. The Queen herself had dictated the rules of engagement with the Radley household, but was already at a disadvantage due to the rumors of favoritism. Both courts were allowed to investigate the Caretaker, yet neither would be allowed to act unless they had reasonable proof that Mike Radley was about to commit a crime against their people.

She wouldn't put it past the shapeshifter to create a reason for Mike to attack her people directly. The stories about what had happened to the mortals who had abducted his children had been juicy gossip amongst the court. The Queen had expressly forbidden any direct harm to the members of the house for this very reason. Should the Caretaker's family experience losses due to the court's intervention, they had every reason to believe the mortal would bring war to their realm.

So what would the shapeshifter do? The princess was eager to find out.

“Come,” she said, gesturing for the shapeshifter to follow. “Though we may not work together, at least allow me to assist you in finding a new face. I do not wish for you to wear that one any longer.”

The shapeshifter hissed in agreement and started to follow her on all fours. It eventually stood upright, assuming the princess's supernaturally smooth gait.

She smiled to herself. No matter what happened in the days ahead, at least it wouldn't be boring.