

A Case of the Shivers

The group walked to the front door with Mike in the lead. The porch creaked under their collective weight as they gathered and a gentle breeze caressed the nearby pillars. Up above, the roof squeaked when Abella landed on it. He reached for the front door, ready to allow Eulalie inside.

When his fingers touched the knob, he hesitated.

It wasn't because of his magic. One of his many gifts from Naia on inheriting the house was the ability to not only sense danger, but to somehow know when someone was a good fit for the house. He felt neither of these things right now, but still couldn't put his hand on the knob and officially invite her inside.

Instead, his mind focused on the shiny chitin of her lower body, the rustling movement of her many legs and the strange rounded pads at the bottom that made soft scratching sounds when she walked. Spiders clearly didn't have needle-thin feet at the end of their legs, but that was a fact he never expected to confront in such a wild manner.

Eulalie's body reminded him of the Andersons' basement. They had been friends of his father, and their basement had been far more comfortable than the back seat of his mother's station wagon long after he had died.

The Andersons never spent much time in their basement, which had worked out in his favor for a couple of weeks. However, it was thick with cobwebs that his mother had dismissed, and not all of the webs had been empty. In the middle of the night, he had wandered through a particularly thick web on the way to the bathroom. What he had thought was just a few sticky strands of web stuck to his face was revealed in the dim light of the bathroom to be a burst egg sac of baby spiders that scurried frantically all over his mouth and nose.

His screams had woken the whole house, causing his mother to berate him in front of their hosts for being such a pussy. He was only nine at the time, and when the Andersons kicked them out a week later, his mother had blamed him for it.

Standing at the door of the house, his skin was once more covered in those imaginary spiders. The others noticed his apprehension, most likely wondering if he had sensed something dangerous about their visitor. The moment was officially awkward, which was now compounding the situation.

Eualalie didn't seem to notice. She moved past him and opened the door herself. Once inside, she looked around and then turned to Mike with a grimace on her face. "Sorry to be pushy, but where's the bathroom?" She bit her lips and flexed her legs, doing a pathetic little dance in his front hallway. "I've been in that box a really long time, and even I have limits."

Dumbfounded, Mike pointed toward the hallway by the stairs. She shouldn't be able to come inside without his invitation. Had Emily invited her in at some point? "It's near the back door, you can't miss it." He didn't bother asking how she was going to fit on the toilet.

"Thanks!" She ran down the hallway, startling a cluster of rats who had been watching from the safety of the stairs. He heard the door slam, and then turned to face Lily and Dana.

"Give me the very brief version," he spat at them. It wasn't so much that he was mad that they had withheld the information, but the shock of seeing a half-spider woman had thrown him off entirely. Now that Eualalie was out of sight, his heart felt like it was working properly again.

"Eualalie and her sister Velvet live out in Oregon," Dana said.

"With Bigfoot," Lily added. "And their father."

"Excuse me, did you say Bigfoot?" This was from Beth, who stood behind everyone with Sulyvahn. "Seriously? How tall is he? What about his, uh, hands?"

Sulyvahn laughed. Abella, who stood in the back, let out a grunt of disgust and jumped into the air with flapping wings. The yard was nearly empty now, save for a few centaurs who were moving about and cleaning up the celebration.

"They're good people," Dana said. "Their father asked us not to tell you they were living there."

"Why?" Mike asked. "It's not like I was going to kick them out or anything."

"It isn't like they would know that," Lily told him. "And besides, there's another reason."

Dana tilted her head in curiosity, but Mike held up his hand for silence.

"Look, I get you thought you were doing the right thing," he said. "But what would have happened to her if neither one of you had been here? Abella would have killed her, and I wouldn't have known better."

Lily and Dana exchanged a look. He could see that Lily wanted to argue, but knew that he was right. Dana, as always, was inscrutable.

“Well, good thing we were here then,” Lily responded. “So get over it.” She pushed her way past him into the house. The others followed, but Tink paused before stepping through the door.

“Husband want Tink get club?” she asked. “Just in case?”

He ran his hand through her hair, then rubbed his thumb along one of her horns. She purred in delight, and leaned into his thigh.

“It should be fine,” he told her with a smile. “But maybe keep the swearing down until she gets to know you.”

“Fucking bug-eater,” Tink grumbled, then walked inside. “Tink no care what spider girl thinks.”

Everyone had spread out in the living room. Tink joined Kisa on the couch with Jenny sitting between them, and Quetzalli held a food platter with one hand while using the other to stuff her face with pigs-in-a-blanket. Cecilia hovered by the window, a look of concern on her face.

Realizing that everyone had decided to stay and watch, he shooed them off while waving his hands. Tink grumbled as she stormed up the stairs with Kisa, and Cecilia simply vanished. Sofia grabbed Quetzalli’s tray with a promise of more if she came to the kitchen, and the dragon followed her.

He didn’t want Eulalie to feel like she was being put on trial, and was grateful when nobody complained. He did ask Beth and Dana to stay. Lily stood in the corner of the room because he knew better than to shoo her off, and he saw Jenny had tucked herself in a corner to watch. That was also not a battle he was going to win, so let her stay.

When the toilet flushed, Mike wondered how Eulalie had managed to go to the bathroom. Did she have a human butt? Or maybe she peed like people do? These were stupid questions to wonder about his guest, but his mind was much happier pondering these things until she stepped back into the hallway.

It was the legs. Each one was black and glossy, and they rustled when she moved. He wondered if she could walk along the wall or even the ceiling, and if the plaster could sustain her weight. A cold chill went up his spine as she came out

of the hallway. Once back in the living room, her whole body moved upward a foot now that she wasn't about to hit her head on the ceiling.

"That's so much better," Eulalie said, then looked at everyone. "I'm so sorry for showing up unannounced, I didn't have a choice."

"You should have called," Dana told her. "Or sent an email."

"I would have if I could." While Eulalie spoke, one of her legs lifted and stretched out. When it eventually settled back to the ground, another one lifted and went through the same routine. "But that was no longer an option."

"Apparently," Lily grumbled from her corner. "You fucking Fed-Ex'd yourself across the country."

"It wasn't technically Fed-Ex," she said, then assumed a weird squat that made it look like she was sitting. This put her at eye level with Mike, which gave him something to focus on other than her body. "But yes, I did cram myself in a box and mail myself here. An overachiever at the post office decided to be nice and put extra nails in the box, which meant I couldn't get out."

"What brings you here?" Mike asked, his voice squeaking a little.

"I don't know," Eulalie said, turning her focus on him. He could see his reflection in all the extra eyes on her forehead. "Wait, sorry, that came out wrong. I have good reasons for coming, but am unsure of the root cause. My sister and I disagree on the severity of the situation. As Caretaker, I believe that you may hold the key to solving our dilemma."

"That's my job." His voice was steady this time. "Tell me everything."

"Thank you." She crossed her hands across her belly. "To begin with, my father Darren passed away over the winter."

Lily let out a noise like a squeak and left the room. Mike found this to be an odd reaction, but kept his attention on Eulalie. Trying to figure out what was going on inside Lily's brain was a madman's game.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said. "Was he, uh, like you?" He looked at her legs again.

"No, he was human," she said with a wistful smile. "And he was wonderful. The only reason I bring it up is because it relates to why I am here. Everything that I'm about to tell you started shortly after his death. When he died, it was like a change had come over the forest. It seemed circumstantial at first, but a pattern

started to emerge. My sister refused to see it, but my whole life is patterns, and she's just being stubborn."

"What do you mean by patterns?" asked Dana.

"There's a barrier around our home, much like your own," Eulalie said. "The former Caretaker Emily gave my mother permission to live there, where she would be safe from people hunting her. The magic that protects the place distracts and confuses anyone from entering who doesn't belong."

"We could use some of that here," Beth grumbled. "Maybe people would quit loitering in our yard."

"The magic isn't foolproof. Anyone determined can breach the barrier, or even just someone who gets really lost. My father used to patrol the boundary almost every day. He would occasionally find a lost hiker, or even a hunter who had tracked game into the area. Nothing too problematic."

"But after he died, no more patrols?" Mike asked.

Eulalie nodded. "For a time. My sister took them up, along with Uncle Foot. Sorry, Bigfoot."

"The *actual* Bigfoot?" Beth's eyes were shining with curiosity. "The real deal?"

"The one and only," Eulalie replied. "He also goes by sasquatch, but don't call him a Yeti if you meet him. He's been living with my family since before I was born. It's why his sightings have been less exciting lately. Usually he would only leave to have meetings with other cryptids, or maybe he would get in a fight with my dad and leave to cool off."

"What the hell? What would your dad want to fight with Bigfoot about?" Beth was leaning forward so far that it looked like she may fall off her seat.

Eulalie chuckled. "One time Bigfoot drank all of my dad's whiskey. It was a Special Reserve he managed to pick up on one of his trips, but Uncle Foot felt like getting tanked and drained the bottle in less than an hour. While Uncle Foot was passed out drunk, my dad got pissed and shaved a reverse mohawk from his forehead down his back, told him if he was going to be a giant, hairy ass then he should look like one."

Beth let out a squeal of mirth, then waved her hand apologetically. "I'm sorry, I'm just excited is all."

Eulalie looked at Mike. "Bigfoot fan?"

Big something fan, he thought to himself. "So what was happening on these patrols?" he asked, hoping to get back to the subject at hand. "And tell me about the patterns."

Eulalie's eyes narrowed. "At first glance, the patrols were fine. Nothing ever happened. But then a pattern of nothingness emerged. Even on patrol, you're bound to see some form of game. Like a bear, or a deer. Or maybe you don't see the animal, but you do see signs that it was there. But there were no signs, as if something was chasing our prey away.

"Anyway, once I realized that Velvet and Uncle Foot were coming back with less food than ever, so I did something I haven't done in a while. I set some traps of my own. I don't usually bother myself with hunting, but a girl's gotta eat."

"With..." he gestured at her waist, the word now stuck in his mouth.

"Webs? Yes." She reached under her skirt with one hand and pulled out a white glob of fluid that balanced perfectly on her middle finger. With a few deft movements, she created a Cat's Cradle, then shifted it around again so that the ensuing web looked like a butterfly. "Unlike my sister, my strengths lie in web-building." She looked around, then awkwardly crumpled the web and shoved it in her mouth.

"Thorry," she muttered. "Not thpothed wipe it on clothes."

Mike just stared at her, his mouth hanging open.

"What did you catch in the traps?" asked Dana.

"Some small game," Eulalie replied. "Not enough for a proper meal, but Arachne can go without for some time if we have to. Now, a lack of game is one thing, but it was too perfect. What really caught my attention was when I discovered that something had taken down my bigger traps. It isn't all just webs, mind you, I incorporate the environment into them. Some of my traps had been sprung, but it looked like the animal had been removed. Other times, I discovered that the trap had been taken down entirely, which doesn't make any sense. Not only are they difficult to spot, but some of these were high up in the trees. Someone would have to climb fifteen feet just to take them down.

"Therefore, this pattern of nothingness isn't natural. Something is chasing away our food, but for what purpose?"

“Interesting.” Mike pondered over this information and stared at the floor. “There’s nothing else in the forest with you guys?”

“Not anymore,” she replied. “We had a huge goblin problem some years back—”

“Goblins?” His head snapped up. “You had goblins?”

“Yes. They took up residence in one of the cave systems, kept breaking into our barn and causing problems.” She waved a hand dismissively. “That is a problem that we took care of years ago. Even if they had somehow survived this long, they would be too stupid to evade my traps.”

Mike nodded. Tink was a genius in many ways, but he had been assured by Naia that her intelligence was completely off the goblin species chart entirely. “So something is taking down your traps and chasing off your food.”

“I see it like a chess match. Our pieces were being eliminated before we even knew that game had started. So I’m here to get some new pieces to come and help us.”

At the mention of chess, Mike couldn’t help but throw a dirty look at Jenny. Checkers was one of the few games he would still play with her. The doll gave him a little wave and pushed herself further into her corner.

“And Velvet disagreed?” Dana asked. “Doesn’t seem like her.”

Eulalie nodded solemnly. “She’s really struggled with everything since dad died. When I brought it up, I got lectured on being self sufficient and how we didn’t deserve to live if we couldn’t do things for ourselves, blah blah blah. And Uncle Foot took her side because he promised dad that he would take care of us.”

“So why didn’t you just call?” Dana shook her head. “Or email, text, whatever. It’s not like you’re cut off from civilization.”

“Oh?” Mike asked. He wondered what sort of technology the cabin in Oregon had. If anything, he bet it had a rotary phone.

“By the time I thought about contacting you, we had been cut off. Completely.” Eulalie sighed. “The very same day I realized my traps were tampered with, I came home to discover that the fiber line we had run to our home had been severed and carried off. And cell service is spotty at best, but it just doesn’t exist out there anymore, almost like it’s being blocked. Whatever is

out there was watching me, and making moves of its own. Velvet and I got in a huge fight over it, and I told her I was leaving to get help.”

“Why didn’t Bigfoot bring you?” he asked. He knew that Bigfoot could move between trees using magic portals, but wasn’t entirely certain of the mechanism.

“This house was cut off years ago, but we had no idea why. Having Bigfoot and a giant spider wandering the neighborhood trying to find this place would be a terrible idea. There isn’t anywhere nearby we could just jump to, he needs certain trees.” Eulalie chuckled. “So he helped box me up and dropped me off at a shipping office in Kentucky. There are still plenty of trees there for him to sneak around in.”

“Seems like he could have come a lot closer,” Beth said with a frown. “If it’s trees he needs, anyway.”

“Oh, he hates coming out east,” Eulalie said. “And don’t bother asking me why. Anytime I asked him about it, he furrows his head up and looks like a gorilla trying to force a monster shit out.” Her cheeks flushed and she covered her mouth. “Oh, I’m so sorry!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mike reassured her. “Our swear jar is full anyway, it’s how we fund this place. It’s a goblin problem of our own.”

“Thank you, I—” Eulalie froze as Death entered the room carrying a teapot in one hand and a Viewmaster toy held to his face. His bony fingers were long enough that he could casually flick the lever that changed the image inside. He did this as he walked past, the Viewmaster letting out a hushed click as he chortled in glee.

“Can you see what he has?” Mike asked Beth.

“On it.” She stood and followed Death into the dining room.

“Was that a ghost?” asked Eulalie in awe. “That teacup was just hovering, it was so wild!”

“That’s...complicated.” He heard Death protesting loudly and Beth came out of the dining room with the slide reel in her hand. She handed the slide to Mike, who held it up to the light.

“I will have you know, Mike Radley, that I paid mistress Tink the sum of twenty dollars for that slide,” Death announced as he walked back into the room. “By the laws of state and local commerce, that item rightfully belongs to me.”

He focused his eye on one image at a time and let out a laugh. The pictures were all of Tink in various states of undress, though a few of the pictures were just downright goofy. In one of them, she was wearing a pair of his boxers on her head with her nose sticking out of the fly.

“Mistress Tink?” he asked. “Since when do you call her mistress?”

“Transference of titles is another valid form of currency, Mike Radley.” Death held out his hand expectantly. “Now please return my property.”

“Yeah, sure.” He extended his hand out, but Beth snatched it away from him.

“Where did you get twenty dollars?” Beth asked.

“Who are you guys talking to?” Eulalie asked in a whisper.

“Just a sec,” Mike replied, curious to hear Death’s answer.

“I found it,” Death replied in an indignant tone.

“Where?” Beth asked.

The grim reaper scowled at her, the tiny flames in his eyes brightening. “In your bedroom,” he replied. “On the floor. Unattended.”

“That was my twenty dollars,” Beth informed him with a scowl. “I keep cash in my purse for emergencies, it must have fallen out. Though I’m not sure how, because I never go anywhere.”

“Aha!” He held up a bony finger. “Per the rules of ‘Finders Keepers,’ that money belongs to anyone who finds it when nobody else is nearby.”

Beth squinted at him. “Finders Keepers isn’t a valid law. But if it were, it certainly does not apply whilst inside of a domicile. Otherwise I could go into the office and claim your maps or your teacups whenever I wanted as long as you weren’t around.”

Death rose a hand to make a counterpoint, but faltered. “Hmm. Perhaps I misunderstood the full tenets of Finders Keepers, and I see that I have made an egregious mistake,” he admitted. “In effect, those pictures now belong to you. Please accept my apologies. I would be happy to loan you my Viewmaster should you wish to view them.”

“Ugh, no thanks. Here.” Beth handed the disc over. “You can have it back. But no more taking money from my room.”

Death took the disc from her and deftly slid it into place as he rushed out of the room toward the kitchen.

“And I want my own title!” Beth shouted after him. “Make it something good!”

“Are you guys arguing with a poltergeist?” Eulalie asked.

“That’s just Death,” Dana replied. “Just try not to let him walk through you, it feels awful.”

“Wow,” she whispered with shimmering eyes. “I always wondered what it would be like here, but never imagined it would be this busy! Emily invited Velvet and me when we were little and told us about some of the people who lived here, but I kind of forgot about them until I saw them out front. The banshee is pretty, can’t believe I forgot about her.”

Beth nodded. “That would be the geas,” she said. “It alters memories when the old Caretaker dies.”

Eulalie sighed, then looked at Mike. Her eyes shimmered under the lights of the living room. “This is so interesting, and I wish I was here under different circumstances, I really do. I often dreamt of coming here and getting to know all these different people, and maybe even being allowed to stay. But we need help. This is a lot to ask, but would you come to Oregon and see if you can help us? We just want somewhere to live in peace, I promise”

Mike nodded. The land was his, and therefore, so was the responsibility. “We can head out in the morning,” he told her. “We don’t have a Bigfoot, but we do have some tricks of our own. You lead me to the cabin and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you so much, I—” She opened her mouth to say something else, but her stomach growled. Wincing, she put her hands on it. “It’s been awhile, sorry.”

“C’mon,” Beth said, then took Eulalie by the hand. “Let’s see if we have anything for you to eat, then we can figure out what to do next.”

Mike watched them go, then let out a breath he didn’t know he had been holding. Once he was certain that Eulalie couldn’t see him, he shuddered. Even though Eulalie seemed nice, he couldn’t look at her legs without feeling baby

spiders all over his face. He felt bad, and promised himself that he would do his best to get over it.

Up on the roof, Abella gazed balefully across the yard. The party had long since wrapped up, and though she was watching for signs of movement, it was the conversation inside the house that she was listening to.

She could hear it in his voice. A slight hitch here and there, or a quick clearing of the throat. Mike was nervous about this Eulalie character, and for good reason. The Arachne were dangerous, and if she had her way, she would have held that crate shut until someone set the damn thing on fire.

Footsteps on the roof alerted Abella that someone had joined her. It was Kisa, she recognized her soft footfalls. The cat girl sat next to Abella and pulled her knees up to her chin.

“You never sit with me,” Abella noted. The roof of the home was big enough that they rarely even saw each other. In fact, if Kisa held still for long enough, Abella couldn’t even hear her breathing, or see where she was. It was some type of magical invisibility that made people forget that she was there.

Kisa’s ears flattened, and she let out a low growl. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “That one kind of slipped out because I’m all worked up. Can I tell you something?”

“I suppose.”

“That thing down there gives me the shivers.” Illustrating her point, Kisa’s spine stiffened, and she shook her head. “Like, holy shit. I’ve never seen a spider up close before, but her whole body is just...damn.”

Abella nodded. “Have you ever wondered why humans have such a reaction to spiders?”

Kisa shifted forward, her tail moving around erratically.

“Can’t say I have,” she muttered. “Don’t really stare at spooky shit and wonder why it’s so spooky.”

“It’s primal. You fear things that are different, but it goes even deeper with arachnids. It’s not just that they have eight legs and too many mouth parts. Your ancestors were hunted by them relentlessly. They could wipe out entire villages

overnight if they wanted to, and only those who had a healthy dose of fear survived to pass the tales along. It's no different than your fear of the dark."

"So you're saying that people are afraid of spiders because of the Arachne?"

Abella nodded. "Think about the things that humans are afraid of. Some are logical, like falling. Public speaking is bad. But why are spiders so high up on the list? Most of them are harmless."

"Hmm." Kisa surveyed the yard while toying with a bracelet on her wrist. It was a pretty yellow band that matched a similar one that Tink sometimes wore. "It's kind of weird, but I'm half a cat because I wore a cursed collar to fix my shattered legs. I'm not really in a position to argue."

"Do you know what hunts man?"

"Tigers. Sharks. Taxes." Kisa smirked at her own joke.

"Do you know what hunts the Arachne?"

"Really big fly swatters?"

Abella snorted in disgust. "The answer is nothing. No being in their right mind willingly hunts them for food. If this is just silly for you, I'd prefer you go someplace else to sulk."

"You really hate them don't you?" Kisa looked at Abella expectantly.

Abella pursed her lips and nodded. "More than anything."

She spread her wings and leapt from the roof, soaring over the yard and then circling higher when she reached the edge of the geas. Down below, the yard had come to life with fairies, insects and lightning bugs. Their chorus reached Abella's ears, but brought her no joy as she attempted to reach the clouds.

How could Mike trust Eulalie so quickly? Despite Lily's assurance that the arachne was safe, what if she tried to mate with him? It was instant death to mate with the arachne, and Abella would die before allowing Eulalie to make a move on him.

She wanted to punch something or someone, but her options here were limited. To correct the issue, she flew outside of the geas. The magic was like a leash once she passed its boundary. It compelled her to return, but she could resist for a while. The sky had taken on the azure hue of twilight, and she wasn't worried about being spotted.

While soaring over a nearby park, she spotted a group of teens down by the edge of the lake. They were laughing while throwing rocks at a pair of ducks that were out on the water. About fifty feet behind them was a large stone monument dedicated to the park where they had leaned their bicycles against.

With a grin, she landed nearby on the soft ground and wrapped her arms around the monument. She used her tail and talons to keep from sinking too far into the ground while she carefully lifted the conical monument into the air. As long as she didn't tilt it from side to side, it should remain structurally sound.

Once it was free of the soil, she wiggled her fingers down its cool sides until she could get her hands beneath the bottom and then lifted. The monument went into the air high enough that the bikes fell into the gap it had left. With a smirk, she set the monument down on top of them.

The bikes creaked as they bent and became pinned. Only their bent and mangled wheels remained visible. Should they ever be removed, the bikes would be completely unusable.

With a chuckle, she used her tail to wipe away her footprints and then lifted into the sky. Other than the laughing teens, the park was abandoned and she wasn't too worried about being spotted. She wished she could see their faces. Dishing out petty justice hadn't made her feel much better, but it was a start.

She flew toward downtown and found one of her favorite perches on a local church. After folding her wings about herself like a cloak, she pressed herself against the stone facade and shifted the color of her skin to match. From here, she could watch people moving about the city without fear of being spotted.

The pull of the house was growing stronger, but her anger made it easy to stay away. At some point, the compulsion would be too much, and she would take to the sky to protect the home once again.

No, that wasn't correct. She would fly home to protect *him*.

She could still picture the day she had met Mike, how she had listened in panic to his screams for help. The mandragora hadn't been fed in forever, and it was trying to consume him. Her limbs had been stiff, and she had fought to wake up and rescue him.

He had seemed so helpless in that moment, but had accepted her without any fear. It had been that way with all the Caretakers, an immediate kinship that they felt with the monsters of the house. But Mike had been different. He had

been just as enamored of her as she had been with him, and she couldn't wait to feel his soft flesh against her fingertips.

She imagined that humans felt the same way about plush dolls as she did about them. They were so fragile and cute, she simply couldn't help it. This was a feeling that the others of her Clan had never shared, which was the main reason she was even here.

Pierre was the other.

Moving along the edge of the church steeple, she paused when she saw the gargoyle that had been built on the corner. It was like a devil, with large horns and fangs. The stone was new, maybe only a decade old.

Had it really been so long since she was here last? Time was an interesting construct for her. Her kind were capable of being still for months or even years if they wanted. It was like hibernation, and they would only awaken if threatened. The last time she had come here was after a fight with Emily, but she couldn't remember what the argument had been about.

At the time, she had been contemplating leaving the house because of something Emily had done. Still angry after arguing with her, Abella had come here to blow off some steam, ultimately deciding that the house was still her safest bet for survival.

She crouched along the edge, her eyes and ears on the people down below. A pair of women walked along the sidewalk, laughing at each other while they held hands. When she closed her eyes, the images came unbidden.

The French city of Marseille was sprawled out beneath her. The faint light of distant torches twinkled like fireflies, but her attention was squarely focused on the couple walking on the path beneath her.

They had met earlier, a nobleman and a young woman who lived down near the docks. If not for the class disparity, she wouldn't have paid them much attention, but the way he had spoken to her was far too familiar.

The man left after a brief discussion about the baked goods being sold in a nearby cart, but the woman took her sweet time picking out bread before leaving. Abella had waited, and been amply rewarded when the commoner met the noble in an alley next to a cobbler's shop. The two had embraced like lost lovers, only to be chased away by a stumbling drunk.

It had been easy to follow them. The night was dark, and there weren't many people out. Abella had moved along the building tops, making sure to keep the couple in view. The man led the woman to an isolated garden where they found a stone bench to sit on.

Abella gripped the edge of the roof she was on in anticipation, her fingers crushing the brick into powder that scattered on the breeze. The man sat on the edge of the bench and the woman on his lap with her back to him. He playfully grabbed her breasts through the thick fabric of her dress while licking her neck.

"C'mon, c'mon," Abella muttered, then licked her lips. It was very rare to get the opportunity to watch humans fuck, and it was usually through a window, or the view blocked by awnings. The woman was grinding her ass on the man's lap, and she could hear both their hearts thumping from where she sat.

The man ran his fingers through the woman's hair. Abella mimicked the move with her own hands, wondering how it felt to him. Her hair, being made of stone, was stiff and fairly unyielding. She had touched human hair before, but only on corpses. Humans were very squishy by nature, but their hair fascinated her most of all. What would it feel like to run her fingers through the thick locks of a woman? Or even a man?

Shivering in delight, her tail moved of its own accord and thumped on the stone of the building. Down below, the woman paused for a moment, her wide eyes scanning the area.

"Did you hear something?" she asked in French.

"I only have ears for you," he replied, then spun her around in his lap. He undid the laces of her dress to free her breasts and nibbled the pale flesh around her nipples. "Let me taste you," he muttered.

She acquiesced, her head tilting back. This gave Abella a phenomenal view, and she brought her tail around to put her foot on the tip. The last thing she wanted was to get so excited that she scared them off.

The woman was making noises that reminded Abella of a cat. They were gasps of joy and pleasure. Abella squeezed her own breasts out of curiosity, then frowned. It definitely didn't feel as good for her as it did the woman below.

The man was now fumbling with his belt, and the woman was doing something beneath her skirt. Clothing fascinated her, and she watched as the two

of them shifted about for a moment before coming to a halt. They both let out moans of pleasure.

“Holy shit,” she muttered. He was definitely inside her now, and the woman had arched her back. This wasn’t just some chance meeting for either of them. Was she a servant of his? Or perhaps a secret mistress? Abella could see the ring on the man’s finger. Marriage customs among humans were very quaint, but not always honored.

So a forbidden romance, then? Maybe he was forced to marry for land or wealth, and the woman was a childhood love of his. Perhaps they had been in love this entire time, their entire relationship forced into seclusion. That would make this tryst even more precious, more passionate.

Abella gasped at the sudden sensation in her groin. Her hand had moved on its own down to her groin, and she stroked her stiff labia with the knuckles of her fingers.

The woman dismounted, then moved so that she was bent over the bench. The man moved to penetrate her from behind, and they both let out cries that sounded like startled birds.

Groaning, Abella bit down onto the wall to keep from making any noise. Her teeth ground against the fine stone, and she let out a grunt as she worked one of her fingers into her triangular vagina. Designed for laying eggs, it was easily stretched, which meant a single finger wouldn’t do.

She was up to four fingers when the man pulled himself out of the woman. His cock was hard to see in the darkness, but she could make out glistening fluid on the head of it that reflected the distant lights. The lovers shifted about so that the woman could take his cock down her throat, and Abella could hear her groan and swallow as the man came.

Abella was close to an orgasm of her own, and was strongly contemplating using the thick tip of her tail as a cock substitute when she heard the ominous creak of stone wings up above her. She groaned in disgust as another creature landed on the building behind her, then licked her fingers off before turning around.

“Peeping on the humans again, I see.” Her brother Pierre smirked at her. “Aren’t you supposed to be scouting right now, runt?”

She snorted at him. "You know I would have finished my task before indulging my fancies."

Pierre shrugged, a movement that sent a ripple through the massive muscles of his chest. Out of all of her siblings, he was by far the largest. Only a couple of men in the clan were larger than him: their leader Torsten and Seneca, their shaman.

"I would expect no less of you," he said with a grin that showed all his fangs. The large horns on his head curled downward like a ram, and he moved to join her on the edge of the building. "Don't these fleshlings know that there's a plague?"

"It's about passion, Pierre. They're in love." She spoke to her brother in whispers that couldn't be heard by humans from ten feet away, much less the top of a building. "Look at how he pines for her."

Pierre grunted. "If he pines for her, then why does he leave her before she finishes adjusting her dress?"

Abella watched in dismay as the nobleman threw some coin down for the woman and wandered off into the night. The woman tucked the money in the folds of her skirt and spent a couple of minutes rearranging her clothes before she left the garden. Gone was the illusion of love and passion, and the whole interaction now felt tainted.

"Hmmf." Pierre snorted in disgust. "They can't even breed properly. He has given her money for what? Access to her loins? Disgusting."

"They breed for fun," she explained, then stood to her full height. She was a full head shorter than him. "And it is the oldest profession in the world for a reason. Do you think she deserves shame if she earned some coin to feed her family?"

"Breeding creates more of them," he grunted. "She may have earned some coin, but what now? Will that coin feed the child that is born next summer? The humans are foolish, and I wish your fascination with them would wither like a flower in the fall."

Abella said nothing. Any argument she had with him here would only continue once they were back, and some of her other siblings would likely join in.

“That’s what I thought,” he muttered. “Come home, Abella.” He opened his wings and leapt into the sky. She watched him ascend and then looked back down at the gardens below.

“Fuck,” she muttered, then opened her wings to follow. Pierre was dozens of feet above her as she flapped her wings, and she was almost fifty feet above the garden when she heard the clattering of metal followed by a scream that was cut off.

Curious, she widened her ascent and looked down onto the cobblestone road below. Near the edge of the alleyway, she could hear the ringing of metal as a solitary coin rolled across the street and struck a stone before coming to a halt.

Instead of ascending, she hovered up above, moving her head back and forth in the hopes of catching another sound. The streets below were silent.

As she turned her head to look away, she spotted movement out of the corner of her eye along one of the nearby rooftops. The dark figure scurried across the roof with the woman slung over its shoulder, then leapt a thirty foot gap onto another roof.

“Pierre?” She looked up at her brother, who was watching her. He had a look of confusion on his face.

She followed the mysterious creature. It rustled when it moved, and there wasn’t enough light to see what it was. Perhaps a vampire? It had been a while since Abella had even heard of one actively hunting. There had been a clan in East Europe that had gone head-to-head with one and only a couple of them lived to tell the tale. Usually if a creature like that was discovered, the clan would initiate contact to avoid a potential misunderstanding. There was plenty of room for everyone as long as the humans didn’t cause trouble.

And if they did, the Clan would see fit to set things right. She dreaded the day that she would be commanded to kill a human, but she would do it to protect her family from destruction.

The figure jumped off a nearby roof and landed in the street, its body momentarily illuminated by a lantern that hung over the road.

Abella nearly fell out of the sky, and Pierre swore under his breath. The creature below had the legs and abdomen of an arachnid.

“Pierre?” she asked, her eyes wide. When she looked over at her brother, his face had become a mask of anger.

“We need to follow it,” he said, his tone serious. “If it’s passing through, then we’ll let it go. But if it’s part of a nest...”

He didn’t have to finish. An Arachne nest could wipe out a city in a matter of months, which would bring the men in white. Monster hunting would begin anew, and her kind would see their heads mounted on buildings once more.

Down below, a man sneezed. The sound brought Abella back to the present, and she lowered her gaze to follow his movements. He was an older man in a white trench coat, and his footsteps were nearly silent. Though he was just some late night churchgoer, she couldn’t help but be reminded of the men who had hunted her kind through the centuries.

“Baiseurs,” she muttered. If the Order found out that the house was harboring an Arachne, they would waste no time laying siege to the place. The society had been bad enough, but a worldwide organization devoted to maintaining order and hunting monsters was an entirely different problem.

She turned to look at the gargoyle next to her. It loomed over the ground below, its expression haughty. In truth, it was much closer to a generic demon in appearance than one of her own kind, but it was merely a poor derivation of real events that had occurred centuries ago. A Clan had gone rogue and started hunting humans for sport. As a result, the Order had arrived and slain them all.

And now? The true name and purpose of the gargoyles had been lost to history. Now they were nothing more than a silly fairy tale that carried no weight, a creature to be placed on buildings for birds to shit on. They had become the garden gnomes of buildings.

With a glance, Abella confirmed that nobody was down below. Snarling, she gave the statue a shove, which ripped it free of the building. With little effort, she cast it over the edge and then moved along the side of the building so she wouldn’t be spotted. The sound of the statue shattering brought a smile to her face. She had broken the last one nearly fifteen years ago. Maybe the church would spend its hard earned money on feeding the poor instead of stupid decorations this time.

If not, she’d be back eventually. From her new vantage point, she watched the police arrive. A small crowd formed, including the man in the white coat that she had seen earlier. His face was pock-marked in scars, and he stood with his

hands casually in his pockets. Maybe he was a wealthy patron of the church, now worried that his donation would go to renovations instead of actually helping people.

But that was rarely the way of things. Most humans would rather buy their way into heaven than earn it. For the first time in her life, Abella wished that Lily was nearby. The two of them would have a good chuckle over this.

She fought the pull of the house for a couple more hours. It was now late at night, and the crowd had dispersed. Other than a couple of people who crossed the police tape to grab souvenirs, she hadn't seen anyone in almost an hour.

Once back in the sky, the house attracted her like a beacon. What could have been a leisurely glide became a frantic push. Her gut filled with terror, and her mind was flooded with anxiety. What if something had happened while she was gone? What if the society had returned? Maybe Eulalie attacked Mike. Her wings pumped hard and fast, and the feelings vanished immediately upon crossing the boundary of the geas.

From up above, the house was quiet. A couple of lights were on, and she landed on the roof in a crouch, her gaze once more on the street. A couple of centaurs milled about in the darkness. She realized that they were carrying spears, but they seemed to be relaxed. Basic guard duty.

Inside the house, Mike was talking to someone. She leaned over the edge to hear him better, then let out a groan.

"Oh Mike," she muttered in dismay. What was she going to do with him?

Mike stood over his desk with a map of Oregon laid out. A red outline had been drawn on it, and Reggie stood near the edge with his paws splayed out.

"I believe we can get you to here," he told Mike while tapping on the map with a claw. "My intel says that there are some abandoned cabins we can chew our way to, but we need to verify before we make you a big enough portal to go through."

"Hmm." He leaned over the map and let out a sigh. "I guess get us as close to the boundary as you can. Nobody should be waiting for us, but if they're watching, they will come."

Lily, who sat across from him, shook her head. "I don't see why you have to go," she told him with no small amount of anger in her voice. "Literally anyone else can go. Amir is still out there, and it bothers me that we haven't heard from him. If he's put any sort of force together, he is watching for you to leave the house."

"I know. But even if he is, he won't be able to force his way through. Based on Eulalie's explanation, only people who become seriously lost ever slipped through. Never anyone with a purpose. What do you think?" He addressed his question to a crystal ball on the desk. Inside the ball, he could see Ratu reclining on an ornamental chair.

"I agree with this assessment," she declared. "The geas here lets people onto the land, but they can't see the truth of things. I attempted to scry the location earlier, and it is practically unreadable. In fact, that map of the boundaries you have is insufficient. Much like the greenhouse, the land itself is bigger on the inside. Even if Amir could track you to Oregon, he couldn't track you directly."

"But what about here? Once he knows you're gone, what's to stop him from dropping by and storming the place?"

Mike looked at Ratu, then back at Lily. "We actually have options, but that's going to depend largely on you. Ratu, do you want to explain?"

"No." The naga lifted a cup of tea to her lips. "She needs to hear it from you, not me."

He frowned, then looked at Lily. "This is actually something that Ratu and I have been working on for a while. Ever since the whole Underworld incident, we've been working on different ways to keep the society guessing, and we think we have a solution."

With a natural pause, he hoped that Ratu would take over. She did not.

"So," he continued. "Ratu got the idea from a magic bag of marbles. I'm...not even qualified to try and explain the theory behind them. Apparently she has found a way to make it look like I'm in two places at once."

"And that involves me." Kisa spoke up from the corner of the room, which caused Lily to jump.

“Fucking sneaky-ass kitty cat,” the succubus swore, placing a hand over her heart. “I forgot you were there.”

Kisa stuck out her tongue in response.

“Kisa is my familiar,” Mike explained. “We aren’t entirely certain what that entails—”

“Other than constant fucking,” Lily added.

“Once you go cat, others fall flat,” muttered Kisa, her tail twitching.

“But what it means,” Mike interrupted with a raised voice. “Is that Kisa has a soul signature similar to my own. That’s actually a by-product of the, um...”

“Constant fucking.” This came from Reggie, who nodded sagely. “A beneficial side-effect of maintaining your harem.”

“They’re not my harem. Please, everyone stop interrupting.” Mike noticed that Ratu was laughing into her sleeve. “And you’re not helping.”

“I’m not buying it. A similar signature doesn’t mean shit.” The succubus crossed her arms. “You aren’t selling me on this idea.”

“Similar won’t do the trick, but this will.” He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a silver band. “Ratu enchanted it to amplify the signature. We tested it a few times and it seems to work.”

“It almost works,” Ratu added. “Amir cannot scry within the geas. At best, he will be able to see that Mike is in two places at once as long as he is on his own property.”

“Which means he will need visual confirmation,” Lily said, realization dawning on her face. “So if he comes around...”

“Then we need someone who can look like me,” Mike finished. “So what do you say? Wanna play dress up for a bit? You can even boss everyone around and put on a good show.”

“There’s still a hole in this,” Lily told him. “If they’re watching the house, then they’ll notice that the sundial isn’t being turned.”

“Tink is already on it. She is making a replica of the dial top that rotates. So you will have to go out every day at a certain time and spin it.”

“And a simple, non-violent scanning spell will reveal that I’m not you.”

“Unless I’m with you.” Kisa now stood in front of Lily. “Which they might not notice. Going unnoticed is my thing.”

Lily looked down at Kisa, then up at Mike. “You really thought this through, didn’t you?”

He laughed. “It’s not like I’ve just been sitting around doing nothing. Especially with Sarah roaming about. Protecting this place is my number one job.” The soul of Sarah the witch had been trapped inside of a necklace after she had died trying to kill him in the greenhouse. During last year’s siege, it had been recovered by Sarah’s mother, Elizabeth. Nobody had any clue what happened afterward. It was possible that she had learned her lesson and would be content being a proper cunt somewhere else entirely, but even he doubted that.

“So then why go?” Lily asked. “If protecting this place is your number one job, why not send someone else?”

Mike looked at the others, then wandered over to the window. Out in the yard, he could see the fairy lights sparkling in the garden. Centaurs moved around the perimeter, making sure to give the Jabberwock a wide berth.

“Two reasons. The first is that I’ve noticed that the geas here isn’t working properly.” He thought about all the people who had wandered into his yard recently, but that wasn’t what bothered him. “Yesterday, someone tagged this place on Instagram. The Radley Estate, they called it. Cecilia was in the picture. She looked like a regular person, but that’s just it. People used to come here and not see any of you at all. You were invisible. But now? It isn’t the case. The neighbors could hear us last night, and that was hardly the noisiest we’ve ever been. I need to know why it isn’t working properly, and the fact that a similar effect is happening in Oregon may be a clue. As the Caretaker, this is my problem to fix.”

Lily let out a grunt. “I guess that’s valid. But maybe the problem is here, and leaving is the wrong thing to do.”

“That brings me to the second point.” He turned to face the room. “It’s a feeling. I actually feel something drawing me to Oregon. I haven’t thought about it really until Eulalie brought it up. That time I went to the fae realm, we made a pit stop in Ireland, remember? I could feel the property I own out there calling to me, but forgot about it. What if there’s something I’m supposed to do? We’ve all just assumed that I take over caring for this place, but what if there’s something else? Kind of like the sundial. Maybe the geas needs to be reset, I don’t know.”

“What did Naia say?”

“She didn’t have an answer. In fact, she went blank when I asked, and we know what that means.”

Lily nodded. “The geas is protecting the answer.”

“You got it. So this is what needs to be done. Tomorrow, I’m planning on going to Oregon, but this all hinges on your willingness to stay here and pretend to be me.”

“You aren’t going to just tell me to do it?” She flipped her hair defiantly. “I may just tell you no.”

He smiled at her, then walked around the desk until they were only a couple inches apart. The smirk on her face melted when he touched her cheek.

“And that would be okay,” he said. “We would figure something else out.”

Her lips parted as she stared into his eyes. It looked like she was going to say something, so he waited.

Lily grinned, and she reached out and pinched his nipple through his shirt.

“Ow, fuck!” He swatted her hand away and covered his chest.

“I’ll do it,” she told him. “But I plan to be a huge fucking diva about it. And you’ll owe me. Big.”

“I expect nothing less,” he said with a laugh. “King Reggie? Have your people make the necessary plans. With any luck, Bigfoot can help us set up a portal of our own to come back, so we won’t have to risk the safety of your crew.”

“It shall be done.” The rat king gave Mike a salute, which caused his crown to fall off his head. He picked it up in his teeth and leapt down from the table. As he left the room, Beth walked in with a concerned look on her face.

“Mike? I need you to come with me.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Eulalie.” Beth’s brow was furrowed, and her voice contained a hint of panic. “There’s something wrong with her.”

Concerned, he followed Beth out to the garage. Dana had invited Eulalie to stay in her room beneath, which was an old oil pit that had been turned into a room. Dana stood in the middle of the room, her focus on Eulalie who sat in the

corner. A small web had been built as a supportive hammock and Eulalie had gone limp inside of it.

“Eulalie?” He moved close to the web, but stayed back. Her eyes fluttered open at her name and she let out an exasperated sigh.

“I’m sorry, Mike, but I won’t be able to lead you to the cabin.” She sat forward, her arms resting on the webs.

“Are you sick?” he asked.

“Worse,” she replied. “I’m getting ready to molt.”

He shuddered in revulsion. There was no hiding his reaction this time.

“So can we wait a day or two?” Beth asked. “Until you’re done?”

“It’s going to take way longer than that,” Eulalie replied. “Nearly a month.”

“A month?” Mike was incredulous.

Eulalie nodded. “A month of discomfort and feeling bloated, followed by my exoskeleton cracking and falling apart as the tissue beneath expands. It isn’t a pleasant process to watch, and I will be extremely vulnerable to injury that whole time and become a liability. I thought I had more time, but packing myself up in a box and being sedentary may have triggered it.”

“It’s okay.” Dana moved toward Eulalie and took her hand. “We’ll figure something out.”

Eulalie looked at Mike, her eyes imploring. “None of this worked out like I thought it would, and now I’m a huge imposition. This fucking sucks...sorry.”

“The jar is full already,” he reminded her.

“I just...will you please go help my sister? I’ll do anything.”

“Eulalie.” He kept his eyes up as he approached, trying to avoid looking below her waist. When he held out his hand, she took it. At once, he realized that her skin was covered in extremely fine hairs that he hadn’t noticed before. Marveling at how soft her fingertips were, he gave her a confident smile. “Don’t worry. We’ll take care of everything. And you are welcome here as long as you like.”

“Thank you,” she said, then leaned forward and hugged him. Her arms were surprisingly strong.

Velvet was crouched up in the tree, her legs splayed out amongst the branches. She was careful not to jostle the branches, afraid that she would knock free some of the ice that had accumulated there.

A young buck had wandered into the glade and was almost beneath her tree. It had been a little while since her last proper meal, and her stomach felt tight with hunger. She had been extra hungry recently, and had no idea why.

Probably a perk of getting old, she thought to herself. Nobody knew how Arachne morphology worked anymore, and she wondered how many molts she had left until she became old over a matter of weeks, just like her mother had.

At least it would happen to Eulalie first. Then the two of them could figure out if they got aches and pains like people did. True, one of her leg joints squished when it was cold out, but that's because she had injured it a couple years back and it hadn't healed straight. It would be right as rain eventually, but it was still annoying.

When the buck was beneath her, she dropped down out of the tree and tackled it to the ground. It let out a cry of alarm, but she snapped its neck with her powerful arms before it could fight back. She bit its neck in a few places, her digestive enzymes and venom now being pumped through its circulatory system. The venom would help the creature relax in its final moments, and the enzymes would soften it up for consumption later.

She slung the buck over her shoulders and waited for Emery to fly over from his secret perch. The imp landed on the animal's head and perched on its stubby antlers.

It was a few miles through dense forest, but she traversed it with ease. The woods were eerily silent, which wasn't abnormal whenever she was out for a hunt. They could sense the predator moving among them, but it was more than just animals hiding.

The forest itself felt afraid. It was a stupid idea to have, but even when she hunted, she could still hear the river, or feel the wind currents as they blew through the trees. Everything had gone absolutely still, the whole world silent except for the soft padding of her feet on snow.

"I don't like this," Emery muttered from his perch. "I feel like something is wrong."

She nodded her agreement. "I'm moving as fast as I can. Seems like game is getting harder to come by, at least this one wasn't all the way by the barrier."

"There was something off about that bear," Emery added. "I wish you hadn't eaten him."

"Well, it didn't kill me, so your wish is wasted. Besides, I—"

Near microscopic air currents moved across the sensitive hairs of her body, and she froze in place. The currents moved across her body, the result of something circling around her behind the trees, and she scanned the perimeter. Her eyesight was extremely good, particularly when it came to movement, but whatever was out there remained hidden.

She kept walking as if nothing was wrong, then frowned when she detected more movement from up ahead. There were two of them now, and they were moving parallel with her.

She was being hunted. It had been over a decade since something had bothered to tangle with her, and even longer since she herself had become prey. Whatever it was, it was either stupid or crazy.

And now there were three of them.

"Emery, move onto my shoulder, please."

"I am quite comfortable—"

"Not a request, Emery." She threw the imp a warning look. His features softened into understanding, and he hopped onto her shoulders, his feet grabbing tight to her jacket. The material was thick and warm, but she wore it mostly because it had been her father's.

She debated abandoning her kill and watching from the trees up above, but her hunger kept her from doing so. The winter had been a long one, and she had spent far too much time mourning her father's death and not enough hunting. Poor Eulalie couldn't even help, because it was hard to spin webs when the world was frosted over.

A branch snapped, and something dark leapt out of the shadows, moving so fast that it was a blur. It let out a screech of rage, but Velvet used the buck as a makeshift club and smashed it into the creature before leaping into the trees above. She didn't get a good look at her attacker, because she dropped out of the tree to avoid a rock the size of a suitcase being launched at her head.

Emery screamed as she tumbled, but she landed on her feet and bolted. The leaves rustled around her as her attackers gave chase, and she cursed the meal that she was being forced to leave behind.

Chirps and hoots could be heard now as the hunters chased her down, but she was no ordinary prey. She danced among the tree tops and scrambled over boulder fields so fast that she nearly lost them on multiple occasions, but the damned things were fast.

What were they? It wasn't the first time they had been attacked, but it had been so many years since another cryptid had appeared in the forest.

"Damn you, Emily," she swore under her breath. The prevailing theory was that the former owner of the land had given blanket invites to many creatures in the hopes of creating a sanctuary for them. This alone would allow them to breach the barrier, but there was no way of knowing if that was still true, because Emily had died.

The hooting stopped, and Velvet dropped out of the tree when she sensed something big moving her way. It was a log that had been sharpened and strapped to the branches overhead, and it narrowly missed her.

They had been herding her. Down on the forest floor, she backed herself up against a stone slab and watched as they emerged from the shadows. They stood between three and four feet tall, and their skin was a mottled grey. They were humanoid with vicious teeth and comical pot bellies. A couple of them drew bows and nocked arrows.

"Not today," she muttered, and drew the pistol from its holster. It was a Sig P220, also her father's. He had carried it for years in case of a bear attack. She had never had any use for the firearm, and only brought it along because it felt like he was still by her side.

One of the humanoids fired its bow, and she scuttled to the side, the arrow shattering on the rock. The other took longer to aim, and the Sig barked twice. The first shot went wide, but the second caught the creature in the chest, sending it back with a loud oomph.

They rushed her, and she got off two more shots before they were on her. She lashed out with her legs, and then grabbed one and smashed its skull into the rocks. The creature didn't die, but the others fell on it almost immediately to tear it apart.

“Fuck this,” she muttered, then snatched up Emery, who had gotten knocked off. She leapt over the slab of rock and tumbled head over feet down the other side before dashing off into the woods again. Behind her, the sounds of pursuit became louder.

She knew the woods around her like the back of her hand, and she dashed off toward a deep ravine to the west. Once there, she jumped, crashing through dense leaves before landing nearly thirty feet below.

“That should—” she began, but two of the creatures landed in front of her. She fired the Sig two more times, then dashed away when they charged her. Up above, the trees had become loud with the sound of crashing bodies, and when she looked over her shoulder, there were maybe ten of them in hot pursuit.

Up ahead, she spotted movement in the trees, but it was something far larger than the squat humanoids. She ran past a thick Ponderosa Pine and was relieved when the figure stepped into view.

Standing almost nine feet tall and covered in thick fur, Bigfoot let out a roar that startled birds out of hiding, then grabbed one of the creatures before it could stop and smashed it into a tree so hard that the trunk splintered. The others were undeterred by this new development, and moved to attack him.

Bigfoot slammed a massive fist into one of the creatures, launching him through the trees and out of sight. Another got kicked hard enough that its head was on backward by the time it landed, its eyes already rolling up in its head.

“We need to go,” he growled, then wrapped his arms around Velvet and pulled her behind a tree. They were instantly out of the ravine and over half a mile away, teleported by his magical ability to walk between the trees. They could hear the creatures hooting in the distance, and then they were another mile away in just a few steps.

“What the hell were those things, Uncle?” She looked back over her shoulder.

Bigfoot’s face scrunched up, which was impressive to behold, as very few things rattled him. “They went by many names, once upon a time. Teihiihan, Nirumbi, they were a blight on the land. Murderous little cannibals nasty enough to unite the tribes, I thought they were wiped out.”

Velvet smirked. “I bet people think that about all sorts of cryptids.”

“Yeah, well, these ones were an odd lot.” They traveled another hundred yards and were now ten miles away. “Even if they were still around, this isn’t where they live.”

“So they migrated?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. But we need to get you home first, make a plan. They will be looking for you, and will have the advantage at night.”

Velvet sighed. “Wish I still had my sword.”

He chuckled. “I’ll sharpen a stick for you.”

The clearing around their home appeared almost as if by magic, and relief filled her body once she saw the log cabin and the nearby barn. They walked along the overgrown path that no longer saw any use from her father’s jeep.

“I’m glad you found me,” she said.

“I came running as soon as I heard the gunshots.” He stopped next to the barn and raised a massive arm to lean on it. “I don’t know what I would do if something happened to you.”

She smiled. “You would do what you always do—keep being Bigfoot.”

He squinted at her, then laughed. “Because that’s what Bigfoot does.” It was an old joke that he had told her as a child. He and her father had gotten in a disagreement that involved alcohol, and her dad had told Bigfoot to get a job. This had caused Velvet to pester him endlessly about what sort of job he was going to get.

“C’mon, let’s head inside and see if there’s anything to eat.” She knew there wasn’t, but there was always the hope that her sister had stashed a raccoon or a pair of squirrels somewhere.

When she opened the front door of the cabin, she realized that Bigfoot was still out in the yard, his face concerned.

“Uncle Foot?”

“Velvet, I—” Bigfoot stumbled, and his pupils dilated. He let out a groan and tipped over as if in slow motion, his heavy limbs thumping on the ground.

“Uncle Foot!” She was at his side in an instant. When she rolled him over, she noticed an arrow sticking out of his shoulder. It came free easily and had only

barely penetrated his fur. The wound wasn't deep enough to hurt him, which could only mean one thing.

“Poison,” Bigfoot muttered as she dragged him toward the cabin. He was heavy, and it took several minutes before she even had him up the stairs. Just as she got him inside and closed the door, the nearby forest came to life with the sounds of chirps and hoots.