

## Long Nights

“A dullahan?” Mike frowned. “I’m afraid I don’t know the term.”

“I’m yer friendly headless horseman, lad.” The dullahan still held his own head in one hand, and was now swinging it back and forth like a macabre pendulum. “My job is similar to a banshees in that I deal with dead spirits, though I usually cut a more dashing figure on my horse. So I guess I’m technically just headless.” The grin on his face was impossibly wide, his lips stretched nearly to his ears.

“I want to speak to the faerie queen, right now please.” Mike crossed his arms and stared down the dullahan. “How do I make that happen?”

“You certainly are an anxious sort.” Sulyvahn swung his head in a circle and released it into the air. His body stepped forward and his head landed on his shoulders with a thud, scattering the inky mist in a perfect circle, much like a smoke ring. “In regards to Her Majesty, I can say without reasonable doubt that she has no interest in speaking with ye.”

“Oh really?” Mike stepped closer. “And how do you know that?”

Sulyvahn’s grin faded. “Not puttin yer best foot forward now, are ye lad? The queen has very little liking for your lot, humans to be specific, but she’s a particular dislike of you. Says you sullied one of her own, and she sent me cause she has it on good authority you have no interest in seducing menfolk. Believes you used some kinda dark magic to seduce our Cecilia, but no disrespect meant, just telling you what I’ve been told.”

“Wait, hold up.” Beth stepped forward, a grin plastered on her face. “The reason she sent you was so that Mike wouldn’t sleep with you?”

“There’s no shortage of banshees in the fae realm looking for work, lass, and many would be happy to come here. The mortal world isn’t a friendly place for our kind these days, so when I was offered the position, I gladly accepted. Thought it could be fun to visit with the living and do something different for a bit, I’m less shy than my sisters are. As for an audience with the queen, I’m afraid my abilities are limited to patrolling the grounds and making sure you are sent proper to your final rewards.”

“So you won’t help me?” Mike lowered his arms.

“I see no desire to anger the queen on account of a man I just met, nothing personal. I’ve only been here a minute, and yer asking me to bend the rules.”

Sulyvahn tilted his head to one side, causing the skin on his neck to split and spill out some more black smoke. "Not that I mind a little rule bending, but the queen is not one to be trifled with, and I'd like to be allowed to stick around.."

Mike let out a sigh. He needed a different approach. "You know what? You're right. Feel free to have a look around, don't mind the centaurs if they show up, they're friendly and tend to the grounds. Oh, and don't sit on the swing. It might break under you." It was a lie, but he couldn't bear to see Cecilia's replacement in her favorite spot.

"There's a lad." Sulyvahn patted Mike on the shoulder. "I appreciate the hospitality."

"You're welcome. Good night, Sulyvahn." Mike walked past the others and into the house. The others took a moment to greet the dullahan one at a time before filing back into the living room where Mike waited.

"So what's the plan?" Beth asked. "There's no way you would have backed down so easily unless you had one."

Mike smirked. The lawyer knew him all too well. "I don't trust the dullahan, not yet, anyway, but we don't need him. He's already given us the most important piece of information that he can."

"Like that Cecilia is with the faerie queen?" Beth raised an eyebrow.

"You got it." Mike looked at Reggie. "Odds that your rats can chew a portal into the faerie realm?"

"Hmm." Reggie's whiskers twitched. "We would need more information about where we were going, but perhaps."

"Okay then, information is good, and I think I know a place." He winked at Sofia. "But we need to keep in mind that Sulyvahn may be an agent of the faerie queen. I don't get the impression he's here to harm us, but I also don't want to clue him in on what we might be doing. For now, the plan is to gain an audience with the queen and negotiate Cecilia's release. Until then, can I get someone to keep an eye on our guest?"

"I'd be happy to," Beth volunteered. "I have a way with people."

"I know you do." Mike fought the grin on his face. "However, make sure you're ready to go when we find a way to... whatever it is we're going to do. I would like your help with the queen, you're a much better diplomat than I am."

“I can do that.” She winked and walked outside.

“Well then.” Mike turned to look at the others. “What do you say? Who wants to look through some books with me?”

---

Death looked up at them when they came in the office. Sofia stood behind Mike, and Tink had joined them. Reggie scampered in a few seconds later after speaking with one of his lieutenants.

“Mike Radley. You have brought odd company this night.” Death sipped his tea.

“Sorry, Death, we aren’t here for a visit. Got some house business, we’re just passing through.” Mike looked at the bookshelf behind the specter and grabbed the red book from the bottom. “Are we all ready?”

The others crowded in and he searched for the right location on the shelf. Spotting the magic symbol, he slid the book home and the world transformed like a turning page. They now stood in a large chamber with impossibly high ceilings supported by massive columns. Not only did the columns contain entire rooms full of books, but each column was connected to the others with an intricate set of multi-story bridges that also doubled as book storage. Access to these stacks was nearly impossible from the ground without magical assistance of some sort, and Sofia had once warned Mike that she would occasionally find the skeleton of some poor soul who snuck in and got lost before starving to death.

Sofia picked up her staff and tapped it on the ground. “I have a few reference sections we can check, but a lot of it is written in other languages.”

“We’ll make it work.”

“Indeed.” When Death spoke, Mike jumped. He turned around to see that Death had come with them into the Library. The reaper held a long tube that undoubtedly held the map he had been looking at earlier.

“Here.” Sofia pulled the tube out of Death’s hands. “I’ll get this put back.”

“Thank you, Sofia.”

“He says thanks,” Mike repeated, knowing she couldn’t see or hear him. Once she had taken the tube from his hands, she had no idea where he was.

“Anytime.” Sofia stared into the distance, waiting. Eventually a large floating carpet arrived, and they all climbed on. It lifted them up into the air and proceeded through the Library on a preset course.

“It would be best if we split up,” Sofia explained several minutes later when the carpet landed on a platform four stories in the air. There was a hanging lantern by the entrance, and Sofia tapped it with her staff. The lantern filled with light, and she lifted it up and handed it to Tink.

“Follow the light,” she told the goblin. “It will lead you to a group of books about the fae.”

“Tink got it.” The goblin slid her goggles over her eyes and took the lantern. The ball of light flew out of it and hovered several feet ahead of the goblin, leading her into the stacks. Reggie followed behind her, and their shadows disappeared between a pair of shelves just as the carpet lifted off again.

“You okay?” Sofia asked.

“Hmm? Oh, yeah.” Mike realized that he stood with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face. “I’m just ready to go get her back is all. I’ve been so worried, and now I’m concerned about this faerie queen person. I’m wondering how much ass we’re going to have to kick, and I’ll admit that I’m kind of working myself up.” It also didn’t help that he was tired. He had been planning to go to bed early and catch up on some sleep.

“Yeah, well you need to keep a clear head and really think this situation through. How many times has everything gone to hell because you’ve jumped before looking?”

“I mean... I don’t keep count.” Mike frowned. “If it was you being held captive, I’d still approach it the same way.”

“Maybe.” Sofia turned away from him, her gaze on the distant columns. Her thick braid bounced around on her shoulders. “But I would still want the same thing from you. Don’t just rush in. Think before you do, or speak. In the span of half an hour, you’re now ready to take on a being of immense power, the queen of the fae, because you aren’t happy with a decision she’s made regarding one of her subjects. This isn’t a problem you can just fuck or blow up.”

He shrugged. “We don’t know that.”

“Well I do. I’m no expert on the faerie queen, but I’ve heard plenty of stories. Fae music alone is greatly feared, do you know why? You hear it once and

it gets stuck in your ear forever, or you wander into their realm and never return. What if you go to the queen's court, and decide you never want to come back?"

"Is that what you're afraid of? That I may never come back?" A smirk crossed his lips. "Would you miss me?"

"You're not funny, Caretaker, nor are you taking this as seriously as you should be. There's a reason mortals have few stories about faerie kind that end well, and I don't want you joining that number." The carpet came to a stop and she tapped on the lantern there. "These are books about dealings with the fae. Feel free to skim through them to get a better understanding of what I'm telling you. I know that you're doing this to help a friend, but think of the friends you might leave behind when you do so." She passed the glowing lantern to Mike. "Actually have a plan this time. Your usual tactics won't work here."

"You mean getting lucky at the last second?" He wanted to hear her response, but the ball of light burst out of the lantern and he had to chase it to keep up. The Library wasn't intended for casual browsing by visitors, and he was soon buried deep within the stacks, his eyes on the little glowing ball of light. It finally settled at the end of one of the rows, and then leapt back into his lantern.

"Hmm." He held up the lamp and scrutinized the covers of the books. They were written in another language, but under the lamp's light, the words swam in front of him and reformed into English. Sofia alone could activate the lamps, just one of her many abilities as the Librarian, and he was grateful for the magical translation. The moving letters did make him feel a little motion sick though.

"There are no maps here," Death said, and Mike jumped, nearly banging his head on the shelf above.

"Shit, I didn't realize you followed me!" He put a hand on his chest and tried to catch his breath. "You almost gave me a heart attack."

"I did no such thing. I didn't wish to get left behind, so I rode with you." Death knelt down and gazed at one of the books. "I must admit I have contemplated learning to read."

"You don't know how to read?"

"The grim reaper has no need for books." Death slid a large tome out and opened it up. "Nor has there been any time for it."

“What is being the grim reaper like?” Mike spotted a book that looked promising and opened it. The letters lifted off the page and reformed into english, so he scanned the contents.

“That is not a question I can answer.” Death stared at him. “Other than a few rare moments in history, I have no recollection of ever having thoughts or desires of my own.”

“That makes sense.” Mike tucked the book under one arm. “You’ve been with us for a couple of months now, though. Surely you have some thoughts on the matter?”

Death nodded. “I only exist on this plane when a creature dies. Though it happens constantly, each moment is but the blink of an eye. Rarely do I even walk among you. Rather I simply come and go.”

“Really? Then what?”

“I reap, but do not sow. The souls I collect get passed on, but to where, I do not know.” Death put the book away. “It was only recently that I was able to even contemplate the creatures I am sworn to collect.”

“You mean humans?” Mike pulled out another book.

“Indeed, Mike Radley. I was not created to experience your human emotions, only to serve. I have witnessed the best and worst of humanity in their final moments, but I do not judge. However, I have become curious about your kind, and found my attention lingering on more than one occasion. Think of it as a professional courtesy.” Death held up the book he was holding. “Imagine that every letter in this book is a single soul. I flip the book to a random page, read my letter, then leave. I have gained very little.”

“Okay.” Mike held onto his current book, now giving his full attention to Death. “So do you get to read the book when all the souls are collected?”

“No. The letters keep moving.” Death flipped to a different page. “In the course of human events, I will often find that I must collect many souls in the same area in a short amount of time. It is during these times that I was able to briefly walk the earth and know you, to see the whole page as I pluck some letters from it.”

Mike paused, deep in thought. “Are you talking about wars?” he asked.

“A bit. War is a brother of mine, and thanks to him, I have seen much of this world.” Death closed the book. “Natural disasters, plagues, acts of gods, I am there to reap, to collect my bounty and move on. It is those moments that linger with me as I walk this plane of existence with you. I have a chance to think about what I’ve seen and to process it.”

“That sounds like a lot. Is that why you’ve been looking at old maps? Is that when a bunch of people died?”

“It helps to put my thoughts in order, yes. I am no mortal being, Mike Radley, and my memory is infallible. However, my sense of time is very distorted, and I find comfort in being able to organize those thoughts much like this library, to put order to my collection. It also allows me to put imagery to locations, to see the world proper, though I never leave this house.”

“So you remember everybody that’s ever died?”

“I don’t reap everybody. There are other entities similar to me, like your dear Cecilia. Unlike her, I have had very little chance to interact directly with mankind, and am trying to properly appreciate the opportunity while it lasts. To do this, I am trying to better understand myself.”

Mike frowned. “That’s... pretty deep, to be honest. So you stare at these maps and remember stuff? It sounds like kind of a bummer, really.”

“It is no bummer, Mike Radley, to offer relief to those who are ready to cross over. Grief and pain exist only for those who are left behind.” Death winked, a process that involved one of his eye sockets temporarily folding shut. “As for what comes next? That is the true mystery.”

Mike shivered. “That’s a mystery I’m willing to put off for as long as possible, if you don’t mind.”

Death stared at Mike for nearly a minute, then nodded. “That is appropriate.”

“You know what though?” Mike held up his book. “I’m glad you’re getting this chance to hang around and explore, but don’t focus too much on the past. You can enjoy looking at your maps and such, but take the opportunity to see how humans live. Quit staying in the office all day, get involved somehow. By contemplating all these lives you’ve seen while they’re ending, all you are doing is looking at a story from the final few pages. That’s no way to read a book, you know.”

“I see.” Death stroked the spine of a nearby book that was gilded with gold letters. “Perhaps that is the first thing I should know about reading.”

“It’s one of many things. Never skip to the end, often the journey makes it even sweeter.”

“I enjoy our chats, Mike Radley.”

“When I’m not so busy, I’d be happy to help you learn how to read.” Mike took a peek inside the book in his hands and nodded to himself. It had a few mentions of faeries in it. “Until then, you can help me carry some of these.”

“I can do that.” Death held out his bony hands to accept the book from Mike. They perused the row they were in, and Mike pulled a few more books from the shelves and handed them to Death. When it was time to move to the next row, they stopped to set the books down on a nearby rolling cart to carry them.

The light of the lantern left many times, and each time, Mike followed. He collected dozens of books, piling them onto the cart as the hour grew even later, fighting off the occasional yawn.

Death said very little, content to watch.

---

Dana frowned at the gathering on the front yard. While everybody else had been curious to see what Mike had been hollering about, she was currently distracted by the processed semen running through her body.

As a zombie, her hunger could become quite dangerous. She needed to consume the brains of the living in order to have enough life force to sate her hunger, but it had been discovered that Mike’s biology had been significantly altered by the magic to the point that his semen was capable of giving her the boost she needed to not only maintain her own sanity, but to keep her from decomposing as well. The sperm shooters in the fridge weren’t nearly as potent as consuming it directly from the source, but they were good enough to keep her from cracking into the nearest living creature for a quick bite.

Unfortunately, his semen had the odd side effect of making her horny. It was almost like her nervous system returned to life after feeding, but focused all of its energy on her erogenous zones. Earlier today, she had simply gone back to her shop and masturbated quickly, just to take the edge off. However, being forced to eat again after slashing up her hand meant that the satisfaction from



her fingers wasn't going to be anywhere near good enough to get her through the night.

While Mike and the others were speaking with the headless man out front, all Dana could think about was the sexy nymph out back. Always a willing participant, Naia was always there for her when she needed to get off. Biting her lower lip, she had left the others in front of the house and made her way to the backyard instead. Whatever the issue was, she could be filled in later.

Naia's fountain was gushing enough water that she was tumbling around at the top like a skydiver, laughing quietly to herself. The fairies were dive bombing her, trying to grab a small crystal from her hand that she kept tossing to her other hand, or dropping it into the fountain and making the water carry it back up on a jet of water. The air smelled of rain and mint, causing Dana to inhale deeply.

She sat on the edge of the fountain and watched. With every turn, Naia's slender legs slid free of her skirt, revealing her upper thighs and the runes on her torso glowed brightly through her gown. Eventually, a blue ball of light swooped in and grabbed the crystal, taking off over the roof of the house while the others followed.

Laughing, Naia stabilized to a sitting position, her eyes on the fairy lights. Once the fairies were gone, she tilted her head down toward Dana and winked.

"It's a nice night out, isn't it?"

"I guess so." Truth be told, unless it was snowing, Dana had no idea how cold the night actually was. "What was that crystal you had?"

"A piece of seaglass. Well, my own version of seaglass, anyway. Cerulea brought me a piece of glass she found in the yard, looks like someone tossed a bottle over the wall and it broke." Naia rolled her eyes. "Was likely from someone walking past. They better hope Abella doesn't catch them. I remember one time, a bunch of years ago, a guy flicked his cigarette butt into the yard, so she followed him home and then ripped the hood off his car."

"Sounds a bit extreme, but pretty funny."

"Indeed." Naia's water geyser weakened, lowering her to the ground. Her feet touched the surface of the water, sending ripples across the fountain, and she skipped across to where Dana sat. "So what brings you to my fountain so late at night."

Dana squirmed, her thighs rubbing across each other. "You know why I'm here. I just had a snack, and... well..."

Naia giggled. "Oh, I have a pretty good idea why you're here. However, I like it when you ask."

Dana scowled, a brief rush of heat entering her cheeks. "You're teasing me."

"Of course I am." Naia placed her hand on Dana's cheek, lightly stroking the skin. "But only because I know you like it. Deep down, you like a woman who takes control, who tells you what to do. Someone who can take your hand and lead you to orgasmic bliss." While she spoke, Naia's hand moved down Dana's chest, softly caressing a breast through her tank top.

"That's not true."

"Oh really?" Naia's face was now close enough that Dana could feel the nymph's breath on her skin.

"You always do this to me." Dana's voice was weak, and she turned away.

"You're right." The nymph was whispering in Dana's ear now, the sensation sending enhanced pleasure throughout the zombie's body. "And you always love it."

"That's not true." Dana said, her lip trembling. Naia's fingers were moving across the crotch of Dana's jeans now, applying pressure to the edges of her labia. She spread her legs to give the nymph better access.

"You always say that, too."

"Maybe that's a sign that you're predictable."

"Oh really?" Naia moved her hand away. "You think I'm predictable now?"

"Maybe."

"Hmm. Guess I should probably step back, think long and hard about how to please others." Naia drifted away, moving toward the center of the fountain.

"No, wait." Dana watched the nymph move toward the middle of the fountain, her gaze on a pair of birds bathing in the basin. "Naia?"

Naia ignored her.

“Shit, look, I’m sorry.” Though she said the words, they had no meaning. She had been going for playful while caught in a vulnerable moment, and clearly taken it too far. Dana kicked off her sandals and waded into the fountain, the water soaking into the legs of her jeans. “I wasn’t trying to say that—”

Her legs were ripped from under her, and she fell into the fountain, splashing water everywhere. She tried to sit up, and realized she was being held in place by the pressure all around her. Up above the surface, she saw Naia lean over her and smile.

Dana opened her mouth to talk, but let out the air in her lungs instead. The sensation of breathing was still automatic for her, but she no longer needed to do it.

The water flowed along her arms and legs, caressing her skin, and it wasn’t long before she felt her jeans and panties pulled away from her. Dana’s outstretched arms tried one more time to break free, but she was effectively restrained.

*I’ll show you predictable.* Naia’s voice came from everywhere, and Dana’s whole body was massaged by the water. Hundreds of invisible fingers spiraled up her legs while several hands grabbed her by the ankles and spread her legs wide.

Dana tried to moan out of habit, but all she managed was to expel some water. Her panties floated over her face now, followed by her jeans. Her jeans folded around her head, blocking off the view.

*Have you ever wondered what happens when you strip away the senses? Your body becomes so desperate to feel anything that it enhances the others.*

Dana nodded, her hips twitching. The fingers now pressed against her labia, massaging heat and life into her groin. So much of her existence was muted these days, but every time she fed, she was reconnected, her body closer to life than it had been.

Right now, she couldn’t smell a thing, and with her vision gone, all she had was her hearing. The water around her warmed up, and her entire existence was now a dark space where she was being touched repeatedly. She couldn’t even beg, or cry out, her own voice stripped away from her.

Something large rolled up her thigh, then teased her clit. Dana couldn’t even figure out how to push toward it, her mind lost in her own body. The object disappeared, and Naia’s voice giggled in her ear.

Dana's fingers curled up in anticipation as the object moved up her thigh, teasing the smooth skin just above her pussy. Just when she thought it would penetrate her folds, it slid past, moving along her ass and then up her spine.

Sparks had formed in the darkness of her vision, sparks that spiraled around like sentient fireworks. The water teased her breasts now, pushing up her shirt and spiraling over her nipples. The ice that flowed through her veins was replaced with something hotter, and her body flooded with warmth as she built toward orgasm, only to have it taken away. Several minutes passed like this, or maybe even hours. Time was somehow meaningless in the fountain, and all of Dana's attention was on the storm forming between her legs.

Several thick tendrils rolled up her calves, spiraling along the outside of her thighs, then combining just outside of her swollen pussy. The tendrils teased her, pushing inside of her one at a time for less than a second. Her clutching hands tightened into fists, her nails digging into her palms, and a few of the tendrils moved along the curves of her ass, pausing against her ass.

*Oh god.* She had no time to process her thoughts at the tendrils teased her asshole, pushing against it gently. Her ass was sensitive, and always had been. The few times Alex had slipped something small into her ass, she had felt so full and heavy all at once, and now was no different. Every time her pussy was penetrated, she felt like she floated upward, but then the tendril in her ass would bring her back down to earth. They alternated, giving her the sensation that she was flying through the air, one hole at a time.

Her orgasm kept approaching, but Naia would let up at the last second, letting Dana float in the void. She wanted to beg, was willing to do anything if Naia would just topple her over the edge, allowing her to feel that sudden rush of life throughout her body as all of her nerves caught on fire, to be alive for even just a few seconds.

Watery hands teased at her thighs and breasts, stroking her exposed flesh, and a mouth now hungrily licked at her clit. The edges of her erect nipples were now being teased by rapidly shifting currents, causing her whole body to shake. She tensed her jaw, careful to avoid biting her tongue, her orgasm now fluttering beneath the surface of her skin like lava, threatening to burst free in a fiery eruption.

Trapped in the void, she let out a soundless scream when the water double penetrated her. A buzzing sensation tore through her limbs, filling her with heat and electricity, and the tongue on her snatch became several high-pressure water

jets that circled her stretched out labia, then came together in a torrent right beneath her clitoris.

Dana's mouth opened wide, the orgasm flooding her body as she tumbled through the water, unsure of what direction she was facing. The sparks in the darkness exploded outward in vein-like patterns, and the watery restraints released her. Putting out her hands, she released she was face down when her palms came in contact with the floor of the fountain.

Pulses of heat racked her body, and she ripped the jeans off her head, opening her eyes beneath the water. Naia hovered beneath Dana, her hair floating outward like seaweed, a seductive smile on her face. The nymph embraced her, their lips meeting as the orgasm finished its course through Dana's body. The fountain drained around them until Dana was laying on top of Naia, gasping for the air she no longer needed.

Minutes passed, and the world was suddenly warmer and more colorful. Dana used these minutes to study the blue and green strands of hair in front of her face, to gaze into Naia's sapphire eyes and feel a sense of belonging. For just a few moments, she pretended that the blood running through her body was warm, that she would close her eyes tonight and drift to sleep and dream once more of her beloved Alex. Briefly connected with her emotions, her grief was suddenly amplified and her eyes burned, unable to produce any tears.

"You okay?" Naia asked.

"No," Dana responded, burying her face in Naia's hair. "But I will be in a minute." These moments never lasted long, and today was no exception. After a few more minutes snuggling with Naia, Dana stood, then helped the nymph to her feet.

"I hope that wasn't too predictable for you." Naia held out Dana's jeans. They were already dry, and the panties had been tucked into a pocket.

Dana smiled, and got dressed. "I appreciate it. I appreciate you."

"I know." The two of them embraced then parted. The fountain was filling up again, and Naia floated on the surface of the water. "Feel free to drop by if you're ever feeling lonely."

"I always do." Dana gave the nymph a wave and walked across the garden to her garage. She rarely stayed long after being with Naia. If the nymph minded, she never said a word.

Dana pushed open the door to the garage and crossed the messy floor to flop down on her workbench. Rubbing her belly, she turned her attention to the disassembled drone on her bench. She picked up a rotor and frowned at it.

Trying to power a drone with magic had several different problems, but the biggest one right now was power regulation. How could she get a magical stone to regulate its own output without blowing out half the circuits in the drone. She hadn't bothered telling Mike that she and Tink had already blown through a couple grand in parts trying to make it work. Once they reached five grand, she'd have Tink do it.

Picking up a soldering iron, she contemplated it for a few moments before tossing it onto the bench. She was tired of dealing with drones and needed to do something else. Looking around the room, she let out a sigh and began picking stuff up.

It took her most of an hour to clean up her workstation and organize it, and another to clean the garage and sweep it out. Tink had been tossing burnt out components on the floor, and Dana dumped over a hundred dollars in broken circuitry into the trash. Kneeling down to get beneath the bench, she found a busted rotor blade.

"So that's where you went." She smiled and tossed it away, the memory of a drone bouncing around the room while Tink screamed in terror and hid from it. Somehow, the voltage to each motor had gone out of whack, and the thing had spiraled randomly around the room until it turned into a smoking ball of fire that Tink had knocked down using her club.

Satisfied that the garage was clean, she walked to the back of the garage. There was a flight of stairs hidden in the back that led beneath the garage. Her best guess was that it used to be a bay for working on cars, but she had cleaned it out and turned it into her own private refuge with Tink's help. It had apparently been the goblin's room until Mike had moved in, and Dana thought it poetic that her living space was now six feet under ground.

There was a chaise lounge in the corner right by a nightstand filled with books. In the other corner was a comfortable loveseat pointed at a wall mounted television. Ever since she had died, sleep was no longer a necessity. However, the tradeoff was that boredom now waited around every corner. She sat on the chaise lounge and opened her laptop, clicking on her languages program.

An hour was spent on french lessons. Dana had always wanted to learn another language, and figured maybe she would travel again once her undead condition was reversed. One odd thing about being dead was that her memory seemed to be much better now. Not the memories from when she was alive—those were still seen through the fog of mortality. New information was burned into her brain with laserlike precision, which meant the learning process was phenomenally faster. She wondered if the issue had something to do with missing so many of her emotions, as if her mind was compensating.

Done practicing the names of fruits and vegetables *en francais*, she opened up a folder and spent some time looking at pictures of Alex, her deceased girlfriend. It had been over a year now since she had died in a motorcycle accident, but in some ways it still felt fresh.

When Daryl the necromancer had killed her, he had stripped away not only her future, but also her ability to die. While thrilled at the prospect that there was apparently something that came after death that allowed her to be reunited with her loved ones, Dana's soul was stuck with whatever was left of her body no matter what happened. Her love for Alex was one of the few emotions Daryl had left her with in order to make her obey his whims and desires. Unfortunately for him, the women in the house had persuaded her that he couldn't be trusted and found a way to keep her from feeding on the living.

Looking at so many old pictures made her nostalgic, but it was hard summoning up memories that involved emotions that were now muted. A camping trip where they had set up a tent on the beach made her smile, but the awe and wonder of seeing the Milky Way had been stripped away, stealing more than a little bit of the romance from her memory of the event. Pictures from meals they had shared did little for her now—the taste of human food was simply a fond memory at this point.

Sighing, she closed the slideshow on her laptop. She was doing better than she had been, but looking at the pictures made her melancholy. There was only one solution these days. Crossing the room partially bent over to avoid smacking her head, she settled down in her chair and turned on her Playstation. It was the Pro model, which booted up quickly, and she loaded Dark Souls 3.

The game itself was incredibly difficult, but she got a chuckle out of the **You Died** death screen. It also didn't hurt that becoming frustrated with the game was nearly impossible now. She had never been super into games, but being unable to sleep meant she could only binge so much Netflix before getting bored. She

wondered what life would be like if she was stuck this way for an entire lifetime, or even hundreds of years. What sorts of tricks would she utilize to keep her mind busy?

The room suddenly stank of sulfur with just a hint of coconut and a hand touched Dana's cheek. Distracted, she turned her head, only to hear her on-screen avatar grunt in agony as he was impaled with a spear.

"You died," Lily told her, reading it off of the screen. She walked around the loveseat. She wore a tank top and a miniskirt, her hair pulled back into a small bun. A series of piercings adorned her face, and she wore a couple of glow sticks around her neck.

"Just the one time." Dana tossed the controller onto a nearby table. "I'm surprised to see you so late at night. Usually you come by earlier if you're nearby."

"Well, I was originally dropping in to see Mike, but apparently he's off in the Library." Lily sat down next to Dana and picked up the controller. "We were supposed to meet up, but he found out that Cecilia was captured or something, I didn't get much detail from that little green fairy. She was the only one I spotted on the way in, and she kept rambling about how nobody would play with her. I certainly know how she feels, seems like nobody is ever around when I drop by. I mean, what does a girl have to do to get any actual attention around here?"

"Cecilia was captured? That sounds interesting." Dana wondered if she should offer to go help. She hadn't spent much time in the Library, but figured a pair of tireless eyes would be more than capable of helping out. "So what have you been up to?"

"A lady doesn't kiss and tell. Fuck!" Lily scowled at the game, her lip sticking out. "Did that guy just kill me with a giant barrel of apples? Fucker smashed my head in. Is this supposed to be fun?"

"Aw, I thought you liked things that were hard." Dana snatched the controller back. "My turn. And you're hardly a lady, so spill."

"If you must know, I was at a concert. Local band. Well, not local here. I flew in special for the occasion. That, and the bar they were at had the best rum punch I've ever had. I let myself get drunk for a little bit, that's how good they were."

"Really? Concert hopping and rum? Sounds pretty tame."



"I caught a guy slipping roofies to his date. Waited till he went to take a leak, offered him a blowie and sucked his soul out through his dick. Cops got called when they found him comatose, they took his date out in an ambulance. Guy was a serial offender, thought an eternity of torment would be a little funny." She tapped her head. "I'm letting some of the rougher souls pass him around like a pack of cigarettes right now. They can be downright nasty when I let them have just a pinch of freedom.

"That sounds more like you... shit." Dana tossed the controller back to Lily. "I promise I'm better at this game when you're not watching."

"Uh huh." Lily's eyes smoldered for a second when she picked up the controller. "Let's see what happens when I enhance my reflexes and... fuck!" Promptly after the game loaded, the succubus had walked her avatar off the edge of a cliff. "I'm still a little buzzed is all."

"Take another turn, it's fine." Dana fought back a grin, but mostly because she had walked off the same ledge before. The next ten minutes consisted of Lily consistently dying in the game and swearing in several languages before tossing the controller back over to Dana.

"Told you it was hard." Dana turned off the console using the controller. "Do you want to play Mario or something easier?"

"Hardly." Lily turned sideways on the loveseat, one leg folding up and the other dangling off the edge. Her open thighs revealed that she wasn't wearing any panties, and her pubes were currently trimmed into the shape of a heart.

Dana rolled her eyes. "Okay, that's a little distracting."

"Hmm?" Lily looked down at her crotch, then back to Dana. "Oh, this? You like what you see?"

"Naia already helped me out earlier."

"Damn nymph," Lily mumbled. "I should have come home sooner."

"Maybe you could actually stick around for once, not just sneak in to give Mike wet dreams and binge watch Netflix with me." Logically, Dana knew she should feel a little hurt that Lily didn't visit her more often. Emotionally, she couldn't care less. There was just nothing there, a yawning void where some of her feelings should be.

“Romeo and I have been working on something, so it’s mostly business.” Lily shifted her hips and a pair of black panties appeared, hiding her vagina away. “Even he understands that I need my space.”

“Does he though?” It was an honest question. Mike had been nothing but kind to Dana, and she felt a little guilty for how she typically ignored him. He occasionally checked in with her, but she rarely went to him unless she was hungry. Even though she had seen him with the others, she had never personally observed the dynamic between Mike and Lily.

“If he didn’t, you would never see me here at all, unless he commanded me.” Lily’s face was suddenly serious. “You can tell a lot about a man by how he treats those beneath him. For all intent and purposes, I am completely beneath him.”

“That’s true. I guess he could make you do whatever he wanted.”

“And I’ve given him opportunity to. And he simply doesn’t. I want to know why. That’s why I keep coming back, and it’s also why I don’t mind helping him.”

“Does he know you are murdering people at bars?”

“Yeah, well, a girl’s gotta eat. We have a mostly unspoken arrangement where I don’t give him the details and he seems to trust my decisions.” Lily let out a sigh. “Besides, it feels kind of nice being able to pick what I want at the buffet.”

Dana nodded, letting it go. “At least you have options now.”

Lily smiled. “Every soul tastes different, but even the soul of the shittiest human is like the sweetest candy, and...” The succubus cocked her head, as if listening to a distant sound.

“You okay?” Dana asked.

“Gotta go see a man about some sand.” Lily winked and vanished in a stinking cloud of sulfur.

Dana coughed, waving at the air in the room. With no proper ventilation, she knew the scent would linger. Grumbling to herself, she lit some scented candles to help overpower the stench. By herself once more, she sat back down on the loveseat and turned her game on once again. The minutes went by, the night dragging on, her sleepless mind holding onto every detail of every minute.

Her avatar charged into a cave, only to get massacred by a pair of hidden enemies. The screen turned dark, displaying the words **You Died** once again.

"I wish," she muttered, then hit continue.

---

So many thoughts were running through Beth's mind that she couldn't stop to count them.

First, the excitement of someone new coming to the house. When he had first pulled his head off, it had taken everything inside of her not to scream with joy. She should have been unsettled, scared, or maybe even sick to her stomach, but all she could think about was how interesting he was. A man who could remove his own head, how awesome was that?

Second, the dullahan wore tight leather armor across his body. Straps and buckles were located everywhere, and she got the impression that he was ready to ride into battle with those sinister dark eyes of his if he had to. This wasn't just someone who sat around, this was a creature ready to pick a fight. She wasn't super familiar with dullahans, so wondered if he would have interesting stories to tell.

It didn't hurt either that he looked like a far sexier version of Edward Scissorhands, minus the scissors. Only his hands and his face were uncovered, and she couldn't help but wonder if his skin was just as pale as his face beneath all that fabric. A dark mysterious stranger had appeared in their front yard, and she wanted to know more about him.

Mostly though, she needed to get to know him for unselfish reasons. Right now, he was their only link to the faerie realm, and he could be an invaluable source of information. The fairies they already lived with were a separate species of magical creature with no information on the fae realm, so Beth planned on pumping Sulyvahn for any information without being too obvious.

And that would mean being friendly. She didn't mind friendly.

When she stepped outside, she pulled the door behind her shut so hard that it rattled in the doorframe. Sulyvahn was giving the home a hard stare when Beth stepped outside, but his features softened at the sight of her. He gave her a playful bow as she drew closer.

"Good evening to ya, Lady Beth." His thick, irish accent sent playful chills down Beth's spine, and she couldn't help but notice the leather armor he wore

was rather tight across his shoulders. He shook his shoulders and popped his head free, catching it with the hand nearest his chest. Dark mist poured from his open neck, flowing around Sulyvahn's head like a waterfall. "I am your humble servant."

"You're not my servant. That's not how things are done here." She smiled, and bent down with her hands on her knees to be eye level with him. "Besides, we would rather be friends than your employers."

"Yer a softer touch than the man of the house, that's for sure." He put his head back on and smiled. "And definitely not squeamish either."

"Oh. Were you trying to make me squirm?" Beth arched an eyebrow at him, touching her lower lip with the tip of her finger.

"Aye, a bit. Trying to have a wee bit of fun, the lord of the house seems wound a bit tight, thought it would be good for a chuckle."

"Nah, Mike's a good guy, he's just worried about Cecilia." Sulyvahn's smile faded slightly, so Beth changed subjects. "But enough about her, I would love to learn a little about you."

"Me?" Sulyvahn pointed at himself, genuine surprise written across his face. "Well now, I don't know that I've ever been asked to talk about myself."

"Here." Beth stepped forward and slid her arms around his bicep, leading him toward the start of the hedge maze. The muscle in his arm wasn't as thick as Asterion's, but it felt plenty thick enough when she squeezed it. "Let's walk and talk. I would love to hear more about being a dullahan."

Sulyvahn approached the maze with a lopsided grin on his face. "Well, let's see. The banshee are a fine lot, but they're joined to family bonds, Cecilia being one of the exceptions. However, foreigners and exiles don't warrant the family treatment a banshee can provide, so it's my job to go and collect. I would ride my horse across the hills and through the bogs, collecting the souls of the departed before they could wander off. Met plenty that weren't ready, but I can be persuasive."

"Interesting." Beth squeezed his arm and led him into one of the longer paths that would take them to the sundial. "How does one go about persuading a spirit to move on."

The dullahan broke into a huge grin. "Allow me to show ye!" He slid his arm out of hers and yanked his head off, black smoke spilling out of his neck. With his free hand, he reached into the gap and pulled out his own spine.

Beth felt her stomach drop, watching the vertebra exit the neck hole one at a time until his entire spine was now outside of his body. Sulyvahn gave the spine a flick and it expanded, the bones now dangling loosely from a cord made of the same smoke that leaked from his body. He cracked the whip over her head and she felt a paralyzing chill wrap itself around her.

"What do ye think?" He did a couple more practice strikes, and she could hear the bones rattle against each other every time he allowed the whip to coil in on itself. "Those I can't reach, I can catch."

"Wow. I really wasn't expecting that. May I?" She moved closer to examine the whip, which Sulyvahn presented for her inspection.

"Look, but don't touch. You won't like how it feels," he warned her.

"Fair enough." Her fingers hovered over the whip, and she could feel the immense cold coming off of them. "But I get the impression that you're trying to make me squirm again."

"Maybe a little," Sulyvahn admitted. "You don't spend your whole life running down spirits without wanting to be properly appreciated by the living. Truth be told, I rarely get to hunt these days, not since the Roman Catholics invaded Ireland. Everyone seems to have their own method of dying that doesn't involve the old ways, but I do occasionally get to chase down an atheist who dies on our soil. Always a gasser, chasing down some poor eejit who thought they were just gonna spend eternity in the dark and all."

"So do you escort the dead to the afterlife too?"

"A bit. Toss them all in the wagon and ferry them over. Not as nice as a personal escort, but dullahans weren't made to be polite." Sulyvahn gave the whip a shake and the bones locked together once more, forming back into a spine.

"How can you stand up straight without your spine?" Beth asked.

"Never said it was mine." Sulyvahn's head grinned as he shoved the spine back into his neck.

"That's a little disgusting, to be honest."

“No harm in it.” Sulyvahn put his head back on, the smoke vanishing again. “I’m made of much sterner stuff than a couple of human bones.”

“Indeed. What are you made of, exactly? I mean, you were created to collect wayward souls, after all. Is that dangerous work?” They continued onward through the maze, Beth just a step ahead of the dullahan.

“Hmm. There’s an interesting question. I don’t know what I’m made of, just existed one day, so I’m afraid that’s a secret the queen keeps to herself if she even knows. As for danger, aye, I’ve run into my fair share.”

“Like what?”

“There are creatures out there, beings that feast on the souls of the departed. Sometimes they collect them just to keep them locked away, feasting on their misery. Others tear the soul apart, reducing it to sparkling shreds. There’s a reason creatures like me exist, and it’s to ensure a proper departure from the mortal plane. Let’s just say that I’ve run into a scrap or two by collecting something else’s prey.”

“Whoa, like what kinds of things?”

“Things that know when they’re spoken of, lass, so I shan’t say more about them.” Sulyvahn smiled, turning his eyes to the sky. “It seems unusually warm for this time of year.”

“The house seems to have its own weather.”

“Oh? You don’t know for sure?”

“There is very little about this place that we know for sure. In fact, the news that the queen has an agreement to shuttle Caretakers to the other side is one of the few facts that we have.”

“Aye. Every soul is special in its own right, but from what I’ve heard, a Caretaker’s soul is a rare thing indeed, and it can’t be left to wander around.”

“Oh really?”

Sulyvahn nodded. “Never seen it for myself, but our dear Cecilia has been ferrying souls exclusively for this house for many centuries now.”

Beth frowned. “It can’t have been that many. The house was built less than two hundred years ago.”

The dullahan's eyes sparkled. "I assure you that this place is far older than the foundation on which it's built. I'm a little surprised that you don't know more about the place."

"Yeah, well the spell that protects it has a memory component. It's a bit frustrating, but nobody who lives here can remember anything until Mike unlocks it."

"Now that's fascinating. Would explain why Cecilia would never say much about the place. Would drop off her charge and then wander back to the mortal realm."

"Does she drop off souls in the faerie realm?"

"Not quite. She passes through it on the way to... wherever." Sulyvahn grinned. "You have to understand that the world beyond the veil is complicated. Beings like us all have our own road to walk, but the destination is the same."

"Beings like you?"

"Collectors, psychopomps, whatever we're called these days. When the world got bigger, we would run across each other on occasion." Sulyvahn stopped in front of the sundial. They were at the center of the maze now. "Not very useful at night, is it?"

"Makes a good centerpiece. Sort of ties the whole yard together, don't you think?"

"Looks old." Sulyvahn crouched down, his eyes on the dial. "Wonderful craftsmanship."

"We like to think so. So I was wondering—" Beth was cut off when a white van pulled up between the lions, the driver hopping out and then opening the back. Sulyvahn faded into a black mist as the delivery man wandered into the front yard, his eyes moving across the massive yard. His eyes locked on Beth, and she rushed out of the garden maze to meet the driver halfway.

"Bit late to be out, isn't it?" Beth asked, immediately suspicious.

"Priority delivery from Lance Ferguson." Once the driver was close, Beth recognized him as Marco, one of the legal secretaries from the office. His short, dark hair was spiked up, and he had shadows under his brown eyes.

“Marco, I barely recognized you out of your suit! What are you doing delivering packages for Lance?”

Marco gave a grin. “This is a special occasion and Lance wanted to make sure that Mr. Radley got his belongings back.” He gestured to the van on the road. “Do you remember the storage unit that had some stuff auctioned off? Lance hired a private investigator and was able to track down and recover some of it. I’ve been on the road for the last couple of days bringing them right over.” He looked over her shoulder in disbelief. “I’ve come out here a couple times over the years and always seem to forget just how big the property is. Want me to help you take them inside?”

“Um, no, Mr. Radley isn’t home right now and he’s doing a remodel in the front hall.” The lie slid right off her tongue. “But we can stack them next to the door, and when he gets home, he’ll let me know where they can go.”

“Yeah, sure thing.” Marco went back to the van and slid open the door. “So you seriously moved in with this guy? Seems like a strange career move.”

“He has a lot of assets and needed someone full time. The house is bigger than it looks, I’ve got my own room and everything. I hardly even see him some days.”

Marco twisted his face in disbelief, but kept his thoughts to himself. Beth had heard through the rumor mill that some of her former coworkers thought she had become a gold digger. While it stung a bit, she was too busy living the dream in a monster house to worry about what others thought of her.

There were six medium sized boxes in the van, so Beth had Marco pull up the driveway first. The freshly poured pavement went all the way around the maze, passing nearby the porch, and she was able to help him stack everything up by the door.

“Sorry Lance made you drive for this. I’m surprised that he didn’t just have it Fed-Exed or something.”

“Yeah, well he didn’t trust anyone else to do it. You see, this stuff has been bouncing around ever since the sale.”

“What do you mean?”

Marco grinned and pointed to a thick stack of shipping labels on one of the boxes. “When the lot got auctioned off through New Castle, all of it got shipped to some place in Colorado. All of it except for a small batch of items that ended up in



Seattle. And then Atlanta. And then San Diego. For whatever reason, it keeps getting lost in the system, must be some sort of major glitch with the barcodes or something. It would eventually get found waiting in some warehouse, and then shipped off again. I don't know how, but Lance got ahead of the game and made a call to the guy who bought the stuff and offered to buy it back. Guy was happy to have the money, since his shipment never came, so here we are."

"That's really weird. All of these boxes kept getting lost? Why not just one or two?" Beth eyed the shipment with curiosity.

"Yeah, well..." Marco stared at the boxes for a few seconds, an odd look in his eyes.

"Something up?" Beth asked.

"I'm just tired. Been driving for the last few days and sleeping in the van. Lance didn't want me taking my eyes off of these, even for a second. Nothing but fast food and all that, and long hours on the road."

"That all?"

Marco twisted his lips up, then let out a sigh. "Just exhausted, frankly. I'm that kind of tired where you get a little jumpy, maybe even feel like you're being watched. A couple of times when I was trying to sleep, I swear I heard something moving around back there, boxes moving, that kind of thing. Freaked me out is all."

"Yeah, I bet it's exhaustion. When I get really tired, I see shadows sometimes. Happened all the time in college, actually. Tell Lance thanks for me, will you?" Beth walked Marco back to the van. "And thanks for bringing these by. I really do appreciate it, and it was nice to see a familiar face."

"Yeah, no problem. Lance is paying me mileage and overtime, so I was happy to go on a road trip, make some bank, and... see a familiar face as well." Marco opened the door of the van, his cheeks red. "Take care, Beth."

"You too." She waved at him as he backed down the driveway, which passed between the lions. Once he was gone, she turned her attention back to the boxes.

"Seemed a decent chap," Sulyvahn said, reappearing next to her. "What was that about?"

“When Mike inherited this house, some of the objects inside were mistakenly sold at an auction. I spent weeks trying to track everything down, but it was all bought by a thrift store, so it had been sold already. Now, apparently, some of the stuff has come back.” She shrugged at him. “So that’s a surprise.”

“Providence is a fickle—” Sulyvahn froze, then leaned to the left to look around Beth. “Well now. You don’t see that everyday.”

“See what?” Beth turned around to see that the six boxes were no longer stacked. Instead, they were now scattered across the front porch, and the one closest to the door was balanced perfectly on one of its corners, rotating in place. Beth took a step toward it and jumped when it tipped over and slammed against the wood of the porch, the contents rustling inside.

“Looks like you’ve some unpacking to do.” Sulyvahn winked, then vanished once more into an inky mist, leaving Beth alone on the porch.