

Chiming In

Eulalie sat in her web hammock, her attention firmly focused on one of the monitors as she typed lines of code into a text editor with one hand. The other hand casually flicked at a fidget spinner that was held in place by the paw of her fourth leg which she had curled upward. In truth, she could have written code solely by sound if she wanted. Her hearing was sensitive enough that she could now recognize the distinct sound of every stroke on her keyboard. Still, being able to triple check for errors now was far preferable to potential hours searching for her mistake later.

That, and then she wouldn't be able to listen to the satisfying buzz of ball bearings as her fidget spinner whirled. It sang to her as she flicked it again, then she flexed her paw so that the spinner was balanced in the center much like a juggler might spin a plate.

Movement out of the corner of her eye caused her to shift her attention to a rat carrying a strand of fiber optic cable. The creature came to a stop beneath her, its whiskers twitching with anxiety as it held the cable up for her inspection.

"We lost another connection," it said. Eulalie studied the rat for the span of a breath to identify it. Her senses dug through all the markers: fur, scent, pheromone, the way the rat held its tail aloft when he walked on two paws, the small clip in his left ear. This was Basil, who belonged to a family of rats who had taken their names from the contents of a spice rack once upon a time. Basil was technically a legacy name. Right now, Basil Sr. was in charge of organizing incoming cookbooks for the Library, but not because he was named for a spice. The whole family knew how to read and understand food labels, which was definitely a niche skill set for rodents.

"Tell me more, Basil." She leaned over and took the cable from Basil and held it up to get a better look at it. Sure enough, the cable was neatly severed by a collapsing portal. There was a bit of an art form to the magical portals the rats made. When they fell apart, anything caught in the portal was simply detached at a molecular level. There were likely some interesting applications of this process, but the Arachne had plenty of other things on her plate.

“This one came from the server room in the Computer Sciences Department at MIT.” Basil cleaned his face nervously. “It was spotted by the intern.”

“The intern?” Eulalie’s eyes narrowed. “Do you mean Carl?”

Basil nodded. Carl the intern was a new student in the Computer Sciences Department. For whatever reason, he had been put in charge of the server room maintenance, and had become the bane of Eulalie’s existence on the MIT campus.

Server rooms were easy to infiltrate once you bypassed external security. Unless there were problems with the server, nobody paid much attention to what was going on with the hardware itself. It was easy enough to plug a direct line into a server and maintain a continuous connection. In fact, Eulalie often did maintenance of her own to ensure nobody looked twice. There were over a dozen college campuses right now that were running at peak performance due to her interventions.

However, Carl was either some sort of cable savant or a bored nerd. This was the third time this month the man had discovered one of her cables. The rats monitored stuff like this for her, and protocol upon discovery was to immediately shut down any portals to that location. This meant that Carl had likely discovered what appeared to be a cut cable attached to nothing, or perhaps even a hole that went a few inches into the wall and terminated abruptly.

Now that was something she wished she could see. She fiddled with the cable for a moment, wondering if it would be worth installing another one sometime just to see how fast Carl would find it. However, if this guy was half as good as she thought he was, there was a chance he was doing diagnostics on that particular server already. He would see that information had been going both ways through that port, which meant problems for Eulalie. The safety of her niece and the house came first and always. Sighing, she handed the cable remnant to Basil.

“Go ahead and pull any other connections from MIT,” she said with remorse. She hated losing a direct server connection because it would be that much harder to dig through data flowing through the school. MIT had some cutting edge research, along with top secret government programs that she had been eagerly watching. The Arachne turned her attention to another screen and set a reminder to check on Carl’s enrollment at MIT every six months. The guy was

due to graduate in two years, and she didn't want to forget to go back later. Someone like Carl was good to know about, and maybe even hire someday.

Ignoring the rat, she opened a command console window and quickly set up a search program that would dig through forums, message boards, and anywhere else a server junky may go. If Carl started asking around about mysterious cables that disappeared into walls, she wanted to know right away.

When she turned her attention back to Basil, she was happy to see that he had at least relaxed a little. The rats trusted her, but they got very anxious whenever failing a task, even if it wasn't their fault. Reggie's predecessor was largely at fault for this. That rat had been a real bastard.

"Dismissed," she said as she leaned back into her webs. "And thank you."

Basil bowed low, then scampered off with the cable in tow. She watched him vanish into one of the tunnels carved in the wall, then reached out and flicked her spinner again. It practically hummed while spinning, and she tossed it in the air with her paw only to catch it on the end of another leg. Grinning, she looked back at the code she had been working on.

The flow of air shifted slightly in the room and was accompanied by the sound of sliding fabric. Eulalie frantically typed in an attempt to finish one last bit of code just as Sofia entered the room. She hit enter and leaned back so far in her hammock that she was now looking at the cyclops upside down.

"Ugh, I hate when you do that." The cyclops shivered, then continued into the corner of the room where a small table and chairs had been placed for visitors. Earlier, the rats had set up a small plate of cheese and fruit. Eulalie had wondered who was coming to visit her.

The Arachne tumbled backward out of her web, the fidget spinner precariously balanced on one foot. She wondered how long she could make it spin. Her personal record was almost two hours. How long had it been spinning already? It didn't really matter. She could just start the timer now.

Walking across the room, she studied Sofia. For the first time in a few days, the cyclops didn't smell of alcohol, which was a pleasant surprise. She did, however, have a large bag under her eye from lack of sleep. It was almost painful to look at, and made Eulalie think of a double chin. Every time the cyclops blinked, it wobbled. Arachnes didn't really get bags under their eyes. It didn't serve any evolutionary advantage. In fact, she wasn't entirely certain what purpose they

were meant to serve. Of what use was advertising to the world that your sleep habits were trash?

Then again, maybe it was meant to be a physiological warning sign. One look in the mirror and you knew you weren't at your best. How much sleep had Eulalie been getting lately? She did some quick math in her head and frowned. If she remembered correctly, she was averaging around five hours of sleep a night. That was definitely sub-optimal. She couldn't even blame an MMO this time.

Gods, that little eyelid chin just kept jiggling. The eye itself narrowed and Eulalie realized she had been staring for a few seconds.

"Good..." Eulalie checked a nearby monitor for the time. "Morning!"

Sofia sighed. "Did I come at a bad time?"

The Arachne shook her head. "Lily and Dana aren't currently murdering anyone... I think. No, this is fine. Is something up? Is this about all those books I ordered? That's just blatant market manipulation and I did it on my own account. Or maybe you heard about MIT?"

"MI... no, I'm not here to talk about whatever is going on outside the Library." Sofia took a deep breath and looked away. This was a sign that whatever she had to say was difficult for her. Eulalie hated conversations like this. They made her itchy. "I wanted to talk about what happened yesterday."

"Yesterday?" Eulalie winced. She could still picture that bubbling wraith as it twisted away from her, like hot tar with an attitude. The thing had been nearly as quick as she was, only slipping free of her grip due to its amorphous body. Dealing with any creature that could outmaneuver her was always unsettling.

"Yes." The Head Librarian sat up straight in her seat, which put her at eye level with Eulalie. "You broke protocol. Severely."

Eulalie immediately stopped the fidget spinner and slipped it into her pocket. She dropped her other hand to her spinnerets and pulled out a small length of webbing, which she immediately pulled into a loop. This activity was far quieter than the fidget spinner and less likely to annoy the cyclops.

"Yeah, about that." The Arachne studied Sofia, uncertain where to begin. "I'm really sorry."

“Sorry? That’s it?” Sofia’s tone was like ice. “You accidentally freed a malevolent entity and you’re...sorry?”

“I guess I’m not sure what else you want me to say.” This was why she hated confrontations that weren’t through a keyboard. She screwed up and had apologized. What more was there? “So yeah, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry isn’t good enough, Eulalie.” Sofia stood now, her fists balled up. “Do you have any idea what you almost did?”

“I mean...” Eulalie dropped her gaze to the webbing in her hand. She had already converted the cat’s cradle into a Jacob’s ladder. “Yeah, that thing almost hurt everyone.”

“That thing killed one of your rats and almost killed me.” Sofia’s voice was little more than a whisper.

“No it didn’t.” Eulalie tilted her head to one side. “Not the rat part, that was very regrettable. I mean the latter half. You can see your own future if it involves getting hurt or dying. That thing wasn’t actually going to hurt you.”

“You’re wrong, Eulalie. I saw that thing kill me, over and over again. But do you know what? When it came at me that very last time, I saw my death. I amended every possible outcome I could, and nothing changed at all. In those two seconds, I died over a dozen times, and there was nothing I could do. Nothing at all!” The cyclops was grinding her teeth, Eulalie could hear them. “If Mike hadn’t stepped in, I would be dead right now!”

“Oh.” Well, that was quite the revelation. How was she supposed to parse that nugget of information? “Um...well...I’m glad you’re not dead.”

“Gods, you don’t even see it, do you? What would have happened if I died?” Sofia ran a hand through her hair so roughly that some of it pulled free from the braid. “Well, to start with, you would be responsible for my death. Can you even comprehend what that’s like? To fuck up so badly that somebody you know dies in front of you?”

“Uh...” This conversation was already difficult, and Eulalie was now in uncharted territory. What could you say to someone you almost killed due to carelessness?

“How would you have lived with yourself? Do you know what it’s like to get somebody killed and constantly see shadows of them?” Sofia’s features were

bright red now, and Eulalie half wondered if the cyclops might take a swing at her. “What if Mike hadn’t been there, hmm? What if that thing had gotten away and killed Tink? When you have to sit down with Grace and tell her that you accidentally killed her primary mother figure, would you just say ‘Sorry’?!?”

The webbing in Eulalie’s hands snapped. The cyclops now had her full attention.

“Don’t bring Grace into this,” she whispered. Eulalie loved her niece more than anything, and maybe that was part of the problem. She had never planned on becoming a mother. Honestly, neither had Velvet. Years ago, they had resigned themselves to the idea that the two of them would be the last of their species.

But now, the future of their species was in the hands of a little girl who still ate crayons. Eulalie sometimes wished more than anything that she could set aside her asexuality and take that burden, to mate and produce offspring of her own. But Arachne biology demanded compatibility. Even if she tried to inseminate herself with a turkey baster (per Lily’s suggestion), it would do nothing.

Was Grace destined to feel the burden of their species? Or was she loved enough that she would never crave the companionship of her own kind?

“But she’s a part of this, no matter what you want.” Sofia looked down at Eulalie over her nose. “Every person is a member of her family. She still carries around that bear of hers, and she only knew Cyrus for a few months.”

“Don’t...don’t talk about him, either.” The room felt like it was spinning under her feet. “He’s off limits, too.”

“You don’t get to duck out of an adult conversation just because it’s hard. For fucks’ sake, Eulalie. I’m the one who almost died because of you! You couldn’t follow the rules! Fuck!” The cyclops slammed her fist against the wall, which startled a few rats who had been trying to covertly conduct their business through the room. “Once I’m gone, that’s it! You’re the Head Librarian. Then it’s your turn to be miserable and remember those who came before you, wandering the stacks and wondering what you could have done differently. Do you think I want that for you?”

“I...um...” The Arachne was so off balance, she wasn’t sure where to begin.

“You’re nowhere near ready for the responsibility.” Sofia crossed her arms. “If you ever hope to become the Head Librarian, you need to find a way to properly own up to mistakes like this.”

Aha! That was something Eulalie could finally latch onto! Should she beat around the bush a bit? Some people preferred that. Then again, Sofia looked tired and would probably just be annoyed.

“Except I don’t want to be the Head Librarian.”

“What?” It was like the breath had been knocked out of the cyclops.

Eulalie shrugged. “I like helping you and being part of the Library, but I’ve never wanted to be in charge. I’m not really a people person. My skill set is very different from yours. I would be a terrible Head Librarian.” She jerked a thumb at the rats. “And it’s not like that lot can be in charge. They’re happy to have a purpose, but this place needs someone like you who can restore it to its former glory.”

“You...don’t...want...” Sofia’s mouth opened and closed much like a fish out of water.

“Not in the slightest.” The Arachne gestured at the bank of monitors. “I’m already caught up in so many other things, and that doesn’t include being the Rat Queen. The Head Librarian isn’t just a title. It comes with so many duties that I wouldn’t know where to begin. I always figured we’d just work together until we had a few more librarians and that maybe you’d choose one of them.”

The cyclops had gone pale and was breathing fast. She mumbled something under her breath that even Eulalie couldn’t make out, then stood and walked briskly out the exit. The Arachne stared at the archway as she pulled another bit of thread from her spinnerets.

“Well...fuck,” she muttered. She was fairly certain that conversation had gone better for her than Sofia. Tapping a finger on her chin, she sighed and turned her attention back toward the computer.

Doing computer stuff was always easier than dealing with people.

Mike looked down at the table and frowned. He contemplated the playing card with a picture of a hobo spider on it, his left hand hovering over the

face-down cards spread across the table. Opposite from him, Grace stared through his soul, somehow looking back in time to his childhood and judging him even there.

“Blink, honey.” Yuki ruffled Grace’s hair. The Arachne blinked exactly once, her gaze never leaving her father’s face. Squatting next to the little girl was Abella. The gargoyle had positioned her hands beneath her chin as if in deep contemplation. In front of her was a pair of cards she had already matched in the memory game.

Mike sighed. He had no idea which card he needed and it was time to commit. *Fuck it*, he thought and chose at random.

He flipped over one of the other cards. It was, in fact, not a hobo spider. The jumping spider looked friendly enough, but his failure to match cards meant that his turn was over and the game had now circled back to his daughter.

“You’re up, kid.” He leaned back and groaned inwardly. Grace stared at him as she flipped over the hobo spider once more and then turned over its match, which had been revealed by Abella on her turn. The jumping spider was next, and its match was exactly where Reggie had found it three minutes ago.

“Bugs,” muttered the Rat King. He had three matches in front of him, his tail twitching in irritation. One by one, Grace went through the cards and matched all of them until there were four cards left. At no point did she ever look away from Mike as she promptly stomped on everyone who was playing. However, she did pause to contemplate the final cards, none of which had been flipped yet. She took a chance and failed to match the crab spider with its mate.

Reggie sighed. He flipped over one of the remaining cards, then swept the table. He held up his matched cards. He had five matches to Grace’s eight.

“I’m starting to think she may be unstoppable,” he said.

“We can blame that on Jenny,” said Mike. Now that Grace was old enough for certain games, she played with Reggie and Jenny all the time. The doll was usually cheating somehow, but Grace’s intense focus often meant she was able to bypass the doll’s exploit. Poor Reggie was usually caught in the crossfire of the battle of the titans, and Mike wondered if the extra gray hairs on the rat’s snout had come from playing with them.

“You can blame most of that on her heritage,” said Yuki as she stroked the little girl’s hair. Grace hissed with pleasure at the compliment, then picked up all the cards and started to shuffle them.

“I don’t think so,” said Reggie. “I’m fairly certain she can track them by feel.”

“Is that true, Grace?” Mike cocked his head at his daughter. In response, she pulled two cards seemingly at random and handed them over. It was a pair of jumping spiders.

“Shit,” he whispered to himself.

“I’m out,” said Reggie. “I haven’t had this much abuse since the time I got trapped in a pantry by a cat.”

“When was this?” asked Mike.

“My younger days.” Reggie smirked. “I had several adventures of my own before becoming royalty, you know.” The Rat King chuckled to himself and hopped off the table. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a warm bed and some kingly duties to attend to. Maybe I’ll sire a child who can keep up with your children, Caretaker. The numbers are in my favor, after all.”

“It’s good to be the king,” muttered Mike as he watched Reggie leave. Once the rat had gone, he looked at his daughter and laughed. Yuki had taken the cards and spread them out. Grace had already matched over half of them. “Not much of a game, now is it?”

Grace shrugged, then scooped the cards up and set them in the middle of the table. She reached up to pat Mike on the head just as Death stepped out of the office.

“It is officially eleven in the morning,” said Death as he put on a pair of safety glasses. “Which means it is time for us to show up to work.”

“What exactly are you two doing out there?” asked Mike as Grace slipped on her own glasses. Over in the corner, the lamp threw itself behind the couch and transformed into a tool chest, which rolled out into the open. “Sorry, the three of you.”

“Mostly standing around,” said Death as he walked to the front door. “Oh, wait!” The Reaper ran into the office and returned with a thermos. “Don’t want to

forget my soup,” he said as Grace opened the front door and held it for Tick Tock. Once the trio was through, the door clicked shut.

“They’re up to something,” said Yuki. “I’d bet one of my tails on it.”

“They’re going to hang some chimes,” said Abella with a grin. “Death and Grace picked out some spots to hang them. Her job is to string up the chimes themselves with her webs. I think it’s a good idea. It’ll keep Grace busy while Tink is out.”

Mike sighed. He was happy that the Reaper had taken it upon himself to keep Grace’s hours occupied, but how long would he have to do so?

“Enough of that.” Yuki picked up a card and tossed it playfully at him. “Doom and gloom looks awful on you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He picked up the card and set it back on the pile.

“Do you think Sofia has read that journal yet?” Abella looked at him hungrily. “Because if she’s not going to be by until later, I can think of a fun way to occupy—”

There was a clunking sound, followed by a book being set on a wooden shelf. Sofia walked out of the office. Mike noticed immediately how tired she looked, and how red her eye was. Had she been crying?

“Looks like my date is here,” he said. When he rose, Abella playfully clutched at his hand, as if trying to hold him down.

“Call me,” she whispered with a wink. The gargoyle stood and walked slowly toward the front door of the house, careful not to destroy the floorboards. The door opened as if by magic, allowing Abella to step outside. Cecilia briefly appeared, then gave the door a gentle push shut before fading from sight.

“So did you get a chance to...” Mike’s voice trailed off as Sofia ignored him to walk through the dining room and into the kitchen.

“Looks like somebody is still struggling.” Yuki rose and adjusted her kimono. “Maybe I should give her my therapist’s number.”

“Perhaps, but...” Mike winced when he heard a cabinet door in the kitchen slam. “Do it tactfully?”

Yuki laughed. "I don't want cyclops spit in *my* food." She headed for the stairs. "Send me a text if our little construction worker circles back around."

Mike nodded, then headed for the kitchen. He stepped inside to the rhythmic sound of a knife's edge knocking against the wooden grain of a cutting board. Sofia had already pulled several vegetables from the fridge and pantry and was frantically chopping them. Knowing better than to startle a woman holding a knife, he stepped up beside her to make his presence known before speaking.

"Hey," he said. Sofia grunted in response, but said nothing else. The late morning sunlight occasionally glinted off the edge of the knife as she chopped, creating a hypnotic pattern.

Mike debated asking her what was up, or if she wanted to talk about it. However, it was obviously related to whatever issue was constantly plaguing her. Talking about it clearly hadn't helped the cyclops. He wasn't often at a loss for words with his various housemates, but the cyclops was different. Sofia didn't technically live with them, despite her constant presence in the kitchen. Maybe part of the issue was neglect? Did she feel taken advantage of? Or was it a Library problem? If he didn't know better, he was starting to think Sofia was on the edge of a mid-life crisis, one that couldn't be fixed with the purchase of a new sports car.

"Would you like some help?" he asked. Sofia actually paused for a moment, then nodded and slid a beet toward him.

"You can peel that," she said.

"Sure thing." He picked up the beet and paused. "Wait, is this the one I should wear gloves for?"

"You don't have to," she said. "But it will turn your hands red."

Mike chuckled as he opened a drawer to reveal boxes of nitrile gloves. Available in all sizes, he pulled some large ones from the box and slid them onto his hands.

"You seem overly pleased," Sofia muttered.

"That's because I look like a professional now." Mike flexed his hands inside the gloves. "All I need is a chef jacket and toque people will think I know what I'm doing."

Sofia scoffed, but the corner of her mouth briefly lifted.

"So what are we making?" Mike pulled a peeler from the drawer. "I remember you once made a summer salad that was quite delightful."

"That would be the one that Grace fed to the rats under the table." Sofia smirked again. "However, I remember Callisto eating thirds."

"Centaur love their veggies." Mike laughed. "Though he still gets pissed if you offer him a carrot." He had learned the hard way that centaurs could offer other centaurs carrots, but when he did it, it was considered extremely offensive. Human and centaur cultures rarely overlapped while the centaurs had been on Earth, but mankind had been very efficient at being maximum assholes while it occurred.

"We're making borscht." Sofia looked at him as she expertly chopped an onion. Her eye flickered more than once, causing her to change the angle of her knife at the last second. "The nights are getting cooler. I thought soup would be nice."

"Soup is always good," Mike said. "Vastly underrated. A good soup fills you up physically and spiritually. That's why restaurants charge so much for it. They'd rather feed you the cheap crap that makes you miserable."

"Are you buttering me up?" Sofia glared at him.

"I'm just being honest," Mike protested. "But if that happens to butter your roll, well...then I guess I'm guilty."

Sofia snorted, then scooped her chopped onion into a bowl. "As long as you aren't trying to make me feel better, I'll give you a pass."

Mike took a deep breath, then let it out. It was clear that Sofia would bring up today's issue when she was ready. "So what are we making with borscht?"

"Bread," she replied. "Well, not us. There's a wonderful bakery in France that makes a delightful black bread that will pair nicely with this."

"I'm looking forward to it." Mike concentrated on peeling the beet. While his own danger sense might prevent him from slicing his hands, he definitely didn't have Sofia's precision or culinary technique. That, and slicing the tip of his finger off wasn't exactly life threatening. The two of them became quiet as they

peeled and chopped veggies, then tossed them into a large pot. It was almost an hour of reserved silence, but he could feel Sofia relax as she did it.

They were near the end of their meal prep when Sofia turned toward him. "So I read through the journal last night," she said.

"And?" Mike looked at her expectantly. "What are we dealing with?"

Sofia sighed. "I'm not entirely sure," she admitted. "There was no smoking gun, not that I noticed, anyway. Charles was part of one of the wealthier families that moved to London from France, so a bunch of what was in there was just the ramblings of a man in his twenties."

"Damn. So he wasn't part of a cult or anything?"

"He was not. But..." Sofia paused and set aside her knife. "There was quite the obsession with a young man who lived nearby. Charles grew up with him and his sister, Eloise. The three of them were rather inseparable."

"Hmm." Mike peeled off his gloves and tossed them in the trash. "I hardly feel like that justifies attaching a malevolent entity to the journal to kill anyone before they could read it."

Sofia shrugged. "It wouldn't be the first time someone got murdered in order to hide the perpetrator's sexuality."

"Noted."

"I did, however, look up Charles' history. Turns out he didn't really do anything. Grew older, got married, then failed to father any children before dying. His spouse had a minor scandal involving a younger man, but that was it. The contents of the book were hardly salacious."

"So, you don't think he's the one who stuck the wraith to it." Mike leaned against the counter. "Then who did it and why? On a whim?"

Sofia smiled. "You would think so, but I need you to remember that this book got sorted because it met our search criteria. Specifically, the mention of prolonging life."

Mike perked up. "And?"

Sofia tossed the last of the veggies into the pot. "Okay, let me give you some background. Charles was infatuated with Gerard, and Eloise was Gerard's

twin. As they grew older, Eloise fell victim to a rare debilitating blood disorder. It sounds like Gerard became obsessed with pursuing treatment."

"So a quest not unlike my own."

"Correct. Unlike our issue, Eloise was very sickly throughout her childhood and early teens. However, during the summer of this journal's creation, suddenly Eloise became healthier, unexpectedly so. Charles was thrilled. Not only did this mean Gerard had more time for Charles, but the sister was now spending more time with both of them as well. Charles even fantasized about marrying Eloise and starting a secret relationship with her brother, if possible."

"Was Gerard even interested in Charles?"

Sofia shrugged. "Charles seems to think so, but he is not a reliable narrator. Anyway, the focus of the story changes rapidly right around the fall. The year was 1888."

Sofia stared at Mike knowingly. He just sat and waited, completely oblivious to what should have been a grand revelation.

"Really, Mike? Don't they teach you anything in those schools of yours?"

Mike shrugged. "The mitochondria is the powerhouse of--"

Sofia picked up a tomato chunk and flicked it at him, striking him on the cheek just under his eye. Mike tried to flick it back at her, but she had already armed herself with another tomato.

For several long seconds, they stared each other down. A broad smile grew across Sofia's face before she playfully tossed the tomato chunk into the sink.

"It would be fun," she admitted. "But very messy."

"You're right." Mike tossed his piece in the sink as well. "We'd be the poor suckers who would have to clean it up."

"I can think of worse fates." Sofia's tone became serious. "The fall of 1888 was the year Jack the Ripper appeared."

"Oh." Mike frowned. "Wait, wasn't the book--"

"Bound in human skin? Yes." Sofia leaned down to wash her hands in the sink. When she was finished, she dried her hands on a towel and started fiddling

with her braid. "However, that's not the original cover. Someone got a hold of this journal after it was written and re-bound it in skin."

"But why?"

"Why indeed?" Sofia smiled and leaned against the counter. With the light coming through the window behind her, it almost looked like she was glowing. "Ratu has the book right now. I sent it to her last night. My best guess is that the skin was part of the wraith's binding process. So the real mystery now is if the wraith was the trap of a psychopath or--"

"There's something in there we weren't meant to see." Mike let out a deep breath. What sort of knowledge would be worth protecting like that? "Okay, so our guy is writing his journal while Jack the Ripper is running around town. You don't suppose..."

Sofia raised an eyebrow. "That our mystery binder may be related? Could be. Then again, Jack wasn't the only one killing women in that region. The primary controversy surrounding the Ripper is how many victims were actually his. Many scholars suspect that at least one copycat killer was operating at the time. Perhaps this book is Jack's work. Then again, our bookbinder may have used the slayings to take a victim of his own. Or perhaps it isn't related at all. We don't know when the book was rebound, after all. In fact, the killings are mentioned, but Charles treats them as dreadful news rather than something to be excited over."

Mike nodded. "Yeah, that probably would have been too convenient."

"But we can't immediately discount the relationship, either. You see, Eloise begins having these terrible episodes, at which time Gerard takes a renewed interest in her condition. Jack the Ripper seemed quite intrigued with female anatomy. Maybe Gerard himself was the Ripper, pursuing dark ends to prolong his sister's life."

"So we're back to thinking this book involves Jack the Ripper?"

Sofia laughed. "Honestly, I don't think so. But the parallels are there, and you should be aware of them. Anyway, Charles becomes very distraught when the love of his life no longer has any time to spend with him. Their story together ends when Gerard tells Charles that he is taking his sister somewhere safe, a place where she can be cured."

Mike's heart thudded loudly in his chest. "Where is that place?"

"Charles doesn't say. However, Ratu thinks she may have the solution for that, if you can peel her away from her most recent project."

"The lamia statue."

"Correct. You should probably pay her a personal visit real soon and make sure she doesn't have tunnel vision." Sofia's smile faded. "Before I forget, I need to say something to you."

"I'm listening."

"You saved my life yesterday." Sofia gazed deep into his eyes. "I know I haven't exactly been pleasant to be around. I'll also admit that my life isn't going the way I thought it would. But when that ... thing came for me, I realized that there are still plenty of opportunities I want to live for. And maybe it's stupid, but ... when you stepped in and saved my life, it felt like I actually matter to you."

Mike's jaw dropped. "Of course you matter to me," he said. "Why would you think otherwise?"

"I'm not like the others, Mike. I can't give you children. I'm not good at emotional support. I'm just ... old. Old and tired. I'm the person who cooks meals and loans out books. I don't even live here."

"You're so much more than that, though."

"I want to believe you," she said, then sighed. "But that's a me problem. One that I need to figure out for myself." Sofia fiddled with the end of her braid, then threw it back over her shoulder. "Anyway, thanks for helping with meal prep. You should probably go see Ratu."

"I'm still willing to help." Mike opened the glove drawer. "I can always put on new gloves."

Sofia laughed. "If you don't mind, I'd kind of like to be alone. Lose myself in searing some meat. There are some other things I need to think about."

"Okay." Mike put his hand on top of Sofia's. It always surprised him how big her palms were. "You matter. Not just to me, but to the others also."

"Do I, though?" Sofia groaned. "Ignore that. I'm still not in a great frame of mind is all."

Mike nodded. He understood that feeling. How she felt now kind of summed up his early twenties. He pretty much had walked around in a fog of anxiety and depression which had come to an end the night he had inherited this house and swapped soul pieces with a nymph. Sadly, he didn't think a bath with Naia would fix her issue, but it would probably be hot as fuck to see.

"I'll see you at dinner?" Mike curled his fingers around Sofia's. "If you're feeling underappreciated, maybe you should stick around so that the others have a chance to spend more time with you."

The cyclops stared at his hand for a few seconds, then shrugged. "Perhaps." A weak smile crossed her face. "I'll try," she added.

"That's my girl." He patted her affectionately on the hip and gave her a brief hug. As he stepped out of the kitchen, he looked back to see that she was staring out the window, lost in her own thoughts.

Damn, he thought to himself. Why couldn't any of his problems this week be fixed by punching somebody in the face? He could outsource that. His house had no shortage of women who were happy to punch somebody in the face for him.

That thought immediately reminded him of Tink. His mood shifted and he quickened his pace toward the laundry room. Other than a washer and dryer that saw very little use because Naia could clean and dry things within seconds, there were a pair of portals chewed into the walls. One went straight to Di's lair in Hawaii. The other took him to the center of the Labyrinth.

He opened the makeshift door on the Labyrinth portal and stepped through. The temperature and humidity changed immediately, causing gooseflesh to rise across his arms. He stood at the base of a miniature pagoda which stood perhaps twenty feet high. Mike paused just long enough to knock on the door, then walked inside.

The interior of the pagoda was much taller than the outside. The building was a dimensional pocket, far bigger on the inside than the outside. Mike walked beside the ramp that ran along the inside of the exterior walls, his ambient magic causing the crystalline lights embedded in the wall to brighten temporarily. He sent a small pulse into them as he passed, changing them from orange to purple. Mike had learned long ago that the crystals functioned much like LEDs did. His own magic had frequencies he could experiment with. Ratu had cautioned him

not to experiment too much without either herself or Yuki present to avoid blowing himself up.

Roughly three levels up, Mike heard muttering through one of the doorways. He turned the corner to see Ratu standing in a room with a table in the center. The lamia statue was floating above the table, the pieces rotating independently of each other. The edges of the broken statue glowed bright, changing from orange to green and then back again.

Ratu stood with her hand curled beneath her chin, contemplating the statue. Instead of a kimono, she was wearing a white cotton chest wrap with matching underwear. All along her skin, her scales shimmered and shifted, catching the light like uncut gemstones.

“This is new,” he said. “What’s with the outfit?”

Ratu turned her head slightly and raised a single eyebrow. “I’m trying to limit interference from my clothing. The dimensional pockets I’ve woven into the sleeves were causing false positives during my tests. Hence, I was forced to dress minimally.”

“Why wear clothes at all?” he asked. “This is your home.”

“Decorum, mainly.” The naga smirked. “I never know who is going to drop by.”

“Uh huh.” He moved next to the table and stared at the busted statue. “Any answers yet?”

She shook her head. “Only more questions, really. Based on preliminary tests, I’m starting to wonder if the lamia was actually trapped inside the statue.”

“Um...” Mike scratched his chin. “What are the alternatives?”

“Most troubling would be the idea that the lamia was somehow created by the magic residing in this vessel. That would be the sort of magic you would find in the Grimoire.” Ratu gestured at the glowing edges of the statue. “My current hypothesis is that the lamia wasn’t stored within the vessel, but perhaps in some other sort of extradimensional space. The statue was like a tether, with the breakage being the trigger.”

“I don’t follow. Why would the extra dimensional space location matter?”

“Think of it like the greenhouse. That space exists within the greenhouse itself. The wardrobe, however, is a portal to a pocket world. Originally, I thought this statue was like the greenhouse. Now I wonder if it is more like the wardrobe.”

Mike nodded. “So I understand the difference, but you haven’t explained why that matters.”

“Mmh. Right.” Ratu scrunched up her face. “The enchantment on the statue is self-contained if the creature was stored inside. The magic is isolated. However, if the lamia came from someplace else, it means that it came from ... outside, for lack of a better term. If that’s the case, there’s a good chance that whoever created this thing knows we opened it, and that the lamia came here. For a brief moment, the inside of your home was breached by an outside entity without your permission.”

“That’s not the first time that’s happened,” Mike said. “Lily was able to break in when the Society got my blood. They used blood magic to sic her on me, which was able to bypass the geas. I’ll also point out that the geas wasn’t nearly as strong then. Who knows what loopholes we’ve already closed since then?”

Ratu studied Mike for a moment. “I’m not interested in old loopholes. I want to know about this one. This statue sat in your home, like a ticking bomb. Mike, if this thing is hooked to an external location, it isn’t something that we would have found in our sweep of dangerous objects. It had a magical aura of a benign nature. Well, benign being in the eye of the beholder, anyway. I wouldn’t have given it a second thought.”

“So you think there are others like it?”

“I’m not sure.” The naga sighed. “Maybe I’m just paranoid. Something about this statue is really bothering me. If I can at least recreate the magical signature before it was broken, I can go through the house and see if there’s anything else containing a potentially deadly surprise.”

“That sounds like quite the task.” Mike shivered at the idea that his home may contain more creatures like the lamia. “Should we just do a purge? Toss out anything we know nothing about?”

Ratu shook her head. “At my most paranoid, the creator of this statue, should they still live, knows that the lamia was freed. For all we know, they have a direct link to anything else that may be here. If we started tossing out their trojan objects, they may choose to activate all of them. It would be better to do a

coordinated disposal after identifying them. However, that is an issue for another day. You are here about the diary.”

The naga led him up one floor, and then into another room. This one was more academic in nature, with books and scrolls lining the wall. Mike shivered at the memory of the Restricted Section, then noticed that the skin covered diary was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room inside of a massive sigil that had been drawn on the floor.

Over in the corner, Opal sat in a chair while reading on a tablet. She was wearing a translucent outfit that looked like it had been cut from a raincoat that kept her from sticking to the furniture. Upon Mike’s entry, she looked up from her book and smiled.

I was wondering when you would be here, she signed.

“To clarify,” he replied, “I’m here on business, not to feed you.”

Prude. Though Opal seemed disappointed, she happily tucked back into her book.

“I left her in here to make sure this thing doesn’t have any more surprises for us.” Ratu walked to the edge of the sigil on the floor. “Though after what I’ve heard, it sounds like you’re the one full of surprises.”

“You know me. Always full of…” He trailed off when he noticed Ratu giving him an odd look. “What?”

“This book contained a spiritual construct. A wraith, or whatever enigmatic name you prefer.” Ratu put her hand on his chest. “Which you apparently defeated by ripping out its soul.”

“Now, hold on. I didn’t rip out its soul.” Mike waved his hands in self defense. “That thing certainly wasn’t alive. It was kind of like that lamia, actually. Someone built it out of spare parts and I yanked out the piece that mattered most.”

“I see.” Her serpentine eyes studied him for several long seconds. “Out of curiosity, what if I was trying to kill you? Or someone else? Would you have done the same to me? Reached in and grabbed my soul?”

“I…um…” He swallowed the lump in his throat. “I don’t know,” he admitted. A soul wasn’t just a piece of someone, it was who they were. Damaging

it could change them on a fundamental level, or maybe even kill them. Still, if it meant saving a life... "It's something I've wondered about, more than once. I'm not even sure I could do it to something with an actual soul."

The naga moved closer. "You can see my soul, yes?"

Mike nodded. Right now, her soul was like a swirling fractal made of scales and fire. "It's taken some getting used to," he admitted. "But I see magic and spirits almost full time now." Keeping his senses open full time not only strengthened his skills, but was a super power of its own. Reading someone's intent was also a handy skill, but he had also used it more than once to navigate the house while the lights were off. His whole home was magic, he could navigate it with his eyes closed this way. The practice would likely end once one of his children started playing with Legos. He sincerely doubted the little building blocks would register in his soul sight, or whatever he was calling it these days.

"I'm curious. You have a derivation of Naia's gift involving souls, and I wonder if you could touch mine. Yuki once described at length the ordeal involving Freya, and I wonder if you've become even stronger, more precise."

"You want me to touch your soul?"

"For academic purposes." She smiled. "It would help me understand your abilities just a little bit more. Such an ability can cause great harm, but perhaps it can also do some good."

"How do you figure?"

Ratu snorted. "As you are aware, I am currently stuck on a solution for Dana's problem. Her soul has been woven into the very essence of her flesh. Perhaps as you grow stronger, it is something you could fix for her."

"Oh." That was something Mike hadn't really considered.

"Oh, indeed." Ratu licked her lips. "So go on. Touch it. Maybe give it a little push. Let's see what we can learn from each other."

Although feeling uncertain about the naga's request, Mike decided to indulge her curiosity. He reached his hand out and concentrated on the swirling mass of her essence that shifted all around her. Heatless flames curled around his fingers as her soul flowed through his flesh. It was almost like he could feel who she was through his fingers alone.

“And?” she asked.

“It’s kind of hard to explain,” he replied. “But you feel very different than how the wraith did. You’re all warm, even though it feels like it’s all in my head.”

Ratu snorted. “Just what every woman wants to hear. Now, if you wouldn’t mind, could you interact with it?”

“Just what every man wants to hear.” Mike laughed when Ratu stuck out her tongue, the forked tip flickering before disappearing back between her lips. When he ran his fingers across her soul, the naga let out a sigh.

“It kind of feels like I’m sitting in a sunbeam,” she said. “It’s quite pleasant. What are you doing?”

“Being gentle, honestly.” When he pushed on her soul, it rippled much like a pond.

“This is really nice.” Ratu shrugged her shoulders and sighed. “Would you try pulling on it?”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“I know you’ll be gentle,” she replied.

Feeling unsure, Mike found a strand of her soul and wrapped his finger around it. He moved slowly, separating the thread away from the rest of her soul. Immediately, Ratu’s face went pale, her eyes bulging out of her head. Scales rippled all across her body as she shuddered, then pushed him away. Mike released her soul immediately, and the naga bent forward to dry heave.

“Are you okay?” he asked, worried. “Did I hurt you?”

“I’m fine,” she gasped, then coughed. “But I think we’ll avoid messing around with my soul from now on, if you don’t mind.”

Feeling guilty, Mike stepped back and looked around the room. In the corner, Opal made eye contact with him.

You warned her, she signed. This is on her.

Mike nodded, but still felt really bad about it. The naga put a hand to her chest and gasped for air a few times, then cleared her throat. She winced and looked his way.

“Let’s talk about this book.” She gestured at the diary. “Sofia spent some time reading it last night before handing it over to me. I studied it for a while and compared it to the notes she left me.”

“Based on what she said, the notes aren’t really helpful.”

“Sofia is a Librarian and not an enchantress.” Recomposing herself, Ratu moved to the edge of the sigil. “This book has two separate stories. The one written inside and the one involving why it was covered in human skin and bound to a malevolent spirit. I believe I’ve stumbled onto the answer.”

“You have?” Mike didn’t dare get his hopes up.

“Yes. You see, while I was flipping through the book, I spotted a message at the end.” Ratu pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to Mike. “I took the liberty of copying it down in English. I’d prefer not to open that book up again just yet.”

“But it’s safe now, right?” Mike took the slip of paper. “That...thing got destroyed.”

“Indeed it did, but you should know better than anyone not to underestimate what magic is capable of.” Ratu rubbed at her sternum with a frown. “Look at the paper.”

Mike turned his attention to the slip of paper in his hand.

My dearest C,

Come find me

~G

“G? As in Gerard?” Mike frowned. “That’s the name of the brother, the guy who took his sister away.”

“It is.”

“How did Sofia miss this?”

The naga chuckled and walked over to the side of the room where she had a pot of tea on a jewel-encrusted platter. He watched her send a stream of fire mana into the pot, which spat out some steam. She poured herself a cup, followed by two more. Mike watched with interest as she took one of the cups over to

Opal. The slime girl accepted the cup, then sprouted a third arm briefly to sign *Thank you*.

“It was written in the back of the book, after several passages of Charles pining for his lost...friend.” Ratu chuckled. “I suspect these men may have been in love but had never been afforded the opportunity to pursue each other properly.”

“That makes sense, but...” Mike accepted a cup of tea from Ratu. “Thank you. So if Gerard wrote that in the back of the book, it means he got ahold of it after it was written. Is he the one who enchanted it?”

“I’m not sure. However, this becomes the story of the book, does it not?” Ratu arched an eyebrow and sipped at her tea. “Two men in love, one takes his sister to a mysterious location to cure her maladies. Some time later, Gerard gets ahold of this journal and sees how his friend pines for him. Allow me to posit a theory.”

“Posit away.”

“That wraith you encountered was never intended to be malevolent, not in the way you and Sofia believe. The book was trying to escape the Library, but why? To feast on others? To pursue a sinister end? I don’t think so.” Ratu turned to look at the book. “I think the wraith’s purpose was to deliver a message to Charles.”

“How do you figure? What message?”

“Find me.” Ratu smirked. “Think about it. That wraith was able to generate a pocket reality based on nearby books. I believe that the wraith was a messenger, but it realized that you and Sofia were definitely not the intended recipient. That is the real reason it tried to kill you. The message, ‘come find me’ was meant for Charles, and was written there by Gerard as part of the magic. The wraith’s job was to give Charles directions in how to do just that.”

“Wow, that’s...” Mike had been about to say great, but realized what this actually meant. “Shit. I destroyed the message, didn’t I?”

“Perhaps.” Ratu walked back over to the tea table and pulled out a vial from a drawer beneath it. “I collected some of the remnants of the wraith from the Library. I firmly believe that between the two of us, we may be able to ferret out the information we need. The fact that so much work was done to keep this

information hidden from anyone but Charles leads me to believe that this secret was worth keeping, ergo, it's one we should look into."

"I agree." Mike sipped at his tea. "Oh, that's nice. I don't think I've had it before."

"Death gave it to me. He picked it up at some roadside stand during his...walkabout. Pairs perfectly with almond milk. I had some biscuits up here that went with it, but they've gone missing."

In the corner, Opal put a hand to her mouth and made a squelching sound, followed by bubbles that rose across her body. Mike noticed a couple of crumbly bits that rode the bubbles to the top but sank back into her core.

"So how do we do this?" asked Mike. "Find the message that this Gerard left for Charles?"

"Between these remains, my magic, and your ability to manipulate souls and spirits, I think we may be able to briefly recreate the message. Think of it like running electricity through a corpse."

Mike frowned and set down his tea. "I'm guessing you've got this all ready to begin?"

Ratu nodded. "There's a really good chance that we only get one shot at this. That diary will act as a conduit for the spell I intend on performing, and it's likely that we will destroy it in the process."

"One shot, huh? Just tell me what I need to do."

"First, we finish our tea. I would like some extra time to...prepare myself." Ratu rubbed her chest again for emphasis. "Out of curiosity...never mind."

"What?"

"No, really. Never mind." Ratu fixed him with a hard stare. "I don't think I want to know the answer, yet."

Mike nodded, then sat in silence while the two of them finished their tea. Opal had already emptied her teacup, and a little sloshing ball of tea floated around in her belly. Eventually, the naga set down her empty teacup and moved to a corner of the room where one of her kimonos hung beneath a serpent-shaped hook. She slid her arms into it, then held them up as the belt tied itself around her

waist. After doing a cursory check of her sleeves, she moved next to him and studied the sigil on the ground.

“I will manifest the spellform,” she said, then held up the vial. “Once I’m ready, I will open this vial and pour it into the sigil. Your job is to force mana through the remains in an attempt to mimic the spiritual energy that was once there.”

“Right.” In truth, Mike wasn’t entirely certain how to do this, but would give it his best effort. It was easy enough to picture the writhing, malevolent energy that had been flowing through the wraith.

Ratu began the spell, the ground glowing with arcane energy. Opal set down her book and watched in fascination, her translucent eyes gleaming with magical light. The diary lifted into the air as if held aloft by a string, then opened its pages. The ink inside the book ran like blood, forming into thick beads along the edges until it dripped like a leaking faucet. On the ground, the ink formed into a secondary sigil drawn by the diary itself.

“Now,” muttered Ratu, uncorking the vial and pouring it. Mike grabbed the mana of the spell and stretched it wide into a net, then wrapped it around the remains of the wraith. The dark fluid bubbled angrily as Mike fed his own magic into the spell, then pressed the mana into the wraith. The dark liquid grew spikes that extended along the magical network of strings Mike had assembled, then stretched out and formed into a clawed hand.

“It can’t get out,” whispered Ratu, her eyes glowing as she maintained her concentration. She was now drawing runes in the air that drifted away to form a band of energy around the spell. “But try not to let it disturb the diary.”

“Understood.” Mike forced more mana into the wraith, picturing braided energy that spiraled through its core. The spirit reassembled itself, but looked like a balloon that had been repeatedly deflated. Malevolent eyes glowed dimly, and there was no obscene intelligence lurking behind them. The creature was little more than a toy that Mike had plugged the batteries back into.

“Good,” said Ratu. The diary continued pouring out ink, the pages fluttering until they were now at the back of the book. Mike could see an inscription glowing with golden letters. “This thing was able to recreate scenes from a book. Now it’s time for us to see the scene it was supposed to deliver.”

The wraith's eyes changed color, matching the golden light of the inscription. It stretched wide, blurring out as the diary disappeared and a man sitting at a desk appeared in the middle of the sigil. He was speaking as he wrote, but no sound came from his lips.

"What's he saying?" asked Mike.

"No idea." Ratu frowned. "I'm not sure if this is a limitation of his spell or the result of the wraith being dead."

The man flickered and started writing in reverse. A moment later, he was standing from the seat, then sitting back down.

"I'm guessing damage," Mike muttered as sweat poured down his forehead. His magic had never been intended for playing back VHS movies of the damned, and he was already getting tired.

"Damn." Fire formed around Ratu's fingertips as the image cracked around the edges. "We're losing it."

"C'mon," whispered Mike, looking at the man in the playback. The figure briefly looked up, revealing a face with sharp features and a cruel smile. The man finished writing the inscription as he spoke, then rose from his seat and walked toward the two of them. The image fluttered briefly between full color and black and white as white lines formed through the scene.

"He's saying something about their summer together." Ratu cocked her head to one side. "It's hard to read his lips, his movements are all jerky and he's speaking French."

"You speak French?"

"I've been around long enough that I speak lots of things. Don't distract me."

"Sorry." They watched as the man got stuck in another loop where he would say something and shrug. Mike's shirt was soaked with sweat now, and he could feel it dripping down his back. The core of his magic was now wrapped up around the figure in the center of the scene, as if the specter itself was draining Mike of his energy. "I assume that's Gerard."

Ratu didn't respond. Her eyes had taken on an eerie green glow that obscured her irises and her tongue was flicking out rapidly. Her cheeks puffed in and out with the exertion of each breath.

"C'mon, you bastard, spill." Mike's left eyelid spasmed as he kept his eyes on the scene. "What was so important that you needed to give this book the power to kill?"

Gerard suddenly became animated, and the lighting of the scene shifted enough that Mike could almost make out the words he was saying.

"...we...special time...more than..." Ratu grunted between words as mana swirled all around her. "Come...together...bring..."

The scene suddenly filled with color, then shifted slightly so that Gerard was looking directly at Ratu. The man grinned and held out a hand as if beckoning to a lover.

"Come, Charles. Mortal life is fleeting." Ratu's eyes flickered as she studied the man's face. "Death doesn't have to be the end. Let us embrace immortality together." Gerard stepped away from the desk and walked across the room he had been sitting in. The scene flickered again, and the color drained onto the floor into a crimson pool. The sigils below flared brightly as they broke apart.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Mike forced the rest of his magic into the spell, his eyes blurring from the effort. Ratu hissed, her aura rippling and fading. Gerard's features blurred as if he was made of paint that had become smeared.

Heart racing, Mike grabbed the edges of the scene with his magic and clamped down on it. The scene shifted back to a normal resolution as Gerard stepped outside of the building and pointed to a structure in the distance. Moving on instinct, Mike immediately pulled his cellphone out and snapped some pictures moments before the scene exploded.

Ink went everywhere, coating both Mike and Ratu. In the corner, Opal's dark blue surface burned red for a moment as she destroyed the ink that had struck her body. Both sigils had been destroyed. In the center of the room, the diary crumbled to ash, the remnants caught by an unseen breeze and carried up into the air.

"That went poorly." Ratu wiped the ink off her face. "I don't think we got anything of value."

“Maybe not.” Mike looked at the cellphone in his hands. “But I did get some pictures of that building. I bet Eulalie may be able to help us find it. If she can’t, there are people online who specialize in geolocation.”

“I hope so.” Ratu looked at him. “This room is going to take forever to clean.”

“Sorry about that.”

The naga shrugged. “No matter. Come. We should probably wash up. I can’t imagine this substance is good for our skin.” She inscribed a rune in the air, causing a small closet to open in the corner of the room. Mops and rags emerged, moving methodically across the floor as they scoured it clean.

Ratu led Mike up the pavilion to her private quarters with Opal on their heels. A massive bed capable of holding Ratu in one of her snake forms lay just beyond a small pond. The naga stripped off her clothes and got in the water, then turned and beckoned to Mike. Her breasts briefly emerged from the water as she bobbed up and down.

“Wash my back?” She winked at him.

“Only if you wash mine.” Mike set his phone aside and stripped off all of his clothes. He inspected the ink that had soaked through his pants and frowned. “Do you think this will come out?” he asked.

“Honestly, I would just burn those.” The naga scowled. “I hate to lose one of my kimonos, but worry about potential contamination. Dark magic was used to create that journal, after all.”

“That’s fair.” Mike bid his clothing a final goodbye, set his phone on a nearby table, and then joined Ratu in the bath. He was soon followed by Opal, who burred happily as she vanished beneath the water.

The two of them dunked themselves several times to get the ink out of their hair. Ratu moved to the side of the pond where she opened a container with a thick, paste-like substance inside. She started scrubbing it into her hair when Mike moved behind her and scooped some into his hand.

“Shampoo?” he asked.

“Sort of. It’s a special formula I use.” She turned to face him, her breasts brushing against his chest. “It works on hair and scales.”

Mike ran it through his own hair and started a good lather. Ratu moved behind him and put her hands on his shoulders to pull him onto his back. He was now lying on her chest as the two of them floated in the pond. His legs brushed against her body, and he realized she had transformed her lower half into a snake and was holding both of them above the water.

“Allow me,” she said, then ran her fingers through his hair. Mike closed his eyes and sighed, soaking in the heat of the water along with the slow, rhythmic sensation of fingers moving through his hair. When she was done washing his hair, she pushed him up and laid on her back to allow him to do the same for her.

It wasn’t an equal trade by any means, but Mike didn’t mind. He spent the better part of an hour slowly running his fingers through her long, waist-length tresses. The suds turned into bubbles which floated away from them to collect along the edges of the pond in a froth. Once her hair was clean, Ratu twisted it up and produced a pair of sticks to pin it in place above her head.

The two of them took turns scrubbing each other off. The dark stains on their skin slowly broke up and disappeared in the water. Mike used a pumice stone to scrub the scales between Ratu’s shoulder blades, an action that elicited several sighs of contentment. Beneath them, Opal occasionally tickled at his feet, but otherwise left them alone.

Once they were clean, they moved to the edge of the pond and sat there with Mike holding Ratu from behind. His hands were on Ratu’s stomach with her hands on top of his.

“How are you feeling?” Ratu tilted her head to one side to look up at him.

“Tired,” he admitted. “That whole spell took it out of me.”

She nodded. “I figured as much. Your magic is quite powerful, but has requirements. It drains you when you do not meet them.”

“That it does.”

“I’m sort of surprised you haven’t made a move on me.”

Mike chuckled. “I wasn’t getting that vibe off of you. Sometimes, it’s okay to have moments like these, and nothing comes of it. I’m more surprised Opal hasn’t made a move on either of us.”

“I’ve been keeping her well fed.” Ratu grinned. “It is a bit embarrassing to admit it, but I sometimes let her feed from me while I’m in my bigger form. It not only provides her more sustenance, but my orgasms feel very different when I’m forty feet long.”

“I hadn’t even thought of that.”

Ratu shrugged. “Naga breed regardless of form. Since we can match each other’s bodies, we don’t see it as odd by any means. In all honesty, it’s the only limitation of our own relationship. Now, if you could somehow acquire the ability to transform yourself...” She playfully tickled his side.

“I mean...huh.” Mike was suddenly contemplative. “Do you think I could have acquired that ability from you?”

“Because of the soul swap?” The naga pulled away from him so that they were facing each other. “I don’t know, but have wondered. What determines the trait or ability you inherit? To my knowledge, it isn’t something you think about.”

“But what if I did?” If he were to concentrate on what he wanted out of the soul swap, could he choose what he got from his partner?

“I find this fascinating, academically. However, we don’t exactly have a pool of candidates right now for us to figure this out with. While you will likely have no shortage of future potential sexual partners, I don’t know that you want to establish relationships with them for the purpose of acquiring power.”

“True. But that does make me wonder. What have you acquired from me?” Mike studied the naga’s face. “I’m fairly certain I got some mastery of magic from you. Without our soul swap, it’s likely I wouldn’t be anywhere near as capable.”

“You don’t know for sure?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I wasn’t exactly keeping a list. By the time I figured out it was happening, my own magic was evolving so fast that I couldn’t keep track of it.”

“I guess I shall add it to the pile, then..” Ratu let out a small groan. “Yet another puzzle to keep me up at night. Maybe I’ll work on it after I’ve figured out the statue thing.”

“Right. Speaking of puzzles, I should get back to my own.” Mike got out of the pond and grabbed a nearby towel to dry himself. “The sooner I get those images to Eulalie, the sooner she can help me figure it out.” He moved to the table

where his phone was. After getting the pictures to Eulalie, he would have to figure out how to scrape the ink off of it, or get a new phone. He didn't like the idea that the ink was somehow dangerous after the fact, but magic was weird like that.

Opening the images tab on his phone, he studied the pictures he had managed to capture. Flipping back and forth through them, he realized that the camera had actually captured far more detail than he remembered. The structure in the distance appeared to be some sort of keep, or potentially a castle. Strangely enough, it almost seemed familiar, as if...

"Fucking hell," he muttered as he tapped on the most recent image and zoomed in. Staring at the distant building, if he were to pretend one of the towers had crumbled away, and maybe covered the outside with moss...

"Is everything okay?" Ratu had left the tub and Opal was helping her into a robe.

"No. Yes. I'm not sure. Fuck."

"What's wrong?"

"I think I know where this place is," he said as he looked up at Ratu.

"You do?" Ratu had summoned flames to dry her hair.

"If I'm right, yeah, I do." Mike scowled at his phone. The place Gerard was guiding his potential lover to was a castle built in the middle of a lake in Ireland. It was run down and abandoned, or at least the world believed it to be so. Like everything else in his life, looks were deceiving. The place was in better shape than imagined and quite haunted by entities who were very unfriendly. "I'll double check just to be sure, but...I think we might be looking at my own damned castle."

The princess and the shapeshifter walked along the edge of the Radley property, her fingers hovering just above the stone wall as she moved. The princess marveled at the quaint human dwellings. It fascinated her that they built homes of stone and wood to separate them from what remained of the nature their homes had been built upon. It was indeed the time of year for the foliage to go dormant, but she should still be able to feel the slumbering lifeforce within. At best, it was weak, a dimly lit ball of energy that had curled up in the corner, starving and weak.

A layer of segmented concrete made up a thing called a sidewalk. As if to further isolate themselves from nature, the humans had constructed an even wider composition of stone and tar called a road. The first car that had driven past her had been fascinating in shape, but atrocious in both smell and sound. She could hear the moving parts inside, squealing like trapped spirits.

“Isn’t this wonderful?” she asked, twirling in place to walk backward. The shapeshifter had taken on the appearance of a sullen man, his hands jammed in both pockets with a knit cap pulled over his brow. “The dichotomy of man and nature. The sheer amalgamation of life and death.”

The shapeshifter paused and turned its attention to the stone wall that bordered the home. “Are you talking about this thing?” It picked at one of the stones with a sharpened fingernail. The princess noticed that part of the grout broke free and fell to the ground. When she turned her attention back to where it had fallen from, the grout was still in place as if it had never been disturbed.

“What a clever enchantment,” she said, placing her hand against the rocks.

“Yes,” said the shapeshifter, mimicking her. “A dichotomy of man and nature.”

“What? No.” The princess breathed deeply, holding back her frustration. It was easy to forget that the shapeshifter was only a day old. “This property has a protective spell on it. I was referring to how the mortals shape their dwellings and neighborhoods. It’s very like humans, you see, to find somewhere special to live, drain away its resources, then dress it back up in a facade of normalcy.”

The shapeshifter regarded her carefully, then nodded. “An amalgamation of life and death.”

“That’s ... okay.” She made a mental note to keep her musings internal from now on. A shapeshifter learned best from its environment and she was polluting the simple creature’s mind with a higher order of thinking than it was capable of. “We’re almost to the entrance. I do not wish to enter with you.”

“Of course not.” The shapeshifter pulled his hands from their pockets. “I’m just out for a run, anyway. It’s something mortals do.”

The Unseelie agent pumped his arms and ran ahead of her. When he got to the opening, he turned his head to look inside, then stumbled over his feet and tripped on the curb. If a car had been coming, it would have hit him.

The princess stopped and watched the scene with a frown on her face. Eventually, the shapeshifter got up and limped away, though she knew the injury itself was a farce. Shapeshifters were hearty creatures with malleable bones. Unless torn open with a sharp edge, they were fairly resilient.

So what had startled the thing? The princess walked beneath the first stone lion and peeked around the corner. Almost immediately, she was assailed by a sound that made it feel as if knives had been driven into her ears. She gritted her teeth, eyes watering as she backed away from the opening.

Some maniac had strung up bells and wind chimes along the foliage that lined the long driveway. Worse still, someone had inserted thick wooden posts into the ground, each one topped with a chunk of poorly cut wood that acted as a ledge. A hook had been screwed into the bottom of the wood, adorned with bells on a string or a wind chime. A slight breeze caused the dangling ornaments to ring, and the princess took a step backward.

It was a defensive measure capable of thwarting most fae, but was childish in its implementation. Grinding her teeth together, the princess sent a pulse of mana outward, hoping to catch the attention of a sprite or air spirit. With her back against the stone wall surrounding the Radley Estate, the chimes were just a distant murmuring, their sound muted by the geas. After a few attempts, she caught the attention of an air spirit. The tiny entity fluttered about in confusion as she captured it with her will.

“Unhook those chimes,” she said through her teeth. A pounding sensation had formed in the back of her head. “Gather your brethren and silence all that rings in this yard.”

The spirit was clearly terrified, but left to fulfill her demands. She waited beneath the stone lion until she heard the tell-tale clatter of metal hitting the ground. After a few repetitions of this noise, she peered around the corner to see that a swarm of air spirits were busy either unhooking the chimes or holding them perfectly still.

Sniffing with disdain, she stepped around the corner and made her way up the long driveway. At the top of the hill, she saw a large gathering of humans as they managed the grounds. Her previous knowledge that these were centaurs coupled with her own fae heritage quickly dispelled the illusion, allowing her to see the grounds and its occupants as they truly existed. The yard became far larger, and the humans were now centaurs busy at work maintaining the grounds.

“Oh!” The princess paused and stared off to the side. Beautiful hedges had been planted along the driveway. Though the leaves had mostly fallen away, she could feel the spirit of the plants as they got ready to sleep for the winter. Moving in for a closer look, she knelt down and ran her fingers through the loose dirt beneath it. The land here had a steady heartbeat, one that she had only heard in her own realm.

In all the discussions regarding the Caretaker, not once had anyone ever brought up his actual care of the land. The focus had largely been on his clandestine relationships with the banshee, Cecilia. Of note, he had often engaged in intimate activities with others, but they were not Fae thus of little importance.

The princess felt eyes on her and stood. Turning her attention to a nearby tree, she saw a small, green fairy with a body like a locust regarding her with curiosity.

“Gross,” she whispered. Though the fairies who lived in this house were indeed from the Fae realm, they were considered little more than pests. These ones in particular had evolved magically to subsist off of sexual fluids, which was rather disgusting to anyone capable of managing an iota of logic.

This fairy was soon joined by a red one with compound eyes and dragonfly wings. A blue one appeared next, shaped like a beetle. A bee-colored fairy completed the quartet, the four of them now staring silently at her.

Deciding it was better to simply ignore them, she turned toward the house and glided the remaining distance. Once the driveway ended in a circle, she had a beautiful cobblestone path she could follow. All around her, the centaurs stopped their work and stared, entranced by her appearance.

“Hello.” When she spoke, she could feel the way her words caressed those listening like a lover’s hands. Mortals always had trouble resisting her presence. “I am here to—”

She was interrupted by a loud ringing sound that immediately shattered the effect of her words. Clutching at her ears, the princess turned her attention to the small Arachne girl standing by her side. It was Grace, the Caretaker’s daughter. She was holding a pair of hammers, one in each hand.

“What are you—” the princess cried out as Grace interrupted her again by smacking the hammers together. This time, she actually fell to one knee as pain burned through her head.

There was a loud thud, followed by the shuffling of stone on stone. The princess looked up to see a gargoyle glaring daggers at the Arachne child. She had already confiscated one of the hammers.

“That’s enough of that,” said Abella, the home’s guardian. She rubbed at her ears and then crossed her arms before looking at the princess. “What do you want?”

Caught off-guard, the princess cleared her throat to buy a moment. “You may call me—”

The sound of chimes ringing caused the princess to wince. She turned around to see that the four fairies from earlier were chasing each other across the yard, managing to dislodge the air spirits and allowing the wind to ring the chimes once more. The little balls of light giggled, oblivious that it was taking a massive amount of willpower from the princess to avoid blasting them apart with magic. Fairies were common enough, the Caretaker probably wouldn’t even notice if she replaced them. She suddenly remembered the lions and paled. The chimes had distracted her enough that she had forgotten about them.

Gritting her teeth, she turned her attention back to the gargoyle. the princess refused to lose focus this time. “I’ve come to—”

Pain, cold and violent, crossed between her ears as the pure, ringing sound of metal violated her thoughts. Looking down, she watched in horror as the Arachne casually shook a silver bell that was attached to a crimson ribbon.

“Wow, that sounds so pretty,” said Abella as she knelt by the child. “Where did you get that?”

“Sleighbell.” Without breaking eye contact with the princess, Grace shook the bell again. It was like a blade had been shoved into the princess’ eye, puncturing her brain. “From Santa.”

Abella frowned, then looked at the princess. “That’s so cute. You should go inside and show it to your dad.”

Grace shook the bell again and walked onto the porch. Abella cleared her throat and stared at the princess.

“Can I help you?” she asked, her posture turning aggressive. The gargoyle’s wings flexed outward, highlighting the stony musculature of her frame.

The princess wanted to reply, but couldn't. The bells and chimes were like an itch beneath her skin, the sound tunneling through her flesh and making her shiver with disgust. She couldn't concentrate, and almost asked the gargoyle to take care of the chimes. However, that would put her in debt to Abella, and she wanted to avoid any such transactions.

"I'll...come back later." The princess gave a little bow and walked back down the drive, wincing at the sound of clanging metal. When she looked back, she saw Abella standing in the same spot, her arms crossed. Past her on the porch stood the Arachne, her predatory eyes unblinking as the princess stepped beyond the boundary of the lions and back into the world of men. The little girl held up four fingers, pointed at her own eyes, then back at the princess.

What a weird fucking kid, thought the princess as she fled the Radley estate. She would have to try again once she found a way to remove all those blasted chimes.