

## Fleeting Moments

The backyard was quiet when Mike stepped out of the house sometime after lunch. Since his tryst with Beth yesterday, he had taken the completed maps she made with him to the Library, where Eulalie was busy at work digitizing them as well as making a hardcopy for his trip.

Naia sat on the edge of her fountain, quietly chatting with Sulyvahn. The dullahan turned toward Mike and gave a little wave. Nearby, at the base of the tree, Amynone's head drooped as she struggled to finish just one more book. By the looks of things, Mike knew that she would be asleep by this evening. He made a mental note to be back by this afternoon.

He smiled and waved back at Suly, thinking more on Beth's words. After Mike left the cabin and came home, the dullahan had wrapped up whatever his task was there and followed, only to wander the grounds and pretend to care for the garden. Mike was starting to think he knew what was going on, but Beth had been insistent that he put as little thought into it as possible.

Naturally, being told not to think of something made it even harder to avoid it, so Mike spent a better part of the afternoon reminiscing about all the things Beth had done to him in that shower. This had served to lure Kisa out of the Library. His familiar spent a good part of the evening in his bed, trying to work out her own frustrations that stemmed from their magical link.

That, and it gave her a break from making sure Tink stayed in bed. The goblin had made three escape attempts yesterday, all of them to find projects to work on in the Library. Sofia had busted Tink taking apart one of the floating platforms and had actually threatened to beat her with her staff after the baby came.

"What are you guys talking about?" he asked on his way to the back gate.

"Just catching up on centaur gossip." Naia grinned. "You'd be surprised how much drama happens in their village. It's like that show Abella watches."

"Um..." Mike frowned. He honestly couldn't keep track of Abella's shows. Half the time he caught her watching something, it was just porn. What was that show Tink had been watching? "*Bridgerton*?"

“Yer close.” Suly chuckled. “She’s watchin’ the one about the abbey right now.”

“I thought she watched that already.”

“I did,” called Abella from up on the roof. “And I’ll do it again!”

Mike laughed. He had actually watched a couple of episodes of that one with her. For humans, it was an interesting period piece made for entertainment. For Abella, it was sort of a part of her history, and she loved being able to finally see what went down inside someone’s home without just hearing it through the walls. *Well, at least a dramatic reenactment of it.*

“Centaur drama, huh?” Mike chuckled to himself. “Budget for a show like that would be too much, I’m sure. So...anything about Zel?”

“Nay. Yer filly is a taskmaster, but a fair one.” Suly snorted at his own joke. “But yer son has a bit of a crush on one of the girls who fletches arrows.”

Mike stopped in his tracks. That was unexpected. “How big of a crush are we talking?”

The smile slipped from Suly’s lips. “I would say innocent enough, though he did make a comment about how she was real good at handling shafts. Sounds like the boy was honestly trying to compliment her fletching, but her father didn’t care much for the remark and ran him across town.”

“Gods...damn it.” He stared off into space for a moment, thinking hard on centaur biology. They grew much faster than humans did, some reaching adulthood in only a few years. Callisto grew slower than the others due to his half-breed status, and Mike didn’t suspect that his son had hit puberty yet. He hadn’t had time to drop by the village since his son got grounded, but that was mostly due to Tink’s situation.

Mike made a mental note to drop by and speak with his son after lunch. Then maybe check in with him before leaving. With any luck, he would be gone for just a few days, but he could never be sure. During his ruminations, he caught sight of movement through one of the slats of Death’s teahouse and heard the soft clink of ceramic. “Is Death having a tea party?”

“He is,” said Naia. “We were warned not to interrupt him or he’d have to start over.”

“Oh.” Mike pulled out his phone and checked his messages. He vaguely remembered getting one from the Reaper yesterday, but had been too busy to respond. It took a moment, but he found it. “ICYMI, skull emoji and bae princess at T-House, HMU.” He frowned. It was probably Lily who had taught Death to text like this. “Who is bae?”

Naia shook her head. “I’m not sure, but he took her in there yesterday.”

Mike’s jaw dropped. His son noticing girls, *that* he understood. But Death? As far as he knew, the Grim Reaper had no interest in romance, but if they’d been doing a tea ceremony for...a whole day?

Suly cast a wary glance at the teahouse.

“Do you know who it is?” asked Mike.

“I cannae say,” said the dullahan with a sudden smirk. “I didn’a see ‘er go in.”

“Interesting.” Mike scratched his chin, then decided to let it go. If Death wanted to bring around goth groupies or whatever, he would have to trust the Reaper’s judgment. The longer Death wanted to have tea ceremonies, the less likely he was to do any more projects on the house. Somebody had already cleaned up all the windchimes out front, but the random bits of wood nailed to his home remained. “Well, I’m off to the underworld.”

“I’ll come.” Sulyvahn slid off the fountain. “Fer extra protection.”

“Of course.” Mike waited as Sulyvahn gave Naia a slight bow and kissed the back of her hand. The nymph giggled, then winked in Mike’s direction. If Sulyvahn had any sort of machinations on Mike, would she know? As the dullahan walked toward him, Mike studied his soul, or whatever passed for one in regards to the fae.

The man was hard to read. Mike didn’t know if that was because his head and body were technically two separate entities. However, he did notice flashes of golden thread along Suly’s essence. If he didn’t know better, he would assume they were tiny chains. He’d never seen them before, but had also not spent a lot of time studying Suly’s soul.

Mike pulled the key to the gate out of his pocket and slid it into the padlock. Usually Cerberus hung around the backyard, but the hellhound often got bored and would go back to their usual hunting grounds. Once the gate was open, he

stepped through and waited for Suly to follow before locking it from the other side. There was a loud thud from the opposite side of the gate as Abella landed nearby.

“See you in a bit,” said Mike as he passed the key through to her.

Abella grinned at him and folded her wings around her body. “I’ll be waiting,” she said.

Mike moved along the wall and found a small stack of hiking sticks. He picked one out and turned to hand it to Suly, but the dullahan waved him off.

“No use fer it,” he said. “Mah feet dinna tire, and my balance is on point.”

“Suit yourself.” Mike took a couple of practice swings with the stick. “I use it mainly for smacking demons. Small ones, anyway.”

“Yer not afraid of the bigger ones?”

Mike shook his head. “Not really. We’re in the Underworld. Though I have a corporeal body, my magic allows me to directly interact with spirits here. Between Cerberus keeping the place clean and my own abilities, we’d have to run into something pretty bad before I’d worry about it. Besides, I’ve also got you.”

“That ye do.” Sulyvahn grinned. “I feel like we’ve never had a proper walk together. We’re always busy workin’ on our own affairs.”

“Speaking of affairs, Beth misses you.” Mike could actually see distortions of discomfort wash through Suly’s spirit. “Care to speak to that?”

“Not much to say. I’ve got responsibilities taking up too much of my time is all.” Suly walked past Mike and picked up one of the sticks. “So whacking wee demons, eh?”

“Yep.” Mike tried not to laugh at the obvious attempt to change the topic. “The worst ones look like a cross between a frog and something you’d pull out of a shower drain at the beach.”

“That’s...mighty specific.” The dullahan chuckled. “I’ll try the stick fer a bit, be a change from the whip.” Suly took a practice swing. “So where be our girl?”

“Honestly?” Mike turned his attention to the blasted landscape. The Underworld itself was constantly changing except for the area by his gate. The

forest around it looked like a wildfire had blown through, scorching the earth and leaving behind skeletal trees. “If they already know I’m here, they’re hiding.”

“Why would they do that?” Suly frowned.

“Hellhounds are all business. When Cerberus got hit by that spell that turned them human, there was a translational error.” Mike ignored the snort that came from Suly. “When you take an immortal beast and give it human properties, every facet of its existence needs to choose where it exists along the line between human and beast. So now we have a hellhound with a master, in a sense. I’m not super fond of the term, really.”

“Yer the dominant partner,” Suly offered.

“Thank you, yes. As a result, Cerberus has been spending time with the family and seeing us interact.” Mike walked away from the gate, using his hiking stick to prod at the ground ahead of him. “So now we have an isolated creature learning how to bond with others and become one of the pack. Humans are pack animals, despite how many of them like to brag about being lone wolves.”

“Why would mortals say that?”

“Because wolves are cool. The idea of a lone wolf implies someone who doesn’t need anyone else. They’re strong and capable of taking care of themselves.” Mike found a small path between the trees and continued along it. “Some people actually fit that description, but most of them don’t walk around bragging about it. What people tend to forget about lone wolves is that they were either kicked out of the pack or are simply on their way to making one of their own.”

“Then why would anyone brag about such a thing?”

“Because people hate being lonely.” Mike thought back to all his years alone. “They don’t like admitting that they need others, that they want to be reassured of their worth.”

“Ye seem to be an expert.”

“I paid enough money to therapists over the years to qualify. Well, on this topic anyway.” The two navigated a particularly rough section of terrain between the trees. Branches scratched at them in passing, but Mike used his stick to push most of them aside. “Anyway, back to Cerberus. We now have a three-headed beast with human emotions that has become part of the family. Their urge to

protect is still very strong. There are other...urges they also choose to indulge in.” Mike paused to give Sulyvahn a chance to comment. When the dullahan stayed silent, Mike continued. “But now that Cerberus has others in their life, there’s something that both man and beast enjoy.”

“Which is?” Sulyvahn caught up to Mike, who had stopped to look around.

Mike chuckled and picked up a rock. He looked at the dullahan with a grin. “To play. I see you!” He threw the stone at a tree across the clearing. When the stone hit the bark, a three-headed woman jumped out. Their gothic-style dress clung to their skin like oil, the custom bustier pressing all three breasts up to display them. Cerberus smiled with all three heads, their tail wagging behind them.

“Come. Catch. Us!” Each head spoke a single word and then Cerberus transformed into a fearsome hellhound, the beast’s sudden size shoving aside nearby trees. The hellhound bowed down low, tail wagging, then ran off into the forest to hide once more.

“Are ye serious?” Sulyvahn’s eyes were like saucers. “Ye’ve got her playin’ hide-n-seek?”

Mike shrugged. “That’s her choice. Anyone reads. Abella watches movies. Tink fixes things. To my knowledge, this is the first time in Cerberus’ existence that they’ve been allowed to be playful. There’s no longer a need to wander the eternal wastelands, scouring it clean of roaming spirits. Sometimes they go to the Greenhouse with Callisto and Grace to play fetch.”

“Huh.” Sulyvahn stared at the wreckage Cerberus had left behind. “It’s almost like they be a new entity all together.”

“Yeah, kind of.” Mike started down the path Cerberus had created. “But isn’t that true of all of us? Over time, we often become new people inside, bit by bit. It’s not uncommon to look back and realize we’re completely different now.”

“The fae aren’t really known for that kind of thing.”

Now it was Mike’s turn to snort. “I would bet they change more than they’re willing to admit. You all have very specific rules you follow, but there’s so much wiggle room as to the kind of people you can be.”

“Are ye really man-splaining the fae to me?” Suly laughed. “Leave it ta mortals to be summin’ up te things they know the least about. If yer Cerberus be gettin’ even a tenth o’ that, I get why they be so different now.”

“My kind really are just chaos monkeys trying not to eat the pieces on their gameboard, after all.”

“I’m detection’ some falsehood there.”

Mike sighed. He had forgotten how adept the fae were at falsehoods. “I don’t actually identify as human anymore. I’m sort of my own thing now. However, my opinion holds regarding people.”

“That’s a lad.” Suly clapped a hand on Mike’s shoulder. “Now if we can just get ye to be more arrogant, we’ll make a proper fae out of you.”

The two of them followed the trail for nearly ten minutes before it disappeared. When Suly asked how that could be, Mike told him that Cerberus either changed back into a woman or had simply decided to move more carefully. Hellhounds could be surprisingly stealthy when they wanted to, despite their size. He had once watched them stalking prey through the woods. The hellhound had looked almost like smoke floating between the trees.

“Hold up.” Mike sniffed the air. It stank of sulfur. “Demons.”

“Where?”

A casual glance across the clearing revealed one hiding inside of a bush. Though the demon’s natural camouflage was pretty good, it was made of the same essence that Lily was. The swirling mass of energy at its core was easily visible through the dead leaves and branches.

Mike readied his hiking stick and then pointed toward the demon with his free hand. As soon as his hand was raised, the demon burst from the bushes and charged them. When it leapt into the air, mouth open wide, Mike raised the stick with both hands and stepped into the attack, shoving the tip into the thing's mouth and then pinning it to the ground when it flipped over backward. The demon squealed like a pig and thrashed around, its claws carving chunks out of the dirt.

“Hardly seems harmless,” said Sulyvahn. “Now what? Kin ye kill it?”

“Not really.” Mike put a hand to his mouth and whistled. Moments later, the sound of heavy feet bashing trees filled the air, and then Cerberus leapt into view. The hellhound narrowed their eyes at the demon Mike had caught.

“Ye coulda just whistled fer her all this time?”

“Well, yeah.” Mike laughed. “I told you. This is just a game we play. If it was serious, they wouldn’t have run off like that. Cerberus, I caught you a snack.”

The hellhound growled, then knelt down and closed one mouth over the demon. It shrieked as Cerberus wandered away and then dropped it again, all three heads biting at the fiend before ripping it apart and eating it.

“Gods,” muttered Sulyvahn, somehow looking paler than usual. “Remind me not to get on their bad side.”

Mike grinned at the dullahan, sensing an opportunity. “Hey, before I forget, I don’t know if you’ve heard, but I’m heading to the property in Ireland. Most likely tomorrow morning, if I can. Beth and I spoke; she thought you’d be a valuable asset to bring along. We can expect a lot of troubled spirits.”

“Troubled spirits be my bread and butter. I’d be happy to come.”

*I’m sure you would.* “That’s great. I don’t know how long we’ll be gone. We’re really just looking for clues. There might be something hidden in the castle that can help Tink.”

“Aye. That lass be needin’ all the help we can give ‘er.” Sulyvahn’s forehead wrinkled in concern. “She be treadin’ the line far too close fer my likin’.”

“On that, we can agree.” Mike turned his attention back to Cerberus. “As for you, how have things been around here?”

The hellhound took a step forward, dark smoke surrounding their body as they transformed back into a gothic woman with three heads. Cerberus finished the transformation standing uncomfortably close to Mike.

“Things. Are. Good.” The heads fixed him with a serious look. “Territory. Is. Secure.”

“Excellent. About that, I was wondering if you’d want to come on a short trip with me.” Mike nearly laughed when their tail started wagging, despite the serious looks they gave him. “I’ll take that as a yes.”



“Cerberus. Take. Trip.” The hellhound grinned once Mike patted all three heads. “Be. Good. Girls.”

“I know you will.” Mike couldn’t help but notice the look on Sulyvahn’s face. With Cerberus watching his back, Mike would feel much better about whatever the dullahan had gotten himself caught up in. Even from several feet away, Mike could see just how tightly those chains bound Sulyvahn.

This also made him wonder what it would take to break them.

He chatted with Cerberus some more and made sure they knew where and when to meet him. Once they were done speaking, Cerberus guided the group back to the iron cemetery gate that would take them to Earth. Abella was there to let them inside, and Mike locked up the gate behind them. He walked up the hill to chat with Naia and saw that Amymone had fully nodded off, her book now lying on the ground.

“She won’t last much longer, lover.” Naia smiled as she took the key from him. Her voice caused Amymone to bolt upright and grab her book.

“I’m awake!” she declared, then gave her sister a dirty look.

“Barely.” Naia scowled. “Seriously, how many more pages do you have?”

“Two hundred.”

“You’ve got about three hours, lover.” Naia turned back to Mike. “She usually reads faster, but that sounds about right.”

Mike nodded, then looked at Suly. “You know where to meet me tomorrow?”

“Aye.”

“Good. I need to check in with Callisto and his mom, then I have one more stop.” Mike knelt down next to Amymone and patted her on the leg. “And then I’ll be here to help you get to sleep, okay?”

“Promise?” Amymone looked at him, her eyes all bleary.

“Wouldn’t miss it.” He stood and looked at Naia. “Send a fairy for me if she starts to go early and I’ll come right away.”

“It’s the only time you come right away.” Naia smirked and blew him a kiss as he jogged to the front of the house and used the centaur’s shortcut to get to

the village. Callisto was with his mother, which gave him the time and opportunity to explain to Zel what was happening before seeing his son. The centaur was quieter than usual, but Mike imagined that was because the child was still upset over his house ban.

Before leaving, he asked if he could have a private chat with Callisto. Zel waved the two of them off, and Mike had Callisto guide him into the woods where they could talk. Once they were several minutes out, Mike turned to his son.

“So I hear you’ve taken a sudden interest in archery.”

Immediately suspicious, Callisto kept walking and pretended to ignore his father. After a couple of minutes, the boy coughed into his hand and then pulled a dying branch off a tree and swung it at some grass.

“Centaurians are natural archers,” he said. “This is due to a generational reliance on hunting from a distance. That, and why waste time fighting with swords when we can outrun our enemies and shoot them from safety?”

Mike actually stopped walking. “Why do centaurs still use bows?” he asked. “Why not upgrade to something else? Like firearms?”

“Because bows and arrows can be made from things we find in our environment. Centaurs haven’t pursued metalsmithing in the past, other than basic tools and our own horseshoes.” Callisto smirked. “It’s not like we just have gun powder lying around.”

“No, but it wouldn’t be that hard to…” Mike let the thought trail off. Did he really want to introduce guns to a tribe? It wasn’t that he thought they couldn’t handle it. But if something happened to him, they would have become reliant on a weapon they could no longer obtain. Maybe it would be worth training some elite centaurs with guns? This was something he definitely wanted to run by Zel before discussing with anyone else.

“Hard to what?” Callisto, like any other child, had latched onto the sudden silence.

Mike continued walking. “I guess if centaurs used guns, the people who fletch arrows would be out of a job.”

Callisto went silent and scowled at a nearby clump of grass. He swung his stick a few times, managing to slice the tips off of some of the taller stalks. After another minute of doing this, he let out an exasperated sigh.

“Are we going to have the talk?” he asked.

“Do you want to have the talk?” Mike asked.

“Ugh, no.” Callisto frowned. “I’m not even entirely certain what you want to tell me. I know how sex works. The centaurs aren’t exactly shy about it. We do it out in the open.”

Mike choked on his own spit. “We?” he rasped.

“The tribe, Dad, not me.” Callisto threw his stick into the woods. “That’s not something I’m interested in. Yet, anyway. So, no, I don’t need your advice on sex or whatever.”

“What makes you think I was going to give you advice?” Mike shrugged when Callisto looked at him. “Look, your life is going to be filled with so many moments that I have little to no input in. When my son likes someone, I sort of want to know about it.”

“But why?” Callisto turned around and walked backwards, his tail swishing anxiously.

“Because you’re my kid.” Mike grinned. “If you like this girl, I sort of want to hear about her. To hear how you feel, to understand what’s going through your mind, that sort of thing. When I had my first crush…” This time, Mike stopped.

Callisto made a face. “What about your first crush?”

“Okay, this is getting more complicated than I intended,” Mike said. “When I had my first crush, I didn’t have anyone to talk about her with. My dad was gone and my mother was…problematic.”

“Problematic how?” Now Callisto’s curiosity was piqued.

“She was abusive.” Mike smiled weakly. “After my dad died, she forgot to take the medicine that kept her mentally balanced. That’s something I learned by accident just over a year ago, but we had a terrible relationship.”

“Mom said that she died in a car crash.” Callisto stopped walking and gestured at Mike’s stomach. “The same one that gave you your scars.”

“Yep.” Mike put his hand on Callisto’s shoulder and squeezed. “I’m not trying to ask about this girl you like because I want to tease you, or embarrass you. I don’t know why people do that in the first place, to be honest.”

“I don’t, either.” Callisto turned around to walk beside his father. “One of my friends was teasing me about it. Kept bringing up her name and how much I love her. Over breakfast, of all things. But I don’t really love her, I just...like her in a strong way that occupies my thoughts needlessly.”

Mike nodded. “Yeah, that’s annoying. It’s hard enough navigating our own feelings while others try to force us to define them for their own amusement. Does your mom know?”

Callisto sighed. “She’s in charge. She knows everything.”

“Not everything, despite what you may think.” He thought for a moment about how he wanted to continue. “At some point, more parts of your life will open up for private exploration. That can include hobbies, things you think about, and the relationships you have with others. Typically, we will be on the outside looking in, so you can’t fault your parents for being curious.”

“Even though it’s annoying.” The boy grinned. “I guess...as long as you aren’t too obnoxious about it, then maybe it’ll be okay.”

“Good.” They walked a bit longer, the trees now thick around them. “Now that we’ve talked about that, it’s time for The Talk.”

“What?” Callisto snorted. “I should just run away and leave you out here.”

“I’m not going to talk to you about sex and babies. You know all that stuff. I want to give you a couple of the secrets to a successful relationship. As a man who has several intimate relationships at once, I am overqualified to give this advice.”

Callisto actually stopped on the trail and crossed his arms. “This isn’t an elaborate setup for one of your puns, is it?”

Mike shook his head. “Not today. I want my words to stick, and they won’t if I amaze you with my phenomenal wit.”

“It doesn’t amaze anyone.”

“I have my fans.” Mike spotted a tree he could lean against for a moment. “Okay, are you ready for the first secret?”

“I guess.”

“Before you’re ready to have relationships with other people, you need to have a good relationship with yourself. You’re still young and figuring things out.

Never fall into the trap of thinking you need to be with someone else to be complete.”

“But isn’t that sort of what’s going on with you and Aunt Tink? And Aunt Yuki? And Aunt—”

Mike waved his hand dismissively. “I want you to focus on the part where I said you’re young and figuring things out. Once you’ve grown into the man you’re happy to be, one who feels complete on their own, it’s a lot easier to think about including others. Young love is special, but it’s also difficult.”

“Hmm.” Callisto contemplated Mike’s words. “So you’re saying I shouldn’t be interested in Adhara?”

“Is that the girl’s name?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s fine to be interested in her. But you’re both young and still growing. It can become very easy to grow into two very different, potentially incompatible people. There’s a term for early relationships you should hear now before it upsets you.”

Callisto looked up at his father. “What’s that?”

“Practice.” Mike smiled. “Your first relationships are likely to become practice for the future ones.”

“Why would that upset me?”

“If you fall in love with someone and then break up, it can be upsetting to have your previous relationship defined in such a way.”

“That makes sense.” Callisto blinked. “What was the other secret advice?”

“This advice is usually saved for later. Much later, if ever.” Mike studied his son and thought back on Emery’s words about childhood. “And I’m telling you now before you’re a grumpy-ass teenager.”

“Is it about sex?”

“It is.”

Callisto groaned.

“Hold on, this is actually a pretty easy one. Are you ready to hear it?”

“Yeah.” Callisto made a face like he had stepped in poop.

“Alright, here you go.” Mike cleared his throat. “When you get older and things become intimate, consent is super important. You should be able to discuss what you want with a future partner before you do anything with them.”

“I know this, already.” Mike could tell that Callisto was fighting the urge to roll his eyes.

“I know your mother, and yes, you should. But I can’t assume it stuck. So now for the secret part that most people don’t seem to get.” Mike fixed Callisto with a serious stare. “If you’re too embarrassed to talk about it with your partner, you’re not ready to do it.”

“...what?”

“Do you think about kissing Adhara?”

Callisto’s face turned bright red. “I dunno. Maybe.”

“Have you talked with her about it?”

The blood drained from Callisto’s face. “Gods, no, why would I...oh. Oh! You’re saying that if I don’t have the emotional maturity to speak about potential intimate actions with others, then it’s something I’m not yet ready for! That’s actually very logical.”

“Logic can get lost in the heat of the moment. But that advice will serve you. Rushing into things may someday cost you a worthwhile relationship.” Mike stepped forward and rustled Callisto’s hair. “I heard Adhara’s dad got mad at you.”

“That’s because I’m an idiot.” Callisto winced. “I was trying to come up with a topic of conversation and failed miserably.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

The centaur paused, his head cocked to one side. A warm smile broke across his face. “Do you know what, Dad? I kind of do.”

“So you complimented her on her shaft work, huh?”

Callisto groaned. “Yeah. She was holding an arrow in one hand and using a tool to make a groove for the fletching. I’m an idiot, and ran out of things to say, so said that I bet nobody gripped a shaft quite like she did. I could watch her hold that shaft all day.” He shook his head and covered his eyes with his hands. “She

got really quiet, and I couldn't figure out why. I didn't know her dad was listening when I followed that up with telling her that I had some arrows that needed fletching. She said that she was kind of busy, and then I told her I would gladly give her a hand with her job."

"Ah, putting your foot in your mouth." Mike nodded and patted his son on the shoulder. "The Radley family specialty."

"He got real mad and I panicked, then he chased me off." Callisto sighed. "In retrospect, I understand why he did that."

"I sometimes see centaurs with hiking staffs. Is there someone who makes them?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. They're quarterstaffs, actually. We mainly use them to test the ground so we don't break an ankle on loose soil or whatever, but they can also be used for self defense."

"Do they have daughters?"

"Two."

"Maybe don't hang around them, either."

The two of them laughed. Mike listened as Callisto talked about Adhara, his sometimes-friend Nima, and how a group of younger centaurs had discovered a pond to the south where they snuck off to throw rocks at frogs. By the time they circled back to the village, Callisto was in much better spirits. Zel pulled Mike aside, citing urgent business, then kissed him so hard that it took his breath away.

"What was that for?" he asked when she broke away.

"Just a reminder that he's not the only reason you should drop by." Zel traced a finger along his chest. "Ratu said she'll have a bracelet ready for me soon. The new bangle is supposed to break the one-hour barrier."

"Now that's exciting. We should go on a date. Maybe I'll take you dancing."

"Oh, Mike, I'd love that!" Zel squeezed him tight, then let go. "Kisa can teach me how to dance on two legs!"

"I bet she would." Mike frowned when the alarm went off on his phone. "If you'll excuse me, I need to get home."

"Amymone?"

Mike nodded. "Yeah."

"Go, shoo!" Zel pushed him out the door. "You're leaving first thing in the morning?"

"I am."

"Make sure you drop by. I'll have some supplies ready for you." Zel blew him a kiss, then galloped off toward her tent. Mike watched her go, then headed back to the house.

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Nyx stared into Death's sockets, then took a deep breath and raised her cup to her lips. The fae's fingers trembled almost imperceptibly as she tipped it back, the last vestiges of tea disappearing. Silently, she set the cup down and bowed her head until it touched the table. The pot was finally empty, and her tea finished. When she sat up, the Grim Reaper studied her for several long seconds.

"Wonderful!" Death clapped his bony hands together, the sudden movement causing Nyx to flinch. "Simply wonderful! And thus, Death's Special Ceremony of Greeting for Immortals has concluded, and I have fully welcomed you."

"You..." Nyx licked her lips, the taste of lavender now properly ruined for her. "Do you perhaps think that it was a little long?"

"Nonsense, not for a member of the royal court." Death chuckled as he started cleaning the table. "Did you know that royalty will often celebrate a wedding or birthday for several days? What is time to an immortal, anyway?"

"I see." Nyx couldn't think of an argument. She had been so focused on remembering all of Death's various titles that there hadn't been time for schemes or contemplation. "Do we...is this ceremony a one-time thing?"

"That's the beauty of a tea ceremony. It can be done when we choose. In fact, you can do it now, if you wish." The Grim Reaper handed her the book. "Consider it a gift, freely given."

Nyx struggled not to grind her teeth. "I accept." She tucked it away into a magical pocket inside her dress. Later, when given the chance, she planned to burn it.



Death pulled out his phone and studied the screen. "Mike Radley has not yet responded. He must have been very busy." The Reaper tapped fingers on his jaw in contemplation. "Though he may not have wished to disrupt the ceremony. Shall we step outside and see if he's available?"

"Please." It took a tremendous amount of willpower not to pick up the closest teapot and smash it into the Reaper's skull. Rage simmered beneath the calm exterior of the princess. Her time had been wasted, of that she was sure, but why? The perpetrator had acted in good faith and was above any sort of repercussions. For now, she would have to play nice.

"You look a little stiff. Were the cushions comfortable?" Death held out a hand to help her rise, which she accepted.

"They were...adequate." The fae princess stepped carefully out of the teahouse, then scanned the twilight skies. How long had she been in there? The leaves of the massive oak in the backyard were entirely yellow now and had already formed a few golden piles beneath it.

Studying her surroundings, the princess realized that somebody was singing a wordless tune that reminded her of a lullaby. She followed Death to a different vantage point in the yard and saw that the nymph was sitting on the edge of her fountain closest to the tree. In the roots of the oak, a man laid with his back against its trunk, the dryad cradled in his arms. Her green hair was now entirely yellow, some of it falling out in clumps.

The man looked up at the two of them and held a finger to his lips for silence. The moment his brown eyes met Nyx's, she felt a shock go through her body. Her mouth opened in a silent gasp at the sensation. In most ways, the man appeared entirely ordinary. He didn't seem particularly tall, nor did he have a thick muscular build. However, his presence dominated the clearing, as if he was the very weight holding down the entire earth.

"That's Mike Radley," said Death in a whisper.

"What's he doing?" asked Nyx.

"Amymone is a dryad. Every year around this time, her tree hibernates, and so does she."

"I know that." Nyx rolled her eyes.

“Well, you see, many years ago, somebody chopped down Aymone’s tree and she actually died for a time. Her soul was trapped between this realm and the next. Mike Radley found a way to bring her back to life.” Death crossed his arms. “When fall came that first year she was back, she realized that her own slumber felt very much like dying. So every year since then, he makes sure to lie with her as she falls asleep, to remind her that she’s safe and that she will wake up again in the spring.”

“But she’s just a dryad.” Nyx felt a chill run up her spine and turned to see the little fires in Death’s socket had turned red. “Why go through all this effort for a tree spirit?”

The Grim Reaper contemplated Nyx’s words, the fires slowly shifting back to blue. “I think I see the problem. Tell me, when you gaze upon my visage, are you afraid?”

“I am not.” Nyx raised her chin in defiance.

“As you shouldn’t be. Your kind are not likely to encounter me unless you meet an unnatural end. You have seen death, but rarely your own. All mortal creatures of minimal intelligence contemplate when their end will come, and how. They think about what life will be like for those they love when they’re gone, and they worry about what comes next. Their lives are so short, yet they find a way to pack in so many emotions and experiences. To you, she’s just a tree spirit. To the members of this home? She’s family, and she’s frightened.” Death turned back to the scene. “Mike Radley is called the Caretaker, not because he cares for these grounds, but for those who live on them. As long as Aymone fears her winter slumber, Mike Radley will lie with her, and let her know it’s going to be okay. That’s a special kind of magic, one I dare say may be beyond the understanding of the fae.”

“My people care for each other.” Nyx sneered at Death, but the Reaper ignored her. “To assume we don’t is simply foolish.”

“I did not mean to imply that you don’t care for each other. Mortals form relationships knowing that all they have is today. There is no promise of tomorrow. When they fall in love, it’s with the knowledge that someday one of them will have to say goodbye forever.” Death sighed. “This is something I am only now coming to understand. I lost a good friend recently.”

It was clear that Death wanted to say more, but Nyx didn't bother asking. She simply didn't care. If not for the fact that it would cause a scene, she would march right over to the Caretaker and introduce herself. A member of the nobility was being forced to wait around while the Caretaker tended to a mere tree spirit was—

Mike lifted his gaze in her direction, his now-golden eyes holding a menacing edge that made her feel like she was staring down a cold iron blade. It was as if the man could read her mind, or was even perhaps studying her very soul. She immediately slammed down on all of her thoughts, making her mind as flat as the surface of a pond.

She stood this way for over an hour as the Caretaker stroked Amymone's forehead, held her hands, and held her against his body. Over time, the spirit slowly melded into the roots of the tree, the bark of her skin vanished into the trunk. Even with her disappearance, Mike kept one hand pressed against the roots, his magic caressing them. The leaves got caught in a breeze that ripped them free, forming into a whirlwind of gold that spread across the yard. Nyx looked up at the leaves in awe and realized that motes of Mike's golden light flitted between them.

"My name is Mike. I'm the Caretaker of this house and all who live within." His voice snapped her out of her reverie, and she realized that she hadn't heard him move or sensed him coming. The leaves had concealed his passage and now he was only a few feet away. The magic radiating off of him was strong, far more powerful than any other human she had encountered. "Have you been properly greeted yet? Perhaps you would like some tea?"

"I've already had tea." Nyx cast her eyes toward Death. "I have also been properly greeted. You may call me Nyx, but I am also known as..." She flashed back to the last several hours of listening to Death repeat all of the names she had offered. "A member of the Seelie Court."

"Nobility?" A look of concern crossed Mike's face. "Did something happen to one of our fae ambassadors?"

He was referring to the fae that lived in his garden. What a quaint term. Nyx shook her head. "No, nothing of that sort. In fact, I've been sent here to open the lines of communication with you and your family. To my knowledge, you have made your agreements through the Queen alone, and the Seelie nobility have appointed me as their own ambassador." She smiled.

“Hmm.” Mike cocked his head to the side, lost in thought. “It sounds like we have much to speak on. I usually have my attorney handle such negotiations —”

“You would not be making any agreements at this time.” Nyx stepped forward and took Mike’s hand. His skin was soft and—

Her heart raced on making contact. Once again, it felt as if the weight of the world was pressing her toward the Caretaker. Was it his power? His influence? It was suddenly hard to concentrate.

“Nyx?” Mike looked down at their hands, then back into her eyes. “Are you okay?”

“It is my task to get to know you better.” She raised his fingers to her lips and smirked, then kissed the back of his hand. Her magic washed over him, circling like a vulture. Death held this man on quite the pedestal, but he was still just a man. The Seelie had chosen Nyx specifically to cater to the Caretaker’s unusual tastes. “Perhaps we could go inside and become better acquainted?”

“I must decline.” Mike withdrew his hand and gave a polite bow. “I have other plans this evening that I must attend to.”

Nyx was stunned. This was unfamiliar territory. She couldn’t remember the last time anyone had told her no. Her mind raced in an attempt to formulate a response, a way to get closer to him. Before she could speak, the wind whispered words in her ear in a language that was already ancient when the world was new.

“Then I bid you farewell for now, Caretaker.” Nyx bowed her head and turned away, leaving Mike and his family behind. On the way out, she felt a predatory gaze. Turning to face it, she saw nothing other than the Caretaker’s daughter standing up on the roof.

Nyx waved to seem friendly, but the Arachne didn’t respond. The remaining centaurs gave Nyx a wide berth as she left, the fae following the wind’s instructions. They had her return to the park where she had come into this world, and she sat down on a rock by the shore to wait.

The water in the pond rippled, and the head and torso of one of her elder sisters appeared. Her sharp facial features reflected moonlight like a mirror. Nyx bowed in greeting.

“I was called,” she said in the old tongue.

“We have received word that the Caretaker leaves in the morning for a new location. You are to intercept him there where his defenses are weaker.” The fae made a hissing sound through her teeth. “Your Unseelie counterpart has gone missing. Do you know their whereabouts?”

“I do not.”

“Then they have already failed.”

“That is likely.” Nyx licked her lips, remembering the power radiating off of the Caretaker. “You should let them know not to underestimate this man. He may have been born a human, but is now something more.”

“It shall be done.” The fae extended a hand. “Come, sister. Let us be on our way. Perhaps you will find success tomorrow.”

“Perhaps.” Nyx walked into the water and sank beneath its depths. The darkness embraced her, then carried her across the world.

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Sofia leaned against the railing, staring at the mountain of books that were piled below. This was a part of the Library that she hated coming to. Not only was it a grim reminder of the past, but stood as a monument to her inability to keep up with the demands of her job. Even now, with the help of the rats, there was simply too much to do.

*“I’m back.” The cyclops pushed the cart past the Information Desk in the lobby. A tray of cheese and mead was sitting there, along with a leg of fresh grilled mutton. Sofia licked her lips as she picked up the mutton and sank her teeth into it. Somewhere in the world, she could only assume some member of nobility was extremely pissed to be missing out on the crown jewel of their meal.*

*Mutton was a delicacy for Librarians. No matter how much they wanted it, the Library only took from those who could afford to lose it. A leg of mutton may be most of a meal for a family, which meant food like this typically came from royal gatherings.*

*Cheese, on the other hand, was plentiful. On several occasions, Sofia had noticed that some of the wheels were actually labeled. They were being aged in a cave by a monastic order. Sadly, upon looking into the order itself, she had learned they had perished in a fire. For several years afterward, she and the others had been the beneficiaries of forgotten cheese. It made her wonder what other food*

*and drink had been lost due to the deaths of those who had hidden it away. Sure, it was no pirate treasure, but cheese could be eaten.*

*Gold and jewels? They were of no use to Sofia. The Library didn't have a store, and it provided whatever she needed.*

*Since Lukios wasn't manning the desk, she took the opportunity to slack off for a bit. Recently, the satyr had been possessed with a sudden intensity to complete old projects. Sofia found a book of poems and sat down in a leather chair that had seen better days. She munched on cheese and mutton, then drank some of the mead.*

*Losing herself in a good book was her favorite pastime. At least, she assumed it was, the options here weren't exactly diverse. The longer she read, the more worried she was that Lukios would return from whatever task he was on and ream her out. Not that she feared his outbursts. All the satyr could really do was yell.*

*The joy at being able to finish the book of poems was replaced by the stillness of the Library. Lukios had known that her task would only take a couple of hours, and it wasn't like him not to leave a note with something else she could work on. Sofia stood and walked to the satyr's bedroom. When she knocked, there was no reply, so she entered. The room was empty.*

*She went back to the Information Desk and checked the job board. Lukios usually left a list of the tasks he planned to tackle. She saw her own name on the tablet and used a piece of chalk to cross out the job beneath. The Head Librarian had a relatively short list today, but in the middle of that list were the words Book Mountain.*

*Sofia let out a sigh of exasperation. She wasn't sure what Lukios hoped to accomplish out there, but maybe he had learned something she didn't know. The cyclops left a note, then summoned a platform and took it to visit the Head Librarian's tasks in reverse order, hoping that he was near the end of his activities.*

*He wasn't doing an intruder check in the Forbidden Section, nor was he collecting new books that had come in registered as Occult. That meant another long ride out to Book Mountain. At least Sofia had eaten a decent meal before departing the Information Desk.*

*The platform arrived near Book Mountain. Sofia and the others had learned long ago that the area was still unstable, and didn't dare to fly a platform nearby.*

*Something about the ambient magic being unstable meant that platforms would sometimes crash, and hiking down a mountain of books had triggered an avalanche that had nearly killed a librarian twenty years back.*

*“Lukios?” Sofia guided the platform around their usual landing spots until she spotted a platform loaded up with books down below. She landed, then walked up a nearby set of stairs that spiraled up a column before zigzagging back and forth along a wall. This overlook was a perfect spot to see all of Book Mountain. “Lukios, where are you?”*

*The silence was overwhelming. Her voice didn’t even echo here, and she could hear her own heartbeat. Muttering to herself that she shouldn’t have drunk all that mead, she started to climb. It was almost ten minutes to the top of the stairs. She took her time. Sofia didn’t want to be sweaty for the rest of the day.*

*She took a step onto the overlook and called out. “Hey, Lukios. Where are you, you old goat?” If the Head Librarian could hear her, that would bring him out. The satyr had a certain level of vanity that required he respond indignantly.*

*Sofia was struck once more by the silence. Frowning, she scanned the area and noticed that the Head Librarian’s staff was on the floor by the railing. Drawing her blade, she walked forward with confidence. If anything wanted to ambush her, she’d know it was coming. By the time she made it to the railing, her hands were shaking. Sheathing her blade, she crouched down to pick up the staff.*

*The Head Librarian’s staff felt heavy in her hands. Lukios had made her spend plenty of time practicing with it, just in case. She didn’t know if it was the magic or the weight of the mantle that made it feel so heavy. When she lifted it off the ground, she saw a folded piece of paper beneath its head.*

*“You’d better be off taking a shit,” she growled, hiding fear behind false bravado. Unfolding the paper, she read the message and promptly closed her eye in pain. Once she was ready to process the words, she looked again.*

***My dearest Child,***

***I’m sorry. The Library belongs to you now.***

***Lukios***

*Now that she stood by the railing, the faint creaking of rope rubbing on stone drew her attention. Looking over the edge, she could see the satyr’s body at the other end of the rope.*

*“Say hi to Agatha for me,” she whispered, then reached over to pull him up.*

Back in the present, Sofia picked up the wine bottle in her hand and held it up in a mock salute. “To those who came before,” she muttered without completing the remainder of the passage. After what Eulalie told her about becoming a proper Librarian, Sofia expected the place to be a tomb for paper and cardboard bindings in another century if they were all lucky.

She heard the gentle sound of stone touching marble. Sighing, she slumped against the railing and waited. Sure enough, she heard footsteps on the landing behind her. “I suppose you want me to look up something else for you?”

“I found what I’m looking for right here.”

Surprised, Sofia turned around to see that Mike had arrived on one of the magical platforms. She had expected Ratu again. The Caretaker walked up to the rail and stared down at the mountain of books.

“Holy shit,” he muttered. “What happened here?”

“How did you find me?” she asked.

“Went to the front desk, stood on a platform, and told it to take me to the Head Librarian.” He winked at her.

“It doesn’t work that way.”

“I know.” He turned around and leaned his back against the railing. “I asked the rats which way you flew off. How many do you think live here these days? It has to be thousands. They’re all over most of the columns I saw, putting away books. All I had to do was ask and there would be someone who could point in which direction you went. That last stretch was a bit unnerving, though. How far are we from the lobby?”

“About a hundred miles,” said Sofia. “I think.”

“You know, if we could market those platforms and make them work on Earth, we could destroy the automotive industry. Airline industry, too.” Mike chuckled. “What should our brand name be? I thought we could call them Floaters, but realized that’s not the vibe we want.”

“Always a joke with you.” Sofia lifted the bottle to her lips and was surprised when Mike snatched it away.



“I think that’s enough self medication for one day.” Mike moved to toss the bottle. It was clear he wanted to get rid of it but didn’t know how. After scowling at it for several seconds, he tilted it up and chugged the rest down.

“You’re going to puke,” said Sofia.

“Ugh, maybe. But now you can’t drink it. Besides, once I’ve had enough that it becomes toxic, my body treats it as poison. I can get drunk, but not hungover.” Mike handed the empty bottle back. Sofia tossed it over the railing where it shattered a couple of seconds later on the marble below. “Yeah, I didn’t do that because I figured you’d be mad.”

“Mad about what? Have you seen what’s out there?” Sofia gestured at the pit of books below them. “Did you know I spent almost a decade trying to fix this mess. Used magic and everything. And yet, the mountain remains!” She slammed the butt of her staff against the ground and dozens of books lifted free of the mountain, flapping their spines like wings. They circled around, as if lost, then fell back into the pile.

“What happened?”

“Just another mishap. This one wasn’t my fault, for a change.” Sofia sighed. “Back when there were just a few of us remaining, one of the librarians got the bright idea to use summoning magic to create a force to help us stay on top of the work. However, the Head Librarian at the time forbade them from doing it.”

“Which means, naturally, they snuck off and did it anyway.”

Sofia nodded. “That mountain of books used to be several columns. There are hundreds of thousands of books down there, most of them crushed beneath their own weight.”

“Where are the columns?” Mike leaned over the railing, as if trying to see underneath.

“Gone.” Sofia shivered. “Are you familiar with how summoning magic works?”

Mike made a face. “Not really. Explain it to me.”

“You can’t just summon whatever you want.” Sofia gestured at the pile of books. “You need to be either significantly stronger than the thing you summon, or you need to find ways to artificially enhance your power. This can be as simple

as using an enchanted item to bolster the spell, or perhaps an intricate diagram that uses the earth's natural magical energy."

"I knew it," Mike muttered. "We really do tap land for mana."

Sofia scowled. By his tone, she could tell he was making some kind of joke, but he hadn't actually said anything that seemed silly to her. "Anyway, the power requirement is a pretty big deal. You also need to bind the creature or entity with a spell to keep them from running amok. As you mentioned about the rats, there are so many of them. There isn't a single creature capable of handling this workload."

"Makes sense." The Caretaker belched and rubbed at his chest. "Excuse me," he muttered, then waved at the air as if to chase away the smell of wine.

Sofia contemplated him for a moment, then let out a long, low belch of her own. Her larger frame meant it was a bass note that rumbled.

"Nice." Mike gave her a thumbs up. "Felt that in my chest. So how did summoning a bunch of small things lead to a mountain of books?"

"We don't know for sure. The summoner died." Sofia smacked her lips and frowned. That had tasted worse than it smelled. "Our best guess was that they tried to summon some type of spirit or otherworldly force. When you cast spells like that, you have to be very careful with the language you use. Putting together a ritual and demanding ten spirits to help you out will bring you ten spirits. However, let's say you didn't set a limitation. Maybe you told the magic that you wanted enough spirits to handle the Library's current input. Now you have a problem."

"You think they summoned too many spirits?"

Sofia shook her head. "The problem wasn't that they summoned too many spirits. The issue likely arose when they accidentally burned themselves up trying to summon them. This was very old magic, we learned that from the tome they had borrowed from somewhere else in the Library. Think creation-level spells, that kind of thing. They weren't just pulling an entity from the Underworld, or Hell, or whatever. This was magic capable of piercing the void and calling something back. As long as the summoner is present, they can close the rift if things go wrong. But a dead summoner?" She looked at the mountain of books.

“Oh, shit.” Mike seemed to get it now. “So when the summoner died, something else was allowed to come through.”

“Yes. Whatever it was, it didn’t stay long. Their brief existence here was enough to shatter all of the columns in this area. When the column containing the runes fell apart, the spell ended and the entity was banished back to wherever they came from.” The cyclops shook her head. “In a sense, we got lucky. When a summoning spell is disrupted, there’s always a chance that whatever you called may simply escape.”

“Can we even talk about...them while we’re here?” Mike looked up at the ceiling. “I can freely discuss them at home, but Pele warned me not to talk about them elsewhere.”

“They can’t see in here. The Library is built between worlds.”

“That...is kind of in their neighborhood, though.”

Sofia nodded. “Only sort of. The space we’re in was modeled on where the Others exist. Time flows here, but not biologically. In terms of space, we have dimensions, but no location. Even if someone was staring in through one of our skylights, there would be nothing for them to comprehend. The Others crave the destruction of your world because it’s teeming with life and order. This place? It may have order, but it’s largely devoid of life. It’s like a speck of dust in the back of a pantry packed with junk food.”

“But they could still look.”

“It’s also warded from outside observation.” Sofia gestured toward the ceiling. “So even if those things were looking in, they wouldn’t see you.”

“Right.” Mike crossed his arms and stared at his feet for a moment. “So this place is beneath their notice and they can’t even see inside of it. They would have to be led here first.”

“But only an idiot would do that.” Sofia shook her head. “We both know there’s no limit on human stupidity.”

“Was the person who did this a human?” Mike asked with a smirk.

“Point taken,” Sofia muttered. “Stupidity is universal. Are you happy now?”

“Not quite yet.” Mike stepped away from the railing. “In the morning, Cecilia, Sulyvahn, and Cerberus are coming with me to Ireland so that we can

properly investigate Bullshit Castle. With any luck, whatever cure or magic that Gerard found is still there, and we can use it to save Tink.”

“Then I wish you luck.” Sofia scowled and rubbed her forehead. She wished she had brought an extra bottle. The whole idea of coming out here was to drink in peace.

“I don’t want your luck,” he said. “I want you.”

“Huh?” Sofia looked up at him. “Really? You dropped by for a last minute booty call?”

“Gods, you’re obnoxious when you’re drunk. Even if I did want to fuck, I can tell you’re not in the right frame of mind to consent. What I’m actually saying is I want *you* to come with *me*.” Mike jabbed his finger at her and then himself. “Sulyvahn and Cecilia can help me with the spirits. Cerberus is my heavy hitter in case we run across a demon or something worse. But I need someone smarter than I am to call me out on my shit, to help me figure things out.”

“Then take Beth.”

Mike groaned. “Sofia, Come on. You’re out here in the middle of nowhere having a massive mid-life crisis and I’m offering you the chance to do something other than marinate in your own misery. I can see your soul. That little adventure in the diary sparked so much joy that I could feel it. You need to do something different, to put your mind against a different set of problems. Come on another adventure with me. Reconnect with yourself. Do something other than stare at books all day.”

“Have you asked Ratu?”

“I don’t want Ratu.” He stepped in front of her, his eyes shimmering with magic. “I want you. Not as the Head Librarian. I want Sofia the badass to come with me.”

Sofia stared at him hard, her emotions swirling. There was a part of her that wanted to accept, to practically beg him to take her away from here. But another part of her wanted to explore the depths of her misery, to sulk and be angry. These two factions warred with each other as Mike reached past Sofia and grabbed the Head Librarian’s staff from where it sat.

“Let’s see,” he muttered, then tapped the butt of the staff on the ground. A wave of light blinded her, and she cried out in surprise. Sobriety instantly washed over her, chasing away the effects of the wine.

“Why did you do that?” she yelled, snatching away the staff. Sofia blinked several times, her mind suddenly clear. “How did you do that?” she asked.

“I watched you do it before,” he replied. “Took me a couple of seconds to identify the trigger for it in the staff, but it was simple enough. I used to be a programmer, you know. My skillset goes beyond fucking and blind luck, despite what some may say.”

Sofia almost asked who would say that, but didn’t bother. Now that she was sober again, most of the darker emotions had fled.

“As for why I did that,” Mike added. “I wanted you to have a clear head before answering my question. Sofia, would you like to go check out a haunted castle and fight ghosts with me?”

This time, that part of her that craved misery was too weak to argue. She looked out at the mountain of books, then back at the strange man that had come into her life just a few years ago. He was a harbinger of change. Of that, there was never any doubt.

And it was time for her to make a change. She looked at the staff in her hands. It was time to say goodbye for a while.

“A haunted castle, you say?” Sofia said with a grin. If this silly little human needed her help, it would be rude to decline. “What do you think I should pack?”

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When Mike walked out of the portal, it was into the silence of a barn somewhere in the countryside. He stepped outside of the structure to see that it was nearing twilight in Ireland. Satisfied that nobody was nearby, he returned to the portal and guided the others through.

Sulyvahn came first, followed by Cecilia. Cerberus stepped through the portal wearing a large hooded cloak. They sniffed the air and then moved aside for Sofia. The cyclops was wearing a cloak as well, and had exchanged her Head Librarian staff for a walking stick that she had not used in over a hundred years. She carried a large backpack filled with supplies.

“Let’s go,” said Mike and the others followed. Just outside the barn, an older pickup truck had been parked. Sofia climbed into the bed with her back against the rear of the cab, her legs taking up the bed. Cerberus took the passenger seat and promptly rolled down the window. Sulyvahn gave the group a mock salute, then summoned his horse and galloped off toward their destination.

Cecilia’s ghostly form hovered between Mike and Cerberus as he tried to shift the truck into drive. After grinding gears, he finally remembered how to drive a stick-shift and pulled away from the barn. Eulalie had purchased the property, but it was still ten minutes away from the lake. As long as he avoided prying eyes, they would make it to the castle soon.

Being away from any of his properties made him nervous. He pretty much assumed that somebody was always trying to scry him. Right now, there might be a mage at the Order freaking out and announcing his location, or maybe Elizabeth had survived and was glaring down angrily at a crystal ball. Eulalie had sent rats to recon the lake last night and they hadn’t found a secret army waiting nearby for his arrival, so he felt this was a reasonable risk.

The cool air from the open window entered the cab. Mike looked over at Cerberus. Two heads were hanging out the window while the third head, which didn’t quite fit through the opening, was grinning in his direction. As the truck sped up, Cecilia grabbed onto Mike’s shoulder in order to keep up with the truck. Cerberus started fidgeting with the knobs on the radio. When Mike hit a particularly deep pothole, Sofia elbowed the cab of the truck.

“Do better,” she hollered. “There’s nothing padded back here!”

“Your ass has plenty of padding,” Mike muttered. Cecilia gasped in response, then gave his ribs a playful pinch. “Hey, stop it!”

The radio blared to life, startling Mike and causing him to swerve unexpectedly. He straightened out the truck and then swatted Cerberus’ hand away from the radio. Sofia elbowed the cab again. He could see her grouchy expression in the rearview.

“Just five more minutes,” he muttered. Luckily, the sudden burst of sound from the radio had given Cerberus plenty of reasons to stop messing with it. The road smoothed out, and the remainder of the drive was without incident or traffic. When Mike pulled up to the dock, he held his breath and waited for a secret army to jump out at him.

Nothing happened. However, Sulyvahn was waiting for them by the shore with a shit-eating grin.

“Beat ya,” he said. “Looked like it was a bumpy ride.”

“A bit,” Mike replied as he helped Cerberus out. “Did you find our boat?”

“It’s a rental.” Sulyvahn walked to the end of the dock. The boat had four seats and looked like it was mostly used for fishing or just cruising around the lake. To fit everyone safely aboard, Sofia had to sit in the middle on the floor to keep it from tilting. Mike turned the key in the ignition, then moved the throttle forward just enough that they puttered away from the dock.

The silhouette of his castle loomed in the middle of the lake, the shadows eagerly gobbling it up as the sun’s rays faded. A trio of stars had already emerged, along with at least one planet. If Zel or Callisto were here, they could tell him which one it was. Mike looked up at the sky as he pushed the throttle forward. He promptly hit a wave and got chewed out by Sofia for being distracted.

Cecilia, who was once again clinging to Mike’s shoulder, kissed him on the cheek in a show of support. He took a deep breath and focused on the dark waters ahead. Along the hillsides, lights from distant homes twinkled through the trees. Eventually, they disappeared as the castle took up his entire field of view.

The dock at the castle had been repaired prior to his last visit here. Somehow, it was once again torn apart, almost as if someone took an axe to it. Frowning, Mike slowed the boat to a halt and trained his flashlight on the broken wood. Sofia trained her own beam on the dock as well.

“You’re going to have to find somewhere on shore,” she said. “Those planks will not hold up to foot traffic.”

“Agreed.” Mike idled the boat until he hit soft sand. Sofia promptly vaulted over the edge and grabbed the boat, then dragged it most of the way to shore. Out of an abundance of caution, Mike dropped the anchor. The last thing he wanted was to come outside later and have to swim back. The water was too cold for it. Once everybody was on shore, Mike let out a sigh of relief. They had made it.

“Welcome to Machnaimh Abbey, everyone.” Mike scowled at the darkened structure. He wasn’t necessarily thrilled that they had been forced to come here

just after the sun went down, but the cyclops and the three-headed woman would be difficult to explain to anyone who might see them.

There was an archway roughly twenty feet from the dock that allowed them through the walls to the courtyard of the Abbey. The moment they drew close to the stone structure, Mike felt faint pangs of dread deep in his stomach. The house had the geas. Oregon had a field of misdirection. The Abbey relied on terror and natural boundaries to keep curiosity seekers away, and other than a few patches of graffiti by the entrance, it was plenty effective. Even though he'd warned the others about the effect, its suddenness still caught him off guard.

"This feels far worse than I expected." Sofia put a hand to her stomach. "It's like some of my visions, only nothing is happening."

"Yeah, I hate it, too. How is everyone else?" Mike looked at Sulyvahn first.

The dullahan shrugged. "No problems here, friend."

"Cecilia? Cerberus?" Mike looked to them next. The banshee shrugged. Cerberus was busy sniffing at the archway. "Okay, then. Looks like we're in the minority, Sofia."

The Cyclops looked borderline annoyed that none of the other cryptids were experiencing the same fear she was. She made a point of stepping through the archway first, and Mike followed. The others came behind him.

Immediately inside the courtyard, a dark figure rose from the shadows, turning its attention toward the group. Mike went still, but didn't feel his precognition trigger. Whatever it was, this specter meant them no harm. Still, Sofia pulled her blade and placed herself in front of Mike.

"There you are, Caretaker." The robed figure pulled back the cowl of her robe to reveal platinum hair that looked like it had been woven from moonlight, and a face composed of sharp, ethereal features. She bowed to the group, then smiled wide enough that Mike could see the points on her teeth. "I was wondering when you would get here."

Mike stared at the woman, a different kind of dread sinking into his guts. How had she known they were coming? How did she get here? Why was she here?

"You've caught me by surprise," he admitted, stepping in front of Sofia and pushing the sword down. "I greet you, Princess Nyx of the Seelie Court."



The fae laughed. Somehow, it felt like the sound of a trap closing shut.