

Springtime

Mike Radley yawned, then stretched his arms, causing his left shoulder to pop egregiously. Opening his eyes, he realized that he had drifted off to sleep. It had been a long night chasing a swarm of scarab beetles out of his house and he had apparently drifted off sometime after breakfast.

The scarabs themselves were the result of an empty tomb that was discovered on the other side of his otherwise empty basement. Originally thought to be a crack in the foundation, everyone had been surprised to discover that the crack in the otherwise smooth concrete led somewhere else. Once Tink the goblin had declared the wall to be non-load bearing, Abella had been brought in to knock it down with a single punch. The gargoyle had been happy to help, but not so much when a colony of scarabs fled the room and crawled across her stony flesh. Despite being impervious to their clicking jaws, Abella had squealed and nearly taken everyone out with her wings in her hurry to brush them off.

“How long was I out?” he asked. His head was currently in the lap of the home’s resident banshee, Cecilia. The pupils of her eyes were white like pearls, and though she was blind to the visible spectrum as he understood it, she was capable of seeing souls and spiritual energy. Able to see the souls of the scarabs, she had been a huge asset tracking them down. Each time the colony attempted to set up a new nest, Tink would punch a hole in the wall with a hammer while everyone pitched in to catch them in some cloth sacks that Tink had once used to make her clothes out of.

“Perhaps an hour.” Her voice had a soft, Irish lilt to it, and her white hair floated about her as if she was suspended under water. Like her eyes, her hair was a startling white color, save for a thick lock of red just over her right eye. “You needed it.”

“I suppose.” He sat up and groaned, his back tensing up. He had only meant to sit for a few minutes, and his body protested being prone on the bench for so long.” He yawned again, then gave the banshee a peck on the lips. A chill ran through his body. “I didn’t miss it, did I?”

Cecilia smiled. “You wouldn’t hear the end of it if you did. There’s plenty of time, Sofia is getting lunch ready if you want to help.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” When he stood from the swing, she floated up to join him. Caressing his cheeks with her hands, she winked and then vanished from sight. With the banshee gone, he felt a bit warmer already.

Out in the front yard, a small cluster of centaurs moved about, trimming away the last branches of winter. It was the middle of March, and they were getting ready for the Spring Equinox celebration, which Naia had promised him would be a sight to behold.

When he had first moved into the home nearly nine months ago, the front yard had been just a small sidewalk that traversed what couldn't have been more than thirty feet of grass. Now though, it was home to an illustrious garden maze, at the center of which stood a magnificent sundial that had been recently polished. The giant bushes of the home had been trimmed into topiary figures by the centaurs, and already this month, he had chased away a few randoms who had wandered into his yard to take pictures.

The Radley estate hadn't always been so popular, but magical homes had a way of gathering attention, both good and bad. Chasing off people who wanted to take pictures of the bushes was far preferable to the literal battles he had fought in the yard with monsters and witches alike. It had been almost six months since the last incident which was the current record.

A pale figure wandered out from the maze and held up a hand in greeting. It was Sulyvahn the dullahan, who was also Ceclia's twin.

"Yer lookin' well rested, me lord." Sulyvahn was holding a small bucket full of clipped flowers that had yet to bloom in one hand and a pair of shears. While the centaurs maintained the rest of the gardens, the dullahan had somehow become in charge of the flowers themselves.

Mike nodded. "You didn't see any of those beetles out here, did you?"

"That I haven't." Sulyvahn pulled one of the flowers from his bucket and eyed it with suspicion, then gave it a shake. A tiny green light fell out of it and bounced off the ground. It looked like a tiny devil, and it stood up and chattered at Sulyvahn angrily.

"What is it?" asked Mike.

"Just a pest." Sulyvahn gave the creature a kick, and it vanished in a puff of smoke. "Now that spring is almost here, we've been seeing a bit more of them. They're creatures from my world, no idea why they're showin' up."

"Hmm." Mike made a mental note to bring it up next time he saw Titania, the queen of the fae. He had only seen her twice since November, and both times had been brief. The queen never came to the real world, but visited his mind

while sleeping. It was a strange arrangement, but it allowed her a short respite from the faerie court. "Should we be worried?"

"Nah. Little buggers are like locusts, they'll just start eatin' everything. I'll get the centaurs to spray some of that silvered water to get them out."

"You do that." Mike waved in parting and walked inside the house. The smell of freshly baked goods tickled his nose, and he walked across his living room and into the dining hall. It was the biggest room in the house, currently, able to sit everyone comfortably. Tink had custom made chairs for everyone to accommodate their unique body shapes. Currently, the doll Jenny was sitting on a small wooden chair across from a large rat that wore a crown on his head and plastic glasses that looked like they had been taken off of a Mr. Potatohead.

Jenny's face was the placid smile of a thrift shop horror, but Reggie the rat king wore an expression of doubt. Mike paused to see what they were looking at, and realized that the two of them were playing *Battleship*.

"Problem?" he asked.

"I am fairly certain she is cheating," Reggie said. The empty plates on the table rattled threateningly, but Reggie had long ago stopped letting the haunted doll intimidate him. The rat king and Jenny, once enemies, had apparently worked past many of their differences, and it said quite a lot about their relationship that Jenny didn't actually attempt to hurt him. "I have yet to figure out how."

"Hmm." From where he stood, Mike had a great view of Jenny's board. She had snapped the boats into pieces and scattered them about. As far as he knew, the rules didn't explicitly state that was forbidden, which would probably be argued about later. It wouldn't be the first banned game in the house as a result of rulebreaking. "Well, good luck."

"Thank you," Reggie said, and Mike continued into the kitchen. The smell of baked goods reached him well in advance, and he entered in time to see a feminine figure with a very shapely ass bent over in front of the oven. He paused to admire the view, then kept moving when Sofia stood holding a muffin pan.

"Cornbread?" he asked. He saw that the counters had been covered in different baked goods, such as pies and cakes. "Seems a little basic."

The cyclops turned to regard him with a long stare. She stood well over a foot taller than him, but he feared her tongue more than her physical presence. Though she could be sweet when the two of them were alone, she typically chose

to berate him over little things. It didn't bother him anymore, because he knew for a fact that it just played into her kink.

"I *thought* it would be nice to offer something that wasn't so sweet." She lifted the door of the oven with her foot, which caused it to slam with a metallic *bang*. The kitchen itself had expanded toward the end of February, but nobody knew why. This had allowed Mike to purchase a much larger fridge and redecorate the place so that it looked almost like a kitchen in a high-end restaurant. Sofia had appreciated the extra room to cook, and had spent a good chunk of the winter prepping meals that tasted like they had been cooked by professional chefs.

"Sounds like a great idea," he offered. "I love cornbread."

She huffed at him, and then moved the pan over to cool. "Aren't you supposed to be helping somewhere?"

"Yep." This was an outright lie, but it would get him out of the kitchen without further discussion. He snapped up a small pastry from the edge of the counter on his way out, then dashed out of the kitchen when she opened her mouth to yell.

When he passed the dining room table, Reggie's arms were crossed in anger, his whiskers twitching. A pair of forks hovered threateningly over his head.

"The rulebook does not have to explicitly state that you can't break the pieces," he declared in anger. A small rat squad that Mike hadn't noticed before huddled nearby, clearly fearful for their king. Reggie squinted beady eyes at Jenny, who stood defiantly with her hands on her hips. "In the instructions, it clearly stated that you were to place your ships fully on the board. By breaking your pieces, they are no longer ships, and that means you are unable to even start the game!"

A heavy pitcher lifted in the air, but Mike grabbed it as he walked by. "He's got you there, Jenny." He set the pitcher down at the other end of the table. "Jenny, if you mess up the table settings, you'll piss off Sofia."

The forks immediately dropped out of the air and clattered on the table. Though lacking a mouth, Jenny was able to blow a loud raspberry before hopping down from the table and running into the living room. Reggie just shook his head as he put the forks back where they belonged.

“Thank you,” he said. “I was afraid that we were about to have another *Clue* incident.”

Mike shivered, then shook his head vehemently. “We don’t talk about the *Clue* incident,” he reminded the rat king.

Reggie snorted, and Mike left. Not having a destination, he decided to head out back to see how preparations were progressing for the equinox. His backyard was so large that it rivaled the front, and was now easily half the total land his home sat on. A large fountain sat in the middle of the garden, and the massive oak tree behind it dominated the view. Just past the tree was a gentle slope that terminated at a stone wall with a large, wrought-iron gate. Beyond the gate, the occasional howl of a demon could be heard, but as long as it remained locked up tight, Mike wasn’t worried about another invasion from the Underworld.

That, and Cerberus was always watching. The three-headed demon dog was loyal to Mike now, and they sat on the other side, always watching for trouble. Tethered to the Underworld by dimensional chains, they couldn’t come more than a hundred feet into the backyard before reaching the end of their tether. He felt bad that Cerberus could never properly join the household, but it was probably for the best.

A few centaurs milled around a device that looked like a cross between a snail shell and a water tower. Tink had built the thing over the last two weeks, and was inspecting a large cistern that she had attached to the base, which consisted of long lengths of pipe that went beneath the ground and around the home to the front yard.

“How’s it going?” Mike asked when he walked up. He took a bite of the pastry and almost groaned in delight when the buttery texture traveled through his entire mouth. There was a hint of some kind of berry, but he couldn’t quite tell what. It was somewhere between raspberry and blueberry, which made him wonder if it wasn’t both.

“Tink find small problem, fix with hammer.” The goblin indicated a broken pipe made of PVC that sat off to the side. Mike’s best guess was that she had smashed it with the hammer and replaced it.

“So you think it will work?” He had thought the idea of a sprinkler system was a good one, but implementing it was a bit of a problem. The water in the home was fed to it by a spring buried deep beneath, which meant there was no easy way to hook anything up without potentially disrupting the spring itself.

“Husband look here.” Tink pointed near the bottom of the cistern, and when Mike bent down for a closer look, she snatched the pastry from his hand and stuffed it in her mouth.

“Hey, that was mine!” He crouched down so that he was eye level with the goblin. She wore a work apron and had dirt smudged all along the green skin of her arms and legs. Her reddish hair had been pulled back into a ponytail, revealing the short yellow horns on her forehead. When he had first met the goblin, she had stolen his tools. A fight had ensued, which turned into sex, which now meant they were married, according to goblin law, anyway.

He wouldn’t trade her for anything in the world.

“Husband pay for doubting Tink,” she informed him with a condescending pat on the cheek. Her mouth was still full of pastry as she spoke.

“She’s got you there, lover.” The water in the fountain swirled into a frenzy and the nymph Naia appeared. A statuesque beauty, her blue and green hair rippled behind her as if she stood in a breeze. Her feet were translucent, her body made of the very water she stood in. “But yes, we tested it this morning. It should work.”

“I guess that leaves the star of the show.” Mike looked past Naia at the oak tree. “Where is Amymone?”

Naia pointed upward with her finger and rolled her eyes.

“Again?” He looked up into the thick branches of the tree and was just able to make out a figure through the mostly bare branches. The dryad was huddled up against the trunk on one of the higher branches, a book clutched tightly in her hands.

“Apparently this one is a good read,” Naia explained. “We were making too much noise, so she went up there for some peace and quiet.”

He nodded. Once properly hooked by a story, it was nearly impossible to get the dryad’s attention. He could climb the tree and try to convince her to come down, but nobody seemed to be in a hurry to start the festivities.

Tink spent the next thirty minutes showing him the sprinkler system she had built. The way it worked was that Naia would summon a giant surge of water from her spring and force it into the cistern, which would activate the sprinkler

system properly. Apparently whatever Amymone had planned for the equinox was going to require a lot of water.

Up on the rooftop, he saw a dark figure wave to get his attention. He squinted his eyes to see who it was, and managed to make out the large stony wings of Abella the gargoyle. She was pointing at the front yard, but because she was backlit by the sun, he couldn't make anything else out.

He left Tink behind and went through the house. Jenny and Reggie had their faces pressed against the glass. Behind them, Death stood with a hot cup of tea in one hand and a small saucer in the other.

"What's going on?" he asked the grim reaper.

"I am not sure, Mike Radley." Death took a sip of his tea, the hot liquid vanishing in the darkness. Mike was grateful that it went somewhere other than his floor, but he had no idea where that would be. "This man has been standing there for several minutes now. Perhaps he is lost? If so, he is free to use one of my maps if needed, but I must insist he return it."

Frowning, Mike opened the door and stepped outside. Standing at the edge of his yard was an older man in a white sweater vest holding a newspaper under his arms. He wore silver spectacles, and his mouth was hanging open as he gazed up at the house.

Mike looked around the yard, and saw that the centaurs were still working, but a couple of them had grabbed their bows. Over by the far wall, a large creature that vaguely resembled a dragon lifted its head and snorted. The Jabberwock had been rebuilt after the incident with the shadow on Halloween, but was now trained to obey voice commands from Mike. It was hard to say what the stranger might be seeing, because the geas had a way of keeping anyone from seeing the fantastical creatures in his front yard. The effect used to only apply to creatures inside the home, but as the home grew, so did the geas.

"Can I help you?" Mike kept his distance. The man hadn't stepped into his yard yet, which meant the geas would protect him from a magical assault. Even if the stranger walked in and tried to cast a spell, the lion statues that stood above them would drop down and crush him to a pulp. Really, his main concern was any sort of physical assault, and Mike's danger sense (courtesy of Naia) would warn him of impending harm.

"The end is near," the visitor said with a raspy voice, then lowered his gaze. His eyes were cloudy, like partially cooked egg whites, and his hanging mouth

barely moved. The voice Mike heard was ethereal in nature, like someone speaking through a large tube. "Prepare yourself for judgment, child of—"

As if he was suddenly disconnected, the man lurched forward and his pupils appeared. When his jaw shut, his teeth clacked together, causing him to wince and rub at his cheek. His dark brown eyes focused on Mike, and a scowl formed.

"Are you the new homeowner?" he asked. It was as if the past few seconds didn't occur, and Mike scanned the street, convinced that the threat was still out there, that this stranger was little more than a decoy.

"Excuse me!" The man stepped onto Mike's property, but still maintained his distance. Though the ominous voice was gone, his body language was now aggressive. If not for the fact that he looked like a disgruntled professor who most likely battled heartburn on a full-time basis, Mike would have felt more intimidated. "Are you the new homeowner?"

"I am." Mike had learned long ago that the less he said, the faster conversations would end. It had been a survival skill for years, due to his social anxiety, but now he had better things to do than piss around with some lame-ass Mr. Rogers knockoff.

"My name is Murray, I live next door." Murray stuck his thumb out to the right, looking briefly like a hitchhiker. "I don't want to be that guy, but you and I have a problem."

"We do?" Still worried that a threat was imminent, Mike crossed his arms and begrudgingly gave Murray his full attention.

"Yes, we do, Mr...?"

"Radley. Mike Radley." Mike didn't bother offering his hand.

"Michael. While I appreciate all the work you've done to improve the grounds, I'm afraid I must insist on expressing my outrage over all of the noise you keep making." Murray's cheeks were now red, and his hands had balled into fists. It was clear he was working himself up.

"What noise?"

"Ever since you've moved in, I've had to call the cops multiple times because of the noise at your house. Like last night's party, for example."

"Um..." He thought back to when Tink had knocked holes in the walls, and when everyone had shrieked when the scarabs had flooded the upstairs hallway.

The women of the house had reacted in different ways, which was why the third floor hall had frosted over, and there was one broken window on the second floor where the fairy girls had started their own bug rodeo. Though the home had leaked noise on more than one occasion, it had only been during far greater battles than home extermination, and those had been outside.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about.” Murray pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it over. “I’ve spoken with my attorney. On his recommendation, I am letting you know that I intend to sue if you keep it up. I am losing valuable sleep and it is affecting my job performance. I also don’t appreciate all the extra foot traffic you’ve brought to the neighborhood, this is supposed to be a nice place.”

Mike took the paper. It looked like Murray had taken a picture of a computer screen displaying the local noise ordinance with his phone, then printed that image out with the remnants of a fossilized ink cartridge.

“Well?” Murray asked, looking quite satisfied with himself. “Do you agree now that we have a problem?”

Mike folded the paper and stuck it in his back pocket. He had once stabbed a demon in the head before collapsing a pocket universe on it. There was also the time he had fought witches in the front yard, or even the incident with Titania, queen of the fae. While Murray posed very little threat to him in pretty much every way, he definitely wanted the man off his lawn. The last thing he needed was a nosy neighbor. “Thanks for letting me know. I’ll try to keep it down.”

Murray, looking very satisfied with himself, straightened his sweater and left.

Mike watched him go, then pulled the paper out of his pocket. He would have Beth look at it later. While he didn’t necessarily feel like dealing with a court battle, she would know exactly how to handle it.

And what of Murray’s strange behavior? His King Theoden impression clearly wasn’t an act, which warranted a proper investigation. Next time he spotted Lily, he would see if he could convince her to spy on him. If nothing else, the succubus could hop into Murray’s dreams tonight and take a peek around to see if anything was amiss.

“It’s always something,” he muttered, then stuck the paper back in his pocket. Despite the incident with the scarabs, it really had been too quiet lately.

Taking a deep breath, he looked at the gathering of people in his yard and crossed his fingers.

Hopefully it wouldn't get too crazy.

The Labyrinth beneath Mike's home had seen better days. Enough progress had been made with the repairs over the last six months that Beth was finally able to traverse it on her own without a sturdy pair of hiking shoes, but it was still treacherous to walk in some areas. The shadow, a nameless menace with magical powers, had used a magical text called the Grimoire to take a shortcut to the middle of the Labyrinth, where he had encountered the naga Ratu.

The battle had not ended well for the naga.

Upon arriving at the naga's lair, Beth saw Ratu sitting on a large, soft chaise lounge beneath a modified sunlamp. Though Ratu had survived the attack, her recovery had been agonizingly slow. Currently, her upper torso was that of a human, and her lower body was the long slender form of a cobra. Her snake skin was shedding, and she had apparently convinced the fairies to help her out by scraping it away with stones that looked like pumice.

"Ah, you're early." Ratu put down the magical text she had been reading. The book shimmered momentarily before the cover expanded and sealed it shut. "I wasn't expecting you until later."

Beth felt the heat rise in her cheeks. Originally, she had planned to arrive early and perhaps mess around a bit with the minotaur, Asterion. He was a couple hundred pounds of muscle wrapped around a gentle soul. He also had an enormous cock of which Beth had become quite fond.

Sneaking away to a hidden part of the Labyrinth for a quick fuck was definitely Beth's idea of a fun time, but no amount of lube or foreplay would be able to help her with an issue that had developed earlier in the week.

"I ended up with some extra time on my hands," she offered. "It's looking better down here."

"The rats have been a big help." Ratu let out a sigh. "Can I get you some tea or something?"

"No, please. Stay where you are." Beth sat on a nearby chair and appraised the naga. The scale patterns that shimmered across Ratu's skin had finally

returned, and her fangs were a normal size now. Still, she looked paler than normal, and whenever the naga shifted, she winced. “Guess you and the Labyrinth are going to need more time.”

Ratu nodded. “The magic I used to survive was not a spell to be taken lightly. I essentially became one with the earth as much as possible without losing myself. My recovery is speeding up, however, and I expect to be in good health in the next few months. Maybe then I can tackle the secrets of the Grimoire.”

The Grimoire was a book of magic bound in leather with an apple on the cover. The house had been attacked on multiple occasions based only on rumors of the book’s existence. During the most devastating attack, Beth had managed to take it back from the shadow prior to his untimely demise. For now, the Grimoire was being held in a safe place where nobody could get to it—inside the belly of a friendly mimic.

A centaur wandered over with a silver platter that contained a pitcher and some cups. The centaurs were amazing healers, but Ratu had demanded that she herself oversee the repairs to her home. Now a small team of them occupied the naga’s lair and did their best to help.

“So what’s new with you? It’s been a couple of weeks since I’ve wandered down here.”

“Not much, I’m afraid. Much of my research was destroyed, what little I have left is either a complete mystery or merely parts of a larger puzzle. Some of the artifacts I had in storage were also destroyed, so now there’s wild magic down here.” The naga frowned, then shook her head. “It’s a little bit like the scarabs from last night. Magic is bouncing around everywhere, just looking for a new home. I’ve had the rats bring me plenty of replacement items, so if you see random objects lying around, that’s what those are for, and you should definitely not touch them.”

“It’s not...something I should be worried about, is it?” Beth suddenly felt like she had exposed herself to danger by coming here.

“It’s very rare for enchantments to be able to cross from objects to living tissue. Based on my research, you shouldn’t see any harmful effects.” Ratu frowned. “However, one of the destroyed objects was something Dana brought me to reverse her curse. It was a terrible loss.”

“Oh.” Beth wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Ratu and Dana had been working together to find a way to undo her curse. Dana had been killed by a

necromancer, who had then fused her soul to her body. Unable to ever truly die, her eternal destiny was locked to her new zombie form, which presented some serious ramifications if the spell could never be undone. Dana had gone on a long trip to hunt down some magical items that could reverse the spell, but the trip was a mixed success when she couldn't find them all.

Beth was certain the news would be devastating. "Does she know yet?"

Ratu shook her head. "She doesn't. My hope is that the enchantment from the flask will eventually find a new home and it won't be an issue. Even if I still had the flask, I'm in no condition to pursue a cure for Dana's plight. I haven't been in a state like this since—"

The naga paused, then frowned. "Never mind. Anyway, now that you're here, I have a favor to ask." She reached into the pocket of her sleeve and withdrew a crystalline vial. Inside, a black liquid sloshed around.

Beth recognized it immediately. Some time ago, a demon had imprinted a part of his soul onto hers as a way to control her. After Mike destroyed the demon, the demon's soul tried to take over her body. Ratu had built a device to filter it out, and then bottled up the resulting ooze.

"What do you want me to do with that?"

Ratu held up the vial and gave it a shake. It was like staring into the void, for light didn't reflect off of its contents properly. "I've been racking my brain to try and figure out why the shadow tried to take this from me. I can think of several reasons, and none of them are good. After much deliberation, I've decided that I would like it stored away in the Vault. I'm in no condition to destroy it, and need it kept safe."

Beth nodded, and took the vial. "Out of curiosity, why didn't you stick it in the Vault sooner?"

Ratu groaned in disgust. "My own stupid ego. I've been holding onto it ever since I could move around again, thinking I was the best person to keep it. However, last night, some of that wild magic attached itself to a robe I was wearing, and the fabric itself tried to strangle me. In a better state, I could easily manage an aura of protection, or detect the presence of magic. But...I'm not in a better state. If I can't even protect myself from an angry robe, then I definitely can't handle anyone who would come looking for that."

“I’ll take care of it.” Beth slid the vial into her pocket. She could feel an ominous chill where it rested, and wondered if it was a psychosomatic reaction or something more sinister.

They spent the rest of their visit discussing various things, but primarily Beth’s spiritual health. Ever since the incident with the demon, Ratu had done frequent checkups to ensure that there were no lingering issues with Beth or her soul. Beth helped Ratu rearrange some of the magical artifacts she still had stored. This was usually a job for Asterion, but these objects had been damaged and required a more delicate touch than the minotaur could provide.

Once she had finished her visit, Beth left the Labyrinth and was led by a rat to a shortcut that took her directly to the house. The rats had chewed a portal in a small alcove that led her to the servant’s quarters on the second floor. The servant’s quarters had been hidden behind a false wall, and could only be opened by the rats on the inside. While this was a perfectly good shortcut to the Labyrinth, Beth preferred taking the magical door in her closet. It was the atmosphere of mystery that she craved, watching that long stone corridor appear where there should be wooden walls, feeling the cold breeze on her face from the caverns below. Seeing the ceiling disappear in darkness above as the Labyrinth was revealed by the glittering lights on the stalactites above.

That, and Asterion could meet her at the entrance to the Labyrinth. A typically surly character, watching his eyes light up when he saw her always made her day. She frowned at the thought of what had happened earlier. It was a problem that had occurred in the past, typically after some rather intense rounds of self pleasure with her larger dildos. A quick medical search online revealed that it was either simple bruising, vaginitis or she was dying of cancer, there didn’t seem to be anything in between.

Truthfully, it was most likely her current sex life. While she absolutely adored the time she spent with either Asterion or Suly, both of them had abnormally shaped cocks that pushed her physical limits. No amount of lubrication would rectify the problems concerning bruised inner tissue.

It reminded her of the time one of her bigger dildos had slipped free of its mount during a rigorous session. Upon popping free, it had remained inside her when she had tried to sit up to see what had happened, forcing the toy in deep. The resulting pain had been horrendous, and it had been several days until she had felt comfortable doing anything again.

She made her way down the stairs and then to the kitchen. Just past the pantry was an unassuming door with a concrete set of stairs that went down to the basement. Sofia was busy making more pastries, but paused when she saw Beth by the stairs.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Putting something in the Vault for Ratu,” Beth replied. “Can you come with?” It was a general rule that nobody should go in the Vault alone, and she had known that Sofia had been baking since early this morning.

The basement was cold. Up until last night, the only thing down there was an enormous freezer in which Sofia kept prime cuts of meat. Now, though, there was a large opening across from the freezer. Beth pulled a piece of chalk from beneath the freezer and drew a door on the wall, then knocked on the concrete. Shimmering lights appeared and formed straight lines, revealing a magical door that opened with a creak.

The air of the Vault was supernaturally cold, and Beth chased the shadows away by flipping the light switch. The room was large, and looked very much like a thrift store, except the objects in here could potentially kill. She was careful not to touch anything as she made her way to the back. There was a glass display case where Jenny used to be stored. It was a perfect home for the vial.

Once the vial was in place, she turned around and paused at the sight of a painting that had been wrapped in paper. It sounded like someone was whispering from the other side, and she shook her head in an attempt to dislodge the sound. The room suddenly felt like it was closing in, and she took a few steps toward the door before losing her train of thought and wandering elsewhere.

It wasn't until she had crossed the room and was about to put her hand on the painting that she received a powerful smack from a long wooden spoon on the back of her hand. Yelping, she yanked her hand away and saw that Sofia had hunched over to step inside the Vault.

“That one's really nasty,” she said, then helped guide Beth out of the room. “Painted by a man who had gone insane, killed some people. Anyone who sees the painting becomes haunted by dark figures until they die.”

“Wow, seriously?” Beth rubbed her hand, and then pulled the Vault shut.

Sofia nodded. “A very unpleasant mess. It was actually in the Library's Restricted Section for a bit, I gave it to a previous Caretaker for safe keeping.”

Despite being miles away from the information desk, I could hear the damn thing whispering from time to time.”

“That’s seriously creepy. So what haunts it? Ghosts? Demons?”

“Demons would be the best word.” Sofia had started up the stairs. “At least, as far as you know them. Demon is kind of a blanket term, like alcohol. Can apply to many different things that share similar properties.”

“I thought all demons were the same?” Beth stopped to peek in the room where the scarabs had come from. The middle of the room had an empty pedestal and the ground had been swept clean of the pottery shards they had found. The working theory was that the scarabs had been trapped inside of something that had broken. Of course, this could have been something that broke yesterday or a decade ago, it was impossible to tell.

But when Beth looked at the smooth walls, she caught just a hint of color smeared around the room. She wondered if there hadn’t been something painted there that had been worn down over time by scuttling legs.

Sofia laughed behind her. “Yes and no. There are plenty of things that call themselves demons but aren’t. Biblical demons are the ones everyone is most familiar with. Ones like Lily and Oliver. These are angels that have fallen from heaven itself. But many religions have demons of their own with different origins.”

“I see.” The answer itself made sense, but opened the floor to a lot of questions. Beth turned away from the room and started up the stairs behind the cyclops. “So it’s really just a matter of nomenclature. Something nasty and from a dark place, must be a demon?”

Sofia nodded. They were in the kitchen now, and she turned on the sink to wash her hands. “That’s one way of looking at it. Categorizing demons is a tricky business, because one of the defining qualities usually involves devouring a human soul.”

“Not a lot of those just lying around, right?” Beth pointed to a pastry. “May I have one?”

“You may.” Sofia had pulled some dough out of a large bowl and was kneading it. “And thank you for asking.”

“I’m not a child.” Beth picked up the flaky pastry and bit into it. There was a type of jam inside that made her think of strawberries. “This is really good.”

“Thank you.” The cyclops smiled.

“So, a follow up question. If demons can exist from different religions, doesn’t that mean multiple religions are valid?”

Sofia laughed. “Ah, the eternal question. Which religion has it right? Well, in a way, all of them.”

“But how is that possible?” Beth asked.

“Simple.” Sofia set the dough down and put her hands on her hips. “Don’t trust everything you read. Each religion has its own agenda, for better or for worse. And when you rely on a human, of all things, to remain unbiased while passing the information along, you’re bound to get a few mistakes, some personal interpretations, maybe even a few exaggerations, opinions, etc.”

It made sense. She and Mike had done a ton of research into the after life and the underworld in an attempt to traverse it and get Cecilia back from the faerie realm last year. Notes had been made about multiple gateways that could be found there, and the destinations were often unpleasant.

“Is there a text that has it right?” Beth asked. “One that only contains the truth?”

Sofia grinned. “If there is, I certainly haven’t seen it. As a reader, it’s our job to question what we are reading, to learn how to read behind the lines. Just because it’s been put in print doesn’t make it trustworthy, no matter how hard we want to believe.” She picked the dough back up. “You have to remember, I was raised when the Greek gods were still kicking about. I’ve lived in a society where people could commune directly with the gods themselves.”

“Whatever happened to the gods?”

Sofia shrugged. “Great question. It’s interesting how some gods simply disappear, isn’t it? Best as I can tell, they all just kind of vanished one day. Were they hunted? Did they just leave? Or did they rely on belief to continue existing? I really don’t know. Maybe we were never meant to know.”

Beth watched Sofia with the dough, and a giant grin crossed her lips. “Would you like some help with this?” she asked. “I would love to talk about this stuff some more. What were the gods like?”

“Most of them were major assholes,” Sofia said. “Wash up and I’ll tell you.”

Mike counted almost thirty centaurs in the front yard. Though the moon tribe lived in a magical greenhouse behind his home, they used a shortcut that the rat king had built to come directly to his front yard from the middle of their village. Though he didn’t know all of their names, he recognized them as the men and women who took care of his yard. It was something he had never asked them to do, but was aware that it was a thank-you for rescuing them from persecution in their former land.

He was disappointed to see that their chieftain Zel was not among them. He rarely saw her anymore, but understood why. The centaurs had spent most of the winter mapping out the vast jungle where they lived, and had been working on an expansion plan, which required Zel’s full attention. The topography of the area allowed for some phenomenal agricultural opportunities, but they needed a central location for that. Over the winter, Mike had managed to bring in some livestock for the centaurs to raise, and what had once been a small collection of yurts and hay had become a full-fledged village. The tribe was flourishing, and though he missed his friend, he couldn’t be happier for her.

Besides, they had an agreement to meet every once in a while and just chat. He found himself looking forward to those days, if only because he felt like it was a miniature vacation from the day-to-day happenings in the house.

The centaurs milled about his yard with the other members of the house. A retinue of rats kept close to Reggie as he used the railing of the home to watch the proceedings, and Cecilia sat on her swing next to Suly. Down in the yard, a space had been cleared, and the centaurs had rolled out a pair of large drums. Not ones to waste any time, they had apparently decided that it was time to start a party of their own. A group of centaurs appeared wearing feathered anklets on their legs, along with bells, beads, and anything else that would flair out dramatically.

Looking down at Kisa, he said “Looks like they’re going to start dancing.” Standing at around four feet tall, Kisa had once been human, but a cursed object had transformed her most of the way into a feline. She wore an emerald dress that matched her eyes, the same dress she had worn for Zel’s chieftain ceremony so many months ago. “You going to join?”

He didn't even have to ask that question. Ever since the night he had mated with her, not only had they bonded, but she was now his familiar. The magic inside his body was now somehow mirrored in her own, and while she was next to him, he could sometimes feel her emotions. Right now, her heart was racing in excitement at the idea of dancing with the centaurs, and he couldn't help but smile.

"It's more like they're going to join me," she uttered with a grin, then vaulted over the railing. After landing without a sound, she jogged out toward the drums, and was greeted with an enthusiastic cheer.

"She seems happy." When he heard Beth's voice, he tensed up a little. Turning around, he saw that she had changed into a peasant blouse with a red skirt that went to her ankles. In each hand was a glass of wine, and she handed one to Mike. "Are you going to dance, too?"

He chuckled, then took the wine. "Nobody wants to see the electric slide."

"I don't know. I bet you could get the centaurs to do it with you, would probably be interesting to watch." She sipped her wine with a grin.

"Knowing my luck, they'd like it so much that they start doing that instead of what they currently do." He had seen the centaurs dance on a few occasions, and each time had been exciting. There was one centaur in the tribe that could actually do a backflip, which was apparently a sight to behold. "I promise that traditional centaur dance is far more impressive than what a bunch of drunk people in a bar can manage."

"Not a fan of line dancing?" Beth smirked.

"I'd rather eat my own hand," he grumbled, his mind going briefly back to middle school gym class. To this day, he had no idea why an entire month had been dedicated to country dancing. He couldn't hear *Achy Breaky Heart* without having flashbacks to the school gym.

"But you do dance. I've seen you."

His cheeks burned for a moment. Kisa loved to dance, and on more than one occasion, she had enticed him to join. She would literally dance circles around him while he tried to keep up, but at least he could sway to a basic beat without feeling awkward. The idea that Beth had been watching made him nervous. It was a throwback to before he had moved into the home, to before he had fallen into a life of magic, mayhem and intimacy with the many women in his home.

“When the mood strikes me, yes, I do.”

Beth looked at her drink, then slammed it. She took a deep breath, as if steeling her nerves, then stuck her hand toward him. “Come. Dance with me.”

He swallowed the lump in his throat, then raised his hand to take hers. Though he and Beth had lived in the same house for several months, it seemed like their schedules ran opposite. She was the day to his night, the two of them often pulled in opposite directions.

But now, maybe for a few minutes, they could be on the same schedule.

A yellow light descended from above, flashing erratically, and then Daisy appeared on his hand. She stood a few inches tall and had a body that was a cross between a human and a bumble bee. Though she was deaf, she could hear through the vibrations in her wings, and she was signing frantically.

“What’s she saying, I can’t follow.” Beth frowned at Mike.

“Apparently there’s a problem out back. They need my help.” Though Mike couldn’t sign at all, he was able to understand Daisy through a magical bond that they shared. It was as if the words appeared in his mind, which was extremely useful in times like these. “Guess my dance card is full. I’m really sorry.”

Beth smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Please look me up when you get back?”

“Of course.” He set his glass down on a small table by the porch swing and then went inside the house. It was the only way to get from the front yard to the back without scaling the sides of the home, which he had done on occasion.

Once out back, he found Naia in her fountain with a concerned look on her face. Amygone was on her knees at the base of her tree, her hands placed against its thick bark. Her face was screwed up in both concentration and frustration.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“No.” Amygone groaned and stood. “Apparently there’s a problem.”

“With what?”

“I thought that I had saved up enough energy over the winter to help the plants bloom.” Amygone’s job at the home was to maintain the ecosystem around the house. Connected to all of the vegetation around the house through

the roots of her tree, she was able to subconsciously manipulate not just the plants of the home, but the micro-climate that existed inside of the geas. On a conscious level, she could command all of the plants to emerge from hibernation and bloom, which was what today's party was supposed to be about.

"What's the problem?" he asked.

"I suppose being dead for several years." In a fit of madness, Amydone's tree had been cut down by the previous Caretaker, Emily. Luckily, the dryad had managed to hide her Heartwood away prior to the attack so that the tree could be reborn. However, this had resulted in her soul being stuck in the Underworld until her tree had been replanted. "For a good chunk of the winter, I was asleep, just like my tree. But I didn't spend all summer and fall stockpiling reserves for this moment, which means I'm running on empty now." She picked up a rock and threw it in frustration, then smoothed out her dress. "Fuck."

Naia snorted, a sound that was somehow almost musical coming from the nymph. "Sounds like you already know what the solution is, sister."

"Beg pardon?" Amydone looked over her shoulder at Naia.

"You need to fuck. Him." Naia jerked her thumb at Mike. "C'mon, you know you wanna. You've mentioned it before."

"Naia!" Amydone hid her face with her hands and her bark-like skin turned a deep shade of brown that was almost black. "The whole point of talking about stuff like that is for you to keep your fucking mouth shut!"

Mike laughed. Though the two weren't actual sisters, they certainly acted like it.

"Seriously though, fuck him." Naia pointed at Amydone's tree. Small buds were struggling to emerge from its branches. "I know you've been dying to, and now that you're not bald anymore—"

"NAIA!" The dryad stomped her foot, and one of the tree's massive roots hurled a chunk of dirt into the nymph's fountain, causing the water to turn brown. Naia frowned, then crossed her arms as the water beneath her swirled violently, then blasted the debris back out of her fountain and onto the lawn.

Over the winter, Amydone had lost all of her hair and curled up at the base of her tree to rest. Her long, green locks had returned in the last couple of weeks, locks which would undoubtedly turn a golden brown by the fall.

Mike put himself between the women, his hands held up in surrender.

“Naia, if Amygone isn’t interested, then we need to respect that. Amygone, we won’t do anything you don’t want to do. Now, if you’d like to watch me spank your sister for being a snitch, I think we could arrange something.” Though his relationship with many of the others had become carnal over time, he had always made clear that sex wasn’t a prerequisite for staying in the home. “Is there some other way we can help you out?”

Amygone turned away from Mike, her hair covering her face.

“Don’t pout,” Naia told her. “You were the one who got everyone excited for the equinox, you didn’t even have to do it this way.”

“Oh?” This was news to Mike, and he turned toward Naia. “What do you mean?”

“Amygone doesn’t have to wait for the equinox to do anything. She kind of wanted to make a big fuss this year because you actually seem to care about the little things and she was trying to impress you. Previous Caretakers would generally just bring her reading material and leave her be, but she remembers how you came out during the winter and put a blanket over her when it snowed.”

He nodded, remembering how he had fussed over Amygone. She had been recently revived before winter had come, and had worried more than once about her tree suddenly dying again. Unable to hire a local company to care for his magical tree, he had made sure to clear snow around the base of the tree and had watched the weather in case temperature fluctuations were too rapid.

Once she had come out of hibernation, he had kept her in books. Able to easily read five or six a day, he had tried to convince her to use a Kindle. She had stubbornly insisted on paperback only, which he found a bit morbid on account of paper being made from wood. Regardless, he had to agree that the new book smell couldn’t be beat, and the two of them would often pick a book to read together every week and then talk about it.

Amygone groaned, then crouched down. “If I had just been doing it a little bit at a time, then it would be fine. I just can’t make everything happen all at once, not this year.”

“I’m sure everyone will understand,” he explained. “It’s okay to have ambitions, but it’s also okay to fail. It’s how we all learn.”

“You sound like an after school special,” she muttered.

“But he’s right,” Naia added.

The dryad groaned again, then stood. “You do realize that this is not at all how I expected our first time to be, right? I was thinking maybe closer to summer, way after my awkward winter phase had ended. I could lure you up into my tree, maybe there’s just enough moonlight to see each other. The wind would rustle through the leaves, the crickets would be singing, we would look into each other’s eyes for a good long while...”

“That would be her romantic streak,” whispered Naia, though Mike was certain Amydone could hear. “She gets it from all the romance books she reads.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Amydone retorted. “I’m allowed to want what I want. That’s my prerogative. You only get one first time after all.”

“Surely it isn’t your first time...” Mike muttered.

“First time with you.” Amydone winked. “But I guess I’ll have to settle. I did kind of build this event up in everybody’s mind, so what’s done is done.”

“But your magic will give her the boost she needs,” Naia added. “Since she’s connected to her tree, she can take that energy and use it to help the plants and flowers bloom on time.”

Mike nodded, a crooked grin on his face. While it wasn’t uncommon to solve his problems with sex, he did find it amusing that he was officially going to start spring with a bang.

“I guess we’re probably in a hurry.” Amydone approached her tree and bent over, her hands pressed against the bark of the tree. “In a way, maybe this is kind of exciting, too. We can be strangers passing in the night, or perhaps—AYE!”

Mike had snuck up on the dryad and given her ass a playful smack. She had wide hips that were complimented by a slender waist and very thick thighs. When she looked over her shoulder at him, he gave her another playful smack.

“That’s for making things unnecessarily hard on yourself,” he informed her.

“Oh, do you want to do some roleplay?” she asked. “I’ll be that pesky rhododendron that just can’t get enough water, and you can be a beefy firehose.”

“Um, what?”

“Oh, I know! Maybe I’m a bonsai tree, and you’re here to tuck my branches in. Use those fingers to push my branches in place, tie me up a little. Oh, I know! You can be the dirty gardener, and I’m just a bush waiting to get trimmed.”

Mike looked to Naia for help. The nymph was laughing.

“She’s just fucking with you,” she told him. “I think.”

He turned his attention back to the mischievous dryad. She was chattering on now, something about his bark being worse than his bite. Using one hand to pull her gown up to give him access, he summoned his magic from deep within. It was wild magic, a cross between the abilities of a nymph that Naia had given him when he had become Caretaker, and the fae magic from Cecilia.

Sparks of electricity formed along his torso and then ran down his arm until they gathered along his hand. The idea of controlling this magic had been impossible six months ago, but after so many opportunities to practice, he had learned a few new tricks.

With the gown pulled to the side, he noticed that Amymone shared a feature with Naia. Neither the nymph or the dryad had buttocks, but Amymone did have the largest labia Mike had ever seen. They were dark brown with a swirling pattern that reminded him of the grain on his new office desk.

“Are you stumped?” Amymone looked over her shoulder at him, mirth on her face. It was clear she was still running with the dirty gardener gag. “I promise it works like the others you’ve seen. I am really hoping you have a green thumb.”

He didn’t reply. Instead, he allowed his fingers to just barely graze her labia, and watched in immense satisfaction as the sparks leapt from his fingertips to her body.

“Oh, shit!” Amymone’s body went rigid, and her legs shook. He touched her again, sending an additional wave of energy through her body, and she leaned forward into her tree. Her forehead now rested on the bark, and he could see tiny little lights migrating up the trunk.

Interesting. He used his fingers to explore her, marveling at how soft her skin felt despite how rough it looked. After pushing her gown further up her body, he rubbed the small of her back while he fingered her with the other hand.

Amymone’s spine made wave-like motions as she gasped and grunted against her tree. He was already hard, a benefit of the nymph magic flowing

through his body, and he paused long enough to take off his pants. His cock sprung free, despite the slight chill in the air.

“Ooh, give it to her, lover.” Naia was sitting on the edge of the fountain, her legs crossed beneath her. Miniature cyclones danced across the water’s surface, and the fountain was jetting water almost twenty feet into the air.

“Yes, please,” Aymone begged. “Fertilize me!”

Ugh. Fairly certain that her plant puns were a deliberate attempt to screw with him, he kept his attention on the curves of her body. Standing behind her, she was just short enough that his cock rested on the top of her ass. He looked down at her feet to see that little tendrils had sprouted and sunk into the ground. With a tentative push, he realized that she wasn’t budging, no matter how hard he pressed.

A smile crossed his face, and he leaned back far enough that he could push his cock into place.

“Ooh, are you about to plant someTHING!” Aymone let out a shriek as he buried himself inside her, allowing his magic to flow directly out of his cock and into her body. He could feel them connect on a magical level, and the tree was now glowing as if infested by fireflies just beneath its bark.

The dryad cried out in pleasure, and Mike leaned forward until he was resting on her ass. His hands moved along her belly and up to her breasts, and he gave them a squeeze. Her skin felt soft, but her breasts were where he could really feel how firm her flesh was. It took a powerful grip just to give them a squeeze, which emboldened him to be as rough as he wanted.

Inside, his magic was now flickering back and forth between her and him, driving their arousal to greater heights. He fucked her hard from behind, varying the tempo in tune with her reactions. At their feet, little flowers sprouted all along the ground, and he had to move his toes to keep them from getting tangled in the new growth.

“Naia...” Aymone looked at her sister. “I...need...water.”

The nymph gave a salute, and the swirling water in the fountain blasted into the cistern. Tink’s design allowed for the water to be pumped directly to the roots of the plants, otherwise the party-goers would all be enjoying a very cold shower.

“More,” Amymone begged, then looked at Mike. “You, not her,” she clarified.

Happy to oblige, he pounded her from behind. He moved his hands along her body, then slid them around to the front to squeeze her breasts some more. When he went to play with her nipples, he realized that they felt pointed, bringing to mind the tip of an acorn.

The tree creaked, and the bark split in a few places. Light glowed from within, and Mike briefly worried that something bad was about to happen. However, it was Amymone’s tree, and no matter how hard he was fucking her, he didn’t think she would allow it to come to any harm.

He dropped his hand along her waist and summoned a handful of magic, then sought out her clit. Unlike the fleshy nub to be found on a human woman, hers was quite hard, and most likely made of wood like the rest of her.

Amymone swore, then gripped the tree tightly as her hair bloomed. Tiny leaves appeared all along her body on the ends of twigs barely thicker than a nail.

When she finally came, the tree shook, dropping leaves and branches all around them. The roots shifted about, tearing up the yard, but the ground under their feet remained steady. Birds that had been nesting took flight, and more than a few dropped down to Naia’s fountain to complain to the nymph about their harsh treatment.

Mike clamped down on the tough skin of Amymone’s hips and let out a deep groan that transformed into a growl. His magic expanded inside of his body, and then pumped itself into Amymone. The tiny sparks of magic flowed through the dryad’s body and into her tree, and he watched in amazement as they circled the trunk and then split apart, some going up and most going down.

Naia’s fountain turned into a rush of water as she pumped hundreds of gallons of liquid into the cistern that Tink had built. Below his feet, he could actually feel his magic migrating away from them and traveling beneath the house.

A collective cheer rose from the front yard. Though he couldn’t see what was happening there, he was certain it was similar to what he saw in the back. Amymone’s tree creaked as all of its leaves opened at once, showering them in tiny lights that looked like butterflies. The flowers in the back all bloomed at once,

each one emanating its own unique musical note. More lights emerged from the foliage and faded away on the breeze as the land came to life.

“More,” Aymone cried, but this time it was at Naia. “More water!”

As Naia pumped more water into the cistern, Mike pumped himself into Aymone once again. She let out a low moan, and the roots of her tree shifted about. Though he had no desire to pursue another orgasm, it felt good just to be inside of her, to cling to her sturdy frame and just enjoy the feel of her body against his.

“You weren’t kidding,” Aymone muttered, then looked over at her sister. “I’m all tapped out. That was definitely not the short end of the stick, holy shit.”

“More tree jokes? Seriously?” When Mike pulled out of Aymone, he was surprised that he didn’t see any of his come follow. He assumed she had absorbed it all, which didn’t surprise him.

“Oh, please.” Aymone pushed herself to a standing position, then turned to face him while adjusting her gown. Her nipples were, in fact, shaped like tiny acorns. She grabbed his cock and gave it a playful squeeze. “You’re not one to talk. After all, you’re the one who brought all the wood.”

Mike groaned. “Please, no more,” he begged.

“You’re saying you want me to leaf it—” she never finished her statement, because Naia had summoned a jet of water to hose her down. Both of them laughed, and Mike couldn’t help but join in as he put his pants back on.

Mike checked the time on his phone and smiled. The party for the equinox was apparently going to roll well into the night, and he couldn’t be happier. The setting sun cast long shadows that had draped themselves over the garden, but many of the magical flowers had started glowing. It was like looking at a field of stars in his own lawn, truly a sight to behold. They had already chased off a couple of people who had wandered in while everyone gathered. Mike had mentioned to Tink that it was time to put a locked gate in the front yard.

Beth was currently dancing with Sulyvahn. He wasn’t sure if she had seen him when he came back, but she was clearly having a good time with the dullahan and he was very reluctant to butt in.

The centaurs milled about with food and drink, and it looked as though anyone able to come was there. Even Dana had come out to visit—after finishing up a project for the centaurs in January, she had turned her attention to the giant mechanism on the third floor. Last year, the shadow had unlocked a mysterious door on the third floor to reveal an observatory with a dilapidated telescope inside.

Mike hated that room. The few windows it had were boarded up from the outside, but when they had tried to open the large sliding wall that allowed a telescope to see the sky, it had been to a place of absolute darkness, though it was still the middle of the day. The observatory was meant to view a place that wasn't here on Earth, and it frightened him to think about what might be looking back when they finally fixed it up.

Still, it gave Dana something to do, and though he hated the room, he never felt like he was in danger while in it. The door had to be removed, because nobody was certain what the password was to get in, and it didn't seem like it could be opened from the inside. Now it just sat on the floor of the room, and Tink could often be found studying its inner mechanisms to try and figure out its secrets.

There was movement down by the lions, and Mike headed to intercept the newcomer. He assumed it was another jogger, or someone out for a walk that wanted a closer look, but paused when he saw a man in brown pulling a dollie laden with a sizable wooden box on it. The party cooled rapidly as the man walked past everyone, all of them holding still as if not to be seen.

The delivery man looked confused for a few seconds as his eyes slid over everyone, then finally landed on Mike. "Mr. Radley?"

"That's me."

"Great. Would you like me to bring this inside, or...?"

"No, you can just leave it right there, please." Mike wasn't expecting a package, and was immediately suspicious.

"I mean, I can, but..." The delivery man looked around again. "Isn't this a wedding reception?"

"It's just a rehearsal dinner." Lily slid up beside Mike, her arm going around his waist. The succubus gave him a tight squeeze. "For two people who are very much in love, isn't that right, Mikey-bear?"

She pinched his cheek hard enough that he winced.

“Yeah, well, I might be having second thoughts.” He moved toward the delivery man, who set the crate down. “Sent away for a new wife, this must be her. Hope she has enough air in there.”

Lily laughed obnoxiously, and the delivery man just shrugged and held out his tablet for a signature. After getting one, he took his dollie and left, leaving Mike and Lily standing over the box. The party livened up again, but the random interloper had definitely put a damper on the mood.

“So what did you buy me?” Lily asked, then ran her fingers over the wood. “I’m guessing it was expensive.”

“I haven’t bought anything, Tink or Beth must have ordered it.” He made eye contact with Beth, who stood nearby with Sulyvahn.

“Wasn’t me,” she told him.

“Must have been Tink then?” He looked at the packing label, but it didn’t have a return address. “At least, I hope it was her.” His luck with random packages on his doorstep wasn’t great.

“Should we open it?” Lily asked, her tail appearing over her shoulder. It looked like she was going to wedge it into a gap in the wood when the crate shifted on its own. The party came to an abrupt stop as all eyes now rested on the mysterious delivery.

“I think we should definitely open it,” Mike said, taking a step back. “But not inside. And definitely not without backup. Everyone, stand back.” He held up his hands and walked in a circle. “I don’t want anyone getting caught up in this. Yuki, where are you?”

“Here.” The kitsune had been sitting up on the porch. She already had a pair of shimmering spheres of ice in her hand that were swirling around and forming into a pair of icy spikes.

“Abella, I need some—” the gargoyle landed behind him with a solid thump. “Muscle,” he finished.

“I’m on it,” she said, then grabbed the lid. Tink appeared with Kisa in tow, both of them looking very concerned.

“No time like the present.” Mike muttered, then knocked on the crate. “You can come out with your hands up, or we can just set this thing on fire, your choice.”

Whatever was inside the crate thumped on it loudly. It sounded like morse code for an SOS, so Mike nodded at Abella, who then sank her fingers into the wood and pulled.

A diaphanous white substance made a thick ripping sound as Abella lifted the lid, and her features went from confusion to horror. She immediately tried to force the lid back on, but whatever was inside was now fighting her, and the crate was bouncing around on the sidewalk.

“Kill it!” Abella cried, her eyes falling on Mike. “We have to kill it!”

Shrieks of panic went up from the party-goers. The centaurs, now expecting battle, rushed for whatever weapons they could find. The temperature in the air dropped as a large icicle formed over the crate, ready to drop at a moment’s notice. Tink and Kisa grabbed Mike by the hands and pulled him away, but Lily was now at Abella’s side, trying to force the lid shut again.

“Wait, what? Wait!” Lily’s face went from serious to concerned as she suddenly fought against Abella, wedging her tail into the box. “Abella, stop!”

Abella shook her head vehemently, and then used her wings to shove Lily to the side. Lily looked to Mike for help, her eyes pleading.

Mike ran up to the crate and put his hands on the other side. Whatever was rustling around inside was becoming frantic, and the wood creaked as Abella used her thumbs to press nails back into the wood.

“Mike?” This was from Yuki, who was waiting to drop the icicle. “What do you want me to do?”

“You don’t understand,” Abella growled. “The thing in this box, it is dangerous, more dangerous than you can ever know. We had these in France, they killed thousands of people.”

Mike wanted to trust Abella, to let Yuki drop the icicle, but the look of panic on Lily’s face gave him pause. He looked from Abella to Yuki, then back to Lily.

“This one is different,” Lily promised. “You have to trust me.”

Abella snorted, and Mike paused. He hadn't come as far as he had by making assumptions, and clearly whatever was in this box needed to get out. Abella wanted to kill it, Lily wanted to let it out, but the choice needed to be his.

He decided to follow his gut. Placing his fingers on the edge of the lid, he looked at Abella and shook his head.

"Help me open it," he told her. His words seemed to stun her, for her hands slipped off the lid and it burst open from inside. A humanoid figure leaned over the edge of the side and coughed, then took a deep breath. It was a woman with dark black hair that hung over her head, and she looked up to see everyone standing around her.

"Did I make it?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"You sure know how to make an entrance," Lily said from her spot on the ground. "Probably would have been better if you had called first."

Mike tried to step around to get a better look at her, but his hands were stuck to the lid by the sticky, silken material. When he pulled them away, he realized that the same material he had seen earlier now clung to his fingers, and his heart slammed in his chest once he realized what it was.

"If you'll make some room," said the newcomer, and she pulled herself out of the box. Her pale torso came easy, but where her butt should have been was a large, shiny black surface that kept coming out of the box. Mike felt his heart racing now as several legs appeared and stretched out, allowing the newcomer to stand and look around.

Cries of alarm came from multiple directions, and the stranger suddenly looked uncertain. Mike took a few steps back, fighting the panic that had taken root inside of him. It was an old and common phobia, one that took him back to his own traumatic childhood that included weeks on end sleeping in the unfinished basements of distant relatives and old family friends.

"Eulalie?" Dana pushed her way through the centaurs, her eyes wide in astonishment. "Is that really you?"

"Uh...yeah." Eulalie drew herself up to her full height, now standing over Mike. "This was very...last minute, and...um..."

Dana ran up to Eulalie and embraced her tightly. "It's so good to see you!"

Mike took several deep breaths in an attempt to calm himself. His mind was struggling to reconcile what he was seeing, but somehow, Lily and Dana seemed to know who she was.

Dana released the newcomer, who now turned her attention back to the crowd.

“Hi. My name is Eulalie.” She smiled nervously and gave everyone a wave. “Emily said that I should come here if I ever got in trouble, so...here I am.” From the waist up, Eulalie looked like she was in her mid-twenties, with raven hair that covered most of her face and hung past her shoulders. Her dark eyes were like pools, and Mike was drowning in them already.

From the waist down, she had the glossy black body of a spider.