

## **She's a Fixer Upper**

Dana stood beneath the ancient telescope, squinting up at a series of gears. It was like staring into the fathomless depths of the ocean, each spindle holding a gear vanishing up into the darkness of the mechanism that positioned the telescope. If she hadn't spent the last few months rebuilding the system from scratch with her own tweaks, she would have no idea what she was looking at.

"Well?" she asked, then looked at the goblin standing next to her.

"Hmm." Tink wore a pair of magical goggles that enabled her to see how things worked and what was wrong with them. The magical lenses clicked back and forth over the primary apertures as she scrutinized the array. "Tink see. Gear right, debris wrong."

Tink handed Dana a screwdriver and then pointed. Dana got on her ladder and climbed to the top, then looked down at Tink.

"Dead girl go higher," Tink informed her. "Two feet from outside, lost screw."

"You heard the girl." Dana tapped her foot on the ladder, and Ticktock extended itself, raising her up so that she could stick her arm in the gears. She clutched the screwdriver in her hand and looked at Tink again.

"Left. More left. Stop." The lenses were clicking like a tiny typewriter now. "Use screwdriver, gear sixty-two."

Dana looked into the mess of gears and pulled a flashlight from her belt. Shining it upward, she picked out the correct gear based on her photographic memory of the schematic and saw that the head of her screwdriver was inches away from a dull, black object jammed into the teeth between sixty-two and its neighbor.

"Good job," she told Tink, then pressed the head of the screwdriver into the gap. Grease coated her arm as she wiggled back and forth, trying to dislodge the foreign object. It looked very similar to one of the black screws they had used to replace the panels of the observatory. Replacing the panels had been a weird experience, because she had been forced to go outside to properly install them. The telescope was mounted to a metal dome on top of a mountain which overlooked a barren wasteland with no water or vegetation. The view made no sense, because the observatory itself was built atop a Victorian era home on the

east coast of the United States. Somehow, the interior of the observatory led to an alien landscape devoid of life. Ever since the first time Dana had seen this room, the foreign stars in an unfamiliar sky had called to her in a way that she couldn't explain. Fixing the telescope had become an odd compulsion, one that she had only experienced once before when she had encountered an old clock that turned out to be the mimic beneath her feet.

The ladder extended a bit more in an attempt to give Dana more leeway inside of the mechanism.

"Thanks, Tick Tock." She patted the top of the ladder appreciatively, wondering if the mimic even enjoyed physical affection. It wasn't something she had ever thought to ask, and it had never gone through the trouble to tell her to stop.

She pulled a hammer from her belt and was able to line it up with the screwdriver. Giving it a good whack, the bolt flew out, allowing the mechanism to move freely.

With a loud grinding noise, the gears rotated as the body of the telescope dipped. The safety pin they had put in place failed, shearing from the weight of the scope. Dana grunted as her arm was sucked into the gears and pulled off of her body.

"Shit!" She threw the hammer down at the floor and waited a moment for the mechanism to settle. Once it was stationary, she reached into the machine with her remaining arm and found her lost limb. The edges had been mangled, which meant she was going to need help reattaching it.

"Nasty," Tink muttered, sticking out her tongue. "Tink glad, still have both arms."

Dana threw her arm at the goblin, who let out a squawk before catching it. She waited for Tick Tock to lower her to the ground, then stepped off and held out her hand.

"Looks like we're done building for the day." She turned her attention to the failed locking mechanism. "I thought you said this would hold?"

"Should have worked." Tink handed over Dana's arm, then frowned at the dented body of the telescope. Dana was glad they hadn't installed any lenses yet,

as they would be broken. When Tink picked up the broken pin, she growled and held it up. “Wrong fucking pin.”

“What do you mean, wrong pin?” Dana knelt down to take a look and then groaned. It was one of the thinner pins from a different part of the mechanism.

“Need thicker pin, why dead girl put wrong pin in?” Tink knocked on Dana’s forehead.

“Because...I was distracted.” She didn’t bother going into details, and the goblin didn’t ask.

“Next time, right fucking pin.” Tink flicked the pin at Dana, and it bounced off her forehead to clatter on the floor. “Tink check gears tonight, but busy tomorrow.”

“Nah, don’t even bother.” Dana looked at her drawing of the mechanism on the table. She had been working on this project for months, but was rapidly losing motivation for it. After so many thousands of dollars and multiple setbacks, there were better things she could be doing.

Once she figured out what those things were, she would go do them.

Tink helped Dana clean up the work space, then used her goggles to identify where all the blood had gone. It took them another hour of scrubbing zombie blood away before the observatory was declared free of potential zombie virus.

Picking up her arm, Dana walked out the door and paused in the hallway. A small group of foot-tall rats stared at her from the opposite wall, their spears held suddenly ready as they attempted to look like they were still officially on guard.

“No surprises today,” she informed them as Tink squeezed past her. The goblin disappeared down the hall, muttering a list to herself of things she was going to work on. The goblin, foul tempered as she seemed, was one of the kindest souls Dana had ever met. Sure, she swore, spit a lot, and threw the odd tantrum, but was a phenomenal partner when it came to building things. They never argued, and the small talk was almost always at a minimum. What would be an uncomfortable silence for others was peace for Dana.

Talking had become hard for her. Six months ago, almost nothing phased her, but ever since a fight with the Jersey Devil had turned her into a feral creature who killed and ate the living, her emotions had been out of whack. The death of a

friend had been the final trigger, and even a casual statement had the potential to catapult her back in time. Ever since she had died, her memory had become perfect, and nothing poured salt into a wound like having to relive her most traumatic experiences.

Down the hall were stairs that she took to the main floor of the house. In the living room, Mike sat on the sofa next to the coffee table, a giant egg strapped into a baby carrier on his chest. A checkers board had been set up on the table, but half the pieces were gone and had been replaced with random objects from around the house. The spooky doll named Jenny sitting across from him gave one of the pieces a kick, sending it across the room.

“It’s not my fault that you forgot the salt shaker was one of my pieces.” Mike rubbed the top of the egg, then captured two of Jenny’s checkers. “Maybe if you’d stop losing pieces, we wouldn’t have to replace them with—oh, hey, Dana. Trouble with the telescope?”

She held up her arm, which she had taped shut to keep it from leaking zombie blood everywhere.

“Do you want to make the joke about being disarmed now or later?” she asked.

He waved her off. “Too easy. You heading to Zel’s to get it fixed?”

“Yeah.” She watched as he stood, cradling the egg with one hand. If he were to lower the egg and wear a shirt over it, she would swear that he was pregnant. In fact, at the rate he was meeting and fucking new monsters, it wouldn’t surprise her if he ended up that way.

Even though her sense of humor was dramatically dulled due to her undead condition, the thought of a pregnant Mike begging someone to rub his feet put a smile on her face.

“Here.” He gave her a small box, which she tucked under her arm. “These are some things they wanted me to order for the centaurs. Tell her hi for me.”

“Yeah, sure thing.” She watched as he sat down across from Jenny, who had hidden three of his pieces while he wasn’t looking. The ghost was the very definition of a troubled spirit, but she had been single-handedly responsible for saving the world from the apocalypse a few months ago. Mike examined the

board and pulled a chess piece, a keyring, and an army man out of his pocket to replace the pieces that Jenny had stolen.

Damn, Dana thought. Her life was weird.

Walking out the back door of the house, she saw Naia the nymph and Amymone the dryad sitting on the edge of Naia's fountain. The dryad was letting Naia rub her shoulders while reading *House of Leaves*. Around the edges of the fountain, small animals were busy eating some of the fruit that had fallen out of Amymone's tree. The dryad had found a way to produce multiple fruit in what should have been an oak tree, but that was magic for you.

"Hey." Naia greeted Dana warmly, her eyes sliding down to Dana's burden. "Uh-oh."

Amymone looked up from her book, her eyes stopping on Dana's severed arm.

"Well now," she began. "That's a bit disarm—"

Naia clapped a hand over the dryad's mouth.

"We all knew that was coming," she said with a soft smile. The dryad loved puns even more than Mike did.

Dana managed a weak grin, then crossed the yard and entered a small building that looked like it belonged on a golf course. On the far wall was a portal that took her across space and deposited her into a yurt. A pair of centaur guards nodded at her when she emerged, their eyes moving to the bloody stump.

"House is fine," she told them. "Just had an accident at work."

The guards relaxed, grateful to know that the house wasn't under siege. The centaurs lived a separate life from the home, but any assault on the house was officially seen as an attack on them, and they would rush to defend it at the cost of their lives if they needed to. They were still bitter about the house being stolen by an angel back in March, but the house had come back stronger than ever as a result.

"Where's the boss at?" Dana asked.

One of the guards pointed in the direction of Zel's yurt at the center of the village.

“Thanks.” The village was bustling with life, the centaurs greeting her warmly. Her drone project had helped them to establish agriculture in the area, and she was a frequent presence. Quetzalli, her pseudo-girlfriend, often accompanied her on such trips. As a dragon-god bound into the form of a curvaceous woman, she was revered by the centaurs. The relationship definitely escalated Dana’s social capital.

It felt good to be accepted. She doubted they would be as kind if they all knew how much they smelled like steak and hamburgers to her. All living flesh had a smell that typically left Dana’s mouth watering, the more intelligent the creature, the better. On at least two separate occasions, she had almost asked Zel if she could eat a member of the tribe who had recently died.

Earlier in the year, she had gotten into a fight with a forgotten tribe of beings from North America known as the Nirumbi. Driven to a level of desperation she hadn’t yet experienced, she had feasted on them during the fight, an event which had given her quite the taste for living flesh. It was hard to put it out of her mind some days, and was likely the reason she was so emotionally unbalanced. The hunger was always there, hovering in the back of her mind.

It also didn’t help that eating the Nirumbi had imparted her with greater strength. She was always stronger after feeding, but actually eating living tissue had made some of that strength permanent.

She nodded at the guards outside of Zel’s yurt, then walked through the flaps. Zel, the chief of the centaurs, was studying a bubbling flask in the center of her alchemy table. A mixture of old world lore and modern equipment, it looked like a fantasy version of a scene from *Breaking Bad*.

Zel looked over her shoulder to see who had come in. “Oh, Dana, it’s you. Perfect timing, could you give me a hand?”

Dana walked up behind the centaur and tossed her arm onto a clear space where Zel could see it. The centaur snorted in mirth, turning just enough to roll her eyes at Dana.

“In a perfect world, we’d both think that was hilarious,” Dana informed her.

“Here.” Zel used a pair of tongs to grab the flask and started swirling the mixture inside. “Keep it moving or the liquid will set.”

“Aye aye, captain.” Dana set Mike’s box down and took the tongs. She repeated the motion exactly the way Zel had taught her so many months ago. There was a benefit to having flawless muscle memory.

Zel double-checked some of her notes and then held Dana’s hand still while she added a powder to the flask. The bubbles turned to foam, and the mixture turned blue.

“Excellent.” Zel took the flask back and put her thumb over the top and gave it a good shake.

“So what are you working on today? Bomb? Fairy repellent?” The faeries had a bad habit of messing with the centaurs, though nothing serious.

“Neither of those things.” Zel took her thumb off the top and put the flask to her lips, slamming the contents of the flask in moments.

“You’re not planning to transform into a human again or something, are you?”

Zel pulled the empty flask from her lips and let out a belch. “Nope. The foal is giving me heartburn and the shits like nobody’s business.” She moaned and rubbed her belly.

“You’re pregnant back here, though.” Dana rubbed Zel’s flank.

“It’s caused by where the human stuff meets the horse stuff. Common issue, but...” Her face scrunched up and she let out another belch. “Wow, that feels better.”

“You make pregnancy sound awesome,” Dana deadpanned, then picked up her severed arm. “Anyway, I was hoping you could reattach this.”

“Yeah, no problem.” Zel moved away from her alchemy table and opened a nearby drawer. Inside was a small kit with needles and special sutures for Dana. “Let’s go outside, the light is better.”

“Sure. Oh, and this is for you.” She tapped the box. “From Mike.”

“Those must be my vitamins. Hold on a second.” She cracked the box open and examined the contents. “Struggling to get enough iron in my diet.”

“Sure.” Dana had no idea what being pregnant required. Even when she was alive, children hadn’t been on the radar. Alex had mentioned adoption a couple of

times, but they had both been young and assumed they still had years to figure that stuff out.

Zel popped the cap off a bottle and pulled out a vitamin, which she then popped in her mouth. A waterskin hung on a hook nearby, and she lifted it up long enough to take a swig.

“Okay, let’s get you put back together again.” Zel held up the suture kit and headed for the exit. Dana followed her through the flaps and they moved around to the back of the structure to a work bench with a stool for Dana to sit on.

Zel unrolled a nearby blanket and spread it across the surface. Dana sat on the stool and laid her stump on the blanket.

From a pouch on Zel’s waist, a pair of white latex gloves came out. Zel didn’t bother scrubbing in before starting, as she was the only one who needed to worry about an infection. Dana held still as the centaur lined up the bones first.

“Crushed?” she asked.

“Yep,” Dana sighed. “Trying to get that telescope working, got caught in the gears.”

“Hmm.” Zel pulled the suture kit out and set it to the side. “It’ll take me a few minutes to get these fragments lined up. Looks like a fairly clean break, all things considered.”

In fact, it likely hadn’t been a clean break. Dana’s undead body had the ability to regenerate itself as long as all the pieces were there. The bones would have shifted and popped back into place using the magic stored in her body, but it would come at a cost.

Zel ordered a centaur to prep a small fire, then had them bring some pliers that she had forgotten from her bench. She used the pliers and some tweezers from the kit to push the bones back in place. The regeneration was so aggressive that the fragments would sometimes make a clicking sound as they healed on contact.

Zel hummed to herself as she put Humpty Dana back together again, then pulled out the suture kit to start on the soft tissue. Since the muscles and veins had been severed, it was important to at least push them back together so they could rejoin her body.



“Ah, shit.” Zel held up the sutures. “We’re running really low on spider silk. I’m going to need you to get some more from Eulalie.”

*They stood at the base of the mountain, all eyes on a dark crevice that Bigfoot and Abella had just unearthed. Eulalie stood frozen, contemplating that yawning portal with her hands pressed together over a pair of dog tags in her hand.*

*“I don’t know if I can,” she whispered, knowing that the corpse of her sister was in there.*

*Mike stood off to the side, his hands wrapped around a large egg and one arm in a sling. His face had gone pale, his eyes already red from the tears.*

*“We have all the time in the world,” he told her. “And there is no right or wrong. If you want to see her, you can. If not, that’s okay, too. This moment is about you and nobody else.”*

*Strangely, Lily was standing back and away from everybody. She had barely said a word all morning, her expression hidden behind a pair of giant sunglasses.*

*“I just...I want to remember her as she was, and...” Eulalie shook her head, her dark locks spiraling around her shoulders as she bolted into the forest. A cold breeze blew across the opening of the cave, causing it to cry out in mourning.*

“Dana?” A concerned hand squeezed her shoulder. “Hey, you okay?”

“Still dead, thanks for asking. Mind wandered is all.” Dana looked down at her arm to see that Zel had reattached her biceps. The muscle was thickening where it had been severed, going through months of recovery in moments.

“What were you thinking about?” She offered Dana a dry rag.

“What’s this for?”

“You’re crying.” Zel was familiar with Dana’s intense flashbacks.

“So I am.” Dana wiped her face, surprised that she hadn’t noticed the moisture. Zombie tears came out at room temperature, which was part of the problem.

“You didn’t answer my other question,” Zel said as she adjusted Dana’s arm to start working on her triceps.

“You’re right, I didn’t.” Dana had a strong suspicion that even speaking about Velvet’s death would send her down the rabbit hole of grief once more. Eulalie’s name had been the trigger, there was no doubt in her mind.

Zel changed the subject, asking Dana about a new mapping project the centaurs had planned. Earlier in the year, it had appeared that the Mandragora plant had returned to the area, but Zel couldn’t be sure if it was the original plant or an offspring. After some reports from other centaurs, the plant had vanished. Zel thought it may have just moved to a better spot, but she wasn’t about to go looking herself, as the Mandragora had a very interesting defense mechanism.

It took almost two hours for Zel to complete the task. Throughout the process, anything she used was either sterilized in the fire or simply burned. Even the blanket was tossed into the flames—the last thing anyone wanted was a breakout of zombie centaurs.

“Hmm.” Dana flexed her arm to make sure that everything worked. She could feel the pit of hunger in her belly expand as her magic was used to heal the damaged tissue. “Looks like I’m all fixed.”

“Not all wounds are external.” Zel tapped Dana on the forehead. “You may be dead, but you still have feelings. Have you talked with Mike about it?”

“A bit.” He had been hit hard by Velvet’s death, and she hadn’t wanted to bother him. Now it had been several months, and she was still having the odd outburst. “Ratu thinks the part of my brain that regulates emotion may have been partially resurrected. So when it catches up to me, I get it all at once.”

Similar things had happened to Dana before, but it was always after feeding off of Mike’s magic. His semen was essentially a calorie bomb of magic capable of replenishing her lost reserves as well as preventing her from taking a bite out of anyone who moved.

Zel stuck the tweezers in the box and held it up. “No more injuries until you refill this. I have maybe enough for a severed toe, or perhaps a pinky.”

Dana took the box. She had nothing else going on, so figured now was as good a time as any. “Thanks, Zel.”

“Anytime.” Zel pulled off the gloves and tossed them in the flames. The air filled with the scent of carcinogenic smoke, which managed to overpower the smell of Zel’s hamburger hide.

Damn, Dana was hungry. Smacking her lips, she left the centaur behind and returned to her home through the portal. With so much regeneration to fix her arm, she was overdue for a snack, which meant raiding the fridge for a shot of Mike's semen.

She had long ago come to terms with the idea that her survival relied on eating Mike's sexual fluids. It was hardly the weirdest part of her day anymore, and she had even hooked up with him a couple of times. When she had been alive, it had only been women who sexually excited her. Now? Dead girls didn't lust after anyone, at least not until they sucked down enough magic spooze to tickle their hypothalamus back to life. It acted like a magical aphrodisiac, and had led her to fuck anyone (or anything) on hand until her lust was satiated.

There really wasn't a word for that on the sexuality spectrum.

Without knowing where Quetzalli was, Dana had nobody on hand to fuck afterward. She could call Lily, but the succubus was likely on another crusade hunting and eating the souls of bad people. Last month, a famous celebrity had OD'd on the set of a movie. According to Lily, his soul was currently being used as a cum dumpster inside her belly by his fellow inmates.

Fucking Mike was an option, but the couple of times she had, it had turned her into an emotional mess afterward. Every emotion she should have felt in her undead state would catch up to her all at once. These events had all been before Velvet's death and the incident with her feeding frenzy. Considering her current emotional issues, she didn't think such a pairing was a good idea and would likely end with her in hysterics

Before she knew it, she was standing in front of an open freezer, staring at a tray of shot glasses full of frozen semen with popsicle sticks stuck in them. She didn't even remember walking there. The carefully measured portions had been created to satisfy her hunger without causing her lust to become out of control. The frustrating void in her belly demanded that she eat something soon, before she took a bite out of someone.

"Fucking hell," she muttered, pulling out the tray. She moved to set it on the nearby counter and caught a deep whiff of cinnamon with a hint of sulfur.

"You rang?" The silky voice was followed by the chitinous caress of a scorpion's tail, which draped over Dana's shoulder and traced a pattern along her neck.

“Actually, your timing is pretty good.” Dana put the spunk tray down and turned to face the succubus. Lily was in a crop top and jean shorts, her legs clad in thigh high leather boots. Her eyes flicked down to the sperm tray, then back to Dana.

“Take it your horny girlfriend isn’t around?” Lily’s tail was now teasing the collar of Dana’s shirt.

“Sure never get tired of that joke.” Though Quetzalli was in human form, she had a single horn in the middle of her head through which she could channel lightning. “And she’s not my girlfriend, we’ve been over this.”

“Oh, but maybe I’m the jealous type.” Lily’s eyes flashed as she put her hands on Dana’s waist, her outfit melting away to reveal perky breasts with strawberry nipples that stood at attention like little soldiers.

“I think you’re just hungry for attention.” Dana reached for a sperm pop, but Lily was faster. The succubus snatched one out of the tray and held it to her lips, her pink tongue snaking out for a taste.

“It has its own unique taste, doesn’t it?” Lily licked her lips, then rubbed the sperm pop across her chest. Her body was warm enough to melt the pops, leaving behind a glittering trail of magical semen that shimmered in the light. “Want a taste?”

Ordinarily, Dana would have rolled her eyes at Lily’s antics. The succubus was constantly baiting her and today would be no different. However, her stomach felt like it was being sucked into a black hole, so she leaned forward and licked the magical cum off of Lily’s tits.

“Mmm, that’s a good girl.” Lily stroked Dana’s hair, then playfully pulled on her ponytail. “You’re just not you when you’re hungry.”

“Jesus, you’re just being obnoxious.”

“Hey now, we don’t discuss sky daddy or his martyr baby, you know the rules.” Lily stuck the sperm pop in her mouth and pulled the stick free, revealing that she had swallowed it whole.

“Hey!” Dana backed away from the succubus. “What the hell?”

“Now you’re talking my language.” Lily cupped her breasts and gave them a squeeze. A tiny bead of milky fluid formed around her nipples, then dripped onto

the floor. "It's just that I thought of a fun delivery method for you, if you're interested."

Dana's tongue tingled from the little bit she had already consumed. That aching void in her stomach demanded more, and the small amount she had eaten had been enough to ignite her sex drive. Repressed desires bubbled through her, moments of previous attraction and intimacy baring themselves for proper inspection.

*Quetzalli pressed against the wall of her bedroom, her hands on her ass as Dana ate her out from behind. The dragon cried out in sweet agony as sparks of electricity traveled along the wall to the metal pole that had been grounded to prevent her from shorting out the house again.*

*"More, please, I want to feel more!" the dragon demanded.*

Snapping back to the present, Dana had pressed her face into Lily's chest, greedily sucking at one of her boobs. The amount Dana swallowed was copious, which made her suspect that most of it wasn't even the magical semen Lily had consumed. With each spray of the warm fluid into her throat, she could feel the cells in her body come alive once again.

She stuck a hand down the front of Lily's pants, her fingers seeking the thick folds hidden within. Lily spread her legs, the fabric of her shorts loosening so that Dana could find the treasure inside. The succubus had thick, puffy labia today that gripped and sucked on Dana's digit like a second mouth.

Lily's tail had coiled around Dana's leg, the tip of it vibrating through the fabric against Dana's clit. Her hips spasmed at the sudden stimulation, but the tail was wrapped tight enough that contact was maintained.

"That's my good girl, drink up." Lily squeezed the bottom of her breast, filling Dana's mouth with the life restoring fluid.

Hungry for more, Dana got too excited and bit down, drawing blood and causing Lily to flinch.

"Ouch, looks like we've got a biter." Lily pulled Dana in close and stroked her hair. "But really, maybe don't do that. Biting can be sexy, but it's a habit you can't afford."

Dana broke suction just long enough to speak around Lily's boob. "Thorry." Lily was one of the only people in the house she could bite without fear of

infection. Nobody was absolutely certain if her condition was contagious, and she hadn't had the heart or opportunity to test it out and discover the truth.

"As long as you apologize." Lily continued to feed Dana in the kitchen, neither of them worried about someone walking in. With all the sex that occurred around the home, it was considered standard practice to just back out of whatever room it happened in. In fact, Dana caught a whiff of Yuki's scent. The kitsune had acquired a smell like smoked bratwurst, which made Dana's mouth water. Everyone smelled like the food she had enjoyed when she had been alive, a fact that made not eating them just a little bit harder.

Dana continued feeding, sparks of pleasure running through her pelvis and up her spine as Lily's tail vibrated against her. She fought to undo her pants, hoping to feel that thick tail between her legs. Once they were loosened, the head of Lily's tail shifted, transforming to look very much like a rabbit vibrator. A pair of chitinous barbs pressed against her exposed clit, but they were somehow soft to the touch. The head of Lily's tail entered Dana, causing her to gasp so hard that she spit milk out of her mouth.

"Aw, it looks like you..." Lily cocked her head, leaving the statement dangling. "Yeah, you're not into the mommy kink that much, never mind."

To be truthful, none of it was Dana's thing, but consuming Mike's sperm did this to her every time. She craved any sort of sexual attention, anything that would grant her that sweet relief. Maybe it was just an endorphin deficiency, or maybe it was something more complicated, but all she could think about was how that hot, thick tail cock was expanding inside her. It was pressing into her hard enough that all she had to do was bend her legs to feel her entire weight centered on that point.

Her eyes rolled up in her head as tiny lights flickered at the edge of her vision. She pulled her mouth off of Lily's nipple and inhaled, feeling the cool air of the kitchen infiltrate her lungs and flood her body. The skin on her hands turned bright pink, and her chest flushed as the orgasm tore through her.

The succubus held her close, a smirk of satisfaction on her face.

Before Dana could come back down, hundreds of visions fired through her brain, a backlog of emotion from the last couple of days. Something as simple as a missed smile now bore scrutiny, her face twisting and contorting through a maelstrom of expressions before she finally let out a shriek of horror.

*Her arm! It had been ripped off in the machinery!*

Lily hugged her tight, squeezing so hard that the zombie's shoulders popped. She clung to Lily and cried into the crook of her arm, letting out those vicious tears. Already, the numb feeling was returning to her brain, forcing the emotions back to wherever it was they hid.

Lily's tail vanished in a puff of smoke, and Dana pulled her pants back up with one hand. She backed away from the succubus, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"That was a bad one," Lily commented. "Anything you want to talk about?"

"No." Not that it would do any good. Trying to work through her emotions in this state was useless. Any progress she made would be purely logical, and have no bearing on the firehose of feelings that would come later on.

"Okay, then." Lily leaned back against the counter, her clothes shifting until she was modest again. Well, modest for Lily. Her current outfit would probably get her kicked out of a church, should she ever choose to attend. "So, as good as my timing is, I was actually coming to find you."

"Really? Why?"

"Eulalie sent me."

*She's back on the front porch of the cabin now, staring at the scorched earth where the barn had been. The nirumbi have vanished at Dana's arrival, fear and distrust in their eyes. She didn't blame them—she had not only vanquished several of their warriors in combat, but had eaten a fair number of them. The nirumbi believed that the strength of their dead was passed on through the act of cannibalism. They didn't mind that she had killed so many of them, but were rather upset that she had taken the strength of the tribe as her own.*

*Though Bigfoot, their new caretaker, had tried to explain to them that Dana had taken nothing, she couldn't be so sure. She used to be strongest only right after feeding or when she was really hungry. Now her baseline for strength was permanently higher, and she had no doubt it was the result of a feeding frenzy that had nearly cost her sanity.*

"Hey." Eulalie leaned over the roof of the porch. "I have something for you."

*The Arachne extended a hand, and Dana took it. Eulalie easily lifted Dana onto the roof, the two of them moving to a more comfortable position up top. From there, it was easier to see more of the valley.*

*“How are you doing?” Dana asked. In all honesty, she didn’t care. That part of her had been stripped away, leaving only her own grief for her dead girlfriend Alex to sit beside her hunger.*

*But even though she was dead inside, Eulalie was her friend and Dana wasn’t a complete asshole. She knew that saying nothing would be a missed opportunity she would regret later.*

*“Not good,” Eulalie confessed. “It’s like there’s this huge hole in my being, and I don’t even know how to begin filling it.”*

*That was a feeling Dana not only understood, but still felt.*

*“Still, fixing this place up and my new duties at the Library help. There’s also the egg.” Eulalie smiled at the mention of Velvet’s egg. It was her sister’s sole legacy, the only way she would live on other than in memories. “Anyway, I need to check on some things, but wanted to give you this before I forgot.”*

*Eulalie reached behind her back and turned her wrist over, her palm extended toward the sky. In her hand was the folding blade of a knight of the Order. It had been Velvet’s, loaned to Dana once upon a time. She had tried to return it, but the Arachne had insisted she hold onto it. After Velvet’s death, Dana had given it back to Eulalie, sad to part with the weapon that had become such an important tool to her.*

*And now Eulalie was giving it back.*

*“Are you sure?” Dana asked.*

*“I have no need for it.” Eulalie smiled. “Always was a spell-user, anyway.”*

*Dana forced a laugh at the joke, a reference to the Dungeons and Dragons game that Eulalie had played with her sister and Bigfoot. She had even played with them during her first visit, the memories seared into place.*

*“What about your niece?” Dana asked. “Maybe she’ll want it someday.”*

*“I would rather my niece focus on other endeavors, if I’m being honest.” Eulalie sighed. “Would you just take the damned thing? I’m not gonna lie...it hurts to see it.”*



*Dana nodded, taking the knife-sized sword and tucking it in the back of her pants.*

“Wow, shit, you really are getting bad.” Lily was snapping her fingers in front of Dana’s eyes. “More flashbacks?”

Dana debated lying, but knew the succubus would see right through her. She dropped her gaze and nodded.

“That snake better find a fix for you soon.” Lily took Dana by the hand and led her out of the kitchen. On the floor, a small spot of semen had been spilled, and the fairy Cerulea was eagerly lapping it off the floor, tiny blue sparks shooting off of her beetle-like body.

“What does Eulalie want?” Dana had spent more than a little time avoiding the Arachne. While many of her flashbacks were random, Eulalie tended to spark the worst of them. Running through the forest and eating nirumbi was a top contender for misery, but nothing surpassed having to live through Velvet’s memorial on repeat. Every moment stored away in the old gray matter in intimate detail.

“Texted me earlier, said it was important.” Lily held up her phone. Ever since the angel incident, they all had phones now. “She probably texted you too, but I bet you were up in the observatory.”

“I was.” Her brain barraged her with images of her severed limb, overlaying it with memories of the associated panic that had only come minutes ago. “Had to see Zel after. Haven’t found a good inter-dimensional carrier.”

Lily snorted, a grin on her face. When they walked through the living room, Mike was no longer there. The checkerboard had scorch marks on it, and the couch was covered in the flame-retardant spray of a fire extinguisher.

“Looks like the doll won,” Lily noted.

“I would assume otherwise,” Dana replied. “I don’t think that Mike would set fire to the board because he lost.”

“The little shit thrives on chaos. Don’t believe for a moment that she didn’t get a spirit boner from this.” Lily led the way into the office. A few rats were busy cleaning dust bunnies from beneath the desk, scooping them up into a little tray. In truth, rats were very clean creatures and had become a tremendous help

around the home. One of them was wearing a child's toy spider ring as a bracelet, indicating they were under the banner of Eulalie, the official Rat Queen.

Eulalie becoming queen of the rats had been a surprise development. While the Rat King Reggie had been stuck in the Underworld, Eulalie had accidentally ended up becoming a leader figure for the rats. When Reggie had returned, the kingdom had split down the middle. He had been sour at first, but realized it was for the best. With two figureheads, it was possible to split the work.

It also helped that Eulalie had full access to the Library as Assistant Librarian. The rats who worked there were helping restore the place to its former glory, and there was plenty of room for them to expand.

An innocuous bookshelf stuffed full of books waited for them. There was a certain book on the shelf that looked like any other, save for the odd symbol on the spine. It appeared as a different book depending on who picked it up. For Dana, it would be an engineering text. For Lily, it was a cheap *Kama Sutra* knock-off, and when she pulled it off the shelf, she flipped to a random page.

"Bleh, boring. More likely to break a hip than get off." She moved the book to another position on the bookshelf. It put the book's spine in line with a similar symbol that had been engraved into the wood. The moment she set it in place, the office vanished, and the bookshelf was now in a massive lobby with skylights several stories above.

The reference desk was ahead of them, built beneath a massive stone globe that hovered above. According to Sofia, the globe used to be a map of all the open gateways to the Library of Thoth, which was a repository for all written knowledge. However, the Order had tried to take it centuries ago and most of the doorways had been destroyed as a result. Other than a few tiny sparkles on the globe revealing where the rats had chewed holes for fiber optic cables, the only proper light was in the same geographic location as the house. With no patrons and a staff of one, the Library had absolutely seen better days.

A rat with comically large horned-rim glasses looked up from the desk and stood on their hind legs to greet them. They handed over a large pen and stamped a foot on a guest log.

"Seriously?" Lily asked. "Nobody ever comes here but us."

The rat bared its teeth, and Dana snatched the pen from Lily and moved to sign the log. She saw that Mike's name was in it several times, as was Reggie's and

Ratu's. It made sense that the naga enchantress would visit, she had spent a good chunk of the spring trying to figure out how to stabilize Opal, a woman made out of primordial ooze.

"Eulalie is expecting us," Dana said as she handed the pen back to the rat. The rat nodded and picked up a tiny, silver bell. When they rang it, the sound somehow carried through the Library, summoning a floating platform from up above. It was stacked high with books that needed to be shelved, but there was still room for the two of them.

As the platform lifted off, Dana stared up at the skylights and wondered if they led to the same world as the observatory. None of the platforms went that high, and Eulalie had expressed no interest in scoping them out beyond decreeing that they were secure.

*"Do we really need to do this?" Dana pulled out her sword and held it up in the position Sofia had taught her.*

*"We do." The cyclops gestured over the side of the platform with the tip of her own blade. She had gotten hers centuries ago from a man who had tried to kill her with it. "You can't always assume you'll be in a fight somewhere safe. The small area will force you to be offensive as much as defensive and the platform has been programmed to weave and keep your legs off balance."*

*Dana sighed and readied herself. The cyclops had demanded that Dana practice with her at least once a week. Not only was the cyclops a superior swordswoman, but her ability to see the future meant that Dana had yet to lay a mark on her. The lessons were terribly brutal, and always unfair.*

*The good news, however, was that they stuck. Every day was a chance to learn something new, a memory that was locked in place until—*

"Hey!" Lily slapped Dana on the ass with her tail. "You suffer more flashbacks than a bad anime's filler arc."

"Huh?" Puzzled at the comparison, Dana realized they were at Eulalie's doorway. The Arachne had been given a home in the Library that was only accessible by herself or a platform. Without prior permission, anyone hoping to get the drop on her would have to either scale a perfectly smooth column for several stories or fly up under their own power.

The door to Eulalie's room was open, and they wandered inside. The interior space was covered in a massive bank of monitors. Beneath them was a large console that was connected to a massive server room beneath. The wires were immaculately distributed so that they seemingly vanished into the walls. Tiny interdimensional portals connected the servers to different locations on Earth, allowing Eulalie to establish a truly private network. Even if someone tracked her on Earth, all they would find is a wire that disappeared into the wall. Any attempts to widen the hole would cause the portal to collapse.

Suspended from the ceiling, Eulalie lay in a hammock made of the finest spider silk on Earth. She was staring intensely at the monitors in front of her, able to peruse and process several of them at once with both her human and arachnid eyes.

"Ooh, you look so dramatic," Lily said. "How long have you been sitting up there trying to look like a badass?"

The Archne tilted forward, tumbling out of her hammock and gracefully landing on all eight legs as if the fifteen foot fall was no big deal. She pulled off a pair of headphones and folded them up before slipping them into a pocket on her dress.

"It's been a while," she said. "I need your help."

"Oh?" Lily raised an eyebrow. "What on Earth could the Rat Queen possibly need that her little minions can't do for her? Well, except for anything requiring an actual brain."

Eulalie reached into one of her pockets and pulled out a small, white patch of webbing. She balled it up between her fingers, then flicked it at Lily, hitting her in the eye.

"Ow, fuck!" Lily tried to pull the webbing off her face, but only succeeded in smearing the sticky substance across her skin. "What's that for?"

"I don't mind jabs at me, but don't talk shit about my rats." Eulalie's features softened. "Besides, I've never known you to complain about white stuff all over your face."

"Ha fucking ha." Lily sank her nails into her forehead and peeled the top layer of skin off her face. Once it was off, the skin poofed away into smoke, allowing the webbing to drift to the floor.

“That...was disgusting.” Eulalie gestured to one of the monitors. “I needed to speak to you privately, and didn’t want to do it over text. Come.”

The monitors displayed so many images and running numbers that Dana couldn’t figure out where to look. Social media feeds were gathered together in one corner while spreadsheets had been opened off to the right. Two screens indicated that drives separated by continents were backing up, and a small cluster of monitors seemed to be overlooking bank transactions and the stock market.

“What’s going on?” Dana watched Eulalie move to a thick black binder that was hanging from a bundle of webs. The Arachne picked it up and turned to face them.

“I’ve been watching the Order. It’s not easy. Their tech people are top notch, and I suspect they’ve found a way to integrate magic into their system. Most of what I’ve accomplished has consisted of sending in rats to interface directly with their hardware, or even simple stuff like make photo copies of their files.” She handed the book over to Dana. “I don’t dare leave a digital trail of my own at this point, not after what I discovered.”

Dana opened up the binder and stared at the pages. They were jumbled, a collection of newspaper clippings at first, and then building plans, purchase orders, and a ton of random items like meteorological reports and more than a few electric bills.

“It’s all in there,” Eulalie declared, crossing her arms and smiling.

“It’s, uh...” Dana handed the binder back. “Maybe you could start at the beginning.”

“Don’t you see? This is proof they can trace us! Any of us, in fact. All they need is to ask, and poof!” She put her fingers together and then ripped them apart dramatically. “Answers!”

“Uh, okay.” Dana looked at Lily, but the succubus looked just as confused.

“I mean, even if they track us...so?” Lily shrugged. “Unless they team up with the boogeyman, they’re not getting in here. Mike refuses to leave home ever since the world almost ended, and the lions will absolutely shatter anyone the Order sends for us.”

“No, not us! I’m not worried about us.” Eulalie threw her arms in the air and grunted. As she twisted, Dana noticed the bags under the Arachne’s eyes, and how one of her front legs tapped frantically on the ground like it was impatient.

“When was the last time you slept?” Dana asked.

“Hmm? Oh, not long ago. Uh...” Eulalie snapped her fingers. “The night after you came here for your weekly ass whooping with Sofia!”

Lily winced.

“Eulalie, that was almost a week ago.” Dana gestured at the folders. “Maybe this is something we should talk about after you’ve had a full night’s—”

“NO!” The Arachne’s body lifted high, her legs going taut as if she was about to leap forward at them. “No, this can’t wait! We have to go now, before they move it again!”

“Move what?” Lily asked.

“The Oracle! The Order, they’ve been keeping this creature for decades now. They say it can answer almost any question, but you have to be specific. It’s how they tracked my mom and who knows how many other cryptids!” Her legs relaxed, lowering her back down. “Don’t you see? If we can find where they’re keeping the Oracle, we can use it!”

“For what?” Lily asked.

“Revenge!” Eulalie’s lip lifted into a queer smile, her eyes suddenly wild. “For what happened to my sister.”

Dana and Lily looked at each other. It was clear that Eulalie had lost it, as Leeds was currently entombed inside of a mountain in a pocket universe.

“Eulalie, Leeds is—”

Eulalie hissed, cutting Dana off. “Not that piece of shit, the one who created him! Leeds has the soul of a man and the body of a demon, which means!” She held a finger up for emphasis. “That somewhere out there is a demon with the body of a man! That means we can kill them, or at the very least ruin their life.”

*They were standing on the hill where Velvet had been buried. The location was peaceful, right next to where Velvet’s parents rested together in peace. The*

*cabin was visible in the distance, along with the start of a new frame for the barn. The rats, Tink, and Abella had put up the frame in record time.*

*Eulalie stood in front of her sister's grave, cradling Velvet's egg against her belly. She had gone missing earlier today, but Lily and Dana had known right where to find her.*

*They let her stand there and grieve for over an hour, content to keep her company. It was a lonely world, and you never got to choose who you walked it with. When Eulalie finally broke the silence, her words were barely audible.*

*"What am I going to do without her?" she asked.*

*Dana didn't have any good advice. She had spent over a year mourning her own loss, developing an unhealthy obsession with a motorcycle that now lay in a magical storage unit almost a mile underground in Montana. If anyone had advice for how to move on, it wasn't her.*

*"You're going to keep moving forward." Lily stepped toward Eulalie, her arms crossed over her chest. "And whenever you need someone to help you do that, just call. We'll be there for you."*

*It was an odd thing for the succubus to say, but she seemed to have a soft spot for the Arachne. Dana wasn't entirely certain why, but didn't question it.*

*"Thanks." Eulalie looked down at the ground.*

*"No, really. I mean it." Lily used a finger to raise Eulalie's chin so they were eye-level with each other. "You just say the word, and we'll do it."*

*"Please, I need this." Eulalie rubbed at her cheeks, then balled her fists by her waist. "This fucker swapped bodies with an infant, and we know he's out there somewhere. People like that don't just wander off and die, shit stains always find a way to persist!"*

*"Okay." Lily put a calming hand on Eulalie's wrist. "What do you want from us?"*

*The energy went out of the Arachne and she sighed. "I want to talk to this Oracle of the Order. Or have you talk to it for me, whatever. Find out where the demon is, hunt his ass down, then kill him."*

*"Okay." Lily looked at Dana, then back at Eulalie. "I'll agree on one condition."*

“Name it.” Eulalie gritted her teeth, clearly expecting the worst.

“Go to bed. If I find out you didn’t sleep at least eight hours, then fuck you, I’m out.” The succubus looked at Dana.

“Both of us,” Dana agreed. Using a mystical being to hunt a demon sounded far more interesting than fixing up the observatory, and it would be good to get out of the house for a bit.

“I…” Eulalie looked at both of them and sighed. “Fine. I’ll go sleep. But you have to let me know—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Lily held out a cellphone. “Daddy has me on the phone plan, unlimited minutes and all the tits I can sext. You give us the binder, and we’ll go check out a lead.”

Dana wondered what she could be talking about, then realized it was probably Cyrus. The old man had taken up residence nearby, and if anyone knew about this Oracle figure, it would be him.

However, even though he had helped the house survive the apocalypse, nobody knew for sure where his loyalties lay. When Dana said as much while they boarded the floating platform, Lily smirked in response.

“You just leave that to me.”

---

When Cyrus opened the door of his third floor apartment, his weary eyes registered shock as Lily threw herself into his arms. She wore the form of an eight year old girl in a baseball cap wearing a pokemon backpack. If not for the red streaks in her hair and the zombie traveling with her, he wouldn’t have known her identity.

“Grandpa!” Lily shouted, her hands wrapping around his waist. She felt him tense up, unsure how to react to her presence. They had called yesterday to schedule a meeting with him, so he had known they were coming. Transforming into a little girl just to fluster him would have been reason enough for her to come, but they also had an agenda today.

Cyrus pushed Lily away and nodded at Dana, who stood behind the succubus. “It’s so…nice to see you two today.”



Even though they were alone, it said something that the old man played along. Caution was a primary instinct to members of the Order, and there was always a strong possibility that he was being watched. It could be his former employer, or any number of people or monsters that he had pissed off over a long life of monster hunting.

Dana walked past Cyrus into his apartment while Lily held the man's hand. Once the door closed behind them, he yanked it away from her and scowled.

"Other people live here, you know." He waved a hand toward the door. "Do you know how many nosy neighbors I have? I'm willing to bet I get asked about you two, now. I'll have to explain that my granddaughters were visiting."

Lily rolled her eyes and transformed back into an adult wearing garish lingerie. "Oh, fine. Would you rather I show up like this and have people ask about the escorts you hired?"

"Yes. Yes I would." He sighed and ran his fingers through wild hair that stuck out in every direction. It had clearly been awhile since his last haircut. "People like asking safe questions. Were those your grandkids? I didn't know you had children. Do you have a son or daughter? What's their name? Where do they live? All safe questions that I need to prepare answers for and keep track of. Nobody is going to ask me about hiring an escort, because that means I'm a horny old man who is simply spending his money how he God damn pleases!"

She smirked, knowing she had unnerved him. They moved into a simple living room where Dana and Lily sat on a loveseat while Cyrus took his place on a recliner. He had a beer open on the side table next to an open book and a bowl of chips.

"Drinking? Before noon?" Dana asked.

Cyrus chuckled. "Honestly, when I heard you wanted to see me, I knew it's because you wanted something. There's probably a good chance I won't care much for what you ask, but will do my best to help."

Lily nodded. "It's almost like you know us." Cyrus had taken an interest in Lily and Dana after the mishap in Hawaii. For now, his concerns seemed purely academic, and she wondered if he was trying to atone now for some of the shitty things he had done during his career. Not that she was any different.

“So what do you have for me?” Cyrus asked with a yawn. He stretched, the whole room distorting as Lily snapped the Dreamscape around him. Cyrus hadn’t noticed that she stung him during their awkward hug, the slow acting venom allowing him time to let them in and sit down.

In the real world, Cyrus was in his recliner while Lily sat in his lap, her fingers caressing his temples. Dana had pulled the binder out of the pokemon backpack and was flipping through to some pages she had marked.

In the Dreamscape, Cyrus seemed unaware that they had tricked him.

“We have some questions about the Order,” Lily began. “About where they may be keeping a prisoner.”

“Whether I can help you depends on the questions.” Cyrus sipped at his beer, then stared hard at Lily. “Though the Order and I may be at philosophical odds these days, they are a powerful organization capable of raining hellfire down on both of us. There are some things I won’t tell you for your safety and my own.”

“You call it hellfire, I call it a hot shower.” Lily grinned. “We want to know about someone called the Oracle.”

Cyrus had been sipping his beer when she said this, and the ensuing spit take was hilarious. He wiped his mouth and stared at the two of them in horror, unaware that his memories were unfolding above his head in a giant thought bubble straight out of a comic book. Lily caught a glimpse of glowing red eyes behind thick glass.

“The Oracle? How do you know about the Oracle?”

Lily shrugged. “You know how it is. You go to enough parties, hear some rumors about a mystical being that can see the future, you get curious.”

Cyrus just stared at both of them, more images appearing over his head. Since they were in the Dreamscape, Lily was able to sort through them while a false version of her spoke from the couch.

“What do you want with it?” Cyrus leaned forward in his seat. “You should know it’s dangerous.”

“Honey, I’m dangerous.” She grinned at him, revealing a set of fangs that would startle a shark. “And yet I’m sitting right here, having a pleasant conversation with an old friend.”

“I may be old, but we’re not friends.” He shook his head. “And you didn’t answer my question.”

“We have a question for it,” Dream Dana said. “We’re trying to find someone and heard that it was within its power.”

Cyrus pursed his lips. “Even if the Oracle wanted to help you, there’s no way in Hell that the Order would let you speak to it. The fact you know about it is bad enough.”

Over his head, Lily saw memories from his point of view. Somewhere in the past, Cyrus had been able to phone the Oracle directly, or at least send in his questions. For whatever reason, the creature was under far tighter surveillance these days, and Cyrus was no longer a man with the clout to arrange a meeting. He spoke the truth when he said it could be months before such a meeting took place, and he definitely wouldn’t be able to bring anyone else along.

Flitting through his brain, it was also easy to see that he wouldn’t have done it. He had drawn a very clear line in his head between anything involving Mike and his former employer. The man didn’t want anyone to know about the Radley house, because he feared that the Order might send someone to investigate, or worse, ask him to do so.

“Can you tell us where it is?” Dream Dana asked.

Cyrus shook his head. “I really can’t. At best, I knew where it was, and they may have moved it already.”

Above him, memories of the area where he last saw the Oracle appeared. Images of a small building in the middle of nowhere guarded by several men and women. Lily studied them and moved her consciousness briefly to the real world and shared the location with Dana. The zombie wrote the information down on paper. Based on what Eulalie had learned about the Order, even the act of pulling up a map of the region online might send up red flags on their end.

“C’mon, you can do better than that,” she told him, a coy smile on her face. “Suck your dick like nobody’s business.”

Cyrus turned beet red and he looked down his nose at her. “Absolutely not.”

Lily went back and forth with Cyrus, badgering him unsuccessfully to give her more details. In truth, she had everything she needed. She had suspected that he wouldn’t voluntarily give them information on the Order and had come

prepared to sift through his brain without him knowing. Was it a violation of trust? Absolutely. Did she care?

Fuck, no. Still, she needed to create the illusion that their visit had been unsuccessful, that the three of them had chatted for awhile. If she gave up now, he would absolutely suspect something wrong.

When it was clear that Cyrus was good and agitated, Dream Dana asked him some questions that Real Dana had about trans-dimensional boundaries, mainly the ones she had encountered in the observatory. Cyrus, happy to change topics, questioned her at length about the observatory itself, making sure to remind them that he would happily come see it in person.

This wasn't likely to happen. Once Mike invited someone into the house, the protective geas let them come in whenever they chose, and Cyrus was absolutely on the forbidden list. The mage was plenty curious about the home, and though time was made for him to study it from the outside, Mike had no reason or desire to let him in.

Lily played Dreamscape telephone for Dana in the real world, speaking in Cyrus' voice whenever he asked questions. In this manner, Real Dana could absolutely hold a conversation with the sleeping mage. This not only allowed Dana to get some valuable information about trans-dimensional fields, but make the deception less obvious should Cyrus bring up the conversation later.

After almost an hour of back and forth, she felt the mage start to stir. In the Dreamscape, she had gotten bored and was digging through Cyrus' fridge for a beer of her own. Lily made sure to line up Dream Dana with Real Dana, and then sucked down the contents of Cyrus' beer before sauntering over to the fridge to grab a new one. She pulled one out of the fridge, opened it, took a quick swig, then dropped it on the floor.

Cyrus startled awake, practically jumping to his feet to see what had caused the noise. He held a wand in his right hand, the tip glowing hot.

"Shit, it's just beer," Lily told him, pulling down some paper towels. "No need to vaporize me over it."

"My apologies." He put the wand away and rubbed his face. "I've been a little on edge recently."

“You don’t say?” Lily found a small grocery bag and tossed the glass shards into it.

“It’s Order related,” he told them, then turned to Dana. “I think something big is going down. I’m no longer on the inside and don’t know the details, but the few times I’ve been in contact with them, they’ve been on high alert. I get the impression that maybe they’re dealing with something they aren’t equipped to handle.”

“And you think you’re important enough to be involved?” Lily tossed the glass pieces into the bag, not worried in the slightest about getting cut.

“Well, that’s only part of it. You see, they asked me if I would be willing to go active again. Not for their sake, but my own.” He scratched at his beard and frowned. “I get the impression that other retired operatives may have gone missing.”

“And you think you’re next?” Lily rolled her eyes and mopped up the rest of the mess. “We are rather full of ourselves today. So, what, are you going to ask if you can move into our home? Or perhaps into the vacant one next to us? Mike is in the process of buying it, you know.” That home had belonged to a man named Murray, who had become possessed by an angel. He had died in a fight with Mike and the others, and the decision was made to just buy the property once it went on the market. It would mean one less neighbor snooping on them.

“No, I’m comfortable here. I’m not used to living in big spaces.” Based on his apartment, that wasn’t a lie. Aside from a kitchen and living room, the apartment only had a master bedroom and a bathroom with blue-striped wallpaper. “But it doesn’t mean I’m not worried.”

“Your wards looked fine on the way in.” Lily had spotted most of them, but knew the man had others. If she had meant him actual harm, he probably would have answered the door with a fireball. “And the Rat Queen has this place under surveillance.”

“Ah, yes. The mysterious Eulalie.” Cyrus chuckled. “I spot rats sometimes, but assume it’s for my personal benefit.”

“She hasn’t forgotten what you did for her, or the others.” Lily stood and put a hand on her hip. “She’s got her eyes on the place. If she saw something, she’d warn you herself.”

“That’s good to hear.” Cyrus looked at Lily and Dana. “I don’t suppose either of you want to stay for lunch? I know that neither of you need to eat, but...”

The mage suddenly looked very much like the old, lonely man he was. His eyes darted back and forth at the two of them, hoping to see a sign of interest. Lily had seen this plenty of times in men like him. A lifetime of devotion had given him nothing more than a sense of accomplishment and no family to share it with.

“No, there’s some stuff I want to check out in the observatory now, see if your theory about dimensional threading is correct.” Dana made her way to the door. “I’ll be in touch with what I find out.”

“I’m eager to hear it.” By the time he turned his attention to Lily, she had turned back into a little girl and thrown her arms around his neck before planting a big, sloppy kiss on his cheek.

“I’ll miss you, Grandpa!”

Cyrus wiped his cheek and shoved her away. “Yeah, yeah, I answered your questions, now get the fuck out of my home, you spawn of Satan.” He opened the door for them. “Oh, and say hi to Mike and Death for me. We’re supposed to have tea next Tuesday.”

Lily blew him a kiss and skipped down the hall ahead of Dana, her braids bouncing off her shoulders. She had taken advantage of the old man’s kindness and gotten exactly what she wanted.

Somewhere, deep down inside, a part of her felt bad. With very little effort, she squashed it away.

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Tasia stared out the wrought-iron framed window at the Aegean sea. The dark waters surged, signaling a coming storm. There was a heaviness in the air, the result of the protective wards around her family’s island absorbing energy from the pounding surf. The magic protecting the island was old, and had served to defend the Laskaris family for several generations, back to the founding of the Order.

She was waiting in a study reserved for guests. It had a wonderful view of the sea and a bar with thousands of dollars worth of alcohol at her disposal. Not that she planned to partake, as she wanted her mind to be at its sharpest before speaking with her father.

The door behind her creaked and an older man in a butler's coat stepped in and nodded in her direction. "Miss? Your father is ready for you in the tower."

"Thank you, Basil." This servant had been with her family since before she was born. He was a good man who could have retired years ago, but had recognized that he was a cog in a very important machine.

Basil smiled and gestured toward the hall with a white-gloved hand. She knew the way, but indulged him, allowing the butler to lead her outside to the stone bridge that connected the primary residence to the main watch tower in the center of the island. She could hear the waves smashing into the cliffs of the island, smell the salt and ozone in the air. The gray clouds above gave her the feeling that she was walking into a trap, and not into the personal office of the man who had raised her and taught her the way of the sword.

They passed through an entryway guarded by a Knight and Mage of the Order. Recognition flickered in their eyes, but they did not greet her as she passed between them. She was certain there were rumors about her disappearance, but didn't care what they were.

Last year, she had suffered several humiliations at the hands of a succubus, only to have her mind dominated by a dragon man. Her superiors hadn't blamed her for the failure of the mission, and had even commended her on surviving.

But they didn't have to live with the memories of being forced to slay her own teammates, or see the pity and scorn of the other Knights. She had been one of the best, but had fallen from grace in their eyes. More than anything, she had feared what her father would say when she had returned home.

The stone of the tower swallowed up the sounds of the island, and they got into a small elevator that took them to the top. She half expected a word of encouragement from Basil, but knew better. He was, above all, her father's servant.

The elevator doors opened into an opulent room constructed from marble and lined with gold molding. The walls of the room were decorated with different weapons and armor, all of them from members of her family that had either fallen in battle or performed great deeds for the Order. The enchantments lingering in this room were powerful enough that a wizard would give an arm and a leg just to study them. The Order could find nobody better suited to protect them than the Laskaris family.

On the far side of the room, the floor had been raised with a pair of stairs along the edges to reach it. Her father stood there, wearing a sleeveless white button-down shirt over navy slacks, his hair pulled back behind him to drape between his shoulder blades. He wasn't wearing any shoes and had both hands in his pocket.

Basil excused himself and moved to a hidden door next to a shield with the family crest: a wolf's head guarding an open book. The Laskaris family had long been the Knights of the Order, those who would lay down their lives to protect their brothers and sisters, the mages. Most of the Order was comprised of gifted orphans found around the world, but the Laskaris family was different. They willingly sent their children to become the most powerful Knights the Order would ever see, building an untouchable legacy that Tasia was very proud to be a part of.

"I see you survived the process." Alexandros Laskaris turned to face his daughter. His tan skin had olive undertones that mimicked her own, but the attribute they shared most were his piercing blue eyes. They were so light they almost seemed white in places, making him look more like a predator than a protector.

"I did." Tasia kept her head held high. Last time she had spoken to her father, he had told her about an experimental program that the Order had been working on for almost three decades now. The mortality rate was extremely high, nearly ninety percent. However, she had been unable to live with the memories of her failures, not without finding a way to become stronger. They had promised her, should she survive, she would inherit abilities far beyond those ever possessed by a Knight of the Order.

One of those abilities in particular mattered the most. Though Knights had formal training against psychic attacks, the dragon man's strength had been a surprise. With words alone, his magic had dominated her.

Now, though? Her mind was untouchable. Anyone digging around in there was in for a very brutal surprise.

"Show me." Her father held out a hand and his sword appeared as if by magic. It was the enchanted bracelet on his arm, an innocuous stone trinket that allowed him to remain armed at all times.



She pulled her own blade free. It was the size of a dagger, but unfolded rapidly like an old-fashioned switchblade until it was around a meter and a half in length.

Alexandros didn't move a muscle, yet he was suddenly in front of her, his blade whipping down through the air so fast she could hear the air around it shriek as if being pierced. This was no longer the man who had raised her, nor the teacher who had taught her. This was a man who was trying to kill her, to see if she was truly worthy of the gifts she had received.

She raised her own blade to counter, the impact of the weapons ringing painfully in her ears. There was a tense moment when it felt like the weapon itself may give, shattering under the brutal pressure of her father's strength. One of the first abilities taught to a Knight was how to project their mana or spirit into the armor and weapons they used, strengthening the material past anything their artisans could create.

She cleared the blade, then stepped to the side and dodged the knife hand strike her father followed up with. It was the same strike she had once seen him use to kill a minotaur, puncturing its sternum to damage the heart directly. The poor beast was dead for several seconds before realizing it, staggering around with fear in its eyes before collapsing to the ground.

This was a man who wanted to see what his only daughter was capable of, and she obliged. With his hand so extended, she twisted away and brought her sword down on his wrist. She didn't think he would lose a hand, but if so, the wound would be clean enough that it could be reattached.

Though she was fast, her father's speed with a blade was legendary. He withdrew his hand and struck the flat of her blade with the pommel of his own, deflecting it even further. Despite his parry, her sword was still quick enough to sever the tip of one of her father's fingers.

Alexandros paused, contemplating the wound. He winced, his hands shaking.

It was a trap. He expected her to back down, to ask if he was okay. The moment she dropped her guard, he would counterattack. When she tried to skewer him instead, his blade deflected hers and a proud smile broke across his face.

The fight continued for a couple more minutes, her father now using techniques she hadn't seen in years to bypass her defenses. Her sleeves and pants were soiled with her own blood by the time that they finished. Though neither of them were even panting from exertion, Alexandros had finally called a halt to their fight. Tasia had failed to strike her father after that first hit, but couldn't help feel the pride welling in her chest.

First blood had been hers. In any battle, that was sometimes the deciding factor.

The wounds on her body were already closing up, the scabs turning black as her body knitted back together. Her father, on the other hand, had to wrap his finger with a bandage that Basil brought him. Basil also presented her father with some rags and oil to wipe the blood off his sword. Her father had once told her that the greatest sign of respect a warrior could show to their weapon was to take care of it themselves. He was of the mind that all weapons had a soul of sort, and were bound to their wielder.

"You are much stronger." He wiped his blade free and inspected it.

"Faster, too." She turned to Basil, who offered her rags and oil of her own. Wordlessly, the pair cleaned their weapons before putting them away.

"It would seem your decision was a wise one, daughter." He bowed his head to her as a sign of respect. Though he had proposed the experimental treatment, it had to be something she wanted to do. Too many subjects had lost their minds during the process, and had been put down like animals as a result. He held out his hand and Basil placed a phone in the center of his palm. He inspected it for a moment, and then handed it to Tasia. "You have been called."

It was the closest thing to a dad joke she would ever get from the man, and it took every ounce of willpower to hold back her grin. The phone was her official connection back to the Order, and would have the details of her next assignment.

"Do you know what I'm hunting?" she asked.

"I do not." Alexandros was as high as you could climb on the Council without being able to tap into the divine, or utilize Creation level magic. Even those people were rare, and far more content to let men and women like her father run things for them. "But I suspect that your new team will require your strengths."

“And they’re aware of my...condition?” She looked up from the phone to her father.

“The team leader has been made aware that you are to be given her full trust in this regard. Still, it would do the program wonders if you could show a bit of restraint.” He chuckled. “So maybe don’t rip someone’s head off with your bare hands.”

She blushed, but said nothing. It was entirely possible that her father knew everything that had happened to her during the program, or had even watched footage. Some of the things that had happened were embarrassing, to say the least. Her father was clearly speaking about an incident with one of the other enrollees, a man named Kent.

Kent had failed out of the program, which was code for ‘He went batshit insane and tried to kill everyone.’ Tasia had been unarmed and forced to improvise. It had been a bloody process, sinking her nails beneath his jaw and pulling from above until she ruptured a disk in her back. The pain she felt in that moment was numbed by the sheer exhilaration of defeating an opponent who was definitely bigger and stronger than herself.

“You are dismissed.” Satisfied, her father turned away from her as Basil approached with a fresh change of clothes.

“Come, miss. I will show you to our guest quarters where you can clean up.”

“Thank you, Basil.” She was almost to the elevator when her father spoke once more.

“Tasia?” Alexandros was staring at her from by the window, his visage fierce and threatening. For a single moment, though, it melted away to reveal the soft core of the man within. “I order you to return to me when you’re done.”

“As you will, father.” She bowed her head, then allowed Basil to lead her away.

The guest quarters were fit for a king. After her shower, she sat naked on the balcony and watched the storm roll in, protected from early raindrops by a stone ledge. She pulled out the smartphone and unlocked it with her fingerprint. Scanning through the file, she grinned.

Something was killing people in Florida, USA. The pictures she saw were horrifying, and there was already a dossier with several possibilities. As she

scanned through the images, she thought back to her last mission, the one that had gone so very wrong.

This time would be different. No matter what she faced, she now had the power to confront it head on and defeat it, whether it be a dragon man or a succubus. Though her father had bested her upstairs, that had been a test of swordplay alone. If she had truly tapped into her new power...

She shivered in delight. Though the bed inside her room was soft, she far preferred sleeping outside, to feel the rain on her bare skin as if she were back in the woods once more. The sole fault of the program was that it had taught her that humanity was fleeting, but nature was eternal. She longed to feel soil beneath her feet, to inhale the scents of the forest.

But what she wanted most of all was to once again experience the thrill of the hunt. As the storm smashed itself against the magical barrier of her family's island, a growl of anticipation snuck past her lips.