**Welcome Home**

Mike opened his eyes, staring at the waning sunlight through the canopy overhead. Scattered rays were dying, a sign that the sun was sinking toward the skyline, ready to slumber until the break of dawn. The forest was quiet – a complete lack of animals meant that the only sound Mike could hear was the occasional rippling of the leaves as the wind brushed them against one another.

Lifting his head, he knew that he needed to get back. Though his slumber had been restless, he had clearly slept the day away. Groaning, he leaned out of the makeshift hammock that the Mandragora had made for him and promptly crashed onto the ground, his legs unable to properly support him.

“Fuck!” The numb sensation he had experienced earlier had passed. His legs burned as if full of fire ants, and his ankle felt like it had been twisted too far to one side. Checking his surroundings, he scooted around to look at the Mandragora.

Sarah’s pod had ominously sealed shut along the top of the mouth. The whole pod gently convulsed, a dark fluid flowing through its lower stalks and into the main plant body. Mike shivered, realizing that, if not for a memory, that would have been fate too.

The Mandragora had left him presents. He was surrounded by more food, and another one of the coconut things to drink from. The Mandragora had also left him an old branch that was the perfect height and thickness for a hiking staff. Shaking his head in disbelief, he ate what little he could, drank the fluid from the hard shelled fruit, and tried to stand with the staff.

It was slow going. Painful as it was to stand, the Mandragora dropped loops of vine for him to hold onto. Standing, his legs wobbled painfully beneath him. He was in poor shape for walking.

The plant would take care of him, he was sure of that. But what of the others? What had happened to his girls? Was Cecilia okay? What about Abella?

Sensing his anxiety, thick vines gently stroked his arms, soothing him. As it was, the girls would have to figure things out on his own, at least until he could walk. Once that was possible, the next step was to figure out the best way to get home. There was no single path leading away from the Mandragora, which meant he may accidentally wander deeper into the forest.

He had to try. Looking in the direction of the distant cliffs, he started walking. Slow, clumsy footsteps were soon replaced with strength and confidence. His body was no match for his determination, and once he got moving, it was far easier to stay moving then it was to stop.

After ten minutes of walking, he was already feeling a little better. His stiff muscles had loosened, and the staff kept most of his weight off his bad foot. His ankle was swollen already, but he needed to keep moving forward. The path he followed was mostly flat, and for that, he was grateful.

Ominous silence accompanied him on his journey. Thick clouds rolled in, gobbling up the sun’s light, and as dusk fell on the forest, Mike was engulfed by the shadow of night. He realized how much trouble he was in when he could no longer discern the edges of the path, often stepping into a cluster of bushes. He clocked himself good on a low hanging tree branch, so he sat down on a nearby log, taking a breather.

The silence was broken by the distant peal of thunder.

“Fuck.” Without animals to worry about, he had figured it would be a safe trek. Without any light to see by, and a storm blowing in, it occurred to him that staying with the Mandragora would have been a better idea.

Distant lightning gave him brief glimpses of the path, and he used them to hasten his journey. There was no way he was going to make it to the house this night, and he kept his eye out for any kind of shelter. With no wilderness experience to speak of, he debated his ability to climb a tree and at least get off the ground.

The lightning grew closer, and his eyes were having trouble adjusting to the sudden contrasts in light. The storm’s thunder boomed, a chaotic rhythm that he could feel in his chest. Each tumultuous clap was moving closer, his ears ringing after some of the louder ones. The humidity in the forest was increasing, and he wondered how often the forest flooded.

Stumbling around, he heard it, the eerie song of a woman in mourning. It carried across the world, distant at first, but growing louder. It was a song of loss, peace, and memory, the words foreign to him, but exposing an unfilled gap in his heart. The song was drowned out by the thunder, but he no longer cared for the storm. Traipsing through the wood and brush, he shoved his way through to the source.

“Cecilia!” He called, his voice cracking with the effort. “Cecilia, over here!” His own voice was lost in the wind, the ground beneath his feet quaking in fear as the storm rolled over him. Staring up into the sky above, he watched the lightning dance between the clouds, illuminating the large birds in the sky who beat their mighty wings, the thunder deafening.

“Cecilia! Cecilia!” He crawled through the bushes, rapping his staff on logs, rocks, anything he could find. Her song was growing louder, and he could make out the sinister glow of her body through the trees up ahead. His throat raw, he no longer formed words, simply screaming at the top of his lungs in the hopes that he could fill the silent spaces of the storm.

She emerged from the trees, her body passing through them like mist. Her hands were clutched to her chest in sadness, her mouth open wide as her song took over the cacophony of the world around him. Mike tripped over a log, falling face first into the ground.

“Mike!” Glowing hands took him by the arm, lifting him free of the ground. Cecilia pulled at him, her entire body floating through the trees a she guided him onto a new patch of flat ground. The storm broke above them, rain falling all around. Between Cecilia’s pulling and the staff, Mike broke into a near jog, his heart pounding in his chest, his ears ringing. The dark world around him was lit by lightning and the fires it had started, glowing embers carried above the canopy like shooting stars. From the darkness emerged a cluster of rocks, and Cecilia led him to the other side. Here, the large slabs of stone lay across each other like folded hands, and Mike stumbled up the dirt slope to their opening, his feet slipping out from beneath him.

“Cecilia, thank god.” He pulled the banshee in for an embrace, her presence chilling his body but warming his heart. Cecilia clung to him — her steady presence plus the quieting effect of the cave made the whole world stabilize around him.

Getting chilled, Mike let go. “What about the others, are they okay?”

Cecilia nodded. “We ran into some trouble. By the time we got into the greenhouse, the storm was too windy for Abella to fly, and Tink may have broken her foot, so she couldn’t come. I’ve never seen her so angry.”

“And you? You got hurt?”

“Aye, I did.” Cecilia pulled down the top of her dress, revealing a scar. “That knife was not of this world.”

“Yeah, well it belongs to the Mandragora now.” Mike sat down, leaning against the wall. His whole body hurt now, his muscles cramping. “Is Naia okay?”

“Yes. She knew you were still alive, so she wasn’t too worried.” Cecilia stood. “I must report back to the others that you are safe.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

Cecilia smiled. “I shall return, a runsearc.” She blew him a kiss and faded from sight.

Sitting in the darkness, Mike waited. There was nothing else to do but listen to the storm that raged outside.

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“I don’t understand what your problem is.” His mother told him, weaving in and out of traffic. Her breath was dangerous, some concoction of whiskey, cigarettes, and something else, a handful of pills she had stolen from someone’s medicine cabinet.

“I just want to go the the dance,” Mike told his mother. He was hoping he would get to see Lucy there, his lab partner from Biology. He felt like there had been something between them, a spark when they worked together at the fume hood. They were both in ninth grade, and he was new to the school, which meant Lucy had no reason to know any of his own personal history.

“And why is this dance so important? I need your help, Michael! How the fuck am I supposed to make things work if you won’t even help me!” She punctuated her words by pointing at him, her cigarette dangling limply from her lips. Her eyes somewhat glassy, she pulled briefly into oncoming traffic to go around a guy on a motorcycle.

“Help you with what?” Mike asked.

“Laundry. Bathrooms. Sweep the garage.” His mother flipped the bird at the guy ahead of her, blaring her horn. They were already over the speed limit, but his mother had learned about a new check cashing place that had just opened, which meant the new hires might not figure out that her driver’s license was faked.

“That’s what you’re supposed to do!” Mike shouted. It was the list of things his mother had agreed to upon moving in with her old best friend from high school. This was how it started. Offers to help out that never came to fruition. Eventually, Mike would be forced to do the work, but someone would catch on. They always caught on.

“You need to help me out!” She shrieked. “I can’t do this without you, Mikey!”

“Don’t call me Mikey!” It was what his father had called him. Now, his mother only used it when she needed something from him.

“It’s a girl, isn’t it? Some little whore wants you to go with her to the dance.”

“No, it’s not like that,” Mike said, his cheeks filling with heat. Lucy was anything but a whore.

“Did she promise to suck your dick?” His mother flicked her cigarette in his crotch. “To get your wiener wet? Make a man out of you?”

“Stop it!” Though his mother’s driving was terrible, it was the whole world that spun chaotically for Mike. He hated her so much, this shell of a human being.

“It is, isn’t it? Did you tell her about the time you got a hard-on for your mom? How you skunked the bed with me in it? Fucking little pervert.”

Mike covered his ears, but his mother raised her voice.

“Maybe she can borrow one of my bras, and let you beat off to-hey!” Mike, frustrated, had grabbed the emergency brake of the car, yanking it upward. He had expected the car to come to a stop so that he could jump out, but it swerved dangerously instead, crossing into oncoming traffic. Something large clipped the back of the car, causing it to spin even faster. Mike closed his eyes when the car rolled, his face showered in glass and his world a cacophony of screams and squealing metal. He didn’t know how many times the car rolled, but when he opened his eyes, he was upside down.

“Mom?” She hung upside down, wide eyes on the pavement in front of them. The world smelled of gasoline and hot asphalt.

“You little shit,” she uttered, her eyes not quite focusing. Shaking hands pulled a box of cigarettes from her bra, along with a lighter.

“Mom, don’t!” He tried to grab the cigarette from her, but his arm didn’t work right.

“Fuck you Mikey!” She stuck it in her mouth, lighting it. A deep inhale, and she blew the smoke in his face. “I wish you had never been fucking born!”

Horrified, Mike looked at the roof of the car. The smell of gasoline was stronger now, and he realized that it was leaking from above his mother, dripping on to the roof below.

“Put it out!” He hollered, fighting to get free of his seat. She tried to slap at him, but was unable to reach. Instead, she swiped at him with her nails, catching his shirt and leaving deep scratches. Ignoring her, he fought to undo the belt, but it was no use. It was simply too tight to be undone.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” The cigarette fell from her mouth, landing above her. The vapors had grown even stronger, and his eyes watered. He grabbed a broken piece of metal, sawing frantically at his belt.

“Anywhere I can, as long as it’s away from you!” He cried, slicing through the fabric. He fell to the roof just as the gas ignited. His mother let out a shriek of pain as she was immediately immolated, the ball of fire searing its way into his side. Shrieking in pain, Mike pushed through the broken windshield only to have a strong pair of hands yank him free.

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He opened his eyes. Staring at the stone walls of the cave, he was relieved to discover that both time and distance separated him from that burning car. However, the intense blast of heat had been replaced with the exact opposite.

Mike shivered. His clothing was soaked, the stone beneath him was cold, and his muscles were cramping up again. He was lucky that the temperature outside wasn’t any colder, else he would probably be looking at freezing to death.

A dim glow filled the opening of the cave, and Cecilia reappeared. She was carrying a small messenger bag that was now covered in a light film of frost.

“Here.” She handed him the bag. “Tink put some stuff in there for you.”

“She did?” Mike opened the bag to look inside. Inside he found a light blanket, an amber stone, and a box of frozen Eggos. Mike couldn’t help but laugh, putting the Eggos to the side. “”What is this?” He asked, holding up the fist sized stone.

“A sun stone. Rub your hands together until your skin is hot, then hold the stone between them and blow on it.”

Mike obliged, his stiff, shaky hands rubbing against each other. The warmth was fleeting, but he kept at it until he was certain that they were actually warm, and not just warm to him. Grabbing the stone, he lifted it to his face and blew.

The stone glowed, sucking the warmth from his hands. Energy swirled around inside of it, and it ignited, shedding a warm glow that reminded Mike of a salt lamp. It was surprisingly warm, so he set it down in front of him. Soon the whole cavern was toasty. Sighing, Mike stripped off his wet clothes and laid them next to the stone to dry, wrapping himself in the blanket.

“She said to make sure that comes back,” Cecilia informed him. “She got it out of the Vault.”

“What’s so dangerous about this?” He asked.

“The amount of heat used to activate it determines how much warmth it gives off.” Cecilia knelt by the stone. “This one was found in the rubble of Pompei.”

“Shit.” Mike stared at the innocuous stone. Several minutes passed, and he realized that he had become lost in its flickering glow. “This was just sitting in the Vault?”

“It’s one of the few thing in there that is labeled.” Cecilia shook her head. “The one who built the house stored away such things to keep them from the hands of man, for they are too dangerous. We were invited to the house to help him protect these items from getting out, though we ourselves are also in need of protection. That is the nature of the house - it requires balance between the mortal and supernatural world to truly be a haven to all.”

“Do you remember anything about the original owner?” Mike asked.

Cecilia shook her head. “It’s strange. Whenever a new Caretaker is selected, everything from the house becomes a blur. I can remember before coming here, and after you arrived. The gaps get filled. I met the original owner long before coming here, and yet my memories of him have been erased in a similar manner.”

“So a powerful wizard then?” Mike asked.

“More than that. To accomplish such a spell would require Old Magic. The kind of magic that created me, and Naia. Humans, to my knowledge, are incapable of such a feat. But in my heart, I know that he was a human, or at least used to be.”

“What do you remember?” Mike asked.

“My family in Ireland. I was the spirit responsible for taking them to the afterlife. Every family had one, a gift from the spirits of the land to the people. Back in the old days, humans and the sidhe lived in harmony. With the spread of the Catholic Church, many of the old ways were lost to them, and the sidhe took back many of their gifts, but the banshees remained. We are tied to our family, for all time or until they cease to believe in us.”

“Is that what happened to your family?”

“No. The potato famine. There was a period of time where I came to their home every few days. The soul survivor of my family was a child who was taken in by the church itself. Knowing that my days were numbered, I roamed the countryside, trying to see as much of the changing world as I could before fading away into the Void.”

“The Void?”

“It’s just a name, a bedtime story for creatures like me. Where does a spirit go when they die? Nobody knows, not even the sidhe. We call it the Void, for nothing has ever come back from such a place.” Cecilia smiled. “Though I do not remember our meeting, I can remember the sudden warmth of him, a being who brought me such hope. In much the same way that a banshee can be passed on by marriage to an outsider, he brought me to the New World, and it was here I wandered until he built our home. I saw the railroads being built, watched brother fight brother in the Civil War. I have seen many things, always as an observer, watching the world go by. Though I claim many years as my own, I believe that I have never truly lived. Not until you came.”

“Am I really that different from previous Caretakers?” Mike asked. He picked up his pants, which were sufficiently dry. He slid into them, savoring the sensation of warmth along his legs. It was like getting clothes out of the dryer. “I mean, they couldn’t have been bad or anything, right?”

“I feel that you are the only one who has lived among us that has not seen the clear lines between your kind and ours. Everyone fucks the nymph - that is her magic, and it binds Caretakers to the home. Though past Caretakers treated us as friends, or even family, there was always a an unspoken rule between us. Some of us aren’t as human as others, and, in turn, were never truly part of the home. But you. You include everybody equally.”

Mike frowned. “Growing up, I never fit in. My mom lost her shit after my dad died, and we were always bouncing from home to home. The reason we kept moving was her friends didn’t like how she treated me. Instead of finding a way to fix the problem, they turned their backs on it. I was tired of seeing the pity in their eyes when they told us their spare room was no longer available, or that they wanted their couch back. No matter what anybody said, my mom blamed me for it.” He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. “I guess you could say that I became tired of humans. For all their good intent, I always felt like they were ready to look away when the going got tough. When I met all of you, this was your home as well as mine. Maybe I am the new Caretaker, but you all aren’t my pets.”

“Most people don’t have sex with their pets,” Cecilia muttered.

Mike laughed. “Most being the operative word. Living with you feels like my first taste of true acceptance, of freedom. I would just like to survive long enough to see what comes next.”

“I must admit, no Caretaker has had this much trouble up front. However, the Society was not a problem until Garrett came along. Emily was in a position of power, she knew exactly how to keep them at bay. Your learning curve has been tremendous, runsearc. I am proud of what you have accomplished in so short a time.”

“You mean nearly burning down the house, destroying the garage, and feeding a witch to a plant?” That last one was still taking him some time to digest.

“That isn’t what I speak of.” Cecilia was suddenly so close, a chill returning to the air. “I am proud that you have given your heart so freely.” Her hands slid up beneath the blanket, touching his chest. “It isn’t just physical pleasure that you seek. It is something more, a connection.”

Mike shivered at her touch, the ice of her hands traveling through his stomach. “I think part of it is the Nymphs’ Blessing. It makes me more willing, physically and mentally. After what happened at the Mandragora, there is no way I should be able to get aroused.”

Grinning, Cecilia let her hand slide across the front of his pants. “And yet you are.”

Mike opened his mouth to say something, but he couldn’t put what he wanted into words. “I like that it feels like it’s more than just sex. Yes, there is some lust, but I feel like there is so much more between us then that. Naia is an extension of my soul. Tink is my shadow, she follows me everywhere, and Abella is my protector, my guardian spirit.”

“And what about me?” Her lips were close to his. “What role do I have in this?”

“You are the unknown. One day, I know you will walk me to the other side, and I will see many strange and wonderful things. It will be good to know that I have a friend to help me through it.”

“More than a friend.” Cecilia’s hand stroked Mike’s cheek, pulling him into her. His lips tasted hers, the first spark of many between them. She broke contact, her white eyes practically glowing in the darkness of the cave. “Always more than a friend.”

“Hold on,” Mike told her. He moved against the wall of the cave, sitting down, then waved her forward. Floating toward him, she landed gently on his lap, running both of her hands up his chest. “Sorry, my legs are all messed up.”

“It’s not your legs I am interested in.” Cecilia moved forward, straddling his hips, her mouth finding his. The warmth of the cave coupled with the banshee’s cool embrace made Mike feel like he was standing in the doorway of an air conditioned building during a hot day in summer. Small wind currents were starting to move in the room, the temperature trying to equalize. Cecilia’s hands moved along his sides, then down his hips. He could feel her cool thighs against him, her pelvis pushing into his.

Mike’s hands squeezed her waist, one hand moving down to caress her ass through her skirt. He squeezed gently, then pulled her forward, grinding his crotch into hers. “Do you think the sidhe ever pictured you with a mortal?”

“If they did, they probably forbid it.” Cecilia kissed her way down his neck, but went no further then his shoulders. He kissed her forehead, the hairs on his arm jumping every time he touched her with his lips. She leaned away from him, giving him access to her neck and the top of her breasts. Her hair fluttered up around her head, the static building between them. “Kiss me more,” she whispered, her voice echoing softly in the cave.

 “I can do that.” Mike said. kissing the cool skin of her shoulders, his hands running behind her ears. Cecilia moved her hips back and forth, causing Mike’s dick to go hard. As soon as his member was rigid, she shifted her weight so that her pelvis now did a balancing act on his shaft, stroking him with her lower body.

“I can feel it,” she whispered, moving back and forth. “That part of me that I never knew existed. It’s like fire, and ice, and lightning, all centered in my being. I want to feel more of it, that human feeling i’ve never known.”

“Then let me help you.” Mike undid his pants, sliding them down his hips. Cecilia immediately grabbed his cock, teasing the top of it with her ice cold fingers, kissing him deeply on the lips. Mike’s fingers dropped to the top of her ass, squeezing the cool, soft globes through her skirt.

Cecilia pumped Mike this way for a couple of minutes. Her legs floated up as her head dropped, and she took him into her mouth, squeezing his balls gently while she swallowed the length of his dick. Mike gasped, Cecilia hovering into a headstand, grabbing his hips in her hands to pull him all the way into her body.

“Oh, Cecilia!” Mike grabbed her head, pulling her off his dick and back up to his lips. She embraced him, her tongue dancing along his. His hands traveled the length of her body, grabbing her floating body by the hips and pulling her waist down to his. She pulled her skirt up, rubbing her panty-clad pussy up and down his cock, using one finger to pull it to the side, causing him to slide deep inside of her.

“Mmh!” Cecilia moaned into his mouth, her pussy cool and electrifying at the same time. Plugged into the Banshee Sexual Network, the world exploded in sparks, the steady glow of the sunstone punctuated by the miniature lightning bursts that jumped from Cecilia through Mike’ thighs and then into the ground.

“Move slower,” he told her. “I want to take my time.” She obliged, her hips moving gently. They kissed some more, hands exploring each other. Mike was determined to pull her clothes away from her skin, fighting the magic that held it against her skin. It became a fun game for him, trying to peek at the pale skin beneath, explore it with his hands, taste it with his tongue. Running his lips across the top of her breasts, Cecilia’s hips began to move on their own, her pace quickening.

The sparks increased in frequency, the mild shocks forcing Mike and Cecilia together, driving him deeper than ever. Every thrust completely lacked control, his body moving in time with the sparks. His breathing was ragged, but Cecilia was starting to gasp for air, her breasts heaving with each breath.

“Oh, fuck!” Mike’s hands grabbed her ass, pulling her as close as possible. She squeezed him with her thighs, her lighter-than-air body starting to pull him upward. When she sat back on his cock, they both slammed into the ground causing Mike’s cock to drive even deeper into Cecilia.

It began as a low wail, Cecilia building steam as her orgasm approached. Her hands clutched his upper arms, nails digging into his naked flesh, her lower body quivering in anticipation. Her cries echoed back and forth across the cavern, the cave itself becoming a giant amplifier. Mike feared that if she screamed, he would go deaf, but his fears were mitigated by the sudden fire blossoming deep inside his stomach. His balls ached, drawing up into his body, and he yanked down on Cecilia, fighting to bury himself in her. Her hips bucked, and her cries started to rise in pitch.

“Please! Please don’t!” Mike grabbed her by the hips, thrusting wildly. “I’m so close, please don’t disappear!”

“Don’t worry,” she said, a grin on her lips. “This time it’s all about you.” She closed her eyes, grunting several times, forcing herself down onto his shaft hard enough that he bottomed out inside of her, his ass slamming into the rock beneath. Each grunt was punctuated by a sudden tightness inside of her as well as a spark of lightning that jumped from her to Mike or the cave itself. Gasping for air, she smiled at him as she rode him, leaning back so that he could see her properly, watch the place where they were joined, see his huge duck sliding in and out of her glistening, wet pussy.

“Fuck. Fuck. FUCK!” MIke came, the fire inside of his belly launching deep inside the banshee. He grabbed her around the waist, holding her in place so that he could push into her with all his might!

“Oh god, it’s so warm. It’s so warm!” Cecilia’s whole body crackled with energy, and MIke watched in amazement as her ivory skin suddenly glowed with color, radiating up and out from her waist. She was no longer light, her body sinking down onto him as flesh and bone. The color spread to her face, and her featureless, white eyes were suddenly glittering emeralds, her white hair turning a crimson shade of red.

“Cecilia?” MIke asked, but she was lost to him, gasping and groaning as she used the lubrication of his load to ride him like the world was ending. Her hands grabbed at his shoulders for purchase, her hair rising from the electrical charge between them.

The scream that came from her mouth was that of a human, not a monster. The magic that burst from her, however, fed directly into Mike. His dick suddenly rock hard again, he pushed Cecilia backward, pulling out of her long enough to flip her on her stomach.

“MIke” She shrieked as he penetrated her from behind. “Oh god, Mike!” Her fingers clawed at the stony floor, and she shoved her ass back into him so abruptly that his balls slapped against her clit. “MIKE!” She came, her whole body spasming on the floor.

“GAH!” The electricity swirled up through his body, streamers of current dancing off his head and shoulders. Sinking his fingers into her ass, he pounded her as quickly as he could. The cave, insulated by the rock, bounced the energy back and forth between them. Cecilia rolled Mike on his back to ride him one last time, sweat pouring down her face, her clothing in disarray. She lay down against his body, her breasts pushed against his chest, her hips twitching with her final orgasm. Whispering sweet words to him in a foreign tongue, she fell asleep against his chest.

Mike wrapped an arm around her, pulling the blanket close. He stared in wonder at the beauty in his arms, watching in amazement as the color slowly left her, her blazing red hair going white again. She became cool to the touch, but he welcomed the sensation. Her body became lighter and lighter until she faded away in the glittering light, leaving Mike behind with a smile on his face and a new memory.

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They stepped together through the portal, the forest of the greenhouse fading away as the sun’s light took over. The backyard was littered with giant craters and stone piles, the grass and soil torn apart all over the place.

“What happened here?” Mike asked.

“Complications,” Cecilia replied. “I’ll let the others tell you all about it.”

Shaking his head, Mike limped along the corridor behind the house. The Mandragora vines were completely gone now, leaving behind grooves in the surrounding bushes where they used to be.

“Are these arrows?” Mike knelt to pick one up. The dense metal tip was cold in his fingers.

‘Crossbow bolts.” Cecilia opened her mouth to say something else, but it was lost in the sudden crunch of Abella landing on the ground between them.

“Mike!” Abella wrapped him up in her arms, squeezing. He felt every bone in his back pop, grunting out loud as he struggled to push the gargoyle away.

“Can’t…breathe!” He hissed. Abella’s marble features darkened, and she set him down.

“I’m sorry,” she began, but Mike put a finger to her lips.

“I’m glad to see that you’re okay too,” he told her, planting a light kiss on her lips. “Where’s Tink?”

“Goblin wife work hard to fix house!” Tink limped around the corner, her left foot bandaged heavily and stuck inside of a small bucket.

“Tink. What on earth is that about?”

“Tink keep banging foot. Bucket make good idea, no more swear at furniture.” Clunking her way toward him, Tink wrapped her arms around his waist, dropping a hammer, a handful of nails, and a handsaw all at once. Patting her head, he could feel the moisture of her tears soaking through the front of his shirt.

“I’m glad you’re oka — ow!” Tink had bitten his forearm. “What the hell was that for?”

“Bite for scaring Tink! No fight nasty witch lady by yourself anymore.” Tink looked up at him. “Bite for you to remember.”

“Oh yeah?” Mike asked, kneeling down so they were face to face. He gave her a hug, then bit her shoulder. Tink yelped in surprise. “That’s for scaring me. We’re even.”

“Mike make good goblin husband.” Smiling, Tink picked up her tools. “Tink go patch front porch roof before it rains.”

Mike smiled, watching Tink scurry off, the bucket on her foot clanking against the ground. There was only one more person he needed to see, and it could wait no longer.

Abella helped him the last thirty yards to the fountain proper. He saw her there, standing on the surface of the water, tiny pink bubbles floating all around her body, the fountain spraying streams of water that altered course in mid-air, forming a giant heart above the nymph. Blue-green hair waved in the wind, and she wore a simple white gown that hugged every piece of her body as if it was a second skin.

“Naia.” Her name was like the ending of a prayer, a wish he never knew he was allowed to make. He stepped into the fountain, leaving Cecilia and Abella behind. Nothing about the house was normal, nor was there anything normal about the people living there, himself included. She held her hand out for him, and when he took it in his own, he felt that spark, the magical connection between them that he instantly recognized as their souls recognizing each other. As much as she was part of him, he was part of her, and nothing in the world was ever going to change that.

“Welcome home, lover.” Smiling, she placed her lips against his, his body instantly warming to her touch. They kissed, his arms around her waist, hers around his neck. The water of the fountain swirled around them, forming a vortex of magic, love, and peace. Breaking the kiss, he gazed into those sapphire eyes that he loved so much, his fingers dropping to her waist.

“Thanks. It’s good to be home.”

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