

Big Hands, Big Feet

The walk back through the tunnels was uneventful. Back in the throne room, Mike had Beth broker a new agreement with the rats. If they wanted to stay, they could, but they needed to close off any tunnels to the outside world that could be used to get in. The rats were hesitant to deny their request, particularly because Tink kept throwing everyone stink eye while holding her club and Mike held Jenny in his arms like a pet.

The doll didn't reanimate on the way back, but he could feel her cold, sinister presence within. He thought back to what he had seen in her illusory world. He was still rather pissed that he had been seen, cock essentially in hand, by Beth. There was still something so very daunting about her, a mental roadblock that prevented him from feeling entirely like himself when she was around.

Then again, who was he really? He thought back to the dual nature of Jenny and Jane. Was Jenny the product of Jane undergoing centuries of anger and abuse, that poor peasant girl now gone forever? Or was Jenny the facade that Jane wore to justify her actions, a true manifestation of her inner id?

With a tentative agreement to revisit the rats again to establish more rules, they were led back to the home by Reggie. Though he was now the monarch, he seemed to take a small amount of pride in leading them back to the house. If there was any anger over the death of the recent regent, he didn't detect any.

"Thank you, Reggie." Beth knelt down to shake his hand. "Let me know if you need anything. Also, if you could fix the locks on the doors, we would appreciate that."

"It would be my honor, Lady Beth." The new king gave them a wave and walked back into the secret passage. Mike yawned and looked at the others.

"I'm beat." He held Jenny out to Beth. "Do you want to take her tonight or should I?"

"I'll take her. She might want to talk later." Beth took the doll. "Oh, and here is this."

She handed over the emerald. It glowed eerily once it was in his hand.

"I'll lock it up in the Vault." He had no idea the extent of its powers, but he instantly knew it would be a bad idea to let anybody else mess with it.

"No use Vault." Tink yawned too, then rubbed her eyes. "Tink find old rat hole in back of Vault. Hide in corner where only doll can fit."

"I see." He sighed. That explained how Jenny had gotten out before. "I'll take it with me, I guess. Hold onto it until the Vault gets properly sealed."

"Sounds like a plan." Beth held Jenny out. She looked like she wanted to ask something, but thought better of it. "Well, goodnight."

"Goodnight." He watched her walk away. Embarrassing moments in the church aside, she had been a wonderful ally to have on his side. He made a brief visit to the kitchen for a drink, pleased that the others had cleaned up the worst of the mess already. He sucked down a beer that he had hidden from Tink behind the orange juice. The little goblin could as well be a dwarf based on how much booze she could handle.

Tink was already in bed, her club leaning against the side of the frame. Mike checked in with Naia, and she took the emerald from him and promised to keep it safe until the Vault was finished. He yawned while climbing into bed, miserable at how soon the sun was going to rise. Tink rolled over and grabbed his arm and he shifted it at the last second to avoid getting bitten.

He closed his eyes, contemplating the dull green glow of the emerald. He could see it as if it sat before him, mounted on a tiny silver stand.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” He spoke the words, but he hadn’t wanted to say them. It wasn’t his voice either. It was a mix of voices, all feminine.

“I... I guess?” When he responded, he heard his own voice. At least he would know who said what.

“Take it.”

“Am I asleep?”

The voice laughed. The image of the emerald was now on top of a marble pedestal and he stood in the sideways tower in the sky. He contemplated the world below where it was early morning, could see the movements of cars and trains beneath him. So many people living ordinary lives, unaware that a man living in a magic house was apparently having a nervous breakdown thousands of feet above them.

“Not quite, but close.”

“When I was younger, I used to dream I could fly.” He grabbed the emerald sculpture. It was about the size of a chess piece in his hand, a hand that wasn’t his own. “I loved those dreams because I would fly straight up into the sky. Away from my mother, my problems and other people. In my dreams, it was so peaceful up in the clouds.”

“Congratulations on finding a new piece.” The room swirled around him and he was back in his house. The first floor was clean and untouched. He walked against his will to the room with the large dining table and saw the familiar gameboard from before. The board was larger now, revealing the new addition to the house. He set the emerald down on Naia’s fountain, next to her game piece.

“Every room has its purpose, every monster has its place.” The voice sang these words and withdrew their hand.

“Uh huh.” He experimented with the board like he had before. He touched the back wall of the servant’s quarters. The board shimmered, but instead of changing, a separate game board appeared to the side of his. Standing in the middle of the throne room was a figurine of Reggy, complete with Potatohead glasses and a crown. “This... this is real, isn’t it?”

The voice just laughed at him. He tried to relax, allowing himself to sink deeper into the vision. He examined the pieces on the board, contemplating them. Off in the corner, he saw a pair of pieces laying inside the lid of a cardboard box. He pulled them out to look.

“Lily and Dana.” Of course. They weren’t on the board because they were traveling. He noticed other shapes on his board, blurry shapes. Those would be creatures he hadn’t discovered yet in rooms he couldn’t find. Frustrated, he tried to examine some of the pieces, but the harder he looked, the blurrier they became.

“So what’s the point in all of this? Am I playing a game?” He was reminded of a movie he caught on TV as a kid. Something to do with the gods using humans as game pieces and sending them out on quests. “Are... are you god?”

There was no answer. Instead, he noticed a shadow sitting at the other side of the table. It was next to a game board of its own, and the shadow’s ears perked up as it noticed him. It stood up and leaned toward him.

“Oh shit.” He couldn’t make out this new creature, but the absolute malice it radiated washed over him like a heatwave. It had several game pieces of its own on a board that looked like it had a forest along the edges.

“You have been challenged,” the voice warned him.

“Challenged to what?” When he spoke, it was in his own voice. He was back in his bed, Tink clutching his thigh. Early morning light illuminated his bedroom and he groaned. Had he actually fallen asleep? His whole body was stiff as if he hadn’t moved a muscle the entire time he was in bed.

The vision had filled him with a certain level of dread, that shadowy figure regarding him from the other side of the table. Was it a Society member? He let out a loud sigh. He was too tired to give it much thought and briefly considered getting out of bed to go talk to Naia, or Ratu, or anyone who could give him a shove in the right direction. Fatigue sat across him like a heavy fog, pressing him into the comfort of his mattress.

“Fuck it.” He grabbed the edge of a blanket and rolled over, shoving his face into his pillow. Tink stirred, and he jerked his thigh away before she could bite it. Unless the world was currently ending, he was going to sleep in.

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It was nearly noon when he walked outside. He held a cup of coffee and wore a pair of sunglasses. He went immediately to the sundial and gave it a good turn, then looked up. He had expected to see Sebastien standing there, but was surprised to see a dark skinned man in a fancy suit.

Amir. This was the head of the Society, standing right on the edge of his property, a false grin plastered across his face. He fiddled with a rather ornate ring on his finger, then put his hands behind his back. This was the first time anyone other than Sebastien had been on watch.

“Mr. Radley.” Amir smiled. “I guess the reports of your journeys are... inaccurate.”

“Come again?” Mike only walked close enough to hear better. Amir, according to Lily, was one of the most powerful mages currently alive. To Mike, he looked more like an expensive car salesman.

“For several hours, a locator spell I cast with your name pinged in an overgrown region of South America. I sent many of the others to capture you, but we lost your location hours ago. Naturally, I came here myself to check on the situation.” Amir folded his fingers into a gun and a black and purple bolt ripped toward Mike. It struck an invisible barrier at the property line and scattered outward. “Can’t blame a man for trying. Anyways, I had hoped to be waiting for your eventual return so I could kill you.”

“Your locator spell is broken.” Mike sipped at his coffee. “Clearly I am still here and haven’t left.”

“Or clearly you have returned. You are a man of many mysteries, Mr. Radley.”

“Yeah.” He turned away from Amir, then paused and turned back. “Any luck finding your succubus?”

Amir’s features flinched. “She has been rather elusive, but I am a patient man. I have lived countless centuries and will undoubtedly live countless more. That is why I have decided that I no longer care about gaining your cooperation. It would be far easier to kill you and whoever shows up to claim your inheritance. If I do this enough times, eventually someone will sell me this place.”

“It’s a shame you have all the time in the world, yet you spend it being a huge douchebag.”

“That is a matter of perspective.” Amir’s smile reappeared. “As the wind wears down the mountain, I too shall see this through.”

“Uh huh.” The way Amir was looking at him now, he knew that he should be terrified. In a way, his death certificate had already been signed by the man. However, he had slept poorly and was officially too grumpy to care. “Anything else you have to say to me? I’m pretty busy these days. Found a dragon in the basement, I’m having him neutered so he quits humping the washing machine. Leaves terrible stains on all my clothes.”

“You have a dragon?” A look of disbelief crossed the man’s face. Mike ignored the man and walked back to his door. He stopped long enough to stare at the swing, wondering how long Cecilia would be gone. At the thought of her departure, his mood darkened.

In the early afternoon, a moving truck arrived. It was all the items from New Castle. He had them dropped off on the driveway and tipped the movers well. Beth came out with her list and verified that each item had, in fact, been returned.

The fairies helped him sort the items into magical and non-magical piles. Surprisingly enough, most of the items were non-magical. These Mike used to re-furnish the second floor with help from Sofia and Beth. The rats had unblocked the remaining doorways and closed up a couple of the portals already.

Tink spent her evening and the following morning in the Vault. When she came up for breakfast, she was muttering under her breath, her face and arms covered in soot. Between inhaling her eggos, she mumbled something about a magical item that had blown up in her face and had gone back down to the basement wearing a thick apron and heavy gloves. The Vault was eventually declared repaired before Tink flopped down on Mike’s bed and slept for nearly fourteen hours straight.

He expected to have another dream about the game board, but it never came. Cecilia still hadn’t returned, but Sofia assured him that many death myths claimed a personal escort could take time, especially when they were troublesome spirits that didn’t want to go.

Somehow, it didn’t help him feel better. He used his nervous energy to help Reggie transform the servant’s quarters into a sitting room. They had both agreed it would be more pleasant than storming into the throne room whenever they wanted to talk. To his credit, Reggie had some of the rats participate in cleaning up, and they even gave Beth an old, beat up doll house meant to be a temporary replacement for Jenny.

The doll hadn’t moved since they returned, but Beth assured him that Jenny’s weird little outburst had worn her out. He was happy to hear that the two of them were at least talking and that the grumpy ghost was okay. He cleaned up the doll house and Beth convinced Jenny to accept it until Tink could build her a better one.

Ratu had taken the gem to the Labyrinth for study and hadn't been seen since. Utilizing the fairy messaging system, she informed him that the emerald had her thoroughly stumped. The magic it contained wasn't easily catalogued and she couldn't get it to replicate the effect of animating furniture.

Another day passed without answers or Cecilia. Mike turned the sundial the next morning, ignoring the figure in white who watched him from the sidewalk. They were able to repair damage to the first floor and Jenny's new dollhouse was rebuilt and waiting for her. The rats agreed to avoid the front room, not as a punishment, but because everyone feared Jenny would kill one on sight.

Sitting at the large table in the dining room, Mike was busy clicking through websites on his laptop. He had sent out final emails this morning to his few remaining clients with references for other webmasters he recommended. He had thought to hold onto some semblance of his old life, but he had come to terms with the fact that he found no joy in working for others, nor did he have the time. He had ordered replacement plates and silverware for what the poltergeists had broken and had gotten some new furniture for the front room. Tink, Sofia, and Abella had worked to repair the table, but it still had several large cracks where it had broken apart.

Beth sat across from him, her nose buried in one of the Harry Potter novels. An abandoned crumpet was on the paper plate in front of her and she stirred occasionally at a large cup of tea.

The sound of scrambling claws announced Reggie's arrival. For whatever reason, he had started showing up for meals. At first, Mike had found the rat's continued presence annoying. However, after a couple of days, he realized that Reggie was a lot like he was. The rat had only been a mouthpiece for so many years that he had had no confidence or hopes of advancing his lot. Now, however, he had been given a chance to shine by the very people who would be his enemies and seemed determined to develop that relationship.

"Lord Mike. Lady Beth." He had to sit in a booster seat Tink had built for him, his paws folded politely.

"Good morning," Beth told him, then slid over her crumpet. Reggie broke off a piece and stuffed it in his mouth.

"How's the kingdom?" Mike pushed over the rest of his omelet. Sofia was still sore about the mess they had made of the Library, so he and Beth had started sneaking him her cooking.

"We are doing well. We have rebuilt part of the warrens and moved our living quarters around. Now that we can move around, we were offered refuge down in portions of the Labyrinth.

"Really? Ratu was okay with that?"

The Rat King nodded. "We have built a series of portals through the maze that allow us to check her traps for her. She also had us build her some shortcuts through the Labyrinth so that she could get here faster. Sir Asterion was not a fan of this, but she placated him with something called... time off?"

When Reggie said time off, Mike caught Beth grinning.

"He doesn't have to be in the Labyrinth all the time anymore," she explained. "He's been allowed to come up and visit the garden. We actually had a nice walk in the greenhouse yesterday. We found a great little waterfall and had some lunch there."

"Yeah. There's a couple good ones there." A chuckle escaped his lips. He hadn't really thought of the greenhouse as a place to go for a pleasant walk. Since he was on permanent house arrest, it was

likely that he would be doing that fairly soon. “Actually, Reggie, the greenhouse might not be a bad place for your people to look for potential homes. I don’t know how big it is, but other than a few extremely dangerous plants, nothing else lives there.” At least, that was what Zel had told him.

“We prefer our comforts to be made of wood. Unless you are offering to build us homes, we will stick with our current domiciles.”

“Of course.” He drank some more coffee and contemplated his computer screen. He felt like he had a million other things he should be doing right now and couldn’t focus on any of them as a result. He excused himself from the table and wandered the house, peeking into random rooms.

Zel sat in the front room next to Jenny’s dollhouse. She was reading a book on herbs that she had borrowed from Sofia. Every couple of seconds, she would scribble furiously in her notebook. She still hadn’t reverted and was taking advantage of being able to walk around the house without destroying the floor.

Out front, Abella was having a spirited game of tag with the fairies up above the sundial. She moved surprisingly fast, snatching Cerulea out of the air with her feet. Carmina and Olivia laughed, racing in circles around her. Out on the sidewalk, Sebastien watched with interest. Mike suspected that any Society members involved in the battle on his front lawn could now see everyone who had been involved, and this confirmed it. They were a potential thorn in his side that would never go away unless he did something.

Like usual, he had no idea what that something was.

Tink was busy fixing up the office, so he left her to it and walked up the stairs to his room. He took off his clothes and climbed into his bath, the water rapidly drawn at the perfect temperature for him.

“Rough morning, lover?” The water folded around him when he lay down in the tub, becoming her arms and legs.

“Maybe. I don’t know. Feel like I have a lot on my mind, but i can’t pinpoint it.”

“I think it’s your brain decompressing. You’ve done an impressive amount since moving in and, as of right now, you aren’t fighting for survival.”

“That’s just it. I feel like I am, somehow. I’m in a dark alley and am about to get robbed, or something.” He reached up and played with her hair. “And the strange vision I had keeps bothering me.”

“The one with the game pieces?” He had told Naia about it the next day. She had no idea what the vision had been.

“Yeah. There’s a challenger. But now what? Is someone going to show up on my front lawn and try to fight me? Or will it be like Lily and someone will try to kill me in my sleep? And I’m worried about Cecilia, and Lily, and even Dana.” He took a deep breath and let it all out at once. “I’m also worried about what Emily was hiding.”

“You’re welcome to look with me.” Naia’s hands squeezed his shoulders. “Where should we start?”

He wanted to ask about the emerald, the magic items she had collected, why she erased the second floor of her house. But Emily was smart enough to make sure that anything connected to those things would have been part of the wipe.

It suddenly occurred to him.

"I've been focusing on the outcome far too much," he said. "Why she did certain things. But something must have given her those ideas, right? I mean, she didn't just randomly decide to go look up some magic rats that could help her steal the Holy Grail or something like that. Whatever her goal, she based her path on knowledge she came by." Or at least he hoped she did.

"So what do you want to see?" Naia asked.

"Memories about portals. Learning what they are, and how they work. I want to see that."

Naia leaned over him, her lips finding his,

Then let's begin.

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Emily pulled her Chevy Impala onto the side of the road. The small hunting trail was nearly invisible from the road, and she wouldn't have seen it either. The tiny yellow fairy sitting on her shoulder had tugged on her ear, indicating that she had detected magic.

"Are you sure?" Emily asked. There was nobody else around, so Daisy hopped onto the dashboard, her hands on her hips. The small creature went through a series of hand signs.

"Yeah, you're right, I'm sorry." She set the brake and turned off the engine. Emily knew better than to doubt Daisy's tracking ability; she just didn't feel like hiking through the thick brush so soon. When she got out, the wind caught her head scarf, whipping the ends free over her shoulder. She tucked her hair back into place, and Daisy squeezed back in to her hiding spot just beneath Emily's ear.

It had been a long flight, and the clock was ticking. The sundial was good for only thirty more hours, which was cutting it close. She gazed up into the woods and let out a heavy sigh. She hated being away from the house for very long. While Abella had assured her that nobody had tried to break in since the late 1800s, she always worried about what might happen if someone did and she wasn't home to activate the sundial.

On the other hand, she also needed to make the house bigger. It was key to solving the home's mystery, and the only way to do that was to offer up her home as a sanctuary. Unfortunately, magical creatures were becoming increasingly hard to come by. The arachne she had discovered in Utah certainly wasn't coming anytime soon.

However, she had been tracking any details on this particular quarry for decades now. His territory was impossibly large, and she wouldn't have bothered if not for rumors that a couple guys had finally caught it on tape. She had seen it for herself and decided to take action. It didn't matter that she was now over a hundred miles north of where it had been spotted. Based on her estimates, the creature could somehow travel a thousand miles a day with little problem.

That was assuming it was the same creature, of course. She had already visited the spot where it had been filmed and planted an enchanted stone beneath the soil. This would ensure that anybody trying to visit the same location would get lost or turned away somehow, thus hiding the creature's last known trail. That was yesterday afternoon, and since then, Daisy had been tracking the creature using a

locator spell, some hair she had found, and a map inside of the car. Once they were close enough, they no longer needed the map, and Emily had to drive incredibly fast just to keep up with the creature's strides. An hour ago, it had been fifty miles to the south.

She slid the rental car keys into her pocket and they started walking. Her thick soled shoes were perfect for hiking, but the trail rapidly diminished. She found herself fighting to make it through the thick brush around the edges of the forest.

It was a sunny day, but the forest canopy kept her in the shade. She whistled quietly to herself, wishing she could listen to music while she walked. She certainly enjoyed listening to her turntable or the radio at home. Her happy tune began to sputter out as the trail steadily became more difficult. She could duck under branches, but the thicket was too massive to push through. She took enormous detours just to get around, stepping off of the trail to get to her destination.

Branches snatched at her clothing, tugging free her scarf. Grumbling to herself, she had to free herself numerous times from the thick vegetation. She was so caught up in keeping her clothes from ripping that she stumbled into a clearing backwards, turning around to kick a root free of her leg.

There he sat, his dark brown fur tangled up in knots. He had built a fire to cook some fish, several of them spitted over the flames. He was tossing some sort of herbs over them when she stepped out of the bushes. He sat up, his eyes already level with Emily. The skin of his face was dark, the hair growing around the outside of it. His dark eyes were kind, and he had several braids in his fur held together by string, ribbon and leaves.

"It's about time you got here," he said, his voice rumbling. "I was afraid you were lost."

"I... um..." She had expected a lot of things, but not this. "You're cooking?"

"Even Bigfoot gets hungry." He used one of his enormous feet to push a small boulder toward her. "Come. Have a seat."

"This is not at all what I expected." She sat down by the fire. The smoke of the flames sought her out immediately, then bent away at the last second. She would tolerate a lot of things from nature, but smoke in her eyes was not one of them.

"I could say the same about you. You carry yourself with confidence through these woods, yet you appear as a fragile beauty." Bigfoot smirked, scratching his cheek with a giant finger.

"You looked a lot bigger on film," Emily said, frowning.

"The camera adds fifteen pounds." Bigfoot lifted one of his fish off the fire. "You hungry? You look hungry."

"No, but..."

He handed over the fish, and she took it.

Up close, the trout smelled amazing and her stomach growled in anticipation. "I'm not here to eat your food."

"That one is for you. Figured you might be hungry after chasing me all morning." He winked and picked up the second stake with two fish on it. "Besides, I should probably eat less. That video wasn't very flattering."

She stared in disbelief. "You knew I was tracking you?"

"Yep. I have very keen senses. The sound and smell of your car are distinct, and the fact that they kept getting closer told me I was being pursued. I waited to see if you were friend or foe."

"And what would you have done if I was foe?"

Bigfoot stood up and casually sunk his fingers into the giant rock he had been sitting on. He pulled it straight out of the ground, the earth parting like sand. The boulder was easily the size of a trashcan and he hurled it with very little effort across the clearing where it crushed the trunk of a tree. It was clearly some form of elemental magic, and just as clearly casually induced.

"Christ." She looked at the broken tree and then down at the fish. She ripped a piece of flesh off and ate it. It had been seasoned with something sweet and lemony. "This is very good."

"Thank you. I pride myself on my cooking."

"Forgive me though, if I may ask. If Bigfoot are so good at hiding and can detect people from miles away, how did you get caught on video?"

"Oh. That." He sighed, momentarily lowering his fish. "The forest protects me in many ways. I am rarely seen, and even when I am, I have magic which can disguise me in plain sight, even when I'm moving. But even though the magic is automatic, I can find myself in a position where my faculties are, um, not as effective."

"Such as?"

He rolled his eyes. "I often like to incorporate floral delicacies into my meals. I found an interesting little hybrid that I thought would compliment my meal that evening. I made a wonderful little meal of it, put it in my salad, cooked it with some rabbit. Tasted phenomenal. About an hour later, I thought I was lost in the desert and a fucking cactus was trying to sell me an automobile."

"Wait, you got high?"

"Yeah, I was pretty messed up. There are so many plants out here with medicinal properties, and I am usually so careful. This one was pretty bad though. When I saw those guys, I was convinced they were judgmental mushrooms. Unfortunately, they just happened to have that camera thing of theirs." He took a bite of fish and snorted. "Fucking figures. No, I have so many people on my ass I should be charging rent."

"About that." She scooted closer to the fire. "I have a house, out on the east coast. It's a sanctuary for creatures like you and---"

"Nope." He took another bite and chewed it slowly. "I appreciate the offer, I really do. But you have to understand that, by nature, I am a restless spirit. I love to wander beneath the sky and commune with the animals. The forest isn't just my home. It's my soulmate, my best friend, the other half of my heart. While your home may be safe, I feel that I would not fare well in its presence. The others of my kind are tied to caves, the ice, and even swamps, so I wouldn't bother making them a similar offer."

Emily sighed. She had come so far for nothing. "I see. I guess this is a wasted trip after all."

"Nonsense." His dark features spread into a wide grin. "It has been many years since I had a guest. Especially one so pretty. Was one of your parents a nymph?"

She fought a smile. "That's a long story."

"We've got plenty of time. The nearest human is over ten miles away. Pair of hunters, a man and his son. He is teaching him how to use a rifle."

"How can you tell all that?"

"The forest speaks to me. It tells me they have been camping for two days. The father is teaching his son to be a steward for the forest, to carry out his trash and to always put out the fire. The love of the woods is ingrained deep in his heart, and he shares it with his son."

"Wow. The forest knows all that?"

"In a sense. It tells me what it sees, and I interpret. The forest is not one to judge, only to observe. In my grumpier moments, I may intervene."

"And that's when you get spotted."

"At times. However, sometimes people vanish and it is for the best." Bigfoot pulled off a piece of fish and held it out. A mouse she hadn't seen stood up and took the fish with its paws, then vanished into the underbrush. "She is pregnant and her hole flooded in the morning rain."

Emily smiled. She finished her meal and they talked some more about the woods. The sun had fallen low over the woods and she realized the entire day had gone by in just a blink. Bigfoot stood and offered to walk her back to her car. She accepted, and was surprised when he took her hand and stepped between a pair of nearby trees. Instantly, they were near the side of the road, her car nearly invisible in the shadows below.

"How... how did you do that?" They had crossed nearly an hour of hiking in an instant.

"There is magic in these woods, in the very heart of each tree. Some of them are connected like doorways, allowing me to traverse the miles in a single step."

"That's... that's amazing." He stayed in the shadows as she stepped out onto the path. Daisy flew above her, her body acting as a light to guide her on through the brush. "I had an amazing day. Will I ever get to see you again?"

"Hmm." Bigfoot's face scrunched up in thought. "If ever you speak my name to the woods, I shall hear. Perhaps we could meet again someday."

"I would really like that." She walked back into the woods just long enough to stand on her tiptoes and give him a kiss on the chin. She felt her nymph magic resonate briefly with his. Naia's magic was as old as the land, but Bigfoot's was positively ancient compared to hers. "Take care of yourself."

"I will, my little nymph." He shifted backwards less than an inch and was instantly invisible to her. She could hear him moving through the brush, his large footprints the only evidence he was there.

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"Emily."

She turned around at the sound of her name. It had been almost a year since she had heard that voice. She was sweating like crazy, standing on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Atlantic ocean. She was hiking through Acadia in search of rumors that someone had spotted a mermaid along its shores,

but she was beginning to think that the creature was long gone. Daisy had found magic residue on one of the many rocky shores, but they weren't any closer to spotting it than they were the day before.

"Did you hear that?" she asked Daisy. The little fairy had been chasing a beetle along the side of the path. Down below, a small group of tourists were having a picnic near the shoreline, their voices drifting up over the rocks. It was possible that she had overheard something similar to her name, but the deep rumbling cadence of that voice was even harder to mistake.

Daisy signed back that she hadn't. Emily shook her head, wondering if she was hearing things. The last six months, she had been in and out of the house, hunting down any rumors she could. The arachne had shown no interest in moving in, and Emily hadn't found any other prospects except for a feral chupacabra that she had been forced to trap in a cave.

"Emily." This time, the voice was more insistent. She turned around and saw him standing between two trees. His dark fur was streaked with soot and blood. He put out his hand and she took it, scooping up Daisy before he could pull her through the gap in the trees. The humid air of the coast was instantly gone, the air containing a chill. She was surrounded by conifers now, and a small lake could be seen between the trees.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Canada." He leaned against a rock and sighed. "I need your help."

"My help? With what?"

He grinned and leaned back, lifting up the thick fur along his ribs. A large patch of mud mixed with berries had been shoved in place.

"You brought me hundreds of miles to help you remove a mat?" She frowned at the sasquatch. "Hardly an appropriate use of my time."

"I'm injured. The mud was to stop the bleeding, but it isn't healing like it should." He peeled it away enough to reveal a quick torrent of blood. He shoved it back into place then wiped his hand off on his fur. "I need stitches, apparently."

"How did you get cut so badly?"

Bigfoot's face darkened. "A sword, apparently. My fur is like the toughest stone and can blunt the sharpest blade. I had a hunter shoot me once from ten feet away, yet no bullet can pierce my hide. But here we are, talking about my boo-boo when you could be helping me stitch it shut."

"Is something burning?" She detected the smell of sulfur in the air, but didn't sense anything demonic.

"Hmm?" He sniffed the air. "Oh. That would be me." He rolled to his side and revealed a patch of hair that had been singed. "The guy with a sword had a friend."

"Okay, tell you what. I'll stitch you up if you tell me the details. Deal?"

"Yes." He reached under the stump he sat on and pulled out a small box. He opened it up to reveal a suture kit. "I took this from a vet clinic, but my fingers are too big."

"It's a shame I wasn't home. I live with a couple of people who are phenomenal with a needle and thread. Then again, you wouldn't have gotten through to me, I guess." She opened the kit and pulled out the thick needle. "Do you need anesthetic or something? Or some antibiotic cream?"

"I don't feel pain like others do and I do not worry about germs. Just do it quickly." He lifted his arm and grabbed the mud patch. "And do it quick. Even if you do a bad job, it will still heal."

"I can't believe I'm stitching up Bigfoot in Canada..." She looked at the wound, which was leaking heavily. "Try and press it together for me."

"Yes." He used his large fingers to push the skin together and she went to work. It was tough pushing the needle through his skin, and she did a simple stitch, yanking the thread to pull the wound shut. After several minutes, the wound had been closed enough that Bigfoot let out a loud sigh and lowered his arm.

"Is that good enough?" she asked.

"Yes. I can feel it mending already." He took her hands in his and squeezed. "Thank you, Emily."

"So tell me about the men who did this."

"There were a few of them, but the two I encountered almost captured me. I sensed their magic through the trees and went to investigate. They accused me of upsetting the Balance and said they were taking me in. I refused." He placed a hand over the wound and winced. "They used a magical snare to keep me in one place, but I broke free with little effort."

"So a wizard then?"

"No. The snare was a magical object. I crushed it and threw it at the man who set it for me. That's when his partner attacked me. I thought he was holding a knife, but it unfolded like paper and slid clean through my flesh. When I struck him, it was like hitting a boulder." He held up the back of his hand. His knuckles were bloody. "I knocked him down, but he was surrounded by a magical aura supplied by a staff his friend carried. That's when he cast a ball of fire at me, and I stepped between the trees to here."

"Someone was hunting you? How?"

He shook his head. "I do not know, but they were able to track me as if a star hung over my head. I tried to avoid them for nearly an hour, and every time I stepped between the trees, they corrected their course."

"Interesting." She looked over at Daisy. Were they using a method similar to hers? "Do you know anything about them?"

"No. But I get the impression they know what they are doing. The way they tracked me through the forest, how quickly they attacked from the shadows, these all speak to experience." He turned his head, his eyes on a distant mountain. He let out a groan. "Shit, they're here already."

"How close?"

"Ten miles. They must have hopped on a plane shortly after our fight." He pushed off the stump, letting out a groan. "C'mon, let's go."

"Go where?"

“California.” He held her hand and walked toward the trees. This time she saw it; the trees seemed to bend around them when they passed through. There was no shimmering glow of magic, or sparks. If not for the drastic change in scenery, she barely would have known.

Looking back, she saw that the portal was gone. “Are we in California?”

“Need a few more steps to get there. We’re in a place you call Seney, Michigan.” While they walked, he tilted his head again. “Here, too?”

“How? I thought they were in Canada?”

“The forest can’t tell the difference. Two men, one with a sword, the other with magic. Apparently they are headed toward us.” He took a step and stumbled, his knee leaving a giant imprint in the ground. “The next portal is just a mile up ahead. Let’s go.”

They moved through the woods as quickly as they could, pushing aside branches. There was no definable path, so Emily stuck behind Bigfoot, his huge body securing passage. It was as if the forest bent away from him, closing up like a zipper as they passed.

“So each tree goes to another specific tree?”

“The long distance ones do, yes. I planted each of those myself. Before man came to this continent, I traversed every last hill and valley without a care in the world. Even then, I recognized the advantage of a good shortcut. There used to be many more such portals, and I could go from coast to coast in a matter of minutes. But when the white man came, so many of my precious trees were cut down to make way for your roads and your homes. Others like me have experienced that same loss.” Bigfoot’s fists clenched tightly, his raw knuckles bleeding once more.

Emily didn’t know what to say. She followed in silence until they walked through another portal. The moment they stepped through, Bigfoot stiffened up and pushed her back into Michigan.

“What’s wrong?”

“They were there too, but much too close.” He frowned. “How do they know where I am going?”

“Hold up.” She placed a hand on his large back. “What if they don’t know where you’re going? What if they’re guessing?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re Bigfoot. When you go to these places, you occasionally get spotted. If they tracked you, they saw you jump across the map, metaphorically speaking. What better way to trap you than to put men on the ground where you’ve been spotted the most?”

“You’re suggesting I go somewhere I’ve rarely been.” He frowned. “We can try, but to what avail?”

“I just need a few hours. If you can get me close enough to a payphone, I can make arrangements to get you somewhere where you can’t be tracked.”

“We can try. I have not met men who hunt as these ones do.” He took her down an old hunting trail and they crossed a river. The animals of the forest ignored their presence, and she walked mere feet away from a herd of deer that looked at her with Bigfoot and continued eating.

“Here.” This tree was buried in a thicket of thorns.

“Where does this go?”

“The Pine Barrens.” They crossed through together. Bigfoot stopped, his eyes on the trees around them. The Barrens were eerily quiet and he scanned the trees, his dark eyes along their tops.

“Are they here?”

“No. I do not come here anymore, for there are things in this world that even I fear. We are currently alone.” He visibly relaxed. “Let us find you your payphone.”

He led her through the tall pines, the miles folding into single steps. Soon they were by a roadside diner. A worn payphone sat just outside the front door. Emily crossed the silent highway and put some coins into the machine, listening patiently for a dial tone. Once she had it, she called her estate attorney, Jerome Ferguson.

It took a few minutes, but Jerome assured her that he already had a lead and to call him back in a few hours. She crossed the road and vanished with Bigfoot back into the woods.

While they waited, Bigfoot showed her how the trees worked. The ones he took short jumps through could be almost any tree, it just had to be taller than he was. The larger ones, however, looked like ordinary trees at first. However, when she got close to them, she could tell that the bark of the tree only looked like the other trees in the forest. It was a type of camouflage, Bigfoot explained. The wood beneath was a rich brown that was almost black. When he drew close to them, he described how the tree would reach out to him and connect like the rest of the forest did.

“Could anybody do this?” she asked. “Or is this just a Bigfoot thing?”

“Anyone who could connect with the trees could do this, yes. Once you find a tree, it will take you where its partner has been planted.”

“And what if one tree dies?”

“If one dies, then the other may become linked to another portal. That is pretty rare though. Usually it just dies. You seem very curious about it.”

Emily nodded. “I’ll be honest with you. North America isn’t super great for tracking down magical creatures these days. I know they are out there, and many of them need a safe place to live. However, I put my own home in danger whenever I leave.”

“Danger from what?”

She shrugged. “Apparently one of my predecessors ran into an issue with a nasty vampire once, but they took care of it. Honestly, the danger could be from anywhere. As long as I am home, the house is safe, but when I leave, I only have twenty four hours.”

“And your home is safe now?”

“I’m taking a huge risk every time I leave. But if I could learn to walk through the trees...” she placed her hand on the bark. “I could travel almost anywhere and still be able to return if a problem arose. I want to travel to Europe. I’ve heard rumors that there are monsters hiding in the ruins. Or maybe even Asia. Travel by air takes too long, even when money is no object.”

"I see." Bigfoot became quiet, his eyes on the treeline once more. "This is a big favor that you ask of me. Let me think on it."

"Of course." She checked her watch. "I need to call my attorney back."

Bigfoot took her back to the diner. She placed her call and was happy to hear that Jerome had come through. When she returned, Bigfoot sat in plain sight on the side of the road. None of the car's bothered to slow down when they passed, the drivers oblivious.

"And?"

"So here's the deal. I have a place in Oregon, a small cabin."

"I cannot live in a cabin," he replied.

"Hush, let me finish. This cabin is an oddity that came with my estate, a home away from home, if you will. I've traveled there a couple of times. It's in the middle of nowhere. The entire area has been blessed with an extremely powerful enchantment that keeps people from wandering into it. I think it was meant to be a safe house on the west coast."

"Where is it?"

"Oregon. The whole area is over a hundred square miles... I think. The few times I visited, it was almost like it was somehow bigger than it was supposed to be. Anyway, the enchantment only allows in people by invitation, much like my own home. You could go there and lay low for a bit. It should offer you a place to hide. Even if these guys are using magic to find you, it won't work unless you tell them where you are. However, I just got off the phone with my attorney. He is buying up even more land around that area and having fencing and private land signs put up all around there. The extra land will give you more places to roam so you don't go stir crazy."

"This is an awfully large gift you offer."

Emily nodded. "You're right, it is. But I offer it freely. The house I live in, it is a refuge for creatures like you. Myself and my predecessors have rescued many different creatures from across the globe and granted them safe haven there. Just because you declined my offer does not mean I wish to decline you the help you need. These people who hunt you, they sound similar to some bad people I heard about from someone else. While you hide there, I can look into it, see if I can find anything out. Then we can go from there."

"Hmm." Bigfoot thought about it for several minutes, his eyes on the trees. The barrens had become unnaturally still after a while, causing him to sit at attention.

"Take me to this place," he told her. "I would like to see it."

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The road was barely visible, already overgrown with weeds. Other than a pair of naked dirt strips where her tires should go, she had no other way of finding her way in. Daisy sat on the dashboard, her legs kicking at the little compass that was suction-cupped to the dash.

They had long ago passed through the locked metal gate that warned that trespassers would be shot. According to Jerome, local hunters had been upset to discover that some of their favorite hunting grounds had been bought up by some wealthy railroad tycoon, but Emily couldn't care less. Bigfoot had already told her that the few hunters he had detected had become disoriented shortly after crossing the

barriers, many of them becoming lost. A local geologist was blaming the effect on a large magnetic field that disrupted navigation and was affecting the human brain.

“There it is.” The shimmering barrier was visible to her, as was the forest beyond. She had tried to photograph the barrier once out of curiosity, but the image had come out blurred beyond recognition. The compass was already spinning wildly before she crossed the barrier, the shining wall passing through the car. The dying trail was suddenly a cobblestone driveway, the car surging forward on the stable surface.

The rest of the drive was far easier, and she made it the rest of the way to the cabin. It was little more than five hundred square feet on the inside, and though she hadn’t been this way in over a decade, it looked like it had been freshly painted. Smoke was coming out of the chimney in anticipation of her arrival.

The door opened itself for her and she walked inside. Fresh biscuits were already on the table along with a bowl of stew. A tiny creature no more than a foot tall fretted over the food, wringing his hands in anticipation. His whole body was a dull color, as if sculpted from unpainted modeling clay. His pointy ears lifted at her arrival.

“Good afternoon, Emery.” At the sound of his name, the imp let out a yelp and stood at attention.

“Good afternoon, Mistress Emily! I made you a late lunch in case you were hungry, and the bed has already been made up for you.” His voice was high-pitched and he wore a little bow tie around his neck.

“Thank you, Emery.” She handed him a silver dollar. The little imp squealed with happiness and ran off to hide away his treasure. A previous Caretaker had crafted the little imp using earth magic with the promise that future Caretakers would bring him silver in exchange for his services. Emily had been disappointed that she couldn’t bring the little guy back to the house with her, but was more than happy to uphold her part of the bargain. On her first visit, Emery had expressed a large level of disappointment that she had not brought him his customary gift. She had made a special trip the next month with a large bag of silver and the coins had been his absolute favorite.

The meal was much needed and delicious. She split part of her biscuit with Daisy, who gobbled up the crumbs hungrily. Though the fairy didn’t eat normal food, she did seem to enjoy the taste.

The sun was sinking out of the sky when she set out, Daisy guiding the way. Once she was away from the cabin and surrounded by trees, she spoke his name.

“Bigfoot. I’m here.”

She waited a couple minutes before he stepped out of the shadows from between two small trees. He smiled and held out a hand for her. She took it and stepped through the forest with him. The scenery abruptly changed and she saw that the cabin was now on a distant hilltop. He had set up a small clearing with a small fire in the middle.

“You’re not cooking for me today?”

“You’ve already eaten. The fire is to keep you warm, a cold front is coming.” He gazed into the sky.

“Are you adjusting?”

“Yes. I step away occasionally. The men who hunt me are far fewer. They have wandered around the edges of this place on the rare occasion I step past the barrier. I hope that perhaps they will give up.”

“They might. I have news on that front.” It had taken her months of digging, but she had found out that his hunters belonged to a centuries old group of knights called The Order. Their activities seemed to center only on creatures who interacted with humans, and she had been able to track them down only because of the intensity of their investigation after the Silver Bridge incident. While many people had gone hunting for the elusive Mothman, the locals remembered the odd words of men who carried swords into the forest. She explained to him the whole story, the sun sinking behind the hills. A cold front did indeed blow in, but the fire had been built close to a large wall of rocks that blocked the breeze. She was comfortably warm.

“So you think they will keep hunting me?” Bigfoot asked.

“Yes and no. You’ve kind of disappeared recently, and from what I’ve heard, they were more upset that you were being spotted. I haven’t been able to find these people myself, and I guess I probably shouldn’t. I’m not certain they would approve of my relationship with my own cryptids.”

Bigfoot snorted, a sound much like a laugh. “That much I do know. I have thought hard about the magic I detect on you and believe that you are underselling yourself on that statement.”

Emily smiled. “You would be correct.”

“I have thought long about what you have asked me.” He looked up into the sky. With the sun sinking behind the mountains, Venus had become visible. “I would like to show you how to walk among the trees as I do.”

“I would really like that.”

Bigfoot nodded. “Yes, you would. I sense in you a connection to the sky and the earth, a desire to protect much like my own. This training will take quite some time, but perhaps in a year you will be able to do it.”

“A year?”

“Yes. A year with me. It is a difficult skill, and while your magic may say otherwise, you are still a human.”

“I see.” She frowned. “I don’t really have a year that I can dedicate to this.”

“I see.” He smiled. “I’m afraid this isn’t taught easily. Your magic must learn how to resonate with the woods, to feel the vibrations of the earth beneath your feet. Each leaf is telling its own story, and you must learn to hear it.”

“It’s an extension of your magic, isn’t it?” She moved closer to him. “It isn’t like a spell you cast. It’s a lot like breathing, something you simply do.”

“Yes. I have thought long and hard about how to teach you such a skill, and the best way to learn would be to have you walk a mile in my footsteps, as it were.”

“I see.” Emily felt that golden glow inside her belly, stroking it gently with her mind. It came awake now, yawning like a sleepy cat. The embers of the fire now flickered purple and pink, swirling around the clearing in lazy circles.

“What is this?” Bigfoot’s dark eyes tracked the movement of the embers.

“If I told you I had a faster method, would you still teach me?” Pheromones were now pouring off of her, manifesting as glittering lights. Bigfoot inhaled them, his dark eyes widening. He took several breaths, the forest going silent as if waiting for his answer.

“So this is your magic?” He let out a sigh. “I am feeling many things that I have not felt in a long time.”

“We could explore those feelings.” She could see her reflection glowing in his eyes. “Let my magic touch yours and learn its secrets.”

“I fear that I would break you.” Bigfoot clenched his fingers.

“Maybe you’re the one who should be afraid.” She leaned forward, her fingers on the warm stones. He remained motionless, and when their lips touched, she felt the sudden rush of heat leaving her body and traveling into his. Bigfoot’s thick fingers grazed the side of her face, his touch surprisingly gentle.

“This is nymph magic,” he told her, his fingers closing around hers.

“It’s my magic. I’ve had a lot of practice.” She moved closer, her lips finding his.

Bigfoot purred in response, his magic rising up to meet her own. As before, her senses were assailed by the sensations of the forest around her. His lips tasted of licorice and her nose was suddenly full of his musk, a heady blend of fennel and wild onions. She inhaled him, feeling his magic surround her like a blanket, then it moved away.

The sun disappeared over the distant hill, allowing the stars to ignite across the night sky. They gazed into each other’s eyes for minutes that suddenly felt like hours. A breeze caused the fire to dance over the logs, pirouetting and casting bold shadows among the rocks.

She kissed him again. Daisy flew up into a nearby tree, leaning over to watch.

Bigfoot grabbed her breast, squeezing it cautiously. She pressed herself into him, letting out a tiny moan. “I won’t break,” she told him. “I promise.”

He growled through his smile, revealing sharp canines. He squeezed harder now, his large fingers swallowing up her boob. She kissed him again, running her hand down his fur. It was surprisingly soft, though his skin was tough like leather. Towards his groin, she felt a large lump fighting its way free of the hair. Using her fingers to part his hair, she was surprised to see the dark skinned behemoth he had been hiding beneath all his fur. It was almost a foot long and nearly as thick as her wrist.

“Sweet Jesus,” she said, rubbing her fingers across the head of his glans. It was the size of a small fist.

“I’m a grow-er, not a show-er.” He leaned back to allow her to explore. His cock had been hidden inside of a furry sleeve that now acted as a cockring. His balls were enormous as well, the thick hair of his scrotum camouflaging the whole package. She used both hands, stroking him with a firm grip. The feat required her to move her entire body to jack him off, and there was still plenty of room for another. She wondered how Naia would react if she brought such a creature home to share.

The head of his cock wasn't going to fit in her mouth, but that didn't stop her from licking the top, sucking gently around the dark glans. Bigfoot groaned, his voice carrying out into the forest. She heard a swarm of bats circle briefly overhead, most likely curious.

His shaft was already leaking precum. She sucked it into her mouth, mixing it with her spit but not swallowing. She infused the liquid with just a bit of her magic, allowing it to coat his shaft adequately.

Preoccupied with his monstrous dick, she hadn't been paying attention to what he was up to. She gasped when she felt a thick digit press against the outside of her pants. His finger was thick and strong, and she was able to rub up against it without budging him an inch.

"I can't wait," she told him, then stood up to push him back. Bigfoot reclined on the ground, reaching over to grab onto a log to use as a pillow. Emily stripped off her pants, choosing to keep her shirt on. Even with the fire, it was still very chilly out. Bigfoot's eyes grew wide, his gaze locked on her vagina. Bared to the elements, the effects of her magic increased exponentially. His cock was completely rigid and, somehow, even larger.

He helped her position herself above his shaft. The head of his cock was entirely too large, but her labia bloomed much like a flower, ready to accommodate him. She swiveled her hips, teasing him just a bit. Their fluids were mixing more thoroughly now, but, more importantly, she was in direct contact with his magic.

A nymph's magic allowed her to connect with an individual on so many levels. It was like opening a door into their soul and seeing what made them tick. His magic was meant to connect him to the natural world, linking him inextricably to every living thing around him. Grunting, she sank down onto his rigid cock, the forest coming alive around her. The large bulge of his glans sank into her, and she was assailed by the sounds and scents of the woods. The leaves had a smell that reminded her of hay rides and sunshine, the earth now a mixture of everything in her spice rack.

"Hoooooly shit!" His cock simply kept going, her stomach muscles contracting when he pushed up against her cervix. She moved her hips from side to side, buying time to stretch even farther. One hand moved over her stomach and she pressed in on her belly, feeling his cock move beneath her hand. Bigfoot growled and grabbed her by the hips. His hands were so massive that his fingertips touched behind her.

She rode him as best as she could, but her leg muscles immediately tired. The size difference between the two of them was making it difficult for her to establish a decent tempo, and his massive cock kept distracting her. The clearing was aglow with pink and purple light motes that drifted into the woods. Connected as she was to the sasquatch, she could tell that the animals of the forest had been forced into heat and were now desperately pursuing one another.

"Gods..." she muttered, her mind expanding even faster than her womb. She could feel so many living things right now, creatures with thoughts and emotions all their own. The door had been opened to the true spirit of the forest and her mind struggled to contain it all.

Bigfoot lifted her off of himself and rolled her face down onto the dirt. She stuck her ass in the air for him and he gave her a playful smack on her spine with his cock. The sensation sent a shockwave through her hips and made the light motes scatter outward.

"You seem distracted," he told her, pushing himself into her once more.

Emily screamed, her orgasm swirling up into her chest and across her back. Shuddering, her arms flailed randomly. The motes whirred overhead, passing through the nearby rocks and exploding into tiny supernova above them. She had never felt so full of another living being, nor so connected. Through his cock, she could feel his own orgasm building, one that had patiently waited for several years to be released.

It was no longer just the forest she could feel, but Bigfoot himself. With every thrust, she could feel the loneliness of centuries deep in her being. She could remember watching the first men and women come from the north, a gift from his brother the Yeti. Domestication of animals, colonization, the railroad, all of these things had new meaning to her now. With horror, she watched the Civil War from the shadows, and with sadness, the massacre of so many trees for the sake of expansion. Yet all was not grief, for this same creature could find immense joy in watching a butterfly suckle from a flower, or a squirrel carry its babies to its den.

With every thrust, he pressed against her cervix, the pressure on her womb immense. Her vaginal walls stretched themselves out, her innate talents allowing her to accommodate his girth. Still, she had often wondered about the limitations of such magic and had come to understand that she was currently at them. The body on top of her was becoming hot, and Bigfoot slammed his free hand into the ground, his large fingers sinking easily into the earth. He shifted himself upward, grabbing on to the nearby log with both hands. Her whole body shifted with every thrust, squeezing a low moan out of her, a continuation of her last orgasm. She turned her head to avoid inhaling the dirt, licking the dust from her lips.

It started as a low growl, the earth rumbling beneath her. It soon evolved into a howl that caused the forest to tremble, nearby trees scattering their leaves. Emily curled her fingers into the soil beneath, her belly filling with his seed and her senses suddenly expanding. The earth was alive, its pulse pounding through her whole body. Bigfoot's fingers sank into the log next to her, the wood creaking in protest as he poured even more of his semen inside of her. Emily hissed at the sudden influx of heat and magic inside of her body, her soul rising to meet his.

The sasquatch gasped for air and rolled off of her, his large body thumping against the ground. Emily spent the next few minutes catching her breath, her entire body as warm as the fire had been. She could feel her own heartbeat through her pummeled pussy, a throbbing ache that slowly dimmed along with the fire's light.

Bigfoot grunted, then snapped off a piece of the log to toss into the flames. Emily rolled over, her eyes on the glow of the forest above. Though it was night, she could now see more colors than she had during the day. The milky way was smeared across the night sky, the whole universe on display for her pleasure.

"You can see it now, can't you?" Bigfoot smiled at her. "The forest is a part of you now."

"Amazing." The leaves should have been obscured by darkness, but each creature in it was like a tiny pinprick of light. Every tree glowed with a lifeforce of its own, a force that was connected by magical roots across the countryside. Just by looking at the portal he had brought her through, she could sense a direct path to her cabin. "This is how you see the forest all the time?"

"I imagine what you are experiencing is a small part of what I do. Our coupling has enabled you to tune into the frequency of the forest, but you are still much like a visitor." He waved his hand toward the woods. "Even so, you now have a greater understanding of the life that thrives out here, away from mankind and its machinations."

"It's so beautiful." She rubbed a tear from her eye. "It's like being able to see color for the first time."

Bigfoot rumbled pleasantly at her. "And with this gift, the forests of the world are yours to travel."

"Thank you." She kissed his lips one more time. "I must go now. This gift will help me to help others."

"Wait. I have something for you." He stuck his hands in his fur, rummaging around for several seconds before holding them out. She held her palms beneath his, and he dropped several odd looking acorns into her hands. "The trees for long distance travel will grow from these seeds. Plant them next to local trees and they will disguise themselves to fit in."

"Thank you." She closed her hand around the seeds. The magic they contained pulsed in her hands.

"It will take many years before they are large enough for you to travel through." He made a rumbling noise in his chest. "And I hope that I will get to see you again."

"You can count on it." She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the chin. "Until next time." She walked away from him, her fingers curled tightly around the seeds in her hands. Her mind swirled with all the possibilities, but she knew one thing to be true.

It wouldn't take her years to grow these, it would only take her days. Using these trees, she could travel the world in mere heartbeats, returning to her beloved home instantly if there was ever any danger.

"C'mon Daisy," she told the fairy, holding up a hand. Daisy flew down from the nearest tree, landing delicately on her outstretched palm. "Let's head back. Emery is probably worried sick." With that, she blew a kiss to Bigfoot and stepped through the portal that would take her back to the cabin.

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Mike opened his eyes, his gaze on the ceiling. He sat in silence for several minutes, his hand rubbing his stomach while Naia gently stroked his head. There was a slew of emotions running through him, and while some questions had been answered, the door had been opened on several more.

"She fucked Bigfoot." He had to say the words out loud just to hear them.

Naia's laughter was like the tinkling of bells. "It wasn't the last time either. Those were precious memories to her."

Mike fought back a laugh. Bigfoot, much like the monsters in his own home, had been surprisingly human to him. Then again, all of the women of his house were people. Even Reggie, who still wore those goofy plastic glasses, had impressed upon him a humanity that he often failed to see in others. "Are there any other celebrity monsters on her list that I should know about?"

Naia laughed again. "If you want, I can show you. I think it's more fun that way."

"I'll pass for now." As much as the thought of a sexual highlights reel appealed to him, he had actual problems that he needed to deal with. "How come I was able to see Daisy? I haven't met her yet."

"These memories happened outside of the house and are not privy to its protections."

"I see. Were those all of the memories about portals?"

"Essentially. There are a few others that are scattered, but they involve Emily planting those trees across the ocean and using them to travel. The range is limited to an extent, so she had to plant them strategically."

"Hold up. If she used the trees as an emergency route to come home, then where is the tree here?" He sat up in the tub and turned around to face her. "Is it in the greenhouse?"

"I..." Naia's face went slack for a second. "Those memories are missing."

"Like from the geas?"

She shook her head. "No. With the geas, the information feels like it's on the tip of my tongue. The missing memories are things I just simply don't know. However..." her face darkened. "When you asked me about the tree just now, I felt like it was both. I've forgotten something that's been blocked."

"How did she grow them so fast? Did she use magic?"

The reaction he got from Naia was the same as before. She shook her head in frustration.

"That door has been closed to me, too, I'm afraid. But there's something else." Naia placed a hand on her stomach. "When I try to think of it, I feel something else. I feel... afraid."

He didn't know why, but hearing Naia say those words made his stomach sink. "Then don't think about it any longer. I'll figure it out." He gave her a kiss, then held her against him. "Besides, the optimists of the world always say that when someone closes a door, God opens a..."

"Mike?" She had felt his body go rigid.

"The skin of the tree was dark." He let go of her and stood, water washing off of him in rivulets. "I think I know what happened!"

His heart raced while he put on his clothes then ran out of the room. He walked toward the stairs, his eyes on the lone wardrobe at the end of the hall. The silver handle gleamed in the lights of the hallway, the dark ebony panels soaking up the rest of it like a sponge. How many times had he been led here, tempted to open it in passing? His full attention on the piece of furniture, he felt it now, a calling from within. There was no dust evident on it, no signs of wear and tear. He placed his hand on the wood.

It was cold to the touch, much colder than the rest of the house. There was an energy within that demanded he come and find it.

Clenching his jaw in anticipation, he grabbed the handle and pulled.

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She stood on the roof of the tower, surveying the land below. The sun was starting to set over the valley, its reflection rippling in the large river that cut a swathe through the land. From where she stood, she could see the edge of the world, the place where the land wrapped suddenly back to the east. She often wondered if she could build her tower even higher, maybe high enough that she could even see it far off in the distance.

She glared down at the woods below, the clouds above dropping a fresh blanket of snow around the tower. It would melt and feed the river, providing life-giving water to the creatures below.

Sometimes she pretended that it was her anger that melted the ice of the mountain, tempering her hot rage. Other times, she debated burning the forest to the ground.

She was in a foul mood, the tarot cards spread in front of her. Every day she would do a reading, and everyday was largely the same. The cards would fall and reveal that her future was unchanged, the safety of her keep unbreached.

Today had been different. Halfway through the reading, she had gotten the sense of being watched. Flipping over one of the cards, she had found herself once more in that wretched house, gazing across the table at a man who sat over the game board, his eyes glued to the pieces below.

She squeezed her fingers so hard into the cold stone that her claws emerged, scratching lines into the solid granite. She had no idea who he was, but he was in the house. Did this mean that Emily was dead? If so, what of this new Caretaker?

No, she couldn't suffer the potential consequences. If he could find his way here, then that meant she could find her way back and claim what was rightfully hers.

"Daisy." She called the fairy's name and waited.

The tiny yellow fairy appeared, signing that she was ready and eager to serve. Though she was deaf, she could hear through the vibrations of her delicate wings.

"We need to make preparations. We will have company soon."

Daisy nodded and zipped away, her light disappearing through the tower window.

"Emily." How many years had it been since she had left her here? She looked down at the cards once more, then picked one up. It was the Hanged Man. She set it down next to the Tower card, squinting to make out the patterns through the falling snow. The fact that she had drawn these two cards was not lost on her, but what could it mean? As was often the case with divination, she often couldn't tell if the cards were meant for her, or for the people she would meet.

Then again, maybe the meaning was clear after all.

A growl escaped her throat and she swept her arm across the stone, scattering the cards into the air. They fluttered like butterflies as they fell into the valley, scattering the dying rays of daylight.