**Chapter Title**

The group was huddled on the floor, staring at the mock map Mike had made of the hallway. He had used his knife to carve wooden blocks from the still flopping dresser, lying the pieces end to end. The smaller ones had already stopped shaking, and the larger ones were weakening. Cecilia hovered overhead, and Carmina stood amongst the blocks.

Carmina had gone first, flying along the ceiling and then back again. Cecilia had become invisible, traversing the same distance. The furniture had remained stationary, meaning that the trigger was likely visual in nature. Mike held the invisibility potion in his hand, wondering if it could be of any help. It would only work on one person, and he and Tink both needed to get to the other side of the room.

There was a hole in the floor at the other end, which led into an office. He doubted that the furniture in there was safe either, and worried that if they ran for it, they would get trapped between two sets of murderous furnishings.

“What do we think?” He looked at the others.

“If Tink right, not all activate at once.” Tink flicked the first block away from the others. It tried to flip itself at Mike, but only succeeding in trembling. “We smash one at time.”

“And if I am right, the trigger for the others will be the first objects activating.” He shook his head. “I really want Tink to be right, but I don’t want to find out the hard way that she isn’t.”

“If Mike is right, the best option would be to run and hope there is a delay.” Cecilia tapped on the thin disk Mike had set down to represent the hole. “This room was mostly empty, and we might be able to bottleneck them. They aren’t smart, by any means, and could catch on each other.”

“Which leaves us these.” Mike indicated three taller blocks. Carmina and Cecilia had described them in much detail, and they all agreed that these were the most dangerous of all. The first was a large china cabinet full of dishes. The thing looked heavy, but he suspected that the dishes would be like the projectile books from the library. The next was a sofa that had rickety legs added to it, the top cushions stitched together for some unseen reason.

The last was a mannequin dummy with a pair of arms attached. Instead of fists, it had been given knife hands. The rest of the stuff in the hall seemed just put together experimentally, but these three seemed the most suspicious of them all.

“The objects don’t seem to be sentient. Maybe we could lure them out first?” Cecilia pointed at the blocks. “I could make them chase me and disappear?”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Mike looked at the model he had built. “There is a hole in the floor right before the double doors. I wonder if stuff would fall down there? What’s on the other side of those doors anyway?”

“Let me check.” Cecelia blew Mike a kiss and vanished from sight. Several minutes passed before she reappeared.

“The double doors are another dead end. It’s that weird rock from before.”

“Fuck!” Mike threw one of the blocks. It bounced off the bed, which flopped in response.

“But good news! The room through the hole is one of the rooms in our house. The door is locked, but Abella is still waiting on the other side. She wants to know if she should break down the door or wait for you.”

Mike frowned, thinking on it. “If she breaks in, then we can’t seal this passageway off anymore, not easily anyway. But then she could trigger any traps waiting for us and smash anything that is following us.” He drew the dagger. “If one of us could cut the lock, then she could come up here.”

“About that. The hole narrows. You should be able to fit if you stretch your arms over your head, but no way will she make it.”

“God dammit.” He fought off the idea of getting stuck while being chased. “This whole expedition has been one giant fucking dead end.”

“Not enough rat jam,” Tink added.

“You’re right.” He looked at the hole in the ceiling. Up above, he could still hear some of the books fluttering around in the room above. There was something about that room that was bothering him, and he felt like he was holding a puzzle piece with nowhere to put it. Carmina, now bored, was now stacking the more active cubes, determined to see how high she could pile them before they fell apart.

“Okay, I’ve got it.” He pulled the dagger free. “Carmina, can you fly with this?”

The fairy left her pile of blocks and inspected it. “Maybe.”

“Here, try it out, but be careful. If you drop that, it will cut through everything.” If not for the hilt, Mike was convinced the thing would sink to the center of the Earth.

Carmina grabbed the handle and grunted, her four wings fluttering furiously. She hovered upwards slowly and made a quick loop around the room. Her speed was very diminished, but she was able to maneuver okay. She landed, setting the blade flat side down on the floor.

“I can do it. What are you thinking?”

“You take the knife and stick it in the lock. Gravity will do the work, that will let Abella in. She can trash whatever jumps her there. Once that room is cleared out, we make a run for it down the hall. Just leave the knife there, I don’t want to stumble and fall on it while running.” He moved toward one of the long supports from the bed. He sliced it down until it was roughly the size of a baseball bat. “We just need to slide through the hole before we get roughed up. I doubt anything makes it through, but Abella can take care of it if it does.” He let out a deep breath. “Once we get back, I think it would be best to meet with the others and discuss a better plan this time. We were all in a hurry to find Jenny, but we haven’t even seen any rats. I almost think these are unused tunnels.”

“If these are unused, then why all the weird enchanted stuff?” When Cecilia spoke, his jaw dropped.

Why indeed? They had seen no signs of habitation, and they definitely hadn’t stumbled across any treasure. His mind was back on the sky room once more.

“We can discuss it later. Carmina?” He held out the dagger once more. “Please be careful.”

“You bet.” She took it from him and flew through the door once he opened it. They all watched her as she disappeared down the tunnel at the end. They waited a few minutes and then heard the sound of splintering wood. The furniture in the hallway remained motionless.

After several more minutes, Carmina appeared in the gap. She stuck a finger in her mouth and blew, inflating her entire hand like a balloon. She gave them a thumbs up.

“That’s one way to do it.” He knelt down and let Tink crawl on his back, her legs passing through the loops in his arms. “Ready?”

“Giddyup!” Tink slipped her goggles into place and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. MIke held out his club then opened the door and ran.

The moment he passed in between a lamp with a boxing glove on top and a coffee table, the whole room activated in a chain reaction. Furniture threw itself forward, some of the bigger pieces overlapping with each other and getting tangled up.

The lamp bent over and launched itself like a spear. The boxing glove hit Mike in the face, knocking his head to the side. Tink grabbed the lamp and tossed it to the ground as Mike stepped onto the coffee table. It tried to hop beneath him, and he jumped off of that and onto an angry mini-fridge that was spilling old cans of diet cola everytime it opened its door.

“It’s like the swapmeet from hell.” He jumped on top of a dresser, the drawers opening and closing beneath him. It tried to tip over, but it was too close to one of the pillars and bounced back. Mike used the shift in direction to leap down onto an ottoman. It jumped up and down, but he was too heavy for it. A coffee table turned on its side and rolled toward him. He knocked it aside with the club, causing it to crash into the mini-fridge.

A tea set leapt off of a nearby end table. The pot smashed into the wall behind him and he swung his club, smashing one of the teacups before it could hit him in the face.

“Sorry Chip.” He stomped on another one and kicked over a table lamp. Most of what was in here was junk, but now he faced the strangely stitched couch.

The upper cushions curled like a giant lip, revealing the rows of knives that had been stuck into the cushions.

“No bite! No bite!” Tink squirmed, her feet kicking out. Mike shoved the club into the couch’s mouth, pushing it back. The dumb thing was on felt casters, allowing him to push it easily across the concrete floor. Its gnashing teeth made metallic clinking sounds, and when the boxing glove lamp caught up to him, he fed it to the couch.

“Smash!” Tink’s shifting weight threw Mike off balance. He turned around to see that she had used her hammer on a changing screen, punching a hole through the top. He grabbed that too and threw it toward the couch. It was now caught up on the cord of the lamp, rotating instead of moving forward.

An Easy Bake oven hopped toward him, a knife hanging out of its open door. He sidestepped, kicking it down the hall. The china cabinet was next, and its doors popped open. The first dish was a miss, but the next hit him squarely in the forehead, splintering against his flesh. He nearly fell over, but Tink grabbed a nearby pillar with her free hand, steadying him.

“Shit, ow!” He ducked behind the pillar as several plates smashed themselves into pieces against it. The furniture nearby was already closing in.

The temperature in the room dropped, and Mike plugged his ears. Tink did the same and Cecilia got between them and the China cabinet. She screamed, the sound painful even through his fingertips. The dishes rattled and cracked inside of the cabinet, and she drew its fire away from them. It fired plates uselessly at the banshee while Mike and Tink ran for it. He kicked down a vacuum cleaner and an ironing board. A loveseat with spider legs leapt across the room, but he fell to his knees, the seat crashing into the wall past him.

The sound of metal slicing through air made him scramble away, the dummy hopping up and down nearby. It swung at him with several pointy arms, nearly tipping over with every swing. Whoever had designed it had forgotten to give it suitable feet, and Mike ran around it, the wobbly thing falling over in an attempt to stab him.

“Go!” He bent over and Tink leapt over him, landing head first in the hole. Her tail quickly disappeared. He stuck his arms up and jumped.

The inside of the tunnel was rough and beat him up terribly when he reached the narrow section. A strong hand grabbed his foot and pulled him through, dragging him sideways into a room. Abella leaned over him, concern on her face.

“Where’s Cecilia?” he asked, but she appeared by his side. Tink was already in the hall, digging through the wood pile when he stepped outside. Once Carmina and Abella were clear, they shut the door and nailed boards into the wall, collapsing against the wall when finished. Tink and Mike held each other, doing their best to catch their breath.

Footsteps echoed down the hall and Zel appeared from around the corner.

“How did it go?” she asked.

Mike groaned in response.

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Zel used a cotton swab and tweezers to clean ceramic shards out of the cut on Mike’s face. He and Tink sat on the hay bales by Zel’s workbench. Cecilia was patrolling the house and Carmina had gone into Beth’s closet to get Ratu.

“You might need stitches.” She had him hold a clean rag to his forehead. “The shards kept moving after they were embedded in there.”

“Great. How steady are your hands?”

Zel grinned, then turned back to her table. Mike noticed her feet looked slightly bigger than they had before, but kept it to himself. Beth wandered in, her cheeks flushed. She was wearing a different outfit than before, a sundress with boots. She sat across from him, a frown plastered on her face.

“I heard you come back. How did it go?”

“Poorly.” He gave her the brief version, ending with their final flight down the hallway. Zel came back from her table with a thick paste and rubbed it into the cut on his head. His scalp tingled and he tried to touch it, but Zel swatted his hand away.

“That needs to sit for ten minutes.”

“Why not use some of that potion you gave me?”

“That potion is for emergency use only and that’s the only one I have.”

“Can you make more?”

“Not until the next full moon. I was too busy during the last one to do anything.” She winked at him, then turned toward Tink. The goblin had a nasty bruise on her shin that was already turning yellow. A different poultice was applied, causing the goblin to grimace. He leaned back on the hay, staring at the hanging light bulb up above.

“Is Cecilia okay? I don’t see her.”

“We wore her out. She’s out front now, recharging.” He shook his head. “We wouldn’t have made it back without her.”

“I heard there was need of me?” Ratu walked through the door, her hands tucked into her kimono. She was followed by Sofia, who had to duck when she came in. “Sorry for the delay, but I stopped by the Library on the way up.”

“Wow, that was fast.” Mike said. Carmina had left only ten minutes ago.

“I guess.” The naga sat down next to Beth and took her hand. “So let’s hear some more about your problem.”

“What problem?” he asked. Beth dropped her head, her eyes on the floor.

“When I got stuck in the mirror prison, the demon there attached part of his soul to mine. This morning, he started showing up in mirrors around the house.”

“Wait, so he’s inside the house?” He felt a cold chill in his gut.

“Not quite. He can’t escape the mirror, so he is only in my reflection. But he’s been threatening me, and I worry that he might be putting you all in danger.”

“Have you tried calling Dana? She could put Lily on the phone and we could ask her.”

“Tried. No answer. Besides, I get the impression that this demon is kind of a big deal, even for a demon.”

“And that’s where I come in.” Ratu pulled out some books from her kimono. “I’m certain we can find a way to undo the spell before it becomes a bigger problem. However, now I wonder if you needed me for something too. That’s a nasty cut on your head.”

Mike told her everything, then handed over the journal he had taken. Ratu examined it, then handed it over to Sofia. The cyclops appeared bothered by it, her eye glued to the writings inside. When he finished his story, it was Beth’s turn. She showed everyone the marks on her arm and explained how Oliver kept coming to her in various reflections. The naga nodded when she was done, deep in thought.

“So it sounds like we have two problems for me to tackle. What to do about the Rat King, and how to remove a parasitic soul from a human. She turned toward Sofia. “Were you able to learn anything about His Highness?”

The question startled Sofia, and she nearly dropped the journal. “Perhaps. I did some looking. Almost everything I found about a Rat King was simply a mass of rats tangled together by their tails. I found that odd, so did some more digging.” She grabbed at a messenger bag that Mike hadn’t realized she was wearing over one shoulder, then pulled a book out of it. “I think this is an example of an imperfect translation. when I went back far enough, I kept seeing the same symbol over and over. This one.”

She opened a book and held it up. It was a detailed sketch of several rats, their tails overlapping in intricate loops that reminded Mike of a celtic knot.

“So, some old books mention a rat king and follow it with this diagram. But the diagram was meant to be interpretive. The tails overlap and cross over one another. This is a kind of symbolism for how reality overlaps itself.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I found it in a very old book. This symbol used to be the coat of arms of the very first Rat King. The many rats represent his subjects, and their overlapping tails represent their ability to chew holes into the places where reality can overlap.” She closed the book. “Think of your older human cartoons where a mouse runs into a hole and somehow comes out somewhere impossible. That’s some leftover lore making it into mainstream culture.”

“So wait. The Rat King can chew holes that go from one place to another?”

“Kind of. The original idea was that tiny holes would be used so that his subjects could safely travel his kingdom. Find a hole in the barn, end up in the castle, that sort of thing. It’s supposed to be short range. However, this house is different.”

“That’s right!” Beth sat up suddenly, her eyes on Ratu. “It’s just like you said. The Architect did all sorts of tricks with time and space to fold this place up. The greenhouse and the Labyrinth aren’t in the house, but somewhere else.”

“I don’t follow.” He looked at all three of them, then turned to Tink. Tink was ignoring the conversation, drawing something on a piece of paper.

“Have you ever seen the wormhole explanation in a movie? The one where they fold a piece of paper over and poke a hole in it?” Beth looked ready to show him if he hadn’t.

“Yeah, a shortcut through time and space, i get that.”

“Well, imagine that the paper is made of several different sheets already. When they chewed through the house, they found themselves able to travel through some in-between spots.”

“Exactly!” Sofia held up the journal. “This makes so much sense. The place you found this journal has been missing for centuries. Not lost, but rather removed. It was home to a very small community of magical and non magical beings. When the Crusades came, something happened and they fled, but not before activating a spell much like the geas. It vanished forever, its secrets lost to the world.”

“Was it by chance a flying castle?”

“What? No, it was built on a hilltop.”

“The whole thing was tilted on its side.” Mike pulled out his phone and showed them the picture of the city. “It’s just hovering above this place.”

“Whoa.” Beth took the phone. “I think might be somewhere in Brazil, but can’t be sure. I went on a school trip there when I was in high school.”

“Fascinating. The place was sealed away, and somehow a piece of it remains in the sky.” Ratu looked at Beth. “In a way, this is similar to the story of Atlantis, only the seams have grown weak on this part of the property.”

Mike let out a sigh. He’d let Beth explain it better to him later. “How can we use this information?”

“The rats don’t need holes as large as they’ve been chewing them. This implies they were moving something.” Beth gave him his phone back. “Also, why would they go here? It sounds like the rats don’t accidentally chew holes into places.”

“Fuck.” The realization hit him like a brick to the head. “The second floor wasn’t just sealed off. Emily erased her own memories about it. The Rat King didn’t sneak in, he was brought here. By Emily.”

They all looked at him.

“The stupid furniture, the weird tunnels, all of it. Emily was using them to go somewhere.”

“But why?” Sofia asked.

“She was looking for something and needed the rats. She did something to keep them in line when she was done, but now that she’s gone, they’re ready to run amok.” He scowled at the floor. “We need to find Jenny first and then talk to the Rat King. He will know what she was looking for.”

“You mean what she found.” Beth shook her head. “I don’t like the idea that whatever she found needed to be kept a secret even from Naia.”

“Yeah, well…” He shrugged. “Beats a group of witches summoning storms on the lawn.” He hoped he was right. “Tink, what are you working on?”

“Rat smasher.” She scribbled a few extra lines and hopped off her hay bale. “Tink go work now. See husband later.” She walked toward the stairs in the back of the garage, disappearing around the corner.

Mike’s stomach growled. It was getting dark out, and he realized he hadn’t eaten all day. It was time for a break.

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Sofia made them sit at the small table just off the kitchen. Beth, Ratu, Zel and Mike chatted quietly while Sofia cooked. Tink appeared briefly when food came out, grabbing a plate for herself and then wandering back out to the garage, muttering the whole time. Sofia sat on her knees so that she was eye level with everybody else.

Sitting at the table, Mike looked over his strange new family. He was surrounded by beautiful women who enjoyed his company, fantastic food, and a sense of belonging he had never had. He wondered if Emily had felt the same way at some point. What could have turned her toward her strange behavior near the end?

It grew even darker outside, night having finally come. Ratu and Sofia left, returning to their respective areas. Mike felt guilty going to bed with Jenny still missing, but he was exhausted. This wasn’t a problem that he could just throw himself at, and he hoped for more clarity in the morning.

At Beth’s request, he covered the mirrors in the bathroom and her bedroom. It gave him the chills to think that a demon could be sitting behind the reflection of the fabric, just waiting to make a grab for him. Beth was unusually stoic about the fact that some dark entity had it in for her, but he assumed it was part of what made her a perfect fit for the house.

Naia helped him bathe, giving him a relaxing massage in the tub. He asked her again if she knew anything about what Emily had been doing, but she still had no answers. Resigned to having a mystery to solve on his own, he slid into the cool sheets of his bed, staring at the oddly placed carpet near the corner of the room. It was where Emily had been found eventually, her body rotting and ruining the wood.

“What were you up to?” He knew from Ratu that she had been seeking immortality, but felt like that was no longer the whole story.

Either way, the carpet didn’t have an answer for him. He turned off the light and rolled over, his eyes closing. He lay that way for nearly an hour, his mind whirring through all the possibilities. Tomorrow morning, he was going to break down the wall in the servant’s room and go down that original path and confront the Rat King in his throne room.

Everything after that was still up in the air. The door of his room creaked, and he heard footsteps approaching the bed.

“Hey Tink.” He lifted the blankets to let her in. He heard clothing fall to the floor, the bed squeaking quietly when she got in. It wasn’t until he felt the normal sized hand slide around his waist and grab his cock that he realized it wasn’t the goblin. He turned the light on and rolled over to see Zel’s smiling face staring back at him.

“What are you doing?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Zel winked at him. “I wanted to spend some more time with you.”

“Where’s Tink?”

“She’s busy in the garage. Making a ton of noise with her tools. When I complained, she told me to sleep somewhere else, so here I am.” The centaur grinned, pulling the sheet back to reveal her bare body. “The potion is slowly wearing off, and I intend to make the most of it.”

“Zel, I…” Thoughts of Jenny and Emily bounced around in his mind, but the sight of a naked woman before him was stiff competition. It also gave him an idea.

“Let me help you relax.” She grabbed his cock through his boxers and gave it a couple of strokes. He was immediately hard, blood rushing to his groin. She pulled the boxers down to reveal the head of his cock.

“Wait, before we begin. How slowly are you turning back?”

Zel shrugged. “Slow enough. I’m guessing twelve to forty hours.” She stroked his cock and gave it a lick. “Do you want to talk about math, or get your dick sucked?”

“Let’s try something else.” He sat up and pushed her onto her back. “If this really is a limited time thing, let’s take advantage of it.” He spread her legs apart, marveling at the silky mane of her tail beneath her ass. Her legs were furry, but it was still smooth to the touch. He lightly stroked her fuzzy pubes, admiring the thick lips of her labia.

“What are you doing?”

“Horsing around.” He lowered his head and planted kisses along her inner thighs.

‘You’re *so* funny.” The irritation in her voice was replaced by a soft sigh. He ran his fingers up her legs and across her thick, puffy folds.

“I do my best.” He gave her a light kiss on her hip bone. “Actually, there’s something I want your help with.”

“Whatever you want as long as you keep doing that.” She stretched her arms, running them slowly across the sheets. “It must be nice sleeping on something so soft.”

“It has its benefits.” He teased her some more, allowing the anticipation to build. She was enjoying the attention he gave her, but that was only second to what he actually wanted to accomplish. He kissed the area around her hairy mound, pushing his thumb along the edges of her labia, applying just enough pressure to make her cry for more.

He pulled her into his mouth, sliding his tongue around the edge of her swollen clit. She grabbed the back of his head, her fingers pressing into his scalp. He let his mind float, the first step to his true intentions.

*She likes that*. Naia’s voice echoed in his ears, his fingers suddenly moving on their own. *She’s never had a tongue pleasure her before. She will be sensitive, so take it slow.* She was just beneath the surface now, guiding him. He felt like a ghost in his own body, his lips and tongue moving of their own accord, guided by an unseen hand.

Zel’s moans were low and guttural, her body moving beneath him. His tongue traced circles on her clit, his fingers sliding into her and caressing her vaginal walls. Her pelvic walls squeezed his fingers, and he added more, stretching her out. Her thighs closed, her legs wrapping around his head. She squeezed him tightly, her moans distant through her thick thighs. He crossed the fingers that he used to penetrate her and gave them a twist when they were halfway in. He enjoyed listening to the gasps of surprise that came from her, tiny sounds that were barely audible.

He was working her into a frenzy. She was lifting her hips now, pressing herself into him. Naia’s voice cautioned him to back down if he wanted to continue. He uncrossed his fingers, savoring both her scent and tangy flavor.

He had every intention of getting her off, but he needed more time.

His own arousal had uncurled itself like a lazy cat in winter, stretching out before getting to work. However, that wasn’t the part of him he was looking to connect with. No, he sought something much deeper and primal, hidden away somewhere inside his very soul.

The wild magic was like the pilot light of a furnace, turned down low and just waiting. While his fingers twisted against sensitive spots that elicited hot gasps of pleasure from Zel, he was attempting, for the first time, to turn the heat up all by himself. He could see it, a tiny blue spark flickering in the depths of his mind.

He was pleased when the first shock jumped from the tips of his free hand onto her thigh. Zel didn’t seem to notice, and he continued feeding that inner fire, delighting in the movements of the woman beneath him.

Sparks formed on his fingers, spreading across the web of his thumb and all along his wrist. He teased Zel’s short pubic hairs, picturing the sparks leaping from his hands to her skin. They formed thin streamers between the two of them, the magic traveling through her pelvis and back into his mouth. He disconnected, sticking out just his tongue to tease her clit.

“Oh!” Zel flinched when the spark jumped between them. “What are you doing down there?”

“Did you like it?” He looked up her stomach. Through the valley between her breasts, he could see her face appraising him.

“Very much.”

“Good.” He resumed, licking all along her inner folds, the sparks jumping back and forth between them. He concentrated on keeping the sparks where the action was occuring, watching them crawl along her skin and vanish. Her moans were louder now, but he pushed her legs off of him and sat up.

“I want to watch you,” he told her, stroking his cock. “Play with yourself.”

“Oh. Yeah, I can do that.” Zel closed her eyes, her fingers finding her slippery slit. “I’ve never had a chance to really do this. Not in my true form, anyway.”

“Do you need any help?”

She laughed, then let out a tiny moan. “I know where all the important stuff is, don’t worry. I’ve done plenty of side research.” She gasped when Mike leaned forward and pinched one of her nipples. Tiny sparks connected them, then vanished.

“I used to carve dildos on trees when I was younger.” She moaned, using both hands to tease herself. “FInd a nice sturdy tree in the woods with some low, thick branches. Spend a few hours carving it into shape, then polish it so it’s nice and smooth. Not super uncommon for centaur women, but I had to carve mine farther away from the tribe.”

“Bet that was frustrating.” He smiled at the sight of her, slick with her own juices, her furry legs spread to give him a full view.

“You have no idea. The first time I made one, I fucked it until my legs gave out. Came six times, had to walk back in the river, I was so sore back there.”

“I bet it was hot to see.” His cock was hard, cum leaking from the tip. He stroked with both hands, using her leftover juices as lube. The sparks inside of him were migrating and building up inside his cock. Everytime he flexed it, it felt like he was about to blow his load.

“There was a field of tall grass not too far from the tribe. I learned at a young age that the grass was just the right height that if I ran through it, the tops would rub against me and get me off. Used to go on morning and evening runs all the time.”

“Sounds like you were a naughty little centaur.”

“I had a friend I used to run with. We would make a game of it, see who got off first.” Zel’s voice was shaky now, her words coming in bursts. She gyrated her hips on the bed, her fingers moving faster.

Mike had stroked himself to the point that he felt like he was about to lose his own load, but he knew that wasn’t accurate. The magic had built up inside him with nowhere to go. LIttle sparks crawled across his skin, and he mentally commanded them to gather in just one place.

It was time.

He grabbed a handful of her tail and pulled, her whole body shifting toward him. She spread her legs wide and he placed his hands on her thighs, more sparks connecting them.

“What is that?” she asked, but he ignored her. Moving his hands to her hips, he guided his thick shaft between her swollen labia and pushed into her.

The effect was immediate. Zel’s eyes widened and she let out a small scream, the energy inside of MIke dispersing through her. Her legs wrapped tightly around him and he grabbed her ass, thrusting into her slowly at first. Every time he bottomed out inside of her, he could see a fresh wave of electricity travel up along her body.

“Oh fuck! Oh fuck! Fuck me! Mike, fuck me!” She grabbed at him, but her shaky hands kept missing. One hand clutched his thigh while the other grabbed a handful of bedsheet, twisting it hard enough that it popped free of the corner of the bed.

*Go fast. Pound her hard, she wants it*. Mike got his knees underneath both of them and raised his hips. Zel’s bottom half lifted into the air, the head of his cock putting pressure directly on her g-spot.

Zel’s cries were loud, and Mike saw a shadow go by the window. He looked out to see a stone figure leaning down from the roof, dark eyes intently watching them. Mike grinned at Abella, then returned his attention to Zel.

“I bet you like that.”

“Oh gods, I love it. Don’t… stop!”

It was a strange sensation. The magic had built up inside of him and he was hesitant to release it now. It felt very similar to holding back an orgasm, the two sensations now running in tandem inside of him. He could feel his balls tighten and relax, his desire to come growing more urgent. The magic was the same way, steadily trickling through the centaur and making her hair cling to the bed.

“Oh… fuck…” He grabbed at his balls, squeezing gently at the base to delay it. While the effect was immediate for his orgasm, the magic that had been building inside wasn’t so easily relieved. The pressure inside his cock was tremendous, and when the dam broke, he flooded Zel with a highly charged wave of energy that manifested as an army of crawling sparks that covered her entire body.

She screamed, then came. Her vaginal walls clamped down on his dick so hard that he wasn’t sure he could pull out even if he tried. Blue waves of energy washed across her, every hair on her body now standing up. She gasped for air, her arms flailing against the cool sheets of the bed.

The energy bounced back, and jumped from her back into Mike. The feeling started in the bottoms of his thighs, his ass muscles tightening and making him lift Zel’s body up. Only her head was on the bed now as he frantically pumped himself in to her, the magic causing huge pulses of pleasure all through his groin.

“Fuuuuuck!” He grabbed her left hip and her tail and pulled, jamming himself into her as far as he could go. Massive waves of energy blew out of him and back into her, the sparks now making enough light that they were covered in a shimmering aura. Filled with his semen, Zel cried out again when the magic made her come a second time, the energy bouncing back into Mike.

He fell forward into her arms, his still hard cock moving at a furious pace. She cried out his name over and over again, frantically pulling at him. The energy left him again with another load of come, and he cried out, all his muscles tightening up.

Zel cried out and rolled him onto his back, furiously riding him for one last orgasm. She grunted while forcing herself down onto him, again and again, her mouth open wide and drool forming in the corners.

Zel came one last time, the sparks dispersing into the room. Her nails dug into his chest, the blue and white lightning crawling across her skin and scorching marks into the bedposts where it jumped across. Her mouth was slack, her eyes rolled back into her head and her back arched upward. Her limp arms hung at her sides while her hips kept bucking above him. Her breathing was uneven, her moans scratchy from screaming so hard.

She collapsed on top of him, her body twitching. He stroked the hair on her hair with one hand and the hair of her tail with the other, running his fingers through it and pulling it straight again. She shuddered, her pussy squeezing his cock and coating both of them in his own semen. It was several minutes before he went soft, and he rolled her onto her side, pulling himself free. She let out a long sigh, her hand finding his above the sheets.

For a moment, it seemed like she was going to say something. He looked into those deep brown eyes of hers, giving her the space to say it. She kissed him instead, a light peck just in the corner of his mouth, and rolled over.

He was certain Zel had drifted off to sleep by the time he heard the door open again. This time, the footsteps were much quieter, and Tink grumbled to herself when she realized that someone else was on her side of the bed. Undeterred, she walked over to Mike’s side and got in there. He lifted his arm and she snuggled right in against his chest.

“Tink too busy tonight. Glad horse ass help out.” He heard her yawn, then she bit down lightly on his forearm and fell asleep.

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Mike opened his eyes. It was still dark, the room filled with the sound of Zel breathing and Tink snoring. He lifted his head, his pulse racing for absolutely no reason. Something had woken him.

Downstairs, he heard glass shattering.

He was up and dressed before Zel was fully awake. Tink, who had fallen asleep in her dress, rubbed at her eyes. There was a loud thump from downstairs, then the sound of something else breaking.

“Fucking rats!” Tink walked over to the door and opened her toolbox. Apparently she had brought it up with her. She pulled out her hammer and a screwdriver, tucking the latter into a loop she had stitched to her beltline. “Horse ass, hurry up!”

“Mmm, what?” Zel sat up, her hair cascading across her face like a collapsed bird’s nest. With the blanket covering her legs, she looked very much like a sleepy girl-next-door type. Mike couldn’t help but let his gaze linger for a couple of seconds.

“Someone is downstairs,” he told her. She groaned, then pulled aside the sheets. Her legs looked a bit more muscular than they had felt just hours ago. He really hoped she didn’t turn back into a full centaur while in his bed. Her dress was just under the bed, and she pulled it free.

“Naia?” Mike called out. The faucet in the bath turned on. “Any ideas what’s going on?”

“There are lights downstairs. Lots of them.” she answered.

Lights? “Those fairies better not be screwing around or they’re grounded.” He grabbed the knob of the door and walked out into the hallway. The sounds were growing louder. By the time he made it to the stairs, Beth was there to meet him. She wore a short nightgown that came to mid-thigh.

“I feel woefully underprepared,” she said, looking at his clothes.

“You learn to dress quick around here.” He winced when he heard a door bang, then proceeded down the stairs. He stopped at the second floor, but the hallway was dark and no sounds could be heard from that direction. He kept going, but didn’t make it much farther before he saw Cerulea fire past him.

“Hey! What are you three-” he stopped when he saw five different colored orbs of light chasing after her. Cerulea reappeared, crashing into his chest.

“Bad spirits! Bad spirits!” She grabbed the neckline of his shirt and scrambled underneath. The orbs came around the corner and scattered before colliding with him. They swirled around in the entryway and then disappeared into the office.

What fresh hell were they dealing with now? He walked into the office and saw that the orbs had gone missing. He took a couple of steps in and the chair behind the desk launched itself at him.

“What the fuck?” He covered his face with his arms, the chair smashing into him. He fell down and rolled, fresh blood trickling down his face. He had bitten his lip. Was the furniture here possessed now too?

An orb blasted out of the chair and passed through the wall. The chair, thank god, remained motionless. Beth helped him up while Zel watched from the doorway. Once standing, he grabbed the bottom of his shirt and shook it. Cerulea fell out, landing on her back on the floor. She kicked her feet to right herself, but Mike helped her up.

“What were those things?”

“Bad spirits!” She flapped her wings, hovering in front of his face. “I caught them breaking dishes, so they chased me.”

“Where did they come from?” When he turned around, he realized that one of them was missing. “Tink?”

“Husband!” Her voice was faint, but he was able to follow it. They all ended up at the top of the stairs to the basement. Walking down, he felt a sense of foreboding. Sure enough, he spotted Tink next to the freezer. A small hole had been carved into the concrete wall, and Mike knew exactly what the issue was.

“They came through the Vault, didn’t they?”

Tink nodded, her goggles over her head. “Big mess inside.” She picked up the piece of chalk hidden below the freezer and drew a door next to the hole. Beth watched, her jaw open in disbelief as Tink knocked and the door opened, letting her in.

He was going to follow her, but stopped. The large shelves had been knocked over, and all manner of items had spilled out along the floor. The goblin was able to move amongst the items without touching them, her tail lifting high at times to avoid an errant touch of something. He still had no idea what all was in there, but Tink had reassured him that everything was very dangerous.

“Uh oh.” Tink knelt down and picked something up. She worked her way back out, holding something in her hands. When she pushed the pieces of it together, it was an old clay jar.

“Okay, enlighten me. What am I looking at?”

“Jar of Souls. Emily bring back from England. Bad ghosts trapped in here, like to throw things and make big mess.”

“Poltergeists.” Beth spoke from behind them. “There were poltergeists in that jar.”

“Uh huh. Jar broke. Can’t put them back.” She handed Mike the pieces. “Unless can maybe fix?”

At the suggestion of fixing the jar, three lights burst out of the freezer. They swirled around him and then hit him in the chest, knocking him down. The jar slipped from his fingers and shattered on the floor. The room filled with cackling laughter before the lights vanished.

“Or not.” Tink picked up a shard of the pot. “Nope. No can fix now.”

“The bigger question is why.” Zel was peering through the hole in the wall. “Why did the rats put a hole here?”

“I’m guessing they were trying to get in.”

“That would seem logical, but think again. Why would they want to get in?” Beth stuck her head through the door. “Is all of this stuff dangerous?”

“To take something obviously. And yes.”

“Then why the mess? If they knew what they wanted to take, why is everything knocked over?” She stepped inside, causing Tink to squeak in protest. Tink grabbed Beth by the hand and dragged her back.

“No go, no touch! Super dangerous.” She wagged her finger at Beth. “Tink can go, but not you?”

“Why do you get to go?”

“Goblin skin tough.” She patted herself proudly on the chest. “Bad spell not hurt Tink.”

“Wait.” Mike knelt down in front of her so they were face to face. “Are you resistant to magic Tink?”

“Uh huh. Goblin good at surviving bad spell, skin very strong. Tink hit in head once by very bad spell but survive. Make hard to talk though.”

“Yeah. Yeah you did.” He put his hand between her horns and tousled her hair. He had seen the moment in a memory of Emily’s. A wand had blasted the goblin in the face, knocking her clear across the yard. He had always thought Tink’s speech was the product of being a goblin, but it was actually the result of a brain injury that should have killed her. “If you looked in there, could you tell if anything was missing?”

“Tink know. Tink help take care of Vault.” Something upstairs shattered, causing everybody to wince.

“Ok, here’s the plan. The Vault can’t stay open like this. If the rats did take something, they might be back for more. Tink, I want you to get this cleaned up so we can see what is missing. Beth, I need you to keep watch out here so that Tink can focus on her job and staying safe.”

Tink nodded and walked over to the freezer. She stuck her hands behind the wall and retrieved a pair of gloves, which she slid over her hands. “Tink ready.”

“I’m not sure what I can do if trouble shows up.” Beth was hugging herself, goosebumps standing up on her skin.

“I just need your eyes and ears. Let her know if something is coming.” Mike stripped his shirt off and handed it to her. “Here, you must be cold.”

A few seconds passed before she accepted it, their eyes briefly meeting. She slid it over her head, the shirt slightly loose on her, but it covered more of her than her nightgown did. “Thank you.”

“No… problem.” He didn’t know why, but he suddenly felt shy in front of her with his shirt off. He watched her stick her hands down the back of the shirt and pull, flipping her hair out to lie on top of the fabric. Her breasts briefly pressed against the front of the shirt, the lace of her nightgown creating patterns. It was a strangely juvenile thought to have, but it occurred to him that her breasts were now touching the shirt he had just been wearing. “Zel, I need you to go to the garage and make sure everything there is secure. These things are happy breaking my stuff for now, but I’m fairly certain you have some dangerous things out there.”

Zel nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

“If you see one of the fairies, grab her. Whoever you find can relay messages. Cerulea, you stay here with Beth. If something happens, come get me.”

“What are you going to do?” Beth asked.

“Let’s just say I know someone who can help.” He followed Zel up the stairs and back through the house. The spirits had peeled wallpaper off the wall and made a royal mess of the first floor. He could hear furniture being moved upstairs and let out a sigh. These things were making a mess of his home.

“Are you going to be okay?” Zel asked when he showed her outside. Abella landed, concern written on her face. Naia’s face reflected worry as well.

“I’ll be fine.” He gave Abella and Naia a quick rundown of what was going on and asked Abella to help Zel protect the garage. He walked back in the house, doing his best to ignore the flickering lights and creaking stairs. Out the front door, he walked down the front steps and straight to the sundial. He gave it a turn, taking note of the figure in white at the end of the driveway but ignoring him.

He came back up the stairs and stopped, his eyes on the porch swing. It wasn’t moving, and he suspected it hadn’t moved in quite a while. Cecilia had explained to him that manifesting took energy, and she had certainly exhausted herself on her trip with him into the tunnels of the house.

“Cecilia?” He fought to ignore the sound of a piano being played poorly inside. He didn’t even have a piano. “Cecilia, I need you.”

The swing moved as if a light breeze had caught it, but he felt no wind. He sat down on the swing and pushed it with his legs, slinging his arm over the back of it.

“Cecilia.” He waited, the sounds getting worse. After a few minutes, the temperature dropped and the banshee slowly faded into view, her head leaning on his shoulder.

“I’m tired, runsearc.” Her cool fingers touched his bare flesh, her body translucent in the moonlight. He stroked her hair lightly, marveling at the thick streak of red tucked away beneath the rest.

“I know, but you have a job to do. Your real job.” He tilted her mouth towards his and kissed her. He felt the heat sucked from his body and shivered. She became more substantial, her hair now beginning to float.

“You aren’t dying.”

“You’re right, I’m not. But there are some souls loose in my home that need tending to.” He suspected that the spirits had been wary of the banshee and had waited until she was gone to act, not knowing that she was bound to the place. To emphasize his point, the lights in the house all turned on simultaneously then went out.

“Loose souls?”

“Yes. They came out of a broken jar.” He helped her rise. She floated before him, her gaze on the outer wall of the house.

“There are thirteen of them.”

“And they’re trashing the place. Can you help them move on?”

A slow smile grew across Cecilia’s face. She took him by the hand and let him open the front door for her. They moved into the front room, orbs of light shooting from wall to wall. He found half of his laptop lying on the ground and just shook his head.

“Once I begin, I will be gone for awhile. The trip is long and I don’t want you to worry.” She squeezed his fingers and then let go. “And whatever you do, don’t follow me into the light.”

“What light?”

“One you shouldn’t be able to see. However…” she flipped the red lock of hair. “I think you might be able to see it now.”

“I understand.” He moved toward the wall, rubbing his hands together. She had sapped a ton of his body heat away and he was starting to shiver.

Cecilia took a deep breath, and he plugged his ears, ready for the scream. This time, however, her entire body lit up with a blue, electrical glow. The air smelled immediately of ozone, and the orbs he could see came to a standstill.

The scream never came. Instead, she sang. Rings of light emanated from her body in every direction, passing through the walls and flashing when they passed through a spirit, freezing them in the air. The rings stabilized, wobbling slightly in time with her song.

It was both very beautiful and so sad at the same time. Mike was filled with sadness he had never felt before, tears streaming down his face. The spirits tried to flee, but the rings collapsed inward, drawing them toward the banshee. In the ethereal light, she had never looked more beautiful, her body floating three feet off the ground. She continued her song, grabbing the spirits out of the air and absorbing their light into her body. The room frosted over, ice creeping along the walls toward his bare skin. The light was so bright that he had to squint through his tears. Other voices joined hers, the melody washing over him. He was paralyzed in grief.

“Slan leat,” she said. The space behind her had opened up, bright light blinding him. He could just make out the sparkling blue waters of a large body of water behind her with a glass boat on the shores. He wanted to follow, to see where the boat would take him. His resistance crumbling, he stood, ready to give chase. Butterflies made of light flew across the pristine sand, their wings beating a tune of their own in the still air. He took a step forward, then another.

A voice could be heard, from across the ocean, telling him to stay. His mind was just able to register the fact that he shouldn’t be able to recognize the voice, but it spoke across the decades as clear as if he had heard it last only minutes ago. Stunned, he ceased his forward motion.

“Dad?” The light vanished, leaving him in a room that was suddenly more lonely than it had ever been.

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“Do you think he’s okay up there?” Beth’s eyes were on the basement, her back to the Vault door. All she could hear was the sounds of things breaking. She wondered if the spirits would level the house given enough time.

“Husband always okay. Slow sometimes, but good heart.” Tink was using the gloves to pick up a small golden box that made a sound like a rattlesnake.

“Yeah, I guess.” She thought of Mike and the changes she had seen in him. She had known him less than two weeks and it was like knowing two different people. She still saw him as the shy introvert from his first day in the house. Then there was the man who had various relationships with the creatures in his home, the same man who had noticed she was cold and given her the shirt off his back. When she had seen the scars all along his hip, it had taken everything in her power not to stare.

Nearly half an hour had passed when the spirits suddenly went silent. A distant song came from upstairs, but it felt like it was somehow seeping through the ceiling itself. It was in a language she didn’t recognize, yet somehow it struck a chord within her soul. Sorrow washed over her, her hand coming to her mouth to repress a sob.

The song came in waves, a dirge that brought a small flood of tears. Her mind was flooded with memories of dead loved ones, the faces of people she hadn’t thought about in a long time suddenly present in her mind’s eye. She looked over her shoulder to see if Tink was reacting. The little goblin was busy putting objects back, tears streaming down her cheeks.

LIght swept through the floor in giant arcs, capturing an errant spirit that had been hiding beneath the freezer. It was slowly drawn up toward the the ceiling, its diaphanous form pulsing in time with the music.

The song lasted several minutes, causing an ache to form in her chest. The light was bright enough to illuminate the dark corners of the Vault. She fell to her knees, the agony within unbearable. Her soul was a raw nerve, flooding her system with grief. She sobbed uncontrollably, leaning forward against the cold floor.

A warm hand took hers. Through her tears, she saw that Tink sat with her now. The goblin pulled her over, lying Beth’s head in her lap. Tink ran her fingers through Beth’s hair, but said nothing. Unable to help herself, she curled into a ball, letting misery carry her for a while.

The light receded, the song over. Through the ceiling, she heard Mike call out, but was unable to hear what he said. Darkness had returned to the basement, but the house above had gone quiet.

“Tink keep watch,” the goblin said, rubbing the back Beth’s neck. “Go find husband.”

“Ok.” Beth stood and wiped her eyes. She climbed the stairs, opening the door at the top slowly. The kitchen was a mess. Anything that had been in the cabinets was now strewn about, the floor covered in broken glass. She walked carefully, her eyes on the walls just in case the spirits were still about.

“Mike?” She walked through the large dining room. The mess in here was minor, the chairs strewn about the room. Walking out into the living room, she spotted him.

He sat on the couch, knees pulled up to his chest. His face was hidden behind his arms and his body was perfectly still. She was almost afraid to touch him, but she had to know if he was okay.

“Mike?” She touched his bare shoulder, His skin was impossibly cold, as if he had been sitting outside in a blizzard. He lifted his head, a haunted look in his eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” His voice was nasally, and she saw streaks all along his face. He wiped his nose and stuck out his other hand. She helped him rise, steadying him. His hair hung around his face in a way that made it look like it had grown out an inch since this morning.

“What happened?”

“Funeral dirge. Cecilia took the spirits away. She’ll be back eventually.” He walked to the front closet and pulled out a coat. He put it on and held it tightly against his body, his teeth chattering.

“Is that all?” His eyes were on something distant, perhaps a memory or a place she couldn’t see.

“Yeah. It’s all I want to talk about, anyway.” He rubbed at his eyes. “How are things downstairs?”

“They’re-” She stopped, her eyes on the dark figure that stood at the base of the stairs. It was a rat, about a foot tall and wearing a pair of glasses that looked like they came from a children’s toy.

“The Rat King wishes you to know that time is up. You have declared war on our people and we will drive you from our lands. This is but the beginning.” The rat’s voice was loud and obnoxious, his whiskers shaking with indignation. “You are to leave immediately or-”

Mike was fast, grabbing the rat by the neck. It tried to bite him, but he shifted his hands so that he held it by the scruff instead. “We never declared war on you or your king. You’re the ones who did all this.” He waved his hand at the room.

“Your avatar has killed many of us and you dare to accuse us of malfeasance?” He swung a paw at Mike, his plastic glasses falling off.

“Our avatar? What are you talking about?”

“You built a shrine to her, I saw it!” He pointed toward the window where the dollhouse had been. “Your champion, the evil doll.”

“Oh, you mean the shrine that you destroyed? Let me rephrase that so you can soak it in. You broke her house and that pissed her off. I didn’t send her after you, I wanted to work things out. She sent herself.”

“W-what?” Disbelief was etched on the rat’s face.

“Yep. You guys dug your own graves and you’re welcome to them.” He dropped the rat on the floor. “You trashed my house, twice, and you have the nerve to tell me your king has the right to be mad at us? Fuck you. You can all die for all I care right now.”

“Hold up.” Beth knelt down to look at the rat. “Now, if you were to take us to your king, maybe we could talk Jenny into not murdering everybody in your kingdom.”

“Impossible.” His eyes watered, his beady nose twitching. “I will not risk His Majesty’s safety.”

“He’s dead anyway, it’s just a matter of time.” Mike kicked at the rat, who dodged to the side and bared his teeth. “I’m not feeling particularly generous right now, but my friend here has the ability to speak with her. It’s your call.”

The rat looked back and forth, indecision on his furry features. Finally, he slumped. “Fine. I’ll take you to him.”

“Damn fucking right,” Mike said. Beth saw a fire in his eyes she had never seen before. It was only once he looked away from her that she realized his eyes had actually been glowing.