**Royal Pain**

Mike, Beth, and the goblin Tink stood at the foot of the stairs, looking upward in awe. Only moments ago, the earth had trembled when Beth had brought in her luggage, the house outwardly expanding. However, it wasn’t as simple as that-looking up the stairs, the new second floor started at the landing where the stairs changed direction. In his mind, Mike now had memories of passing by that hall without a second thought. It wasn’t only the house that had grown, but his memories as well.

“This is amazing.” Beth’s voice was just above a whisper. She had set her luggage on the floor.

“You’re telling me. Do you remember this at all?”

Beth nodded. “I can’t tell you how many times I dropped by to check on the place after your great aunt Emily died. Thinking back on it now, I vividly remember walking past that hallway and never actually checking it out, but I also remember never noticing it.” Beth had been the estate agent who had first walked him through the home almost a week ago. Had it really only been that long? “It’s so hard to explain.”

“It’s like the Mandela Effect. People with a collective memory of an event find out they’ve all been wrong somehow. The big difference here is that we now remember ignoring something we never saw in the first place.” Mike walked up the stairs, his left hand on the railing. At the top of the railing was a smooth metal ball. To the left was the new hallway. “I know that I have never seen this ball before, but I have a memory of grabbing onto it every time I come down the stairs. There’s a smudge on the other side.” He stepped into the hall and looked at the ball. Sure enough, the smudge was there.

“What could cause something like that?” Beth asked.

“There’s a spell on the house, a geas. It’s a type of powerful enchantment. Until you are invited in, you can’t actually see the creatures who live here. It’s why you never spotted anything out of the ordinary.”

“Then how did I come in? Or the maids to clean it?”

“You were working for my aunt, technically. Logically, you were acting as a temporary Caretaker, so you were allowed entry.” He shrugged. “That’s my best guess, to be perfectly honest.”

“Could we ask Naia about it?”

“Maybe. The geas can alter memories. When I first moved in, Naia had forgotten about the others. They only seem to remember things when I discover them.”

“Tink in deep sleep,” the goblin said from behind them. She already had a rag in her hand, and had started polishing the smudge off the railing. “When house sleep, everyone sleep. No wake until husband finds.”

“That’s about right.” Mike stepped into the hall. The wooden floor looked like it had been recently waxed, and the hallway made a sharp, ninety-degree turn. Windows along the hall let in plenty of light, and Mike walked up to the first door, grabbing the knob tightly in his hand.

“Ready?” He looked over his shoulder. Beth and Tink nodded, though Mike saw that Tink was holding her wrench tightly in one hand. He held back a laugh and twisted the knob.

It didn’t budge.

“Huh.” He rattled the knob, then tried to give the door a push. When nothing else happened, he tried knocking.

“So… that was anti-climactic.” Beth moved next to him to help. He was suddenly aware of how close she was, and how the curve of her ass pushed into him when she pressed her shoulder into the door. “Is it locked?”

“Must be.” Mike crouched down, noticing the keyhole under the knob. Or rather, where the keyhole should have been. A dark grey substance was just past the tiny portal. “Hey Tink, is that what I think it is?”

“Husband move.” She swatted Mike on the butt and took his place. She put her magical goggles on, the tiny lenses flicking down to give her a better look. Tink jerked her head back, a look of horror on her face.

“Nasty!” She retched dramatically. “Disgusting shit!”

“What is it?” Mike asked. Beth had pulled a key out of her pocket and was scraping at the substance blocking the keyhole with it. “It’s clay or something like it, right?”

“Shit. Poop. Doody.” Tink’s whole face wrinkled in disgust. “Stupid fuck shit in the keyhole!”

Beth dropped her key.

Mike’s jaw dropped. “How do you shit in a keyhole?”

“Very carefully.” Beth said, an odd smirk on her face. Mike could tell she was trying not to laugh. “Or not. We haven’t seen the other side of the door.”

“Can you get it out?” Mike asked Tink. He really didn’t want to break down the door or damage the lock too badly. God forbid he piss off whoever lived inside, and with the amount of repairs they had been doing lately, he knew that finding a door that would look right was going to be extremely difficult.

“Maybe, but take long time. Poop like concrete. Super hard.” Tink pulled a screwdriver out of her toolbox and shoved it in the keyhole. Using her hammer, she hit the back of the screwdriver, making the whole door shake. She gave it another whack, and the screwdriver snapped in the middle.

The colorful string of expletives from the goblin had Beth red in the face, her lips pressed tightly together.

“You’re loving this,” Mike said.

Beth nodded, her eyes on Tink. The goblin had thrown the handle of the screwdriver at the door. The handle had bounced off, rolling across the hall and coming to a rest along the baseboards. “Maybe we should go check out the other rooms?”

“Certainly. C’mon Tink, we’ll deal with that door later.” They turned the corner and Mike let out an appreciative whistle. The series of windows all looked north into the backyard and into the woods behind his house.The wrought iron gate behind the fountain looked even larger from here, and the light illuminated the two wooden doors on his right. At the end of the hallway was another door.

“I’m guessing they are bedrooms.” Mike walked to the first door and gave the knob a twist, but it didn’t budge.

“This one too?” Beth asked. She knelt down, but Tink pushed between her and the door, scowling through the thick lenses of her goggles.

“Shit!” Tink gave the door a kick then ran down to the next one. She stopped briefly at the next door and stomped her feet in frustration. She ran to the end of the hall and uttered curses under her breath upon inspecting the lock.

“All of them?” Mike blinked in disbelief. Who would block off the doors? And why with poop?

“Hello?” Beth knocked on each of the doors. “There’s nothing to be afraid of, we’re friendly.”

Mike placed his ear on the door closest to him. He heard nothing through it.

“Tink buy new drill from magic screen. Get some bits for concrete.” Tink walked around the corner and Mike could hear her stomping down the stairs. He had no doubt that she was headed for his laptop to put in an order at one of the local hardware stores.

“I guess it’ll have to wait for tomorrow.” Beth raised an eyebrow. “Wanna place any bets on what’s inside?”

“I can guarantee we will both lose somehow.” Mike smiled, and Tink yelled in surprise from the bottom of the stairs.

Beth and Mike ran down the stairs, Mike jumping the last few and turning toward the sound of Tink’s voice. He ran out of the living room and tried to turn into the kitchen, but ran into a wall that had never been there before.

“What the hell?” He looked and saw an opening to his left. Stepping through it, he found himself inside of a very large dining room with ornate china cabinets along the wall and a table that could easily seat more than ten people comfortably. Tink was standing at the other side of it, feeling the wood with her fingers.

“Is very good.” She gave the table a knock. “No remember, but actually remember.”

“I…” Again, Mike somehow had a memory of bolting through this room and never quite seeing it. This one was harder to swallow for him. It easily would take a couple of seconds to cross, so it couldn’t just be memory loss.

“Oh boy.” Beth leaned against the wall, her head in her hand. “This one actually makes me feel dizzy.”

“It isn’t just our memories. I get walking past a hallway and never going down it, but I remember going through this room, and that doesn’t make sense. Is the memory a fabrication?”

“That’s a good question.” Beth moved away from the wall. “Unless the house erased our memory of it as we passed through.”

“That almost makes the geas sound alive, or sentient.”

“Isn’t it?” The way Beth asked the question told him that she had already made up her mind. “The house waited until today to expand. How far can it go, I wonder?”

“If that’s the case, then how many rooms have we walked through already? That kind of time adds up and I think we would notice that it takes a really long time to cross the house. It can’t just be memory manipulation, it has to be something more.”

“Yes, well, before we do anymore exploring, I would like to go lie down for a bit. Unlike some people here, I’ve been up all night.”

“Yeah, okay.” Mike poked his head out the other side of the room to see the small kitchen table that he and Tink had eaten breakfast at. His laptop was still on it. “Hey Tink, go ahead and get that stuff ordered. I want to get into those rooms as quick as I can.”

Tink jumped onto the nearest chair and opened his computer, her fingers clicking on the keyboard. He could hear her pounding on the keys while he grabbed Beth’s luggage by the front door. He tried to pick up the briefcase she had brought with her, but she snatched it away from him.

“What’s in there?” he asked. “Must be important.”

“Sorry, reflex. This was my dad’s case, he gave it to me when I moved out. It’s just a few things from my apartment that I couldn’t live without. Old copy of *The Hobbit* I got when I was young, stuff like that.”

“Hey, you’re entitled to your privacy. I’ve just learned to be curious about everything, especially creepy little dolls.” Mike and Beth both laughed. At the time, Beth’s possession had been a serious matter, but they had both come to terms with it.

“Speaking of Jenny, you should probably get her out of your bag.”

“Oh, right!” Beth opened up her backpack and pulled out the little doll. With a porcelain face that they had cleaned up and a pretty green dress that Tink had made for her, she looked less ominous.

“Here ya go.” Mike took the doll and walked into the living room. The front window overlooking the yard had been covered with dark curtains which he parted to allow in more light. The window sill had been deepened to allow for the large dollhouse that Tink and Mike had put together. It was tucked in the corner of the window, initially hidden by the curtains. It looked like a caricature of the home itself, with a finely carved turret on top with a toy gargoyle hanging from the gutter. Inside, roughly where Mike’s room was, sat a small chair built just for Jenny. He set her in the chair and pushed her to face toward the front yard.

“And she likes this?”

“Loves it. She kept haunting Tink to help her draw up the plans. Tink kept complaining about it because apparently Jenny kept doing that when she was busy with other stuff.” Beth had been gone while they had been building the dollhouse during one of her many trips into the Labyrinth. Mike had learned from her about the potential magical items that had been sold at an auction, so he had her visit with Ratu to see if they could identify any of them from the itemized list she had kept from her visit to the New Castle storage facility.

“I’m probably going back down there again later tonight. Do you think Dana wants to come with me again?”

Mike shook his head. “Not this time. She left me a note. Ratu thinks she found some magical items that may be able to bring her back to life.” Dana’s soul had been bound to her body, meaning that she would never truly die. She was hoping to cure her condition so that she could properly die and be reunited with her girlfriend in the Afterlife.

“That’s good news, isn’t it?”

“She left the house to go find them. Took the mimic with her.” Ratu, a powerful naga, was capable of breaking magical items down and preserving the magic within to combine with other magic. “Apparently something on that list you made might be able to help her.”

“Oh no. Won’t she get hungry if she doesn’t eat… uh…” During Beth’s stay at the Radley house, she and Mike had been careful to avoid any discussion of his sexual dalliances with the others, but he knew that she had long ago caught on. “Your… essence?”

Beth was referring to Mike’s semen. Dana had been turned into a zombie to infiltrate his home, but because his soul was bound to a nymph, his semen had powerful magical properties which kept Dana from feeding on the living, but only if she ate his cum. “She found a way to prolong the effects. She’ll be fine.”

“I see.” Beth started to say something, then pretended to cough instead. “I guess I’ll go to my room now.”

“Yeah, sure.” Mike picked up her backpack and her suitcase, and followed her up the stairs, trying to avoid staring at her ass through her clothes. It was still a bad habit, and the nymph’s magic running through his blood didn’t make it any easier.

Later that night, Sofia the cyclops made them all a big dinner of lamb. They ate out by the fountain on some makeshift tables that Tink had put together out of scrap. They all came out to celebrate their new roommate, the yard suddenly loud with their voices. Tink had put on a cute dress that Naia had helped her pick out, and Sofia wore a regal light blue gown that came to her ankles. At eight feet tall, she towered over everyone else.

When the sun had fully set, Cecilia the banshee made an appearance, her body hovering over the festivities. The three fairies circled overhead looking very much like twinkling Christmas lights. Abella had taken her post on the roof, her sensitive ears turned toward the front of the house. The Society kept a constant watch on the front of the house, hoping to catch Mike off guard.

That wasn’t going to happen. Mike smiled at the weird family that had surrounded him. Even though Beth was still the outsider, they treated her like one of their own. It had simply made sense to offer her a room in the home, especially with the sinister forces determined to discover the secret of the home.

“Penny for your thoughts, lover.” Naia’s lips on his ears made him shiver in delight, and he reached back to wrap an arm around her waist.

“What do you know about the real second floor?” he asked. She smelled of fresh rain on a summer day. “The one that appeared. The doors are all blocked.”

“Surprisingly little, actually.” Naia rubbed Mike’s back through his shirt. “Emily mentioned it to me once, but it was shortly before she passed. She forbid the others from going there, as it had just appeared for her.”

“Wait, so the second floor is technically new?”

“I guess. One of the previous Caretakers may have mentioned it, but I couldn’t even tell you who.” Naia frowned. “Usually when you find something in the house, my memory of it returns. I’m sorry I can’t be of any more help.”

“Don’t worry about-” Mike’s jaw dropped when a pair of dark figures stepped out into the light of the garden. Ratu wore a beautiful silk kimono with a golden dragon emblazoned across the front and back. Behind her stood the minotaur Asterion, his giant axe in hand.

“My colleague here was very adamant that we come tonight.”’ Ratu smiled, her tiara sparkling atop her head. The fairies had stopped where they were, dropping down to hide behind the others. “I found it comforting that you have already spent much effort making us feel welcome.”

“Ratu.” Mike stood and offered the naga a hug, which she accepted. He felt her lick his neck with her overly long tongue, which made him flinch. “I didn’t think you were coming. Don’t you need to be monitoring the Labyrinth?”

“The Labyrinth will be fine for a bit, I have warded the entrance to notify me if it is breached. And I wasn’t going to come, but Asterion made me. Surprisingly, I missed seeing my visitors.” She smiled at Beth, who was looking at Asterion and blushing. “Welcome to your new home.”

“Thank you.” Beth wore a black gown with a pair of horn rimmed glasses. Tink had stolen them earlier, wearing them around the house as a fashion accessory until Mike made her put them back. She rose from her seat at the table to shake hands with Ratu, then gave Asterion a hug. The minotaur hesitated before hugging her back.

“Well, it’s good to see you too.” Mike offered his hand to Asterion, who contemplated it for several seconds before shaking it.

“We can be friends too.” he said. Mike thought it an odd thing to say, but didn’t bother asking about it. Asterion found the vegetarian dish that Sofia had made specifically for Zel. Beth helped him put together a plate of it, which required that he set down his axe. Mike nearly laughed at his reluctance to do so, the minotaur looking back and forth from his weapon to the food.

Where was Zel? The centaur had been there for a while, but had vanished. Mike excused himself and checked in her garage. They had redone a good portion of the small building. The door to get in was now a stall door with a top that opened separately. They had built her a comfortable stall to sleep in with hay scattered on the floor and a comfortable quilt for her upper half. Her alchemist table was a mess - clearly she had been working on something.

Stepping back out into the night, he skirted the fountain and walked around the house. There was a narrow corridor behind the home that used to be thick with Mandragora vines, but that creature had left last week to replant itself. Walking toward the greenhouse, he saw that the door was open.

“Zel?” He stepped through cautiously. Inside the greenhouse was a jungle that went for miles from the door, the door itself built on top of a large cliff overlooking it. He had been assured that the greenhouse held many rare and valuable specimens for potions and spells, but it was never anything he had gotten involved with. Zel spent most of her day at her table working with the ingredients she had brought with her, and would go back into the greenhouse from time to time.

“There you are.” He spotted her on the edge of the cliff. She was slightly taller than he was, her skin pale in the moonlight. Zel was wearing feathers that she had braided into her hair and a sleeveless tunic. Around her human waist was a large sash that matched the rest of her outfit. Her ankles were adorned with bracelets she and Tink had woven out of leather scraps with bits of ribbon mixed in. “Everything okay?”

“We’re about to find out.” Zel pointed at the sky. The moon was rising in the distance. It looked different than the one over his house. His best guess was that the greenhouse was somehow on another plane of existence. “I’ve been waiting for that.”

“The moon? I mean, is it technically the moon? Our moon?” Mike had no idea what the name of the moon was. “That moon?” He at least felt like he was asking the right question.

“Yes, that one. I could have used the moon in the backyard, but I didn’t want to do this in front of the others. Come here.” She patted a rock next to her so Mike sat down. She pulled a slim vial from between her breasts. “I have to drink this right when the moon climbs over the horizon and I want you to be here just in case.”

“In case what?”

“I’ve never told you the truth about why I’m here. Emily never let me live in the house, so I lived out here in the wilderness by myself.”

Mike nodded. He had initially been distrustful of the centaur because of this fact, but had quickly learned that she was worth the risk. Her potions had amazing curative properties, although he didn’t always approve of the ingredients she used.

“Well, in a lot of ways, I was actually hiding. From my tribe.”

Now this was new information. “Why would you want to hide from your own tribe?”

“I was betrothed. It isn’t uncommon for centaurs to do such a thing shortly after birth. It allows us to monitor bloodlines, make familial alliances, whatever. Breaking a betrothal is essentially forbidden without very good reason.”

“I see. Were you hoping to marry for love or something like that?”

“What? Oh, no, nothing quite so simple.” Zel walked along the edge of the cliff, her tail swishing in the light breeze drifting across the cliff tops. Mike noticed the ripples in her human hair, how the gusts caught the edges of her tunic and revealed a little more of the tanned skin beneath. “Centaurs are proud. I believe this is a stereotype that carries over into this world, yes?”

“Of course.”

“Then understand the differences between us. When a human is born with a disability, what do you do?”

“Depends on the disability. Do surgery if it’s fixable, otherwise learn how to raise it and love it anyway.” It’s what he would do, anyway. Life wasn’t always so kind.

“Centaurs will meet you halfway. If it can be fixed, they do it. Our medicine is second to none, and plans will immediately be made to prep the child for recovery. However, if something is really wrong, something that can’t be fixed with medicine, then there’s a different solution.”

“What’s that?” Mike thought he knew where this was going.

“When I was young, my dam’s friend gave birth to a child that was born with legs that would never hold him up. They were hideous and malformed. The chief of the tribe killed the child for them so that the tribe would never be burdened.”

“That sounds terrible.” The death of any child would be, and he winced inwardly. His hunch had been correct.

“Yes, but is it actually? A tribe can be forced to move at a moments notice. It can be for reasons of war, or a hunt, or even something as simple as a forest fire. Such a creature would be unable to hunt or support himself, and he would never be allowed to breed. Is it crueler to end such a creature, or to allow it to live with the misery of its own existence?”

“That’s one of those workplace conversations you’re not supposed to have.” Mike gave Zel a grin, but she clearly didn’t understand what he meant. “For humans, we have an argument similar to that. For a lot of people, it comes down to what it means to be alive, and maybe if their god disapproves of it.”

“Centaurs have no such debate… usually.” Zel had stopped, her eyes on the horizon. “You see, I was born with a disfigurement that could not be fixed. However, it wouldn’t hinder my contribution to the tribe either, so my parents chose to hide it. When I was young, I lost them both to a troll raid, and only my aunt knew of my condition. She was, after all, the midwife at my birth.”

“Go on.”

“There are many legends about centaurs. We have theories, but the only thing we know for sure is that we are half human, half horse.” Zel’s face suddenly grew red. “But if you ever meet another centaur, do not tell them that.”

Mike nodded.

“Anyway, where does the horse end and the woman begin?” Zel pulled up on her shirt. The fine gray hairs of her horseflesh eventually melded into a smooth human belly. “It’s different for everyone. It isn’t uncommon for a centaur to be a horse up to their pecs, or even human between their horse legs. That can be covered by clothing, and doesn’t hurt anything. However, a centaur baby can be born with a horse’s head, or even human feet. Such a creature is usually destroyed right away by its own parents.

“You see, I was born with such a deformity, one that is easily hidden but would become all too obvious on my wedding night.” Zel turned her back to him, her tail swishing back and forth. She reached back to grab it, pulling it out of the way. Mike wasn’t certain what he was supposed to be looking at.

“It looks okay to me.” Beneath her tail, the light fur faded into the soft flesh of a beautiful vagina. He was surprised at how normal it looked until it finally dawned on him. “Oh shit, you’re a human back here!”

“Yes. Centaurs mate from the waist down. I was born with a human vagina, one that will not accommodate a horse’s cock, nor a centaur child.” She let go of her tail. “On the night before my wedding, my aunt brought me here that I may live. You see, I was betrothed to marry the chieftain's son, and my deception would be cause for death on my wedding night.”

“Because you have a human pussy?”

“I am an abomination. My parents let me live, thinking they could someday find a way to make me whole, but they never found a way. This greenhouse is a legend to my people, and my aunt tasked me with finding a way to cure my affliction and someday return to my tribe.”

“And have you?”

Zel’s head dropped. “Yes and no. You see, such a feat can be accomplished only by the combination of science and magic, but magic is, by nature, often wild. I did find an ingredient that would work though, and a ready supply of it.”

“Are you talking about my sperm?” He felt like his semen was officially the swiss army knife of alchemy these days.

“I am. Your semen alone contains a powerful life force, but there is something more. It carries residue of an old magic, something wild and untameable. By that nature, I had to make a choice. I could try to create a potion to restore my equine qualities or to amplify my human ones. In the realm of risks, one could say that only one of those is a safe bet.”

“So you’re saying that you made a potion that will turn you human?”

Zel nodded. “I hope so.”

“But why? I think you are amazing as you are.”

“I may be amazing, but I am alone. I can never truly be a part of my tribe - the most I can hope for is to be cast out, much like I already am. And though I may be a part of this household, I can’t even go inside without fear of slipping. I am limited, and I do not like it.”

“Zel.” Mike shook his head. “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“It is no fault of yours. This is something I have lived with, and will likely continue to.” The moon was nearly risen now, and she held the vial up. “The light of the rising moon is the last ingredient. The moon signifies change and transformation, life and birth. I hope that it may signal my own transformation as well. If it fails… I did not think I could bear for the others to see the result.”

“Then let’s see what happens together.” He crossed his legs, shifting to make himself more comfortable. It was a pretty evening here in the greenhouse, and the others wouldn’t come looking for him right away.

She nodded, holding the vial up so that the light of the moon shone through it. The moment the moon crested the jungle, the liquid inside took on a golden hue, glowing intensely like a tiny star. Zel stepped away from the edge of the cliff, then turned around to sit across from Mike.

“To wild magic.” She pulled a small cork out of the top of the vial and swallowed it. An amber glow descended across her body like a shimmering gown of light, swirling outward. Zel cried out, tilting forward onto the ground. Mike got off the rock and tried to help her up, but the curtain of light was swirling around her now, pinning her to the ground.

“Zel, are you okay?” He was answered by a scream. From where he sat, he could hear a series of snapping noises coming from where her legs were. Steam rose from below her, the shimmering light blinding him now. He closed his eyes and held tightly to Zel, who was now crushing his hand in hers.

Zel screamed several more times before growing quiet. The light faded, the steam gently drifting off the cliff. His eyes still hadn’t adjusted, her dark form dimly lit by the moon. She shifted in front of him, messing with the large sash around her waist.

“Please. Help me stand.” Her hands were shaking. Mike got up on his knees and pulled. Zel pressed into him, her breasts pushing into his chest. She used his shoulders to stand, her body shaking. The sash she had loosened tumbled across her lower body to become an ankle length skirt. She grunted, standing up with Mike.

“It… it worked!” He stared in awe. The potion had made her human!

“Not quite. A failure, albeit an interesting one.” Stepping away from Mike, she grabbed her skirt and lifted it upwards. Her feet were a cross between human and horse, a large hoof where her toes should be. Her muscular calves were not the smooth skin of a human, but rather the furry limbs of a beast. Inspecting her transformation, she pulled the skirt higher. Somewhere near the top of her thighs, the fur transformed into human flesh. When she dropped her skirt, she made a face. Frowning, she pulled a small knife from her pocket and turned around, stabbing the fabric.

“What are you-” She pulled her tail through the opening. It was nearly as long as her legs were.

“That is certainly inconvenient.” Zel shifted her hips from side to side, the tail swishing against her skirt. “I imagine it will be difficult to find pants that fit.”

“So it this… is this you now?”

She smirked, the moonlight sparkling in her eyes like gemstones. “No. When I made the potion, I deliberately built a failsafe in. It will last either an hour or a couple of days, but it’s hard to know for sure given the nature of its components, specifically your contribution. Hmm.” She hiked up her skirt again, revealing a perfectly smooth human ass with a horse’s tail right above it. “I would estimate that I am roughly twenty percent equine still. It’s mostly in the legs. This form at least grants me mobility, but I’m afraid the tail prevents proper integration into human society.”

“I mean, if it helps, human society really isn’t that great to begin with.” It was the whole reason he loved living in the house. He had never fit in very well with other people, quickly finding a spiritual synergy with his new roommates. “You have to pay taxes.”

“You can tell me about these taxes some other time.” Zel pulled him closer. “Dance with me.”

“D-dance?”

“It’s something I’ve always wanted to do. To dance like humans do.” She placed her hands around his shoulders. She was slightly shorter than he was now, her intense eyes sparkling. “PLease dance with me.”

“I, uh…” He put his hands around her waist. He wasn’t exceptionally good at it, but he had learned a few basic slow dances from a previous girlfriend who thought it would help with his intimacy issues. Naturally, it hadn’t. “Ok, it’s been a while, but I’ll do my best.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and opened up his music. He had tons to pick from - for the longest time when he was in college, he had made a little money on the side by putting albums on flash drives for other students. He loaded up Paramore’s ‘The Only Exception’ and started moving to the beat.

Zel closed her eyes, allowing Mike to lead her. They danced in a small circle, illuminated only by the rising moon. Zel’s hair and tail trailed behind her, her movements quickly becoming more graceful as she adapted to her new legs. Near the end of the song, Mike gave her a little twirl, watching her skirt and tail flare out in a large circle beneath her waist. When he pulled her back in, her eyes were open and her mouth hungry, her lips finding his.

“Mmh!” MIke nearly fell over, shifting his weight. HIs hands circled her waist, feeling her supple ass through the thin fabric of her skirt. Her fingers traced along his upper back, exploring the curve of his shoulder blades, then touched his face.

She broke the kiss, her eyes gazing deeply into his. “Pardon my aggressive nature. I worry that the duration of the potion will be short, and desire to experience a few things before it ends.”

He laughed. “I kind of figured.”

“I am unbroken. In human terms, that means that I am virginal and have never engaged in sexual relations with another living being. I do have experience, but is has all been with inanimate objects.”

“Then it’s time to change that.” Mike kissed her some more, touching her jawline and then running his hands through her hair. He could feel how nervous she was, sense the trepidation as her fingers explored his body. She had touched him so confidently before, when she was a centaur.

*Fear of rejection, lover.* This time, the innate sexual sense that had manifested itself before had a voice, and it belonged to Naia. *She’s afraid that you will find her incomplete state unappealing. Touch her somewhere else.*

He listened, moving his hand down her breast to her waist, then spinning her around. She let out a small, playful shriek, then pressed her ass into his groin. He reached around her, running his hand up along her belly. With his other hand, he rubbed her ass first, then moved up to stroke the hair of her tail. He ran his fingers through the stiff hairs, then tugged it past his waist, pulling her ass harder against him.

Zel let out a moan. She tilted her head back, giving him access to her neck. He kissed it, deliberately teasing her by breathing out by her ears. She laughed, taking the hand on her belly and bringing it up to her breast. With her fingers interlocked with his, she showed him how she liked her breasts squeezed. He marveled at how supple they felt through her leather tunic.

She grabbed his hip and squeezed. Mike pulled his hand free of hers and felt along her belly, moving his fingers down beneath the fabric of her dress. Her smooth, human skin transitioned into the soft felt of horse flesh in places, but she was all human when he neared her labia.

“Nngh!” Her hips bucked forward when he touched the engorged lips of her pussy, her swollen clitoris still folded away. She was already soaking wet, her furry thighs slick with her juices. Mike took his time, teasing her outer folds and stroking her inner thighs. With his other hand, he slowly pulled her skirt up, revealing her legs to him.

In the light of the moon, it looked like she was wearing gray leggings with the crotch ripped out of them. She had no true pubic hair, rather a soft patch of felt where it should have been. He tucked the front of the skirt into the waistband, holding it open. He used both hands now, his left hand to tease her outer folds and his right hand to spread her open and penetrate her. She moaned loudly, grinding her ass against his cock, which had become hard beneath his pants. He pushed back, his dick now between her buttocks.

He bit her on the neck, lightly. She shivered, moving her ass out of the way to squeeze his cock through his pants. When she rocked her hips, his fingers moved in and out of her.

It took her several tries, but she managed to free his cock from his pants, stroking him with a firm grip. He pushed her forward, and she got on her hands and knees in front of him, shaking her tail in his face. He grabbed a handful of the wiry hair and pulled, thrusting his hard cock inside of her.

The sound she made was somewhere between a growl and a laugh, her legs trembling. He kept a tight hold of her tail, pumping himself into her while running his other hand along her hips and legs. He liked how her fur became incredibly soft right where it became skin, petting those parts of her while he pounded her from behind. When she lifted her head to look back, he used his other hand to grab a handful of her hair, pulling back on that as well. Her head tilted skyward, a throaty laugh emanating from her mouth, followed by a loud moan.

*Be a little rough.* Naia giggled in his mind. Was she actually there? Could she sense what he was doing, watching him from afar? Or was this just that small part of her soul, grafted onto his. Would she experience his life all at once when he died, or would it just be random memories she could pull up and view like an old movie?

MIke thrust into her roughly, yanking her head back. He wrapped her tail around his hand like a rope, alternating his yanks between head and tail.

“Harder. Harder!”

He fought the urge to yell giddyup, letting out a small yell instead. She reached back to play with her clit, her fingertips brushing against his shaft. Several minutes passed this way, her body going limp and giving him full control. Her cries came in loud bursts, and a small orgasm ripped through her body. She pulled her head free of his grasp and crawled off of him, turning in place to face him. She kissed him hard, her tongue tracing circles on his while she pushed him onto his back.

“Now it’s my turn to ride you.” She pinned his shoulders down and lowered herself onto his cock, shuddering in pleasure when he sank into her. Her vagina was deep, easily taking him all the way down to his balls. She lifted herself up until he almost slipped out of her, then slammed herself back down. It didn’t take her long before her self control eroded, eyes closed while she bounced up and down, pausing occasionally to grind her thick clit against his pubic bone. She grunted through clenched teeth each time she did this, her eyes shut in concentration. Mike grabbed onto her hips, moving his hands down to her furry thighs to help her move. When he could, he teased her by tilting his hips to pull his cock out, then pushed it back in when her cries became desperate.

“Oh shit,” she hissed, the rhythm of her hips suddenly irregular, her whole body tensing up. He grabbed onto the top of her thighs and pulled her tightly against him, lifting his hips off the ground. Looking down, he could see her engorged clit appear and disappear from view as she pressed into him, his lap suddenly wet with her fluids.

She let out a loud grunt that sounded suspiciously like a neighing horse, her whole upper body now vertical and both hands squeezing her breasts through the thick fabric of her tunic. Her whole body quaked above him and her vagina squeezed down on the head of his cock. He held back his own orgasm, lifting a hand to tenderly caress her cheek. Letting out a final squeal, Zel squirted all over his lap, soaking his skin and the ground beneath them.

She collapsed, her face fitting perfectly in the crook of his shoulder. They were both breathing hard, just slightly out of sync with each other. Zel didn’t wait long to start stroking him, keeping his dick nice and hard.

“It’s so much better with someone else.” She teased his urethra with the pad of her thumb. “And it was definitely better than I imagined it would be.”

“I’m glad to-oh!” Zel had moved quick, crawling down to suck him into her mouth. She was using one hand on the base of his shaft and the other to massage his balls, easily taking him deep with her own lubrication to help. Mike lifted his head to watch her, using a hand to pull her hair aside for a better look.

Zel’s hands worked miracles on his shaft, and he blew his load in her mouth. Her cheeks bulged out, and he could hear her swallow in surprise. She pulled her mouth away, trying to catch what she could in an empty vial she had pulled from somewhere. Giving him a few last strokes, she caught a few decent globs in her flask.

“That felt wonderful Zel.”

“Mmm-hmm.” She pulled another vial out and held it to her lips. Semen and spit filled the vial, far more than she had caught in the other. “You came way more than I thought you would. I swallowed some and wasted it.”

Mike chuckled. He didn’t feel like it was a waste. There was something sexy about knowing that his seed was in a woman’s stomach. “Let me guess. You’re going to run some tests?”

“Absolutely.” She gave him a light peck on the lips. “If I haven’t reverted by tomorrow night, could we do this again?”

“I think that would be fun.” They helped each other stand, and he fixed her skirt for her. “But for now, would you like to go to a party with me?” He held out his arm.

“I would love to.” She pocketed the vials and slid her arm through his. Together, they stepped through the door of the greenhouse and back into the real world. When they walked back into the garden, the fairies were flying around, music coming from their glowing bodies. Beth was showing Asterion how to eat a piece of pie, and Tink was in a heated argument with Ratu over what appeared to be the last meatball.

He smiled.

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“Okay, let’s do this.” Mike put on the mask Tink had given him. It had a HEPA filter built in, and was identical to the one she wore. When she crouched down to place the drill in the lock, her tail lifted her skirt just enough that he could see her bare green buttocks. He stifled a laugh, which was easy behind the mask. “Abella, are you set?”

“I’m ready.” She spoke from outside the window. The house was largely made of wood, but all across the roof and siding were iron handholds that had been attached to metal framing in the home. Surprisingly, this bay of windows had plenty of them, allowing the gargoyle to supervise. Mike’s main concern involved something unfriendly beyond the door that may decide to pounce on them. They had chosen the door at the end of the hall so that Abella could quickly get between them and anything that may come after them.

“Cerulea?” The little blue fairy sat on his shoulder, her fingers clutching his hair. She gave him a tiny thumbs up. While not entirely certain how she could contribute, he had found her teasing birds in the garden this morning and thought it better to give her a job for the day. Beth had decided to spend her morning looking into the missing storage unit items, so was probably having breakfast downstairs with Sofia. The cyclops had taken to prepping meals in the mornings and most evenings. Her duties in the Library were minimal and she was grateful just to have some other people to talk to.

Tink’s new drill came to life in her hand, and she pushed the bit into the lock, causing a loud grinding noise to fill the hallway. Mike winced, the sound reminding him of having a tooth drilled. Tink gave him the signal, and he stepped in with his Shop-Vac to suck out the debris. Small wisps of smoke came out of the lock, and Tink swapped out for a smaller bit, the lenses on her goggles swapping places to tell her where to drill next. She tackled the lock at an upward angle now, pushing the bit in until it disappeared.

“Fucking fuck fuck,” Tink hissed when the bit broke. She had the replacement ready, her tail whipping back and forth while she switched out and continued the assault. When finished, she grabbed the knob and wiggled the door back and forth while Mike put the hose on the lock. Hard chunks rattled through the hose.

“The culprit is clever, I must admit,” Abella said when he stopped the vacuum. Tink held a series of thin wires in her hand, her tongue sticking out while she probed the lock.

“I don’t know that playing with your shit makes you clever.” Mike stepped back when the knob turned. Tink held a finger to her lips, then grabbed the hammer hanging from her belt. Mike sighed and loosened the knife in his belt. It was a magical blade that could cut through anything, even spirits. He had never actually used it on anyone, but he felt better having it on him.

“I’m ready.” Abella was holding onto the window sill, ready to launch herself into the hall. She had curled her wings in, her clawed hands squeezing the wood tight enough to leave marks.

“Let’s do this.” He nodded and Tink pushed the door open. The room inside was simple, a small wardrobe in one corner and a bed against the wall. There were no windows, and the room had a bathroom not much larger than a closet.

“There’s nobody here.” He moved toward the bed, but Tink was ahead of him. She knelt down, her nostrils flaring. She shook her head, then grabbed the sheets on the bed and yanked them off. The mattress was old and looked like it had almost never been used.

“Well?” Abella had carefully climbed through the window and stood in the door. Cerulea’s beetle-wings emitted a loud buzz while she circled the room, her antenna twitching.

“Nothing.” Mike looked at the other side of the door. Other than the remaining blockage in place, it was normal. “Does this mean it was sealed from the outside?”

“I don’t think that’s…” Abella’s eyes widened and Mike turned. Tink was on top of the bed when it threw itself into the air, launching the goblin up. MIke stepped to the right and caught her. The bed charged the doorway, its metal legs squeaking.

It threw itself through the air and Abella smacked it so hard that it broke apart upon hitting the floor. They all stared at the broken furniture in disbelief.

“Was… was that another mimic?” Mike asked. The clock in the front room had secretly been a mimic, but Dana had restored it to life and taken it with her when she had left.

“Not mimic.” Tink slid out of Mike’s arms. She picked up one of the busted legs, then dropped it when it tried to curl around her. “Mimic much stronger.”

“It’s been-” Abella spun in place, her powerful tail smashing through the wardrobe that rushed at her and turning it into a pile of splintered planks. Tink had jumped back into Mike’s arms in surprise, and he held her tightly. “...enchanted.”

“How can you tell? I mean, other than the obvious.” Mike, suddenly aware that he was squeezing Tink’s breast, set her down.

“I’m a creature made of stone. I can smell the magic on this. Look.” She picked up one of the boards and it wiggled in her grasp. “Wood doesn’t bend this way unless it’s under a spell.”

“Well who would cast a spell like that?” Mike asked. Abella opened her mouth to respond, but they all heard the low whistle of air across the room. Where the wardrobe had been standing was a large hole in the wall. Mike groaned.

“I should have known.” He walked back into the hall and opened up Tink’s toolbox. He brought back flashlights and handed them out. “I’m hoping this doesn’t go to another Labyrinth.”

“Not sure.” Tink was inspecting the inside of the hole. “Not natural. Someone chew hole.”

“Did you say chew?”

“Yes. Big teeth, look.” Tink ran her fingers around the edge and Mike saw the large grooves. Beyond the plaster and wood was a thick layer of something that looked like particle board. He shined the light in the hole and marveled at the weird collection of vents and pipes on the inside.

“Not a cave. It almost looks like someone tunneled through the house.” Of course, the statement was only half true. The length of tunnel he was looking at would easily carry them outside the external wall. “In for a penny, in for a pound I guess.”

“Tink first.” She scurried into the hole, her goggles on. She could see in the dark with those, but used her flashlight to illuminate the passage ahead. “Husband come, then rock girl.”

“Sounds good to me.” Abella was able to squeeze through the opening with her wings folded in, the shaft widening to about ten feet. The passageway creaked ominously under her weight, but it held. They moved slowly, all three of them sweeping the area with their flashlights. Cerulea had dimmed her own glow, hidden just behind his shoulder. The space made Mike think of one of those sci-fi movies where the heroes crawled through the belly of a large ship - pipes and large vents seemed to be connected with no real direction intended, and he even spotted a broken door that opened into solid concrete.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“Inside house,” Tink whispered. She looked back at him. “Between walls. Bad place, be very careful.”

“I don’t understand. This is the house?” Mike touched one of the walls. He had figured this was just another interdimensional space the home was connected to.

“It is very bad. None of us know very much, but on a couple occasions, the house got damaged badly enough that we saw a space like this.” Abella tapped on a pipe with her finger. “It’s all beyond me, but I imagine this is where the house keeps… itself I guess. All folded up between the walls.”

“I see.” Mike touched a different pipe. He wondered if Naia’s spring moved through any of them.

“Not good for house.” Tink patted a random piece of wood that stuck out of the wall. “We find other side, then Tink fix right away.”

“You can fix this?”

“Mm-hmm. Tink patch up walls. Once both sides patched, tunnel close up like scab. No be inside when happen.”

“Or?”

Tink turned around to face him. She squeezed both hands together and blew a loud raspberry.

“Husband become jam.”

“Interesting.” He followed her in silence. Up ahead, a dim light filled the corridor, and someone had laid down a tattered red carpet. They moved into a large room that had been piled high with broken furniture and various trinkets along the walls. The room was lit by a singular lamp which had been tilted to cast its glow on an antique high-chair made of wood. Sitting in the chair was a creature about two feet tall, wringing its hands together like a nervous fly. It shifted forward into the light for a better look at them, a tiny gold crown on its head and a dirty robe draped across its shoulders. Long white hairs along its jaw made it look like it had a beard.

“Oh fuck.” Mike whispered.

“Who dares to enter the Rat King’s domain?” A shadow by the high-chair stepped into the light. This rat was not as big as the rat king, but still stood at just over a foot tall. It wore a dark pair of glasses that Mike was certain had been stolen off of a Mr. Potatohead toy. “You are trespassing in his kingdom!”

“No trespass!” Tink was pulling her hammer free, but Mike was able to grab her by her pigtails and pull her back before she could move any closer.

“My name is Mike. I am the new Caretaker of this home.” At the word caretaker, a muttering filled the room and he watched several rats appear from the shadows, their beady eyes shimmering while they inspected him. “Was it you who clogged up the doors of my home?”

“Where is Emily?” The Rat King spoke this time, his voice surprisingly deep. He had leaned farther forward, revealing a yard-stick with a green gemstone duct-taped to the top of it.

“My Great Aunt Emily has passed away. I am her heir.” The muttering this time was louder.

“Silence!” The Rat King commanded. “So the Destroyer is dead?”

“Uh… if you mean Emily, then yes.” Mike was startled when the whole room erupted into cheers, the rats around the room dancing in place with one another. The Rat King let them have their fun for several seconds before raising a hand in the air.

“This is truly a great day for we have lived in the shadows long enough.” He pointed his scepter at Mike. “In the spirit of good cheer, I give you one week, child of man, to conclude your business in my kingdom.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You have seven days to move out. After seven days, if you and your ilk have not vacated this property, then we will consider it a declaration of war.” The room was now silent, the rats all looking to Mike for his response.

“This… this is a joke, right? We don’t need a war. Actually, I have no problem with you being here, but you can’t be chewing holes in the wall or shitting in my doors. There’s plenty of room for everybody to-”

“Silence!” It was the Rat King’s speaker now, and he was holding a kitchen mallet. “His Majesty has been gracious enough to grant you this boon and you will honor him by accepting it.”

Mike felt the air behind him shift and looked back to see that Abella had unfolded her wings, her face becoming a mask of anger. All around the room, the rats began to move, waiting for Mike’s reaction. Where had these rodents come from and why were they suddenly so determined to take over his house?

“Cheese fucking Rat King go stick shiny rock up his ass!” Tink kicked a rat that had gotten too close to her, knocking it backward into a pile of wood. Rats nearby bared their teeth, letting out a collective hiss that had Mike gripping his dagger tightly.

“Now look-” he said, but the Rat King leaned to the right, his fingers closing on the end of a very long cord with a number 9 pool ball attached to the end. He gave the cord a yank, and the ground vibrated beneath them. He looked down and saw that the floor had a pair of thick seams just beneath his feet.

“You’ve gotta be-” was all he managed to say before the trap opened and all three of them tumbled into darkness.