

Getting A Head

Beth scowled at the water. She was sitting on the shore of the Labyrinth's circular river, watching it rush past. Her knees were pulled against her chest beneath a powder blue skirt, and she tossed another rock into the cold water. It disappeared with a small splash, and Asterion lifted his head from his position next to her to see what had happened.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes, but didn't look at the minotaur. "Yeah, it's fine." In truth, it wasn't. Ever since her return from the faerie realm, she had been playing the episode with the queen on repeat in her head. All she could think about was the giddiness that had overcome her, the rush of excitement that flooded her whole body and caused her to so quickly turn her back on Mike and the house. In the moment, she would have given her very soul to stay with the fae, and it bothered her to know that she had been out of control.

She hated being out of control.

"Are you sure?" Asterion asked, his voice a low rumble. She had come down to the Labyrinth to drop Quetzalli off so that Ratu could examine the enchantment on the dragon and try to break it. Beth's plan had been to take her mind off of the faerie queen incident by dallying with the minotaur. However, before they could even get started, all she could think of was the queen's mocking tone as the nobility pawed at her body. It had been like a cold shower on her libido, and she had ended up just cuddling with the minotaur by the river.

While Asterion was kind, he was a terrible conversationalist. She had explained what had happened, and he had spent several minutes in thought over it with absolutely nothing to add.

"Yeah, I'm good." She sighed. Mike refused to talk about it with her. He kept telling her it wasn't her fault, and when she had tried to explain her discomfort at being unable to control herself, he had just nodded and explained it would get better with time. It had been a couple of days since the incident, and now Mike was back with the centaurs over his head wound. Apparently his wound had gotten infected, so she was stuck with bringing the dragon down to the Labyrinth.

Quetzalli. There was another problem with no clear answer. For whatever reason, Quetzalli was now Beth's eternal shadow, and while the dragon meant no

harm, it was very much like babysitting an adult child capable of shorting out anything she touched.

Beth's phone had been the first victim. A curious peek, a loud zap, and the screen went dark forever. Her computer was spared, but Mike's was not, and while Tink was ordering what she needed to replace the electrical system, Quetzalli had pointed at the screen in wonder and a series of electrical arcs jumped from her fingers to the laptop, turning it into a paperweight.

After emitting a string of curses that sounded like an entire rap album in fast forward, Tink had dropped everything to make Quetzalli a horn cap. The shiny metal horn the dragon now wore twisted into place and had the appearance of a unicorn's horn, and she shocked everyone and everything far less frequently now. By then, it was bedtime, and she had crawled onto Beth's mattress and fallen asleep right away, leaving Beth to sleep on the couch in the living room.

That was where she discovered that Jenny and the fairies liked to stay up late and play tag in the dark. In the morning, she made sure to make a nice, big pot of coffee before Quetzalli could short that out, too. When the dragon had failed to show for breakfast, Beth went upstairs to discover that Quetzalli had opened all of her drawers and tried on most of her clothes. Even worse, her clothes now stuck to each other, which meant that she would need to run them through the laundry again with copious amounts of fabric softener.

What was going to be a sexual interlude to take her mind off of things was now just a picnic by the river, and Beth sighed when Olivia buzzed up, leaving a trail of sparkling lights behind her.

"They're all done!" The green fairy announced, and then shot off like a rocket, leaving a floating glitter trail behind her. The fairies seemed to have recovered nicely from their ordeal, and had more energy than ever before.

"Take me back," Beth said, and Asterion rose. Together, they rolled up the blanket, and she picked up the small basket of snacks to carry it back. It was still a fifteen minute walk back to Ratu's lair, and when they arrived, Ratu and Quetzalli were in the middle of an animated discussion at one of the tables.

"Oh!" Ratu saw them, and set down her tea. "You're back already, I figured you would be busy. Come, sit with us." A small feast had been laid out, and when Beth sat, she grabbed a few grapes off of a nearby plate. Asterion wandered off to put the blanket away and then stood guard at the edge of the table.

“So what did you learn?” Beth asked.

“Not much.” The naga sipped at her tea. “We actually wrapped up an hour ago but got to talking. Sorry about that, but I assumed you were enjoying your visit.”

“Mmhmm.” Not really, but there was no polite way to say it. “So is the spell reversible?”

“Fascinating thing about faerie magic. How do I put this?” Ratu set her chin on her hand for a couple of seconds in contemplation. “It’s one of the earliest kinds of magic, therefore making it the most powerful. Not much came before the fae, so we are talking about one of the first languages, in a way.”

“I think I follow, but that doesn’t tell me much.”

“Oh, I’m getting there. It’s interesting actually, because I just spent so much time studying Kisa only a couple of days ago. In her case, she has been changed on a cellular level that grants her properties similar to a cat. Her body no longer knows the difference between being a human or a cat, it just is what it is.”

“Okay?” Beth thought about Kisa. The cat girl had been scarce since her emergence the other day, and she knew nothing about her yet. There had simply been too much going on in the house to make any sort of real effort with the newcomer.

Quetzalli spoke up. “Humans and dragons are very different. Obviously, the queen was unable to convert me completely, meaning I am still part dragon. Dragons like me are a physical manifestation of magic that is just as old as the fae, which puts my biology on par with the enchantment I have been afflicted with.”

“Meaning?”

“The transformation is temporary.” Ratu set down her tea and moved to sit next to Quetzalli. “I’m sure you’ve already noticed the scale patterns on her body, yes?”

Beth nodded in interest. She had gotten a close peek at them a few times and had been fascinated by how they caught the light. The patches rested on top of Quetzalli’s skin and looked like pieces of scale-mail that had been glued to her.

“Without examining her innards, we already know that a small part of her body is still that of a dragon. The enchantment that transformed her is fighting to

keep her in this form, but over time, her cells will feast on that magic and enable her to revert to her previous form.”

“Wow, okay, so...any idea how long that will take?”

“I did some math.” Ratu held up a sheet of parchment that had been on the table in front of her. “Based on the limited data I have, I predict the spell will likely break itself in a few hundred years.”

“Years?!?” She looked to Quetzalli, and then back. “You’re talking centuries!”

“For creatures like us, a few centuries really isn’t that long,” Quetzalli said with a shrug. “Though inconvenient, I feel like it could be a great learning experience. I am already enjoying the many kinds of meals that Sofia makes, and am very interested in some of those clothes you had in your...dresser? Is that the right word?”

“Please stay out of my dresser.” Beth had no idea what clothes Quetzalli meant, but didn’t need a repeat of yesterday morning. “We can get you some clothes of your own.”

“Ah, an outing!” Quetzalli slammed her fist on the table in excitement. “Yes, I would love to see more of the human world.”

“No, that’s not what I...” Beth shook her head and held up her hands in defeat. “We’ll talk about shopping later. Seriously, is there anything we can do to speed up the process? She’ll still be a human long after I’m dead, and that just doesn’t seem fair.”

“If there’s a trick to reversing the enchantment, then I am unaware of it.” The naga picked up her tea cup and smiled. “Besides, it will be nice to have someone to talk to over the years.”

“Oh, well, since you two seem to enjoy each other’s company so much, maybe she should stay down here with you?”

“No.” Quetzalli shook her head. “I’m afraid I miss the sky over my head. Besides, Ratu has informed me that my power surges threaten the nature of her work down here.”

The naga smirked over her cup, and Beth threw her a dirty look.

“Indeed. Her electrical discharges have already caused a few issues with some of my experiments. It would be safer for all involved if she were to remain topside.”

You fucking liar. Beth was glad Ratu wasn't a mind reader. “Okay, well, thanks. So...are we done here?”

The naga nodded, and Beth and Quetzalli bid her farewell. Asterion led them to the shortcut out, and they were at the door that led into the house in just under twenty minutes.

Beth waved goodbye to Asterion, and then led Quetzalli into the house. Through the nearby back door, she could see Dana outside messing around with one of her drones again.

“Oh! The dead girl is flying her mechanical device again!” The dragon did a cute little hop in the hallway, the ends of her hair fluttering toward the nearby wall.

Beth stepped past her and opened the back door. “I bet she would love to talk to you about—”

Quetzalli was already out the door, holding up her skirt with one hand to avoid tripping over it. Dana cocked her head to see who was coming, and an almost imperceptible look of dread moved across her features when she saw who it was.

The door slammed behind Beth as she ran to the front of the house. She felt bad dumping Quetzalli on someone else, but needed a break. Spending the morning with Asterion was supposed to make her feel better, but now she just felt antsy.

At the base of the stairs, she paused briefly to look up. Was Mike back yet? She debated climbing the stairs to check, but decided against it. While she really wanted someone to talk to, there was too much weird tension between them right now, even if most of it was just in her head. She still needed to process some things internally before having a chat with him.

Through the open front windows of the house, she heard someone whistling a tune. When she looked outside, she saw Sulyvahn standing right next to the porch, his hands in the bushes. Curious, she stepped outside for a better look and saw that he was holding a pair of clippers and had a bucket nearby.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Hmm?” He looked up, and then back down at the roses. “The centaurs are lettin me tend these uns. Roses are simple enough, once you get the hang of them.”

“You’re...gardening?” It was odd seeing the dullahan hunched over the foliage, wearing his black leather outfit. It made her think of a goth teen being forced to trim his grandmother’s bushes, which made her smile.

“Aye. Not much opportunity for it before. There’s a reason everyone says to stop and smell them.” He snipped a rose free and held it up. “For yon maiden faire.”

“Thank you.” She took the rose and smelled it. The aroma was a subtle perfume that reminded her of the summer, and she felt some of the tension leave her shoulders. “You don’t strike me as someone who likes to garden.”

Sulyvahn grinned. “In a way, it isn’t much different from the job I had before. When ye look at a plant such as this, ye cull out the parts that are dying, or clip the buds to make room for more.”

“And that’s like...collecting souls?”

“Aye.” He knelt over a rose that had snapped and was supported from below by a few others. “The human soul is much like a flower. When ye pass, yer a creature of beauty and light. But if nobody comes to collect, ye spoil and rot.”

“Souls rot?”

“Hmm.” He stood and pondered her question for a bit. “Not in a traditional sense. The human soul is just a collection of memories and emotions, those that ye take with ye when you go. Over time, I suppose some of the memories become stronger than others. Fer some souls, this can mean being trapped, and when it’s time to move on, they refuse.”

“I guess that tracks with just about every paranormal documentary I’ve ever watched.” She smelled the rose again, then leaned against the railing. “Humans have a theory that ghosts who don’t move on can become wrapped up in their own anger.”

“Aye, that isn’t even the half of it.” He gestured toward the house. “That little doll you have inside is a proper example.”

“That’s Jenny. She’s mostly harmless.”

“Fer now.” He moved to the next bush and examined the branches. “You see, when yer dearly departed refuses to move on, they get stuck in a loop. They draw their energy from this world, very much like a lightning rod. Ye ever walk through a cold spot? Probably a spirit, takin just a bit of yer heat to keep themselves going.

“The angry ones, though, that’s a different matter. They feed on their own hatred fer the livin, and will take any opportunity to sap the energy of their own if it mean gettin ahead.”

“You mean, like, ghosts attacking ghosts?”

“Aye.” He pinched off the head of a stunted bulb. “Much like these flowers, if you leave the head to rot, the whole plant still tries to feed it. Imagine then if these blighted buds in my bucket fed off of each other until one became strong enough to attach itself back to the plant. Ye remove the dying buds so that the plant may live, after all, so why would you reattach the damn thing?”

“Well, you don’t.”

“Exactly. So these beings go traipsing around, trying their damndest to remain on the mortal coil, living a faux life, as it were.” He picked up his bucket. “Unseen by mortal eyes, they bleed away the life of the whole plant.”

“Is that why dullahans exist?”

He nodded with a huge smile. “Indeed. It’s my job to pinch the bud before it can become something more sinister. My sister’s job was similar, though she had a smaller clientele.”

“Smaller clientele...do you mean Cecilia?” Now this was news. “Cecilia is your sister?”

“As much as is possible for my kind. We are some of the early fae, created by the queen herself. She followed the rules of creation, and it was considered fashionable to mimic the new humans that were roaming about. One day, she reached into the heavens and commanded the light of the stars to create the banshee and the dullahan, or so we were told. We came in pairs, one man and one woman, and Cecilia was my twin. A woman to tend the home and a man to roam the fields, though I’ve heard that isn’t the case these days. We are a physical manifestation of midnight and mortality, so she gave us our fearsome appearance

to scare the living and the dead. It helps us with our jobs delivering souls to the other side. We keep them from lingering around and making trouble.”

“Oh, I see. So you’re a lot like Death.”

“What?” He tilted his head. “No, we’re very different. Death is the one who cuts the thread. I am simply the one who comes to collect.”

“I see. So you’re kind of like a failsafe then.”

“I guess so.” He lifted his bucket, looked inside, then back at Beth. “I promised the centaurs I would do the ones in the hedge maze as well. Walk with me, lass?”

Beth smiled, twirling a strand of her hair with her fingers. Something about the dullahan was igniting a spark inside her, and the thrill of the chase was just what she needed to take her mind off the faerie queen. Besides, the dullahan seemed eager to chat, and she wouldn’t mind a sympathetic ear right now.

“I’d love to,” she told him, then walked down the steps of the porch to join him.

Kisa watched from the window as Beth walked down and joined Sulyvahn on the path that led to the hedge maze. She yawned and rolled over on her back, frustrated that her sunbeam had moved.

The last couple of days had been nothing like she expected. Besides a few basic questions about where she may have come from, the others seemed content to let her have free roam of the house. She hadn’t explored much on the third floor. Those were bedrooms, and the weird door at the end of the hall was guarded by a small group of rats. Apparently the mechanism holding it shut was capable of killing you if you didn’t know the code, so she did her best to put it from her mind.

Yesterday she had explored the second floor. The room where she woke up was still empty. Mike had explained that they had ordered some furniture for that room and she was welcome to it if she wanted it. She had accepted, but all that was in there right now was Mike’s sleeping bag, which wasn’t that comfortable.

The other rooms on that floor were mostly for the rats, though she did find an interesting room that looked like a small library. The window overlooked an impossible mountain range, and she wondered what would happen if she climbed

out the window and just started walking. The thought was brief, though, because the air had been cold and the cliff was very steep. Apparently nobody had really thought about exploring that area, and without wings, she wouldn't get to either.

Today had been a perfect day to lounge downstairs. Tink was busy trying to fix the electrical panel again, and Mike was with the centaurs. With most of the floor to herself, she had gone into the office and found the door leading to her current location.

The room she was in now was full of Egyptian artifacts, and though she had been fascinated, a large sunbeam had been shining through the bay window at the front of the house, and she had curled up on the seats. Once the beam had faded, she woke from her nap to see Beth speaking with Sulyvahn.

She watched them for a few minutes, but she couldn't hear what they were talking about, so became bored very quickly. Looking around the room, she saw plenty of things to investigate. Rubbing her hands together in anticipation, she slid off the window seat and started looking around.

Kisa couldn't help herself. When she had come in before, her entire world had become about the sunbeam on the window seat, but now that she saw the contents of the room, curiosity had her digging through the contents of the shelves. There were many leather bound books, and way too many statues. She eventually spotted a device with a pair of lenses like binoculars attached to a stick with a double picture on the end. When she held it to her face, she found that when she relaxed her eyes, the image of the Sphinx would turn three-dimensional.

"Fascinating device, isn't it? It is called a stereoscope."

The voice was like a chill down her spine, and when she lowered the stereoscope, she found herself looking up at the grim visage of Death. His bare teeth were twisted into a queer grin, and he set down the picture he had been holding.

Kisa hissed and dropped the stereoscope, then backed into the shelves, knocking several books on the floor. The Grim Reaper frowned at her, his boy visage twisting macabrely, then picked up one of the books.

"You folded some of these pages," he told her, then tucked the book back in its place. "You should be more careful next time."

"You're...you're..."

“I am Death.” He tilted his head to one side, then crouched down until he was eye level with her. “Have we met before?”

“Hell, no, we haven’t!” She started to climb the shelves, panic overriding her senses. Part of her was embarrassed to be acting this way, but the flight or fight response had made its choice.

“Are you sure? Hmm.” He picked up the stereoscope she had dropped and held it to his eye sockets. “Ah, the Sphinx! I could tell you an interesting story about what’s inside if you’re interested.”

“Aren’t...aren’t you here to kill me?”

“Preposterous.” Death lowered the stereoscope. “I am Mike Radley’s guest. and am only here until I can reap the soul of the one called Amir.”

“That’s...you’re...” Her hair stood on end, and she tried to flatten it. Her tail had poofed to three times its original size, and she grabbed it at the base and smoothed it out. “Nobody told me that the Grim Reaper lived here.”

“Not everyone can see me, so they may have forgotten. Hmm.” He inspected her for a few seconds. “That’s odd. Your soul is both human and animal at the same time. That must be why you can see me.”

“Wait, so...the others can’t see you?”

“No. Yuki can see me because she summoned me. Mike Radley and I met once when he was younger, and he also has Fae magic in his blood, so he can see me. Oh, and the zombie can see me too, but I cannot see her. That is quite the mystery.”

Kisa shivered, then straightened the hair on her tail again. “What were you saying about my soul?”

“It’s a mixture. Human and cat. Animals can see me, especially the smarter ones.” He flattened the front of his robes. “I prefer dogs. They will wag their tails, and don’t stare at me quite like cats do. I find it unsettling.”

“You...you’re Death. Why would you find anything like that unsettling?”

Death’s left eye socket twitched. “Because, young kitty, it is very rude to stare.”

“I have a name, you know.”

“And I have yet to hear it.” Death held up the stereoscope again, then adjusted the picture in it.

“You can call me Kisa, I guess.”

“You are uncertain of your name?”

She shook her head. “It isn’t that. It’s just weird to be talking to a skeleton.”

“And yet I have no problem speaking with a cat.” Death lowered the stereoscope from his face and then held it out. “Well, young Kisa, would you like a turn with it?”

“Um...I guess.” She took the stereoscope back and looked at the Sphinx again. The picture seemed like it was taken at the turn of the century, and she lowered it from her face. Amnesia was a weird creature, sometimes. She clearly knew what the Sphinx was, but had no idea what month she was even born in.

“Here. You can change the picture if you want.” He handed over another photograph, and she took it from him. It was easy to remove the Sphinx and slot another picture inside, and when she looked, it was an image of explorers in a burial tomb. The men were surrounded by native Egyptians, and all of them stood around a large sarcophagus on the floor.

“So where did these pictures come from?” she asked.

“I am unaware,” Death replied. “There are photo albums, but I am not certain who owned them.” He picked up one of the closest albums and handed it over. “I am currently unable to read, so you may have more luck than I do?”

“Death can’t read?” She set down the stereoscope and took the book from him to examine it.

“It has never been necessary.” Death picked up the stereoscope and held it to his sockets. “I like looking at these because I remember quite a bit about the Egyptians. Normally when someone dies, it is a short process. But something about their rituals enabled me to see a bit more, and stay a bit longer. I always appreciated the work they put into preparing themselves to be taken to the other side.”

“And what’s on the other side?” Kisa opened the book. It was more pictures of Egypt, but other than some inscriptions with dates and locations, there was nothing that identified who had made it. The pictures were often of people and locations, but rarely did she see the same person more than once.

“I could tell you,” Death replied. “But then I would have to reap you.”

She lowered the book. “Seriously?”

“No. I was making a joke.” He looked over the top of the stereoscope at her. “Perhaps my humor is too dry?”

“Ugh.” She set the book down and grabbed another photo album. When she opened it, something fell into her lap.

It was another stereoscope image, but this one felt different. There was golden ink along the edges, and someone had drawn odd symbols on the back. It was in color and looked more recent than the other pictures. The picture was of another expedition party, and they were all saluting the cameraman with small glasses of wine.

“Hey, can I borrow that thing?” Kisa asked.

“Yes. I believe it is your turn.” Death handed her the stereoscope, then turned his attention to the window.

She slid the new photograph into the stereoscope and then looked through the lenses. The three dimensional effect was immediate, and she looked at the group of men who were clearly celebrating in front of a wall that had been torn down. Inside, torches illuminated what appeared to be a large sarcophagus in the middle of the room. Treasure was piled along the sides of the room, and hieroglyphs were painted on every available surface.

Like magic, the torches appeared to flicker in place. Kisa held her breath as the shadows on the picture moved in time with the torches, and then the image moved in slow motion. It sped up gradually, and the silent revelers toasted each other and waved, then beckoned for the cameraman to come join them.

A woman stepped in front of the camera. She had long, blonde curls that poked out beneath her explorer’s helmet, and she took one of the offered glasses and then turned toward the camera and gave a mock salute with the drink before slamming half of it. The men in the room were enamored with her, and they practically scrambled over each other to interact with her. There was no sound, so Kisa had no idea what was being said, but when the blonde looked directly into the camera, a long, low growl came from Kisa’s throat.

“Are you okay?” Death asked.

“No,” she replied, anger blooming deep in her gut. She knew this woman, but didn’t know her name. She ripped the photograph out of the stereoscope and handed it to Death. “Do you know who this is?”

“Hmm?” He took the picture from her. “I am familiar with all of these men, actually. They died quite some time ago.”

“Not them. Her.” She stood on her tiptoes to point to the woman, but the picture had reverted to its original state. “Wait, where did she go?”

“I don’t see anybody—oh! Oh ho ho!” Death practically dropped the stereoscope and rushed to the window. He pressed his long, bony fingers to the glass and tapped them in excitement.

“What are you talking about?” She followed his gaze and froze in shock at what she saw happening in the front yard.

Beth followed Sulyvahn away from the house and into the hedge maze. The aroma of flowers filled the air, and a small cluster of bees buzzed through the northeastern quadrant, their bodies laden with thick pollen.

“I’m surprised to see the bees are still around,” Beth said. Outside of the property line, the weather in the neighborhood was chilly, and she wondered where the bees had come from.

“Oh, these belong to the centaurs. They lured in a queen shortly after moving here and now have a hive that they are cultivating.” Sulyvahn told her.

“Where is the hive at?”

“With them. Here.” He knelt down and pointed to a small wooden box hidden in the bushes. It was roughly the size of a deck of cards and had a pair of tiny holes in it. “The rats helped. Chewed a tiny little hole in the back. The bees are in the greenhouse and can come here for pollen.”

“Ingenious. I don’t know that I would have thought to do that.”

“Their chief is wicked smart, and a right beauty.” He stood and picked up his bucket. “They mean to make a go at establishing their tribe in the greenhouse. She wanted pollinators working full time for them on account of the food they want to make. They’re already planting flowers on their side, and are hoping to

harvest seeds from these. Someone they have o'er there has plans to make hybrids of the lot."

"Interesting." She couldn't help but notice the small smile in the corner of his mouth. "You sure seem to know alot about this stuff."

"I haven't had anyone to talk to, really. Ye and yer lot have been locked away, but the centaurs are friendly enough. I've learned a lot from them." He led her further into the maze and stopped at a large rose bush that was attempting to take over a small shrub.

"Yeah, sorry about that. Mike really didn't trust you."

"He had no reason to. We'd only just met." Sulyvahn snipped away at the thicker vines that were attempting to strangle out the shrub.

"Even so...I'm sorry."

He smiled again, the skin around his eyes crinkling.

"So how did you get picked for this job?" she asked. "I mean, was it because you're Cecilia's brother?"

"In a way." He paused what he was doing and looked into her eyes. "Ye see, there's a special bond between a dullahan and his banshee. Unintended consequence of using wild magic and all that. I've heard rumors that mortal twins experience it, being able to feel one another across a distance. Sometimes I can feel what my sister feels, in regards to her emotions."

"Can you feel her now?" Beth asked.

He frowned. "It's hard. She's in the realm right now, so I only get glimpses. Mainly I feel loneliness, but she's accustomed to it. She spent many years in this place in such a manner, just waiting for each Caretaker to pass."

"She was lonely here?"

He nodded. "Banshees are accustomed to loneliness, as are dullahan. We aren't exactly harbingers of happiness, are we? She was a constant reminder that mortality comes for us all, and was largely ignored other than the occasional visit."

"But something changed with this last fellow. Something he said or did captured her attention right away, and I could tell right away that he was special to her."

“Is that why you came? To find out more about Mike?”

Sulyvahn clipped a couple more vines off and tossed them into his bucket. “Kind of. You see, the fae and the human realm aren’t quite on the good terms they used to be. On top o’ the old ways being lost, there has been no shortage of disrespect. Our worlds overlap, you see, and the things that people do end up affecting our queen’s borders.”

Beth frowned. It was a familiar tale in so many books and movies, and it made sense that it had some basis in truth. “Pollution, right?”

The dullahan chuckled. “If only that were the half of it. Yer garbage and yer poison are bad enough on the land itself, but it’s what’s happening to the fair folk themselves that is cause for concern. Ye see, we’ve always had a dependency on peace with yer kind, and with access to yer people so limited now, it requires more effort to travel into yer world than ever before.”

“I don’t follow.”

“I’m a gettin there, lass. Ye see, the fair folk are leaving the realm and coming to the human world, but they aren’t coming back. Yer world is all that glitters for them, but not all that glitters is gold. A creature as simple as a pixie can easily get caught up in the excitement of the wonders yer kind have made, in the flickering screens and lights. But the longer they are away from the realm, the weaker they become, until they wither away in yer world and become twisted into something else in order to survive, hateful things that yearn to destroy the humans for what they have wrought.”

“What do they become?”

Sulyvahn snorted. “Nobody knows. There are rumors, though.”

“Such as?”

“For the fae to survive, they must find sustenance. There have been rumors that some have snuck into people’s dreams, giving them frightful waking nightmares. Some of the darker fae have found a way to live in the minds of others, speaking to their darker impulses. And I even heard stories of some fae who found a way to live inside yer wires and tubes to become trolls of a different kind, feasting on animosity and rage.”

“I see.” She thought on the dullahan’s words, the gears of her mind turning. It didn’t take much imagination to wonder about the implications of Sulyvahn’s

words. How many ills in the world could be attributed to the fae who subsisted on such chaos? “So the fae who became trapped are poisoning society?”

“Indeed. Strangle the beast, and the body dies.” He ripped away the last set of vines from the bush and coiled them up in the bucket. “With mankind gone, the fae would be allowed to flourish once again as the land recovers.”

“Is someone leading them?” The idea of a shadow organization consisting of fae sent chills up and down her spine.

He shook his head. “It’s all about instincts, lass. The fae are creatures of impulse. If someone were leading them, yer lot would have died off years ago. As it is, both realms are slowly dying, and it’s just a matter of seeing who’s end comes first.”

“That’s terrible. So we’re killing each other and the rest of the world doesn’t even know?”

“Aye.” He tossed the clippers in the bucket. “Tis sad, but that’s the way of it. But it’s been that way for awhile now.”

“I don’t understand, though. Why not reveal themselves to the world, then? If we need each other, it wouldn’t be that hard to announce their existence, right?”

Sulyvahn turned his dark gaze on Beth and held it for several seconds. He let out a huge sigh, and held a hand out to her.

When she took it, he led her to the center of the maze. Silently, she followed, wondering what was going on. They eventually stood before the sundial itself, and Sulyvahn grabbed her by the waist and lifted her effortlessly onto the stone structure.

“What are you—” she began, but he put a finger to her lips.

“There’s powerful magic about this place, lass, and I suspect that anyone listening in would struggle to hear my words through all the static. Especially here.” His tone was low, almost inaudible. “Banshee and dullahan can walk yer world without repercussions, as it was our purpose. Years ago, an attempt was made to reveal our presence to the mortal realm, and it backfired tremendously. Ye see, the human world thought talk of the fae was naught but mumbo jumbo, and the few human allies we had were ridiculed and mocked.”

“This is the day and age of information, Sulyvahn. A quick video of the queen could become viral in minutes.”

“I don’t fully understand what you mean, but I’m willing to bet any proof would be discounted. Like I was saying, my kind were built to live here. It was believed that the higher fae could travel yer world and find a solution, and there was no higher being than the queen.” He looked away from her for a second. “Or her counterpart.”

“You mean the ki—” she was silenced again by a finger on her lips. Her mind immediately went to the image of the blasted throne in the queen’s court.

“Hypothetically,” he began, “imagine a being of immense power coming to your world to study it and discover what can be done. A being of immense beauty, ready to change the world fer the better.”

“I’m listening.”

“What would such a being have to do?”

She thought on the question. “I suppose they would have to find a way to get everybody’s attention first.”

“Aye.”

“A being of immense beauty and power would probably seek fame.” It made sense to her when she said it. It was no different than amassing followers on social media. “Once they had fame, they could reveal themselves and spread their message.”

The dullahan nodded, his features neutral.

“But something happened, didn’t it?” She thought again of the blasted throne. “And I’m guessing it wasn’t an accident. This person would make a major screw up while over here.”

Sulyvahn remained silent, then spoke softly. “Aye.”

The trappings of fame were well known to many. Such a poisoned treasure was still one that millions would possess if they could. So many names and faces ran through her mind, and she couldn’t help but wonder which of them fit the bill. “I wonder if this person maybe got caught up in their own fame? Like, maybe the message kept getting delayed?”

“Perhaps.” The dullahan seemed nervous, and he kept looking around as if he wasn’t paying much attention to her.

She thought about the queen and how she had treated Mike. Even though Beth hadn’t been in her right mind, she could still remember pieces of their conversation. The queen had been enraged that Mike and Cecilia had become intimate, and now she wondered if the king had come to the mortal realm and fallen in love with all that glittered.

However, based on Sulyvahn’s behavior, it was likely that she couldn’t directly ask him. But there were other ways to glean that information. “Were you worried when Cecilia fell in love with Mike?”

He nodded, a look of uncertainty on his face. “That’s an interesting question, lass.”

“Fae who fall in love with mortals don’t have happy endings, do they?”

This time, the dullahan shook his head. “Not historically, no. Read up on yer legends, lass, and ye’ll discover that it ends badly for both.”

“Is that why the queen sent you here? Because she thought you would hate Mike for what he did?”

He smirked and looked away from her, his eyes on a pair of centaurs who had entered the maze. “Some would say that I should hate the mortal that could steal my sister’s heart. It would make sense to send a spiteful fae, would it not?”

“But that isn’t how you felt?”

“All I know is that she was happy here. And maybe a place that could make her feel that way would be worth protecting while she was gone.” He chuckled, then flicked a piece of dirt off the sundial. “The two of us haven’t spoken in decades. She was actually on her way to say hello to me when she was captured.”

“You must have been very angry.”

“Indeed. Some would say that I was angry that my sister had been defiled by a mortal, but...I felt her heart break through our bond, and the moment her cage was locked, I...” He looked away from her, then cleared his throat. “Sorry, lass. I forgot what I was saying.”

She placed a hand on his cheek. His skin was smooth and cold, just like marble. His eyes widened a little in surprise, and she slid her hand upwards and ran it through his long hair. It was surprisingly soft to the touch.

“You don’t suppose you came here because you were lonely too, do you? Maybe you were hoping to find just a little of what your sister did? A place to call home, and maybe even a family?”

He opened his mouth, but no words came out. Instead, he just gazed into her eyes for several moments, then turned his attention to her hand. He put his hand over hers and closed his eyes, then pressed against her.

“Ye feel warm,” he told her, his voice barely above a whisper. “Dullahan don’t get cold, but we never feel warm either. Not unless we’re touching someone.”

“When was the last time you felt warm, Suly?”

He laughed, but his eyes stayed closed. “I haven’t the foggiest idea.”

Her heart pounded loudly in her chest as she lifted her legs and put them on his hips. Using her free hand to brace herself on the sundial, she pulled him closer. When his thighs met the dial, she scooted forward the last couple of inches until her face was inches from his own.

“Even humans get lonely. But we have many ways to cope,” she told him, then placed her hands around his waist. His musculature was easy to feel beneath the leather of his outfit. He had the body of a warrior, but she felt like he had the mind of something more. Maybe a poet, or a dreamer. These were things for her to ponder later, as she felt that longing void open up inside of her. This was new, and exciting, and she didn’t have a clue what was going to happen next.

But she knew exactly what she wanted.

He grunted in surprise when her lips touched his. Like the rest of him, they were cold and unyielding. It was just a light peck at first, an exploration of intimacy, and when she looked into his eyes afterward, the dullahan was speechless.

“Lass, I...” he touched his lips with a gloved hand. “I dinna what to say.”

She kissed him again, this time parting her lips to run her tongue briskly over his. He made another sound of surprise, his mouth opening, and she ran her tongue along his upper lip. He tasted like black licorice, and when she inhaled, the

cold rush of air was enough to briefly paralyze her lungs, a sensation reminiscent of a cold, winter's morning.

When she shivered, Sulyvahn backed away.

"I'm sorry, lass, it's not somethin I control, and—"

She kissed him again, and ran one hand up his back and then through his hair. Heat was being sucked from her body, but she didn't mind in the slightest. The rush of having such a being between her arms was more than enough heat to keep her warm.

While tense at first, he melted into her. His hesitant hands touched her waist, then moved along her back until one hand rested just above her buttocks and the other was in the middle of her back.

When she broke the kiss this time, she exhaled a small cloud of fog and grinned at him. "Feeling warm?"

"Aye," he whispered. "But I could be warmer."

This time, he pressed into her. She ran a hand along the smooth, supple leather that he wore, impressed at how much of Sulyvahn's musculature that she could feel beneath it. There were several silver buckles that held the outfit together, and she fumbled with one, trying to undo it.

He broke the kiss. "Yer movin fast, lass."

"Some of us don't live for centuries," she told him, then pulled the buckle apart to reveal skin like marble underneath. Her hand just barely fit between him and the leather, and she undid another buckle and lifted the leather away to reveal his neck and shoulder.

"Ye only get one more," he warned her.

"One more what?"

"Buckle." He fingered one that she hadn't undone yet. "The leather is a part of me, but it needs adjusting sometimes. 'Specially if it gets wet."

"Oh, so what happens after three?"

He grinned, but didn't answer. This time, he explored her neck with his lips, and she undid a third buckle, allowing her to push his leather jacket down and reveal the white skin of both shoulders. The thin line along his neck where his head came off occasionally sputtered out dark smoke depending on how he bent

his neck. Stunned, she pressed on the seam, her eyes wide when the smoke curled around her finger like a snake before disappearing.

“Ye like that?” he asked.

“Very much,” she replied. “How do you keep it from falling off?”

“Willpower.” He smirked, then tilted his head to one side. The skin separated, and another blast of dark smoke filled the air and then dissipated when he put his head back. “Can’t have it falling off when I’m on horseback.”

“Where is your horse?” she asked.

“Trade secret, lass.” He winked at her. “Gotta have something to talk about next time, now don’t we?”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

“I’m done talking for now,” he said, then ran his cold hands up her legs, lifting her skirt in the process. “Ye see, I’m familiar with what’s about to happen, but not first hand. So I wouldn’t mind being a very good listener, if ye catch my drift.”

A wide grin broke over her face. “I love a man who knows how to pay attention. For now, why don’t you just follow along as best you can, and I’ll correct you if I need to.”

He nodded, his strong hands moving along her upper thighs now. Occasionally his fingertips would brush against the edge of her panties, each touch sending a rush of butterflies through her gut. When they kissed again, he leaned forward, causing his fingertips to slide up beneath the elastic band along her inner thigh, and a rush of heat to her pelvis triggered a flood of lubrication.

With trembling hands, she unbuckled one of the straps near his crotch. As she pulled the strap free, the first buckle she had undone strapped itself back into place, cinching down. There was another buckle nearby that, once unstrapped, allowed her to pull down the front of his pants.

His crotch was hairless, and when she tugged his pants a bit further, his cock appeared. It was currently at half-mast, and when she gave it an exploratory tug, Sulyvahn let out a groan of delight.

“That’s a new feeling, lass,” he whispered.

“Then you’re gonna love what happens next,” she told him, and slid her other hand down his pants to play with his scrotum. However, she was surprised to discover that the dullahan had no testicles at all, just a bare patch of smooth skin.

“Right. Dinna need those to hunt ghosts,” he explained.

“You don’t technically need this either,” she said, then stroked his cock.

“I do, actually. The queen made us to look like men and women, and those were kind of important. Last I checked, my sister didn’t need a vagina to escort spirits, and I’m fairly certain that’s half the reason she’s in her current mess.”

Beth chuckled. “Okay, that’s fair.” She continued to stroke him and was surprised at how stiff his cock became in her hand. It grew harder by the second, and she could feel it leeching the heat from her palms as she stroked it even harder. Hard ridges pressed against her fingers, and she let go of his cock to see what had happened.

As his erection grew, hard lumps had formed along the sides of his cock. A sly smile spread over her face at the odd shape to it, and she was suddenly aware of how hard her heart was pounding. Her throbbing pulse was centered in the middle of her snatch, and she lifted her legs up and did a little hop on her butt to get her panties off. The cold stone of the dial startled her, and she fell forward into the dullahan, causing him to lose his balance.

They fell to the ground, and Beth pushed him on his back, her hand stroking his bony cock. The weird ridges along the top and bottom reminded her of a human spine, and Sulyvahn was making little moans of contentment.

“I’ve heard it called a boner before, but this is taking it too far,” she told him, then rolled her thumb over the hard tip of his cock.

“Oh, I can actually explain that,” he said. “Ye see, the queen has a sense of humor about these things. I also think it was meant to scare the women folk, but apparently you are made of sturdier material.”

You have no idea, Suly. She stroked him a few more times and then positioned herself over his cock. When that first inch of him slid inside of her, a chill ran up her spine and she let out a yelp of surprise.

“Then again, maybe you’re not as sturdy as I—” Sulyvahn’s eyes went wide as Beth scowled at him and sank the rest of the way down. Each bony ridge

parted her folds only to vanish inside her, and though they were bathed in sunlight, she now felt like she was in a walk-in freezer.

She held still for a moment, allowing her vagina to adapt. It was a different sensation than the dildos she had, and certainly very different from sex with Asterion. The minotaur's penis was huge and warm, but also spongy enough to fit inside her. Sulyvahn's cock was hard and unyielding, much more like a glass dildo.

Sulyvahn remained quiet other than a few grunts, and Beth was finally able to move. It was slow at first, but she was soon rolling her hips to feel the head of his cock press against her g-spot. The unyielding nature of his shaft meant it hit exactly what she wanted it to, so she focused on small movements, letting the ridges do their work along her vaginal walls.

She tensed up as an icy chill ran up her back, and small convulsions ran along her thighs. It wasn't quite an orgasm, but it had felt similar to the start of one.

"Ye okay, lass?"

"Shh." She placed her hand over his mouth and grunted, pushing her hips back which caused his cock to push against her g-spot once more. The same thing happened again, and she cried out when her legs trembled afterward.

She couldn't be sure what was happening, but there was now a pulsing sensation of cold spreading through her entire pelvis. Her pussy was now soaking wet, allowing the ridges of his cock to slide out of her effortlessly.

"Son of a...fuck!" Another set of tremors shook her again, and she leaned forward, gasping for air. Her own orgasm was building, but she was having trouble making it through the weird tremors.

She fucked him like this for several minutes, crying out in frustration. Somehow, she was essentially edging herself, and it was clear that Sulyvahn had no ideas how to further contribute. He had grabbed her hips and was holding her close, but he did little more than let out little gasps and moans of his own.

Trying a different position, she sat up straight, her hands on his belly for balance. Moving her hips from side to side eased the pressure a bit, but the weird blasts of cold were definitely coming from Sulyvahn. His cock was an icy rod inside of her, but the chill didn't hurt at all.

She rode him this way for a few minutes, her attention focused on his mouth as he gasped in pleasure. Every time he opened his mouth, she could see that long tongue of his, and how wide his lips were.

Beth cackled, and Sulyvahn lifted his head to look at her.

“What are ye—” his mouth opened in shock as Beth leaned forward and pulled his head right off. Inky smoke poured from his neck, creating the appearance of a black fog on the ground. He cocked one eyebrow in curiosity at her. “This isn’t what I expected.”

“Stop talking and start licking.” She leaned back, causing her clit to pop out of her swollen labia, and then shoved Sulyvahn’s head in place. He took orders well, and ran his tongue all around her swollen sex.

His body, however, continued thrusting into her. The sensation of being eaten out while she was fucked was new, and despite Sulyvahn’s inexperience, the sensation was enough to overload her senses.

“Oh, mmm, oh fu...oh fu...fuck!” This time, when the tremors came, her whole body tensed up and Sulyvahn eagerly lapped at her clit. His wide mouth allowed him to inhale her and form a seal, his tongue rolling all over her. Her left eye started to spasm, and she bounced up and down on his cock as fast as she could, planting one arm on the ground behind her to steady her movements.

She screamed when she came, letting out a low pitched shriek. To her side, the leaves rustled and one of the centaurs appeared, a look of concern on his face that quickly turned to embarrassment.

“Pardon me,” he muttered, then ran off. The heat of embarrassment from being caught mingled with the chill that ran through her lower body, and she fell backward, her eyes now on the sky.

Movement on the roof caught her attention, and she saw Abella duck out of sight. She should have known better than to start something with Sulyvahn in the front yard of all places, but it was too late now.

“We’ve got a bit of an audience, don’t we?” Sulyvahn asked from between her legs.

“Looks like it.” She really hoped Mike hadn’t come back yet from the centaurs. It was a stupid thought, but for some reason, she didn’t want him to catch her in such a position.

“Well, if everybody else gets to see me fuck you, then I should get to see it, too.”

“You...you’re watching it right now.”

“Stand up,” he told her, his voice suddenly hard. She shrugged and obeyed, though struggled with how numb her legs felt. Wobbling a bit, she made it to her feet, her hands wrapped around Sulyvahn’s head.

“Put me on the sundial, facing you,” he told her, so she turned to obey. Just as his head was settled on the cold stone, rough hands grabbed her from behind. She looked over her shoulder to see that Sulyvahn’s body had grabbed onto her ass.

She screamed in pleasure when he penetrated her, and grabbed onto the sundial for balance. Sulyvahn’s body fucked her from behind while his head leered at her from its position on the dial.

“That’s a good lass,” he told her, then licked his lips. “Yer cunt feels so tight after you came.”

She moaned, then stared into his dark eyes. His face was twitching now as waves of pleasure rolled over him.

“Can you...feel me like...that?” she gasped between thrusts.

“I’m about to...do more than...” his eyes went wide, and then he closed them tightly and let out a howl that raised the hair on the back of her neck. Behind her, his entire body went rigid, and a cold surge washed through her hips. Suddenly cold, her teeth chattered as she braced herself against the dial.

His body thrust into her two more times, and then relaxed. She groaned when he pulled out of her, each ridge stretching her out, and when he was finally outside of her, inky black smoke leaked out of her body, vanishing before it could hit the ground.

“Is that your cum?” she asked him, then ran a finger along her snatch. When she brought it back, an inky fluid on her finger turned to smoke before her eyes.

He sighed and then cocked an eyebrow at her. “Reckon it is, lass. Never seen it before, but might as well be the same stuff the rest o me is made of.”

When his body came to retrieve his head, it stumbled just a bit before grabbing a handful of his hair. He shoved his head back into place and the world's biggest grin crossed his face.

"My legs feel all funny," he told her, then picked up her panties and handed them over. "Like I've been riding all day."

"How do you feel on the inside, though?" she asked.

He looked at her, and then up at the house. The smile on his face made him look warm in spite of his stark appearance.

"Don't know that it's a feeling I can put into words. But maybe not so lonely. Definitely not as lonely."

"I'm glad." She slipped her panties back on and then ran her hands over the buckles of his leather outfit before pulling him for one more kiss. She could taste herself on his lips, and found herself smiling.

She had been right. A walk with Sulyvahn had made her feel much better and been the perfect distraction from her thoughts. She hooked her arm through his and pulled him away from the sundial and into the maze.

"If you have some more time, I was wondering if I could talk to you a bit about what happened. Over there," she said. "I'm...struggling with what the queen did to me."

Sulyvahn smiled. "I know that feeling. For you, lass, I'll make the time."

Kisa couldn't believe her eyes, but had also been unable to look away. Had she really just watched Beth have sex with a headless horseman on the front lawn? It had been an odd sight, seeing the headless horseman drill her from behind, but Kisa had been unable to take her eyes away from it.

"I have so many questions," Death loudly announced, then looked at Kisa, his bony face frantic. "Do you suppose you could help answer them?"

"Ew, no!" She moved away from the Grim Reaper, but got caught up in the curtains of the window.

"Oh, please! Beth cannot see me, so I cannot ask her directly." Death was practically hopping from foot to foot in excitement. "Maybe you could ask her for me? Just one? I want to know if what they were doing just now was considered

making love or boning. I've heard both terms mentioned on the gargoyle's tablet, and I cannot be certain which is appropriate in this case."

"That's not...I...no, you can't ask people about their sex lives!" She hopped down off the window seat and crossed her arms. Her tail swished back and forth, and she tried to make it hold still, but that part of her didn't listen. "That's very rude."

"It is?" Death wrapped his fingers around his chin. "If it's rude to ask, then why do they insist on doing it in front of me? I have seen many pairings since coming here."

"You're watching people have sex?" She hopped onto a nearby table so that she was eye level with Death. "You're not supposed to do that."

Death shrugged. "I wish to know more about how and why humans copulate. Ever since I saw Mike Radley do it with the demon up close, I feel it is worth understanding properly."

"Mike fucked a demon?"

Death nodded. "It was a fascinating encounter, way better than sitting around and looking at maps."

She couldn't believe it. The Grim Reaper was a peeping tom. "That's so wrong. If you see people having sex, you're supposed to give them privacy."

"If that is true, then why did you keep watching?"

"Uh..." Kisa had no answer, and she scowled. Being honest with herself, she had been unable to contain her curiosity. At first, that had been enough. But as the act continued, she had felt something more, a longing deep inside. Her own desires were being stirred, and by the time Beth had climaxed, she had felt a certain level of jealousy for the woman.

She would rather die in a fire than tell this to Death, so she lied. "I wanted to be sure that it was a consensual encounter. That's all."

"Hmm, I see. So it's okay to watch as long as you are uncertain about consent. And we cannot be certain until we ask them afterward."

"No, that's not—"

"I will go ask the dullahan if he granted consent, and you can ask Beth. If they both consented, then we shouldn't have watched."

“That’s not how this—”

“I should probably offer him some tea. I imagine he is very dehydrated. Do you think he is hungry? It looked like he was eating her vagina, but I can’t be sure how much nutrition...it is considered very rude to laugh at someone when they are speaking to you.”

Kisa had exploded in laughter. The whole argument with Death had been absurd, and she had finally lost control at the mention of Beth being eaten out. She laughed even harder when he scowled at her and swept his robes in tight, then crossed the room toward the door.

He stopped at the exit and turned to face her, fire blazing in his eye sockets. “This is why I prefer dogs. I would rather you had simply stared at me.” He slammed the door when he left, causing a nearby death mask to fall off the wall and bounce across the floor.

She fell off the table and onto a nearby couch, and laughed until tears filled her eyes.