

Echoes

The swing on the front porch creaked softly beneath Cecilia's weight as she swung her legs to move it. Out in the yard, she could see the souls of the fae as they woke to greet the sun that rose over the top of the house. In the middle of the hedgemaze, a particularly grumpy gnome grumbled as he collected dew from a cluster of flowers to make his morning tea.

Cecilia didn't see all these things in the visible spectrum. For the most part, she only saw the souls of the living in a void of white light. However, she did see the vague outlines of objects as if they had been drawn on a blank canvas in faint pencil lines. She often wondered about the little details she couldn't see, like the veins on a leaf or the color red. Her brother had explained that red was similar to the color a soul possessed while angry, but these were things she wanted to see for herself.

She twirled her hair around one finger. It was a nervous habit she had picked up in the last year, courtesy of the tiny piece of Mike's soul that had blossomed deep inside her being. The banshee was changing, albeit at a slow rate. She had dreams now, filled with bright colors she imagined filled the mortal realm. The banshee also got bored on occasion, which was such a novel experience that it chased itself away.

If she was lucky, maybe she could see the world as Mike did. He had gained the ability to see the things she could see, so her fingers were crossed that something similar would happen to her.

The door of the home clicked open and Death walked outside. She saw him exactly as the mortals did, a hooded figure with a skeletal frame. He waved an unknown item in her direction and moved to sit by her on the swing.

"I have brought you today's Wordle," he said, holding the unseen object between his fingers. "And we have run afoul of a word that does not contain any of the letters in my name."

Cecilia smiled at Death, then tilted her head toward his hands. "You should try the other vowels, then," she said. "We can figure it out if we put our heads together."

“Hmm.” Death stared at his cellphone, the flames in his eyes burning bright enough that Cecilia could see them through his skull. “Do you know a word with IOU in it?”

Cecilia gazed across the yard, letting her mind drift. Some time ago, Death had discovered that Cecilia was experiencing bouts of boredom and had made it his mission to check in with her once a day while he was home. It was always some type of word game they could do together. They had tried crossword puzzles, but their knowledge of trivia had been abysmal.

“Pious,” she whispered. That was a word she was intimately familiar with.

“Um...” Death tapped at his screen. “Oh! The O is where it needs to be, but the other letters are bad.” The Grim Reaper tapped at his screen some more.

“You’re not cheating are you?”

“I prefer to think of it as educating myself,” muttered Death. “But indeed, you have caught me.”

“Are you in a hurry?” she asked.

“Not really. I’m...distracted.” Death looked back at the house. “It is in regards to Mike Radley. He had a rather troublesome meeting with Santa. I can tell something is bothering him.”

Cecilia nodded, her hair floating around her as if she was underwater. She had seen the turmoil in Mike’s soul; Sofia’s as well. However, she got the feeling that the issues were separate and hadn’t had a good opportunity to ask what was going on.

“Have you tried asking if he wants to talk about it?” she said.

“Not really. I guess it’s better to say that I know what’s bothering him, but don’t know how I can help.” Death stared out across the garden. “Starting a conversation about it feels meaningless. I guess you could say I have the same problem he does. I feel helpless. It is hard to inspire hope when you have none to give.”

“It’s about Tink.” Cecilia smiled sadly. The goblin’s soul sparkled brightly, but the banshee could tell that it had become loose in her body. People often thought of dying as a process for just the body, but that wasn’t entirely true. The souls of the elderly longed to fly free and reunite with those they loved. It was the primary

reason that mean, nasty people tended to outlive their contemporaries. Their souls had nothing to look forward to and clung to their angry, bitter shells as long as possible.

“Tinker Radley may pass upon giving birth. Her existence had brought me great joy, and I cannot ponder days without her.” Death set his phone down and pulled a tea cup from an inner pocket. The moment he opened his robe, Cecilia got a peek of the eternal void that existed within. It was a sight not meant for mortal eyes, and recently, it had become slightly painful for her to look at. “And if I struggle with the idea of her demise, I can only imagine the difficulties Mike Radley faces.”

“Indeed.” The banshee frowned, the joy of the morning spoiled. It wasn’t Tink’s death that troubled her, but the sadness that followed. Ever since that piece of Mike’s soul had taken root inside her, she could sometimes feel his emotions, even from a distance. She had mourned before, because it was in her nature. But to experience loss from a mortal perspective? It was an emotion she wasn’t very curious to explore in depth.

The two of them sat together, Wordle forgotten. Death was deep in contemplation. The Grim Reaper had taken Cyrus’ passing hard, and she worried that he might choose to leave on another long walk when the goblin passed into the next world.

Across the yard, the waking world ground to a halt. Centaurs who were up early to tend to the hedge maze froze mid-stride, their souls now washed out and gray. Cecilia rose from the swing, her gaze on the golden archway that had appeared inside the gazebo.

A slender figure stepped through. It was a sylph wearing a gown made of leaves with a crown of flowers. She raised her hand, palm upward, and summoned a tiny ball of divine light.

“Her Majesty wishes to speak with you.” The sylph spoke softly. If any mortal heard it, they would be infatuated and attempt to follow the fae for the rest of their lives. “Please come with me.”

Cecilia followed, floating through the golden archway. Upon entering the other side, her ethereal form faded and she was forced to walk on a cobblestone bridge. It led to a small island surrounded by a lake and a pair of thrones. One was shattered, the result of the Fae Queen’s anger.

The other held the queen. Her head was tilted back, allowing her to look down her nose at Cecilia. The lake was in the center of a coliseum where hundreds of Seelie and Unseelie sat and watched, eager to see what happened next.

Cecilia bowed her head, suddenly worried. Why had the queen brought her here? When she opened her mouth to speak, the Queen raised one of her many hands to silence her.

“Your brother is on his way,” said the Queen. “I will speak to both of you once he is here.”

The banshee nodded. It was only about a minute before Sulyvahn stepped through the arch, his head clutched beneath one arm as he moved up to Cecilia’s side.

“Yer Majesty.” He bowed low. With his gaze lowered he angled his head so Cecilia could see his face. Sulyvahn arched an eyebrow, as if asking if she knew what was going on. Cecilia shook her head slightly. They were both in the dark.

“Now that you are both here, report.” The Queen’s voice was as imperious as ever, which was a little surprising. Cecilia was under the impression that the Queen and Mike had come to some unspoken arrangement, which would likely be seen as weakness should the watching fae ever discover what that was.

“Um...” Sulyvahn stood upright and reattached his head. “I’m happy to report, yer Majesty, but wouldn’ a mind a bit o’ direction.”

“I wish to know everything,” she said. “Everything you’ve seen, everything you’ve heard, specifically in regards to the Caretaker. From both of you.”

Sulyvahn shrugged. “It be a long tale,” he said. “If’n you do mean everything.”

“We have plenty of time.” The Faerie Queen crossed her arms. “Time has been manipulated. Days here will only be a moment in the mortal realm, your absence won’t be noticed.”

“Aye.” Sulyvahn began with his current living arrangements with Beth at the cabin in Oregon. He spoke at great length about the nature of his relationship with her, along with Beth’s relationships with Bigfoot and Asterion. The Oregon property had become a refuge for Native American cryptids, and most of Beth’s time was spent managing conflicts that cropped up as a result.

Cecilia listened patiently as the hours passed. She knew that the Faerie Queen had her own spies, and there was nothing she or Suly could say that wasn't already known. So was this a trap? Did the fae court hope to catch them in an untruth?

She studied the queen and felt a tiny itching in the back of her mind. Puzzled, Cecilia scratched the base of her neck to no avail. The itch was persistent, making her think of an insect trying to burrow into her flesh. While she was scratching, she saw Titania's golden eyes flick in her direction. The queen studied Cecilia for a moment, then turned her full attention back to Sulyvahn.

The irritation returned, followed by a sudden popping sensation in the back of her mind. Cecilia's eyelids drooped for a moment, and then snapped back open when she noticed that the Queen was now superimposed over herself. The phantom Queen stepped away from her physical form and looked directly at Cecilia.

"Do not react," the Queen said, then gazed out toward the court. "I am speaking to you through the link you share with the Caretaker's Dreamscape and do not wish for the others to hear us. I also do not know how long I can communicate in this manner."

Cecilia snapped her focus back on the Queen's physical body to avoid attracting attention from the others. They were already aware that she had developed some mortal traits, so would assume her attention had briefly wandered. Still, she knew that there were detractors amongst the court who questioned the Queen's decision to allow fae creatures to live on Mike's property. If the Queen was deceiving them on purpose, then there was a very good reason.

"The seers have witnessed portents of doom for our kind." The Queen paced along the edge of Cecilia's vision as if careful not to step outside it. "Many, in fact. And it would seem that they all center around the Caretaker, which means the court has many questions. Has something changed?"

The banshee wondered how she was supposed to respond.

"Think out loud," said the Queen. "Deliberately so."

After a few tries, Cecilia heard her own voice on the wind like a whisper. "Nothing out of the ordinary," she replied.

“Hmm.” The Queen’s phantom double scowled and walked closer to the banshee. “No new members of the house? No recent discoveries?”

“No.” In the background, she heard Sulyvahn regaling the court about how Beth had taught him how to fly a kite. “However, Tink’s pregnancy has become more complicated.”

“How so?” The phantom Queen was so close now that she completely obscured Cecilia’s vision of the proceedings.

Cecilia described what was happening, and then followed it up with what little she knew about the events at the North Pole. The Queen listened quietly until the banshee was done, then took a step back.

“I see,” she said. “This explains why his dreams have been so troubled of late.”

“Your Majesty?”

“Forget I said that.” With the Queen’s command, Cecilia promptly forgot whatever it was that the Queen had just said. “I suspect these portents are directly related to the fate of Tinker Radley. I am unable to directly assist him in resolving this situation and fear there is a good chance that the outcome will be unfavorable.”

“What would you have of me?”

The Queen looked at Cecilia. “I am going to officially task you and your brother with going everywhere the Caretaker goes and, if the situation demands it, to protect the fae by any means necessary.” The Queen’s eyes flashed. “Too long have the fae acted on absolutes. Mortals are frail things, and I suspect a drastic decision today will cost us in the long run.” She threw a dirty look at the court. “We are eternal beings, meant to ride on the unending winds and explore new worlds. The fae cannot accomplish this by shutting ourselves away and claiming superiority.

“But both courts fear change, a weakness most immortals share. I believe there will come a moment soon, one where the Caretaker will make a choice that will lead him down a darker path. I also suspect the court may force my hand and attempt to end his life before he can make this choice. Your task, my child, is to protect the Caretaker from your brethren. You are to remain by his side so that you may be present when faced with this difficult choice in the hopes that you can

guide him along a better path. This command supersedes any other I may give you.”

“I...” Cecilia was speechless, her thoughts thrown into a tizzy.

“You don’t have to say anything. In fact, I’d prefer that you don’t. Your confusion is making a buzzing sound I quite dislike.” The Queen’s phantom moved to super-impose itself over her physical body. “You are different from the others, my child. I used to think that perhaps that made you weak, and yet...” The Queen surveyed her court. “Maybe it will lead to our own salvation.”

The phantom vanished as the Queen’s actual body turned in Cecilia’s direction. “I would now hear from you,” she said, her eyes cruel and unforgiving. Many times, Cecilia had found herself resenting the woman who stood before her. Today, however, she realized just how much a mask the Queen was forced to wear.

“Your Majesty.” Cecilia performed a small curtsy, then started talking. The others in the court leaned forward with interest and glee, so eager to hear what secrets she may spill that it likely never occurred to them that they had already missed the biggest one of all.

Hours passed, and Cecilia spoke without end. Where Sulyvahn had been pragmatic in his storytelling, Cecilia embellished her own. She didn’t just share the events that had occurred in her presence, but the emotions she had experienced as well. Several of the fae regarded her with newfound interest, but others displayed disgust. In their eyes, she was tainted.

The banshee didn’t care. She was in love, and that’s what mattered most of all.

After what felt like days, Cecilia reached the end of her narration. The Queen stood tall and turned her attention to the court.

“Well?” she asked, clearly seeking their feedback. The fae muttered amongst themselves, but nobody responded directly. The Queen still hadn’t officially told Cecilia or Sulyvahn about the seers, which the banshee knew was deliberate. Still, the fae court at least had an inkling that something was wrong, and they were hungry to see what the Queen would do with this knowledge.

“Your Majesty.” One of the unseelie stood, his teeth like daggers. “It is clear that coming events have yet to occur. Should we clip the source of the problem like a weed—”

“You know better.” The Queen kept her voice level. “How are we to be sure that your suggested action isn’t what triggers what is to come?” Even Cecilia knew that any sort of prophecy was closely guarded, because there was a chance that acting on it was likely to cause it to pass. Some of the most terrible prophecies the seers had ever seen had simply fizzled because they were ignored.

The Unseelie was unbothered. He licked his lips and glared lasciviously at Cecilia. “I also doubt this one’s recollection of events,” he said. “Though I do not sense untruths in her words, she is part mortal now, and thus unreliable in her testimony.”

“And what remedy would you seek?” The Queen moved to her throne and sat.

“We are aware that you have your spies on the Caretaker’s property.” The Unseelie gestured to Cecilia and Sulyvahn. “And these two have eyes inside his home, yet they answer only to you. I think it would only be appropriate if both the Seelie and Unseelie were allowed representatives of their own a chance to integrate with the Caretaker’s...situation.”

“You do?” The Queen looked from one side of the court to the other. “And both sides are in agreement?”

Cecilia took a step toward her brother. She wanted so badly to take his hand in her own for comfort. The Seelie and Unseelie rarely agreed on anything. The fact that they were together in this idea was a bad sign and very indicative of the precarious situation the Queen found herself in.

“Hmm.” The Queen arched a brow. “I would remind the court that I have no direct sway or influence with the Caretaker over who he allows on his property or in his home. In fact, that was a condition for allowing the fae to reside peacefully on his property.”

“We’re aware, Your Majesty.” The unseelie’s eyes narrowed. “Clearly you are a...neutral party.”

The Queen surveyed the court, her gaze slowly taking in the fae. Eventually, she turned her attention back to Sulyvahn and Cecilia. One hand had curled beneath her chin while the lower two tapped at the arms of her throne.

“We will discuss terms after these two leave,” she said, sneering at Cecilia. “Since this one’s integrity has been called into question, I believe it would be best.”

A susurrations traveled back and forth across the court, the sound reminiscent of blades being sharpened. Cecilia looked at her brother with fear, but the dullahan stood much as a servant would, waiting for his orders.

When the Queen gave them, the words crumpled against Cecilia’s mind, unable to penetrate the orders she had already been given. Once the Queen had bound them, she gestured toward the archway, dismissing Cecilia and Sulyvahn. The two of them walked through the light together, but only Cecilia emerged from the arch.

When the arch vanished, time resumed. The souls around her flickered once more, making colors and shapes much like an open flame. The Grim Reaper looked up from his phone and grinned. “There you are,” he proclaimed. “I finally figured out the Wordle board!”

“And?” Cecilia felt like she was out of breath. Knowing that the court was actively conspiring against Mike made her feel like she was falling. Whatever the seers had seen had properly scared them. “What was the word?”

“Crown.” Death sounded pleased with himself. “I thought of it after seeing your mother’s archway. I do hope your meeting went well.”

The banshee stared at the Reaper for a moment, a plan forming in her head. The fae were powerful beings, capable of reading minds and easily manipulating mortals. With their involvement, there was no telling what sort of creature they would send, nor how that being would act upon arriving.

The Queen had tasked her with staying close to Mike. Telling him what the court was up to would likely reveal the Queen’s interference. But what if she told someone else, an entity immune to the magic of the fae?

“I say. You do seem rather bothered.” Death put his phone away. “You have my full attention.”

Cecilia didn’t dare turn to look out into the yard. With the time dilation of the fae realm, whatever discussion was had after her departure was long over, and she didn’t know who may already be present and listening.

“No bother,” she replied. “Do you think Mike would want some tea when he wakes up? I would like to bring him some.”

Death’s cellphone vanished into his robes as he stood from the swing. “Why, if he has any good sense, of course he would like some tea upon waking. It sets the tone for the day, and there are many options. Come, let me show them to you.” The Grim Reaper led the way into the home and away from any fae that might be listening.

The technicolor sand beneath his feet had become the color of ash. The oceans of Mike’s soul were so dark the water was a river of ink. As dark clouds boiled over, lightning crashed between their peaks, revealing a crack in the sky packed with watching eyes.

Mike snapped awake. He was in bed all by himself for the first time in...he honestly couldn’t remember when. After the events of last night, he hadn’t craved companionship or even company. Other than sitting with Grace and reading her another book before bed, he barely spoke to anyone, even Naia.

When he sat up, he groaned and rubbed at his temples. The Dreamscape had been extremely unstable all night. He assumed that it was just because he was struggling with what he had learned from Santa, but the Outsiders had made an appearance off the shores of his mind. He couldn’t know if they were actually present or just a figment of his imagination. If Lily were around, he would have asked her to look into it for him.

Sighing, he slid out of bed and stood. He stretched, then closed his eyes and yawned. Upon opening his eyes, he saw Cecilia floating in the door of his bedroom holding a cup of tea.

“Good morning, mo chroí.” The banshee smiled and offered him the cup. “I thought you could use a boost this morning.”

“Oh. Um...thanks.” He took the cup. While he didn’t put acts of kindness past the banshee, he wasn’t sure she had ever brought him something in this manner before. “Is everything okay?”

Cecilia shook her head. “Not really,” she said, her voice sad. “We can all tell that you’re hurting.”

“Yeah. Sorry about that.” He took a sip of the tea. “Is there some kind of cream in this?” he asked.

The banshee giggled. “Death added it,” she said. “He thought it would cut the flavor. Told me: ‘you might grow hair on your tongue without it.’”

“It’s nice,” he said, then took another sip. “Though I don’t know that I’d take tongue advice from somebody who doesn’t have one. Would you like a sip?”

“Already had one. Don’t you see all the hair?” Cecilia stuck out her tongue for him.

Mike actually chuckled. “We’ll have to shave it all off later,” he said. “What time is it? Did someone get up with Grace?”

Cecilia nodded. “Yuki is still keeping a watch on her. She could tell you needed the sleep.”

“I did.” He put on his clothes and left the room. The house was eerily silent. When was the last time it had felt so empty? Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, he heard a rustling sound from the office. He poked his head inside to see that Death was piling notebooks all along the edges of the table.

“Ah! Good morning, Mike Radley.” Death grinned at him. “How was your tea?”

“It’s good, thank you.” Mike stared at the books. “What are you doing?”

The Grim Reaper paused. “Preparing.”

“For what?”

“Do you trust me, Mike Radley?”

Mike nodded. “I do.”

“Then I must ask for my privacy in this matter. I have been entrusted with a sacred duty.”

“By a real person and not somebody online, right?”

Death sighed. “I have learned my lesson about speaking with strangers on the internet, Mike Radley. Rest assured that I am acting in the best interests of the house.”

“I trust you.” Mike moved to the bookcase. “I’m headed to the Library. Do you need anything while I’m there?”

“Hmm.” Death wrote something on a piece of paper and then ripped it out of the book and folded it up. “Do not read that,” he said. “If you could, give that to Miss Eulalie. She never goes outside. Please have any books on that subject brought to me in a paper bag if possible.”

Mike frowned, but took the slip. His curiosity was piqued, but there were other things on his mind and he would find out when it was time. He put his hand on the magical tome on the bookshelf that would take him to the Library, he felt Cecilia’s fingers on his shoulder as the magic took them away. He looked over his shoulder at the banshee.

“I didn’t expect you to come with me,” he said.

“I’m feeling extra adventurous today,” she replied as she faded from view. Her voice became a whisper in his ear. “You won’t even know I’m here.”

Shrugging, Mike walked to the information desk. Plates of food were stacked high, and a trio of rats struggled to balance them on its surface.

“Are these for Tink?” he asked. The rats nodded. “Let me help you,” he said, picking up a couple of plates packed with pancakes, bacon, and eggs. He walked them into the goblin’s bedroom and saw Tink sitting up in bed, licking syrup off a fork.

“Husband!” Tink pumped her arms, which caused a few plates to fall off the bed and onto the floor. At the sound of broken crockery, Kisa walked out of the bathroom and groaned.

“Not again,” she muttered, then grabbed a broom and dustpan.

“Again?” Mike asked.

“She got *really* mad at that old tv show where they give your house a theme and then upgrade it.” Kisa rolled her eyes as she knelt to pick up an errant spoon. “The fact that the title pissed her off should have been her first red flag.”

“Tink no care,” the goblin muttered. “Husband, come. Sit! Eat!” She picked up a piece of bacon that was on her bedspread and ate it.

Mike set the plates he was carrying on a table and knelt to help Kisa. Once finished, he joined Tink in bed and looked at the television. "What are you watching now?" he asked.

The goblin gestured at the paused television. "Downton Abbey," she said. "Historical drama."

"Really?" Mike had no knowledge of the show, but a historical drama didn't seem like Tink's kind of show. Based on what was on the screen, it looked like a bunch of stuffy people sitting around and talking.

"Tink likes their house." The goblin stared at Mike. "Husband need see Tink. Can tell something up."

Mike's mouth went dry. He wasn't entirely sure how to word what had occurred to him in the late hours of a mostly sleepless night. But beating around the bush might earn him a fork in the arm.

"Based on what everyone is telling me, you're...a very old goblin."

"Husband know Tink old. Not a secret."

"Right, but...everyone seems to be under the impression that you're about to die of old age. Nobody really knows how old goblins live to be."

"Ah. Tink understand." She patted Mike's hand. "Tink already live past outdoor goblin time. Maybe only few years left."

"So you knew." Mike took a deep breath through his nose and let it out through his mouth. This was the thought that had robbed him of so much sleep. "That you were going to die in the near future."

"Yep."

"Then why..." Mike put his hand on Tink's belly. "Why did you make this wish if you knew that you weren't going to be around to raise our child together?"

"Ah. Tink understand problem." The goblin smiled. "Tink best wife, big always. But Tink know husband live much longer than Tink, probably break after Tink gone." She put her hand on top of the one he had put on her stomach. "Want make family, leave something behind for husband to love. Make special baby together."

“Tink, I—” He didn’t even know how to process those words. She had wished for her pregnancy knowing that her time was nearly up. His emotions warred with one another as he saw the logic in Tink’s thinking, but was also terrified by the idea that he may have another child who would have to grow up without their mother.

When he looked into Tink’s eyes, all he could see was how she glowed. This decision she had made had been purely out of love and devotion for him. He wanted to be mad at her, to ask how she could have put him in this position, but that would be a waste of time. He had learned long ago that arguing with the goblin was a good way to get bit and nothing else.

Tink’s belly twanged beneath his hand, and he almost jerked it away. The little goblin hybrid gave another swift kick, causing both Mike and Tink to laugh.

“She has strong kick,” said Tink, rubbing her stomach.

“Or he.”

The goblin rolled her eyes. “Husband can say boy, but Tink know better.” She sighed and rubbed her belly. “Tink try and teach her everything. Goblin daughter big smart, just like Tink.”

“Yeah.” Mike gazed into Tink’s eyes, then took a moment to push some strands off her forehead. “Because there's nobody better.”

“Husband finally learn.” She patted the bed. “Husband watch with me?”

He shook his head, then took his hand off her stomach. “No,” he said. “That sounds like fun, but I’m on a mission today. Need to look some stuff up in the Library.”

“Okay.” Tink patted him on the cheek. “Kitty cat keep Tink company.”

“It’s more like I’m your maid,” muttered Kisa.

“Tink could always request maid uniform.” The goblin licked her lips. “Give Tink something sexy to look at.”

Kisa shook her head. “Nope. I was told not to encourage any sexy behavior out of you. Doctor’s orders trump goblin’s orders.”

Tink blew a raspberry and threw a piece of toast at Kisa. The cat girl snatched it out of the air and took a bite. “Ew, what is this shit?”

“Marmite.” Tink cackled. “Tink think it tastes like feet.”

“And you like that?!?” Kisa gagged and threw the toast in the trash. “Ugh.”

The goblin looked at Mike. “Kitty cat too judgemental. One time, Tink watch kitty cat eating her own—”

Mike had never seen Kisa move so fast. With a graceful leap, she was on the bed, her hand firmly clamped over Tink’s mouth. The goblin giggled through Kisa’s fingers.

“I’ve got this trouble maker,” Kisa said. “If you want something to eat, grab it and run. She might catch you if you don’t.”

“I’ll keep that under advisement.” Mike kissed both of them on the forehead and grabbed a platter with eggs and bacon on it. After making sure there wasn’t any marmite, he walked out the door.

Once out in the hallway, he heard Tink speak. “Tink glad husband gone,” she said. “Tink can finally relax now.”

Curious what she meant by that, he stopped to listen. Moments later, a horrible trumpeting sound came from the room. A trio of rats fled the room, their eyes wide with panic.

“Oh, gross!” Kisa retched, and Mike heard the sound of fabric being flapped. “What the hell did you eat?”

“Everything,” Tink replied. Mike did a silent jog down the hall, doing his best to hold in a laugh. Now back in the lobby, he found a seat and took it. He was halfway through his breakfast when he felt eyes watching him. Leaning back in his seat, he looked straight up to see Eulalie dangling upside down above him, only a couple of feet away.

“Morning.” She grinned at him and pointed at the plate. “You gonna eat all that?”

“Yes,” he replied, covering the bacon with his hands. “You do realize that you could order your own food, right? You’re the Rat Queen. They would even bring it to you.”

Eulalie shrugged. “Stolen food tastes better.”

“It’s all stolen food!” Mike gestured toward the information desk. “The Library isn’t reimbursing people for all of this.”

“Correction. It wasn’t.” The Arachne severed her line and dropped down in front of Mike. “Did you know that magic works a lot like code? Well, maybe not your magic. But the magic here requires organization and logic.”

“Right.” Mike was careful to keep a hand over his breakfast.

“Ratu and Yuki helped me monitor the flow of magic. It turns out that there’s a way to track where the food comes from. Well, mostly. Not all of it comes from businesses. So yeah, we’ve been finding ways to reimburse companies for what the Library takes.”

“With what money?” Mike asked.

“I think you forget that I’m the richest person in the room right now.” The Arachne grinned and put a piece of bacon in her mouth. Stunned, Mike looked at his plate and saw that a piece was missing.

“How?” He whispered.

“The hand is quicker than the eye.” Eulalie chomped on her bacon and froze, her gaze sliding toward the living quarters. Mike turned to see Sofia stumbling out of the hallway, her eye bloodshot. “Shit. She’s hungover again.”

“Again?” Mike looked at Eulalie. He scowled when he saw she was eating two more pieces of bacon.

“Yeah, not really something I want to talk about right in front of her.” She shoved the bacon in her mouth and spoke around it. “Death texted me, said you had something to give me.”

Mike handed over a slip of paper. “For your eyes only,” he said.

“Ooh, secrets.” Eulalie tucked the paper down the front of her blouse. “It’s a good thing I’ve got Top Secret Clearance. Okay, I need to get back to work. I’m monitoring a situation in Bolivia.”

“The SoS?”

“Yep.” Eulalie’s smile faded. “Something like that anyway. Good morning, Sofia!”

Mike turned to bid Sofia good morning and felt his plate jump in his hand. When he looked back, Eulalie was gone and had taken the rest of his bacon.

“Damnit,” he muttered. The eggs by themselves were hardly exciting. Shaking his head, he stood. “Hey,” he said. “Rough night?”

Sofia grunted. She walked past him and grabbed a jug of orange juice that had appeared on the Information Desk. The cyclops drank straight from the jug, then fixed him with a baleful look. “You don’t look so hot yourself.”

“I didn’t sleep well,” he admitted.

“Mmm hmm.” Sofia proceeded to chug the remaining contents of the jug, her slender throat flexing with every swallow. Some of it spilled on her blouse. When she was finished, she set the empty jug on the counter and tapped her staff. A white light flashed and her clothes were clean once again. She grabbed a plate stacked high with Texas toast. “What did you give to Eulalie?”

“Death wanted some books from the Library.”

“I see.” Sofia set the plate back down. “I take it you want something from the Library, too?”

He nodded. “This whole time, we’ve been looking at ways to halt the aging process for Tink, or keep the magic from prematurely aging her.”

“Except it isn’t premature.” Sofia’s stomach grumbled, but she ignored the food behind her. “In fact, she still looks way younger than she actually is. ”

Mike took a moment to compose himself before speaking. Clearly neither of them were in great moods, but he wasn’t about to rely on Sofia to be the bigger person about it. “You know what? Let’s add it to the list. Maybe while we’re here today we can look up whatever word means...what you just said.”

“The opposite of premature is overdue. Therefore, it would be...um...overdue aging?” Sofia winced and rubbed her forehead. “Stupid staff isn’t working,” she muttered. “Still feel hungover.”

“That’s two days in a row, Sofia.” He moved closer to her and could smell the stale wine on her breath. “Should we be worried?”

“Nobody worries about me.” She looked away from him.

“That’s crap and you know it.” He studied her soul for a moment, then took her wrist in his hand. She half-heartedly tried to tug it away, but he held on tight. Mike let his magic dance across her skin. Doing so would give him an insight into the things she craved sexually, but he wasn’t trying to seduce Sofia. When her desires came back fuzzy and muted, he realized what was wrong.

“You’re still drunk,” he said. He didn’t know how her staff worked, but if she was still processing the alcohol in her system, no amount of magical cleansing would fix her symptoms.

“That would explain the dizziness.” Sofia smacked the butt of her staff on the floor and was bathed in golden light. Some of the redness in her eye faded away. “Just means I need to keep doing this for a bit.”

“You should probably eat something.”

Sofia grunted in disgust, then stared at the food. “I’m not hungry.” Her stomach grumbled again. “Damn it.”

“Tell you what. I need your help looking stuff up. I won’t make you eat, but let’s take some of this with us, for when you’re ready.”

“Whatever.” Sofia shrugged and gazed out into the depths of the Library. “So what are you looking for?”

“Ways to extend Tink’s life,” he said. “Outside of her current situation.”

“Do you mean immortality?” Sofia looked at him with disgust. “That’s exactly what Emily—”

“Not immortality,” Mike countered. “I’m not trying to make her live forever. I want something that will just let her...” He didn’t know how to say that he wanted her to live long enough to see their child grow into an adult. Mike was still occasionally haunted by the loss of his own father at such a young age. He didn’t wish that on anybody. Sighing, he continued. “Just a few more years, or whatever.”

“A slippery slope.” Sofia gestured toward the Library. “But sure, why not? That’s how it always starts, right? Just a few more years, please, no, wait, how about a decade? Two decades?”

“I can come back tomorrow,” Mike said. “I just figured you’d be eager to help, since Tink has to stay here until she’s better.”

“Ugh, fine.” Sofia sighed. “So life extensions, huh?”

He nodded. "If we can add years to her lifespan, it will also increase the odds that she survives childbirth."

"By giving the magic something to eat, got it." Sofia held up her staff and the crystal glowed. "Hope you didn't have any other plans today."

"Nope. Did you get a lot of hits?"

"Humans first dreamt of immortality around the same time they became afraid of the dark." A floating platform landed by the Information Desk. "For the few who have achieved it, they didn't exactly feel like sharing. So we'll have to chase the same leads that they did."

"Not immortality," Mike said. "Remember? Just an extension."

"I'm aware." She turned to look at him, her gaze unfocused. "Just let me do my fucking job."

Mike kept his mouth shut as he grabbed a few plates of food and carried them onto the platform. He sincerely hoped Sofia's mood improved soon, because she was getting on his nerves.

The platform took off and flew between the columns of the Library, soaring silently between the gargantuan structures. After a few miles, the ceiling dropped to within fifty feet above the ground.

"What determines this place's shape?" asked Mike. "Why isn't it just a large cube, or whatever?"

Sofia remained silent for so long that he thought she was ignoring him. When she finally spoke, she kept her gaze ahead.

"I don't know," she said. "It was once explained to me that the Library was shaped by its needs. Perhaps written works were slowly produced during this particular era."

"But books are organized by topic, not date."

The cyclops cocked her head to one side. "Maybe it's related to how the books arrive here, then. Or the food, for that matter. The building expands when needed, but when expansion is slow, we end up with this."

"Odd."

She shrugged. "The building material likely comes here the same way. Stolen from beneath the earth and placed here by powerful magic that I don't fully understand." Her words were bitter. "Not that it matters."

Mike made a face and wished that he had brought someone else along, like Yuki. He simply wasn't mentally prepared to do a deep dive into Sofia's emotional state right this second. Maybe once she was sober, they could have a proper conversation.

They made the rest of the flight in silence. The low ceiling eventually gave way to building sized columns that stretched away from them in all three directions. They flew up at an angle and were probably a hundred feet above the ground when they landed near a gap in the column's railing. Sofia stepped off first, leaning heavily on her staff as she wobbled.

"This way," she grumbled, her staff lighting up. Together, they walked through the narrow shelving lined with ancient texts. After climbing a spiral ramp, the two of them reached a small cul-de-sac of shelves lined with dozens of glittering tomes.

"Aw, fuck." Sofia rubbed her head. "I forgot to grab a cart. I'll be right back."

Mike watched her go, then moved to the closest shelf and pulled down the first book. Upon opening it, he realized he didn't recognize the language at all.

"Well this is going to make things harder," he muttered as he set the book on a table.

"What is?" asked Cecilia. Mike actually jumped and turned around to see the banshee floating behind him.

"Holy shit," he said, one hand over his heart. "You actually startled me."

Cecilia grinned. "Told you I'd be watching," she said.

"I didn't think you were still with me, though." He smiled, happy to see a friendly face. "Do you have any idea what's wrong with Sofia? I assume you heard our conversation."

The banshee shrugged. "Her soul is in turmoil, as if she is mourning. But even if I knew, it wouldn't be my place to say."

"That's fair." Mike turned back to the shelf and pulled down another book. It was written in the same language as the first. He was about to ask if Cecilia

recognized the language, but remembered she couldn't see it. However, he did think of something else to ask. "You don't happen to know anything about what I'm looking for, do you?"

"I'm not sure why I would," she said.

"I mean, you're around people when they die. I don't know if you would have picked up anything about extending their lives, or perhaps some fae magic I'm unaware of." He shrugged. "I'm looking for any leads, really."

The banshee hovered over to the shelves and studied them. She reached out and pulled one of the glowing books off the shelf. "I don't really have an answer for that," she said as she opened the book and flipped through its pages. "I've heard of people living longer by making deals with the fae or even some demons. Plenty of witches will sell their souls for such a prize. But I don't think anyone would offer you a deal that you approved of."

"Yeah. I'm not looking to make any deals, that's for sure." It seemed like every magical deal he had ever heard of had massively screwed over its recipient.

"What do words actually look like?" asked Cecilia as she paged through the book. "And I don't mean literally. I've actually seen them on a few rare occasions, but they're just a collection of shapes."

"I guess I don't understand the question."

"How does looking at them make pictures in your head?" She turned to smile at him. "I listen to you when you read to Grace most nights. It seems like a special kind of magic to me, that you can look at a collection of symbols and know how they become thoughts, pictures, and feelings."

"From your perspective, I suppose it does seem like magic. For me, I don't quite get how you can tell so much just from looking at their souls. I'm starting to figure some of it out, but I know I'm missing plenty of nuance."

Cecilia closed the book and handed it to him. "I hope I get to see the world as you do, someday. Maybe then, you could teach me how to read." She reached out and ran her finger across his chest. "Maybe I could sit on your lap, too," she whispered.

Mike shivered and wrapped an arm around her waist. "If that day ever comes, I'll make sure to pick something with lots of pictures," he said. "In fact, Tink found a book once that—"

There was a loud bang, followed by the sound of tumbling books. Mike let go of Cecilia and ran back through the shelves. It didn't take him long to find Sofia standing over a pile of books on the floor, their shelves knocked loose by the cart she had been pushing.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Fucking wheel broke!" The cyclops gave the cart a hefty kick, but it was held down by the weight of the hundred or so books that had fallen on top of it. "Fuck!" She gave the cart another kick.

"Here, let me help." He crouched down and grabbed a couple of books.

"Don't bother," she said. "Help me fix the shelves first. I think some of the supports snapped when the cart crashed into it."

They managed to free the first shelf and slide it back into place using the thick grooves along the side. The next shelf had cracked, but was repaired with the magic of the staff. The top shelf was not only broken in half, but the grooves had splintered, making it unusable.

"Damn!" Sofia waved her staff, but the magic flickered and faded. When she tried again, Mike could see the spell trying to take form and repair the grooves, but it kept fizzling before completion.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I have no depth perception and I'm still buzzed." The cyclops squinted at the grooves. "The Library does some things automatically, but this requires me to visualize it."

"Is there something I can do to help?"

"I've got this!" she yelled, then smacked her staff against the shelf repeatedly. "I'VE. GOT. THIS!"

"Okay, that's enough." He interposed himself between Sofia and the offending shelf. "You might not want to talk about what's bugging you deep down, but we're not going to accomplish anything if you're going to be a bitch."

"Bitch? BITCH!" She stood to her full height and glared at him. "I should leave your ass here and—"

Mike poked her in the stomach. In response, her gut rumbled. Sofia winced and placed her hand over her belly as if he had punched her.

“You need to eat something,” he said. “Right now.”

“You’re not in charge of me.”

“**EAT.**” His magic slipped free and wove itself through his voice. The cyclops immediately stiffened up as if struck. Sofia narrowed her eye at him, then turned back in the direction of the pedestal. He followed her, and tried not to roll his eyes when she picked one of the trays and slammed it down on the closest table. She sat down in a nearby chair, grabbed a handful of eggs, and shoved them in her mouth.

“There,” she said, her mouth full. “Are you happy, now?”

“No,” he replied, crossing his arms. “And I won’t be until you figure your shit out. But I know that’s not going to happen until you’re sober. Just how much did you drink last night?”

Sofia grabbed another handful of eggs, then stopped. After staring at her hand for a few seconds, she dropped the eggs and picked up a fork instead.

“I don’t know,” she replied, the heat gone from her voice. “I can’t remember much after we came back from the North Pole yesterday.”

“Why not?” He found a stool nearby and sat on it. “What happened there that triggered all of this?”

She chewed her food slowly, lost in contemplation. He watched her pick at her food for several minutes and noticed that the color was slowly returning to her face.

“It’s the same problem from before,” she admitted. “When we talked about it, I felt a little better. But I realized I still don’t know what I want. I’m not happy with how things are right now, but I’m also not sure what I need to change. And when you went off with Holly, I didn’t think anything of it, but I could tell you fucked her.”

“And?” Mike was puzzled. None of the women had ever admitted to being jealous of the others. This felt like new territory. “Are you upset that I was with her?”

“Yes, but not because of that.” Sofia leaned back and closed her eye. “While you were off having another adventure, I chose to stay behind and pout. I sabotaged myself. All day long I was thinking that I need something new in my life, that I needed it to be different, but when the opportunity came along, I decided to sit on my stool and drink hot cocoa of all things.”

“To be fair, it really is good hot chocolate.”

Sofia opened her eye and stared at him. “You can be so infuriating,” she mumbled.

“You aren’t wrong.” He leaned forward and grabbed a piece of toast. There was plenty to eat for the both of them, and maybe he would feel better with some more food in his belly.

“Do you remember when we first met?” she asked.

He nodded, then reached for an orange.

“You were this weird, silly man who came along and disrupted everything. Then I got pulled into a strange adventure involving a magical labyrinth. It was the most fun I’d had in decades, maybe centuries. But then I ended up staying here to take care of the Library. If something happened to me, then this place would come to an end. It would make all of the sacrifices that kept this place together meaningless. I kept justifying it by saying I made a difference, but I don’t know anymore.”

“I think I understand you,” he said. “You’re surrounded by all these stories, yet you don’t really have one of your own. I can see why that would be a hard pill to swallow.”

Sofia’s jaw dropped. After several long moments, she just shook her head. “Damn,” she muttered. “You just put it all so succinctly.”

“Brevity is the soul of...um...” Mike waved his hand dismissively. “I almost sounded real cool just now, didn’t I?”

“The soul of wit,” Sofia replied. “It’s from *Hamlet*.”

Mike chuckled. “I wondered where I had heard that. We had to read that book in High School and then perform in the play for extra credit. I got cast as a random guard with no lines.” Though his memories of High School were dim, he did vaguely recall having a crush on the girl who played Ophelia. He couldn’t

remember her name, but her long, red locks had dominated his dreams for months.

“I’ve never seen *Hamlet*. I’ve never seen any of Shakespeare’s work performed, actually.” Sofia looked away and tugged at her braid. “I remember when those books came in, actually. There were still three of us at the time.”

“You never talk about the others,” he said.

“And I don’t plan to,” she replied. “Those aren’t fond memories.”

He fought the urge to ask why. She was opening up and he didn’t want the door to close. Instead, he turned his attention toward his meal, and Sofia did the same. They ate in silence until most of the food was gone. Once finished, Sofia stood and tapped her staff a couple of times, the magic washing over her and creating a temporary aura.

“Much better,” she said.

“Sober now?” asked Mike.

“Mostly.” She walked back to the busted shelf and Mike followed. When they arrived, she waved her staff. The shelf lifted into the air and slowly eased itself back into place. Tiny grains of wood floated up from below, finding their original positions and molding into place.

“Is it good?” Mike squatted down and looked up from below. All signs of damage were gone.

“Almost like new.” Sofia gestured at the books with her staff. They lifted into the air and were sorted back into place. This freed up the cart, which Sofia also repaired with magic. The wheel popped back into place.

“That’s really handy,” said Mike.

“If it worked at a distance, it would be even better.” Sofia made a face. “We’ve actually started using the rats to shelve the books. Once a high traffic area has been discovered, they build a portal there and do it themselves. I usually pop through before the zone is shut down and use the staff to check for discrepancies.”

“It still sounds like a lot of work.”

“Yeah.” Sofia went to push the cart, but Mike beat her to it. They walked back to the section from before, and Sofia cast her book-finding spell again. Together, they pulled down several books and loaded them into the cart. Once finished, they took a detour on the way back and grabbed a few more books that were also glowing.

“I assume you can read these.” Mike couldn’t even make out the titles.

“I can,” Sofia replied. “You’re looking at a lot of old Greek and Roman texts, along with some early European transcripts. Most of these are journals, either personal or research. There’s a lot of stuff about alchemy here. We can have Ratu look through them for us.” They arrived back at the floating pedestal, and Sofia pushed the cart on.

“I figured there would be more books like this,” Mike said.

“Oh, this is just our first stop.” Sofia made sure they had everything and then stood at the front of the pedestal. It drifted away from the column. “I had to narrow down the selection pretty hard, but we’ll be gathering books all day as it is. Probably tomorrow, too.”

“Really? How many books are we looking at?”

“Well over a thousand.” Sofia gave him a knowing look. “I did warn you that the quest for immortality is pretty popular. I limited the search to older texts and personal records for this very reason.”

“Yeah, you did.” Mike frowned. “Is there a way to narrow it down even further?”

The cyclops bit her lip in contemplation. “You know, there is. But it comes with a caveat.”

“What’s that?”

“Narrowing it down means dealing with books that are more likely to be grounded in arcane research. To start with, it will take almost an hour to get there. It will also be dangerous.”

“Why? Are the texts themselves magical?”

She nodded. “In a way. There’s a bunch of them in one of the forbidden sections. We get stuff here all the time that has no business existing. We destroy most of it, honestly. But in regards to magical tomes, we try to keep all of them on

file. The information inside is dangerous, but it's our job to have it. We have texts bound in human skin and written in blood, that kind of thing."

"Like the Grimoire."

"Oh, we have nothing nearly that powerful. The Grimoire isn't just a regular book, and the Library was unable to copy it for safekeeping." Sofia leaned against the railing and crossed her arms around the staff. "But just about every madman who delved too deep into the arcane kept a diary. Or madwoman, as it were."

"Like witches."

"Not all witches are bad. We used to work with them all the time, prior to magic getting sealed away. They used to have a saying, knowledge itself is power. As a repository for knowledge, it was only natural for mages of all kinds to pass through the halls of the library. But once a person sells their soul for magical power, we want nothing to do with them. The process of doing so is pretty well documented, actually. A lot of wannabe witches in the modern era will throw together a Book of Shadows which is often just a long-term exercise in creative writing. We've got a bunch of those in the Failed Magic section. But every now and then, you will stumble across a gem where the writer figured out a real incantation and eventually figured out how to contact a demon. The musings of the author usually take a pretty hard shift afterward. Normally we lock anything up that involves knowledge regarding the human soul." Sofia looked at him. "If you were a book, we'd lock you up, too."

"I may not be a book," he replied. "But I do know my way around a good binding."

Sofia grunted and looked away, but she was blushing. The mood had officially lightened.

"Anyway...there are some books about that kind of thing in the restricted section. The odds of finding something of use to you there are much higher, but this is that fine line we've talked about."

"I understand," he said. "We're not looking for forever. And we're definitely not trading souls with anything. Think of it like the internet. We've just turned Safe Search off is all."

“You humans and your damned internet.” Sofia sighed. “It will be awhile until we get there. I can look through those books for you in the meantime and see what they contain.”

“Thank you.” Mike grabbed a book at random and handed it to her. “I would help, but can’t read it. I don’t suppose you have a trick up your sleeve for that?”

Sofia grunted. “Not really,” she muttered. The cyclops set her staff in a tiny groove which somehow locked it into place in an upright position. She sat on the rail and opened the book, her long fingers delicately parting the pages as she searched. Her purple eye pulsed with light in time with the crystal on her staff. After a couple minutes of searching, she shook her head and set the book down.

“Useless,” she said.

“That bad?”

“The author thinks that bathing in the urine of virgins will prolong your life. They have to be desirable women, by the way.” The cyclops smirked. “I do believe virginal women are the one thing you’re running short on.”

“Hey, poor guy just wanted to justify his kink, can’t blame him for it.”

“Poor woman, actually.” Sofia set the book on the floor and grabbed another one. “Though based on how much experimental evidence she collected, I would say she was doing just fine for herself.”

Mike chuckled. “Depending on your definition of virginity, I bet she used the Lesbian Loophole.”

“She had a whole chapter on it, actually. But unless you’re interested in the fluid dynamics of mid-century lesbians, I’d suggest we move on.”

“Agreed.” Mike sat next to Sofia and watched as she dug through the contents of the books they had collected. Though he didn’t understand the words written within, he would often see glowing letters that were probably tied to the search terms the Head Librarian had decided on. Sofia would always stop on those pages to carefully scrutinize their contents before ultimately giving up.

Sadly, the pattern in the first few books seemed to revolve around pseudo-magic involving blood, semen, or urine. Many other books contained anecdotal evidence that sounded more like medieval urban legends. Sofia did

actually find a book that contained a story about the Library itself and how it could grant immortality to those who roamed its halls.

“You know, is there a way we could use that?” Mike asked. “I mean, could Tink live here for a while after the baby comes? Even if she just slept here at night, that would increase her time remaining by...um...” He tried to do that math in his head.

Sofia grunted. “Based on what you’ve told me, there’s a very real possibility that she may become too old to survive childbirth itself. The Library can’t help you there. And I shouldn’t have to say this, but there’s a very good reason people call Death merciful.”

“Because he brings snacks?” Mike smiled weakly, hoping to keep the mood light.

“I know Tink would do anything for you or her child.” Sofia got a faraway look in her eye. “What makes Naia’s magic so special is that it preserves your health until your final demise. You go from being perfectly fit to dead without stopping in between. What you end up missing out on is years of feeling your body weaken while your mind usually remains sharp, decades of aches and pains, of your eyesight blurring for no reason. In the end, all these things make it easier to let go. I doubt you would want for Tink to be frozen in time at the end of her own days, her body gnarled and bent as she hides inside the Library and waits for her own child to come for a visit.”

“Which won’t be often because the baby won’t grow in here.” Mike sighed. “So the Library isn’t exactly a good idea unless she stays here while in good health.”

The cyclops nodded. “I should also add that this place wasn’t meant to be a refuge for those to avoid the natural cycle. It is primarily a place of learning, and it will adapt as it sees fit to maintain this function. Myself, Eulalie, and the rats are currently working to better the Library, and the magic recognizes that. But if it were to fill with people not interested in serving its purpose, the rules would change. This place is alive in its own way, Caretaker. Sometimes, if you just sit and listen for a while, it’s almost like you can hear it breathing.”

“Is that something you’ve done a lot?” Mike saw Sofia stiffen up at his words. He placed his hand on her thigh and squeezed. “Because you’ve been here a long time, I mean.”

She nodded. "I went through a period of time where I would read books out loud in places where I could hear my own echo. I would pretend that it was somebody else."

"How did you not go mad?"

"Who says I haven't?" Sofia wiped a tear from her eye. "Maybe that's what I'm going through right now. The Library has found a proper replacement for me in Eulalie and no longer constrains the effects on my mind. Perhaps what ails me is the beginning of the end."

"I wouldn't let that happen," Mike said, then leaned against her. "None of us would. I don't think you realize how much we all look up to you."

Sofia's breath hitched and she barked out a laugh. "If that was a pun, I'm going to throw you off this pedestal."

"Unintentional," he said. "But maybe you do know how the others feel and the problem is that you don't feel worthy of it."

Sofia didn't reply. Instead, she leaned back into him, her shoulder pressing against Mike's forehead. They said nothing as they continued to soar toward their destination. All around them, the columns thinned out and the ceiling became a large archway. The floor vanished, becoming a dark pit impenetrable by the light. The columns gave way, too, and now they were in a tunnel with smooth walls that had doors built into them every hundred feet or so.

"So this is the Restricted Section."

"The first part of it, yes." Sofia stood and grabbed her staff. "You should know that most of these doors don't actually go anywhere. When you step inside, they lock you in a cell until the Head Librarian comes to find you. Or doesn't, as the case may be."

"Are there corpses in these rooms?"

She nodded. "Some of them. It's the Head Librarian's prerogative whether they let someone out. Once inside, the intruder is scanned and their intentions and how they got there become known. There are some very powerful individuals who vanished from history because they tried to sneak in here to steal secrets and ended up starving in those rooms instead. The walls are enchanted to weaken the body and prevent any kind of spellcasting."

“So you essentially have a prison.”

“Not a prison. There is no assumption here of care. We either let them out, or let them die. There is no in-between.”

“I see.” Mike noticed they were drifting toward a blank section of wall. “Why are we stopping here?”

“Misdirection is a basic tenet of magic,” said Sofia. The pedestal came to a stop against the smooth stone of the long, foreboding hallway. She took the staff and knocked on the wall. A thin seam appeared, and the wall folded inward, allowing them entry. “This is yet another failsafe.”

The temperature dropped. Mike rubbed his arms and followed her inside. The hallway itself was smoothly bored into solid stone, which terminated in yet another door nearly thirty feet away. There was no light source save for the crystal on the Head Librarian’s staff.

“How dangerous are these books?” Mike asked. “I’m getting some major Vault vibes here.”

“Arbitrarily? This would be the minimal security section of the Library. Some of the books contained within aren’t dangerous because of their contents, but because of the magic bound to them.” The staff’s light was reflected in Sofia’s eye. “There’s a room in the Library that only contains a single book bound in the flesh of a being from outside our world. It is said that anyone who has opened it has immediately gone mad and torn out their own eyes.”

“Seriously?”

Sofia nodded. “In my younger days, I went to inspect the holding facility and only got within a hundred feet of the door before I saw my own demise.”

“How?” Sofia’s precognition only allowed her to see her immediate future if it involved pain or her death. “If you weren’t going inside, why would that happen?”

“That’s just it. I never intended to go inside.” She looked at him, her pupil dilated by the low light. “But I learned that even getting close to the door would have triggered a vision of going inside and becoming mad. It was a domino effect of sorts, and we both know that time and space get weird around those...things.”

“Shit.” Shaking his head, Mike turned his attention toward the door they now stood at. “Who wrote that book?”

“No idea.” Sofia touched her hand to the door and an invisible glyph revealed itself in a pulse of light and the door opened. “There’s nothing more sinister than a mysterious book with no author. Perhaps it wrote itself.”

Mike shivered. Even though a self-writing book sounded silly, he didn’t dare question it. Things like logic and the linear flow of nature didn’t pertain to the Outsiders, and he wanted nothing to do with them. Together, he and Sofia stepped inside the room, which was a large, dome-shaped chamber lined with books. A trio of tables had been placed in the middle of the room and a large crystal installed in the ceiling ignited, filling the room with light. Along the edges of the room, several books were outlined with magic, waiting to be plucked from their shelves.

“You should allow me to do this part,” said Sofia as she gestured toward one of the tables. “There are numerous safeguards specific to each title. Please don’t open any of the books without me present.”

“I have zero intention of doing so.” Mike walked to the closest table and sat in one of the chairs. He watched the cyclops do a perimeter sweep of the room, one hand held out and over the books as if drawing warmth from a flame. She pulled a few titles and brought them back to the table before setting back out to retrieve more.

“Um...Sofia?” He looked at the stack of books on the table. Even though all of them were closed, he could hear distant murmurs. One of them was actually bound shut with a leather strap. “Some of these are talking.”

“When you pump enough magic into a book, it can take on a life of its own.”

“So these are possessed?” He reached for a book and paused. When it didn’t trigger his danger sense, he picked it up to examine it. The volume from this particular text was louder than the others, but in a language he couldn’t place. It sounded similar to French.

Sofia looked over her shoulder at him. “The one strapped shut is. The others are not.”

“So then what am I hearing?”

“Echoes. Are you familiar with the different types of spiritual manifestation?”

“Intimately.” He turned the book over and examined the spine, then set it down. The whispering became muted. “These books are like a residual haunting. Highly charged with emotional energy of some sort, but no real intelligence.”

“Close enough,” whispered Cecilia in his ear. Mike looked around, but the banshee hadn’t manifested. “Worry not, my love. No harm shall come to you while I watch.”

He smiled and leaned back in his chair. Invisible fingers massaged his shoulders. Melting into the pressure, he tipped his head back and sighed.

“What are you doing?”

Mike opened his eyes to see Sofia standing over him, holding a trio of tomes against her chest. Her breasts were compressed enough that they actually spilled out over the top and sides of the books.

“Relaxing,” he said.

“That explains the stupid look on your face.” Sofia set down some more books. “I’ve got a few more to grab and we can get started.”

“Are any of them in English?” he asked.

“Old English.” Sofia organized some of the books into a pile. “There. You can look through those once we’re ready.”

“Great.” He looked at the pile. “Can we get snacks in here?”

“Check the corners of the room,” said Sofia. She pushed a ladder out of the way to grab a book on the top shelf behind it. “Consumables will appear there.”

Mike stood from his seat and was happy to see that a plate of food was already waiting for him. Small tea sandwiches were stacked neatly on a platter next to a two liter bottle of Coke and a pair of glasses. “Book snacks,” he muttered cheerily as he brought it all over to the table. Sofia had two more books to add, then sat down across from him.

“Hopefully there’s something here,” he said as he pulled a book from the Old English pile. “Can I start?”

Sofia nodded, then picked up a book of her own. Mike's book muttered to him as he held it. When he opened the pages, a scratchy voice spoke directly in his ear, narrating the words on the page.

"Audiobooks for the damned," he whispered, then flipped through the pages. It was an alchemist's diary. Eventually, he stumbled on some passages about everlasting life and the Philosopher's stone. Sadly, the next two chapters were anecdotal in nature, the author writing ceaselessly about the stone's powers without any information on how to create it.

The next book was a diary that was difficult to read. The handwriting was not only bad, but there were water stains on the pages. This one detailed the Fountain of Youth, along with vague information about its location. If the deceased Captain Francois was to be believed, then it had dried up.

Still, it wouldn't be a bad idea to track the place down and see it for himself. Ratu would probably be able to extract any lingering water, or perhaps even ferret out the cause of the magic that had extended Francois' life. He put this book on the corner of the table so that they could take it with them.

If Sofia was having any luck, he couldn't tell. She was stacking her books in an arbitrary fashion, and said very little to him. They shared the sandwiches as a couple of hours passed. Eventually, he had three books to take back with him. Sofia added two more to his pile, which was a little disheartening.

However, he did notice she ignored the book that had been strapped shut. When Sofia stood and grabbed some books to put them back, he cleared his throat.

"Are you going to look at that one?" he asked, pointing at the possessed book.

Sofia scowled. "Strange. I had forgotten it was even there."

"How?"

The cyclops gave him a dirty look. "It's possessed," she said. "That's exactly the kind of thing a possessed book does."

"Oh." Mike didn't like the sounds of that. "Should we be worried?"

"No. It's likely that it's just trying to get out of here and would have snuck itself into the pile anyway. I would have figured it out before we left when I

counted them.” The cyclops sat down and grabbed the possessed book. Her staff made a humming sound as she undid the strap. “The Library’s magic will keep it from harming us, but I would still be wary in case it tries something different.”

“What do you mean by different?” As soon as Sofia opened the cover, a hideous wailing sound filled the room. Books along the wall were yanked from their shelves, landing so that their pages were now open. Hideous whispers filled his ears, and he clapped his hands over them to block out the sound. Sofia looked at him and shouted, but he couldn’t hear her.

Tendrils of darkness erupted from the book, spreading across the floor and picking up fallen books. It painted the walls black and slowly oozed up to cover the crystal and blot out its light.

“Fuck!” Mike jumped across the table and grabbed Sofia by the wrist just as the lights went out. A hideous cackle stabbed the air, and the room filled with fog. The whispers of the other books vanished and the air became still.

Eventually, Sofia broke the silence. “This is what I meant by different,” she said. Mike heard her tap the staff on the floor. “Shit.”

“It’s not working?”

“No,” she said. He heard the clattering of wood. “That’s not my staff. Damn book tricked me.”

“Where are we?” he asked. As if in response, a loud bell tolled. The fog lifted and he saw that they stood on a cobblestone street surrounded by buildings made of brick.

“I don’t know,” she replied. Spectral figures marched past them, shadows of men, women, and even children. “This is new territory for me.”

Mike studied one of the shadows and saw that it lacked any sort of soul. It was little more than a construct. “This one is an echo,” he said, then looked at the others around him. “This whole place feels that way.” He looked up at the sky and saw that there wasn’t one. Instead, the fog persisted, broken up only by the lanterns along the street.

“I guess it’s time we found our way out.” Sofia looked along the street in both directions, then picked one at random. “But you should know that if we’re in here, it’s likely that the entity is with us. At no time should you assume that we’re safe. We’re trapped in here with it.”

“You’ve got that backward.” Mike grinned, then closed his eyes. He felt Cecilia’s cool touch on the back of his neck. “We’re not trapped with it. It’s trapped with us.”

When he opened his eyes, he saw Sofia giving him a look of disgust.

“Are you finished?” she asked.

“It always sounds badass in the movies,” he replied.

“We’re not in a movie.” A queer look crossed her face and she smirked. “In fact, you could say that we’ve lost ourselves in a good book.”

“Damnit,” Mike groaned as he followed her into the fog. He felt robbed somehow, but couldn’t explain why.