

**TBD**

Ana sat at the help desk, going through the large bin of returns. There had been a nasty cold front with rain lately, which meant business had picked up. She stamped the return date into a copy of *A Wrinkle in Time* and set it aside. Louise walked by with a stack of books in her arms and a new notice for the bulletin board. Ana watched her pass, then sank back in her chair with a sigh.

It had been two weeks since she had gone out on a proper hunt. Two weeks of misery, forced to hide in her church at night and hopefully catch some passing birds. She had been forced to up her calorie intake in regards to human food, but now felt a bit off as a result.

Eating nearly every day at Mattie's aside, her change in diet was causing her legs to cramp inside of the confines of the wheelchair. It wasn't the kind of cramp her human muscles felt. Rather, it was the dull ache of having a fist clenched for too long. Last night it had taken her several minutes just to get out of her wheelchair, her legs locked into place. She couldn't even massage her legs but had instead relied on a super hot bath to try and relax them.

Darren walked past the desk, a massive toolbox in his left hand. The muscles in his arm bulged through the tight fabric of his shirt and she nearly let out a sigh. Her sudden shift in diet had dramatically decreased her sexual cravings, which was an unexpected upswing. Her body was going into survival mode, meaning that even if she bred, she likely couldn't conceive.

Mixed blessings, she thought to herself. She hadn't seen the men who hunted her, but she knew it was just a matter of time before they came snooping around again. Well, maybe. It was her hope that they would assume she had died in the blast. It was all the town had talked about the next day, and several rumors had bounced around in Mattie's and at the library. Her favorite theory involved the aliens that had crashed at Roswell crashing their saucer into the lake, but the most common involved some idiots with stolen dynamite.

*Close enough.* She sipped at her water and let out a sigh. Louise had gone on a diet at least a couple of times since Ana started working for the library. The woman had become an irritable mess for weeks and had grumbled about the wonderful smells that saturated the air around Mattie's every morning. At least a few of the patrons who had come in to browse had smelled just as good to Ana, a cruel reminder that she was never more than a couple steps ahead of her own instincts.

No, she would abduct a pet or something long before hunting down a human. Or even leave town altogether. Now she wondered if she could fake a vacation and move on to safer hunting grounds for a week.

The minutes crawled by, impossibly slow. Her stomach growled and she fought the urge to lay her head down on the desk. Storytime was coming up in half an hour, and she would be forced to read books to the equivalent of an open box of doughnuts.

Louise screamed out in the lobby and came in the doors, her arms now empty.

"Darren!" She called for him several times before he appeared, his toolbox left behind.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"We have mice!" The head librarian shook her head violently, a strand of hair popping free of her bun. "I saw a couple of them out in the front lobby, they ran into the storage room."

"I'll go get some traps." He left, walking out the front door.

Louise sat down next to Ana, placing a hand dramatically on her own chest.

"At least it wasn't a spider," Ana said.

"Close enough. I don't need mice in here chewing up the pages and shitting everywhere." She took Ana's water and drank half of it in one go. She picked up a book and fanned herself with the pages open.

"If you can watch the desk, I need to go use the bathroom." Ana moved her chair backward and around the large desk, leaving Louise behind. Once in the lobby, she moved as quickly as she could, wheeling her chair into the large storage room. Darren was looking through the boxes, trying to find the traps.

"Do we only have these kind?" he asked, holding up a large rat trap.

Ana swallowed the lump in her throat. "Yeah." She didn't think he'd find them so fast.

"Hmm." He tossed the trap to the side. "I think I can build something that won't kill them. Not their fault they wandered into the wrong building."

"What will you do with them after you catch them?"

He shrugged. "Release them out in the woods? Let nature deal with them."

*Oh, I wish you would.* She could smell them now, hiding somewhere in the room, two little cupcakes with tails. "How are you going to catch them?"

"Hmm." He looked around the room. "I could probably bait them with some food. Maybe a box with a hole in the top?"

"They'll just chew through it."

"Shit, you're right."

"I know." She rolled over to an old waste bin and held it up. "If you dump this out, it should be smooth enough on the inside that they can't get out."

"Then how do I get them in?"

"Easy." She pointed to one of the tables. "Lay a toilet paper tube on the edge of the table with some peanut butter in it. They'll fall in with the tube."

Darren fixed her with an incredulous look. "That's... brilliant. I never would have thought of that."

"Uh huh." She was salivating over the idea of being able to snack on a couple of mice. "There's some peanut butter in our pantry." It was one of the few things she kept on hand because she had used it more than once as a lure. Her webs could hold pretty much anything, but coaxing a creature into them took some work.

"Thanks, Ana." When he smiled, it ignited something in her. Her heart fluttered like a moth to his flame, and she once again noticed the large muscles of his chest and wondered if their offspring would inherit his musculature.

“Yeah, well, just something I read about in a book.”

He left, and she debated climbing out of her chair and trying to catch them by hand. There were two of them, running along the back wall beneath one of the shelves. She looked at the trash bin Darren had set aside and let out a loud sigh.

She would wait. With any luck, she could sneak in for a quick bite after he caught one. Hanging her head, she rolled back to the main lobby, licking her lips in anticipation. The light coming in through the windows was slowly vanishing beneath a blanket of grey clouds. She sniffed the air, tasting the sudden shift in humidity.

A storm was approaching.

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Cyrus hung up the payphone, his shoulders slumped against the wind and rain. He crossed the motel parking lot and knocked twice before entering his room. Jeffrey was lying on one of the beds, tilting a beer to his mouth and watching the news.

“And?” Jeffrey asked, not bothering to look his way. Cyrus sighed, then took off his coat to hang it up on the rack by the door. He took a seat at the little table by the window, his eyes on the small notebook he had left there.

“They want us to be sure.”

“Fuck.” For a moment, it looked like Jeffrey was going to throw his bottle. It had been almost two weeks since the incident on the ridge. They had cornered the Arachne and she had gone over the side of the cliff, climbing along its edges. Cyrus had used an extremely powerful spell to strike the rocks with lightning, expecting to shock the spider into the water indirectly and maybe even drown it.

The spell had gone awry. It had been a difficult undertaking to properly align the Storm rod, and he took a huge measure of the blame on his own shoulders. Instead of a cascade of lightning across the face of the cliff, it had all focused on the center, blasting a large hole through the earth and destroying a centuries-old magical item. This, in turn, had triggered an avalanche of stone into the lake, sending a huge wave across. He and Jeffrey had spent the next several hours frantically scanning the shoreline for her body. The Arachne feared water, and he hoped she had been crushed beneath the rubble, doomed to rot at the lake’s bottom.

The local police had shown up the next day and determined, in their limited knowledge, that someone had blown the damn place up. That had resulted in the feds arriving, more lawmen than Cyrus had cared to count. With hesitation, the two had fled to this motel. They had made several calls to the Order asking for instructions, but they had been stuck in a holding pattern while the Council deliberated their next move.

“So how are we supposed to be sure?” Jeffrey asked, his gaze fixated on the screen.

“The Oracle has started spouting nonsense whenever its asked about her, but it won’t say she’s dead. They said it was like radio interference, as if the Oracle was listening in on another frequency. I hate to say it out loud, but she may have gotten away.”

Jeffrey snorted. “Unless she had a submarine under those cliffs, there’s no way she could have escaped.”

"It's not for us to question their decision. They command, we obey." Cyrus wrung his hands together. "There's something else though. Unrelated."

"Oh?"

"Sir Marcus is dead." Cyrus had barely known the man, but he had been Jeffrey's mentor. Marcus had been a legend among the Knights of the Order, a man whose exploits defied explanation. Little had been said of him recently and rumors of his involvement with a powerful coven of witches had slowly spread through the grapevine. The last story he had heard was that Marcus had stumbled across a highly secretive group and had been planning a raid to capture them all for questioning.

"How?"

"In his sleep. It took them a while to retrieve his body, but when they did, they discovered three tiny holes in his neck, like the sting of an insect. The venom was long gone, but..." Cyrus shook his head. "They think it was a succubus."

Jeffrey stood up, his beer forgotten. When he got to the door, he grabbed his own coat and stepped out into the rain.

"I'm going out," he told Cyrus, then slammed the door. Cyrus watched him cross the parking lot and then the street, headed for the bar that was over there. He checked the clock and noted the time.

He would give Jeffrey a couple hours to cool down and then retrieve him. He couldn't blame him for being angry. If Marcus really had been killed by a succubus, there would be no reprieve for his soul until the thing had been destroyed and sent back to hell. Unless the foul demon decided to destroy it long before then. There was no telling what the demon would do.

Cyrus shivered. Many of his brothers had perished since his childhood, but he always took comfort that their souls had moved on as planned. The idea of an eternity of torment or, even worse, absolute destruction terrified him. Some day, he too would meet his fate at the end of something's claws, or maybe its fangs. Members of the Order rarely died of old age, and those who did tended to be the ones running the show.

Thunder rumbled outside, rattling the thin windows of his hotel room. Opening a bag of sunflower seeds, he sat down at the table and popped a few in his mouth. He worked the seeds around in his mouth, splitting them with his teeth and setting the shells in the ashtray. He pulled out their map of the woods and gazed over it, tapping the shattered cliffs with his fingers.

*Where are you hiding?* He drew an X through the lake at the quarry. It was going to be a long night.

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Darren stared at the cardboard tube in his hand with a dollop of peanut butter on it. He balanced it on the edge of the table and looked down on it from above to make sure it was directly over the center of the trash can.

"Huh." He pushed the tube back just a little bit, wondering what the best placement would be. Not wanting to overthink it, he left it as is. He tightened the jar on the peanut butter and pushed it back against the wall. Strangely, Ana had a couple jars of the stuff stored in the back of their cupboard at home.

Leaning over the bin, he contemplated the drop. Should he put something on the bottom so the mouse didn't get hurt?

"That looks nasty." Little Mike used his bayonet to push on the edges of the trap. The two boards folded inward slightly.

"Yeah it does, but is there something else in there?" Dwayne had spotted the trap, and they had gathered around it for a closer look. "These nails don't even look sharp."

"Will that really kill you though?" Hayden tossed in a rock and the boards folded in, the nails slapping together. "I don't get it."

"That's the thing about traps." Cutter spit in the hole between the two boards. "This isn't meant to kill a man, but everyone else he's with."

"How so?"

Cutter knelt down. "Take a whiff boys."

Darren didn't have to. He'd already heard some of the stories from some of the others.

"Gross." Little Mike covered his nose. "Fuckin' Viet Cong and their nasty shit."

"That's right. Some traps are meant to kill a man, others to maim. This one, though, is meant to create a liability." He used the edge of his knife to scrape the tar-like substance off one of the nails. "They rub their shit on here. You step in one of these, you become a liability to your squad, one way or another. In a firefight, it's far easier to gun a man down when he's trying to drag his squadmate. Outside of fighting, even a scratch can make you horrible sick, maybe even kill you after the fact. Demoralizing."

"Disgusting is what it is. Do they dunk the nails in their own shit, or hover over this with their pants down?" Hayden pried up the boards to reveal that a single spike had been embedded in the ground. Even if the nails missed, that spike would easily pierce a boot and pin someone there.

"Now that's nasty." Cutter grabbed at the spike and yanked it free, then tossed it aside. "Fill this shit up so that none of our boys get stabbed."

"Nobody's getting stabbed today." Darren said, staring into the depths of the trashcan for several seconds before leaving it be. The mouse would be fine, and he would let it go somewhere safe. The library wasn't a war zone, after all.

It was dark out. Storm clouds had gobbled up any remaining light in the sky. Other than some distant thunder, it actually wasn't too bad out. He watched the rain fall, fighting off another memory. The smell of wet pavement kept him there, kept his mind from wandering to a place of mud and corpses.

There were no streetlights by the library, which meant a dark walk home. Instead, he turned his attention to a streetlamp a couple blocks away. He could see the raindrops clearly there, highlighted by the lamp up above. The rain trickled down his forehead and across his face. Turning his head up into the rain, he held out his hands, pretending that they could ever be washed clean of the blood he had spilled.

Bright headlights appeared around the corner, and the car slowed down when it drew near. He squinted through the beam and saw that Sheriff Walters was behind the driver's seat. Walter's pulled up alongside him.

“Don’t suppose you’d see clear to do me a favor?”

“I’ve got time.” He opened the passenger seat and got in. “Where are we headed?”

“A bar out on the edge of town. I got word of a drunk who broke the jukebox and then beat up a couple regulars. Ordinarily I wouldn’t ask, but I thought maybe you could be my backup.”

Darren frowned. “I don’t have to carry a gun or anything, do I?”

“Nah.” Walters squinted through the rain. “Just have my back when I ask him to leave. It’s just me tonight, but the men he put to the pavement, well, they’re far younger than I am.”

“I’ll do what I can.” Darren sat in silence as the town disappeared behind them.