

In a certain world, there was a vast lake, and on the shores of this lake there was a great forest, and rising from this forest there was a towering mountain, and on the slopes of this mountain there was a mighty castle, and in the depths of this castle there was a long hall, and at the end of this hall there was a heavy door of purest silver. The door was locked three times.

The first lock took the form of an iron lock, as large as a grown man's head and carved all over with ancient runes and dead languages, promising a dire fate to anyone who so much as dared to touch it. There was no keyhole anywhere on it, though it opened with a key.

The second lock took the form of a pair of guards standing ever vigilant outside the door. They could not be seen behind the crystalline shell of their armor, not their faces nor their hands nor any part of them, but they were tall Sidhe warriors, proud and ancient in their service to their wicked queen.

Or, at least, that was the form the second lock *should* have taken. Not even Sidhe could serve forever without break or pause, and many, many guards had rotated through this position over the past weeks and months. Some were all that they should be, but many others failed to live up to the duties of their position. It was difficult to get them to grasp the sheer magnitude of the threat they contained. It was difficult for most of them to conceive of a mere mortal who could pose a threat to them alone, let alone to this castle and everything in it, up to and including the queen herself.

It was difficult for the queen to conceive of such a thing, which was why this room contained its occupant. Had she grasped the peril she was in, the sheer *magnitude* of the threat she courted, she would never have dared to risk arousing his genuine anger.

But she had dared, and none had questioned, and thus we found ourselves here.

How much different, I wondered, how changed might the entire world might be, had but a single person presented a single choice chosen only slightly differently? Such a delicate web we weave, that a gentle tug to a single strand might bring the whole of the grand construction to the ground in a tangled heap.

But that was a matter of imagination. And I did not deal in imaginations. I dealt in realities, in truths, and the truth of this was that the choice had *not* been made differently. The queen of wicked faeries had made her choice, and placed her bets, and it fell to the rest of us to live with the consequences.

I had time to muse on this, and on a great many other things, as I walked down that long hall. The sound of my footsteps was my only company, echoing from the stone walls with each step, a furtive *tap-tap-tap* here meeting up with a more assertive *click*, there, until it sounded as though a whole company were walking beside me.

But I stood alone. Forever and always, I stood alone.

"Gentlemen," I said, drawing to a stop outside the door. "Here for the usual."

The guard standing to the left of the door nodded, once, and the two uncrossed their halberds from before the door. I was expected. A formality, this exchange, bereft of meaning and import.

It seemed so very hollow. More so than usual. My current assignment was wearing on me, in more ways than one.

"Has the prisoner woken or moved?" I asked, reaching for the key in my pocket.

"Nah," said the guard to the right of the door, deviating from the script. "She is a sweet one, though, isn't she? Doesn't do anything but lie there, but we could still have some fun with her, I think."

The air in that hall, buried under so many thousands of tons of earth, was deathly silent and perfectly still. It would be incorrect, therefore, to say that the hall went still at his words. It would be misleading to say that the fall of a feather to the floor below could have been heard in the silence after his words.

These things, however, would not be *wrong*.

Sound entered the hall again as I walked up to the offending guard, the sound of my footsteps quiet, a counterpoint that did not so much disrupt the silence as emphasize it, the way a candle could illuminate a cave while serving only to reinforce how very, very dark it was.

My current shape was smaller than his, by a wide margin, and there was nothing about it which at a glance would have given an impression of disproportionate strength hidden by the size of my frame.

But I had no difficulty in grasping the guard by the throat in one hand and lifting him off the ground, until my hand was above my head. The strength of my true form, showing through the glamour I wore. I held him there and pinned him against the wall, not saying anything. Not yet.

The other guard shifted his grip on the halberd, as though considering attacking me.

I looked at him. Not saying anything, not threatening or rebuking. My expression was blank and placid, with no hint of a growl or a grimace, a smile or a snarl. Simply meeting his eyes, and allowing him to see the choices before him, the ramifications which followed from each of the paths he might walk.

He made his choice, and the subtle tension, the hint of violence, faded away as though it never were. He set his halberd against the ground again and looked pointedly away, down the hall.

I turned my attention back to the other guard, the one who had misspoken. He was beginning to choke now, beginning to strangle. He clutched at my hand with both of his, his halberd dropped forgotten to the floor, but both of his hands together could not peel a single one of my fingers away from his throat.

"The prisoner is to be treated with all appropriate respect," I said quietly. "Do you understand?"

"Can't...breathe," he wheezed.

I brought my other hand up and slapped him. Gently, by my standards, which meant it was only hard enough to rattle his skull within its helmet rather than crush it.

"If I want to know the status of your breathing, I will ask," I said. "Do you understand?"

He nodded frantically, and I released him, letting him drop to the ground. He collapsed when he hit.

"The prisoner will be treated with respect," I said. It was a statement of fact, not loud nor brash, but with the quiet certitude of someone with no doubts. "You will behave as though you were gentlemen. There will be no inappropriate contact. There will be no cruelties nor indignities. There will be no indulgences of your baser instincts. There will be no fun. Do you understand?"

Again, he nodded.

"Good. Because if you do not comply with these instructions, there will be consequences. Soon or late I will hear of it, and I will hold you personally responsible, without care for who is guilty. I will hunt you, and I will find you, and I will not be inclined towards mercy or reason. I swear this by my own given name. I will hound you, such that you spend weeks in fear, without rest or peace. Where you would find shelter, I will take it from you, that you may know only isolation. Where you would find succor, I will take it from you, that you may know only despair. I swear this by oak and mistletoe and blackest iron. I will make you beg for the mercy of death, and I will deny that mercy. I swear this by the honor and the name of my Queen."

He was staring at me in shocked horror now, and even the other guard, who was still very carefully not watching, couldn't entirely keep from showing his reaction to what I'd said. With reason; that was a very serious oath, something that was not said lightly or without reason. When people heard, and I had no doubt that they would hear, some would say that I had gotten soft, to invoke such an oath on behalf of a prisoner.

The rest would remember what happened the last time I was called on to fulfill a similar oath, and they would not question my resolve.

I left him there on the ground, and unlocked the door.

The room inside was, it seemed, too simple to merit such defenses. There was no hoard of treasure, no ancient weapon or caged nightmare. It was not even a particularly large room. On the contrary, it was quite simple and plain, a small chamber cut into the mountain and finished with silver. The walls and floor and ceiling were all coated with silver, a prince's ransom of silver, and everywhere there were more of the runes and sigils, warning trespassers of the dire fates they courted by entering without authorization.

In one corner of the room was a bed, and on that bed was the reason I was there.

As usual, before so much as looking at the occupant, I examined the devices around the bed. Some—the intravenous line with its attached mixture of glucose and amino acids, the various monitors that hummed quietly around the bed—had been stolen from mortal hospitals. Other devices served to monitor and regulate other functions, things that mortal science was incapable of handling.

The devices were functioning as they ought to. I knew they were; a mistake here would not be tolerated. Knowing how seriously the queen took this work, none of the technicians would dare to risk failure.

But I also had no desire to risk it, and so I took the time to check on each of the devices. The intravenous line was clear, and the bag of nutrients would not need replaced for another hour at least. There were other bags, with blood to replace what had been taken for diagnostics and experimentation, with antibiotic drugs to help ward off diseases of the flesh, but these were not as critical.

An examination of the monitors suggested nothing amiss. The prisoner had not regained consciousness at any point, as the guard had said. She had had no contact with the world beyond these walls, excepting the regular visits of the nurses, physicians, and witches that kept her alive and in good condition.

I relaxed slightly, and sat down in the comfortable chair next to the bed. For the first time since entering, I looked at the prisoner herself.

She was slight of build, with classically Japanese features. Not unlike my own appearance, although there were slight differences. Efforts had been made, but there were limits to what could be done, even when both modern human technologies and ancient fae magics were in play. After such a long period of unconsciousness, consequences were to be expected. A certain amount of emaciation, of atrophication!!, was inevitable.

She was naked, making such comparisons easier, and making it so that there was no hiding the changes she had undergone. I looked her over with a knowledgeable and critical eye, marking and taking note of each of those changes.

Progressive loss of body fat from the breasts, buttocks, and abdomen. Progressive loss of muscle mass from all major muscles, most obviously the arms and legs, but also apparent in the torso, the abdomen, even the neck. Loss of muscle tone. Loss of skin tone. Mild but progressive hair loss.

It was, I thought, good that my memory was nearly flawless, so that I did not need frequent confirmations or reminders. If I were to use her current appearance as the basis for my own, I would fool no one at all.

I hesitated before reaching out to touch her, steeling myself and gathering my resolve. There were few things I feared, and in truth this was not one of them, but there was still a certain hesitation. Not out of fear, I thought, so much as guilt.

The prisoner looked unconscious, and in some ways she was. But that was a simplistic way to view it, an excessively binary one. For our purposes she could not be truly awake or aware, and thus the potion she had been dosed with removed consciousness and volition. But at the same time, I needed access to the knowledge locked within her brain, and thus genuine unconsciousness was not sufficient.

The state she was in, then, was something of an intermediate step. Not awake or aware, not cognizant of her surroundings, not capable of taking voluntary action. But conscious all the same, locked in her own mind in a manner very similar to a perpetual dream.

Or, as the case might be, a nightmare. Thus the twinge of guilt, the momentary reminder from the tiny spark of a conscience which remained within me that what I was doing was wrong.

I knew better than most how wrong it was. I had been dosed with the same potion, to establish myself in my current role. It had been a brief matter, just long enough to establish myself as her, drugged and hidden while an impostor took her place.

The subject of the deception had found the first impostor almost immediately, as predicted. But who would think to look at the person thus rescued with suspicion? Who would think to question whether the impostor they found had been only a distraction, a cover for another, greater impostor?

Such was the way of the Sidhe. One deception covered for another, and if you only thought to look, the truth was plain to see. But so few ever looked at what was closest to them.

Still, though, I remembered how this potion had felt. Not just the helplessness, but the consciousness, the awareness of my own condition. Left to its own devices, outside of my control, my mind had naturally gravitated to darker memories, all the things I had done which I had cause to regret.

From what I had seen of the prisoner's mind, I knew that she had nothing so horrific weighing down conscience as what I had done. She had no memories of torment to match what I had endured.

All the same, her mind was not a place where I would wish to be trapped. Not at all.

And there, I supposed, was the true reason why I had been willing to stake my honor in her defense. I knew that what was being done here was wrong. I prevented the guards from raping her to soothe my guilty conscience for the far greater rape which I had been party to. They would have taken only her body, a terrible crime, to be sure, but one which would pass. I had taken her mind, and her life, and made them my own.

There were reasons I seldom indulged in introspection.

Finally, I worked up my nerve, and rested my hand on her forehead.

The room disappeared, replaced by the mad dreamscapes that spun and danced behind the prisoner's closed eyelids.

Some time later, I opened my eyes again, and took my hand away. I had gotten what I came for, learned what I needed.

I had made mistakes. Too open on some topics, too concealing of others. Too many questions dodged. Too supportive when I ought to have been critical.

On the whole, I had been too quiet, too reserved. An inevitability, and a mistake that I very commonly made. It was generally safer to err on the side of quiet rather than noise. No disguise could be entirely perfect, and thus it was safer to avoid notice, to avoid drawing attention to myself. Not even my skills could stand up to scrutiny indefinitely.

In this case, though, it was a weakness. The prisoner was not quiet or reserved by nature; acting as though she were had the potential to attract precisely the notice that I wished to avoid. To this point, it had been overlooked or attributed to stress. Going forward, I could not afford to rely on those excuses. The danger of being caught out was too great.

I stood and left, locking the door behind myself, and went to another room, several floors higher in the castle.

This room was not guarded, although I knew that it was being watched. All rooms in this castle were watched. It was a fact of life among the Sidhe. Here, I stood as invisible attendants undressed me, bathed me, applied various poultices, wiped them away, bathed me again, draped me in a plain grey robe, and tucked me neatly into bed.

I was tired. Even with the protections I had been given, even with the poultices that had been applied, the presence of so much iron wearied me. A substitute had been made for the prisoner's armor and weapons, but other sources of iron could not so readily be dealt with.

Thus, this room. Here, thanks to the power of the queen, the passage of time was dilated with respect to the mortal world. I could take days or weeks to recover from the iron exposure here, and return with the confident knowledge that only hours had passed.

I let myself relax into sleep.

Waking, I dressed myself. I could have had one of the invisible servitors do it, but I preferred to take care of it myself. It was a ritual, a chance to remind myself of my role.

My appearance still resembled hers, but there was more to it than that. It was a state of mind. I had to keep in mind who and what I was imitating, had to make the role an integral part of my thoughts. Now, I was not playing a role; I *was* a role.

Garbed appropriately, I returned, opening a portal to Transylvania. My true destination was far away, but my cover for my return to Faerie had been spending time in Transylvania, and thus I had to at least visit before my return. Otherwise I was too likely to be asked questions that I couldn't answer.

Another portal, to a location within the city of Colorado Springs. The portal location was at a distance from anywhere I was likely to meet someone of import, giving me time to recover from the effects of the transition. The prisoner had no such reaction to them, which was one of the greatest weaknesses in my disguise. I had no ability to mimic that.

Returning to his house, I found that Winter was out accomplishing another task. A short reprieve, then, and an incomplete one, but still a reprieve. I sat and waited, observing the activity of those he surrounded himself with. It was an interesting observation, although not a terribly useful one.

Finally he returned, and I went to greet him.

"Holy shit," I said as he walked up. "Did you seriously buy a limousine?" I already knew where the vehicle came from, but questions were by definition not lies. Deceptive in their implications, perhaps, but no one could say that they weren't *true*.

"I'm not sure yet," he replied, stepping inside the building. "How was your morning?"

I shrugged. "I've had worse. Yours?" Again, there was no real, definite *meaning* to what I'd said. I'd had worse, yes, but what did that mean? I'd had worse mornings? I'd had worse experiences than that morning? I'd heard worse questions than the one he just asked? Without clarification, any of those interpretations was possible.

We continued inside, and the conversation continued in the same vein, joke and implication without obvious meaning, until his attention turned elsewhere and I could stop engaging in the discussion.

Aiko. It was a good name, although not my name, for all that I was pretending to it just now.

It was my custom to take a new name for each target I mimicked. This time, I had settled on Notsune, before the job even started.

My queen had commented on how odd a name that was. She'd asked why I had chosen it.

"Well," I replied, with my typical dry humor, "I'm certainly not a kitsune."