

Hedgefield, 1973

Blanc LaBelle had been meaning to retire for a while now. He had not expected to find it an hour away from New York City. Hedgefield was a good combination of rural and urban. If a city were too crowded, LaBelle felt like he was cramped in with everyone around him. If a place was too backwoods, everyone in the town would want to know everything about where he came from. LaBelle just wanted a quiet place where he wouldn't be bothered. The apartment was the biggest place that LaBelle could find and seemed like as good a place as any to settle down.

"It's called what?" LaBelle asked, pouring hot water over his coffee grounds with the phone wedged between his shoulder and his cheek.

"Ethernet!" Jack had been talking for nearly forty minutes and LaBelle still wasn't sure what he was talking about. "It's based on this setup they have out in Hawaii. They connect all their computers to this big storage system so everyone can access the files!"

"So, it's like a file room?"

"Yeah, but it's all digital! And you never have to leave your office! Imagine what we could do with spell collaboration if we could create a wireless network like that!"

"Jack, this is all just a fad," LaBelle scoffed. He turned a little to untangle himself from the phone cord and grabbed a coffee mug. "Trust me, it's not worth looking into."

"Come on, LaBelle! I'm telling ya, this is a great new technology. And that's what we need to focus on: integrating magic and technology. It'll be the change of a lifetime."

"We have cars, phones, and indoor plumbing. I've seen more than enough lifetime changes."

"The more I learn about you, the more questions I have..."

"I'll tell you what, I'll swing by Hawaii with you once I get settled here. I just moved into the new apartment and I still have to get acquainted with the local Under. I haven't even unpacked my spellbooks yet."

"Alright, fine," Jack said, "but try to come in with an open mind? I think this is gonna be a hit!"

"Well, I've had enough hits," LaBelle said. "I gotta go. just don't get too excited about this, OK?"

"Buzzkill..."

LaBelle put the phone back on the wall and grabbed his cup of coffee. He had no agenda for the first time in years and, as he sat down on the couch, LaBelle felt at peace for the first time in a while.

A rhythmic tapping came from somewhere close by, just barely audible. LaBelle opened his eyes and sat up. The tapping stopped, so he closed his eyes and leaned back again. When tapping resumed and LaBelle bolted up to find the noise. Pressing his ear against the front door, LaBelle felt like the tapping was coming from the hallway. He undid the deadbolt and looked up and down the hall. He couldn't see anyone and the noise had stopped.

"Excuse me!"

LaBelle looked down and scrunched his face up in confusion. The fairy was only a few inches tall with dark hair. She was wearing a light purple dress and gave off a gentle violet hue when she fluttered her dragonfly wings. LaBelle scowled a little and looked around. "Are you lost?"

"You could say that. Can I come in?"

LaBelle let out an exasperated breath and gestured for the fairy to enter. Her wings fluttered and the gentle buzzing carried her into the kitchen, where she took a seat on the half-opened bag of coffee beans like a couch.

"You know," LaBelle said, closing the door and walking up to the counter, "I invited you in as a matter of courtesy. I'm not really in the mood for company. I came here to disappear."

"I apologize for any inconvenience," the fairy said. "However, I need help and I think you're the one to ask."

"Really? And why do you say that?"

"Fae can sense magical energy and you radiate it. You're practically a magical nuclear bomb."

"You have no idea," LaBelle sighed. "What exactly is it that you need?"

"Well, I have a problem. See, I recently find myself no longer welcome in Fae Town beneath Hedgefield."

"You were banished from the Under?"

“I made mistakes, I won’t lie. And I’m not looking for an appeal or anything, I don’t deserve that. What I need is somewhere to live.”

“I’m not looking for a roommate.”

“I wasn’t planning on that! I just feel like you’re the person to help me track down a good place to live in the city. I’ve only ever lived in the Under, see? I’ve been fluttering around from place to place here, trying to find a spot without humans. It’d be nice if I could live among other fairies, but I can’t find any here. That’s where you come in! I figure, a magically-inclined person like yourself could help me find the local fairy hangouts...maybe even find me a little family up here. So, what do you say? You help me find a family and I help you find something you want!”

“All I really want is peace and quiet,” LaBelle said. “I came to Hedgefield to get away from other people. Trust me, if there was something I wanted, I could get it.”

“You sure that’s true? Everyone wants something. How about I owe you a favor in the future? A proper Fae Deal is—”

“I don’t do Fae Deals. Those get messy fast and rarely work out for the non-fae in the agreement.”

“I swear on the River,” the fairy said, stepping up from the coffee beans. “Please, I can’t be out here on my own. If I don’t get eaten by a bird or squashed by a newspaper, I’m likely to get drowned in the rain! It’s dangerous up here, you have to know that!”

LaBelle sighed and looked out through the skylight. The clouds were dark and it looked like it was going to rain soon. Even a shower under the wrong conditions was a death sentence for a fairy.

“Fine,” LaBelle sighed, “you can stay here for the morning and we’ll find your kin once the rain stops. And no Fae Deals, understood?”

“You have a deal...a normal, non-magic deal, of course.”

The fairy held out her hand and looked up at LaBelle. With a sigh, LaBelle presented his finger to the tiny fairy. She grasped it firmly and shook. LaBelle felt no shift in energy that normally came with the agreement of a Fae Deal. “True to your word. I admire that.”

“Fae can’t lie.”

“No, but there’s enough there to take some liberties with my phrasing. I admire your integrity, Miss...”

“Inorae. My true name, mind you. I give it to you as a sign of good faith. If you know anything about fairies, you know how powerful our names are.”

“I’d suggest changing it while you’re up here,” LaBelle said. “As someone who’s changed their name a few times, it’s important to choose a name that blends in.”

“I’ll have to think on it. Speaking of, what can I call you?”

“LaBelle.”

“Wait...the LaBelle?”

“As I said, you have no idea. Do you need anything while we wait out the storm?”

“If you could spare something to eat?”

LaBelle reached into a cabinet and pulled out a box of crackers. Inorae started eating before LaBelle could put out a large piece of cheese and a shot glass of water. While the fairy ate, LaBelle went back to the couch and sat down. He took out a pen and paper from a spot under the coffee table and started writing a few notes about Inorae’s request. He didn’t ask any questions and the fairy didn’t bother him. When she had eaten her fill, Inorae curled up on the bag of beans and fell asleep with her wings tucked close against her back. LaBelle smiled a little and enjoyed his coffee while raindrops pattered against the skylight.

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When the rain stopped, LaBelle set his empty coffee cup in the sink. He made a precise amount of noise: enough to wake Inorae up, but not so harshly that she would be cross with him. The fairy slowly woke and stretched a little, lazily fluttering her wings.

“Feeling better?” LaBelle asked.

“A bit less frantic. I don’t need sleep, but it does help.”

“Best we find you some kin then,” LaBelle said. He adjusted his suit coat and held his chest pocket open.

“Sorry, I can fly just fine.”

“Lesson number one of living in the Above? No one is going to be ok with you flying. If you fly around every hippy in Hedgefield, someone is gonna start asking questions. I’m taking you to your kin, but I won’t risk exposing the Under.”

Reluctantly, Inorae fluttered her tiny wings and rose up off the counter. She flew over to LaBelle’s open pocket and climbed in, wiggling her way down into the suit pocket. “Just be careful not to squish me!”

“I’ll be careful, I promise.”

LaBelle made his way downstairs and into the streets of Hedgefield. Despite having moved in recently, he still hadn’t taken time to go and explore the town properly. He’d breezed through the pier on the way in, but the businesses lining his street were a curious collection. An old diner was only graced by a pair of seniors despite the bubbling rush of dinner for most humans. The bars and shops that lined the streets played music to entice people in, while kids played in the puddles from the rainstorm. LaBelle felt Inorae trying to peek out of the suit pocket and he turned out the lapel of his suit slightly.

“First time in the Above?” LaBelle asked once they’d passed by the largest throng of people.

“Technically, no. Previously, my only excursions were off in the wooded areas. I’ve never been in a place with so many people and there’s so much magic in the air! How do you stand it?”

“A lot of practice,” LaBelle said. “I’ve been in the Above for a long time.”

“Well, I knew that, but it would drive me mad to be up here with all this noise!”

“It’s called music.”

“That? I’ve heard music and that’s not it.”

“Your new kin can explain it to you.”

“Do you know where there are fairies?”

“Not really. I’m just following the magic, same as you. There’s a lot of fairies up in the Above, but you’re the first I’ve met out in Hedgefield.”

“Where was the last time you saw fairies?”

“A few up in Canada, but they’re a lot more common in Europe. France has a good collection there and I think another grouping in Norway.”

“How long until we get to those?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” LaBelle shook his head. “There are better places to set up shop. France has a few clans, but they all live in the sewers. The Scandinavian Fairies are almost always in territory wars as the world gets more filled in.”

“So, there are fairies around here?”

“I’d be surprised if there weren’t a few. In fact, this seems like a good place to check.”

LaBelle opened his coat and Inorae fluttered out to stand on his shoulder. The ancient pine tree stood in the town center, almost twenty feet tall. He could see people gathering around the tree in winter, children throwing snowballs and couples celebrating their first holiday together. A few birds flittered in and out of the branches, but LaBelle didn’t see any nests. With no one else around, LaBelle approached the tree and stood by the branches.

“I come in peace,” Inorae declared, fluttering down and standing on the wobbly tree branch. “Are there any fae folk here?”

There was silence for a few moments. The wind pushed through the branches, making them hiss as they rubbed against one another. LaBelle fought the urge to draw his wand as the scratching sound concentrated down the length of the massive trunk. Squirrels descended the tree and LaBelle nearly missed the wood sprites on their backs, spears tipped with bundles of pine needles and shields of chipped bark. The tallest of their number was only about four inches high, tightly gripping the reins of his gray squirrel mount. His leaf armor was tightly sealed with layers of pine resin and his helmet was adorned with a crest of beetle wings. His squirrel mount grasped the branch while he pointed a spear at Inorae and LaBelle.

“What brings you here?” The wood sprite snarled in a surprisingly deep voice. “This tree is our long-held property! If you want it, come and tear it out of our hands!”

“Be at peace, friend,” LaBelle said. He slowly drew out his wand and cast a quick spell to grow a daffodil in his free hand. “We are friends of the Under.”

“Indeed,” the wood sprite said, raising his hands and settling the others. “Apologies. We’re just defending our tree. I am Captain Warren of the Pine Guard. Clearly, you are welcome to our company, but that doesn’t change that this is our tree.”

“And rightly so, I’m sure,” Inorae said. “I come to you not seeking your tree, but looking for asylum. I’ve been banished to the Above. By the old laws, I ask for safety and community among your folk.”

“Oh really?” Captain Warren said. “And you thought you’d just help yourself? We have no reason to tend the needs of an exile.”

“She is a citizen of the Under,” LaBelle said. “Exiled, banished, whatever word you choose, she is of your kin.”

“Says who? You? Great, big, giant beast that you are?”

“Underfolk in the Under need to support one another,” Inorae pleaded. “Please, I would much rather be among my own kind.”

“What was your position in the Under?”

“I was a hand in the Queen’s Court.”

“Royalty, then?” Captain Warren sneered. The other wood sprites laughed. The head woodsprite dismounted his squirrel and walked across the branch towards Inorae. Inorae fluttered her wings to keep her balance, but Captain Warren barely registered a shake in his stride. He took Inorae’s hands roughly and turned the palms over to examine them. “You wouldn’t fit in here, sorry to say. We take our work seriously and your soft hands would do nothing but bleed. We tend the Great Pine: ease the sap, mend the broken branches, and fight any invaders. What use do we have for a precious hand of the Queen’s Court?”

“Since when was the hospitality of the Fae subject to the labor of a guest?” LaBelle asked.

“What gives you the right to tell me how to treat a guest?” Captain Warren said. “Spells or not, you are of the human world. It is not your job to tell us—!”

“This tree,” LaBelle said, peering up at the branches, “is not yours. It is of the Above, we can all agree on that. Here, there is no Queen’s Court, no Under Council, no land of Beasts or Magi. She is coming to you seeking refuge and safety. I could quote the declarations of fae hospitality, but I’d like to think you can see that we only have each other up here.”

“Things may work differently in the Under,” Captain Warren said, turning and walking back to his squirrel. “This is how things are done in the Above. We don’t have the security that the Under offers. The Under Pact protects the Fae Queen and her Court, but that doesn’t extend to

us. We follow the laws, but get no protection. We have our freedoms up here, but we have to earn those.”

“I can earn my place,” Inorae scowled, stomping her foot and nearly falling off the branch. Her wings fluttered a little to keep her steady, but her face was still sternly set in a frown.

“Perhaps,” Captain Warren said, sitting on his squirrel’s back, “but your place is not here. I grant you leave and the hospitality afforded to a guest. But you cannot stay.”

The wood sprites turned back up into the tree, whooping and calling after one another. The squirrels scrambled up the bark, chittering wildly and hopping along the branches. LaBelle frowned, but his face softened when he saw Inorae. He expected anger from the tiny fairy, but she just stood, looking down with her hair covering her face. LaBelle offered his hand to her, holding it level with the branch so she could hop on.

“I didn’t expect a welcoming parade,” Inorae said, holding onto LaBelle’s thumb, “but I didn’t think the fae folk could be so cruel up here.”

“I’m sorry you had a poor sampling,” LaBelle said. “Let’s try to find another clan.”

“Maybe somewhere a little less...wild.”

“Let’s see who we can find,” LaBelle said, offering his breast pocket to Inorae.

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Later in the day, LaBelle’s wandering had brought them to a row of manicured hedges in the suburbs, an alley for feral cats, and an abandoned bus at the dump. The fae folk there were a mix of emotions: they were more civil than the wood sprites, but there were no other true fairies and no one was willing to take Inorae in.

“This seems promising,” LaBelle said, walking through the school yard. It was Saturday, so there weren’t any humans around when LaBelle approached the playground. He followed the instinct to what looked like a trio of wasp nests hanging from the eave of the school itself. After confirming there were no humans, LaBelle opened his suit coat and let Inorae float up. She was still hopeful, but the emotional toll of the day was beginning to discourage her.

“If there is anyone here,” Inorae said, just on the edge of sadness. “I could use your help, please.”

The wasp nests shook a little and glowed pink and green. The papery sides of the structures rasped together before a small door in the center nest opened up. A pair of small fairies came out, one with wings like a monarch butterfly and another with a broken beetle carapace hiding his wings. The butterfly-winged fairy flew down, gliding gently and landing on a picnic table beneath their nest. LaBelle sat behind Inorae, folding his arms and keeping an eye out for humans.

“You are a fairy?” Inorae asked, the first light returning to her voice after the day.

“I am,” the fairy said. She wore a pale pink dress that looked like it was made of both flower petals and Band-Aids. Her golden hair was tied back into a bun and a pair of sewing needles hung on each of her hips. “You may call me Audrey...and that’s Sam.”

“It is good to meet you,” Inorae said, bowing. “I have not chosen a new name yet.”

“It will come to you,” Audrey said. “Keep your true name safe in the Above. The Oak Hand has learned the power of names.”

“Oak Hand?” LaBelle asked. “In Hedgefield?”

“We were taken by surprise a few weeks ago,” the fairy kicked at the table a little. “They took one of us: Penny.”

“I didn’t know they were here,” LaBelle frowned.

“What matters is that Sam and I survived,” Audrey said. “We just hope that Penny didn’t suffer. You said you needed help?”

“So do you,” Inorae said. “Do you want me to find Penny?”

“We know what happened to her. She was put in a jar and—” Audrey put a hand over her mouth and shook her head. “I’m sorry. She didn’t survive, but we did.”

“We honor her sacrifice,” LaBelle said, putting a hand over his heart. “Will you accept my friend into your home?”

“The nest is yours,” Audrey said. “Sam and I are going to avenge Penny. We found out where the one who killed Penny lives and we’re gonna return the favor.”

“Facing off against the Oak Hand?” Inorae asked. “That’s a death wish.”

“Maybe so,” Audrey said, “but we need to defend our own.”

“Please,” Inorae said. “You are the first fairies I’ve found since I was banished up here. We can find somewhere safer! We’ll go to the forest and—”

“I have only one lesson for you,” Audrey said. “There is nowhere safe. Maybe back in the olden days, when we could choose where to live, but after they started settling, humans never stopped. There are old forests, but those don’t feel like home anymore. It’s all...planes and traffic, climate change and litter. We aren’t living up here, child. We’re surviving.”

“But violence against humans is forbidden!” Inorae said. She paused and looked up at LaBelle. “Isn’t it?”

“Defense is...a grey area,” LaBelle explained. “While they are within their rights, I would advise against it.”

“Your advice is taken into consideration,” Sam said from the nest. He fluttered down, a little awkwardly until he landed on the table next to Audrey, catching himself on a large club made from an oak branch. “But our only true choice left in this world isn’t ‘fight or flee’. It’s when we have to fight.”

“The Oak Hand favors brute strength over magic,” LaBelle said. “Use that if you can. And do your best to stay out of reach.”

“Who are you?” Audrey asked. “You seem to know a lot about this.”

“Someone who tries to stay uninvolved,” LaBelle said. “Happy hunting.”

Audrey nodded her head and looked back at Inorae. “The nest is yours,” she said. “For us, there are too many memories up there, but...maybe it will be home to new memories for you.”

Audrey put an arm under Sam’s elbow and helped him fly away, the green and pink streaks heading towards downtown. Inorae looked after them, but her expression was impossible to read.

“Well,” LaBelle shrugged. “It’s not much, but it’s something, right?”

“It’s a shell,” Inorae shook her head. “Just...take me back. Just for the night and we’ll try again tomorrow.”

“Sure,” LaBelle said. Without much more, LaBelle let the fairy climb into his suit pocket. For her sake, he pretended he couldn’t hear her crying on their way back to his loft.

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Inorae kicked the blueberry from her dinner down the length of the counter and then kicked it back the other way. After they had returned for the night, LaBelle had set out some food for her and gone into a large office for a while. Inorae wanted to be home again, but she'd been banished. There was no kin for her to rely on, no one willing to take her in. There were even fairies who were more willing to die than try to keep living. Inorae wondered if her banishment was just a crueler death sentence. She kicked the blueberry again and it dropped into the sink with a hollow thump.

LaBelle opened the door to his office after hours of locking himself away. He was carrying a large, glass case in his hands. Inorae furrowed her brow and watched him set it on the shelf. Inside was a small layer of soil and substrate with a few small plants along one edge. Three juice containers had been joined together into a simple structure and a tiny chair was set up on what would be the front lawn of the house.

"What do we think?" LaBelle asked.

"Charming little art project," Inorae said, sitting on the coffee beans again. "Your lizard will be pleased."

"It's not for a lizard, it's for you!"

"Me?"

"I promised I would help you find somewhere to live. It's not quite fairies, but it is something."

"Wait, I thought you said I couldn't live here."

"I changed my mind," LaBelle shrugged. "I'm allowed to do that."

"Why?"

"Well," LaBelle said, "I thought about it and I was a bit of a hypocrite. I scolded the wood sprites for not helping you when they should have been supporting you. And then Sam reminded me that we don't always have the same choices we used to. He said it was a question of when to fight. Maybe I need to decide when to get involved. That's now."

Inorae fluttered over and dropped down into the terrarium. The ground was soft beneath her toes and it felt like true nature. She knelt on the soil and dug her hands into the dirt, raw earthly magic coursing through her. Exhaling, it felt like the first true release of stress that Inorae had

felt since her banishment. She was able to drop the need to survive, if only for a moment.

LaBelle grinned through the glass and Inorae slapped her hands together to clear the dirt off.

“It’ll take some work, but I don’t hate it,” Inorae said, plopping onto the chair. “But if you’re helping me? You’re helping everyone.”

“Everyone?”

“You said it yourself, boss. If we’re all stuck in the Above together, we gotta help each other. I’m clearly not the first fairy banished up here and there’s a fair bit of other Underfolk who get sent up. People get lost and scared. And when they do? It’d be better for them to meet us than the wood sprites. We need to protect the others, like Penny...and Audrey and Sam. And it’s not just Fae Folk! Did you hear about that sea serpent up in Vermont? He could use some help, for sure.”

“Well, if I’m helping everyone, I’m gonna need you. How do you feel about being my secretary? Take appointments, notes...we could bring some order up to the Above.”

“Get me a pen and paper my size and we’ll make a great team!”

“Then what should I call you? If you’re gonna be living here, I’d like to call you something I can say around other people.”

“I was thinking about Irene. It sounds like a nice name.”

“Irene it is, then,” LaBelle smiled. “Get some sleep. I get the feeling you and I are going to be pretty busy.”