

The Fool

The railing was smooth to the touch as if it had been recently polished. She touched a knot in the wood, her fingers caressing the fractured ridges. Closing her eyes, she took in the smell of the place. The rich scent of oil, sawdust and water from the fountain out back filled her with a swirl of nostalgia, causing her to inhale again, only deeper this time.

So many old scents and a few that were new. Behind them all was the faint, faded scent of sunflowers and rain.

Emily. It was hard to think of her without love and hate at the same time. So many good times had been enjoyed in this house, many of those in her presence. Yet the taint of her eventual betrayal left a dark shadow standing in the corner of those memories, ready to tear her heart in two once more.

The steps creaked under her feet, each sound a familiar friend welcoming her back. She only made it three steps down before Emily's scent drifted her way once again. Her breath hitched, and she stopped.

It was hard to do, but she turned around and went back up. The master bedroom was at the end of the hall and she entered it quietly as if walking into a church service.

Oddly, it was largely as she remembered it. Other than some clothes scattered across the floor, it was decorated the same as it had been. The furniture was exactly as she remembered, except for an old rug lying in the corner.

That man's stench was everywhere, but beneath it was the scent of Emily. It grew stronger as she crossed the room, approaching the rug on the floor. When she lifted it up, she could tell that the wood underneath had been badly damaged, and the scent told her why.

Emily had died in this spot and rotted. Beneath the sweet scent of sunflowers and rains was the harsh scent of cloves and death. The room was a treasure trove of sensory information, but this spot was where her dear Emily had finally crossed over. She tossed the rug aside, contemplating the stained floor beneath.

Silent for several seconds, Yuki fought back the grief and anger that welled up inside of her. The memories in this room were suffocating, and she needed to leave before she forgot how to breathe. In a way, this had become Emily's grave.

She stuck her hand inside the neckline of her dress and pulled out a ring on a chain.

"It was never supposed to be like this. You promised me forever, and then broke my heart without ever telling me why." It was all she could say, her skin rippling with patches of fur that rode across her arms like waves. Emily had made her so many promises, but this was one that, in the end, she hadn't been able to keep.

The memory of that first day without Emily had been burned into her mind forever. She had woken up in the tower, surprised to find that Emily had disappeared. Days went by without any sign of her, and Yuki, convinced the centaurs had taken her, had rained terror down on the Herd. Lonely weeks wandering that tower had turned to months, and then years. The portal through the trees never opened once, and she had cried herself to sleep almost every night.

Until the night Emily had come back for some of the magic locked away in the tower. That one night had turned all of her grief to rage, and the two of them had fought for hours. Emily had grown

powerful during their time apart, and Yuki ended up losing her eye. She would never forget that final defining moment in their relationship, the kitsune knocked flat on the floor and bleeding all over the cold tower floor. Emily stood just outside of a portal that had appeared in the tower, clutching a glowing emerald in her hand.

"I wish I could forget you," Emily had said, her face twisted into a sneer, then stepped through the portal. Yuki had cried in agony, watching the portal slowly shrink away to nothing and then vanish. It was the day her heart had been forever broken, and she realized that even true love could be corrupted by magic. Humans were too weak to be gifted with the house and its occupants, destined forever to pursue the power within.

On that day, Yuki had pulled the silver ring off her finger, keeping it only as a reminder of how cruel love could be, pledging to kill the next Caretaker she saw on sight. She could never allow another human to become corrupt inside her sanctuary, threatening those she loved.

She lowered the chain onto the floor, letting it form a spiral on the ground. The ring was last, lying on top of it like the cherry on a cupcake. She had worn that chain every day around her neck, never daring to put it back on her finger. Forgiveness would never come, and while Emily had wanted to forget the whole thing had ever happened, Yuki simply could not.

Standing, she walked out of the room, leaving the ring behind. The scent clung to her skin, Emily's shadow walking beside her when she left. It would probably always be a part of her, a painful memory to contemplate at night. She continued down the hall, past the stairs, and to her old room, then quietly pushed the door open.

This one had changed a bit. Someone had moved in recently, someone who smelled of lilacs and—she sniffed again—sulfur, apparently. The bed was a mess, and a blanket had been tossed over the mirror on the armoire. Yuki removed it, then spotted the dark briefcase under the bed in its reflection.

She knelt down to pull the briefcase out and was about to open it when she saw that the closet was open. It was an ordinary closet for now, but she couldn't help but close it and then twist the knob through a series of patterns. When she opened it again, she was looking into dark cavern within.

Just like that, a memory jumped from the shadows to claim her. its grip was surprisingly strong. She tried to fight it, but it ran like a flood through her mind, and she let it flow freely.

"The house is full of surprises, isn't it?" Emily said, holding up a flashlight up and clicking it on. It was now forty years ago and they were standing in the same room. Yuki sniffed the air and caught a whiff of water and dust somewhere deep in the depths of the cavern.

"How did you find this?" Yuki asked, summoning a ghostly sphere made of foxfire to hover in front of them. It wandered ahead ten feet and then stopped, waiting for them to catch up.

The Caretaker rolled her eyes. "Jenny got loose again and I caught her trying to run down here. I convinced her to tell me how to get in in exchange for a second chance."

Yuki snorted. "Don't you mean a ninth or tenth chance?"

"Yeah, well..." she took a few steps forward. "I figured it would be fun to explore something new with you. What do you say?" Emily held up her hand.

Yuki grinned and took Emily's hand in her own.

They jogged through the cave together. Yuki's senses were sharp enough that she didn't worry about coming across any surprises, and she knew that Emily was well equipped to tackle almost any problem that came their way. Back in the house, it was a frozen afternoon in the dead of winter. Tink and the fairies were huddled up by the fireplace making s'mores with each other. Tink had handed out chopsticks they had gotten from their Chinese food delivery for the fairies to use. Each one of them had taken turns flying close to the fire to toast their marshmallow while Tink drank a mug of hot cocoa.

Yuki had never been certain what to think of the little goblin. Her speech was vulgar, yet she had a brilliant mind. Emily treated Tink with an immense amount of respect but always stopped short of explaining why.

"Oh wow!" Emily stared in amazement at the giant subterranean space that unfolded before them. Large crystalline stalactites hung above an ancient complex below. Luminescent moss revealed that the structure was a giant maze.

"Indeed." Yuki sniffed the air. There were no immediate signs of danger, but she didn't want a repeat of the troll incident. Winking at Emily, she held out her elbow. "If I may escort you?"

"You may." Emily linked her arm through Yuki's and they walked the long, winding path together. So close to Emily, Yuki was overwhelmed by not only her scent, but her magic. It crept across her body like the warmth of a sunbeam, igniting a different sort of fire within. As Yuki understood it, Emily's exposure to Naia over the years had slowly converted her innate magical talents to be extremely similar. Emily rarely traveled these days, but when she did, men and women couldn't help but stare at her in wonderment.

These days, Yuki was having the same problem.

They reached the bottom, and Yuki looked back up the hillside they had just come down. "You could build stairs to get back up if you wanted."

"Sounds like a lot of work. Oh, wow, look at that!" Emily pointed at a large reflecting pool that was close to a set of doors that led into the Labyrinth. When they got close, Emily was already stripping off her shirt, her exposed breasts defying gravity and bouncing upward once freed of their confines.

"Fancy a dip?" She looked back at the fox, her hands on the hips of her jeans.

Yuki swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. She couldn't take her eyes off of Emily's golden areola. It was the first time she had seen the Caretakers bare breasts and was surprised to see that they glittered in the light of the cave above.

"You okay?" Emily asked, concern on her face. She walked closer to Yuki, her prominent nipples waving back and forth like a fisherman's lure.

Yuki was old enough to have been with both men and women sexually, but this was different. The nymph magic running through Emily's blood was polarizing, and Yuki wondered what she would risk if she were to act on the sudden hot feelings running through her hips and along her tails.

"Earth to Yuki." Emily waved a hand in front of Yuki's face. This made her breasts wobble even more.

"Um, I'm good." Yuki shook her head, chasing away the thoughts that had been racing through her mind. Casting her eyes down at the reflecting pool, she grabbed Emily before she could jump in. "Don't jump in there?"

“Why not? Is there a shark?”

“Ha Ha, very funny.” Yuki cleared her throat, trying once more to forget that shark movie that Emily had taken her to see at the discount cinema. She was able to pass for an ordinary human, so would go into town with Emily for rare meals and moves.

Emily thought it was a funny joke, but in reality, Yuki was now terrified of swimming in the ocean as a result.

Not that I couldn't fuck up a shark, she thought to herself. Well, once she grew her third tail anyway. With each tail, she was able to master another domain of magic, and in a couple of decades, she planned to learn some powerful water magic. Shark couldn't bite her if she controlled the medium they swam in, and Emily had already mentioned how useful it would be if she knew someone who could breathe underwater.

That, and being able to summon rain and then freeze it would make her ice magic far more powerful.

“It's a portal.” Yuki told her, kneeling down at the edge. To the kitsune, the outline of the reflecting pool glowed intensely. It was the same glow that illuminated the trees that Emily walked through, the ones that allowed her to traverse entire continents. She had been fascinated by the process when she had first been brought here, stepping through a glowing portal to be greeted by the cool, clean air of Emily's backyard. Since then, they had traveled many places, places where Emily had planted her magical trees so that she could walk across the globe.

“Can you see where it goes?” When Emily bent over the pool, Yuki's eyes flicked to the sway of her reflection's pendulous breasts. She burned that image deep into her mind, fighting the urge to lick her lips.

“Not really.” Her hand hovered over the water, and she interpreted the shifting magical currents beneath her. “It activates once you are inside, but I can't tell where it—”

Emily wrapped her hands around Yuki's waist and pushed, both of them falling into the pool. The world twisted around them both and they burst through a door, spilling across the wooden floor. Yuki stood up and growled, her body more fox than human. She shook off the water, her fur poofing up in response.

Emily, however, was laughing. It was the tinkling of bells, the singing of birds, it was a sound that resonated deep inside of Yuki's heart, calling forth memories of her own childhood chasing butterflies through the forest with her litter mates.

“Why did you do that?” Yuki demanded. “You had no idea where that portal went!”

Emily grinned. “It didn't matter where it took us. I had you by my side.”

Yuki felt a rush of heat in her face, and she opened her mouth, but didn't know how to respond.

“Fucking stinky fox,” a voice grumbled from behind her. When Yuki turned, she saw a miserable looking Tink standing in the living room, her sweater covered in the water Yuki had shed. Tink gazed mournfully at a cup of hot cocoa with a couple of fox hairs floating on the surface.

Emily covered her mouth with one hand, stifling a laugh.

“Oh, Tink, we're so sorry,” she said, kneeling down to placate the goblin.

Tink leaned back to avoid getting hit in the face with a boob. “Emily put Tink’s eye out with these things.” She flicked one of Emily’s nipples impatiently, which put a halt to the human’s laughter. “Why fall out of closet full of water?”

“C’mon, Tink, I have another sweater I can loan you. Guess I’ll have to go back for my shirt later.” She turned around and held her hand out to Yuki. “You coming? You probably need a change of clothes too.”

Yuki had calmed down, her red fur sinking back into her flesh. Pulling her wet hair back into a ponytail, she nodded, and took Emily’s hand, letting her take her upstairs.

“Who are you?” The memory popped like a bubble and she was back in the present, staring absently into the cave. A blue light hovered in front of her and her outstretched hand now held on to nothing. It hovered over the entrance to the cave, and she hastily closed the door before addressing the ball of light.

“Cerulea?” Yuki squinted, her eye focusing on the tiny blue fairy. “Is that really you?”

“Yep!” Cerulea did a twirl in the air, sending magical sparks in every direction. “You’re a good guesser!”

“Cerulea, it’s me, Yuki.” She held up her hand and the tiny fairy landed on it, her plump bottom pressing against Yuki’s finger.

“Hmm.” The fairy tilted her head from side to side. “Doesn’t ring any bells.”

Yuki shrugged it off. “Where are the others?”

“The others? Oh, they’re all over the place. Carmina and Olivia are out front watching the sand man with Abella, and Tink is with the rats. Sofia brought some books for Beth to read, but she’s in the greenhouse with Asterion.” For whatever reason, Cerulea giggled after saying this last part. “Oh, and Mike is in the wardrobe with Ratu and Zel.”

“Oh.” She didn’t recognize a few of the names, but now she knew who the new Caretaker was. *Had been.* “Who is the sand man?”

“He’s one of the mean ones. Those guys want to come in the house and—” the fairy stared into space for a few seconds. “And do something bad. I’m not entirely sure what. One of them made a storm that almost broke the house!”

“I bet they did.” It sounded like Mike was already doing a phenomenal job of fucking up. “But you don’t need to worry anymore. I’ll take care of the mean people for you.”

“Yay!” Cerulea took off and flew away. Yuki was grateful that Daisy was far more intelligent than her sisters, and a much better listener. She closed the closet door. Leaving her room behind, she was back in the hallway and at the top of stairs.

Why was it so hard, coming home? Her foot hovered over that first step again and she paused. What if the others rejected her? She had no idea what Emily had told them, but she doubted it had been anything good. Ever since that fateful day Emily had left her behind in the tower, she had wondered many things, but this was one that bothered her the most.

Why hadn’t anybody come to look for her?

She moved slowly down the stairs, taking in the recent renovations. Apparently there was a new floor, and she fought the urge to go explore it. She could mess with that later once she had spoken with Naia. Naia would be able to tell her everything, and she was already bracing herself for answers that she didn't want to hear.

The place smelled of water, fire, industrial cleaner, and oil. The front room looked like it had been recently repaired and redecorated. In the front window was a dollhouse that looked like it had seen better days. Through one of the windows, she could see Jenny contemplating the front yard. Yuki was surprised to see the doll out of the Vault and made a note to put her back. The last thing she needed was that little psychopath running around.

The house was quiet where she stood, but she could hear Naia singing from the back yard. A chill ran down her spine at the sound of Naia's voice. The two of them had been fast friends, and she fought the urge to run. Would Naia even recognize her now? She looked different now, especially after her third tail had grown while she was gone.

She moved forward, stopping just before the hallway. There was a large blank spot along the wall perfect for a grandfather clock, and she wondered if the mimic was hiding somewhere else in the house.

Every step she took toward the back door was another step back in time. She had dreamt of this moment for so long, but had no idea what form it would take. She pushed open the back door and stepped outside. The sky was cloudless and blue, just as it had been the day Emily had brought her here for the first time.

The memory of her first day in the house was intense. She could feel each of her tails twitching nervously behind her with every step across the cobblestone path just outside the back door. A stone statue sitting on the edge of the fountain had looked up at her with a smile, then took to the sky. Along the back gate, a goblin could be seen examining the large padlock holding it shut, prodding at the lock with a series of picks.

Over the fountain, a flurry of glittering lights danced with the birds. Each light was a different color that emitted its own sound, and the red light broke off from the pack to hover in front of Yuki.

"You're red like me!" The light burst into a tiny woman with dragonfly wings. "Ooh, and your ears are so pretty."

"Um... yeah." Yuki blushed as the other fairies hovered in front of her, each one taking turns touching her ears. Each tap of a fairy hand sent shivers down her spine, her ears extremely sensitive to being touched.

"Off. Off with you." Emily waved a hand through the cloud of fairies and they scattered with a series of giggles. "Leave her alone, let her get settled. They're a little excited, it's been a while since they met someone new."

"Uh huh." Yuki looked over her shoulder, still half expecting a trap to be sprung.

"This is Naia." Emily took her to the large fountain in the back, a wide smile on her face. "She's kind of the heart and soul of the house, and a good person to talk to if you have any questions."

From the water, a figure emerged, fat droplets running down her skin and splashing into the water beneath. Her features solidified when she moved across the fountain, dancing quietly along the

surface until she appeared to be a normal human, albeit one of the most beautiful ones Yuki had ever seen.

She approached the nymph carefully, her hands tucked away in her jacket. Naia's curly hair was a mixture of green and blue, and once she saw the two of them, she sat cross-legged on a stool made of water. Tiny birds circled her, singing their songs while landing in the fountain for a quick drink or a bath. The fairies had left for parts unknown.

"It's so nice to meet you, Yuki." Naia gave the fox a wink. "We're all so excited to have you here."

"We truly are." Emily took Yuki by the hand. "This place is your home now, for as long as you want it to be. Don't be afraid to ask for anything if you need it."

Looking back and forth between Emily and Naia, Yuki now realized where Emily's magic came from. The woman had persistently hunted her down and convinced her to flee her homeland, and she had half expected to be led into a trap by a witch. Even if it had been a trap, her situation could only improve, but so far everything was as Emily had claimed. The other creatures she had met on her way through the house had all seemed so happy.

Happy. A word that had eluded her for quite some time now. The past faded away, and she was back in the present, staring at the same fountain she had spent countless days and nights by. The nymph had been her confidante, her accomplice, her best friend. She wondered how Naia would react upon seeing her again, wondered if she would have the answers Yuki needed to help her move on, to let go of the past.

The nymph was contemplating some flowers that had been moved close to the fountain, her fingers caressing an unopened bud.

Yuki cleared her throat.

"Oh!" Naia jumped, her breasts bouncing beneath her gown. She turned to see who was there, the water of the fountain swirling protectively around her like a cloak. Her mouth became a partial frown. "Who are you?"

"It's me, Naia. Yuki. Don't you remember?" She stepped closer to the fountain and pointed at her ears. "I might look a little different, but the ears never change, right? My hair used to be a lot darker, but I'm still me. How have you been?"

Naia's face twisted up as she became deep in thought. "No, I'm afraid we've never met."

Yuki laughed. "Is this supposed to be a joke? Yeah, I know my hair is different, but c'mon. I came to live here in the eighties. Tink used to play us movies on that old movie projector, we watched Star Wars on that wall over there." She pointed to the blank spot next to the door of the garage.

"Um..." Naia shook her head. "No, sorry."

"I know you have Emily's memories, just take a look."

Naia's eyes flashed several times, but she shook her head. "I'm not sure how you know about that, but there's nothing in there about you. Wait, have you met Mike? Once he sees you, I'll be able to remember."

Yuki snorted. "Yes, I met Mike. The geas shouldn't be blocking any of my memories."

“You’ve met him? Where?”

“Really? I’ve been locked away for decades and all you can ask about is that... is that man?” The chill in her belly extended up through her breasts and radiated along her arms. Was she really so easy to forget? The surrounding temperature dropped rapidly, and she pointed a clawed finger at Naia. “What about me? Did you ever even ask Emily about me, about where I went?”

“I have no idea who you are.” Naia looked apologetic. “I can’t go back in time and ask a woman who’s never met you where you went.”

“It’s me, Yuki!” A blast of frigid air caused frost to creep up the windows of the home. “You used to call me your little fox, you cleaned brambles out of my fur the time the Mandragora and I got into a fight over a steak I had been saving in the fridge, you showed me how to swim properly, and sometimes we would...” she couldn’t bear to say it aloud. A tear formed in Yuki’s eye and slid free, freezing to her cheek. “How can you not remember me?”

“Settle down, there are lots of reasons not to remember. This is a magic house, after all. If you just wait, I bet Mike can help you.”

“He can’t help anybody!” When she swung her arm, rays of frost struck the ground, causing ice to climb up the edge of the fountain. “He’s not the Caretaker anymore, I am! The position is mine by right.” Naia could argue about magical homes all she wanted, but Yuki knew the truth.

Emily had used magic to erase Yuki. The thought made Yuki growl, and the wind swirled around her, flurries appearing around her.

“Look, Yuki, you need to settle down.” The glyphs along Naia’s ribcage glowed ominously and the pressure outside dropped. “There can only be one Caretaker and it isn’t you. Where is Mike?”

“The centaurs have him.”

“What centaurs?”

“The ones who live in the wardrobe.” Ice crystals formed on the stones, creeping up the side of the house now. It occurred to Yuki that the Mandragora’s vines were no longer there. Likely they had died before *he* could figure out how to care for it. “They’ve probably killed him by now if he’s lucky.”

Naia’s eyes flashed, the water now swirling around her and blasting the frosty air with steam. “Why are you so angry with him? Yes, Mike has screwed up more than once, but I doubt he’s done anything to you that can’t be undone.” She tilted her head to one side as if listening to a distant sound. “He’s still alive, by the way.”

“Not for long.” Yuki held up the key to the wardrobe, causing Naia’s eyes to widen. She was tempted to bend it, maybe snap it in half, but remembered that she needed to go back for Daisy. Instead, she made it vanish with the flick of her wrist. “This house doesn’t need him. It needs someone who can protect it. You’ll see.”

“Mike is the Caretaker here. That will not change.” Naia’s voice was suddenly dangerous. “Give me back that key, Yuki.”

Yuki raised a finger, ready to blast Naia and freeze her fountain. She knew better than anyone just how dangerous the nymph could be. But when her sleeve slid up to reveal that the backs of her

hands and wrist were now covered in soft white fur, she let out a heavy sigh. She was losing her temper already and was about to make a huge mistake. This wasn't Naia's fault, after all.

It was Emily's.

"I don't have time to wait for you to remember, to know that I'm right." Yuki loosened the straps of her eyepatch. "But when I do, I promise I'll come back and fix this."

She took off the eyepatch and Naia's eyes went wide in terror. It was a face Yuki had seen many times, but this time flooded her with guilt. Naia couldn't know what was about to happen, but Yuki knew she was already feeling the effect, and her mouth opened in a silent scream.

The effect was usually instantaneous, but it was different with Naia. In slow motion, a dark gray color spread across her body, then sank into the water beneath her feet. Her outstretched arm solidified, her entire body solidifying in place.

The nymph had been turned to stone.

"I'm so sorry," Yuki said, slipping the eyepatch back on. She stepped toward the statue and slid her fingers between the fingers of Naia's outstretched hand. "Once I get everything here figured out, I can undo it. You will remember me."

She felt the ground shake behind her, the air filled with the sound of thousands of pounds of stone colliding with the earth. Grabbed from behind, she was hurled backward toward the house so hard that the back door ripped free of its hinges and she tumbled down the hall.

Abella stomped toward her, murder in her eyes.

"Why did you do that? Why did you kill her?" Abella scooped up one of the concrete planters with little effort, her biceps bulging.

"I didn't kill her, just let me—" Yuki summoned a wall of ice, but the planter busted through, scattering ice shards down the hall. She summoned several walls behind her and stumbled to her feet at the sound of Abella busting her way through.

"Abella, wait, listen!" She ran farther into the house, wincing at the sound of crackling wood. If she got into a fight with the gargoyle here, the house would be quickly demolished. But if she went outside, the gargoyle would have the advantage of the sky. Without the Jabberwock to help her, she'd have to rely on her wits to win.

The house had to come first.

Yuki sprinted past the stairs where Tink and a large rat stood on the landing, open mouthed. The house shook when Abella shattered one of the ice walls, howling with fury. Yuki shoved her way out the front door, casting a wary eye at the porch swing. She wasn't certain if Cecilia would help Abella, but was relieved to see the banshee was absent.

She ran across the yard, summoning a storm of ice. The Gorgon's Eye wouldn't work on the gargoyle, which meant she would actually have to fight her. She had tried to use it on the mysterious naga, but the smoke and steam had made it hard to spot the snake, and by the time she was ready to use it, the naga had hit the sun stone with a massive ball of fire.

There were only seconds left before Abella caught up. The storm was still too weak to provide Yuki with much cover and she was still recovering from her fight with the naga. Several walls of ice

formed between her and the front door before Abella stepped out. Yuki had already ducked behind one, tracing symbols in the ground. She didn't want to hurt Abella, but she needed a plan to stop her.

The heavy flapping of wings signaled that Abella had already gone airborne. Using a swirl of powder, Yuki dashed to another wall. A thin layer of snow was beginning to form, and she commanded her dress to shift back to the white furs she had worn before. Huddled behind another ice wall, she traced more sigils into the ground.

When Abella slammed into a nearby wall, it exploded hard enough that a giant chunk struck her own wall and cracked it.

C'mon, c'mon. Yuki finished her sigil then looked up. Abella was looking around, but Yuki knew for a fact that she was listening, trying to narrow down the kitsune's heartbeat. Luckily, the swirling ice was loud enough to muffle it, but it wouldn't last long.

A series of hand signs created a small crystalline stag. Yuki sent it running across the yard, its legs clicking loudly together, and Abella's head immediately turned to track it.

Abella chased it down, stomping on it once she caught up. It shattered like glass.

Yuki ran to another wall and turned her attention toward the house and commanded the snow to build itself into a series of snowmen. It was a game she had played with Tink in the winter, and she commanded the four foot tall men to charge at Abella. They charged at her, gaining in size as their bottoms rolled across the yard. Abella slapped them apart with her tail.

"Where the fuck are you?" Abella yelled, then flew up again. The cloud of ice and snow that had formed over the house gobbled up the gargoyle.

Fuck. She couldn't see Abella, and knew the gargoyle was circling, just waiting and listening for the time to strike. The snowmen had reassembled themselves and were wandering aimlessly, their icy limbs reaching for nothing. She debated using one of her tarot cards, but couldn't figure out what the best use would be.

Occasionally a dark shadow would emerge from the clouds above and splatter one of her snowmen, then fly away. Getting ready to move again, she summoned a mirror image of herself at a different wall and commanded it to run toward the house. Abella descended from the sky and tore into the illusion, ripping a giant chunk out of the yard. Yuki left a clone of herself behind, then transformed into a fox to run to a better position.

The clone made a break for the main road. With a powerful blast of her wings, Abella leapt across the yard and crashed through the image.

"Fucking coward! Show yourself!" Abella shattered a low-lying ice wall with her tail, then leapt to the sky once more. Yuki was hiding beneath the frost covered bushes near the edge of the yard, her heart pounding furiously in her chest.

On the porch of the house, Tink had appeared with a club, followed by a handful of large rats and Sofia.

Shit. She already knew whose side they would choose, and she didn't want to hurt them.

The storm she had created was now in full swing, the wind whipping up the freshly fallen snow with visibility dropping to only a few feet. She could no longer see the house, but could feel the runes

she had traced in the yard. Using them to navigate, she moved slowly across the yard until she was at the right spot. Using her paw, she finished the last rune.

She could feel them all link together in her mind, ready to activate. She moved across the yard, summoning a clone made of ice.

The clone stood in the middle of the symbols, casting a wary eye to the skies. Yuki let her fox form slide away, casting down lines of magic in a circle around the area as she transitioned back into a human. Once she was ready, she let the wind die down just enough that the house was visible once more.

And so was her clone.

When Abella slammed into the clone, it shattered, causing her to crash into the ground. The runes on the ground sent blue beams of light into the sky that folded over, criss-crossing on top of Abella. Jagged shards of ice sprouted along the ground beneath the blue beams. When they met, there was a loud crash.

The giant crystal in the middle of the yard stood nearly ten feet tall. Yuki walked toward it slowly, then placed her hand slowly on the ice.

Excess shards snapped free and fell to the ground. Abella was frozen in a crouched stance, her wings spread wide. Her stony muscles flexed, but she was sufficiently trapped.

“Abella.” Yuki let out a sigh. “I’m so sorry about this. Naia’s okay, I just can’t have her getting in my way until she’s ready to listen. I need all of you to listen, but I can’t do that if—”

An arrow shattered against the block of ice. Several others followed, bouncing off the cold hard surface. On the porch, the rats had formed a line and were using small bows to launch a volley of arrows. Yuki swore and pressed herself against the ice.

None of them knew her. She was in enemy territory and she needed to make them see that she wasn’t a threat, that she was the true Caretaker of this place. As long as they were loose, they would fight to undermine her at every opportunity and she needed to make sure they were out of the way.

A large rock bounced off the side of the ice, causing it to crack.

A low growl formed in Yuki’s throat and she took off her eye patch. Letting out a howl, she jumped around the block of ice and ran toward the front door. The Gorgon’s Eye had a fifteen foot range, and when she got near the porch, Yuki saw Sofia’s eye flash.

Dropping her sword, Sofia grabbed Tink and a rat with a crown on his head and threw them through the front door, then closed it.

“Run!” she cried, turning around to grab her sword. The rats by her feet were already turning to stone by the time the Eye’s magic swept across her, but she had closed her eye.

Cursing, Yuki drew the Two of Swords and used it to summon a pair of blades.

“Move, Sofia.” Yuki moved quietly up the stairs, a blade in each hand. The cyclops was a formidable foe, but she just needed her to open that eye for a second. They clashed, Sofia deftly slapping away the assault of both blades, yet keeping herself between Yuki and the door. Yuki pressed the assault, but Sofia’s precognition made it impossible to disarm her. However, being blind meant that

her offensive skills were nearly non-existent. In a fair fight, Yuki wouldn't dream of taking up a sword against the cyclops.

This was never meant to be a fair fight. Yuki whirled about, striking as quick as she could. Sofia casually knocked most of her attacks to the side and moved away from the rest while keeping her presence near the front door.

"Did the Society send you?" Sofia blocked a slash that would have sliced open her forearm, then brought her sword down hard enough that Yuki almost dropped her own blade.

"No. My name is Yuki. I lived here with you and the others." She tried to stab Sofia in the foot, but she stepped aside. Yuki's sword got stuck in the wood, and the cyclops brought down her foot on the flat, causing the metal to snap.

"And you think this is the way to move back in?" Sofia slapped aside Yuki's next assault. The kitsune could see the flash of light from beneath her eyelid.

"I'm not just moving in." Yuki took a step back and summoned a sphere of frost. She hit Sofia in the chest with it, the force of the impact knocking the breath out of her. Ice crystals formed along her arms and legs, and Sofia dropped her sword. "I'm the new owner."

"How did you..." Sofia shivered, her words trailing off. Yuki dropped her sword and grabbed Sofia by the forehead.

Using her thumb, she pried open Sofia's eye. Shock registered on her face, her pupil dilating as the Gorgon's Eye turned her to stone.

"You'll understand someday. Everybody will." Once she had everything under control, she could unfreeze them one at a time and explain everything she knew. Once they heard, they would see things her way.

Stepping around Sofia, Yuki pushed her way into the house. Upstairs, she heard a door slam. Her head was pounding now, so she put her eyepatch back on. She could handle the goblin without it. The tarot cards slid into her hands and she fanned them out, walking up the stairs slowly.

"Everything's going to be okay," she whispered to herself. At least, she hoped it would.

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A pair of centaurs pushed aside the flaps of a yurt and hurled Mike inside, his arms and legs splaying out along the hard ground when he landed. He had curled up at the last second to avoid crushing Ratu, and she had squirmed around at the last second to get out of the way. Landing hard, he had the breath knocked from him.

Lying on the floor, he listened to the sound of his own pathetic wheezing and struggled to stand.

Orion stormed in shortly after, only to be grabbed and dragged back out by a pair of guards. Mike lay perfectly still, hoping to avoid further scrutiny of any sort, and the expletives he heard from the hunter outside told him he was lucky they had pulled him out.

Zel's transformation had triggered a storm of shouting that had deafened him. Based on what he could make out, Zel's return to the tribe was proof of some betrayal or a challenge against the Grand Stallion. Even worse, it was also somehow an affront to the gods for whatever reason. Zel's father had eventually joined in, shouting in her face.

Mike had gotten between the two of them only to be knocked aside by a roan colored centaur with a spear. Several of them had taken kicks at him, and that was when the guards had grabbed him and dragged him to this place.

The shouting outside was loud, and he occasionally heard Zel's voice amongst the din.

She's got a lot of explaining to do, he thought to himself. Wincing, he rolled onto his belly and waited for his breath to return.

He finally sat up, a sharp pain in his left shoulder keeping him from putting any weight on that arm. Watching the entry flap, he let out a sigh of relief when nobody came through it to beat him up some more.

Looking around, he saw that the yurt was scarcely decorated with a large bed of leaves and grass in one corner. It smelled faintly like a barn, and he noticed a pair of buckets along the back wall behind a hanging curtain. Moving toward them, he caught the faint odor of piss and then saw that one of the buckets had a dry, lonely horse turd in the bottom.

"Gross." Further surveillance of the room told him nothing else. Either the centaurs lived boring lives in their yurts, or he was in some sort of holding cell.

Ratu squirmed, her body wrapping around his waist and squeezing. He put a reassuring hand on her through the thin fabric.

"It'll be okay," he said, keeping his voice low. "We're safe for now."

She squeezed again, then her head popped free of the bottom, surveying the room.

"Stay inside or else they'll see you." He turned away from the entry flap and walked until he was toward the back of the yurt. Serpentine coils circling his body, Ratu changed positions until she was wrapped around his torso.

She shifted inside of his shirt, her coils elongating. Small hands wrapped around his waist and a pair of legs sprouted from beneath his shirt, dangling over the ground. Her weight increased, and he tightened his abs to keep from tipping forward. Ratu's transformation suddenly stopped when her feet hit the floor, and he lifted his shirt off her head to reveal that she had transformed into a child.

"What—" he said, but she stood on her tiptoes and covered his mouth with her hand.

Satisfied that he would be quiet, she began intricate movements with her fingers. She looked younger than she had when they were in Baba Yaga's trap, her long hair hanging to her waist. The dragon on her kimono looked younger as well, flying in circles across her torso as a golden bubble expanded outward from the two of them and molded itself to the interior wall of the yurt.

"That will keep them from hearing us," she said. Despite her youth, she had her adult voice still. "Turn around and face the door."

He obeyed, and heard a rustling behind him.

"Okay, good. Now if they walk in they won't see me."

"Is that why you're a little girl?"

“Partially.” He felt her hands go up the back of his shirt. “That and I’m hoping that they won’t trample a little kid when they see one.” Her hands moved around to his belly and slid her hands beneath his shirt.

“What are you doing?” he asked, trying not to laugh when she hit a ticklish spot.

“Stealing your body heat.” The moment she said it, a chill went through him. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead and his tongue went strangely numb.

“Isn’t that what you’ve been doing for the last couple of hours?”

“No. I’ve been sleeping.” One hand pinched his side playfully. Her fingers were like ice. “I’m ashamed to admit it, but I got my ass beat. If you hadn’t dropped the sun stone, I wouldn’t have gotten away.”

“What happened?”

“It wasn’t a fair fight. The mountain top was covered in ice and snow, so she had a huge advantage. I think the best comparison is like trying to light a match in a storm. It was an uphill fight, and I thought I was doing okay until that damn abomination showed up.”

“The dragon?”

“Pah, hardly. If it had been a dragon, you would know it. It was some type of creature stitched together with earth magic, a thing of teeth and scales and hair. Technically it isn’t even alive, but that doesn’t matter. It knocked me down, and I had to set fire to pretty much everything to chase it off. That’s when she found me in all the smoke, and I knew that I had to escape. I spotted the stone glowing behind her in the snow, so I gave it a boost.” Ratu sighed. “You’re so warm.”

“Not really.” In fact, his toes were slowly going numb. “Who was that on the cliff? Zel called her the Snow Queen.”

“Cute name. I imagine that’s what the centaurs call her. No, she’s a kitsune, a fox demon. She told me her name was Yuki. Kitsune and naga are a lot alike. We are both shapeshifters capable of tremendous magic, but kitsune tend to be loners, whereas naga prefer the company of others.”

“Oh. Any idea on why she tried to kill me?”

“We didn’t have an in-depth conversation about it. Anyway, I remember falling, and then hearing your voice. You saved me once again and kept me alive until I woke up. By then, the centaurs had us, and now we need to figure out how to get out of this mess.”

“That would be nice.” His teeth chattered. “So why are you stealing my body heat?”

“I’m replenishing my magic. I can think of another way that’s more fun, but I don’t think now is the time or place.”

Mike nodded. The centaurs were upset enough as it is, he couldn’t imagine their reaction to discovering that he had a magical fuck buddy.. “Are you almost done? I’m freezing.”

“Almost.” His fingers tingled and she let out a sigh. “There. I think that’ll work.”

“You can get magic from my body heat?”

“Hmm? Not really, no.” Her hands moved to his back, and she leaned against him. “Your body heat was nice, but I needed something for your magic to hitch a ride on to absorb it. Magic requires

symbolism with logic, a lesson most students learn eventually. By allowing me to take your body heat, I was able to initiate an exchange of magic.”

“Wait, say that last part again?”

“You heard me. An exchange. You have magic, and I just took some of it. Or depleted it would be a better term. Your magic isn’t like mine, so it isn’t a one-to-one conversion, which is a shame.”

“But what if I need it?”

She chuckled. “Are you planning to fuck your way out of here?”

Mike frowned. So far, that was the one trick up his sleeve and he knew she had a point. “No. Not without plenty of water and maybe a granola bar.”

“Very funny. Right now, your magic is tied to sensuality and sexual contact. Unless you are planning to seduce an entire centaur tribe, I think I can make better use of it.” Her hands became extremely warm, sending pulses of heat through his limbs. “Does that feel better?”

He could feel his toes again. “Much. So what now?”

“I’m afraid we wait. We need to know what we are dealing with.”

“What if they just come in here to execute me or something?”

A hiss came from behind him. “Then I’ll turn them to ash. They don’t know I’m here, so we will have the element of surprise.”

He really hoped it didn’t come to a fight. It felt like this was a giant misunderstanding that could be solved with a little bit of diplomacy and a desire to hear him out before stabbing him with their spears.

He checked his phone. He didn’t have service, but he did have his alarm set. Frowning, he turned it off. If he didn’t get out of the centaur camp by nightfall, he wouldn’t make it back in time to turn the sundial and then he would have the Society to deal with.

When would it end? He was exhausted, and the appearance of Yuki the snow bitch had further complicated things. Who was she, and why did she try to kill him? Usually he got a few moments to aggravate someone before they tried to off him.

He paced in the back, Ratu staying by his side the whole time. An hour passed while they brainstormed. Ratu debated the merits of smoking out the camp or transforming into a large serpent and scaring the centaurs. She examined his two remaining vials, the one for hiding and the acidic one for escaping. He had given Zel the worst-case scenario vial, surprised that she hadn’t used it.

Then again, only she knew what it did. She must have had a good reason to tuck it away for later.

Two hours passed, and the daylight coming through the yurt dimmed. Mike was growing anxious, checking the time left off on his phone. He had tried to look out the flap more than once, but a pair of horse butts had greeted him each time. The centaurs guarding him had turned just enough to aim a pair of threatening kicks his way, and he decided to quit looking.

Ratu gave up shadowing him and found an inconspicuous part of the yurt to hide in. Crouched down, she was hard to spot, and spent time drawing symbols in the dirt. Thinking it was an attempt at a plan, Mike had approached, expecting a rough drawing of the camp.

Nope. She had drawn a chibi-style rendition of Asterion having a picnic with Beth.

“Really?” he asked.

She shrugged. “It’s not like I have anything better to do?”

He groaned inwardly. She was right, there was nothing to be done. Frustrated, he walked across the yurt and kicked one of the buckets. It bounced off the back wall and clattered to a halt.

Eventually the flaps of the yurt opened. Ratu vanished with a faint pop, her serpentine form slithering beneath the leaves and grass on the floor. In walked Zel, her face a mask of misery. She was followed in by a female centaur with dark skin and thick braids along her back.

“I’m so sorry about all this,” she said, but Mike held up a hand to silence her.

“I don’t need apologies. I need answers. How fucked are we?”

The centaur with Zel grimaced at his language, but said nothing. He noticed she carried a sword across her waist.

“Very. I invoked parley to keep us alive long enough to get away, but a chance didn’t come up and now we’re stuck here.”

“Clearly. And isn’t parley some kind of fancy pirate speak? Why are centaurs invoking it?”

Zel rolled her eyes. “The Herd loves their rules. You have to understand that centaurs hold honor and tradition above all else. That being said, it isn’t uncommon for them to find fun new traditions to absorb and observe until the end of time, the more formal the better. Parley came about during the last great purge in the eighteen hundreds or so.”

“The purge?”

She nodded. “Centaur history is a mess, but the reason there aren’t centaurs on Earth is because they were either killed or they went somewhere else, like here. It was called the purge because my people had to make the choice to fight or leave, and the different tribes kept warring for leadership as we migrated together. Parley is something we picked up from the French. Or maybe the British, I’m not sure. But the Herd put it in place so that tribes could approach each other without fear of death.”

“Sounds vicious.”

“The centaurs of old were very uptight. My people are considered very liberal in their ways by comparison.”

“They were going to kill us.”

“They still might.” She cast a nervous look at the centaur next to her. “How’s your stomach, by the way? Still all twisted up?”

He could tell she was asking about Ratu. “Oh, it’s fine. So explain to me why there’s a centaur tribe in my wardrobe.”

“Ah, that. That’s a surprise to me as well.” She moved toward the side of the yurt and sat, her legs folding beneath her. The other centaur remained standing, her hand laid across the hilt of her sword. “This place is a pocket dimension. When the Herd was migrating, we were offered a chance to come here and be the protectors of this place. As long as we kept intruders out, we could live here in relative piece.”

“And who offered you guys that?”

“That’s... an interesting story. Nobody can remember him. Or her. It was many generations ago, but a bargain was struck. This place is actually an island. If you sail away, you end up on the other side of the island, almost as if we were on a tiny planet.”

Mike nodded. “The Architect, maybe?”

“Or an early Caretaker. Hard to say. Anyway, Emily came here many years ago, before I was born. My people fought with her, but she kept sneaking in and out with the help of the Snow Queen.”

“Why did she keep coming here?”

“The tower. It was here before we were and is supposed to hold dangerous magic. That’s why we were appointed as guardians of this place, to keep intruders from going to the tower.”

He remembered his brief glance at the impressive structure, and something niggled at the back of his mind in thinking about it. “So you used the wardrobe to get to Earth?”

“No. When I snuck to Earth those years ago, I did not emerge from a wardrobe, but from a magical tree in the backyard of your house. It was difficult, but my aunt figured out how to do the magic that Emily did. The Snow Queen got trapped here many years ago, but now I think that Emily chopped down that tree after we found a way to pass through it.”

“She made it into the wardrobe.” Interesting. “But why not burn it down entirely and lock her here forever?”

Zel shrugged. “I don’t have that answer for you. All I know was that when I stepped through the wardrobe, one of my worst fears had been realized and I got caught up in my own disbelief. If I had just pushed you back through, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“So tell me about this mess.”

“Well, here’s the short version. When I disappeared, it was assumed that Emily took me from the Herd. That was the story my aunt encouraged when she returned, but they saw through her lie. Now that we’re back, Orion has demanded that we follow through with our pre-arranged marriage.”

“That dick was your fiance?”

Her face reddened. “He didn’t recognize me. My father took his father’s place as Grand Stallion when he passed away. Now he wants me back so that he can solidify power prior to my own father’s passing and lead the Herd.”

“Tell him no.”

“Well, that’s where things get complicated.”

“They’re already complicated, Zel.”

"Yes, they are. I informed them that you had a claim to me that exceeded Orion's. They... didn't like hearing that."

"A claim? Did you tell them we're married or something?"

She blushed. "No. If I had said that, we would have both been executed. I told them I swore a debt to you to protect your home, which lies outside of this realm. I told them all about the Society and your battles with them and also about that time you saved me from the Mandragora."

"Ah, yes. That time I saved your life." He had no idea what lies she had told and wasn't about to embellish details in front of her security detail, so blindly agreed. "You didn't share house secrets with your people, right?"

"Of course not. Centaur honor would frown highly on that."

"I'm sure. So what now?"

"Orion has demanded a trial."

"What have I been accused of?"

"Not a human trial, A centaur trial. Centaurs are a proud race, and we tend to settle our differences with a fight to the death or feats of strength and dexterity."

"And he didn't choose fight to the death?"

"Oh, he did. But after I told them about your battles with the Society, he was talked out of it. Emily was a powerful foe capable of magic we've never seen and the fear is that a death match would cause you to lash out at the Herd during such a battle. Orion wasn't happy with the decision, but saw its wisdom."

"Uh huh. Well, unless the feats involve shit like putting on pants and paying taxes, I'm guessing it won't go well for me at all." Naia's magic had given his body more definition, but he wasn't magically stronger as a result. Just leaner.

"Well, and there's the other problem. You see, if Orion wins, I am to be married to him right away. And when that occurs, I will be mated before the entire tribe. Then everyone will know how little... I care for him." Her eyes glanced at the other centaur.

"I see." If he lost, then Orion would discover Zel's secret. He already knew what that meant. "So, what do you suggest?"

"The trials are similar to archaic tests of manhood. You will be asked to complete certain tasks and then compared to Orion's performance. However, I know that with the right preparation, you could slither through these tasks with relative ease."

"Uh huh." Okay. She wanted Ratu to help him cheat. He had zero qualms about that. "And then what?"

"Well, if you win, then I won't have to marry Orion."

"And we can leave?"

She looked at the ground, her hands fidgeting. "Not quite. The centaurs want you disposed of. Permanently."

“Then why bother making me go through these trials?”

“Because technically you haven’t been granted parley yet. Orion’s challenge has to be dealt with first, because my betrothal is at issue. Afterward, you must deal with my father.”

He sighed. He didn’t have time for this, but kept that thought to himself. “So what will happen then?”

“I don’t know.” Her eyes were misting up. “But that’s our best chance for survival.”

He frowned. Captured by centaurs, forced to endure trials with an uptight hunter, and then a meeting with the chieftain that would likely end with his death. He sat down on the grass floor and put his head in his hands.

He felt trapped. The moment he had opened the door of the wardrobe, he had become buried beneath a slew of problems that left him gasping for air. He didn’t know what he had done to deserve such a fate, and his inability to simply fix things left him feeling like an absolute failure.

No. Everything bad that had happened since the house expanded was a result of things Emily had done. Whatever she had been up to had generated a significant amount of fallout and he was officially sick of being the punching bag for it.

He grabbed the hilt of his dagger and squeezed it in frustration, then let it go. Getting mad would get him nowhere. What would Naia suggest if she were here? He wished he could talk to her and get her advice. Or even talk to Zel without the silent centaur listening.

He turned his attention back to Zel.

“Tell me about these trials. What trumped up bullshit do I have to do?”

“A feat of strength, a feat of dexterity, and a feat of endurance. The trial ends when one of you has failed twice. The feat of strength is a tug of war. The feat of dexterity involves shooting a bow. And the feat of endurance means running to the sea and back. Whoever makes it first wins, obviously.”

An idea hit him. “Do I have to do them in that order?”

“Yes.”

The feat of endurance would involve being out in the open. If he could just win the feat of strength or dexterity, he would get a chance to make a break for it, and he thought he knew just how it could be done. “Okay then,” he said, smiling. He officially had a plan.

He turned to the guard. “Well, when you leave and report back to whoever, tell them that the Caretaker is pissed, but is happy to undertake Orion’s trials. Oh, and when I win, Orion can kiss my ass in front of the whole Herd for wasting my time with this petty bullshit.”

This comment made the centaur scowl, but she remained silent.

“No, I’m serious. I’m twice the man he is. Literally.” He pointed at his legs for emphasis.

The centaur snorted, anger blossoming in her cheeks.

“Mike...” Zel hissed.

He ignored her. “Honestly, he may as well challenge me to a cartwheel competition. Stupid horse.”

The guard drew her blade and stepped toward him, but he held his ground. Fear, anger and loathing emanated from the centaur in waves. That was the reaction he had been hoping for, and he gave her the biggest cocky grin he could muster. If she was this mad, he could only imagine how pissed Orion would be, and he was going to need the whole Herd good and mad at him for what he had planned.

After several tense moments of silence, Zel rose and left, escorted by her guard. Ratu came out of hiding and transformed into a little girl again.

“I question the wisdom in antagonizing angry centaurs,” she told him, curiosity in her eyes.

“I’ll tell you exactly why.” He pulled one of the vials from his pocket. “But first, let’s discuss how we’re all going to get out of here together.”