

Page of Pentacles

Mike gazed morosely at his cellphone, watching the timer for the sundial eventually hit zero. For good or bad, he wouldn't be there to reset it.

Time was up.

Standing on the terrace of the tower, it took a supreme effort to stick his phone back in his pocket rather than throw it off the side.

"I take it the dial has reset." Ratu spoke from the chaise lounge behind him, her legs dangling off the side. She was engrossed in another of Yuki's journals. She had stayed up most of the night, unable to sleep herself, poring over as many of them as she could. Apparently Yuki had quite the talent for poetry, and Ratu had shared more than a couple with him.

He had been up most of the night as well. They had built a nice fire in the fireplace to keep the room warm, and he had done his best to try and sleep. It wasn't meant to be. On top of his concern for the others in his house, he realized just how much he depended on snuggling up to Tink to stay asleep. Apparently she had somehow become his personal security blanket, because he had woken up more than once with a sense of dread.

Zel was down below, rummaging through Yuki's alchemical stores. It would seem that the kitsune wasn't particularly skilled at making potions, but Zel was hoping to put together a few basics before they set out.

A centaur horn played outside, eliciting a groan from Ratu.

"They're still there, aren't they?"

"Have been all night, as far as I can tell." He turned his head toward the cliffside trail. Orion was down below, pacing back and forth. The centaur had gotten particularly vocal last night with the help of a concoction likely brewed by his shaman, but the wind had carried away most of his words. Mike shook his head. "I don't think they're going to leave."

"Neither will we, unless we discover a secret exit of some sort." Ratu turned the page. "How is Zel doing?"

"Still shaken up, but she's determined." Last night, Zel had discovered a comfortable stable for her to sleep in. It was attached to the yard out back, and she had quickly wandered amongst the statues, a look of horror fixed on her face. She was adamant that she recognized some of the faces out there as members of

her tribe that had wandered off to face the Snow Queen, never to be seen again. He found it odd that Yuki would keep them stored away like that, rather than simply pushing them over a cliff.

Then again, based on what Ratu had told him, Yuki wasn't all she seemed to be either. Her journal spoke often of her journeys among the island. Any encounters with centaurs typically ended with her sneaking off or, at worst, getting into a fight or playing a magical prank. There was no malice or hate in her journal, only a desperation to understand what had happened to her dearest Emily.

Daisy had explained it to them as best as she could when asked. It had taken forever with only a few words at a time on the slate, but she told them that Yuki and Emily had made the tower their own personal love nest. Apparently it had become a home away from home for them, discovered completely on accident during a trip abroad. Emily had destroyed the old portal to this place after connecting a new one, and the two of them constantly snuck away to enjoy the tower's relative peace and quiet.

One night, Emily got out of bed to wander the tower, leaving both Yuki and Daisy behind. Several years passed, years of searching for her. Yuki had been unable to use the portal, and had assumed the centaurs had taken her.

After months of constant harassment, she was forced to believe that Emily had simply vanished.

That was, until the night many years later when Emily came back. Daisy couldn't say much about that day because she had been off scouting a new area for them to explore. She had come back to discover that Emily had suddenly returned, bypassing the many wards that had been placed around the portal. Instead of a greeting or an explanation, Emily had attacked her former lover, essentially leaving her for dead.

The experience had changed Yuki, and not necessarily for the better. Daisy insisted that the fox was still a good person, but when challenged by the centaurs, she had started collecting them, using one of the magic items that had been hidden away in the tower called the Gorgon's Eye.

Daisy took them to the room she had warned Mike about when asked about what had been kept there. Upon entering, they discovered a room similar in structure to Ratu's laboratory, only it was primarily an armory. Lit by some

torches and a natural skylight, it looked similar to the old library he had stumbled into with Tink and Cecilia.

A few of the objects had been broken apart and stacked on the tables around the room, but the rest were stored in protective cases that had no hinge or latch. Daisy explained that they had been locked up with spells to keep anyone from getting them, and he knew better than to attempt to open them.

A case made of thick wood held nothing but a few inches of water in the bottom. When he approached it, the water formed into a sword, then a handax, then a bow, as if trying to figure out what he would like best. When he moved away, it turned into a massive trident, then collapsed into a pool of water once again.

One of the displays had been broken apart. The only thing inside was an empty stone box that looked like it held something the size of a ping pong ball. In the locked case attached to it was a strange looking sword with a sickle near the end of the blade.

An odd looking mace was in a super thick case and held in place by several heavy looking chains. It rattled the chains when Mike came near, so he immediately moved away. Ratu suggested there was little to learn from the room after inspecting the broken items, so they agreed to leave it alone.

Throughout the tower they also found several hand-drawn tarot cards, hundreds of them tucked away everywhere. Ratu warned him away from messing with them. Apparently several of them radiated magic, and she was fairly certain Yuki had spent her solitary confinement perfecting the art of inscribing runes into the cards.

It was too bad they couldn't find a use for the cards, he thought, walking to the window to look down at the centaur camp. They had set up several more flags along the edge of the cliff, and a few of them had symbols he couldn't quite make out from here. "So what happens when we get past them? After we get home?"

"If it's like when we came here, probably another fight." Ratu grimaced. "I'd like to think I'm better prepared this time, but Yuki seems like a planner. I imagine the whole house is covered in snow by now."

"And the others?"

"That's a great question. I have my ideas, but none of them are optimistic."

He felt sick to his stomach. Had Yuki hurt the others? Or maybe even turned them to stone? Momentary anger filled him, his hands clenching tight. "I wish we knew what those weapons did. I imagine they would help us turn the tide."

Ratu closed her book and lifted her eyes to meet his gaze. "Do you honestly believe that?"

"Of course I do. If that stuff is locked up, it must be powerful."

"That is true. Those things do radiate magic like tiny stars."

"So maybe we should look into them! If I had a powerful weapon, maybe I could beat her this time."

"The only reason you lost last time was she had the element of surprise."

"Hardly. The only reason I'm still alive is the naga skin armor Sofia gave to me. I'm not a fighter. All I have is this knife." He pulled out the dagger. "It cuts through everything, but the damn thing is too short. What good is that? I have to get close enough to use it first. Or what about magic? I can't do magic, not the things you can do. Yeah, I get magic boners that let me last in bed for hours. Super useful. Oh, and limited precognition. I get to sense the future briefly before it smashes me into a bug. A lot of good that did me when I met Yuki. Oh, I know!" His voice had risen now, and he was shouting. "Why don't I just give her some orgasms with my sex lightning? That's right, I'm calling it sex lightning! I bet she'll show me a heap of respect when I show her that trick. Oh, Mike, I'm so sorry I tried to kill you, if only I had known you would rock my world like never before!"

Ratu cleared her throat, giving him a hard stare. "Are you finished?"

"No, I'm not! I feel helpless here. I thought I had things under control until the rats came. And yes, we worked that out, but it was Beth and Tink who did all the work. I feel like I'm just standing back and watching everyone else do everything. Hell, I only got this dagger because the witch who had it got eaten by a plant."

"I see. You are defining your value now based on your ability to fight." Ratu shook her head. "What makes a legend, Mike Radley?"

"What?"

"You heard me. What makes a legend?"

He rubbed the back of his head. "I don't know, legendary deeds?"

"What makes a deed legendary?"

He shrugged. "Something big and grand. David killed Goliath with a sling. Or that guy who killed Medusa for her head and fought a kraken. Or, um, King Arthur and Excalibur? I guess I'm not sure what he did."

Ratu laughed. "In your mind, legends are created when someone stands up to defy the odds, the little guy versus an impossible situation. But here's a secret for you. Legends are primarily made by only one thing: a good storyteller. I could argue that you have already completed legendary deeds. The defeat of Baba Yaga is no small feat, or what about those witches we scoured off your lawn? Or even better, how you were able to rally a household of monsters to do your bidding through kindness alone?"

"Those aren't legendary, those are just... normal days for me."

"I think you're experiencing a crisis of identity. You're the Caretaker, but none of us truly knows what that means. The house chose you for the position. Were you a fighter before?"

"I... no."

"How about a wizard, or a mage, or even a decent stage magician?"

"...no."

"You see? So either the house wants you to remain true to yourself or it will mold you into the role. What would you say you were before you moved in? Think hard about it."

He furrowed his brow. What was he? A shut-in? He didn't even want to deal with the home. He bounced from girlfriend to girlfriend, feared physical and intimate contact. Had regular nightmares about his mother tormenting him. Up until a couple years ago, his therapist had been the person he spoke with the most.

"I was a victim."

"Being a victim is a state of being, not an identity. You can be the victim of a crime, but it only defines you if you let it. Try again."

"But that's what I was. My mom screwed me up as a kid, and being a victim meant I bounced from place to place. That's why I chose a job that meant I didn't

have to work directly with people and I kept to myself. I spent years in therapy just so I could have a normal conversation with a woman without flinching.”

“Sounds like a lot of hard work for someone who still thinks they were a victim.”

“Well, I wasn’t a victim anymore. I was a...” the word finally came to him. “I’m a survivor. I’m cautious, but quick on my feet. I don’t like trouble, so try to avoid it.”

“Interesting. Seems like being a survivor has served you well so far. So maybe you should worry less about how others see you and just worry about being yourself. Find a way for us to survive.”

“Yeah, well I’m tired of getting knocked around. The centaurs were just another example of that. And that douche out there hasn’t helped things. I know he wants me to come out and fight him, but I can’t fight a centaur.”

Ratu picked up the book she had put down. “I wonder. If it meant saving me, would you go down and fight him?”

“Of course I would. I’d piss myself the whole time going down there, though.”

“Interesting. For someone who hates being so weak, you certainly are willing to throw yourself at an impossible problem. If it meant killing Orion to save my life, would you do it? Would you stab him with that tiny dagger of yours? Don’t answer, but think about it. Would you take another life if it meant saving one you cherished?” She opened her robes and laid back, using the thick journal as a pillow. A beam of light he hadn’t noticed slowly crawled over her seat, and she let out a sigh of contentment. “Ah, that feels good. Think I’ll take a little nap, if you don’t mind.”

He frowned. It was the same question that weighed on his mind constantly these days. There was only one way to know the answer, and he didn’t think he was ready to find out for sure.

Daisy appeared near the stairs, signing the word *come*. They had used the slate to learn a few basic words from her, and so Mike followed, leaving Ratu behind to bask in the sunlight.

Down the stairs he went, the smell of breakfast hitting his nostrils and making him salivate. Last night’s meal had been a perfectly good stew, but he was

ravenous once more. Zel moved around her makeshift kitchen, carefully navigating the narrow aisle between tables.

“I found some grains this morning,” she said, putting a large loaf of bread on the table.

Mike drooled over the delicious looking fruit salad in the middle of the table, sitting down and stuffing his face with the juicy berries Zel had picked earlier that morning. His conversation with Ratu wasn't forgotten, but he simply couldn't resist such delicious looking food.

In the distance, he heard the loud trumpet of the centaurs and rolled his eyes. “Sounds like they're still at it.”

“Yeah. Orion was bitching all morning while I picked fruit. I imagine he would kill you on sight given half the chance.”

“There weren't any arrows or spears in the garden, were there?”

“No. The barrier Ratu made is still holding.” She let out a sigh. “I couldn't sleep last night, so I went for a walk in the back. At least a few of the centaurs there have been missing for a decade or more, and more than a couple are kin. It was tough seeing someone you knew so many years later, frozen in time.”

“I wonder if it could be reversed?”

She shrugged. “Maybe, but that doesn't mean the harm isn't already done. These are people who have families that have moved on without them. It's hard to imagine exactly how these people will simply return to the tribe without disruption. But that wasn't all.”

“Oh?” His mouth was full of the best blackberries he had ever eaten.

“My aunt was out there.” Zel's lips formed a grim line. “When it was discovered that she helped me escape, they sent her into exile. It's very rare for the tribe to flat out execute one of their own. It's also very hard to be an exiled centaur. Your only choice is to climb the mountain and avoid the valley, because you will be attacked on sight. So I kept looking. Not all of the statues are bold centaur warriors who thought to challenge the Snow Queen, but also people who were exiled. More than a couple were centaurs who simply went missing, and I wonder if they ran across Yuki on accident.”

“I guess... wow, I don't know what to say.”

“These aren’t all people who came to kill her. Some of them are people who got lost and maybe came here to beg for help, I can’t say. Even if we could release the spell, then what? The warriors would be welcomed back into the tribe, but what about the others?”

“What about them? If they can’t stay here, why not move into the greenhouse? You survived there for years on your own, though it sounds like they’ll have to go vegan.”

Zel twisted her upper half to look back at him. “Really? You would just invite them to come stay with you?”

“I guess. The greenhouse is huge and underutilized as it is. Well, I say this on the assumption that the exiled aren’t huge assholes or anything. But yeah, it’s my greenhouse, so I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“What about the others?”

“We can talk to them when we get the chance, but I doubt they will voice any complaints. You could start your own tribe or something.”

“Hmm.” Zel turned away, her eyes on something distant. She said nothing else while he ate, so he spent his time watching Daisy pluck the tiny spheres off of a blackberry and eat them. She was definitely smaller than the other fairies, and her antennae were thick and black. Dark gobs of blackberry covered her mouth, and she gave Mike a large smile.

“Why did you help us? he asked her, suddenly curious.

She signed a couple of things, then frowned when she realized he couldn’t keep up. The slate was nearby, so she pointed at it and the letters from their last conversation rearranged themselves.

“You helped me.”

“Well, yeah, but I figured you worked for Yuki. We’re kind of at odds here, and will probably fight next time we see each other.”

Daisy pondered her response for second. The slate could only hold so many words at a time, which had made their conversations last night a little challenging.

“You helped even though dangerous. Like Emily.”

“Yeah, but Yuki hates Emily.”

“Emily not always bad. Something happened.”

“Clearly. I feel like the last few days have been nothing but a reminder that she fucked everything up. Do you have any idea what happened?”

Daisy shook her head, then pointed at the board. “Fine one day, broken the next.”

“Great, like a magical stroke or something.”

Daisy nodded solemnly, then stuffed another berry in her mouth. He was about to ask her something else when the tower shook, a low rumble that caused the cutlery to vibrate on the table. Daisy’s eyes opened wide and she looked up at the ceiling.

“What the hell was that?” he asked. Somewhere in the tower, a bell rang ominously.

“DANGER!” The slate announced. Daisy dropped her berry and shot up the stairs. Wiping his face, he made sure his dagger was still with him before following, the slate clutched tightly in his hands.

A cool jet of air caught the side of Beth’s face, blasting her hair away from her forehead. Turning toward the breeze, she looked through a hole about a foot across. The hole led to a rundown room with a busted window, and outside the window was a frosted, barren landscape. Around her shoulder, she wore a small bag she had found in Ratu’s pagoda that was just big enough for Jenny to fit in. The doll had been motionless all night long, so Beth had taken it upon herself to carry her around.

By the sides of the hole, two rats waited for Tink to come running up and shove her head inside. Beth wasn’t certain how her tracking skill worked, but after only a few seconds, Tink yanked her head out.

“No husband,” she told them. “Close hole please.”

The rats got to work chewing on the hole in reverse. It was an interesting process to watch. The rats would chomp down on the stone wall they were working on, then drag their teeth into the opening. At first it looked like the material was stretching, but in reality, it was being restored as if it came back from an alternate dimension where it had been stored.

They had chosen to work away from Ratu's den. With the large amount of dangerous magical items stored there, Reggie and Asterion had felt it would be safer to open portals somewhere else, just in case something was waiting on the other side.

After a long, largely sleepless night for all of them, Reggie had finally announced that the first portals were nearly ready for Tink to inspect. All morning long, they had moved from portal to portal, with zero luck.

Tink hustled over to the next hole, and Beth watched her repeat the process. The ground shook beneath them, and the rats all paused to wait for several of the holes to be plugged back up before another was opened. Reggie had explained that once a hole was closed, it couldn't be used to chew a portal to somewhere else, which meant they were using one of the longer tunnels near the center of the Labyrinth. Asterion had disabled the traps, and the fairies circled overhead. All three of them were together once more, and they flitted in and out of the holes the rats made with the understanding that if they wandered off, they would get abandoned.

"Nope." Tink patted one of the rats on the head. "Good try, no husband."

"We've been at this for awhile now." Reggie rubbed his cheeks and sighed. "Are we sure she can find him this way?"

"Well... I'm going to say yes." Hope was all they had at this point. She was fairly certain that the deadline for turning the dial had passed, and she knew the Society would be eager to try and break in once again.

"Hmm." Reggie examined a globe that he had stolen from a school they had tunneled into. "It would seem that we are no closer to locating him than we were before." He had marked off portal openings using a marker. The whole globe was dotted with markings now. "if he's anywhere to be found, it certainly isn't on Earth proper."

"That's not a comforting thought." Beth picked up a rock and tossed it through one of the openings nearby. It had taken the rats several minutes to open the portals, and just as many to close them. "Any ideas on where to look?"

"It would have to be a place that was cut off from everywhere else. Folded up in on itself." Reggie made a ball with his hands. "Those are extremely difficult to find."

"Like the ones you built the tunnels through?"

“One and the same.” His whiskers twitched and he turned to face one of the portals. “You’ve given me an idea.” He gestured for a few rats to approach. They huddled around him, ears forward as he spoke.

“We’ve opened many portals to other realms in our time here. Speak with the others and reopen them right away.” They nodded at him and bowed, then ran off.

“You think that will help?” Beth asked.

“Perhaps.” He turned to face her. “This woman came through a wardrobe that had been locked by Emily’s hand. If this is the case, then I imagine she couldn’t have come to the house using conventional means. She must have been trapped in one of those pocket dimensions.”

“That’s right, I hadn’t even thought of that!” She frowned. “But why would opening old portals do any good?”

“I have a theory.” He paced down the hall, his eyes on his subjects. “This woman who came here was familiar with the house. Many eyes watched as she walked the halls. She was before our time, this I know. But,” he held up a finger, “I remember Emily demanding that we open the portals for her. She would travel to the Library and come back with her research. Pictures, scriptures, poetry, anything that could help us find the locations she was looking for. All but one time.”

“What happened then?”

“She described a tower overlooking a valley as if from memory. If she could go there, then why not simply go? We closed that portal quite some time ago, but our teeth remember. If we can open up those old portals, we should be able to find that place once more.”

“Reggie, you’re a genius.” She knelt down and kissed the rat on his forehead. It was the best idea they had heard so far, and she hoped he was right.

“You are too kind, Lady Beth.” He threw his shoulders back, suddenly looking very regal. “It is my pleasure to serve.”

The ground rumbled beneath their feet, more powerfully than before, and Reggie ran off, stopping on occasion to sniff the air. Beth followed behind him, wondering what had happened. They ran down the long corridor followed by a

small cluster of rats that had broken away from their projects. She felt like the piper, leading her army of rats to an unknown destination.

“There!” Reggie pointed at a section of the ground.

Beth stopped to rub her eyes, unsure of what she was seeing. Part of the stone floor had gone blurry, which didn’t make any sense. It shrank and grew every few seconds, the air between them rippling.

Nearby, a group of portals had just been opened. The rats that came with them helped close up the holes, rapidly shrinking them down to little dots of light that finally blipped out of existence a few minutes later.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Instability. We spaced the holes just right, but the tunnel curves. We didn’t account for that, and now must leave this part untouched unless we want to accidentally create our own pocket dimension. Or get shoved into a dimension-less void.”

“Yeah, I don’t feel like getting lost in the multiverse or whatever.” She let out a sigh. “I’m glad you got it fixed.”

“I’m just glad nobody was hurt.” Reggie patted one of his subjects on the head appreciatively. “These were portals dedicated to Earth destinations anyway. Please check in with your team leader for new assignments.”

The nearby rats saluted and dispersed.

“They seem to respect you.”

“I like to think so. Our previous king ruled from the throne. I prefer to rule from amongst my people.” He turned to face her, his long tail dragging through the dirt. “If you will excuse me, Lady Beth, I must attend to other matters.”

“Thank you, King Reggie.” She watched him leave, counting her blessings that they had managed to befriend such a powerful ally. How many other creatures like the rats roamed the world, just waiting for a fair shot at survival? Would Mike try and find them, then bring them to the house?

“Big earth shake,” Tink said from behind her, causing her to jump. “Rats no find husband, but try real hard.”

“Yeah, well... it’s definitely going to take some time.” Opening her mouth to say something else, she lost her train of thought when Asterion suddenly appeared, a dark look on his face.

“She is at the gate.” He gazed at the wall, his eyes looking past it. “And now the gate has opened.”

“She’s here? But why?”

“To stop Tink from finding husband.” Tink made a fist and punched her other hand. “Tink make pelt, wear in winter.”

“You mustn’t fight her. Your job is to find Mike and get him back here to turn the dial.” Though, with a fox demon assaulting them from within, she hoped he had some more tricks up his sleeve.

Blinking away her exhaustion, she watched as the rats opened numerous portals that went to strange places. A jungle where the sky was somehow an upside down city, the tower in the sky that Mike had been to, and even the inside of a submarine that had taken on some water. Each portal was a glimpse into a world that had been forgotten, and some of them immediately faded from Beth’s memory once the rats shut the portal down. Dozens of them were opened simultaneously, and Tink paced the corridors, dragging her club behind her.

“There!” Tink nearly knocked over a group of rats that had opened a hole barely a few inches wide. “Husband is in there, Tink can tell!”

Silence rippled across the rats for a few seconds, and then they swarmed. Pending portals were shut down, and rats squeezed in to help open the new portal as soon as there was room. They swarmed to the other side, the sound of their teeth on stone filling the air and sending chills down Beth’s spine.

“She is close now.” Asterion shouldered his axe. “She will be here soon.”

“Go go go!” Reggie shouted. The rats chewed frantically, and Tink was practically hopping up and down in front of the hole. Another squad of rats slipped through the gap to help from the other side.

Once the portal was large enough, Tink tossed her club through and fought to squirm into it. Her hips got stuck and she began frantically kicking her feet, her skirt lifting up to reveal her bare booty.

“Tink stuck!” Her voice sounded both muffled and far away. The rats nearby went to push her through, but balked when her foot connected with one of them, knocking him over.

“Out of the way!” Beth placed a foot on Tink’s butt and gave her a good shove. The goblin slid forward several inches, then stopped again. Letting out a sigh, she placed a hand on each of Tink’s buttcheeks and pushed as hard as she could, musing over Tink’s inability to wear panties.

Tink popped through to the other side, falling sideways onto a stone floor. An azure sky with floating clouds could be seen through a window overlooking a mountain range.

“Close it,” Beth said.

“Wait!” Tink’s face popped into view. “Beth come, too!”

“There’s no time. Find Mike, tell him what happened here.” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Bring him back. You can do it.”

“Lady Beth.” Reggie’s nose twitched and he ruffled his hands nervously over his fur. “I will stay and help.”

“No. Make sure the portals all get closed and then hide. Your people need you, and we will need you once this is over. The last thing we need is a change in the monarchy.”

“I will do my best.” Reggie turned toward the portal. “I need some volunteers to go with Lady Tink to retrieve Sir Mike.”

Several rats raised their hands, and they ran through to the other side to help close it. The Labyrinth was full of chewing noises as the rats quickly shut down the portals all around them. Asterion looked nervous, his gaze turning along the far wall.

“Hmm. She is fast.” The minotaur frowned. “It is as if she knows this place.”

“Great,” Beth muttered. Reggie had the rats opening a small portal into their tunnels, and as each hole closed, the rats would either migrate to help close another or run for the safety of their den. The air temperature was cooling and Asterion took her hand.

“This way,” he rumbled, leading her out of the room.

They took a few shortcuts, the gnawing sounds diminishing behind them. Eventually they entered one of the rooms with the river flowing beneath it. This one had a small drawbridge that Asterion lowered in order for them to cross.

Their feet were thumping on the planks when the kitsune appeared. She had forced her way up onto the wall above them, her face red with effort. Asterion had explained to Beth that the magic of the Labyrinth affected weight and balance once above the wall to prevent flying or climbing, but it seemed that Yuki had been able to surpass these limitations.

“There you are,” she growled, nearly falling from the wall. “There used to be a shortcut here, you know.” Then she moved toward them.

Beth moved behind Asterion, her hands on his hips, waiting. When he hadn’t been turned to stone after a few seconds, she figured it would be safe enough to look. Leaning out to the side, she watched as the fox demon descended from above, sliding down a large ramp of ice she had created for herself. Upon touching the cavern floor, an eerie fog billowed out from the kitsune, causing ice to creep outward from where she stepped.

Her footsteps were quiet, and, behind her, three large tails swished around, defying gravity.

“My name is Yuki. Where is Tink?” the kitsune asked, her voice carrying across the distance between them easily. “I need to talk to her.”

“We just want to talk,” Beth said, holding her hands out. “We don’t want a fight with you.”

“What are you all doing down here? I can sense the portals you are opening. Whatever you were attempting, it needs to end now.”

“We aren’t attempting anything, but we do want to talk.”

“I don’t have time for games, so let’s speed things up.” Yuki pulled a glowing white ball out of her pocket and tossed it to Beth, who caught it. “I can use this to find out if you’re telling me the truth. Basic trickster magic. As long as you answer my questions, I won’t freeze you or your beefy sidekick.”

“I have no reason to lie,” Beth said. The ball turned red in her hands.

“Actually, you have every reason to lie. It’s what I would do. So I ask again: what were you doing?”

Beth looked at the glowing orb in her hand and then back at Yuki. She fought to keep the smile off of her face.

“Tink just wanted to find her husband and go to him.” The ball turned green. “And now that she has found him, they’re gonna go home.”

A look of disbelief crossed Yuki’s face, and then she smiled. “Really? She got married? That’s wonderful! She deserves it.”

“I…” Beth hadn’t been expecting that answer. The kitsune’s body language suddenly relaxed and some of the ominous mist around her faded away. “You’re happy for her?”

“It’s a long story, but Tink and I used to know each other. I wouldn’t say we were friends, but we did get along.” Her face hardened once more. “Now tell me how you were opening the portals.”

“The rat king opened a portal for her.” The ball immediately turned red and Yuki summoned a glowing green flame in her hand. “Wait! I mean the rat king had a portal opened for her. He didn’t do it personally.” The ball flipped back over to green. “This thing is sensitive.”

“A rat king? Hmm. That’s how she did it. Also explains all the rats I’ve seen.” A terrible look crossed Yuki’s face, then vanished. “And where is this rat king now?”

“He took his subjects and went home. I don’t think any of them are around, but I can’t be sure.” The ball remained green and Beth let out a sigh.

“Do you have magic? Do you wish me harm?”

“No and yes. I don’t want to hurt you, necessarily, but I want you to stop turning my friends to stone, but I don’t know how to make that happen.” The ball remained green.

“Hmm.” Yuki thought for several seconds, her eyes traveling across the room. “Maybe this is a good place for us to start then. I’ve been dying to talk with someone, but everybody down here seems pretty angry over what I did to Mike.”

“What did you do to Mike?” Beth threw the ball to Yuki.

She caught it, and let out a chuckle. “I locked him in the wardrobe. He might be dead or alive, I’m not sure. But I hope he’s dead. I deserve to be the Caretaker, not him.”

“I see. And you think turning everyone to stone was the best way to become the new Caretaker?” Beth took a couple of steps forward. “If you knew Tink and the others, then what was the point of attacking everybody and turning them to stone?”

Yuki tilted her head, her eye narrowing. “And who are you, exactly?” She tossed the ball back, and Beth caught it.

“My name is Beth. I moved in here not long ago.”

“You seem painfully human to be a resident here.”

“I’m just a human,” she said with a frown. “It’s not like it’s a disease.”

“Then why do you live here? This home is only for others like myself.”

“I didn’t get a choice.” The ball turned red and Beth sighed. “I mean, I did choose to come live here, and am grateful for it, but I felt like I didn’t have a choice. There’s a group of witches out there who were trying to use me as a way to get in, so it was safest for the house that I move in where the geas could protect me.”

“And what are you to Mike?”

The question made her blush, but she didn’t know why. “Legally, I’m his lawyer. When Emily died, it all went to her next of kin and that was Mike. It’s why he’s the Caretaker.”

Yuki’s face twisted up, and an eerie glow rippled across her arms. “You’re wrong. *I’m* the Caretaker.”

“Legally speaking, the house was passed on to Emily’s next of kin. The relationship was distant, I admit, but Mike is Emily’s great nephew.”

Yuki let out a laugh. “That’s where you’re wrong. Emily was an only child. I can’t blame you for thinking that, though. It’s how the geas works.”

This wasn’t something Beth had expected to hear. “Excuse me?” She threw the ball back to Yuki.

“The geas. When a Caretaker dies, the house passes to the next Caretaker. But here’s the big secret; none of them have actually been related. The rules are quite clear. The new Caretaker must be an orphan with nobody special in their life. Someone who could fall down a hole and never be missed. Emily was an

orphan with no past and no future, a meager little thing who lucked into the most amazing fate.” She tauntingly held up the green ball.

“That doesn’t make sense. I saw the genealogy, everyone was excited when we discovered a living descendant...”

“Please. You’re talking to a magical fox who can turn people to stone and use a glowing ball to discern the truth— and you think magically forging documents is somehow difficult to grasp?” Yuki shook her head. “Caretakers are supposed to help select these people in advance before they pass. I’m guessing Emily didn’t do that.”

“No. When she passed, she lived alone. Well...” Beth waved her hand at Asterion. “Not with any other humans.”

“This Mike has no claim to the house. My claim, however, is legitimate.” The ball flickered a few times at this statement, causing Yuki to curse. She took a deep breath, the words suddenly stuck in her throat. “Emily is my... she was my wife. We were promised to one another, and I would argue my claim is far more valid than any other.”

Beth fought to hold her composure, her eyes on the soft green glow of the ball. Emily had been married? “Yes, well, legally speaking, this marriage was never on record and wouldn’t be recognized in a court of law.”

“Fuck your laws. Do you think I care about them? Do you think the people up there on the lawn cared about them? If I worried about human laws, I would never get anything done.”

“Wait, what people?”

“You don’t have to worry about it. I killed one of them and I suspect the others are in a rush to die as well. Speaking of which, I think it’s about time we leave. I don’t sense anymore portals down here, the last one just closed.” She threw the ball back to Beth. “Unless you think anymore would be opened?”

“If they do, it’s not something I have control over.” Beth shook her head. “However, you’ve got it all wrong about the people upstairs. Those people on the lawn are a group of powerful warlocks and witches. They’ve been dogging Mike since shortly after he moved in. He’s been attacked by demons, elementals, and a witch who could control the weather.”

“And he hasn’t gotten rid of them yet? Pathetic.”

“For the record, he’s only been living here about a month. I’ve only been here a week and I’ve already seen him deal with so much, I have no idea how he does it. But I do know that he’s been trying so hard to keep this place safe. I fail to see a parallel between you two.”

Yuki’s face scrunched up for a second, her eyes on the ball, then snapped back to normal. “My methods are necessary. As long as that man lives, he is the biggest danger to this house.”

“How?” Beth took another step forward, tossing the ball back to Yuki. “You don’t even know him.”

That odd look crossed Yuki’s face again, her features briefly going feral. “Let’s just say that I’ve seen the best that humanity had to offer and was woefully disappointed.”

“Are you talking about Emily?”

At Emily’s name, the ice around Yuki suddenly formed into upward spikes, radiating out around her several feet. A growl came from the kitsune’s throat and Asterion placed himself between the women.

Beth pushed around the minotaur. “What did she do to you? I can see it in your face, something happened.”

“You wouldn’t understand.” The ball flickered in Yuki’s hands, and she squeezed it until it popped with a bang. “And I don’t feel like talking about it anymore. Come. I’d prefer to go back upstairs in case those people show up. Maybe your friend here can help me deal with them.”

“By all means. Lead the way.” Beth threw a look at Asterion. The minotaur curled his lip, his intense eyes on the kitsune. His fingers were tight on his axe, but she put a gentle hand on his arm. He relaxed, giving her a knowing look. “C’mon, Asterion, let’s go.”

They allowed Yuki to lead the way, figuring that it was easier than trying to convince her that Asterion wasn’t leading her into a trap. Yuki summoned a pair of ethereal beings made of ice that followed them all from behind, and Beth wondered if the kitsune was somehow watching them through their eyes.

The walls of the Labyrinth blended together as they walked, and Beth stifled a yawn, her eyes itching. Yuki shook off any further attempts at

conversation, simply muttering that they would talk more once they were upstairs.

Her mind wandered, her thoughts on next steps. The Society had already made their play and another one was coming. Tink was with Mike and needed to bring him back to turn the dial and then deal with Yuki.

However, Yuki wasn't what she had expected either. Instead of attacking them, she had been willing to talk and had seemed mostly reasonable. Maybe she could be reasoned with, convinced to go get Mike and bring him back until they could help Yuki work through her demons.

"You know, I could give you a demon to work through."

Beth jumped, twisting to the side. Asterion was gone, and in his place was Oliver with a cane and a top hat.

"Hello darling." Oliver grinned, then stuck out his tongue. "It's a lovely day in the Labyrinth, though it looks like it might rain." He swung the cane up and it became an umbrella.

"Where... what..."

"Oh, this is a dream. You've drifted off, like a ship on the sea." The walls of the Labyrinth fell over, revealing a large beach made of sand and a deep blue ocean. A giant toy boat sailed back and forth in the distance, vanishing over the horizon. "Technically, this is a place called the Dreamscape. I used to know someone who could manipulate it like clay, but she seems to have gone rogue. Time flows differently here, you know. Hours could have passed already, or even days. Or maybe it's the opposite? Not even a second has passed in the waking world, your foot is mid-step, and the moment you lose your balance, you will jerk yourself awake."

"What do you want?"

"Me? Oh, I'm piloting your body around. It seems nice out here in the Labyrinth, I really appreciate the all-nighter. Not a fan of your friend, however. He smells like an undercooked steak, though I suppose I could have that remedied with a little fire."

"You stay away from him."

"On the contrary. You should stay away from him. Right now, I'm you!" He took off his hat and dropped it across his face. Her face appeared on his body, and

he tossed the hat aside where it was carried off by a technicolor crab. He danced around in her body, kicking up the sand with her heels. "What should I do first?"

"Wake up, wake up." She pinched her arm, then slapped herself in the face.

"Oh, I'm afraid you're gonna need quite the jolt to get out of here. To be honest, I'm surprised that you're even conscious of this place, unless you commonly have lucid dreams. Then again, you drifted off so suddenly this time, I wonder if your awareness came with you." He spoke with his own gravelly voice despite wearing her body.

"I thought I still had time."

"Please. I gave you a deadline based on when the Society will ask me questions. That hardly meant I was going to leave you alone." He grabbed at the air and folded down a large flap, revealing stony walls and Yuki walking up ahead. "So what's her story?"

"None of your business. Besides, don't you know? You've been watching me this whole time."

"Ugh, you've been so distracted lately that the signal has been poor. And all those portals didn't help either. Let's see what I can find out on my own." Oliver hopped impossibly high through the opening and vanished. Through the gap, she heard her own voice speak out loud.

"Yuki, where are we going?"

Yuki looked over her shoulder and shrugged. "I already told you, we're going upstairs so that I can keep a watch on the front yard. I would like to talk to you some more about what's going on."

"We're taking the reflecting pool, right?"

"Of course, unless you want to hike up that hill. The path may have closed anyway, and I don't feel like wasting any time."

"Okay, good," Beth/Oliver replied.

"No, no, no!" Beth tried to hook her fingers into the gap, but they passed through it as if it were made of mist. "Asterion, someone, help me, that isn't me!"

Yuki's ear twitched and she turned around. "Did you just say something?"

“Me? Nope.” Beth/Oliver cleared her throat. “I don’t think so, I’m dead on my feet.”

“Fuck, Yuki! Yuki, don’t let him take me!” She pressed her face into the mist and screamed.

“Actually, there is something. I get terribly dizzy going through the pool and was wondering if you would be willing to help me when we get there.”

“Help you how?” Yuki’s tails swished impatiently.

“Hold my hand?”

“NO!” Beth swiped her fingers and jumped up and down. “Don’t listen to me!”

“Can’t your friend do it?” Yuki looked at Asterion, who in turn looked quizzically at Beth.

“He could, but he’s a little clumsy.” Beth/Oliver stated while looking at Asterion. A knowing look crossed Asterion’s face and he nodded.

“Don’t listen to... dammit!” Screaming wasn’t doing any good, she needed to find a way out. The viewing screen Oliver had made was just to torment her, foreplay for the torture to come. Could he really take Yuki, too? If so, what would happen to everybody in the house? Looking up and down the beach, she realized there was nothing but sand in both directions, and the ocean was calm. In the distance, the toy boat began to sink, a pink tentacle wrapped around it.

What if she killed herself? Would that cause her to wake up? Dying in a dream was scary enough, and always caused her to wake up in a cold sweat. Her options were limited, and she decided to throw herself in the waves and see what happened.

Wading out into the water, her clothes fell away until she was naked. Submerging her head, she swam as far down as she could, the water miraculously clear. Fish made of colored glass swam around her, and she inhaled a large breath.

Nothing happened. Instead of a mouth full of water, she kept on breathing as if nothing had changed.

She swore, a stream of bubbles coming from her mouth. Each one had a capital letter in them, and the F made the surface first. Looking toward the distant

drop-off underwater, she thought about the pink tentacle. Would the ocean of her mind have sufficiently dangerous creatures to do the job?

As if willed into existence, a large shadow emerged from the depths, headed straight toward her. Beth's heart pounded in her chest as it reached out with hungry arms made of teeth and claws.

She swam toward it.

"I don't think so," Oliver said, a current yanking her away and back toward the shore. Large waves tossed her onto the beach, slamming her into the sand.

"God damnit!" Grabbing a handful of sand, she threw it in frustration, hot tears stinging her eyes. "Somebody help me!"

"There's nobody who—" Oliver's voice disappeared, and the viewing screen collapsed.

She waited for several minutes. Oliver didn't reappear, and the only sound was the rough surf. Out on the water, something pale had floated to the top.

"What is that?" She thought the words, but they echoed around her as if spoken. The object was floating, carrying something pink and blue with it. Moving away from the water, she wondered if this was another of Oliver's tricks.

The creature was tossed about on the waves, eventually carried onto the sand. It stood, huge clumps of seaweed hanging from its body and lurched toward her, a pink and blue blob hanging from its limbs. Once away from the water, it shook off the seaweed, revealing pale limbs and dark hair.

"Je...Jenny?" It was hard to believe, but she was looking at Jenny, who seemed to be dragging a large, deflated beach ball with her.

Jenny grunted, tossing the deflated ball into place. Upon closer inspection, Beth realized it was a deflated kiddy pool.

"Where did you get that?"

Jenny put her mouth on the nozzle of the pool and blew. It inflated almost instantly, revealing a plastic bottom with crabs on it that reminded Beth of one she had as a child. Setting the pool down, Jenny collapsed on the edge, exhausted from swimming.

"Bucket," she wheezed, then pointed at the ocean.

“If this is a trick, then it’s a dick move.”

“Bucket!” Jenny’s legs were withering away and turning to sand. Panicked, Beth looked around on the beach and saw a series of sandcastles form all around her. Buckets of different shapes and sizes were scattered among them, and she grabbed the biggest one she could find and ran to the water’s edge to fill it.

Back at the pool, she poured it in, surprised at how quickly the pool filled. Jenny’s body was turning to sand faster now, and Oliver’s voice came from the sky, muffled by the clouds.

“What are you doing in there?” he asked.

Two more trips to the water and the pool was filled. The bottom disappeared, revealing a place of infinite depth.

“Get in,” Jenny told her. “Escape the dream.”

Beth didn’t hesitate as the sky filled with the sound of storm clouds and Oliver’s voice. Holding onto the side, she kicked her feet to stay above the water.

“Are you okay?” she asked the ghost.

When Jenny lifted her head, her skin looked like a lizard. She smiled, her face disintegrating into the water. The ground rumbled and rose up beneath her, the pool tilting dangerously, but Beth dropped into its depths, sinking into the murk while curled up in the fetal position. Looking up into the light of the sky, she could see the giant hand made of clouds trying to reach into the pool.

In the distance, Beth saw stars, stars that vanished and reappeared as if swirling in the void. All around her, dark forms circled hungrily, amorphous beings that tumbled over each other in their haste to reach her.

“Where am I?” Was this somewhere inside her head? Her whole body had gone numb. She was no longer in water, but clumsily tumbling through the darkness.

Nightmare images filled her mind when the forms drew close, and they whispered dark things in her ear in a language she couldn’t understand. All around her, reality began to crack apart as they pounced, each one trying to pull her in a different direction.

She screamed, her mind suddenly fractured. She could see different versions of herself, each one being hungrily consumed by the void. With every shout, the universe roared and shook, the stars around her exploding. Filled with

terror, her whole body trembled as she tried to fight off the darkness, her heart rate spiking. The universe cracked, showering her with light from every direction.

“Leave me alone!” she screamed, but this time it scratched her throat raw, her soul firmly seated again in her own body. They were outside now, walking on the path toward the reflecting pool. Yuki startled and spun around as Asterion panicked and smashed one of their icy escorts with his axe. It exploded with a burst of magic, blowing her away from Asterion. She tumbled across the ground and found herself sliding across the ice of the reflecting pool. Out of breath, she sobbed openly, unable to stand.

It was too much. If Oliver was trying to break her, he had succeeded. Already, her memory of that terrible void was fading, but not the fear that had lurked there. She had no idea what part of her mind contained such terrors, and she hoped to never see it again. Even the sight of her own shadow beneath her made her wonder if such dark things could see her in the waking world.

Asterion roared, and she tried to shout to him, but couldn’t find her voice. Yuki was shouting something, and the sound of crunching snow filled the air, followed by the minotaur’s axe crashing against metal. Flurries had formed all around her now, drifting across her body.

“Asterion, stop!” Her voice was quiet, and she fought to sit up. Her arms were weak, and she could hear Oliver’s laughter in the back of her mind. “Yuki, please don’t hurt him!”

She looked up in time to see Asterion swing his axe down on Yuki from above. Yuki nimbly dodged it while tossing aside a bent sword, spinning away from the minotaur and yanking her eyepatch off.

Oh no. Beth turned her head away and heard him bellow one last time before the world went quiet. The flurries caught in her hair, and she wondered if it would simply be easier to just will her heart to stop in this moment, to give up and give in.

“Asterion?” she called, weakly.

“He’s fine. I’ll let him out when I’m convinced he won’t try to take my head off.” Yuki sounded angry, but Beth didn’t dare look. “As for you, what was that about? I thought you might be planning something, but I don’t get what you were trying to do.”

“Yuki, listen quickly while I still have control. There’s a demon who is trying to possess me and he’s been walking around in my body since shortly after we left the Labyrinth. I don’t know what I said or anything since then, but you can’t trust it. Especially the part about holding my hand! Don’t get in the pool with me!”

Several seconds passed, and then Yuki broke the silence. “Yeah, I’m starting to think you’re more trouble than you’re worth. Humans cling to their lies as if their lives depend on them, which, in your case, is accurate.”

“It’s true, I swear! Get the ball out or something, I need you to believe me.”

“What the hell is that?” Yuki asked.

“Are you trying to make me look up so you can turn me to stone? That’s the oldest trick in the book and we don’t have time for that.” Beth shook her head, but then heard it too. Beneath her, the steady tapping of a finger on the ice. She opened her eyes to see Oliver grinning at her from beneath the pool, just behind her own reflection.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” she whispered.

Satisfied that he had her attention, he started dragging one of his nails along the ice, his finger forming a large arc around her reflection.

Oh god. Beth watched the ice crack near her fingers, realizing that Oliver was trying to get her to fall through. The large grin on his face said it all, and she swallowed the lump in her throat.

“That would be the demon who works for the Society, the one who can possess me. The one who will eventually gain control of my body if I don’t give him what he wants,” Beth explained.

“What does he want?”

“Me. For all eternity.”

“I could just turn you to stone, too. To protect you from him, I mean, until we figure something out.” There was now concern in Yuki’s voice.

“It won’t work. If I don’t go with him willingly, he’ll give information to his masters that will put everyone’s lives in danger. Everyone is already in danger as long as Mike can’t twist the dial.” She felt sick to her stomach, that trapped feeling from the waterfall paralyzing her in place. She needed to fight, to take back the ground they had lost.

The ice creaked around her, the fracture growing larger. “Oliver, wait!” she cried, spreading her arms wide to prevent the ice from breaking.

“I’ve waited long enough.” The grin on his face stretched comically up his cheeks. “Unless you are planning to run? That could be fun, too.”

“No, it’s not that. You said a soul freely given is worth far more than one that you took. What if... what if we came to an agreement?” Her mind spun with the realization that this was it. He had come to collect, and she needed to make the most of a bad situation. This wasn’t a situation where she could go down swinging, not anymore.

“Beth, what are you doing?” She could hear Yuki walking on the ice, and turned her head just enough to see in Yuki’s reflection that she had covered her eye with her hand.

“Wait there, please. This isn’t a fight you can help me with, not unless you can defeat a demon from Hell.” Her voice shook, her mind spinning. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. If Yuki hadn’t come, she would have had time to speak with the others, to come up with a plan and get herself out of this mess. She wanted to blame the kitsune, to be angry that her vendetta against Emily couldn’t have waited another week, but Oliver was the true enemy here.

“Um, not that I’m aware of. Demons are extremely difficult to defeat, and that’s usually only by banishing them. This one is already banished, from the looks of it.” Yuki hung her head. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

“Yeah, well this one has his hooks in my soul. Even if you help me off the ice, in a day or so, he will help those same people break in here.” Beth’s voice trembled, her heart pounding. “You told me once that you saw the best that humanity had to offer and had been disappointed.”

“I’m waiting to hear my deal.” Oliver now stood upside down below her, tapping his foot impatiently while holding the collar in his hand. “And no tricks this time.”

“You’re right, I did trick you last time, but I don’t have one up my sleeve, not today.” Carefully standing up, she watched the gap in the ice darken briefly and then settle. “Let me say my piece first and we can go from there.”

“Fine.” Oliver pulled a comically large stopwatch from his coat. “You’ve got a minute.”

“Yuki. I don’t know you and probably never will. You make terrible decisions, but I think you make them because you think they are right. This house has never been about who is powerful enough to defend it, but about love and community. By taking those things away from us, you have made us weaker than ever. Emily was your wife, and because of that, you put her on a pedestal. I don’t know what happened between the two of you, but you need to see others for who they actually are, not for what she did. When she fell from grace, the fall must have been too far for you to bear, but you still have the chance for a clean start.”

“That’s not—”

“Shut the fuck up! I’m on a timer here. I’m about to give myself to an eternity of torment just to protect everyone who lives here, including you, so keep your damn mouth shut.” She pulled the bag off of her neck and slid it across the ice. “Jenny is in there, so please keep her safe. When Mike moved in, she raised all sorts of hell, but he forgave her. Everybody did. No matter how far down the path you think you might be, I know in my heart that he would grant you the same forgiveness. Consider pursuing it and letting him do his job as the true Caretaker.”

“Ten seconds,” Oliver said, swinging his clock back and forth.

“Fuck you, here’s my deal. I will come to you willingly in just a few moments if you promise to never share any knowledge you have of this place.”

“I cannot agree to that. I have a previous deal with my masters that conflicts with this one.”

“Fine, then I will come to you willingly if you promise to never freely offer knowledge of this home or its contents, living or otherwise. You are permitted to stick with your yes or no answers only from now on as long as you give no guiding advice to encourage said questions.”

“Hmm.” Oliver put away his clock and thought about it. “Spoken like a lawyer who knows she’s about to get hung to dry. Your deal intrigues me, but I wonder where you’ve hidden the trick.”

Beth looked at Yuki. Her face was frozen in shock, her hand still over her eye.

“Beth, I—”

“This isn’t a problem you can fix for me. Not alone. I hope you think long and hard about what’s about to happen here, because I’m about to disprove your theory on humans.” Beth fixed her face into an angry glare, willing Yuki to listen carefully. “He’s going to do terrible things to me in there. You know that, right? It’s not like I’m made of stone. If I was, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, you know? But sometimes, when you’ve lost the fight, you’ve got to know when to put your hands down.”

Yuki’s jaw dropped, but she quickly closed it, a tight line forming on her face. She nodded. “Okay. I can respect that.”

“Oliver, do you want some reassurance? How about this.” Beth put her hands on her hips and stared down at him through the ice. “Am I planning to do anything to get out of coming to you?”

Once any question was asked aloud, he automatically knew the answer. She had planned nothing. When he smiled, his teeth elongated into daggers, making him look very much like a hungry shark.

“I accept. You come willingly, and I shall never freely offer information on this home to my masters.” Oliver stomped his foot, sending cracks all along the surface of the reflecting pool. “So it is done.”

“Here I come, you fucker.” Beth looked up just as the ice broke beneath her feet. The cold swirl of water around her ankles was chased away by the tight, hot grip of Oliver’s hand on her ankle. Sinking beneath the surface, she locked eyes with Yuki, who had dropped her hand. Her right eye was nothing but a gray void that quickly spread across Beth’s vision, a gasp escaping her lips. The world came crashing in around her and everything became gray.

Mike. Her final thought was like a prayer, and then there was nothing.

“What’s happening?” Mike asked, stumbling into Yuki’s room. He had tripped on the way up, bashing one of his shins on the stairs.

“An alarm system of some sort,” she calmly replied from her place on the chaise. Several of the journals had toppled onto the floor and the bell kept ringing every few seconds. “It would seem that something is happening.”

“That’s... no shit something is happening,” he sputtered. He pointed at the slate. “Daisy says it means danger.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Don’t get mad at me, I’m not the one who set it up. And danger where?”

The bell rang again, the tone louder than ever. Daisy clutched her head and then tried signing to them. He looked at the slate and frowned when the letters that appeared were all jumbled up.

“Can you help me figure it out?” He tossed the slate onto the bed.

“That I can do.” She closed the book and stood, her body shimmering until her robes turned into a kimono once more. “Lead the way.”

They examined the armory first, wondering if one of the weapons had been stolen. Seeing no change there, they moved through the tower, checking the other rooms one at a time. The bell kept tolling, but they did their best to ignore it. Zel checked the gardens and the statues for anything different, but they couldn’t narrow down the source of the disturbance.

The centaurs, however, were very upset. Several of them had left the trail, leaving behind only Orion and his most dedicated followers. He shouted at Mike upon seeing him standing on the wall, but Mike simply ignored him and went back inside.

Eventually, he and the others stood in Yuki’s room, listening to the bell toll over and over again. The sound had further disoriented Daisy, who now hid in Mike’s pocket. Attempts at flight had led to her banging into nearby objects, so Mike had caught her and stuck her there for safekeeping. Zel had gone through the trouble of climbing the stairs to join them, standing beside the bed with a frown on her face and her arms crossed.

Shaking his head in frustration, he looked out over the valley, wondering if some natural disaster had occurred. Seeing nothing of interest, he turned around to say something to the others when he realized that the ringing had stopped.

“Oh, thank god for that,” he muttered, grateful that he wouldn’t have to listen to that stupid tone anymore. Savoring the silence that followed, he heard a scratching noise from somewhere in the room.

“Is it just me—”

“Or is something on the other side of this wall?” Ratu finished, summoning a ball of fire in her hand. She hurled it at the stone where it exploded, knocking

down a bookshelf nearby. Through the smoke, he heard a litany of curses flow freely from a very angry creature.

“Tink!” He didn’t even make the opening before she threw herself into his arms, dropping her club on his feet and knocking him over.

“Tink find husband!” she cried, burying her face in his shoulder. His neck was immediately damp with joyful tears, and he worried that she might crack one of his ribs.

He didn’t care. He squeezed her back as hard as humanly possible, fighting back tears of his own. “How did you get here?” he asked. His question was answered when several rats followed her through the opening.

“There was another room through here,” Ratu said, stepping inside. He heard her shifting about before she returned with a grim look on her face. “It’s another bedroom, but I have no idea why it was sealed away. There isn’t anything in here, it looks like a sitting room.”

Daisy squirted free of Mike’s pocket and pointed at her hand. They had left the slate on the bed while searching the house, so Zel picked it up.

“She says that Yuki sealed it up because of Emily. Hold on, she’s writing more. It’s where Emily attacked her.”

“So it wasn’t sealed up for any reason other than it hurt her to look at it?” Ratu shook her head. “Love hath no fury like a woman scorned.”

“Tell me about it.” He set Tink down. “Do you have a way for us to get home?”

“Hold up, there’s more. Something about the bell.” Zel squinted at the board, confusion on her face. “What’s that word? I can’t read her handwriting. Or mind writing. Whatever it’s called.”

Tink nodded. “Rat make hole, we go home. Fight fox face, then turn dial.”

“Finally, some good news.” He smiled at everybody. “I feel like we’re overdue some good luck, don’t you think?”

The room suddenly darkened, and something heavy slammed into the stonework outside their room. The whole tower vibrated as a dark shape lowered its head to peer inside at them. Ominous red eyes were set deep inside of a hairy head with a distorted maw full of crocodile teeth and a hiss of steam emitted from all four of its hairy nostrils. Long claws at the end of wooly feet reached for

them, gouging the stone floor. The creature looked like it had been cobbled together out of random parts with a complete disregard for function, but the giant bat-like wings on the creatures back were functional enough for it to have flown home.

The Jabberwock had come.