**Finding the Center**

 “…and that brings me to here.” Dana sat on the edge of the fountain, her chin in her hands. She wondered if she should feel more upset, regaling the others with her tale. Tears were beyond her ability. The strange numbness of her body applied even more so to her eyes. She could no longer feel them, and it was taking effort to remember to blink. “So if I don’t deliver Mike or whatever special treasure the house hides, he will leave me like this.”

Naia, Cecilia, and Zel looked at each other. Zel had been examining Dana’s body during her story, doing some simple tests. Dana still had her basic reflexes, but her pain sensors were completely gone. Zel struggled to gather a few blood samples, as Dana’s blood no longer flowed.

“I’m curious,” Naia said. “What does the Society think the house is hiding?”

“I don’t know, and neither does he.” Dana shrugged. “It’s kind of like the lost city of gold, right? They are convinced something is hidden away here, but they have no idea what or how.”

“Oh, something very powerful is hidden in this house. That’s a fact.” Naia frowned at Dana. “It’s something that Mike will have to discover for himself, I’m afraid. I’ve had my suspicions for years, and each Caretaker has stumbled upon at least a clue or two.”

“Did the last Caretaker find any? Maybe they knew where it was.”

Naia shook her head. “Emily became obsessed with unlocking the house’s true secret in her last years. The problem, as I understand it, is that none of the pieces are obvious. It calls out to the Caretaker, almost like a gut instinct, a desire to look in a different room a little bit harder. Unfortunately, the harder you look and rationalize, the easier it is to ignore that instinct and lose track of it.”

“It sounds like you know what it is.”

“Even if I did, I couldn’t tell you. The spell on the house erases any memory of any progress made, and the quest begins anew for each Caretaker. It could be as simple as a note written to the Caretaker, or a doorway that appears just for them.” Naia stroked the clock on the ledge. “Emily was given her hint by none other than this little guy.”

“Yeah, about that.” Dana picked up the clock. “What the fuck is this thing?”

“I haven’t seen it in a long time. You are holding a mimic. They are extremely rare. To be honest, I thought it was dead.” Naia smiled. “If we all look away, it will change for us.”

“Yeah, sure.” Dana closed her eyes, and heard a loud splash. Opening her eyes, the clock was gone, replaced by a large floating rubber duck. Naia was playfully scratching its head, and the duck flapped a pair of mechanical wings. “It can transform into different stuff.”

“Only when no one is looking.” Naia said. “All magic has its limitations. Mimics are predatory lurkers. They like to disguise themselves as ordinary objects, then attack when their prey is alone. Once their prey is at least blinded, they can assume their true form and devour their victim.”

“And you have one of those?!?”

Naia laughed, her breasts rippling much as water does. “This one is different. Mimics don’t actually need to eat to survive. They are all instinct, no forward thinking. This one, however, is probably the smartest one in the world.”

“It told me that its heart was broken.”

Naia stopped laughing. “Yes. That is true. You see, this mimic was created a long time ago to act as a guardian for the house. You see, a creature that can lie in wait and watch undetected is a powerful ally to have. When Emily found it, it was a chest with a small diary inside, a diary that was meant to start Emily on the path to discovery. After years of making no headway, she demanded answers from the mimic. The mimic didn’t know anything, but Emily thought it was lying. In a fit of anger, she smashed out its gears with a hammer.” Naia sighed. “She held onto it, just in case it could ever be fixed. That was the beginning of the end for Emily. We all think of her fondly, but she did some terrible things in her last days. She was convinced that if she could unlock the secrets of the house, she would achieve the ability to alter the very fabric of reality itself.”

“Could she? If she had found it?”

Naia shrugged. “All I know is that the secret of the house was put here by the one who built it. I want you to imagine having the power to create a multi-dimensional haven for monsters from scratch, but feeling the need to hide something there so that nobody could ever find it.”

“If he didn’t want anyone to find it, then why leave clues?”

“That’s just it. I think the house’s true secret wasn’t to be found.” Naia smiled. “Much like King Arthur’s quest for the Holy Grail. Only the worthy shall find it.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about these things,” Dana said. “How do you know so much?”

“This house was built around my spring. I was here when this place was created, and I will remain here until it falls apart. Or my spring gets choked off.” Naia frowned. “I’m afraid that any sort of immortality comes with a heavy price. Anyone who tells you differently is lying.”

“So, let’s see if I have this straight.” Dana watched Naia pet the large rubber duck on the head. “Something is hidden here that only Mike can find. So I won’t be able to retrieve it. My only option is to find a way to make Mike let someone into the home, but he isn’t even here right now.”

“Sums it up.”

“Then what the fuck am I supposed to do?” Dana hollered. “He killed me! I can’t die, and I can’t move on to be with Alex!”

“Do you really think that’s even an option?” Lily asked. She had remained silent throughout Dana’s tale, her arms crossed and one foot kicking water in the fountain. “Daryl may claim to be a man of his word, but I know him. There’s a trick up his sleeve. He knows that the task he gave you was likely impossible, and I can’t see him putting in so much effort on a limited return.”

“It’s kindness.” Zel was examining a vial of Dana’s blood. “The black witch is trying brute force, targeting our strength. The sandman tried trickery, targeting the mind. This guy sent in a girl Mike knew as a human. She’s one of us now. My best guess is that he thinks Mike will try to help, and will compromise the safety of the home to do it.”

“And you think Mike would actually do that for me? He barely knows me.” The women, except for Lily, all looked at each other.

“He might,” Cecilia said. “Think of his bond with each of us. If he knew that Dana was denied an eternity with her true love in the afterlife, he would try to help any way he could. Especially since this is because of him. Likely, interacting with Daryl is the endgame, an attempt to lure Mike out of the home to accomplish something else.”

“Mike would go outside to confront him.” Naia frowned. “He wouldn’t let him come in, but I know he would at least talk to him. What could Daryl do to him if he was outside, on the porch?”

“Hmm.” Lily tapped her nails on the side of the fountain. “His specialty is magic involving the flesh. He tends to necromancy, but that’s a by-product of his gifts.”

“So a trap has been laid.” Cecilia looked at the others. “A trap to lure in Mike.”

“Maybe we should spring it,” Naia suggested. “Without Mike here.”

“But what about me?” Dana cried. “If I don’t deliver Mike, I’m stuck like this!”

“The alternative is worse.” Lily shook her head. “Think about the process. He spent time researching you, hunting you down for this specific purpose. Why go through the effort? Let me tell you something else about Daryl. He’s a grade-A asshole. When he snaps his fingers and your soul leaves your body, you won’t be headed for the happily ever after you think you are.”

“How do you know?” Dana asked. “Are you some sort of expert on dying?”

“Because you’ve been Damned.” Lily scowled, her eyes on a distant memory. “And once you’ve been Damned, you don’t get the preferential treatment in the afterlife.”

“But it isn’t my fault!”

“No, it isn’t. But luring Mike to his death can be. Think of it as being on display. By becoming Damned, every action you make is carefully scrutinized. He isn’t controlling you through magic. This is akin to being handed a bomb and told to detonate it in a shopping mall. You know what the repercussions are now, and no amount of do-goodery will spare you the cost on your tarnished soul for that.”

“Speaking of the afterlife.” Cecilia hovered before Dana, taking Dana’s fingers in her own. “Tell me more about what you experienced there. Leave nothing out.”

Dana told her the story again, glossing over her love making with Alex to when the world fell apart.

“Does that sound right?” Naia asked Cecilia.

“Hard to say. I feel like I’m missing something.” Cecilia shook her head, her hair floating eerily. “Each person’s journey is different. It could be correct, but I can’t say for sure.”

“She isn’t talking about the fucking,” Lily announced, splashing the water with her foot. “Maybe the detail is hidden there.”

“But… I guess I’m not comfortable sharing that.” Dana hung her head. “I’m not sure what good it would do to tell you.”

A moment of silence passed. Naia looked at the others, a knowing look on her face.

“I’d better go check out front,” Cecilia said. The banshee vanished, leaving behind the others.

“I have some tests I would like to run. In the garage.” Zel bowed out, her hooves clipping harshly against the stones beneath. Dana looked at Lily. The succubus had crossed her legs, leaning forward expectantly.

“Tell me,” Naia said, the water swirling up behind her. Tiny water globes spun free of the surface of the fountain, drifting lazily around Dana. The air suddenly smelled of lavender and sunscreen, taking Dana back to her reunion with Alex. “Share the moment. I would love to hear how her lips felt against yours.”

“I… I guess it couldn’t hurt.” Dana went into great detail, pausing for several seconds between the most intimate moments. Something about Naia was both motherly and sisterly, and she felt like she could tell her anything without being judged. Lily, on the other hand, wore a mask that she couldn’t see past that reminded her of a doctor examining a specimen. Dana had always been uncomfortable discussing her sexuality with others, but Naia smiled at the right moments, gave her space at others, and the single tear rolling down her cheek when Dana described losing Alex again made her wish that she was capable of her own tears.

“Well?” Dana asked. Naia was smiling, but Lily wore a frown.

“It sounds like you miss her a lot.” Naia rubbed Dana’s arm affectionately. Dana nodded.

“I do. I would do anything for her.”

“Sounds like she would do anything for you.” Lily smirked. “I wonder. What would you say if I told you that the afterlife you saw wasn’t real?”

“Of course it was real. It was the same night we had together all those years ago, except this time it was on the balcony.”

“Nope. Wrong.” Lily crossed her arms. “It wasn’t, no matter how badly you want it to be. This is how Daryl works. He manipulates you using your own weaknesses. Fortunately for us, he has his own weaknesses too.”

“It actually happened!” Dana stood up, her fists balled at her side. “And unless I help him, I will never see her again!”

“Naia.” Lily raised an eyebrow. “By now, even you should be able to see it. I can, and I don’t even have to be inside her head.”

Naia shook her head. “Is it always the direct approach with you?”

“We don’t have time for niceties.” Lily leaned back. “OK, let’s see if I can help you understand. If the afterlife was real, then everything you saw really was a carrot dangled before the horse. But consider this – if you actually made it to the afterlife, then why was it so easy for Daryl to bring you back?”

“What do you mean?”

“Once you’re dead, you’re dead. Your spirit can be called back, but it can’t be forced to stay. Not once you’re there. The number one rule of the afterlife is that it can never be truly known. To that end, bringing a spirit back intact would take a tremendous amount of power, god-level stuff. There’s a reason that boon is saved for messiahs and rock stars.

“Which brings us to the next point. If it wasn’t real, then it was manufactured. If it was manufactured, then the whole thing was an illusion, and though you are dead, your soul never left your body, bound to it by magical means. That being the case, this fantasy of yours was custom built by Daryl.” Lily uncrossed her legs, leaning farther forward. “Think. There has to be a detail that stands out. He isn’t a mind reader, so surely he had to fill in the gaps somewhere. A seam in the dream, as it were.”

“I don’t understand.” Dana shook her head, placing her face in her hands. “How could it not be real?”

“Hey.” Naia lifted Dana’s chin, locking eyes with her. “Have you ever had a dream before where everything is different, yet familiar? Like, you dream that you’re an airline pilot, you even remember going to school for it, but you’ve never actually been on a plane?”

Dana nodded. “Sometimes I would dream that I had failed high school and was forced to go back to middle school, even as an adult. I hated those dreams because the girls in high school were so fucking catty.” And judgmental if she remembered correctly.

“You have a false memory. Daryl made a mistake. Can you spot it?”

Dana frowned, thinking back. There wasn’t anything obvious, at least not right away. Alex had seemed so real, and so had the setting. The feel of her skin against her body, the way their lips touched. The rhythm of Alex’s body above hers…

“Fuck.” Dana scowled at the ground. Fuck. She had been fooled. After so many lonely months, the feel of Alex’s body against hers had distracted her, had made the deception possible. She knew she should be undergoing a whirlwind of emotions right now, but most of them had been stripped away. Anger at being fooled was one of the only things she had left, yet even that had been muted.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. He’s had years to get good at it.” Lily stood up. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to check on Cecilia. You can hug her or whatever it is you do to make people feel better.” Lily placed a hand on Dana’s shoulder. “Later, when you are feeling particularly murderous – come talk to me.” Sashaying dramatically, she disappeared through the back door into the house.

“Tell me about it,” Naia said.

“One time, we got drunk and started making out. Alex thought it would be sexy to watch some porn.” Dana laughed. “We tried to imitate one of the scenes. Alex ended up hurting her back, and I pulled a muscle in my thigh. It was more amusing than sexy, but it was the last time we tried scissoring. Well, second to last time.” She smiled. “A wise man once told me that you should try everything twice, just to be sure it isn’t for you.”

“Yeah. Some people like it.” Naia smiled. “Everyone has their kinks. But that’s an act designed more for the observer than the participants. I strongly suspect that Daryl was close by, watching. Otherwise, how would he know when the worst time to pull you back was?”

“Damn.” So that was that. Daryl had tricked her, and when she finally found a way to accomplish what she had asked for, he would allow her to die, her soul moving on to whatever damnation she had earned for it. He was a man who had not only stripped her life away from her, but her very soul. It was one thing to kill her, but to strip her of eternity?

Somewhere deep inside her mind, she felt the dam break. Anger, white hot, flooded through her body. Standing up, she brushed the back of her pants off and then pulled her hair out of its ponytail. Shaking her hair free, she pulled it back and redid the tail, tighter than before. She knew if she was alive, she would be able to feel her pulse in the stretched skin of her forehead.

“Where are you going?” Naia asked, worry on her face.

“Where do you think?” Dana walked toward the house. “I’m going to talk to Lily.”

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The Labyrinth had taken on a chill. Blue explained that they stood in a passageway that circled a chamber with a frozen lake inside. Rubbing his arms for warmth, Mike caught himself staring at Sofia’s ass. The cyclops had said very little to him after Red had arrived, and he was in a minor state of disbelief over what he had had done to her in the chamber. It was if a part of him had briefly awakened, taking charge of both of them. While he had total control over Sofia’s restrained body, he realized that maybe he hadn’t had total control of himself.

Red, breathless from flying at full speed, had announced to them that there was good news and bad. The good news was that she had found Tink. The bad news was that she was being held in a cage at the center of the Labyrinth.

It had taken some digging, but Mike had gotten Red to spill that she was the captive of someone Red referred to as the Lady of the Labyrinth. Red and Green floated ahead of them, taking them on a secret route to the Lady’s chamber while Blue sat on Mikes shoulder. Mike and Sofia decided that the best plan of action was to sneak in and appraise the situation for themselves, to which the fairies had revealed that there was a small tunnel that overlooked the room. They used it often to spy on their captor in hopes of finding a way out.

The fairies stopped, then quickly doubled back.

 “Why did we stop?” Sofia asked. Green and Red hovered over by the wall, their light illuminating a rough stone in the wall.

“We can slip through here,” Red said.

“But you will need the button,” Green finished. Sofia gave the stone a shove, and a side passage opened without a sound, a narrow opening that revealed a circular tunnel that also went uphill. Mike and Sofia moved into the tunnel, and the wall closed behind them.

The tunnel soon became steep enough that Mike spent most of his time watching his footing. Sofia seemed to have no trouble, though he did see occasional flashes of light from her eye and she would change direction. Mike followed behind her, wary of more than a few loose stones on the path. He knew that a tumble would result in a downhill slide, and some of the sharper stones made him wince at the thought of cutting himself up in the fall.

The glowing moss on the walls suddenly vanished, plunging the tunnel into darkness. Blue and Red lit the path ahead, and Mike stayed in Sofia’s shadow. Green landed on Sofia’s shoulder, then flew back to land on Mike’s.

“We’re getting close,” Green informed him in a whisper. Mike nodded, trying to breath a little more quietly. Green’s light went out, and Red led them the rest of the way, floating close to the floor. The tunnel now curved dramatically onward, like a spiral staircase. A golden glow from ahead lit the tunnel, so Red extinguished her own light before landing on Sofia’s shoulder to sit with Green. Mike followed the cyclops, who was now crouching as the tunnel grew smaller. Soon, both of them were hunched over, walking carefully. The stone floor had smoothed itself out, and the ceiling dropped again. They were both crawling when holes in the stone wall appeared, revealing a view of a giant chamber beneath them.

Up above, a giant yellow gemstone the size of a garden shed floated, held to the ground by several very thick chains that hooked into natural stone towers at the chamber’s edge. Mike could feel its warmth, making him think of a sunny day on the beach.

Lily. The thought of her came unbidden, triggered by his own memory of how they had met. Trapped inside a dream, and surrounded by the ocean of his mind. He wondered if she was doing okay. Shaking his head, he shifted his thoughts to Tink and Abella, who needed him now. He didn’t know if Sofia would ever apologize for getting them into this mess. Then again, if he had come with them, maybe he would have fallen prey to the traps in the Labyrinth. In fact, if not for the faeries, he would probably have died long ago. Whatever they had done to make Emily so mad, they didn’t deserve to be locked up here.

The glowing gemstone illuminated a large chamber beneath them. Piles of treasure had been shoved in the corners like junk, chests of coins and gemstones alike. Several areas below them contained long tables with implements that made Mike think of a mad scientist’s laboratory. Scanning the ground, he noticed the chamber seemed to be equally divided in two. The other half had a large structure toward the back. It looked like a miniature version of a pagoda, maybe something that would be seen on a mini-golf course, about twenty feet tall. A long table covered in food made Mike’s stomach grumble in protest. He felt like he was looking into someone’s dining room.

“There,” Sofia said, elbowing him and pointing. At the end of the table was a small metal cage. Huddled inside it was a green figure, legs pulled to her chest, her face buried in her knees.

“Whoa!” Sofia’s strong grip pulled Mike back into the tunnel. Without realizing it, he had drawn the dagger, sliding through the hole before them. “I know you’re feeling heroic, but it’s a twenty foot drop from here.”

“Take us down there,” he whispered. Blue hopped off his shoulder, walking in front of him. The tunnel they were in dipped down in several locations, and Blue had taken him to the one that had sunk lowest. It was fifteen feet to the ground. Mike picked her up, putting him back on his shoulder.

“I’ll lower you down,” Sofia said. Squirming backward, he grabbed on to Sofia’s hand. The cyclops held tightly to him, lowering him from the opening. She moved farther out, his feet on the smooth wall. He was about six feet up when he let go, landing in a crouch, his heart pounding. Sofia pulled herself back up, disappearing into the darkness.

The chamber was huge, and Mike moved across it, seeking shelter behind piles of gold. Moving closer to one of the tables, he saw a crystal orb on a pedestal sitting next to a gem encrusted wand. Moving across the gap in the middle, he moved closer to the cage, his eyes on Tink. She wasn’t moving, and it wasn’t until she sighed that he felt a tremendous load off his chest.

Moving closer to the food table, he saw Tink lift her head, her nose in the air. Sniffing around, she turned to face Mike, who was almost twenty feet away. A large smile broke out on her face, followed immediately by a frown.

“Tink hates the Labyrinth,” Tink whispered. “Tink wants to go home and never come back.”

“I’m working on it.” The door itself was padlocked shut. After a few quick cuts with the knife, Mike pulled the whole mechanism free, setting it down on the table. Tink pushed the door open and threw herself into Mike’s arms.

“Tink so happy to see goblin husband,” she whispered. “Snake lady try to make Tink do a bad thing, get mad when Tink refuse.”

Snake lady? Mike thought about the large snake skin they had found. “Okay Tink, we can go after we get your goggles.”

“Snake lady has them.” Tink shook her head. “Husband can’t talk to snake lady. Snake lady has bad magic.”

“Seems like everybody does, these days.” Grabbing Tink’s hand, he led her away from the table covered in food, his stomach growling in protest. They needed to get out of there as quickly as possible. Squeezing Tink’s hand, they ran across the middle of the room toward where he had come in.

Braziers all around the room lit themselves, casting away the shadows. Mike and Tink slid to a halt when they saw the minotaur now blocked their path, his fierce eyes locked onto Mike. Mike pushed Tink behind him, drawing the dagger. The minotaur held a small bag in one hand and his axe in the other.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Mike said. “We just want to leave.”

“Hmm.” The minotaur let out a snort. “You may not leave without her permission.”

“And you do not have it.” The voice was powerful, filling every portion of the room. Mike felt Blue grab tightly onto his ear, letting out a tiny squeak of fear. Looking all around, Mike froze in place when he realized the walls were moving. Something large was circling the room, scattering gold coins and treasure chests everywhere. Clutching the dagger, Mike stared in awe as the head of the snake appeared, a golden crown upon its head. The flattened hood spread out as it sat upright, regarding him from nearly twenty feet above. A tongue the length of Tink flicked out at them, tasting the air.

Opening its mouth, it spat out a crumpled figure on the floor.

“Sofia,” Mike whispered. The cyclops was motionless, but still breathing.

“Troublesome little mortals, snooping around my chamber.” The voice came from the snake, though its mouth was motionless. The voice was feminine, with a very thick accent. Circling Mike, it stared down at him. “You have sent a small army in to retrieve my treasure, haven’t you Caretaker?”

“We came to retrieve what is rightfully ours,” Mike said, his mouth and throat suddenly dry. “We have no interest in your belongings and would prefer to leave you in peace.”

The snake chuckled. “Isn’t that what all intruders say? We didn’t mean it?” The snake’s body kept going, winding its way around the chamber. Mike couldn’t see the end of it. “I suppose if I just give you the goggles, you will be on your way?”

“Yeah. That’s the gist of it.”

“Ha!” The snake’s mouth opened this time, revealing three foot long fangs. “So I hand over a Divine Object and you will walk away, never to darken my doorstep again. Such generosity would not paint me well.”

“I… I don’t want a Divine Object. Just the goggles. Because they are Tink’s.”

“Hssssss.” The snake contemplated Mike. “You really have no idea about anything. Let’s say I let you leave. What then of your friends?”

“My friends?” Mike looked around. The minotaur walked over to the long dining table Mike had been at, grabbing ahold of something Mike couldn’t see. With a flourish, he pulled free an unseen cloth. Beth and Abella sat at the table, staring straight ahead. The minotaur folded up the garment, parts of his body invisible behind it. Opening the bag, he pulled out a small glass jar with a pair of glowing lights inside. Red and Green banged their hands against the glass.

“Yes. Your friends.” The snake slithered up to the table. “They were so kind to follow Asterion here. After a lovely chat, they have decided they would prefer to remain. I’m sure I could find some use for them.”

“They would never agree to that.” Mike moved cautiously toward Sofia. Seeing no reaction from the snake or the minotaur, he knelt by her side. “Are you okay?”

“I feel so gross.” Sofia stared into the distance, her eye blinking rapidly. “But she didn’t hurt me. I... just can’t move.”

“What about the others?” Mike looked up at the snake. “What’s wrong with them?”

“You will find out soon enough.” The snake was slithering again, moving behind the large pagoda in the corner. Large flaps of fabric cast eerie shadows as she disappeared behind its folds. “First hand.”

The snake’s body continued moving behind the pagoda, but never came out the other side. Instead, Mike watched the shadows condense themselves down into a slender form that casually walked across the back wall. Emerging from behind the pagoda was a woman with dark skin and a kimono. Long, dark hair was topped with a tiny golden crown.

“I was a fool to be lured here by the last Caretaker,” she said, walking toward him. Her features were exotic, maybe Southeast Asia somewhere. It wasn’t until she came closer that he realized that portions of her skin consisted of scales making the same patterns he had seen on her snake body. “And I would be a fool to allow you to trap me in the same way she has.” Her green eyes lit from within, her whole body surrounded by magical energy. Mike felt all the muscles in his body freeze up. “I know that part of the nymph’s soul resides in you now, and in the past it prevented me from overtaking my captor. But when it comes to magic, there is always a way.” The goggles appeared in her hands. “Only the goblin and the Caretaker can use these. And since she has refused, I will make you do my bidding.”

The sickly green aura that had covered her blew across the room, encircling Mike. He felt it seeping into him, his skin itching all over. All he could see now were her eyes, those beautiful, emerald orbs, expanding to the size of the room, pulling him in. He wanted to kneel before her, worship her, do anything she said, to treat her like the Queen that she was!

The moment passed. Like a sudden bout of heartburn, the sensation faded, and Mike felt the room snap back into place, the memory of those golden green eyes fading away.

“Husband?” Tink asked, pulling gently on his fingers.

“Tink.” Mike looked down at her. “I think she’s going to cast a spell on me.”

The woman stared at him, her exotic features blank for several seconds before twisting into anger. “How?” She asked, her hands balling into angry fists. “How did you evade it?” Her voice filled the whole chamber, shaking loose a few coins that spilled over to clatter on the floor.

“Evade what?” Mike shivered. The room was so cold all of the sudden. “It looked like you were going to cast a spell on me.”

“A spell of obedience.” Scowling, she looked at Tink. “The goblin I understand. Her head injury is unique, and spells are never one size fits all. But you. It should have worked. A human soul with just a touch of nymph attached. I spent the last couple of years working on the spellcraft to make it work.”

*Cecilia left a mark on you*. Naia’s words echoed in the back of his mind. He thought back to that night with Cecilia in the cave. During his own climax, she had temporarily become human. All magic came with a price, and now he wondered what it was that he paid. “I guess I’m a little more complex than that.” Looking at the minotaur, then back to the woman, Mike shrugged. “So I guess this means you can’t cast that spell on me.”

She summoned a giant ball of fire in her hand. “I have other ways of making you do my bidding.”

Mike swallowed hard, fighting to keep his face straight. “You know, you’re probably right. However, did you know that there are better ways of getting people to do stuff for you?”

The fireball hovered menacingly. “The new Caretaker thinks he’s crafty then? Okay mortal. Let’s hear it. What sort of trick will you attempt?”

“Well, you have my friends and me captive. Apparently you need me to use those goggles for something. Did it occur to you that you could just ask? Or maybe we could come to an agreement?” Mike shrugged. “It feels like there’s an awful lot of hostility in this room. And I heard you say that the last Caretaker trapped you. Why? Are you dangerous?”

The woman stared at him in disbelief. Several seconds of silence passed. “Are you not cowed by my very presence? Do you not fear what I could do to you?”

“I was almost eaten by a plant last week, and I have a witch outside my house trying to break apart the protective enchantment that protects this place. To be honest, I’m more worried about what you have planned for my friends.” Mike’s eyes narrowed. “I thought I was coming here for a fight. We came here because we thought the minotaur had sticky fingers. But you? Well, you just seem angry. Angry at me. What have I even done to you?”

The woman held her breath for a moment, the ball of fire suddenly disappearing. “You really have no idea who I am? Or what my purpose is?”

“Nope. The only reason we are even here is because we were trying to help a friend who had been possessed.” Yet another thing that sounded unbelievable, but that was the new normal. “Your minotaur ambushed Tink and took her goggles.”

“Stupid cow fuck,” Tink muttered from behind Mike. Mike placed his hand over her mouth.

“He did so at my request. I have great need of the goggles’ abilities.” Shaking her head in disbelief, she threw her hands out in exasperation. “It seems that perhaps a discussion would be best.” She nodded at the minotaur. Asterion took Beth and Abella by the hands, gently leading them toward Sofia. He casually slung the cyclops over his shoulder before disappearing into the pergola.

“Where are they going?” Mike asked.

“I believe your kind has a word for this. They are… insurance.” She approached the table. “Come. Sit. Eat. Like you said, maybe we should talk.”

Mike gazed at the giant table covered in food, his mouth filling with saliva. “Well, I think it is only polite to start with names. I would prefer that you call me Mike, not Caretaker. And you already know Tink.” He grabbed the goblin’s hand, leading her back to the table. “I hope the two of you didn’t get off to a poor start, putting her in a cage and all.”

“It was, what I thought, a necessary precaution.” She sat across from them. “You may call me the Lady of the Labyrinth.”

“I thought maybe we could dispense with titles. Be less formal, friendly even.” Mike grabbed an empty plate and loaded it with what looked like pot roast, stacking it high with cheeses and other foods. “And where did all this food come from? It looks like you were ready for a feast.”

“Just because your friends are under my thrall doesn’t mean I was going to give them moldy bread and water. I may be a lot of things, but a bad host I am not.” She picked up a goblet full of wine, swirling it with a twist of her wrist. “And since you want something less formal to call me, you may call me Ratu.”

“Ratu. That’s a pretty name.”

“Thank you.” She smiled over her goblet. “I picked it out just for you.”

Mike finished making his plate, then slid it in front of Tink. “Eat up, I know you’re hungry.” Tink threw Ratu a dirty look, then obeyed, grabbing a handful of biscuits while Mike filled up another plate for himself. “Tell me how you came to be here and what your job is, Ratu. The more I know about you, the more I think we can understand each other.”

“Okay.” She sipped from her goblet, then set it down. “Let’s start with the Labyrinth. It has been here far longer than I, and Asterion has been here just as long. This room used to be where the most dangerous magical artifacts were stored, but that is no longer the case.”

“I thought that was what the Vault was for?”

Ratu smiled demurely. “Perhaps an analogy that a human would understand. The Vault is where you would store guns that are illegal to own. The Labyrinth is where you would keep your bombs and missiles. The magic items that were stored here were some of the most dangerous objects ever conceived by man or myth. The previous Caretaker, Emily, brought me here for the singular purpose of studying these objects. I am well versed not only in the creation of such things, but their destruction as well.”

“Are you a dragon?” Mike asked. “I hope I’m not being rude, but you have a treasure chamber, and you seem very powerful. The giant snake thing doesn’t hurt either.”

“I am not a dragon, though I was mistaken for one once.” Stretching her neck dramatically, the scale pattern flashed all the way across her skin. “I am a naga from Indonesia. I came here because Emily promised me a safe place to live. In some ways she delivered on that promise, but in others, I have become a prisoner.”

“Tell me more.” Off to his side, he could hear Tink stuffing her face. “While I’m familiar with the act of bringing magical creatures here, I’m not sure how this became a prison for you.”

“Neither was I, at first. You see, the reason Emily brought me here was to dismantle what she deemed the worst of the worst. Seven artifacts, each one scarier than the last. The more powerful the artifact, the harder it is to destroy.”

“I don’t get it. The Geas seems super powerful, but that woman outside was able to make serious progress in a matter of hours.”

“I wondered about the banging down here. The Geas, in a way, is just the shield. Now that you are the Caretaker, you must find a way to wield the sword. Bang on any shield long enough, and it will finally give.” Ratu set her goblet down. “The objects I was working with, however, were like barely contained wildfires.”

“Such as?”

“I would prefer not to say for reasons that will become clear. Another analogy. The Ark of the Covenant. You have heard of this, yes?”

“Indiana Jones?”

Ratu gave him an odd look. “No, it was created by Moses at the instructions of the Hebrew God. A powerful magical talisman that brought grave misfortune to anyone it considered an enemy. Fires, floods, boils. In the hands of the believer, however, it could confer divine blessings.

“Consider this. Magic is like energy. It cannot be destroyed once harnessed. If you were to take apart the covenant, destroy it, what sort of magic could you gather from it?”

Mike pondered this, chewing on a hunk of cheese. “Would it matter who took it apart? An enemy versus a believer?”

“It would. And the intent would matter to. If an enemy were to destroy it, they could end up with magic capable of bringing catastrophic ruin. If done correctly this magic could also be gathered in such a manner to create a divine object capable of bestowing blessings.”

“Then why bother destroying the ark? If you are going to harvest the magic anyway, then why not keep it the way it is?”

“Because you have destroyed another object and harvested its magic. You are now assembling magical ingredients of the highest quality, potentially building a weapon that has no business existing. So when you destroy a magical item of such a nature, you must find somewhere to put that energy so that it cannot be used in that manner. And this was where my problems began.”

“How so?”

“I come from a race of semi-divine beings. Not quite god, not quite mortal. As such, we can be bound by the rules of both. Emily asked me if I would be willing to dismantle these three objects she had acquired in order to rid the world of them. In exchange, I could leave my home, which was rapidly becoming developed and polluted and then live here.

“It was all in the wording. She promised me that I could live here in exchange for dismantling the seven items for her. She even provided me a vessel to channel the magical energy into. Once I began living here, I was bound to fulfill my promise. I told her I would not rest until I had done what she asked, making the world a safer place. What I didn’t understand was that my desire for a more peaceful existence would blind me to a certain inconvenient truth.”

“She wanted those objects broken down for a reason, didn’t she?”

Ratu nodded. “I mainly suspected that something was up when she brought me here through a one way portal, not the house. The others had no knowledge of me, and I seldom had visitors. Emily checked on my progress at first, and I realized that the vessel she had given me was built for something far more sinister.”

“What was the vessel?”

Ratu contemplated Mike for a long time, then shrugged. “I suppose it won’t hurt to show you. You see, once I found out Emily was no longer alive, I found a way to siphon the magic off of the artifact and create that tiny sun over our heads. Until a year ago, all I had were the torches.” Reaching into her cleavage, she pulled out an ornate key. It was an antique, and the gaps in the key were filled with three different gems. Two of them had cracked, but the last one was flawless. “Often, we discover that magical objects are an extension of their physical form. The ark was for worship, and was built as such. This key was designed to unlock a door. However, with the power of these three stones, it was going to unlock something else.”

“What?” Mike was surprised when Ratu handed him the key.

“I have my theories. Have you ever put two different foods together and discovered that they taste amazing when paired? I believe that Emily was planning to use this key to do the impossible – become a demigod.”

“Why would she need to do that?”

Ratu nodded. “She discovered something in the house. She would never tell me what it was, but based on some conversations we had, I believe that she had discovered the Architect’s identity. However, she knew that her lifespan was approaching its end, and became desperate for more time. Immortality comes at a great price, and she intended to use the power of this key to gain it through divine intervention.”

“So, what, this is the key to Heaven or something?”

“If only it were that simple. I’m afraid that humans have muddied the waters when it comes to what is real and what isn’t. Have you ever wondered if an ant can distinguish you from a cloud in the sky? Mortals are small, and often only see what they want to.” Ratu held out her hand, and Mike returned the key. “No, I believe she was going to use the key to open a door to where the Ancient Ones slumber, beings from before the Universe existed.”

“That sounds like some Lovecraftian shit.”

Ratu frowned, her lips stretching dramatically. “Lovecraft did more for mankind than you will ever know, and he paid a price for it. Yes, we are talking about beings of immense power who are unable to enter this plane through ordinary means. You see, no god in their right mind would simply make Emily a demigod. She had nothing to offer. I believe that she planned to offer a trade, allow one of them to slip through.”

“That’s… that’s crazy!”

“Worse yet, I also believe that she intended to use the secret of the house to control the being – eventually.” Ratu tucked the key back into her kimono. “That being said, this is just a theory. Emily brought me many ancient texts under the guise that I was perfecting my craft. Instead, I was researching the grim possibility that she was about to make a huge mistake. Months before her death, I had learned how to destroy and harvest the magic from the final object. Instead, I encased it beneath a lake of ice.”

“If you know how to destroy it, then why do you need the goggles?”

Ratu pursed her lips, deep in thought. “This… artifact is extremely dangerous. As I mentioned, the Ancient Ones are extremely powerful, but not just in terms of strength. They reside in a plane that is devoid of time and space. The sheer act of interacting with such a creature can destroy the mind, and as such, the object I need to destroy is very devious. Imagine trying to drive a nail into wood, but in the moment you swing your hammer, the nail is now a snake, and the wood a piece of pie. So now you are chasing a snake with your hammer, but now your hammer is a mallet, and you are a German Shepard.”

“…what?”

“Exactly. This isn’t just a hallucination, or a fever dream. The last object is sealed inside a container meant to prevent the chaos from spreading. Once the container is open, you have to hit the nail before the world changes around you. As a human, just to look upon this thing would cause you to go insane. However, the goggles are a Divine Object, able to pierce the veil and protect the user for a time.”

“And this is where I come in.”

“Perhaps. With Emily dead, my contract with her is void, except I have technically collected on a bargain I never delivered. I am unable to leave this place, and I am afraid that I suspected that you had come down here to demand the results that Emily never achieved.” Ratu bowed her head. “For this, I am sorry.”

Mike nodded. “It sounds like you were trying to do the right thing. I accept your apology. What about you, Tink?” Mike looked down at the goblin and smiled. Sometime during the conversation, she had eaten her fill, then leaned her head against his side, promptly falling asleep.

“Do you know what she called me right after I brought her here?”

Mike grinned. “I can only imagine. Did it end with fuck?”

Ratu laughed. “It was like stream of consciousness from the bottom of a swamp. Asterion asked me to explain to him what some of the words meant. He had never heard them before.”

“Yeah.” Mike put his arm around Tink. “She can be feisty. Does this mean you will let them all go? My friends and the faeries?”

“I require a new contract of you, the Caretaker. Once you have fulfilled your part of the bargain, I will release all of you.”

“Lay it out for me.”

“I would ask that you use those goggles to help me destroy the last object. I also wish to continue living in this place, with the caveat that I am allowed to leave when I choose.”

“Sounds straightforward enough.” Mike lightly stroked Tink’s hair, smiling when she muttered in her sleep. “In exchange, I ask for the release of my friends, and that you never do anything to bring danger to the house. Also, safe passage if I or any of the others wish to come see you.”

“That… is an odd request.”

“You seem rather lonely.” Mike said. Ratu’s posture shifted very slightly. “If you were truly a solitary creature, you wouldn’t have chosen this place to come. I’m sure the minotaur is nice enough, but he doesn’t strike me as much of a conversationalist.”

Ratu considered Mike for several seconds, then laughed. “You are an interesting human. Perhaps I will enjoy getting to know you.”

“So what now?” Mike asked.

“I have preparations to make. Feel free to rest in the pagoda – you will be unsurprised to find that it is bigger on the inside.”

“Sounds about right.” Mike finished the last few bites of food on his plate, then pulled Tink into his arms. She shifted, pulling herself tightly against him.

“Husband,” she muttered. Mike smiled, walking along the table and toward the pagoda. The area around it was surrounded by hanging cloths that flapped gently in the breeze generated by the burning braziers. Drawing close, the pagoda gave off a weird illusion, suddenly looking even taller now that he was up close. Stepping through the doorway, Mike stared upward in awe. The pagoda stretched as far as he could see, creating the illusion that he was staring into infinity. Climbing the stairs by the entrance, he soon found a small room lit by hanging lanterns with a large, comfortable bed. Moving toward it, he knelt down to gently set the goblin onto the soft, red sheets.

“Wha-?” While laying Tink on the bed, he felt her teeth clamp down on his shoulder. Growling, Tink pulled Mike into bed with her, her tail whipping around until she was on top of him, her hands pinning Mike to the mattress. She released his shoulder.

“Tink wait long time for husband,” she announced, her eyes narrowing. “Husband come for Tink. Husband love Tink.”

“Of course I do, but – hey!” Tink was yanking Mike’s pants off now, her back to Mike. He grabbed onto her hips to push her off when he felt her hands on his cock. She tickled the underside of it with one of her claws, then bent over, sniffing the air.

“Who is this?” Tink asked. Mike felt suddenly ashamed, but knew there was no reason to be. Tink didn’t care that he had sex with the others. To her, it was no different than watching tv or sharing eggos with a friend.

“Uh… Sofia.”

“Ha! One-eye is a dirty girl. She say she think husband is dumb like rock, but Tink know different.” Tink sniffed again. “But who else?”

“Some fairies.” Tink was stroking him now, the bottom of her skirt riding up enough that when her tail twitched, he could see her buttocks on display.

“Ooh! Fairy make magic oil!” Tink tugged gently on Mike’s shaft, playing with his balls with her other hand. Mike sighed, enjoying the wave of relaxation that was washing over him. It had been a long day, and it felt nice to slow down.

“Do you want some?” Blue, tucked away in Mike’s collar, launched herself in the air, circling Tink. “You’ll have to earn it!”

“Ooh, pretty!” Tink held her hand out. Blue landed gently in the palm of her hand. “Tink remember fairy! We make plenty of trouble.”

Uh oh. Mike tried to sit up, but Tink pushed him back down without even looking.

“Fairy help Tink? Tink think husband brave, need reward.”

“Tink, I don’t…” Her tail brushed across his face, distracting him. He tried to grab it, but it danced playfully in front of his face.

“Husband come save Tink, Tink say thank you.” Scooting her rear up on his chest, she leaned forward to suck him into her mouth. Mike grabbed onto Tink’s hips, letting out another sigh. Tink teased the hole of his cock with her tongue, then used her teeth to tease the edge of his frenulum. Mike stroked her tail, rubbing his hands along the edge of her ass. She leaned forward even farther, revealing the edge of her pussy. Mike’s fingers slid down to find it, teasing her tight opening with circular movements.

“Ah!” Mike gasped – the familiar sensation of Blue grabbing the base of his cock with her hands and legs made him even harder, and Tink’s mouth was stretched to the limit to accommodate him. Tink growled, her mouth full of Mike’s dick. He was able to slide the tip of his forefinger into her snatch, and her growls amplified.

Tink pulled her mouth off of him, pumping his shaft with both hands. “Tink show husband that Tink is best,” she declared. Blue squeaked when Tink grabbed her, sliding the fairy up Mike’s shaft and rubbing her across the head of Mike’s cock. “Tink get husband nice and wet.”

Blue let out a shriek of delight when Tink forced her onto Mike’s cock, stretching the fairy down until her legs bounced against the edge of his balls. Mike groaned, his whole cock tingling with pleasure. Tink scooted around, turning to face Mike, her hands squeezing Mike’s cock through the fairy. Blue’s whole body was distorted, her face stretched into a giant grin.

“Tink always best,” she muttered, pushing Mikes cock down against his stomach. Scooting herself forward, she trapped Mike’s cock in place with her pussy, rubbing herself against the fairy and Mike’s shaft. Mike ran his hands up Tink’s thighs, pushing her dress up and over her head. Her nipples, all four of them, were rock hard.

Mike grabbed a pillow, placing it beneath his shoulders so that he could sit up. Tink humped him, causing Blue to let out a noise similar to a squeaky toy. Mike tried not to laugh, which resulted in a huge grin on his face.

“Tink really is the best,” he told her, his fingers squeezing her breasts. Purring, Tink knelt down to kiss him, her lips soft against his. Mike ran his fingers through her hair, his thumb rubbing the base of one of her horns. Her kissing became more insistent, her hips grinding more fiercely against his.

“Little fairy work harder,” Tink declared, lifting her hips and rotating Blue so that she was face up. Blue’s tiny hands reached up for Tink’s labia, clutching her tightly before Tink could settle back down on the fairy.

“Can she breathe?” Mike asked.

“Tink not worry. Fairy need magic or air, not both.” She kissed Mike again, only more urgently. “Get husband nice and ready.” Tink bit Mike on the lip, drawing blood.

“Naughty goblin.” Mike pulled Tink’s hips against him, one hand reaching around to grab the base of her tail. “I was worried about you.”

“Tink always worry about husband. Husband need Tink.” Tink was gasping now, moving her hips in a circular motion. Blue flashes of light were emanating from between them, the fairy shedding magical light. Mike could feel the fairy’s body tightening against his cock, her tiny limbs shaking.

Music played, and Tink shifted off of his cock. Blue was glowing, her body shooting off sparks that played musical notes when they vanished. Grabbing the fairy, Tink jacked off Mike as fast as she could.

Blue let out a tiny shriek, and Tink pulled her off Mike. Glittery cum ran out of the fairy, pooling up on Mike’s stomach and across his balls. His whole cock was iridescent now, shimmering in the room’s light.

“Fairy girl take a break,” Tink declared, dropping Blue at the foot of the bed. Rubbing her slit against Mike, she pinned his shoulders down. “Tink’s turn.” Grabbing Mike’s shaft, she positioned herself just over his head. “And this time, Tink make it fit.”

“You really are a naughty goblin.” Mike groaned, his shaft sinking into Tink’s tight pussy. The fairy’s cum allowed him to penetrate her easily, sliding in with minimal resistance. “But Tink, lube doesn’t mean I’ll go in deeper.”

“Husband never bet against Tink.” Tink was rolling her hips, pushing against him as hard as she could. With every pass, she sank just a little bit farther. “Tink have big idea.” Tink was now as far as she could get, a couple of inches above the base of Mike’s cock. He could feel the back wall of her vagina bouncing off the head of his cock.

“What now?” Mike asked, playfully yanking her tail. “I know one place I can fit, if you’re so determined.”

“Tink determined,” she gasped. “Tink make it work.” She was rolling her hips now, the back wall of her vagina rubbing sideways against the head of his cock. She lifted herself slightly, then pushed down. Frustration crawled across her face as she repeated the process several times.

“What are you trying to do?” Mike asked.

“Tink… saw… picture,” she declared. “Picture on… magic screen.”

Oh god. What had she found on his computer? Suddenly, he felt a slight shift inside of Tink, a small bump along the back of her vagina. Tink held still, moving carefully now, centering Mike’s dick on that spot.

“Tink,” Mike whispered. “That isn’t going to fit there.”

“Fairy oil,” she hissed, pushing herself down on him. It should have been impossible, but Mike’s entire life was the impossible. Groaning in delight, he felt the tiny ring of Tink’s uterus squeeze along the head of his cock, his dick pushing through an opening it had no business fitting through. Gasping for air, Tink sat up, swiveling her hips from side to side, working Mike in even deeper.

“Holy shit,” Mike whispered. Tink’s clits were engorged to an unusual size now, pressing against his dick like a pair of fingers.

“Tink make fit. Tink make fit,” she groaned, over and over again. Mike felt himself pushing against the back wall of her uterus now. In awe, he stared at the goblin. Her labia were pressed firmly against his pelvis, his cock now entirely inside of her. “Husband no move.” He could feel the tension in her body building up, the excitement of the moment lifting Tink away. An energy had built up between them, ready to be released at any moment.

Mike grabbed Tink’s tail and yanked it. Hard.

The goblin screamed, her entire body racked with spasms that started at the base of her body and worked their way up. Her eyes rolled back into her head, her arms going limp as her orgasm sucked the life out of her. Her vagina clenched Mike tightly, but nowhere near as hard as her cervix did. Mike cried out, feeling like it was going to crush him. He tried to pull himself free, but it was so tight that he couldn’t pull out.

The effort of trying to free himself triggered a second orgasm in Tink. Falling forward onto Mike, she growled, then bit his collarbone. Mike’s micro-thrusts combined with the tightness of the goblin caused a small orgasm to hit. However, the tight ring just past the head of his cock blocked him from releasing it all, and his orgasm vanished. Tink kept riding him, causing another small orgasm to hit, and this time the pressure was almost unbearable.

“Tink!” Mike cried out, and her uterus unclenched. Mike filled her womb with sperm, his third and final orgasm making his whole body shake. His whole body tensed up, and then relaxed, his cock popping free of Tink’s uterus. He stayed inside of her, pulling her tightly against him. Tink stopped biting him, her arms folding against his chest.

“Tink told you she is best,” she muttered, burying her face in his chest. She purred quietly, her body going limp when she fell asleep. Holding the goblin against him, he let out a sigh. Tink was safe, and that was what mattered most. Now that they were reunited, he felt like a part of him had been restored, a piece he hadn’t realized was missing. He tightened his grip on the goblin, holding her as close as possible. Tink sighed, her gentle purring filling the room.

His hard cock was still inside her when he fell asleep.