

## The Tower

Mike's heart pounded in his chest at the sight of the thing. The Jabberwock regarded the small group of people in its master's home, then opened its mouth to let out a cry that made him think of a pterodactyl on steroids. Jabberwock saliva misted the entire room, and everyone covered their ears to shut out the cry.

Daisy bolted, vanishing down the stairs and leaving a glittering trail behind her. Zel made a break for it, and the Jabberwock lunged for her, leaving a bloody gash in her hindquarters with a claw before she vanished down the stairs.

The beast's long arm swept away the chaise lounge and busted apart the bed frame, hissing its displeasure that the centaur had escaped. When it whipped its head around, it managed to catch Mike in the chest, knocking him across the room where he fell against a bookshelf. The shelves were old, busting apart and showering him with dust and splinters.

"Tink fuck up ugly dragon!" Flipping the lenses of her goggles into place, she stood up and charged the Jabberwock, her club held high. It took a swing at her and missed when she jumped over its hairy paw, then slammed her club into its face. The Jabberwock let out a sinister hiss, steam venting from its nostrils.

"Tink, get out of here," Mike cried, moving toward the stairs along the outer wall.

Ratu summoned a ball of fire that splashed across the beast's hide, scorching the hairs all along its body. The room filled with a sulfuric odor of burnt hair, causing Mike to gag and then spit. When the Jabberwock swung its attention toward the naga, she made a fist with one hand and slammed it into the open palm of her other. A stone ripped free of the wall and smashed into the Jabberwock's snout, causing it to shift away from her.

"Stinky dragon go now," Tink yelled, then smashed her club onto the Jabberwock's hand. Two of its talons broke off, and it blew a blast of steam at her from its nose. Tink dodged away as Ratu smashed the Jabberwock with another stone, sending the steam harmlessly across the floor.

This time, the Jabberwock grabbed the first stone that had hit it and hurled it back at the naga. She yelped and summoned a blue aura around herself, but the hit knocked her off her feet. Tink saw this and shrieked in rage before smashing the Jabberwock in the jaw with her club. This caused its teeth to crunch together with a loud pop.

Mike couldn't move. Smoke and steam had filled the room, and it hurt to breathe. He couldn't even call to Tink, his heart racing so fast he was afraid he would pass out. Swallowing his fear, he ran over to where Ratu was lying and dragged her away from the fight. Tink was much faster than the Jabberwock and seemed to be fairing pretty well in keeping its attention. It made a grab for her and she squirted out of its busted hand, then smashed another talon, cracking it.

"Ratu? Ratu?" The naga was unconscious, but alive. Spotting a pair of rats hidden under a toppled bookshelf, he had them drag her into the sealed room that they had come from. The Jabberwock couldn't reach her here. Satisfied that she was safe for the time being, he leaned around the corner to see what was happening.

"Tink smash stinky dragon into jam!" She sidestepped another blast of steam that scoured the stone beneath her clean of debris. The creature was clearly frustrated, extending its serpentine neck to

headbutt her. Its head was larger than she was, and one of its long fangs caught her ankle when she tried to roll away.

“Tink, get out of there!” His heart was racing frantically now, and his stomach churned. It felt like he was going to throw up, he was so scared.

“Husband run first, Tink follow!” She blocked an attempt to grab her by smashing one of the Jabberwock’s fingers.

He ran across the room to the stairs, sliding underneath a jet of steam and nearly slipping on the wet floor. His whole body was filled with ice now, danger waiting for him in every corner of the room, his magic warning him to GET OUT!

“Tink, I’m—” he looked back in time to see the Jabberwock grab Tink by the feet with its tongue. It dragged her towards its open maw, but she flipped the club over and used her feet to aim it, firing the secret arrow from its base.

The bolt pierced the creature’s eye, causing it to let out a shriek of anger. It jerked its head back, pulling Tink through the air by the rope from the club. She landed hard on the ground, clutching her weapon tightly against her chest. The rope connecting them went slack, then slowly tightened as the beast lifted its head.

Opening its mouth wide, the Jabberwock snatched Tink in its jaws and shook her back and forth, smashing her against the hard, stone walls. She let out a scream when it smacked her on the ceiling, the goggles tumbling from her head and crashing on the floor. Tink went limp, her pain-filled eyes briefly meeting Mike’s.

Lifting its head, the Jabberwock opened its jaws and she fell into the back of its mouth. Its jaws slammed shut like a vice and she was gone.

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It was several minutes before Yuki stepped into the pool, taking the shortcut back to the house. Fearful that the demon would find a way to abduct her, she had cast several spells over the pool in an attempt to lure him out. Figuring she officially had no other options, she had jumped in, Jenny clutched tightly against her chest.

When the closet spit her out, she quickly leapt to her feet and shut the door behind her. The water sank into the wood as if the house was thirsty. Stepping into the front room, she opened up the curtain to reveal that the front yard was as she had left it.

“What do I do now?” Yuki held up the little doll, looking deep into its painted glass eyes. The demon had taken Beth without a care in the world, and Yuki had turned her to stone just as quickly, her body sinking away into another plane of existence. She wasn’t worried about the demon undoing the spell, but now she feared that Beth would get smashed by a vengeful demon who might attempt to come after her.

Beth had given up everything to keep the house safe. That was how Emily used to be, back before she had disappeared. Either the woman was very brave, stupid, or both, and Yuki was struggling with the ramifications.

“Do you think I was wrong?” she asked Jenny, not expecting an answer. The little doll was limp, and Yuki cast a quick spell to make sure she was still in there. Satisfied that Jenny hadn’t vacated her cloth body, she set the doll up on the mantle.

“Beth said they forgave you for causing trouble. Do they know how many people you killed?” Yuki knew of at least a couple of occasions that the doll had escaped and the host had ended up dead. However, she now lived with at least one viable human host. Why not hop in and start the process anew?

There were too many thoughts going through her mind, and she couldn’t process them all at once. Too much was at stake, and if she made the wrong decision, she would lose the house. Frustrated, she flopped down on the couch.

How many times had she been captured by humans in her long life? It was too many, and the instances ran together in her mind. A feudal lord in Japan, farmers in China, even a group of fishermen who caught her in a net and insisted she was some type of wish granting deity. She scowled at the memory of them all, then turned her thoughts to Emily once more.

“Why did you betray me?” The empty room had no answers, and neither did the doll on the mantle. Yuki closed her eyes, fighting the grief that swelled in her chest. Had Beth been right? Was her judgement clouded by what Emily had done? Upon meeting Mike, she had tried to kill him, never even giving him a fair chance to explain himself. How much of that had been the desire for a revenge she could never have?

For years, she had promised to kill Emily on sight, without hesitation. Being able to commit to murdering a loved one was nearly impossible, and those long years had been spent emotionally distancing herself from everything. When push came to shove, she used the Eye to resolve disputes rather than taking a life. Her inability to commit had further frustrated her, and she had acted without thinking, seeing the man as an immediate threat. There would be no bargaining, simply justice.

Now the house had turned against her. That was unexpected. The hero’s welcome she had hoped for on her return was now the solemn march of a villain.

“Why?” She stood and approached Jenny. “Why does it have to hurt so much? I thought that when I came back, everything would put itself together. But then I hear about this man, this supposedly wonderful person. I remember how everyone loved Emily, but she did bad things. I thought that was maybe because of her magic, the nymph inside of her. The Caretaker is loved because of their magic, not their actions. And now here I am, fucking everything up while they defend him!” She stomped her foot and a chill wind rushed through the room, briefly lifting the edge of the area rug.

“Tell me, Jenny! If it was up to me, I would lock you in a block of ice for all eternity in the Vault, but he gave you a second chance! Was he right? Do you deserve it? Is he truly a good man? Because even a good man can fall from grace!” Yuki slammed a fist into the mantle, knocking loose a brick and breaking the skin of her hand wide open.

“Ow, *baka kitsune*,” she hissed in pain. Sticking the wound in her mouth, she licked up the blood and waited. Minor wounds were an inconvenience, and she used magic to speed up the healing process. Pulling her hand free, she scowled at the itchy scab on her hand.

Idiot indeed. There was a mirror over the hearth that had been covered with a piece of fabric. Yuki pulled it down and looked at herself, taking in the image of the fox who looked back. Once, she had prided herself on her ability to approach things logically, to survive in the wild using her wits. Her years

in confinement had worn away that person, leaving behind the raw nerve she had become, so eager to act or react. Being honest with herself for the first time, she saw little more than a scared, stupid fox girl so obsessed with revenge that she could no longer see the forest for the trees.

“Naia.” Her best friend, her confidante. Even if the nymph had forgotten her, it wouldn’t change the caring soul she had been when they met. If she could talk to anybody right now, it would be her.

Frowning, she paced the room, occasionally glaring at Jenny. The doll was no use, and without Daisy, she had nobody else to talk to. She had effectively traded one prison for another.

Taking a deep breath, she made the decision, walking toward the back door of the house. She would free Naia and hear her out, let her talk. It was time for the voice of reason to speak to her, to help her make an informed decision.

Her wards went off.

“*Chikusho*,” she swore. What now? All of her wards were being broken, and she walked to the front window of the house to look outside. The front yard was a pristine canvas, her wand warriors standing at proud attention like a small group of trees. A gentle wind scattered ice crystals across the yard, and a small group of figures stood at the wrought iron gate she had built.

Letting out a grunt, she focused her attention on a patch of snow and swirled her magic around, raising a figure from it. Closing her eye, she let her consciousness flow into her clone, satisfied that her body was safe inside the home. Shaking snow off her shoulders, she walked down toward the gate, her crystalline tail swishing behind her.

There were three of them. An older woman with long, braided hair that reached her waist. A black woman who wore a gown that left little to the imagination, her skin painted with runes of blood, and an arab man in a suit, a cocky smile on his face. He lightly fingered a ring on his left pinky.

“Ah, you must be the newest addition to the home.” He smirked, his eyes traveling along Yuki’s body. “And a fine looking one at that.”

“What do you want?”

“Manners first. I am Amir, these are my associates Elizabeth and Kali.” He waved his hands at the women by his side. “Frankly, we are here for the house.”

“Over my dead body.”

Amir sighed. “Sadly, I was afraid you would say that. If we must, then we must. But I was hoping you would be a bit more reasonable. You see, Mr. Radley has been quite stubborn, and I was certainly hoping to work something out. I feel I would be remiss if I didn’t at least put an offer out there.” He turned around and waved at the street behind him. “If you would be willing to leave, to walk away for good, I would provide you immeasurable financial compensation. In my world, money really does grow on trees. You would be free from harassment, allowed to go wherever you wish while my associates do our work here.”

“I think you underestimate your chances here.” Yuki held her arms out, sending her magic into the ground and forming several ice minions, beings about three feet tall with jagged teeth. “This place is essentially a fortress. You can fight me, but you will lose.”

Amir shook his head. “Okay. I tried.” He rubbed the ring on his finger with his other hand and dark smoke sank from it, pooling near his feet to form a man that was roughly four feet tall. His skin was

dark orange and he wore a white and red vest with large, golden chains fastened around his neck. His legs faded into the smoke that leaked from Amir's finger.

"Master?" The djinn's voice was surprisingly deep for his size, and his inky black eyes locked on Yuki. They were sad, and the being stuck his hands in spectral pockets, awaiting orders.

"Today's wish is for you to remove this gate. With prejudice."

"As you wish." The djinn floated forward and placed his hand on the cool metal of the bent swords. "Nothing personal," he said quietly to Yuki.

With a light shove from the djinn, the gate ripped free of the stone pillars and blasted through Yuki, shattering her clone. Her awareness popped back into her body and she snarled, watching the gate collide with the edge of the house and fall apart. The Page of Wands had already charged toward Amir, but Elizabeth had set it on fire. It now ran around, clawing at the flames on its head. The djinn had turned back into smoke and flowed into the ring.

"Damn, damn, damn." She ran to the door and pulled off her eyepatch and ran outside. Amir was only a couple feet into the yard, casually swatting away her minions with a wave of unseen force. When he looked up, Yuki let out a gasp.

"We saw what you did to our associate," Amir explained, his grin wide beneath the dark black blindfold. Elizabeth and Kali wore them too, and Kali seemed to be setting up some items in preparation for a large ritual. "We don't need our eyes for this."

"*Ketsumedo yarou.*" Yuki slid her tarot cards from her sleeve into her hand and commanded the ice to attack. The remaining minions swarmed Elizabeth, but she spat out a black goo that expanded and caused them to stick together. Large icicles rose from beneath the snow and launched forward, but Amir let out a yawn and shattered them with his fist when they came close.

"Set up a perimeter around the sundial," he said to Elizabeth. "I'll see to Kali." The Queen of Wands charged him, but he grabbed her with his hands and yanked, ripping her in half vertically. "If we keep them from using the dial, we can have this done by nightfall."

"Like hell you will." She slid the Knight, Queen, King and Page of Swords into her fingers and threw them like knives. They exploded in mid-air, showering the yard in sparks as four armored figures burst into being. The Knight and King charged at Elizabeth, who took several steps back and summoned a ring of green fire around her that they bounced off of. Amir's smile faltered when the Queen and Page attacked him. Rubbing a ring on a different hand, the smoke from within formed into a scimitar.

"And I haven't forgotten about you," Yuki muttered, pulling the Five of Pentacles loose. Kneeling, she pushed away the snow and shoved the card into the ground. On the other side of the yard, large cylinders of stone burst from the ground, breaking Kali's objects apart and knocking her around. Kali hissed something and sent an angry ball of light at Yuki, but she caught it in her hand and held it up to inspect.

"Huh." *I have no idea what this is.* She hooked her fingers in it and yanked, ripping it apart. Kali ran for the front gate just ahead of the King of Wands, then spun about and held up her hands, fingers pointed.

A blast of lightning rocked the yard, blowing the King of Wands apart. Amir had overpowered the Queen and Page of Swords, his blade cutting through their armored bodies and leaving them in ruin.

Elizabeth was now outside the green ring of fire, the King and Knight trapped inside. Yuki's magic militia was falling apart.

Yuki shuffled the cards quickly, watching Amir approach. Pulling out the card she needed, she held Judgement over her head and winced in advance.

The horn blast from above was loud enough to break the windows of the house. A fierce wind built up, forcing Amir to kneel down to remain in position. Ice and snow blew away, forming large drifts along the front fence of the yard, and Kali made a break for it, sliding between the lions and vanishing into the street.

The sound intensified, lifting Elizabeth off her feet and tossing her bodily over the gate along with the King and Knight of Swords. Amir grimaced, turning his sightless face toward her.

"This isn't over," he mouthed, and then let the wind carry him away. Once airborne, a large rug lifted up from behind the fence and caught him, ferrying him to safety.

Yuki lowered her hand with a gasp, tossing the scorched card to the ground. Most of the ice and snow had been blasted free of the yard, and the gate was a mess. Summoning her magic, she began to rebuild her defenses, her heart racing.

They would be back. Their siege had begun.

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His mouth was dry, his limbs numb. His heart slammed so hard against his ribs that he was afraid that he would break apart, and the cold feeling in his gut now spread throughout his entire body. The Jabberwock lowered its head to regard him with its remaining reptilian eye. It snorted, a blast of steam filling the air, then used the rim of the opening to pull itself forward, reaching for Mike with its damaged paw.

The magic inside of him uncoiled, ripping through his body. The air around him went cold, and he could feel it like a thousand angry spiders beneath his skin, squirming around and demanding release. As one, they rushed up through his body, spiraling in a tight circle as he took an insanelly deep breath. The world moved in slow motion, hot tears springing to his eyes as he opened his mouth and screamed.

"TINK!" The magic came out all at once, moving outward in a wave of force. The room shook, causing dust to fall from the ceiling, and the Jabberwock blanched, jerking its head up and slamming it into the top of the opening. His yell went on for several seconds, his whole body vibrating with power. His own voice sounded like it was far away, and he realized he was hearing an echo from the distant mountains.

It was the rage-filled cry of a banshee.

Letting out another roar, he charged the jabberwock, sliding his dagger free of its sheath. The beast was stunned, but had quickly backed out of the entryway and was flapping its wings, desperate to gain lift. The wind rushed through Mike's thick air, and he was almost upon the beast when it pushed away from the wall, sinking just over the edge.

Mike leapt after it, falling several feet before crashing into its belly. It was covered in so much hair that it was easy to grab a handful of it with his free hand and use the knife to penetrate the Jabberwock's thick hide.

The Jabberwock dropped into the valley, spinning around in an attempt to dislodge him. Mike's whole body tingled now, and his hands moved on their own. When the Jabberwock dove, he would reposition himself, crawling higher on the beast toward its head, then hang on for dear life when it pulled up. Every move it made came to his mind just before it happened, allowing him to remain attached.

Unable to dump Mike, the beast slammed into the wall of the cliff, rocks crunching and falling free. Mike twisted to its blind side, rolling out of the way to avoid being crushed into paste, but unable to dodge the sharp bits of stone that cut at his arms. It did this a few more times, and then started a slow climb into the air.

It soared out toward the edge of the island, the miles passing gently beneath them. When it reached a higher altitude, it rolled on its back and fell while clawing at its own belly. Mike had already tucked himself along its side, where it couldn't touch him.

He stabbed the Jabberwock a few times, but it didn't bleed. Rather, hot mud flowed from its wounds, and he knew it would take drastic measures to bring the beast down. It had no discernible anatomy on the inside, so he wondered if he could try to blind it.

Since his handholds became slick where he stabbed the beast, he slid his dagger back in its sheath and fastened it into place with the snap. The Jabberwock tried to ascend and fall twice more, then turned around and flew back toward the tower.

When it returned, it whipped around suddenly, then dove past the centaurs on the cliff. They riddled the beast with arrows, and Mike was surprised to discover that none of them had hit him. However, the arrows made excellent handles to climb with, and he continued up toward the base of the Jabberwock's neck. It did this again, and Mike realized that it was trying to get the centaurs to dislodge him. An arrow just missed Mike's cheek, and he moved his head in time to avoid two more. The arrows helped him reposition himself on the creature's side.

The Jabberwock fell into another freefall, but Mike grabbed on to one of its four bat-like wings. When it flipped over near the ground to glide away, Mike shifted positions, Naia's magic guiding him, and landed neatly on its back. There was a part of its spine that looked very much like a saddle, so he locked his legs around the bony protrusions nearby and held on.

He was hundreds of feet in the air, finally getting a chance to see the entire island all at once. That alone should have terrified him, but he felt as if the sky had been his home for years.

"Time to land," he muttered, then drew his weapon and stabbed the creature in the base of its wing. The blade cut cleanly through, and they immediately lost altitude. The Jabberwock tried to turn, but another stab caused it to change course and head straight for the tower.

The Jabberwock grabbed hold of the upper tower wall then and tumbled over, crashing into the garden below. Mike's whole body was jerked around, but the wings prevented him from being crushed by the stony ground. He kept cutting until the wing fell free, and the Jabberwock let out a hiss, folding up its battered wings and rolling its serpentine body across the garden.

Mike couldn't hold on any longer. He leapt free and grabbed hold of the ladder by the gate, quickly climbing to the ledge to avoid being crushed. Finally realizing it was free of him, the Jabberwock turned to face him and let out an evil hiss. Then gagged. The creature coughed twice, then gagged hard, its jaws opening wide. In the back of its throat, Tink clung tightly to the club, her eyes wide in fear as she

turned the crank that tightened the rope. The arrow was still embedded in the Jabberwock's skull, and everytime the beast tried to swallow her, its whole head jerked sideways when the rope tightened.

Zel galloped across the garden, unseen by the Jabberwock. Rearing up on her hind legs, she gave it a powerful kick to its side, and it coughed hard enough that Tink dislodged completely, swinging underneath its jaw like a green pendulum. Her dress was shredded, and her body was covered in saliva.

It swung its large, reptilian tail at Zel, knocking her through one of the garden beds. The last Mike saw of her was all four hooves in the air, and then the leaves of the bushes that caught her.

The Jabberwock opened its mouth and blew a long jet of steam at Mike. He leapt to the side, sliding the dagger free of its scabbard.

When the Jabberwock swung its head, Tink smacked up against the ladder, letting out a grunt. Climbing slightly higher, she put enough slack in the rope to pass the club through its metal rungs, then turned the club sideways to lock it in place.

The Jabberwock's head was pulled sideways when the rope went taut, and it could no longer turn to follow Mike. It pulled several times, but Tink held onto the rope, keeping tension on the line to prevent the club from popping free. She grumbled under her breath, her body bouncing against the stone wall of the rampart. The Jabberwock tried to twist its body around, but only succeeded in flailing around the garden.

A shadow formed above them all. Mike looked up to see an enormous cobra wrapped around the tower, descending rapidly in a tight spiral. Longer than the Jabberwock, it flung itself forward, the two creatures clashing with fangs and claws.

Ratu wrapped her body around the Jabberwock and squeezed, pinning it in place. Unable to move its limbs, it hissed angrily. Tink pulled the rope tighter, stretching its neck out and holding its head in place.

Mike leapt down onto the beast and it cried out. Holding his dagger up high, he plunged it into the Jabberwock's neck.

"Snicker-snack, mother fucker!" The blade sliced through the thick flesh of the monster, showering everyone in hot mud. Sputtering, he held on tightly while cutting, and eventually the Jabberwock's head fell free of its body, crashing against the stone floor of the garden. It snapped its teeth together, and its body tensed up, thrashing in its death throes. However, as mud flowed freely from it, the head and body deflated like a giant balloon, flooding the garden with hot soil.

It was over.

Sliding down its shriveled body, Mike ran to the ladder and yanked Tink off of the bottom rungs, clutching her tightly to his chest.

"Don't you ever scare me like that again!" His voice was raw with emotion, and he didn't care that he was crying. Tink said nothing, only sobbing in response. Satisfied that she was okay, he went to help Zel.

Ratu released the Jabberwock's corpse, her body shrinking down to a normal size. Her outfit was a wreck, and she had multiple scrapes on her body. She approached the messy remains, scrutinizing the area.



“That was... unexpected.” She sat down on the ground and watched the Jabberwock dissolve into mud. “And more than a little fascinating. This whole beast was constructed of earth and animal essence.” She stuck her hand in the mud and pulled out a glowing stone the size of her fist. “Ah, so that’s how she did it.”

Figuring that Ratu was fine, Mike looked for Zel and found her near the fountain. The bushes had broken her fall, smearing her body in blueberry juice. “Are you okay?”

“Hardly, but I’ll live.” He helped her roll over, and she winced. “I messed up my ankle pretty bad, though.”

“But you’re alive. That’s all that matters.” He gave her a hug and let out a sigh. They were all okay, and that was all that mattered. Sliding free of her embrace, he sat on the ground next to her and then fell onto his back. The whole world seemed so big now, weighing in on him.

“Mike?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” He yawned, his body suddenly heavy. His muscles hurt, and he could no longer hold up his head. “I’m just going to... take a nap...” He closed his eyes, darkness swooping in to claim him.

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A cool breeze blew through the window, making him shiver.

Opening his eyes, he saw a giant crack in the stone ceiling above him. When he sat up, his whole body flooded with cramps, making him gasp in pain. He had been wrapped in bandages, the naga skin tunic completely gone. When he pulled the blankets down, he realized that, other than some bandages, he was naked.

“I was wondering how long you would sleep.” Ratu was holding one of Yuki’s journals and sat on a chaise lounge across from him, but she seemed taller than normal. Mike looked around and realized that the dusty old mattress that had been in Yuki’s room now rested directly on the floor.

“What time is it?” His voice was raspy, his throat raw. A drink of water sounded marvelous.

“Night time. You were out all day, which is probably for the best.” Ratu rose and came to his side with a silver mug. When she offered it, he drank from it greedily. It tasted like mint. “How do you feel?”

“Strange.” When he lifted his arms, they were sore, but he felt an odd tightness through his chest. He rubbed his pecs, wincing at the small wounds that were open there. “I feel tired, but so does my brain. Kind of. When I was younger, I used to do gaming marathons and would feel super burned out after words, but this is different. Everything is a bit foggy.”

“Yes, well, about that.” She knelt in front of him and inspected his face. “I suspect that wrestling with a Jabberwock will do that. Zel was pretty upset with the number of injuries you had.”

“I shouldn’t have been that injured.” He thought back to the flight over the valley. “I don’t even remember getting hurt.”

“Ah, well, a good chunk of that was adrenaline. A good portion of it was self inflicted though.”

He blinked, confused by her statement.

“Something else happened, remember?” Ratu plugged her ears dramatically. “It was loud enough to wake me up, that’s for sure.”

“Oh. Right.” That explained why his throat was sore.

“I have some suspicions which we can confirm later, but I want you to tell me what happened while you were riding that thing.”

It took a few minutes to tell the story. He stopped every few sentences to sip from the silver mug, and told Ratu how his intuition had guided him and kept him from harm. Once finished, she leaned back and smirked.

“Interesting. So you rode on this thing without a care in the world, somehow held on for dear life, and drove it to the ground.”

“When you say it that way, you make it sound impossible.”

“It should have been.” Ratu took Mike’s arm and stretched it out, and he winced. “You pulled most of these muscles. Would you like me to explain how?”

“Sure.” He winced again. “Where is Zel?”

“She’s on the ground floor sleeping. She can’t climb the stairs, her ankle is pretty bad. Tink helped me carry you up here.”

“Where is she?”

Ratu chuckled. “Last I saw her, she was stuffing her face in the kitchen with the rats. They had quite the tale for us as well.” She passed along everything that Tink had seen, and Mike felt the bottom of his stomach drop out when he heard that Yuki had turned the others to stone. Once Ratu was finished, he started to stand up.

“I need to get back,” he said, but Ratu pushed him back onto the bed, her body on top of his.

“Not until tomorrow. The rats need time to open a portal back, and everybody is wiped out. If you are going to face Yuki, you need to be prepared, mentally and physically.” Her arms slid around his torso and she gazed intently into his eyes. “And I have a theory I want to test.”

“I don’t know that now is—” her lips met his, and he felt a tremendous heat radiate from her body into his. A wave of arousal washed over him, and she broke the kiss, sitting up and straddling his waist.

“I think now is exactly the time,” she told him, rubbing her crotch against his. “It will take your mind off of things and could even help your recovery.”

“How?” A groan escaped him, and he let his head fall back.

“That’s something we will find out together.” A mischievous grin crossed her face, a wave of snakeskin rippling across her cheeks and down her neck. She pulled open her kimono to reveal the smooth tops of her breasts. “Do you remember when we spent the night in the ice cave?”

“How could I forget?” They had been freezing to death, and had eventually ended up naked in each other’s arms. *Just another weekday*, he thought to himself with a grin.

“The lightning. I want to see the lightning again.” When she slid out of her robes, they folded up around her legs and then melded into her skin, the flying dragon moving up her thighs and now circling her torso like a magical tattoo. “Show me your magic, Mike Radley.”

“You certainly are forward.” The heat pulsing through him helped his muscles relax, and he slid one hand across Ratu’s breast. The skin beneath it was reptilian, and he marveled again at just how soft it felt against his thumb.

“I don’t have time for men who play games.” She leaned forward again to kiss him, but bit his lip playfully instead. Her breasts pressed against his chest, and the tightness in his chest relaxed a little. “Especially interesting ones like you.”

“I’m not that... yeah, I don’t think I can say it with a straight face anymore.” Something had rolled over in his head, his sense of self just a little bit larger. He wasn’t so sure about who or what he had become, but he was no longer a reclusive web developer. Here, in the arms of a naga, her blazing eyes just inches from his, he felt like the center of the universe.

“I can say without a doubt that you are one of a kind. I have met no human quite like you, and I have met many.” She nibbled on his lower lip and then moved past his cheek, her lips now on his ear.

Her breath was hot against his ear, and he could feel the tip of her tongue split in two along his lobe. One side ran just underneath his ear, tickling his neck, while the other teased the outer ridges of his ear. She whispered softly with each breath, and he felt the heat pulsing through his body shift, targeting the areas where he hurt the most.

“Are you healing me?” he whispered.

“Not quite. Just a little targeted heat therapy.” Ratu had developed a temporary lisp, and the words spoken directly in his ear made him shiver in anticipation. She was grinding on him now, a thin pair of red panties separating her flesh from his. He grabbed her by the hips and pushed up into her, his cock swelling.

She was right. This was taking his mind off of things.

“Summon your magic for me,” she hissed in his ear. “I would feel it run through me again.”

“I’ll do my best.” It was hard to concentrate on controlling it when he was already so aroused. His mind took a step back from his body and gave his magic a gentle prod. It moved sluggishly, slowly creeping through his body.

“Hmm, yes, I can feel it shifting within you.” Scales rippled across her body and she let out a tiny moan. A couple of stray sparks formed on Mike’s chest, but then sank back into his skin.

“I’m sorry, I’m having a bit of trouble.” His cheeks became hot, and he was reminded of all the times he had failed to perform with prior girlfriends. Sure, his cock was hard, but the naga wanted something more of him, and his failure to produce was bringing back bad memories.

“I think you just need a little help.” She licked her way down his neck, pausing to lovingly run her hands along the scars on his side. Her tongue teased the area around his belly, tracing wet circles around where his cock lie.

"I like that," he told her, closing his eyes and relaxing. When her tongue finally found his shaft, it wrapped around the base, squeezing him rhythmically. She wrapped her hand around the base of his balls, massaging his prostate through the skin beneath.

"Let's see if we can build up a charge," she said around her thick tongue, her voice thick.

"Please don't make any more puns," he groaned, shivering when her tongue circled just beneath his thick glans and squeezed. Her tongue acted much like a cockring, coaxing blood into his cock and trapping it there. The pressure building inside of him rode the boundary between pain and pleasure.

Ratu teased him this way for several minutes before sucking him into her mouth. Her tongue swirled all around him, the sensation making him a little dizzy. When he felt like his orgasm was getting close, she clamped down on the base of his cock and held perfectly still.

"You tease." He lifted his head in time to see a flurry of sparks manifest and then disappear. "It seems to be working."

"Fascinating. It's almost like you pulled a magic muscle." Ratu was barely legible, drooling all over his crotch when she spoke.

"Stop talking with your mouth full," he told her.

She laughed, causing a weird ripple effect along his shaft. Shifting her body weight, she took him all the way into her mouth and sucked hard, slowly pulling her mouth upward. He watched in amazement as his cock slowly slid into view, still tightly wrapped in her snake-ish tongue.

The light in the room dimmed, and he tilted his head back to see Tink standing over him, her hands firmly placed on her hips. She had already patched what remained of her dress, and a scowl was fixed to her face just beneath her goggles.

"What husband doing?" she asked, sliding the goggles up above her eyes.

"Um... Ratu has a theory about my magic." He grinned sheepishly.

Tink rolled her eyes dramatically. "Snake face always have theory. Husband needs rest."

"Actually..." Ratu pulled her mouth free with an audible pop, Mike's wet cock slapping against his belly. "If my theory is correct, this will actually help him recover."

"Oh?" Tink cocked her head. "How?"

"I need to get him sufficiently aroused. To see his magic." Ratu picked up Mike's cock and stroked it. "Care to lend a hand?"

"Pssh." Tink's dress was over her head in an instant. "Tink lend more than hand." Straddling his face, she lowered herself, her thick, green labia now over his mouth.

Mike's eyes went wide, and then his vision was obscured by the goblin's backside. Her tail swished over his head and came to a rest by his ear. He opened his mouth and licked the edges of her pussy, causing her to shudder.

"Now, we need him horny, but he can't come yet. Not until we see the sparks," Ratu explained.

"Tink make sparks then." She placed her hands on Mike's chest and pushed herself into his face. Ratu's tongue was back on his cock, and she fellated him as only a naga could, taking him balls deep into

her mouth and sucking him down. He closed his eyes and moaned into Tink, his tongue parting her double folds.

“Mmm. Husband do good work.” Tink said, then patted him on the belly. He felt her hands start massaging his pelvis, right above his dick. Ratu kept moving, and he felt his orgasm building up once more. With so many hands on him, he felt like he was getting close to a massive orgasm when Ratu held still again, applying pressure.

“Make him work harder for it, Tink.” Ratu said, and then somebody slapped his belly. Tink rolled her hips back, allowing him to savor her completely, his lower lip teasing her while his tongue slid inside to push against the first of her inner double clits. Her vagina was narrow enough that it was difficult to push that deep, but she was pushing into his face hard enough to help him.

When his orgasm subsided completely, Ratu began stroking him again. Tink leaned forward to help, her small hands on the top and Ratu’s larger hands on the base and his balls. They occasionally worked in tandem, but then would jerk him at random, disrupting the building pressure within.

A spark jumped from his mouth into Tink, and he heard the goblin yelp.

“Ooh, looks like we’re getting there,” Ratu said, letting go. Her body weight shifted forward, and he felt something else envelop the top of his dick. “Ngh, you’re so big!”

He tried to mumble thanks, but his mouth was simply too full. Another spark left him, firing into Tink. Her hands were still on the base of his shaft while Ratu sank down onto him, and the fire in his belly came to life, hungrily spiraling out along his limbs.

Breathing deeply, he inhaled Tink’s musky scent, his head swimming with the aroma. The pulse in his cock now matched the rhythm of his inner fire, and he clamped his hands down on Tink’s thighs, holding her in place.

The magic within him surged, greedily lapping at the beautiful women above him. Where they were connected, he felt a momentary surge of energy, as if their sensuality fed his own inner flame. He thrust himself into Ratu, eliciting a gasp from the naga, and flicked his tongue along the edge of Tink’s clit.

“Mmm... snake face make sparks...” Tink said between gasps.

“Oh yeah. You, nnggh, have them too, oh!” Ratu’s hips shuddered and she rode Mike hard, her hips slamming into his. “Oh yes, I’m gonna come, I’m gonna come, I’m gonna...OW!”

Tink had leaned forward, and the naga thrashed on his cock.

“You fucking bit me!” Ratu yelled, her hips slowing down.

“Husband have to wait, so snake face wait too.” Tink leaned back. “Tink didn’t bite hard, snake skin too soft.”

“Oh really?” Ratu asked. “You think you’re tough?”

“Goblin much tougher.” Tink lifted off of Mike’s face, allowing him to see Ratu. Her own fangs had descended, and a devilish grin had crossed her face. “Naga think she bite better than Tink?”

“Hey, play nice,” Mike told them, but Tink moved down onto his belly and grabbed Ratu by the hair. She yanked the naga’s head back and kissed her fully on the mouth. Ratu’s hips gyrated while they were lip-locked, and then Tink broke the kiss, biting Ratu’s lower lip.

“Oh, you really are a filthy little goblin aren’t you?” Ratu kissed her way down Tink’s neck, then bit her on the shoulder. Tink grunted, then grabbed a handful of the naga’s breasts.

“Snake girl give good bite,” she muttered, licking along the naga’s areolas. The sight had Mike hard as a rock, and he felt his orgasm building.

“Um, are you two fighting, or...?”

Tink bit Ratu’s nipple, eliciting a hiss from her. Ratu stuck her hand between Tink’s legs and fingered her ferociously, her hand elongating until it looked like a snake’s tail in the shape of a cock.

“Ooh, clever snake.” Tink leaned forward and bit Ratu on the neck, exposing her ass to Mike. With a devilish grin of his own, he grabbed the base of her tail with one hand and began pushing on her asshole with his thumb.

Tink let out a gasp, and Ratu giggled, her legs elongating and wrapping tightly around Mike. He could no longer move his legs, so tightly was he wrapped in her coils, but Ratu now acted as a large counterweight, allowing him to sit up and grab the goblin from behind. He slid one hand over her small breast, playing with her rock hard nipples and pushed forward with his other hand.

“Ahh!” Tink bucked her hips, and Ratu kissed Mike over Tink’s shoulder. He cut his lip on one of her teeth, but didn’t even mind when she squeezed and pulled him as deep inside of her as he could possibly go.

The magic sparks jumped back and forth between the three of them now, eliciting moans and gasps as they were connected by it. A large portion of it entered the naga, who then passed it back to Mike or into Tink with her fingers. Electrical sparks jumped off the goblin onto Mike and Ratu, causing them to flinch away with gasps of excitement.

When Ratu came, she arched her back and spread her hands wide, waves of heat rolling off of her and warming the room substantially. The sparks collected along her arms and face, dancing across her skin. Tink leaned into her, nibbling at the naga’s breasts and grabbing her hips to push her down on Mike’s cock.

“Stupid snake hurry up,” she muttered, then used her fingers to rub at Ratu’s swollen clit. The naga flinched and let out a laugh before moving backward.

“Okay, enough already.” Ratu let out a chuckle and pushed off of his cock, moving backwards. “It’s your turn.”

“About time.” Tink turned to face Mike and grabbed the top of his shaft. “Tink wait too long for—” her eyes rolled up in her head when she sat down, a line of magical current suddenly connecting them. Her passage was extremely tight, squeezing down on his cock with enormous pressure.

“Oh no you don’t, keep going.” Ratu placed her hands on Tink and pushed her down.

Mike let out a groan, his magic now cascading up and down his spine. With every pulse of fire and electricity through his body, he could feel himself growing lighter, his muscles tensing and then relaxing. Tink rode him hard for several minutes, his cock never going farther than two thirds of the way

in. The room was full of her high pitched cries, and the space between them had filled itself with sparks that crept across all three of them.

Panting, Tink let out a cry and tried to jam herself down onto him. Ratu had grabbed the goblin's breasts from behind and was now lasciviously licking her neck, and the pressure was simply too much for him any longer. His magic expanded throughout his body, the sparks causing everyone's hair to stand on end, and then raced down his body towards his groin.

When he shot his load inside of her, he let out a long cry. Sparks crawled onto Tink's skin, making her entire body buck back and forth. She reached over her shoulder and grabbed Ratu's hair, yanking her face forward far enough for their lips to meet, and Ratu's eyes went wide when the magic flooded into her as well.

Tink screamed into Ratu's mouth, and the sparks changed color, racing both into Mike and the naga. He tried to pump himself back into Tink once more, but Tink had bounced off of him completely, leaving his cock exposed.

Ratu mounted him again, lightning and heat flowing along her body as she fought for her next orgasm. Disgruntled, Tink mounted Mike once more, sliding her soaking wet pussy toward his face. He grabbed her ass and pulled her the rest of the way, his tongue eagerly lapping up both of their juices.

Leaning back, Ratu grabbed Tink by the horn and pulled her head down to her crotch. Mike was bent just right that Tink was able to lick at the naga's clit while she swiveled her hips on him. When her orgasm came, it blasted through all three of them, causing the magical sparks to swirl through them like a storm.

Swearing in another language, Ratu's legs melded together and her lower half wrapped around Mike, pinning him in place. He grunted, then gasped for air as he pumped a load into her as well, his stomach tightening up so much that he thought his lower ribs had cracked.

Ratu screamed when Tink shifted and bit into her upper thigh, an orgasm of her own ripping through her. Her vagina tensed up, forcing Mike's tongue and his earlier load out.

"Oh god, I yield! Parlay!" He held up his hands in the universal sign of a time out, but it was no good. Ratu nearly crushed his lower half with her snake body as she fought hard for her third orgasm, finally letting out a cry of relief that dispersed the magic into the air. Tink threw herself off of his torso, clawing her way toward the edge of the bed to escape the effect of his magic.

"Ratu, please!" he begged. Her tail had circled his abdomen and was now moving across his rib cage. When she looked at him, she had a dangerously predatory look to her eye.

"Oh, how exciting." A sly grin crossed her face, and then she saw that her lower half had expanded to take up nearly half the bed. "Looks like I lost control a little bit."

"Yeah..." Mike sighed in relief when she withdrew, savoring the sensation of blood flow to his legs again. Ratu slid off of him, her fingers catching a large gob of his come in one hand.

"This is interesting." She smelled it first, then tasted it with a forked tongue.

"Is something... wrong with my... load?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." She licked it off her fingers, sucking them dry. "There's a tremendous amount of magic inside of it."

“Like, life essence or whatever?” He couldn’t think straight right now.

“That too. You said you were tapped out, but were able to generate quite a bit of energy through the act of coitous. How interesting.” She moved off to the side and snuggled in near his armpit. “If I didn’t know better, I would say that was my magic inside of it.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Why would your magic be in my...” he lost himself in the light in her eyes, and couldn’t help but match her grin. “You know what? Nevermind. I’ll let you explain first and ask questions later.”

“Thank you.” She traced her finger along his ribs. “Your magic is like the tide. It ebbs and flows, and can carry things away and toss them up on the shore. As we shared each other’s bodies, your magic mixed with mine.”

“I guess that makes sense. What about Tink?” He looked over to see that she was out cold on her belly.

“She doesn’t have magic, not like you or I do. How do you feel?”

“Tired.”

“Still sore?”

“Um...” he tested his free arm. “Not as bad, actually.”

“In the same way I or others can draw magic from your essence, you have been drawing magic from us. But I think it goes beyond that. I’ve been thinking about what happened during your fight with the Jabberwock. You manifested abilities that you shouldn’t have access to, very specific ones.”

He nodded, knowing exactly what she was talking about.

“Tell me, have you had sex with the banshee before?”

“A few times.”

“Interesting. These sparks of yours. Did you use them then?”

“Yeah, but they weren’t mine, they were Cecilia’s. Naia thinks they rubbed off on me somehow.”

“Oh. OH!” Ratu sat up, staring off into the distance. “When you first had sex with Cecilia, I imagine there were difficulties? Banshees weren’t built for breeding, after all.”

“Yeah, it was weird. The sparks started crawling all over me and her clothes wouldn’t let me remove them.” He thought back to their first encounter. “But does that matter?”

“Magic is a mysterious power, but the biggest rule of magic I would share with any apprentice is that magic relies heavily on intent and conveying that intent through actions. Do you ever wonder why gods used to demand sacrifices and such? It’s not like tossing a virgin in a volcano suddenly suffused them with power. Rather, the idea that their followers would be willing to give one of their own to the gods helped complete the pact, or activate latent magic. That raw power needs a focus, somewhere to go, and any sort of ritual helps direct that power.”

“I don’t understand. What are you trying to say?”

Ratu let out a small laugh. “I won’t pretend to fully understand the ramifications of the soul swap that Naia does with you. However, I suspect that when you attempted to couple with Cecilia, your



whole body was suffused with ancient fae magic. All of that energy without a focus, like a bomb without its trigger. What happened immediately afterward?”

“Uh...” he thought back a bit to his first week in the house. “She disappeared, and I went to the bathroom to... Naia helped me finish.” His cheeks burned at the admission, remembering how the magic had swept back and forth between them when he came. “It created a weird feedback loop.”

“Uh huh. You and Naia are resonant souls because you each already have a piece of each other entwined. She uses sensuality to power her spells, and the only spell you had really been subjected to was the soul exchange. When you two had sex, that connection resonated and the magic flowed back and forth, taking shape as something similar. My educated guess is that you have been inadvertently casting the same spell she did through sexual contact, exchanging bits and pieces of your soul. The effect with Cecilia would be the strongest, primarily because she is the source of the magic.”

“That’s how I was able to scream?”

“A piece of her lives within you. As a spirit being, she is her magic. I don’t expect you to be ushering the dead off to the other side, but you could certainly generate her unique vocalization at a cost. That also means that she carries a small piece of you inside.” Ratu let out a small chuckle. “And I guess the same could be said about myself. In a sense, spiritually, I am now part human, and you are part naga.”

“Is that... okay?” He thought of the red lock of Cecilia’s hair where it had once been white, or the moment in the cave when she had appeared human. Had he appeared as a banshee to her, if she had been looking? Being nothing but a spirit, the exchange had been literal in her case.

“That’s a great question. I don’t know. Ordinarily, magic involving someone’s soul is a tricky business. If I take a piece of it, you lose a piece of who you are. Your memories and experiences won’t change, but it will almost be like that part of you doesn’t work right anymore. If I took a hand from you, you could still use your arm. But what if I took the ability to use your shoulder? Imagine what it would be like being unable to lift or rotate your arm. A piece of a soul is a valuable thing, and removing it would have dire consequences. If I simply took it, I could then fill the void with what I wanted, like magic. Remember the necromancer? He would remove the right pieces and fill the gaps with his magic, allowing him to control most of his creations with little effort.” She flipped her hair back and showed him a patch of snake skin. “But imagine that I took a piece and replaced it with a piece of myself, an equivalent exchange. Functionally, nothing has changed, but just like this skin, I have added a bit of myself. Under the right circumstance, it’s noticeable, but now it belongs to you and you are still whole.”

Mike stared in wonder. All those times he had had sex with the others and used his magic, he had actually been making tiny swaps with them. “I should probably tell the others. They should know that this has been happening.”

“Maybe. That’s up to you. When one of you dies, the exchange undoes itself, so it isn’t permanent, per se.” She teased the edge of his limp cock with a fingernail. “But now I wonder what part of me swapped with you?”

“Like how? Can I do magic like you?”

“I doubt it. Once you have a magic of your own, your body wouldn’t just magically absorb another type. You’re like a sponge in that regard, already full of water. And because it’s an exchange in

such a small amount, the changes wouldn't be anything drastic. A soul is many things, and power does not make the man." She playfully ruffled his hair. "I don't remember this being so thick."

"I see." He ran his fingers through his hair. It had been longer and thicker for some time now, and now he wondered who he inherited that from. "When I was on the Jabberwock, it felt exciting to fly through the sky. I imagine I should have gotten scared, but it felt like a part of me."

"The gargoyle then. Her love of flying is now a part of you."

"But she still loves flying, right?"

"I imagine so, but now she probably has a new interest, or trait just waiting to be discovered." A sly grin crossed her face. "You'll tell me if you grow scales, yes?"

He let out a laugh. "I'm sure everyone will know by then."

Tink rolled over in bed and gave him a solid punch in the thigh, her mouth open wide in a yawn. "Husband talk too much. Tink tired, big fight tomorrow."

He smiled at the little goblin, running his fingers through her hair and caressing her horns. "You're right. Let's try and get some sleep." He laid his head down on the pillow and felt Ratu snuggle up on his free side, her body shifting against his. She radiated heat like an electric blanket, and he closed his eyes, waiting for dreams to take him.

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He couldn't sleep, so had snuck out of bed to stand outside.

The cool night air drifted across his bare chest, and he stared up into the dark sky above. Other than the soft glow of the torches in his room, there was no other illumination. The centaurs had fled after the Jabberwock had attacked, even the stubborn Orion bailing on a tower with an angry monster inside. Mike guessed that the centaur found very little reason to stick around and argue with the victor of such a fight.

The stars above were different from any he could remember, and an entire galaxy ran across the sky, colorful smears that reminded him of the Hubble Deep Field.. He wondered if Earth was on the other side of it, or if he was looking at a parallel universe that could only be seen from inside the wardrobe. He was both close to home, yet impossibly far away.

The house was full of secrets, but so too were the places it had linked to. His programmer brain was busy trying to make sense of it all, to tie the threads together, but the house was determined to keep its secrets.

Turning to look back into the bedroom, he smiled at the sight of Ratu and Tink crashed on the bed together. Tink had grabbed Ratu's tail and was snuggling it like a giant body pillow. Walking back inside, he filled the silver mug from a pitcher of water that Ratu had left by the chaise. A cool breeze blew through the room because of the large hole in the wall. Curious, he walked over to explore it.

The hidden room had little furniture, but it did have a small alcove tucked away in the corner. A narrow set of stairs wound upward, and he figured it wouldn't hurt to check it out. Ducking beneath the low ceiling, he marched upward, stopping every so often to look out the tiny windows that had been carved into the exterior wall. The valley below was dark, though he could occasionally see the soft glow of fires at the centaur camp in the distance.

He placed a hand on the windowsill and leaned against it, gazing down into the valley. What sort of life did the centaurs lead in such a place, constantly worried about attacks from without and within? They were xenophobic for certain, but was it justified? He could only imagine the persecution they had faced in fleeing their homeland to end up here. That sort of history didn't tend to breed compassion for strangers.

He supposed when he left this place, he could simply leave them behind, but he didn't like the idea of leaving things the way they were. If they had suffered at the hands of Yuki or Emily, then perhaps it was time to break the cycle, and find a way to make peace. Of course, he should probably send Beth to broker a deal, it wasn't like that was his strong suit.

Beth. The lawyer was easily one of the most powerful tools in his arsenal, a brilliant woman with a sharp mind who seemed to make friends faster than he ever could. He had felt guilty for a bit about her getting sucked into this whole mess, but she seemed to genuinely enjoy her time living with him.

When he arrived at the top of the tower, he came to a stop. He was apparently near the top, and starlight came in through the decorative skylights overhead. However, what had caught his attention was the stone table in the center of the room. It was just large enough for two people to sit at comfortably, and on it was a game board.

"Am I dreaming?" he asked aloud, expecting a woman's voice, but it was his own

The room he stood in now looked like one he had seen in one of his visions, and he was half convinced he was asleep somehow. Walking across the cool floor, he saw that a few game pieces had been set out on the board. When he picked them up this time, they didn't blur out or look anything like anyone he knew. Instead, they looked melted, like sticks of half sculpted wax.

Frowning, he searched the room, checking the smooth walls for any other clues. In the back of the room, he found a small box set in the wall, its door partially open. Using the flashlight on his phone, he opened it and looked inside.

There was another game piece and a piece of metal. When he pulled it out, he realized he was holding half of a key.

*Caretaker.*

The voice in his mind sent a chill up his spine, and he spun about. Behind him, along the walls, a shadow crept. The figure had no distinguishing marks, and it held up its arms to show that it wasn't armed.

*Do not fear me, Caretaker. I shall not harm you.*

"...Thanks?" He pocketed the key fragment. "Who are you?"

*I was once like you, and I cared for this place.* The shadow moved against the wall toward the window. *I witnessed many wonderful things from this, my home.*

"So you were a Caretaker once? For this place? Do you have a name?" Mike wanted to run, but the shadow was between him and the entrance. It didn't seem hostile, but it gave him a bad feeling, almost like he was going to be sick.

*I no longer remember.* The shadow held still, rippling against the wall. *I have come to warn you.*

“Of what?” The moment the words left his lips, his mind filled with a vivid image of his home burning down, of his family trying to flee but getting trapped. He could smell the smoke in the air and feel the heat of the blaze on his face, and when the vision released him, he fell against the back wall in terror.

“What the fuck was that?” He asked, choking on phantom fumes.

*A possible future. There are those who seek the power within, like they did from my home. I died here, fighting powerful enemies, and I would see you succeed where I have failed. The shadow rippled across the room, moving closer to Mike. Let me help you.*

“Help me how?” Mike moved away from the wall and looked at the figurines on the table. On closer inspection, he saw that the pieces had been burned into ash.

*I can guide you on your quest for power. Power to protect those you love.*

“I’m not actually on a quest or anything. I just want to get home.”

The shadow paused, deep in thought. *You have set foot on the path already and have walked further than most.*

“I’m not entirely convinced that you have the right guy.” Now that the shadow was closer to him, he was able to back toward the stairs.

*Let me share with you my knowledge. The room filled with whispers, so many voices all at once that filled the air. Let me guide your journey.*

“And what do you get out of it? What’s the cost?”

*I just want a piece. The shadow took a step toward him. Your soul burns so brightly. A small piece would let me continue my bleak existence for many years to come. It is only fair that you help me persist that I may help you succeed. You will hardly know it is gone.*

“A piece of my soul?” He frowned, thinking about what Ratu had told him early. “Like a soul swap?”

*No. You would willingly give me a piece of my choosing. In exchange, I would give you the next step. A doorway appeared in the stone wall. Behind it was a long tunnel that vanished into an inky void. Along this path lies a power that is rightfully yours. I could guide you from afar, speaking to you through...*

“Nope.” He took a step back, his heel touching the top of the stairs. “Not even an option. If you take a piece of my soul, everything gets fucked up inside my head and then you become the pilot. I already know this trick, have since I was a kid.” His mother’s voice echoed briefly in his head, but he shrugged it away. He was a different person now, and no longer a scared little kid. “The last thing I need is another voice trying to manipulate me.”

The whispers became loud and angry, spitting like a pot of boiling water all around him.

*Without me, your world will burn Mike Radley! You will watch your beloved....*

Mike was already halfway down the stairs, hesitant to look back. What sort of being had he just encountered? And why did it desire a piece of his soul so strongly? Finally stepping out into the room at the bottom, he turned around to make certain that the shadow hadn’t followed.

The staircase was gone, the wall smooth as if the opening hadn't existed. Wondering if it was just a dream, he stuck his hand in his pocket and closed it around the metal key fragment he had retrieved. Pulling it out, he inspected it in the gentle glow of the torches around him, and then stuck it back in his pocket.

Not a dream after all. He walked back into the bedroom and woke Ratu, then explained quietly what had happened. A troubled look crossed her face, and she got out of bed, looking at where the staircase had been. She spent a few minutes lying down magical wards, and then proclaimed the room safe as long as Mike didn't wander into any more mystery hallways.

He crawled back into bed, this time lying between Ratu and Tink, thinking about the vision the shadow had showed him. Had it been a vision of the future? Would it happen if he didn't take the shadow's offer, or was it just dicking with him?

Tink shifted and bit down on his arm, and Ratu's legs wrapped around his thigh. He stifled a laugh and held them close, letting the shadow's offer fade away. Maybe the world would come burning down around his ears one day, but, until then, there were more important things to hold onto.

Trying to drift away, he couldn't help but hear the shadow's words once more, as if whispered directly in his ears.

*Your world will burn, Mike Radley.*