

Nine of Wands

Mike wasn't sure what he expected to see once inside the tower, but it certainly wasn't this.

What he had thought was the entrance to the tower was in fact an outer wall. A large courtyard full of flowers and creeper vines would have been impressive enough, but the sheer number of butterflies, bees, and even birds had him staring in awe. An entire ecosystem had been formed inside these walls, complete with a small waterfall that flowed out of the cliff itself and fed into an irrigation canal. The water eventually filled a fountain in the middle of the yard that was an exact replica of Naia's fountain back home.

At the back of the courtyard, rising ominously into the sky, was the actual entrance to the tower. The top of it was higher than the nearby peak that the tower seemed to grow from.

"This place is surprisingly peaceful." Zel approached one of the garden beds to inspect it. "Hey, most of these are vegetables!"

"I found some strawberries over here." Ratu plucked a few of them and tossed them in her mouth. "Mmm, they're good."

Salivating, Mike approached the bushes and the three of them picked the fruit. Daisy seemed content to watch the group, occasionally moving away from a bee or butterfly determined to interact with her. In the distance, they could hear the trumpeting of horns.

"Should we worry about that?" Mike asked.

"Nah. The only way the centaurs have ever gotten in was if the drawbridge was down." Zel said. "Well, at least that I know of."

"Is that true?" he asked Daisy. The fairy nodded and made some hand signs.

"I honestly don't understand you."

"But I might." Ratu licked the juices of a blackberry off of her finger and held her hand up with the same finger outstretched. "Come here."

Daisy seemed nervous, but with a glance at Mike, landed on the naga's finger.

"When you sign something, I want you to visualize the word. Try to keep it simple though." Ratu closed her eyes and made a Y with the thumb and pinky of

her free hand. She moved Daisy close to her forehead, placing her thumb on her own forehead and her pinky on Daisy's.

Daisy made a couple of signs and Ratu's face scrunched up.

"Yuki... gone," Ratu said. "Tower... safe from... outsiders."

"Are you reading her mind?" Zel asked.

"Kind of. Now be quiet, unless you have a question for her. Keep them simple, I can only pick up bits of it, fairies think differently than mortals do."

"Is there a way to get home?" Mike asked.

"Only... portal. Guarded by... Jabberwock." Ratu winced between words, her brow furrowed in concentration.

"What the fuck is a... oh shit." The word came to him from out of a memory of a movie he had seen. "Are we in Wonderland?"

"Not... Wonderland. Yuki... lonely and... scared. Make Jabberwock... for protection."

"From who?"

"Emily... ah shit." Ratu moved the fairy away from her face and wiped blood away from her nose. "Yeah, I'm done doing that. It was a stupid idea anyway. Reading a fairy's mind is like trying to read a newspaper using a strobe light. Damn." She found a stone bench to sit on and lay down on her back. "Try not to bother me for a bit, my head is pounding."

"She was afraid of Emily." He held his finger out for Daisy and she landed on it. "Did she have a good reason to be afraid of her?"

Daisy nodded and pointed to the tower door.

"Is the tower dangerous?"

Daisy thought about the question for several seconds. She pointed toward the top of the tower and shook her head. She then pointed toward the door and pantomimed walking in with her feet and then nodded.

"So parts of the tower are dangerous. Can you keep me away from those parts?"

Daisy nodded and fluttered away toward the entry of the tower. She left a glittering trail in the air behind her.

“Is that wise?” Zel asked. “Going in by yourself?”

“You’re welcome to come with me.”

“Yeah, no thanks. I spent my childhood being terrified of the place.”

“Ratu?”

“Ugh, don’t talk to me.” The naga had covered her eyes. “If you want to go now, you’ll have to go without me. Just let me take a nap.” She folded in on herself and turned into a snake. Coiling up on the bench, she closed her eyes.

He frowned. It was going to be dark soon and he didn’t like the idea of sleeping outside, no matter how tame the courtyard garden seemed. The glittering trail hovered in the air, so he followed it, walking up to the rounded walls of the tower.

Staring up its walls, he felt a brief moment of vertigo. It was several stories high and had a few windows and ledges. To his right, he could hear the waterfall flowing out of the cliff. He turned to look at it. It was literally a hole carved into the stone. He wondered if there was a lake somewhere nearby, or if Yuki had put in an aqueduct system. Stepping inside the tower, he slowed his movements to a crawl, waiting for a trap to spring.

Torches on the wall lit up at his entry, and the glittering trail hooked a hard left just inside the entrance. Looking at the ground, he saw faint lines in the dirt around the block in front of him.

“It’s a trap,” he muttered, stepping around it and following the trail. When he waved his hand through it, the trail scattered like dust, so he walked just to the left to leave it intact. A flight of stairs ascended the circular wall, and Daisy was waiting for him at the bottom. She pointed at a lever, so he shrugged and gave it a pull.

A mechanism clicked somewhere, and Daisy flew over to the trapped stone and landed on it repeatedly.

“It’s safe now?” he asked.

She nodded, then took off toward him and up the stairs, the glittering trail forming behind her once more. The tower was rather large, but mostly empty.

Any furnishings had long ago been stripped away, and nearly every floor had a set of traps that he could easily disable with a lever or a touch of a button.

Nearing the top of the tower, they entered a room with a pair of black, double doors at the other end and another flight of stairs. Daisy pointed at the door several times and shook her head no.

“Is that the dangerous part?” he asked. Happy to be understood, she nodded and flew up the stairs. He followed her until the wall suddenly opened up to reveal a large balcony with a breathtaking view of the valley below. He stepped away from Daisy’s trail and approached the railing. Up here, flower boxes had been filled with roses, violets, and plenty of other flowers he couldn’t identify. He put his hands on the railing and looked down.

He could just barely see the edge of the centaur settlement. There appeared to be no activity from them down below, but he could see most of the trail that had lead them here. A small cluster of centaurs moved along it carrying weapons, but that was all that he could see. He guessed they were maybe an hour out from the tower, if that. Straight down was a sheer drop, and to the left, he could see part of the courtyard. Zel was wandering around, collecting food in a small pile. He had passed through a kitchen on the way up, and wondered if she could bake them something.

To the right was another courtyard, but this one was barren of life. Instead, dozens of statues had been shoved up against the walls, packed in like sardines. They reminded him of the terracotta warriors from china, except they seemed to be far more lifelike. Plus all of them were centaurs, which was kind of weird.

Daisy tugged at his shirt collar, so he went back to following her. They walked into a large bedroom with a four poster bed and a small library against the wall. A chaise lounge near another balcony had an old book on it.

“Is this Yuki’s room?” He walked to the balcony and looked out. The view from here was even better, allowing him to see the full length of the valley below. Centaur trails were easy to spot between the trees, and he could watch the sun disappear behind the thin sliver of ocean in the distance. He could just barely make out the sparkle of sunlight on the water, then looked away, blinking spots out of his eye.

Looking around the room, he was grateful that the whole tower had magical torches in the wall that kept the place well lit. An old rug on the floor looked like it had been around to witness the death of Christ, it had been worn

down in places to the threads beneath. To its credit, the room was certainly clean, not that there was much to get dirty.

Daisy got his attention and flew over to the bookshelf, pointing at something. He ignored her, instead picking up the book on the table.

It was an old, illustrated copy of *Alice in Wonderland*. The pages were wilted, many of them dog eared. Notes had been written all along the margins in what looked to be Japanese.

“Interesting.” He set the book down and walked over to where Daisy was pointing. The shelf had a few books on it, but also a chalkboard. When he pulled this out, Daisy blew a handful of glitter onto it.

“Hi,” it displayed in glittery, yellow letters. He looked at her and she gave a small wave.

“We can use this to communicate, good idea!” He tucked the slate under an arm and pulled out the books. They were leatherbound journals, and while a few of them were empty, many of them had been written in. These were done in another language as well.

“Are there any other traps I need to worry about?” he asked.

Daisy shook her head yes, and then blew a kiss at the chalkboard. “I can show you.”

“Let’s bring the others inside and see what we can make of these.” He took the books with him and went downstairs. Daisy showed him a few more traps to turn off on the way, and he met Zel out front. She held a small armful of produce.

“Is there a kitchen in there? I can make us a stew.” Zel held up a large squash. “I’m starving.”

Mike’s stomach growled in response. “There sure is. Daisy, can you show her?” The fairy nodded enthusiastically and flew back into the tower, leaving a glitter trail behind her. “There’s a lot of stairs, is that gonna be a problem?”

She shrugged. “Only if they’re narrow, or made of wood.”

“Nope. Wide stone all the way up.”

“I figured. This tower is plenty large enough, wouldn’t think whoever built it would skimp on materials.” She trotted in through the doors and disappeared.

Ratu was still lying on her bench. He sat down on the ground next to her. "Feeling better?"

"A bit." She opened her eyes. "Did I hear something about food?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Night's coming, but the tower is safe enough. It looks like some centaurs are headed our way. Do you think they can get in?"

"Doubt it, but let's check." Sitting up, she rubbed her temples, then looked at his burden. "What do you have there?"

"You tell me." He handed over the books he had grabbed. "Spells or something?"

Ratu sniffed the cover of one and then opened it. "Nope. It appears to be a journal."

"You can read it?"

"Most of it. It's written in Japanese." Flipping through the pages, Ratu revealed a few drawings scattered throughout, then set the book down on the bench. "I'll take a look at those after we check the battlements."

"Battlements?"

"Those." She pointed at the walkways near the top of the large wall. "I can promise we're not leaving tonight. I'm exhausted, it's getting dark, and those centaurs are certainly upset with you."

He shrugged. "They were being dicks. Act like a dick, you get fucked." His treatment at their hands had been no different than some of the assholes he had grown up with. It had been bad enough when his mom was still alive, but after the accident had somehow been worse. Orion in particular reminded him of the alpha jock at every school he had bounced around, always going out of their way to ensure the new kid knew his place. He could pretend to understand the centaur culture all he liked, but the fact that they hadn't even wanted to hear him out left him with zero sympathy for their feelings.

"Yeah, well they certainly got fucked. Again and again." Ratu grinned, popping another strawberry in her mouth. "Did you know that was going to happen?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "No idea. I gave it to Zel when they had captured us, but when she didn't use it, I wondered if it was some type of poison

or something. As someone who has experienced Mandragora pollen firsthand, I can assure you that many of them will be more than a little sore in the morning.”

They both stood and approached the thick ladder that went up the wall. He climbed up first, walking cautiously toward the edge and marveling at the view. The tower had been built into the side of the mountain, but from here, he could see how the bottom of it sloped away into nothingness revealing the vast expanse below. Large holes had been cut in the stone, deep holes that looked like something had been mounted there.

“Ballistae.” Ratu said, reading his mind. “Think like a giant crossbow.”

“Strange.” The holes seemed to go around the perimeter of the tower. “Why would you need to fire giant bolts off a steep drop? Is someone attacking from the sky?”

“That’s a great question. An even better one is this; why is the tower made of a different stone than the mountain?”

Mike surveyed the greyish cobblestone beneath their feet, his eyes following them until they merged with the cold granite of the cliff. The colors were indeed mismatched. “It looks like someone shoved this tower into the mountain.”

“Or teleported it here.” Ratu winked. “The centaurs were told to guard this place, so it’s likely this whole world was created to defend this tower from intrusion. I can sense magic inside, so it wouldn’t surprise me if something important was stored here at some point.”

“Do you think the Architect built this place?”

She shrugged. “No idea. Why is this world in your wardrobe in the first place? Why not put it deep in the greenhouse, several days journey out? Very little makes sense in the Radley house, you know.”

“Ha ha.” He said, rolling his eyes. “Maybe the tower holds the user manual for the house. I certainly wouldn’t mind some Ikea instructions for how to activate all of its hidden passageways.”

“What’s an Ikea?” She looked over his shoulder. “Never mind that. Our friends have arrived.”

A large cloud of dust rolled off of the mountain, and the sound of a nearby horn startled him. Dark figures emerged from the cloud, carrying unlit torches in

their hand. The centaur toward the front had a dark look on his face, and Mike immediately recognized Zel's betrothed. Orion carried a spear with a flag attached to it. When he spiked it into the dirt, the flag caught the wind and revealed an image similar to a coat of arms. This one had the outline of a centaur carrying a bow with falcons circling him.

"You forfeited the trial!" Orion shouted. "Lower your bridge and return what is rightfully mine, and then face me like a man!" Mike noticed that Orion now wore a thick bracelet on his wrist and wondered if that was from the Trial of Endurance. If so, he must have come straight up from the ocean and assembled a small war party. The centaurs behind him were now planting torches in rocky crevices and setting up small tents.

"Are they planning to camp here?"

"Looks like it." Ratu summoned a ball of fire. "Should I roast them?"

"Not yet." They watched the centaurs assemble their camp. There were about five tents along the trail, and nearly twenty centaurs wandering among them. He wondered if there were even more hidden away around the corner. He looked up at the mountain, then back at the trail. "You don't suppose they could push boulders onto us or something?"

"Doubt it. That looks like a sheer climb to get up there, and it would take a hell of a push to get a boulder to cross the distance."

"Hey! I'm talking to you!" Orion picked up a spear and lobbed it at them. Mike and Ratu stepped away from each other, the spear shooting between them and landing in the garden below.

"That'll be enough of that." Ratu knelt down and pulled a piece of chalk from her pockets. Another spear flew over the battlements before a glimmering aura radiated up from the stone. The next spear bounced off the barrier and fell down the cliff.

"How long will that hold?"

"Until morning. Simple shield spell that will keep them from bombarding us with arrows while we walk around in the garden." Ratu paced the battlements and drew a couple more, spacing them apart. "These overlap a bit, which will help us if they get smart enough to break one of them."

"How could they break one?"

“Coordinated fire. Either a bunch of them firing at the same spot one after the other, or everyone firing on a small area at the same time.” Another arrow broke on impact a few feet above them. “However, this does present us with a new problem.”

“I’m guessing it involves getting to the portal with an angry centaur mob at our door?” From below, Orion was shouting from the edge of the cliff trail for Mike’s attention. He briefly wondered if he could quickly lower the bridge and crush the feisty centaur beneath it.

She nodded. “If I had the time and materials, I could probably fly us there, but that nasty monster of hers is still circling that area. I can fight or fly, not both.” Ratu grabbed the top of the ladder and descended, a cool breeze grabbing the sides of her kimono and exposing her legs.

“If we can get there, could you fight that thing? The Jabberwock?” He followed her down, wincing at the sound of a pair of arrows breaking on the barrier. From down here, he could just barely hear Orion’s voice over the wall.

“Maybe. But I think it might be time to face a hard truth.” Ratu swept her hair out of her eyes. “I don’t think we’re going to make it back in time.”

He shook his head. “I refuse to believe that. There’s always a way. Nothing’s impossible.”

“Your optimism aside, I can’t think of any way to get to the portal by tomorrow morning. Can you?”

“I...” A sick feeling had formed in his gut. How long could the others hold out against the Society? “Surely there’s got to be a way. I refuse to believe it can’t be done.”

“That’s why it’s called a hard truth. Sometime tomorrow, the dial will reset, and the Society will come. However...” a grim smile broke across Ratu’s face. “I also fail to believe that the fight for them will be easy with an angry kitsune guarding the house.”

“Do you think she stands a chance against them?”

“Possibly. Right now, our biggest worry is going to be how to get home.” Ratu picked up the journals.

“We just need to get back to the portal.”

“You’ve forgotten something important. You left the key in the wardrobe.”

His face fell, and the world spun around him. Putting a hand on Ratu for support, he knelt down, waiting for the dizziness to pass. He had been so focused on getting back up the mountain that he never once considered the idea that Yuki had locked them in.

“Hey. Don’t worry about it.” Ratu rubbed his lower back. “Let’s focus on the things we can do. Like get something to eat?”

Mike swallowed the giant lump that had formed in his throat and stood up, blinking away the tears that had already formed in his eyes. Everyone was counting on him, and the weight was suddenly crushing. Closing his eyes, he took several breaths. Ratu was right. Freaking out now wasn’t going to help him get home any faster. A good meal might help him focus better anyway.

She took his hand and led him inside.

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Yuki filled the bathtub to the brim with hot water, trying her best to ignore Naia’s absence. Stripping off her robes, her tails swished in the hot, humid air of the bathroom as she stepped over the tub wall and into the water, the warmth rapidly climbing her legs.

When the tub overflowed, she sighed, remembering that there wasn’t a nymph to prevent a mess from being made. She opened the drain and snapped her fingers, causing the water on the floor to flow in reverse until it was back in the tub. Satisfied she wouldn’t flood the bathroom, she stoppered the tub once more and laid back.

The tears came slowly at first but then flowed freely once the full weight of her reality sunk in on her. How had things gotten out of control so fast? Sure, she had expected some resistance to her taking ownership of the home, but she definitely hadn’t expected everybody to forget about her. The fight with Abella had been exhausting in more ways than one, and seeing the look of horror on Sofia’s face as she turned to stone had twisted a knife in Yuki’s heart.

Tink had fled into the Labyrinth with others she hadn’t recognized. Determined not to be ambushed later, she had frozen the reflecting pool so that none of them could take a shortcut back. She would deal with them eventually, but for now, she just couldn’t handle it anymore. Years of pent up anger had taken their toll, and all she wanted was a nice, hot bath.

Her tails floated along the surface, so she took several minutes to wash them clean with soap and shampoo. Most of her bathing had been restricted to the rivers of her prison, though she had, on occasion, made herself an actual bath. However, a proper shampoo was far superior to stealing toiletries from the centaurs. She had done her best to avoid them for many years, but their path's eventually crossed. How many times had a group of warriors clustered near her tower, demanding entry? She had stoned them all, moving their statues out back. She had debated tossing them from the tower to shatter on the rocks below, but Daisy had convinced her that keeping them in storage could have certain benefits as well.

After a good scrub and rinse, she drained the tub a bit to get rid of the dirt and filled it up again. Then she grabbed a nearby towel and soaked it in hot water. She got it nice and wet and placed it over her face, letting the heat open her pores.

The water streaming down her face mixed with more tears, and a sob escaped her lips. This was not the triumphant return she had expected, and she couldn't help but wonder if she was going about everything all wrong. The urge to release Naia was tempting, but her old confidante would likely not be in the mood to speak with her unless she brought back Mike first.

She simply couldn't. After what had happened with Emily, there was no way she could trust another human being with the house.

The warmth of the tub soaked into her core, and she let out a sigh.

"Feels nice, doesn't it?" Naia was scrubbing Yuki's back, her fingers massaging the muscles beneath.

"Your hands are magical," a much younger Yuki replied. Intense warmth radiated out from where Naia touched her, relieving aches and pains. Yuki and Emily had just returned from a quick trip to Europe that had failed miserably and resulted in a fight with a bridge troll. They had gotten banged up a little, but had eventually escaped to the safety of the forest. "Is that nymph magic or water magic?"

"It's water magic. I can teach you sometime." Naia's thumbs dug into some tight muscles around Yuki's left shoulder blade. "You can learn a lot about a person by how their muscles are wound up?"

"Oh really?"

“It’s true. For instance, you have a sore spot down here,” Naia’s hand moved below Yuki’s ribs, “that’s from an impact.”

“Yeah. I got kicked.” It had hurt like a bitch, too.

“Tightness in your legs is from running. Most of these are easy. However, I want to talk about this.” Naia’s thumb found a muscle by Yuki’s neck that twinged once it was touched. “This is from carrying the weight of a secret.”

Yuki felt a chill go down her spine. “A... a secret?”

“You know what I’m talking about, don’t play dumb.” Naia leaned forward and gave her a hug. “I see how you look at her.”

She blushed. “Is it that obvious?”

Naia laughed. “Of course it is. You’re different when you’re around her.”

“How so?”

“It’s hard to describe in words, but you practically glow when she talks to you, hanging on nearly every word. That’s not a bad thing, you know.”

Yuki let out a long sigh. It was true, Emily occupied most of her waking thoughts now, which didn’t make much sense. She had never given a human more than a second thought, unless they had wronged her and she wanted revenge. “About that. My feelings for her... are they because of her magic?”

“No. You’ve lived here for a few years now, and if it was magic, it would wear off when she wasn’t around. That, and it does take a deliberate effort on my part to make someone think they love me, and Emily wouldn’t do that.” Naia slid her arms around Yuki’s waist and gave her a tight hug. “Think of it this way. Why do you like her so much?”

“I...” How could such complicated, yet delicate emotions be put into words? “It’s how she sees me. Growing up in Japan, it was always about survival for me. If people weren’t suspicious, they were enamored, there was no in between. Being what I am, it was hard to find anybody willing to see me for who I am, and when I’m with Emily, she treats me like everybody else here. Maybe it’s stupid to like someone because they don’t give you special treatment, but there it is. Do you know how many legends about kitsune revolve around granting wishes, immortality, or even becoming a god? It’s why I fled to China in the first place. When she looks at me, it’s just me, and that’s what makes me feel special.”

“Hmm. I would argue that she doesn’t treat you like everyone else.” Naia placed a tiny kiss on the top of Yuki’s head. “Emily spends way more time with you than she does with anybody else. Surely you’ve noticed?”

“That’s because she needs my help when she goes exploring. My magic can protect her.”

“Sure, when you leave the house. But what about inside the house? She could have brought anyone else down into the Labyrinth you two found, yet you often go down there for hours at a time, just searching through it. I would even argue Abella would be a better choice, or even Tink.”

“I can sense the Labyrinth’s traps, and my magic can protect us when we trigger them.”

Naia laughed. “While that may be true, she can sense danger far better than you can. Almost any of us could go down with her and still be perfectly safe. I guess what I’m trying to say is—”

“Don’t say it.” Emily walked into the bathroom, holding a book in her hand. Yuki’s cheeks burned and Naia dissolved into the water, just her head floating on the surface. “If she is going to hear it from anyone, I would prefer she hear it from me.”

“As you wish.” Naia vanished beneath the water, leaving a small tide pool behind that eventually burst.

“May I join you?” Emily asked, setting the book down on the bathroom counter.

“I... I guess.” Yuki looked away while Emily undressed. They had seen each other naked plenty of times, but now she was too embarrassed to look. Emily eased into the bath across from Yuki, letting out a moan of pleasure when the warm water swirled around her waist.

“I wasn’t trying to snoop, by the way. I found that book in the Library and thought you might like it, but heard you talking about me.” She chuckled, her eyes on the water. “I confess, it was something of a relief to hear some of the things you said. Before I say anything else, I just want you to know that... I like you. A lot.”

Yuki swallowed the lump in her throat. “You do?”

“Yeah, I do. Some years before you moved in, we had an... incident here in the house. As much as I love everybody who lives here, I was feeling lonely and thought I had met a kindred spirit. I met him the year I traveled abroad to plant the trees for the portals, and brought him back here with me to meet the others. It was great at first, but things changed. Turns out the guy was no good for me, and he put everyone in danger.”

Emily let out a sigh, tracing her finger across the surface of the water. “After what he did, I was afraid to leave the house, or even be outside. The others helped me get past that, and it occurred to me that what he tried to do was what happens to creatures like you all over the world. That feeling was the only way I was able to leave this place, to help others. I was even more determined to make this place a safe haven for creatures like you. As you know, I wasn’t super successful in finding others, but that changed when you came.”

“How so?” Yuki’s ears had cocked toward the sound of Emily’s voice, hanging on every word.

“Well, you were able to travel with me. The others, not so much. At first it was nice when I realized that I had someone to keep me company. Well, you and Daisy.” Emily smiled at the thought of the yellow fairy. “But something else happened. You see, even though I’m formidable in my own right, I still struggled with what happened. That man walked in here and almost took everything away from not just me, but everybody. Since that day, I’ve been under a cloud. The shadow follows me no matter where I go, a feeling of helplessness that never quite drifted off. Do you remember that first trip we took together?”

Yuki laughed. “Down to South America? That was a lot of fun.”

“It was. We struck out hard, but I’m talking about that night we got spotted by that group of men. Remember, the ones that chased us into that alley?”

“I do. There were five of them, and they pulled knives on us. They wanted us to come with them.”

“And do you remember what you did?”

Yuki grinned. “I do. I fought them off.” Centuries of living had taught her many things, but one of the most important had been the various martial arts she had picked up while traveling through Japan and China.

“You did. But you did it without magic. That impressed me, your ability to show such restraint. Even more so, when you were done, you asked if I was okay.”

During those tense few moments, watching you knock those men around as if they were children, I felt something that I hadn't felt in a while." Emily smiled, stirring the bathwater with one finger. "I felt safe."

"I think I understand that. When the Japanese decided they wanted to expand their empire, there were rumors of an elite unit of men and women who were capturing magical creatures and attempting to strip away their abilities. It was a technology that Germany had been working on for years. So I fled to China, bouncing from village to village to stay a few steps ahead of the Japanese occupation. I couldn't let them get their hands on me, not when so many of my kin had already been captured."

Emily nodded, her breasts bobbing in the water. "I found one of their facilities once, not too long after I inherited the house. It was based out of Hiroshima. I seduced an intelligence officer who then took me on a tour of his military base, hoping to get a blowjob when we were done. When he showed me the building, I could feel the magic radiating off of it and knew it for what it was. A storage area for magical creatures. Knowing I couldn't do anything, I ran away that very night, not even bothering to go back to my hotel. I found out some years later that he was executed for showing me, and that the Japanese military tried to track me down, thinking I was a spy. Luckily I had stowed away on a commercial fishing vessel and found a way home from South Korea. I didn't leave home until after the war was over."

Yuki sighed. "Yes, the war. It was a terrifying time for everybody. Magical creatures are typically territorial, and being from Japan made it even worse. I rarely stayed anywhere longer than a couple of months, because eventually something would sniff me out and a fight would ensue. Rumors of a magical fox that could grant wishes began to dog me everywhere I went. I gave up on living among mortals, and that's why you found me hiding in a cave. When you brought me here, I was just waiting for the trap to be sprung, but I was okay with it, because you brought me to America. The U.S. is a much safer place for creatures like me. But when you showed me genuine kindness and let me come and go as I please, I felt safe for the first time in a long time as well."

The smile that crossed Emily's face lit up the room. Small bubbles floated up from the surface of the bath "Maybe that's why we mesh so well. We both know what it's like to be terrified and then find solace." She slid closer to Yuki, placing her hand on Yuki's knee. "But it's become more than that for me."

Yuki swallowed, staring at the hand on her knee. It was warm from the bath, but it was somehow more than that. The rest of the room had suddenly fallen away, her focus entirely on that patch of skin that now connected them. Her heart was beating fast now, her thoughts sliding away before she could contemplate them.

“I first noticed it after our trip into Canada. I was checking on something as a favor to a friend and you and I came across that witch. We tried to let her be, it didn’t seem like she was hurting anything, but then she got upset because her cover had been blown. I was completely out of my depth, and we got separated.”

Yuki remembered it well. The woman could turn herself into a large bear, and had made them lose each other in a snowstorm. “It took me hours, but I was able to find you. The witch had taken you back to her home and put you in that cage made of whale bones.”

“That’s right. When you burst through her front door and tore into her, I realized that I wasn’t just happy that you had come to save me, but I was happy to see you again, to know that you were safe. It was a feeling I hadn’t felt in some time, and I didn’t know how to put it into words.” Emily’s other hand landed on Yuki’s other knee. “You’re good at hiding your emotions, but that makes sense. You’re a kitsune. I didn’t think you felt the same way that I did, so kept my thoughts to myself.”

“Emily.” Yuki spoke her name as if it were a prayer. With a hand on each knee, she was all too aware of the position they were now in. Heat flowed back and forth between her knees, passing through her groin with every heartbeat. She was breathing hard now, staring into Emily’s golden flecked eyes.

“I can feel you now. I couldn’t before, but now that we’re being honest with each other, your arousal is like a perfume to me.” Emily parted Yuki’s legs, moving forward until their mouths were only a few inches apart. Yuki gasped at the sheer smell of her. It was like standing in a field of blooming wildflowers.

Golden bubbles drifted off the surface of the water, popping in the air with the tinkling of bells.

“You... we...” Yuki didn’t know what to say, her head was suddenly full of fog. Her head was finally able to latch onto a single thought, an emotion that kept driving her forward. “Emily?”

“Yes?”

“I... I think I’m in love with you.”

Emily’s fingers slid onto Yuki’s thighs. She leaned forward, those golden eyes of hers filling Yuki’s vision, expanding outward until they were all that existed.

“I’m falling for you, Yuki. Put your arms out and catch me.”

When their lips met, Yuki lost control of her form, her body sprouting fur all over. She couldn’t bring herself to care, her entire being now tied up inside of that kiss, their tongues moving cautiously over one another. The bath water was swirling around them, Emily’s magic manifesting in its movements.

Emily’s lips tasted of mint and springtime, and her hands moved off of Yuki’s legs and onto her hips. Yuki had kissed her fair share of men and women over the last century, but never with such passion. Her twin tails burst out of the water, splashing both of them and bursting several golden bubbles.

They broke the kiss, both of them laughing.

“I love how soft your fur feels,” Emily told her, running a hand along Yuki’s side. It had grown in underneath the kitsune’s breasts and all along her backside with a bare patch around her belly button and the top of her breasts. Her sideburns had extended down her cheeks and onto her neck.

“You should feel it when it’s dry.”

“Oh, I intend to.” Emily tilted Yuki’s chin upward and placed a small kiss on the delicate flesh beneath, working her way down Yuki’s neck. Every kiss sent chills through Yuki’s body, somehow feeding into the building heat in between her legs.

Emily’s lips found the top of Yuki’s breasts, and those gentle pecks became insistent nibbles once they neared her nipples. Yuki purred, closing her eyes and leaning back to give Emily full access to her breasts. Every bite stopped just short of being painful, and every lick was followed up with a cool blast of air from Emily. Yuki’s nipples were hard now, her wide areola giving Emily plenty of real estate to play with.

A pair of fingers teased Yuki’s labia, tracing gentle patterns around her puffy lips through her thick pubic hair. Yuki opened her legs wide, giving Emily full access to her sex. Those fingers eventually found their way inside, spreading apart and stretching Yuki’s vaginal canal wide.

The fox let out a cry, the sweet agony of being spread open by Emily too much for her mind to handle. A subtle foxfire glow formed along her hands, her magic leaking out in response to the stimulation.

“I’ve never seen anyone react that way before,” Emily told her with a smile.

“I’ve never felt this way about someone before.” Yuki pulled Emily in for a kiss, thrusting her hips into Emily’s hand. Those fingers slid deep inside her, curling up and stirring her insides. Magic flowed from Emily into Yuki, igniting a series of orgasm-like tremors that had the kitsune growling in pleasure.

“Do you like that? It’s a trick Naia taught me.” Emily’s voice was coming from a floating bubble nearby, her mouth currently busy with Yuki’s breast.

“I do.”

“Here’s another one.” Emily scooted back, her pendulous breasts dangling between them. With a wink, she sank beneath the water, her mouth replacing her hand. Her tongue was impossibly long, swirling across Yuki’s clit and then sliding inside of her. It expanded, filling Yuki up completely, and she began slapping the sides of the tub with her hands, scattering foxfire along the floor and wall where it clung like soap bubbles, casting an ominous glow across the room.

“Oh, Emily!” Yuki thrust her hips into Emily’s face, desperate to feel her and yet afraid this was just a dream. If she awoke, she knew her heart would break. So many fantasies were coming true for her right now, her entire world now confined to this little room. She had met someone who completed her, who could keep her safe and cherish her. Someone that felt the same way about her.

The Caretaker was underwater for several minutes, and Yuki started to worry. She grabbed Emily’s hair to pull her up, but Emily slapped her hand away.

“I can breathe underwater,” she said, her voice coming from a nearby bubble. “Just relax, and let me do my thing.” Emily’s tongue and fingers seemed to multiply beneath the water, and phantom hands grabbed Yuki’s thighs, holding her in place as the pressure on her clit increased.

Yuki put her hands out, trying to grab onto the sides of the tub, but she couldn’t get a decent grip. Instead, she buried her hands in Emily’s hair, holding her in place as Yuki’s whole body flooded with vibrations. She let go of Emily and dragged her claws along the tub, leaving deep grooves.

When she came, it was with a rush of heat to her loins, and her thighs squeezed Emily like a vice. Yuki’s growl echoed off of the walls until she let out a

guttural moan, her body letting go of all of its tension. The surface of the water sparkled as if glitter floated on its surface, and the foxfire climbed the walls of the room like magical slugs, breaking free of the wall to hover overhead like Will-o-wisps.

“Wow!” Emily’s head broke the surface of the water. She rubbed her jaw, massaging it by the joint. “I didn’t think your legs were so strong.”

“I like to think I’m still full of surprises.” Yuki sat up in the tub, a mischievous grin crossing her face. “Turn around for me? I want to see that wonderful ass of yours.”

“Ooh, someone’s getting bold.” Emily faced away from Yuki, her ass rising from the water. Rivulets of water flowed off of the sides of her juicy curves, and she wiggled her golden muff back and forth, her swollen labia dripping with her own fluids.

“It’s easy being bold when you feel like you’ve won the lottery.” Yuki smacked her on the ass playfully, then buried her face in Emily’s cunt.

“Oh, you’re good at this,” Emily told her, pushing back into Yuki’s face.

From here, Yuki felt like she was smelling the very depths of Emily’s soul. Her magic, her spirit and her body all existed in this place, the taste and smell flooding Yuki’s head with information. The kitsune inhaled it all, letting her tongue roll across Emily’s clitoral hood. Able to sense Emily’s arousal on such an intimate level, she established a set of movements meant to maximize pleasure.

The water of the tub swirled around them. For a second, Yuki wondered if Naia had returned, but soon sensed that the response came from Emily alone. She had clearly attuned herself to the nymph, able to replicate her abilities with ease.

“Mmm, don’t stop,” Emily begged, bracing herself against the faucet.

Grinning inwardly, Yuki stroked her own clit, willing it to elongate. She felt it engorge with blood, stretching well past its limits. The process itself was pleasurable, and she moaned into Emily, distracted by the sensation.

“Ooh, what are you doing back there?” Emily looked over her shoulder, but Yuki slapped her on the ass again.

“Turn around,” she growled. Satisfied that Emily wasn’t looking, Yuki sat up, water dripping free of the massive cock she had grown. It was shiny and pink, the base of it surrounded by her stretched out labia. Just as Emily was about to turn

around again, Yuki grabbed onto her ass with both hands and plunged herself into Emily's soaking wet vagina.

"HOLY FUCK!" Emily's back arched and the water in the bath exploded outward, soaking the room in water.

Yuki fucked her frantically, fighting the urge to come again so soon. Her new cock was hypersensitive, and the pressure it put on her g-spot every time she pushed into Emily was incredible.

"Oh, Yuki, you're perfect," Emily cried, pushing backward for more. Yuki pounded her for several minutes, the air filling with steam and glitter. Emily's moans grew steadily louder, the water level in the tub slowly dropping away.

Just when Emily was about to come, she reached a hand back and grabbed at Yuki's shaft. Yuki grunted, enjoying the sensation of Emily's fingers, but was caught off guard when those fingers slid down the base of her cock and found her tight vaginal opening.

"Oh my—" Yuki's breath was taken away when Emily hooked her fingers inside of Yuki's narrow vagina, pulling Yuki forward by her g-spot. Every time Yuki slammed forward, her cock tingled with pleasure and heat. When she rocked back, her vaginal walls were pulled at by Emily's fingers, filling her groin with pressure.

She didn't last.

Growling again, Yuki buried herself in Emily and howled in sexual release. As if on demand, Emily responded with a cry of her own, the glittery steam swirling around and scattering the foxfire into glowing motes that filled the air like fireflies. Both of them came for several seconds, their magic swirling above their heads and mixing together. The lights flickered and went out, giving Yuki the impression that they now floated in space, the stars of the universe now watching them.

Leaning forward on Emily, Yuki's cock deflated, transforming slowly back into her clit. Emily slid from beneath her and they held each other. In the faux starlight, the only sounds to be heard were their breathing and the dripping of water.

Eventually the lights came back on, revealing that they had made an absolute mess of the bathroom. Yuki was able to casually extinguish the foxfire,

and the water that had been splashed around the room began a slow crawl back into the tub to drain properly.

Several quiet minutes passed. Yuki felt tears on her own face, but left them. Tears of joy were special, and she didn't feel like casually discarding them just yet.

"C'mon. Let's go somewhere a little more comfortable." Emily stood up, the leftover water running down her legs.

Yuki let out a laugh. "You'll have to wait a second. My legs are crazy tired."

"You can lean on me." Emily put her hand out. "Always."

Yuki stared at the hand before her for several seconds, and then took it, her heart racing. Emily helped her out of the water, pulling her into a naked embrace. Their lips met once more, warmth flowing back and forth between them. Emily broke away, hugging Yuki tightly against her.

"That was... special," Emily whispered in Yuki's ear.

Her heart soared, and the fur along her arms and legs rippled much like the applause of an audience. Before this moment, she had never known what it meant to be complete. "I hope it can be special again."

"Oh, it will be." Emily broke away and tugged on Yuki's hand, pulling her toward the bed. "Maybe I can show you a few tricks of my own."

"I would really like that." Yuki followed, stopping only long enough to pick up the book that Emily had set down. "So what did you bring me?"

"Oh, that. It's an illustrated edition of *Alice in Wonderland*. It was my favorite book growing up and I thought you might like to read it. It's about a girl who stumbles into a world where nothing makes sense, but in a weird way, it kind of does."

Yuki smiled. "I think I know that feeling." With those words, she let Emily pull her toward the bed, the world around her melting away as the memory came to an end. The world was now darkness and heat, and it took a few seconds for her to realize that she had drifted off.

She opened her eyes, tossing the rag away from her face in disgust. That first time with Emily had been special, but now she saw it as poison, a stain on her soul that had blinded her to the truth. She stood up, water flowing from her body

and onto the floor as she got out. After getting dressed, she stormed into the bedroom and cast a nasty glance at the spot Emily had died.

“I wish I could forget you, too.” When she slammed the bedroom door behind her, it suddenly occurred to her how still the house was. Night had fallen and nearly all the lights were off, but the silence was the worst. This place was almost never quiet, yet now it wasn’t much different than the tower had been.

Had she exchanged one prison for another? Descending the stairs, she flipped all of the lights on as she went. Out in the front yard, she looked at the statues of the others, then out at the street. A jogger went by, which she found odd for this time of night, but anybody who chose to run for fun was pretty weird to begin with.

It took Yuki only a few minutes to move the rats into the backyard, but Sofia took longer. She moved the cyclops carefully through the house using magic to levitate the statue, wary of chipping or cracking the stone. While she was still a statue, she could be uncursed with no harm done, but a crack could become a serious injury. Sofia got set next to Naia’s fountain.

Abella couldn’t be moved. A permanent frost had settled over the house, so Yuki shaved the ice block down to a reasonable size and then built a snowman on top of her to hide her in plain sight. She wasn’t worried that it was almost eighty degrees outside of the front yard, the geas would take care of the details.

The jogger went by again. He only paid her a cursory glance, but she couldn’t help but feel that he was actually seeing her and what she was doing. She didn’t like that at all.

The sundial was slowly counting down. Yuki grabbed it and tried to give it a spin, but it didn’t budge. Frustrated, she set up some wards of her own underneath the lions. If someone walked in, she would know and deal with them accordingly. Just to be safe, she spent some time creating giant ice blocks along the walls that she could smash together to crush an intruder from the sides.

Satisfied that the front yard was secure, she went back inside and to the wardrobe. Using the key to unlock it, she stepped through and waited a few minutes for Daisy to arrive. Puzzled that the fairy was missing, she checked to make sure the Jabberwock was still standing guard and then went back through the trees to the house, locking the wardrobe again and tucking the key away.

She couldn’t bear to sleep in Emily’s bed, so took up a spot on the couch downstairs, her ears turned toward the closet in case the others managed to thaw

the pool. A pair of tarot cards were kept close at hand in case she needed to summon some magic at a moment's notice. Lying there, she yawned wide enough that her mouth elongated and her jaw cracked. Promising to close her eyes for just a few minutes, her mind, her head filled with images of a strange room in a house full of game pieces. She wandered from room to room, pursued by the shadow of a tall woman who kept holding up a shining gem.

Her wards went off.

Bolting upright, she squinted against the bright light streaming through the front windows. How long had she slept? Sliding off of the couch, she winced, rubbing her lower back. She had fallen asleep on one of her tails and her spine was now all out of whack. Stumbling up to the front door, she took a moment to compose herself, tucking the tarot cards out of sight. Silencing the blaring alarm in her head, she opened the door and walked outside, commanding her outfit to change into a set of white robes.

There were several of them, standing there in broad daylight, men wearing different outfits. Some were in regular clothes, but a few were in uniform. A pair of garbage men, a man carrying bibles, and even a police officer. They had spread across the yard, each one staring in her direction. Three of them stood between her and the sundial. She recognized the jogger, then realized that she recognized all of them. They had the exact same body and face, that of a blond man with a neatly trimmed mustache. One of them wore a white suit and carried a cane and he stepped forward from the group.

"I wouldn't even bother yourself." He smirked, leaning forward on the cane. "The others are already on their way."

"The others? What others?" Yuki yawned, revealing her teeth. "I'm sorry, but apparently I overslept. Are you the one who set off my wards? What time is it?"

The intruder shook his head and three of the men near her rushed forward. Now that they were close, she could smell his magic. These were golems made of sand, simple but effective, and they were nearly at the steps. She sent out a pulse of magic, and the ice spikes hidden beneath the snow burst forth, impaling them vertically in place.

The intruder seemed taken aback. "Surround her, take her out."

Yuki tossed a pair of tarot cards into the front yard, where they vanished into the snow. Thick, wooden roots swirled upward, forming into a pair of men,

one distinctly shorter than the other. Long staves burst out of the ground, and the elementals armed themselves.

The Knight of Wands rushed forward, crashing into a police officer, while the Page of Wands speared the jogger with a staff, tossing him to the side. The front yard was essentially one big mana pool for Yuki to draw upon, now that it was covered in a foot of snow, so she summoned some snowmen as well. The men on spikes turned into sand and fell free, reforming at the bottom. She was able to freeze one in place, but not before another one pulled out a pistol and fired.

The Knight of Wands took the bullet for her, stumbling back before rushing forward and taking out her attacker. The golems were now becoming more fluid to avoid her attacks, so Yuki summoned the King and Queen of Wands. Atop their heads, they wore a crowns of wood, and they crashed into the invaders.

The one with the cane drew a blade out of it and charged at Yuki. The Queen intercepted him, but he made a gesture with one hand that sent her flying back and through the front window of the house. A few more golems showed up in a car, driving right through the open gate, and a few of the ones already there were starting to glow. Whoever was controlling them was now funneling massive amounts of magic into them.

Two golems grabbed onto the King of Wands and exploded, spraying the yard with debris. The blast knocked Yuki off her feet, and they swarmed in toward her. Hands grabbed at her feet, dragging her down the stairs, and she let out a snarl, ripping at them with her claws.

“Hold her down,” a voice cried. “Amir will want to see this.”

“I’ve got something to show you.” Tearing her hand free, she yanked off her eyepatch.

Pain flooded her head. Using the Gorgon’s Eye always came with a minor price, but she screamed in agony when she locked eyes with her nearest assailant. Fighting free of her captors, she fell into a pile of nearby snow and vomited, holding her belly as waves of pure agony washed over her. What had he done to her? It was taking everything in her power not to rip the eye from her own head.

Moaning in agony, she realized that the yard had gone completely silent. Moving slowly, she closed her bad eye, squinting against the bright white of the snow.

They were frozen, all of them, unmoving. Yuki stood, walking over to where she had dropped her eye patch. Once it was back in place, she approached the statue nearest her, puzzled.

This one was facing toward the house, a knife held in his hand. The King of Wands stood next to it, his staff ready, but there was nobody to attack. With a mental command, she had him stand down, and summoned the Queen of Wands from inside the house.

“Why are you all holding still?” Even the sound of her own voice was too loud, causing her to wince. Placing a hand behind the statue’s head, she leaned forward, trying to concentrate.

The Gorgon’s Eye pulsed in her socket, and it occurred to her that these were no mere golems. The sand had been made into flesh, which made them vulnerable to her magic, but she should have only turned the ones nearest to her. In fact, three of them had been turned to stone.

Sitting on the porch, she pondered the crowd of men, both stone and flesh. Looking at their identical features, a grin crossed her face.

“You were driving them, weren’t you?” A laugh escaped her lips, which triggered another bout of agony, but it was worth it. The man who had created these beings hadn’t just made them and set them loose. He had been piloting them, his mind jumping around between them.

Which meant he had been looking at her when she used the Eye.

“Oh, I wish I could see the look on your face. Well, your actual face.” These were sand clones, identical to their creator. And right now, their creator was a beautiful statue somewhere. Standing up with an assist from the Queen, she walked to the one closest to her.

“Smash him,” she commanded, and the Queen shattered the statue. Nothing happened. She picked another one, and the Queen leveled the creature with a swing of her staff. Frowning, Yuki looked around the yard.

Whoever this was, he wouldn’t put himself in harm’s way. So where could he be hiding? Commanding the King and Queen to remain behind, she wandered out of the front yard, carefully watching the street while the Page of Wands followed her. Sniffing at the air, she caught a whiff of magic, following it across the street. It was nearly a block over that she found a black town car parked in

front of somebody's house. The driver inside was unmoving, but she was more interested in the man in the back of the car.

The passenger had turned to stone, but his clothing had not. Maybe it was a function of seeing her through one of his golems? As a result, the strange device near his ear was unharmed, and she heard someone speaking through it.

It was a woman's voice. She slid the device out of his hands and held it in front of her face. A glass screen displayed the name **Kali**.

"Sebastien? Sebastien, are you there? We are only a couple minutes away, what is happening? Do you have Mike in custody?"

Yuki tilted her head back and forth, looking at the device. She held the device near her head as Sebastien had. "No, he doesn't."

There was a moment of silence. "Who is this?"

Yuki nodded at the Page of Wands. He dragged the statue out of the car and smashed it face first on the concrete. It broke apart, sending sharp fragments through the air. The driver let out a loud moan and crumbled into a pile of sand.

Satisfied, she held the device to her lips. "Sebastien's gone. All the king's horses and all the king's men won't put this bastard together again."

After a few more seconds, a new voice came over the phone. This was a man whose voice resonated with energy, even over the device.

"Who is this?" he demanded. She felt the magical compulsion wash over her, but shrugged it away.

"I'm the fucking Snow Queen, that's who." Her hands rippled with fur, and she crushed the device with her claws, bits of metal, glass and plastic raining down on the concrete. Leaving the car behind, she walked back to the safety of the house. The pain in her head was finally subsiding, but there was still work to do.

All of her years in the tower had taught her a lot of things, but some of the most important lessons had involved the traps she had discovered. The clouds darkened above as she funneled magic into producing more ice and snow. The only way any new intruders could come in was through the front walk. She layered traps on top of each other, thinking back on the voice she had heard. It had been the voice of someone who was used to getting his way, and if she was correct, he would be there soon.

The front street was empty, so she peppered it with wards along the walls and sidewalk. If anyone approached, she would know. Her last act was to use the Eight of Pentacles, the Six of Swords and the Six of Wands. Long, thick wooden staves grew from the ground, ripping through the grass and concrete to form a barrier in-between the lions. The swords fell from the sky, stabbing into the ground. The energy from the Eight of Pentacles swept up the blades, stretching and reforging them to form a series of bladed bars that lay across the barrier. The barrier glowed intensely for several seconds, the magic fusing metal to wood.

If someone came, that would hold them for several seconds. To be safe, she left the King, Queen and Page to watch guard over the yard while she went back inside to recuperate.

She had done it. She had protected the house. Barely containing a squeal of delight, she went to the kitchen to fix herself a snack. She didn't recognize most of the food in the fridge, and didn't feel like trying to cook something from scratch. Digging in the freezer, she found a box of something called Eggos hidden away.

"Weird." The little yellow disk in her hand had square grooves all along it. The picture on the box showed butter and syrup. She practically salivated at the idea of something so rich. Her diet had been primarily what she could raise in her garden and the occasional animal she caught. She followed the oven instructions, tapping her finger impatiently on the counter while she waited for the oven to heat up. Once ready, she tossed the Eggos on a sheet and slid them in.

A few minutes later, she sat over a mouthwatering pair of the tiny waffles, slathered in way too much butter and syrup. Each piece clung to the plate when she pried it up with a fork, and every bite was absolute heaven.

Halfway through the second Eggo, she felt the pressure of the room drop around her. Standing up, she sniffed the air, trying to ascertain what she was feeling.

"No. No no no no no!" She left the table, her finger just barely hooking the remaining Eggo with her claw to take it with her. Running up the stairs, she left syrup on the knob to the closet, pulling it open to reveal the long cave. Running down the cave, she stuffed the Eggo in her face and went on all fours, transforming just enough to run faster.

Emerging into the underground cavern, she could smell it now. Both the air pressure and magical pressure of the room were fluctuating wildly.

Someone was using powerful magic, deep in the Labyrinth. It was the odious smell of portals being opened and closed.

Growling, she swallowed the rest of her snack and descended toward the large maze below. Whatever Tink and the others were doing, she would put a stop to it right now.
