

Seven of Swords

Beth said very little to the minotaur as they climbed the trail to the top of the cliffs. She could tell he wanted to comfort her, but there weren't words or deeds to make the situation right. Her plan was to speak with Naia and Sofia right away, to see if either of them could offer her any help. There were only a few days to make her decision, and she wouldn't be able to live with any of her options.

She remembered when she was little, her parents started arguing nightly about their dog Chunky. These heated discussions often ended in tears, and Beth had been sent to her room more than once with the assurance that everyone was okay, but they were very upset. When she was older, they explained that Chunky had become very sick and the vet had recommended that he be euthanized. The argument her parents kept having was not if they should do it, but when. Every extra day meant the world to Chunky, but he was getting progressively worse. How could they choose when the pain of a single day overrode the possibility of table scraps, or running around in the backyard and smelling squirrel poop?

Chunky's fate was inevitable, but the choice itself was what had caused so much pain. No matter what she chose, she would still end up in the demon's grasp, but one decision was far and above the best option for her new family.

Unless she could find another solution. There had to be a way out, some new trick she could pull. She had beaten him once, and only by sheer, dumb bad luck had he decided to latch a piece of darkness onto her soul, intending to grant her damnation in exchange for eternal youth, beauty, or whatever he had planned.

She had time. Mike was going on a quick trip into his wardrobe, and she knew he'd be back soon. With all the heads of the house pushed together, she felt hopeful that a plan could be made without her. After all, she had no idea how to know that he was watching.

She pushed open the door to the greenhouse and nearly slipped on the snow and ice that had formed at the entrance. Walking carefully forward, she waited until Asterion had followed her out before closing the door and staring dumbstruck at the backyard.

"What the hell?" She stuck a hand out and caught a fat flake in the palm of her hand. It was snowing hard enough that the grass had vanished beneath a blanket of white, and icicles had already formed along the roof.

"Hmm." Asterion gazed upward. "It still smells of early fall."

"Are you sure? Now I'm worried that we were somehow stuck in there for months or years or something." The last thing she needed was to find out the greenhouse had malfunctioned and Oliver had sold out Mike and the others. Then again, that would take away the fun in making her choose to join him.

"I do not like the cold." He hefted his axe. "It makes my weapon slippery."

"Well, you shouldn't be needing it anytime soon." A drift of snow fell free of the roof. "Maybe." Had the Society started something new? There should still be plenty of time on the sundial. Beth wrapped her arms around her torso and looked up into the sky. The clouds had become a low lying fog, but she could see where they bunched up against the edge of the home's magical shell. Whatever was happening had been caused from within.

A loud boom came from the front of the house.

“Shit.” Beth broke into a jog, careful to watch her step. The ground was more ice than snow, and she felt herself slipping every few steps. Asterion’s long strides allowed him to keep up easily, his hooves clomping in the snow.

Another boom echoed over the house, the wind picking up dramatically. Another sound like a shriek made her duck down, and the minotaur caught up, hovering over her like a shield. The flurries assaulted them from every direction now and visibility dropped to a couple of feet. They moved close to the house, using the slats as a guide.

“Naia?” Beth called out for the nymph, hoping she would answer. They ended up huddling by the house as the storm escalated. Asterion leaned against the wall, leaning his axe against the house. They stayed there for several minutes, and the chill of the storm infiltrated her clothing, causing her teeth to chatter.

The loud noises ceased, and the storm died down. The low clouds above quickly turned to more flurries and fell to the earth, and they could see once more. Beth slid out from beneath the minotaur and hurried toward the back yard. She was cold and wanted to get inside as quick as possible.

Stepping around the corner of the house, she found herself staring at the fountain. It was frozen now with icicles hanging off of its outer rim. A gray figure stood at the edge, unmoving and covered in snow.

“Naia?” Beth stepped toward the back door of the home to get a better look at the figure, then clasped a hand tightly across her mouth to hold in a scream.

The statue standing by the fountain’s edge had a look of surprise on her face, her hair flared back as if a breeze had been running through it. One hand was outstretched, fingers spread as if trying to stop a ball.

It was Naia. Stunned, Beth gazed at her for several seconds, uncertain of what to say or do. Asterion now held the axe tightly in both hands, his intense gaze sweeping across the backyard. Beth’s heart slammed against the inside of her chest, and she touched Naia’s hand.

“What could have done this?” she asked.

Asterion shook his head. “I do not know.”

Another loud bang kept from the front of the house. Beth grabbed Asterion by the wrist and pulled him toward the house. Once inside, the sounds were muffled, but loud enough that she could tell they came from out front. Grateful for the warmth of the home, she was nearly at the front window for a look outside when the front door opened.

Tink and Reggie went flying across the front room and crashed near the bottom of the stairs.

“Run!” Sofia yelled, then the door slammed behind her. Tink stood up and adjusted her goggles over her eyes.

“Tink, what’s happening?” Beth asked.

“Bad lady!” Tink picked up Reggie by the scruff of his neck and pushed him up the stairs. “Tink saw, turn other rats to stone.” Outside the door, the sound of clashing steel echoed through the window.

Beth tried to look through the window, but Tink slammed her club into the floor, drawing her attention back.

“No look, or turn to stone.” She pulled Beth away from the glass and then went back, eyes closed, to pull Jenny out of her dollhouse. “We run, find husband, he fix everything.”

“How is Mike going to fix this?” She could hear voices through the door.

“Husband fix. Husband always fix.” The look Tink gave her left no room for argument. Tink believed in Mike. There was room for nothing else in her heart. “Run for rat halls.”

“No.” Reggie stood on the stairs, his tail whipping back and forth. “We must lead her away from my people. We cannot risk them being turned to stone.”

“We should return to the Labyrinth,” Asterion said, wary eyes on the front door. “It is the safest place for us.”

Reggie nodded, and Beth agreed. Asterion’s knowledge of the Labyrinth would keep them safe. They ran up the stairs together, stopping briefly for Reggie to tell a pair of rats to lock up the tunnels. At the top of the stairs, they ran into Carmina. The fairy followed, and they were in Beth’s room when they heard the front door of the house open.

“Move!” Asterion pushed them all to the closet, then grabbed the bed and shoved it up against the door. They ran together, Carmina lighting the way ahead. They were near the end of the tunnel when they heard a loud crash behind them.

Asterion’s thick arm circled Beth’s waist and he jumped down the steep incline of the switchback trail. Tink and Reggie followed, the air filled with the sound of rocks tumbling around them. With every landing, Beth felt the air pressed out of her lungs, her heart jumping into her throat. Her skirt billowed up on one jump, exposing her bare ass to the others.

She thought she heard Tink giggle, but it was hard to tell.

Once at the bottom, the minotaur set her down and they all moved toward the thick door of the Labyrinth. Beth cast a wary eye at the reflecting pool, hoping that Oliver didn’t have a way to jump out and ambush them somehow. She noticed that Asterion kept himself between her and the pool, and she was grateful for it.

“Bad lady!” Tink suddenly cried, and Beth looked over her shoulder. Frost was forming at the top of the hill around a figure in white who emerged from the cave. Beth spun around, suddenly frightened that she might get turned to stone. The large doors of the Labyrinth were in reach, and Asterion stood on the pressure plate, causing the doors to open.

In the air around them, giant swords appeared out of nowhere, swirling around them like leaves in a storm. They slammed into the ground, attempting to pin them in place, but Asterion smashed them out of the way with his axe, the group following close behind him.

Just inside the door, several rats were surprised to see everybody come running in, but joined along when they realized that Reggie was there too. The doors slammed shut behind them, and Asterion led them down one of the long corridors, guiding them past a tripwire and into a hidden tunnel. He slowed down just enough to make sure that everyone could keep up, and soon they were traveling a narrow underground tunnel that Beth knew from experience took them to Ratu’s lair.

Behind them, the Labyrinth was silent.

Asterion had them wait in a hidden cave, disappearing back the way they had come. Beth finally felt like she could breathe again, and Tink sat on the floor, her face twisted into a sour expression.

“What happened up there?” Beth asked.

“Not too sure. Fox Lady and Stone Butt get into big fight. Tink go and watch. Stone Butt frozen in big ice, then fox come at Tink. Tink brave, but One Eye throw Tink and Rat King into house. Tink see other rats turn to stone through window.” She let out a deep breath. “Husband in big trouble this time.”

Beth wondered what special nickname Tink had for her. “Where is Mike? Is he back yet?”

“Tink don’t know, but Tink can find.”

“How? Didn’t he leave through a magic door or something?”

“Maybe, but no matter. Tink find husband anywhere. When first meet, Tink give special bite. Can always feel husband, no matter where. Good rats help Tink, chew hole in wall, bring husband back, then smash Fox Lady into rug.” She smacked her club on the ground for emphasis. “Tink make brilliant plan.”

“Really? Do you think you can find him in another world?”

Tink nodded sagely, then tapped her nose. “Goblin always have to know where husband go. Need to keep husband out of trouble.”

Amazing. Beth didn’t know if Tink was telling the truth, but she definitely seemed sure of herself. If she was right, then they could find Mike and bring him back, though she wasn’t certain what good that would do. An enemy that could turn you to stone was a hard sell, and if not for her own problems, she was tempted to leave.

“Tink, I have another question for you.” Beth knelt in front of the goblin. “This bite. Could you do it to anyone?”

She shrugged. “Maybe, but Tink don’t know.. Goblin only give special bite for special reason.”

“Amazing.” The speck of an idea was forming, but she would need to talk to Reggie first and see if it was possible.

Asterion appeared in the opening, startling her enough that she let out a yelp. He chuckled, then motioned for them to exit the cave.

“She is no longer pursuing you,” he said, guiding them away from the cave. “She has yet to come inside the Labyrinth.”

“That’s strange. I thought she was here to kill us or something.”

“Maybe not.” Reggie rubbed his chin, his whiskers shaking. His crown had gone missing during their escape, but he still had his toy glasses. “During her engagement with Abella, she seemed more interested in diplomacy.”

“Really?” Now that was something she wished she had known earlier. “Did she say anything else?”

“Nothing I could hear. She summoned a snow storm and then fought the gargoyle quite brilliantly, I’m afraid.” Reggie shivered, rubbing at his cheeks. “I hope my people are okay.”

“We’ll make sure of it, just you wait.” She hoped it was a promise she could keep.

They eventually arrived in the center of the Labyrinth, and they entered the magical pagoda where Ratu lived. Inside, there was plenty of room for everybody to sit at a large table. Asterion excused himself to go set some alarms in case they were chased, and Beth sat down with Tink, Reggie and the other rats. Jenny was propped up on the table next to Carmina, but showed no evidence that she was even paying attention.

“So where do we go from here?” She felt like it was a great question to ask. “How much time is left on the sundial?”

“Maybe twelve hours,” Reggie answered. “Though I don’t know for sure. He spoke with me not too long before he left.”

“Okay Tink, then problem one is that we need to get Mike back before the dial turns back. Do you think you can find him that fast?”

Tink shrugged. “All depend on rat. Rat hole take time, and Tink won’t know until Tink look in right hole.”

“I see.” She turned back to Reggie. “How quick can you open a hole?”

“There are others hidden throughout the Labyrinth doing work for mistress Ratu. If we can round them up, then maybe an hour.”

“Really, an hour?” That was far too long.

Reggie shrank. “If you want it big enough for a human to pass through, then yes.”

“No need big hole. Tink just need hole big enough for seeing.” The goblin held up her fingers in the shape of an O. “Tink take good look, know if husband there.”

“How long would that take?”

Reggie mulled it over. “Maybe a few minutes. A hole that big can only be chewed open by one rat, so we could open many holes at once, but we have to be careful.”

“Why?”

“If you open too many holes next to each other, the portals won’t work properly and might accidentally open into each other, which can cause instability and eventually collapse the room we started in.”

“Meaning?”

Reggie clapped his hands together dramatically. “Rat pancake.”

“Okay, then we will exercise caution. Have your subjects rounded up and brought here.”

He nodded, throwing a look at his subordinates. They gave little rat salutes and hopped down off their chairs, disappearing into the shadows of the pagoda. Beth could hear their tiny feet scratching on the stone as they left.

“So now we just need to open a bunch of random holes in reality and hope for the best.” Beth rolled her eyes. Given enough time, their plan was guaranteed, but she had the distinct feeling that they were gonna need a healthy dose of luck as well. Even if they found Mike, they still had the woman upstairs to deal with.

No. She would face her problems one at a time. Focusing too much on the future would make her unable to deal with the present. Thinking of the demon latched to her soul, she knew she had to tell the others now. To put it off would put them in harm’s way, and once their current issue was dealt with, there would be little time to figure out how to save her. And who knew, maybe they would have an answer for her.

“Hey Tink? Reggie? I have a problem.” She told them the whole story, fighting back tears as the reality of her situation was allowed to fully sink in. When she was done, she was met with a stunned silence. Several moments passed them by before Tink hopped off her stool and threw her arms around Beth’s waist.

“No worry. Husband fix this too.”

Beth wiped a tear from her cheek.

“I certainly hope so,” she replied.

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When the centaurs came for him, they were pretty rough. Grabbing him by the arms, they lifted him just enough that his toes could barely touch the ground, so he hop-walked between them, casting a glance at the small lump of grass by the wall where Ratu was hiding.

Once outside, he squinted against the harsh light of the sun. It was sinking toward the horizon, but Mike figured there was at least an hour before sundown. The tribe was thick around him as he was escorted and, sure enough, a large crowd had gathered out on the floor of the valley. Torches lined the pathway they took him down, and he found himself led to a large clearing with a small hill just above it. Standing on the hill was the Grand Stallion, his staff clutched in a hand that was so tight that his knuckles had gone white. Centaur men and women surrounded the hill, and they spread apart to let him in. The group was eerily silent, and he saw anger and distrust in their eyes.

Just like he had planned. Mike forced a smug grin before he was bodily tossed into the clearing, landing on his face and biting his lip. He moved quickly, standing up and brushing the dirt off his pants.

“I find your hospitality lacking.” Mike locked eyes with the Grand Stallion, finally getting a good look at him. His hindquarters were a dark black, and his skin had the deep tan of dozens of summers. Deep lines criss-crossed his forehead and his impressive salt and pepper beard came halfway down his chest before terminating in a braid.

“You are not here for our hospitality,” the Grand Stallion told him. “You are here because you have been challenged—”

“My name is Mike, by the way. That’s a custom amongst my people, a polite introduction.”

The air filled with the sound of anxious murmurs and the Grand Stallion gave him a dirty look.

“You are here because—”

“Zel always told me about how amazing her people were. Polite, refined. Dignified even. So I’ll try again. My name is Mike and—” Someone jabbed him in the back with a spear butt and he hopped forward in response. “I’m the Caretaker.”

The Grand Stallion glared at him, visibly grinding his teeth. “Are you finished?”

“I’m just trying to observe my own customs as a show of respect, Your Honor.”

“You will refer to him as Grand Stallion.” This was from a female centaur by his side in battle armor with a silver blade across each hip and chainmail armor. “And you will dial back your impertinence.”

“Oh, I apologize. We haven’t been formally introduced, per my custom, else I would have known the honorific he preferred. I mean, that is the point of my tradition.”

“Your petty human traditions hold little sway over us, Mike the Caretaker. Your kind have brought naught but harm and chaos to the Herd, and therefore we feel no need to honor them.”

“Yet you force me to abide by yours? You do realize this entire world is inside of a wardrobe which is inside my house? Human law dictates that, by proxy, summa cum laude, abra cadabra, I own this place.”

Shouting came from the centaurs around him and an ice cold chill filled his gut and sank downward to his legs. He dropped to one knee in response just as a rock flew overhead, crashing against the ground in front of him.

The Grand Stallion held up his hands and a few of his honor guard stepped down from the hill to move among the crowd. The din faded away, though trace muttering could be heard. Zel’s father cleared his throat and gave his people an intense look.

“You will not harm this man. He is still under the protection of parley and to harm him now would be dishonorable.” He nodded to someone just behind him. “I have decided there is no use speaking with you, Caretaker. It is clear you are trying to antagonize—”

“Do you treat all your guests like this?” Mike spun around, his hands indicating the hostile crowd. “Me and mine were fine on that mountain top and had every intention of going home. Yet you drag me down here, treat me like garbage, and expect me to behave?”

The Grand Stallion pulled something from a bag around his back. It was a clear jar with something inside, but his hands covered it up.

“For years now, we have been forced to endure the attacks of the one known as Emily, and the Snow Queen. On the day you arrived, the mountain exploded with a fury we haven’t seen since last we were on Earth, and you expect us to believe you had no part in it?”

“Two things. First, the Snow Queen attacked me for no reason, so the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Second, Emily has been dead for years now.”

More muttering surrounded him at this news. Orion stepped around the hill, his intense gaze on Mike and his fists balled up.

“So you say you have no association with these individuals? That it is sheer coincidence that you arrived and brought my daughter back to me?”

"It is." Mike wondered where he was going with this.

"Then this creature, who has long been in their employ, matters not?" He held up the jar and shook it. A tiny yellow light sputtered several times and crashed against the bottom of it.

Mike squinted to see it better, his eyes going wide when he realized what he was looking at.

"We caught her lurking around the camp and captured her. She is the eyes and ears of the Snow Queen, and though it has been some time since we saw her, we check our fairy traps every day." He set the jar with Daisy inside on the ground. "But if you don't lay any claim to her..." He lifted a massive hoof over the jar., ready to bring it down.

"Wait!" Mike held out his hand. "I do lay claim to her, yes. She is one of the denizens of my home and therefore under my protection. It is my charge, as Caretaker of the house." What was Daisy doing here? He had a brief memory of seeing a tiny ball of light during their flight down the mountain. Had she been following them the whole time?

"How can you explain the dichotomy of your statements? If the creatures in your house are under your protection, than why have we not benefited from such protections?"

Ah, shit. He really wished he had Beth with him.

"I just learned about you. Like today."

The smug look on the Grand Stallions face told Mike that he had already lost any argument he could make. Several centaurs of different color marched Zel in. She wore a large chain that went around her waist and clipped into a metal ring in the earth that he hadn't noticed. She took a seat, her chin high and her gaze on the clouds.

"I am not here to argue with you, Mike the Caretaker. After the Trial, we shall have a formal parely, and barring any unforeseen argument in your favor, it is likely you will not take kindly to the outcome." He handed the jar with Daisy in it to his Honor Guard. She stuck the bottle in her bag. "Orion, you may begin."

Orion stomped forward, his lower half very similar to a horse geared up before a race. He held a rope that was as thick around as Mike's wrist, then tossed it to him. Looping a significant portion around his own waist, he looked at his fellow centaurs.

"I have challenged this man to a Trial! He claims a life debt on Zelenia, but I believe that his claim is false due to our prior betrothal. If he should beat me at the trials, then she will go with him. Otherwise, she will become my bride and we will consummate our union. Are there any here who believe they have a claim that trumps my own?"

Mike wasn't sure if he was supposed to say anything, so he raised his hand. The centaurs closest to him snickered.

"We already know of your claim, human." Orion said the last word with a sneer. "Now brace yourself for the Trial of Strength!"

"Nah, I forfeit." Mike kicked the rope to the sound of gasps.

"You... what?" Orion just blinked. "I heard rumor that you spoke so highly of yourself, yet you throw away one of the trials?"

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I’d probably win anyway. I just wanted to give you a chance to beat me in the test of endurance.”

“You... but you’re human. There’s no way that you could...” Orion looked at the Grand Stallion, who said nothing.

“I’m not only super fast, but I’ll probably be back here before you even get to the ocean. We are running down to the water, right? I love the coast.”

Orion’s face turned a shade of red that reminded Mike of a nasty sunburn. “Pick up the rope.”

Mike shrugged. “Nah, I’m good. You get this one, way to go.”

He heard it now, harsh comments amongst the centaurs. Between badgering the Grand Stallion and his comments about Orion, he could feel the animosity washing over him from every direction. It made him feel sick to his stomach, because the only thing keeping him alive right now was their own code of honor. Gazing out among them, he imagined that they weren’t actually a bad people. If he hadn’t appeared out of nowhere with their missing princess after destroying a mountain top, it was possible they would have listened to reason.

Today, however, was not that day. “So when do I get my bow?”

Orion threw his rope down and stormed off, the others moving with him. The crowd shifted a dozen yards to the edge of the clearing. In the distance, a group of centaurs stood around holding weird looking staves. The crowd spread apart, making it clear this was to be the shooting range.

“The trial of dexterity requires a centaur to be quick of eye and hand.” The Grand Stallion held up a pair of bows. “You will each be allowed to fire three arrows. Whoever pierces more targets will be declared the winner.”

Orion took his bow, throwing Mike a nasty look. “Since you were so gracious with the last test, allow me to go first and show you how this is done.”

“By all means.” Mike was handed the second bow, wincing at how heavy it felt.

Orion walked up to a line that had been painted on the ground, then nodded. He tucked two arrows into a shoulder quiver and nocked the third. The centaurs at the edges of the range nodded and swung their staves.

Three discs flew into the air, looking exactly like clay pigeons. It was clear that the discs were launched to different heights, and Orion released his arrow at the lowest one. By the time it exploded into several fragments, he had already drawn the next and fired it, busting the second highest into pieces. His third arrow caught the last disc on its way down, breaking it into two pieces that crashed into the ground.

“Holy shit,” Mike muttered, and the centaurs went crazy. Cheers rose up all around him, and he could feel their anxious stares on him now. He was going to have to break all three targets and hope they had a tie breaker. Swearing under his breath, he hoped that Ratu would be able to account for the fact that the targets were moving and not stationary.

Orion walked past, a smug look on his face.

“Okay then, let’s see how this pans out.” Mike didn’t have a quiver, so slid them into the collar of his shirt. The arrows slid down his back and fell out the bottom, eliciting laughter from the centaurs. His face burning, he tucked his shirt in and tried again. This time, the arrows stayed in place.

The notch on the arrow was easy to spot, and he couldn’t help but appreciate how much work had gone into it. The feathers were likely from some indigenous bird, and he rotated it to make sure the feathers didn’t hit the bow. He gave the string a tentative pull and nearly gasped at how difficult it was to draw.

Oh god, what have I done? He had been planning on stationary targets. Looking at the men and women around him, he wondered if Ratu could see him. Maybe turning into a giant snake and torching the lot hadn’t been such a bad idea after all. He wondered where she was hiding. She had explained that she needed to be in either human or her true form to spellcast and had gone off in search of a suitable spot once he had been taken from the yurt.

“Do you forfeit?” When Orion spoke, the crowd immediately became quiet.

“Hell no. I just haven’t fired a bow like this before. I’m used to fiberglass and aircraft grade aluminum, Earth stuff.” He cast a silent prayer to Ratu and lifted his arms, the bow almost too heavy to lift. “Um... pull?”

The centaurs near the edge of the field hurled the discs skyward.

His arms burned so hot that he nearly dropped the bow. The arrow was in the air before he had realized it, and he fired the second. The first disc shattered half a second before the second one did. Powered by the magic, Mike turned his gaze onto Orion, letting Ratu’s magic do the work for him.

Orion met his gaze and scowled.

He never saw the third target break, but he could hear it shatter. An ominous silence filled the area, and all eyes turned to Mike, Orion and the Grand Stallion.

“The Trial will continue until someone misses.” With a gesture, three more arrows were given to each of them. Mike moved away from the line, his arms burning as if he had completed a hardcore workout.

Orion easily replicated his earlier result, all three targets breaking. There were no cheers this time, the audience anticipating Mike’s response.

Lifting the bow again, he realized just how heavy it was. His right hand hurt to clench, a side effect that Ratu had warned him about. Could he do this again? How many times would the magic be able to run through his body before he burned out?

This time, the three targets were launched and he fired right away. However, the magic had him draw a second arrow and stall, the two targets falling toward the ground.

Ratu, what are you doing? His heart slammed in his chest, watching the targets fall. It was when he released that second arrow that he realized that the target on top was falling faster than the other. By the time the second arrow struck, they had overlapped just a couple feet off the ground and the arrow shattered both of them.

Gasps of amazement from the centaurs. Mike picked up his last arrow, his fingers cramping up terribly. He tried to twirl the arrow and succeeded in nearly dropping it.

"I believe I get another shot." he told them. "Unless Orion wants to forfeit."

The Grand Centaur had gone pale, and Orion was visibly fuming.

"He is clearly using magic!" Orion's left eye was twitching, and a large vein in his forehead bulged out. "He who cheats during a Trial is to be promptly executed."

"Or I'm just a better shot than you." Mike lowered the bow, trying hard not to throw up. He knew he was walking a fine line between keeping them pissed and getting lynched. "Where's my fourth target?"

An older centaur walked over to the Grand Stallion. She held a staff as well, but her body was decorated with beads, feathers, and an assortment of furs. Limping forward, she knelt down to get a good look in Mike's face. Around her neck was a necklace with several polished stones and a crystal.

She held up her hands and everyone went silent. Mike looked around and saw that Zel was still chained to the ring, but was largely being ignored. Turning his attention back to the woman, he realized she had a faint aura of magic around herself and had several bags that reminded him of Zel's.

She must be the shaman, or whatever. He held his breath, expecting a spell or a potion to be tossed at him.

"An accusation of cheating is serious business. According to Centaur Law, if such an accusation is made during a Trial, then the Trial will be decided by the innocence of the accused." She looked at Orion. "If he is using magic, then you will have won. However, if he is not, then he wins by default."

"Ooh. Kind of makes you think, doesn't it?" Mike pointed at the targets. "I can tell you for a fact that I have not cast any spell or enchantment to accomplish this. Is there a truth serum I could take? Or a spell she can cast? Frankly, as much as I would love to beat you fair and square, I do have other things to attend to."

All around him, the centaurs muttered amongst themselves. Mike prayed they would take the bait. He didn't know how they were going to test his truthfulness, but if it was that easy, they would have done it already.

"I withdraw my accusation." Orion threw his bow to the ground. "Proceed to the next trial."

It was the moment Mike had waited for. "Yes, please. I am so ready for this race. Where am I going?"

"We will take you to the starting line." The centaurs began migrating away, disappearing through the woods of the clearing. If Mike was right, they were headed to better vantage points, which was exactly what he needed right now.

Many of the centaurs who walked past Orion clasped hands with him, or even patted him on the shoulder, all while throwing him dirty looks. They hadn't expected Mike to make it this far, and they offered words of encouragement to the hunter before disappearing.

This was perfect. The tribe had shown up in a crowd to watch him compete, but now he knew they were all dying to see him race. Every centaur who left to watch was one less that he would need to deal with. The tribal leaders spoke amongst themselves, buying time for their people to get in position.

Even most of the guards vanished, leaving behind the tribe leaders, the Grand Stallion, and Zel. Orion was stripping down until he was naked, tossing his weapons aside. The clearing was now empty,

and Mike could see the long stretch of valley before them. It wound back and forth, a series of low hills lying between them and the horizon.

“The floor of the valley goes straight to the ocean. Follow it and you will meet a guard who will hand you a bracelet. Put that on your wrist and run back,” the Grand Stallion told him. “The first one to return here will be declared the winner.”

“Can I fly?” Mike looked over at Orion. “I mean, he gets to have four legs, so can’t I choose an extra pair of limbs?”

The Grand Stallion ignored him and turned his attention to Orion. “I trust that you will abide by the results of this Trial.”

“Aye.” Orion sneered at Mike. “I cannot wait for that mouth of yours to be shut for good.”

Mike just nodded. “Yes, well, you’re about to see the last of me one way or another.”

The shaman held up her hands, and Orion took the space to her left. Mike walked over and stood below her right arm. He got in a runner’s stance, his feet planted firmly in the grass, his eyes on the distant treeline.

He only needed an opening, and it was about to be created. The centaurs had spread out, and he looked over his shoulder at Zel, then up toward the mountain and the tower.

The way was clear.

When the shaman’s arm dropped, Mike sprang forward into a furious jog. His arms felt like spaghetti, but his legs felt surprisingly great. The wind ran through his hair faster than he could ever remember. Never a huge fan of running day in gym class, his breath came to him easily now. His pace was phenomenal, his heart filled with triumph.

Orion easily blew past him with a laugh. Mike blew him a kiss and moved into a fast sprint. There was no way that he was going to keep up, but that had been the point. The centaur’s body grew small as they ran down the gently sloping valley together, and then disappeared.

The first turn was plenty wide enough, but Mike kept his direction aimed at the treeline right at the edge. The centaurs had gathered all along the trees and had cheered when Orion ran by. Several of them easily kept pace with Mike, mocking him as he ran.

Several minutes passed, and sweat poured down his back. He was finally at the first turn, and there was no sign of Orion. The valley floor was several hundred feet across, and this portion was easily a mile long before disappearing around another hill. Nearby, the trees stretched out in clumps with super thick bushes nearby. Seeing an opening in the brush, Mike followed the gently sloping curve of shrubbery before sprinting wildly through a gap in the trees.

The closest centaur was maybe a hundred feet away, and he knew there were only seconds to be spared. He uncorked the vial in his pocket and dumped it over his head, careful not to inhale any of it. Holding out his hands, he watched his skin disappear first, followed by his muscles and then his bones. Startled, he dropped the vial on the ground. He couldn’t see himself at all, and he leaned against a tree, suddenly dizzy.

Heavy thudding through the vegetation was followed by the appearance of a centaur, arrow nocked and ready to fight. She was pretty, with dark skin and tattoos down her arms. He stared at her,

her bow pointed right at him, but her eyes slid over him without a second glance, and then she galloped down a path he hadn't seen.

Time to go. He ran back the way she had come in, emerging out onto the valley floor. Distant centaurs were looking around in a confusion, and another one blew into a hunting horn. In plain view, Mike ran back up the hill, his legs aching with effort.

Going back around the bend, he saw that his plan had worked perfectly. The centaur royalty still stood at the top of the hill, but most of the remaining guards had migrated downward, their eyes on the trees. Keeping an eye out for the few centaurs who crossed, he made sure to run along the part of the valley where the grass was thinnest. The last thing he needed was an eagle-eyed hunter fucking up his day.

Once he was close to the starting point, he slowed to a walk and took several deep breaths. He needed to move quietly now, and he could hear the Grand Stallion arguing with another tribal leader. They were already discussing Mike's execution methods.

He gave them a wide berth, casting a wary glance at the shaman. She had her head tilted as if listening to something, and he really hoped she didn't have any tricks up her sleeve. Toward the bottom of the hill, a group of centaurs had gathered, forming a search party before vanishing into the forest.

Once he was close to Zel, he knelt at her side, drawing the dagger from his pouch. Her eyes were cast downhill, a miserable look on her face.

He grabbed her hand gently, her eyes going wide.

"It's me," he whispered near her ear. Careful not to stab himself, he slid the dagger through the chain holding her down, using his other hand to keep holding it up. Putting the dagger away, he guided Zel's hand to where he had cut the links, closing her fist over the break.

Zel let out a little cough, and rubbed her nose. "What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Wait for the signal. Ratu is on her way." As if summoned from the aether, a snake slithered up behind Zel and crawled onto her back. Standing up, he looked over at the shaman, the Grand Stallion, and then his guard.

Her gaze was down the valley floor, and he looked at her saddle bag. Moving quietly, he came up behind the group. Luckily, the tribal leaders were now so loud that Mike didn't worry about being too quiet, and walked up to the centaur. It was a simple flap that held her pouch shut, and he carefully opened the flap and pulled the bottle out.

Inside, Daisy looked pathetic. However, at the revelation that she was now inside of a floating bottle, her antennae picked up, and she placed her hands against the glass.

Mike took a few steps back and felt his heart drop when the shaman whipped around, her eyes on the floating bottle.

Mike yanked the stopper open and Daisy shot into the sky, disappearing from sight. However, the shaman threw a handful of powder that made everybody start coughing. Rubbing it out of his eyes, Mike saw that it had stuck to his skin, outlining him in yellow.

The shaman waved her staff in a large circle, a glowing trail forming behind it. In response, he threw the bottle at her, cracking her right in the head. She stumbled back, dropping her staff. The Grand Stallion barely caught her before she fell.

“Sorry!” He ran at Zel, who quickly stood up and turned around. With a leap, he landed on her back and she took off at a gallop, hooves thundering on the ground.

“Take us to the tower!” he hollered, grabbing Ratu and coiling her around his neck. Shouts of alarm were followed by a loud acoustical blast from behind. When he looked back, the shaman was blowing into one end of her staff, and the centaurs at the bottom of the valley were already running like crazy to get up the hill.

“I can’t outrun them,” Zel said between breaths. “They’re hunters and not carrying anyone.”

“I’ve already thought about that. Where’s the other vial?”

Zel’s hand went to her blouse, and deftly plucked it out with her fingers. She held it over her shoulder and he took it with his free hand. He had a death grip on her waist, but kept sliding back every few seconds.

“Will this work?” he yelled.

She gave him a thumbs up, her legs thundering loudly beneath them. Down in the valley, the centaurs were charging toward them, bows and arrows drawn. Zel was already heading toward a rocky portion of the mountain in a different direction than where they had come from. Picking her way up the stones carefully, they started moving up a steeper incline. Mike held the vial in one hand, wondering how much devastation it would cause.

“Should I throw it?”

“Wait until we’re higher.” She grunted between words, fighting for air. The guard was the first one to the rocks, her blade drawn.

Zel stopped long enough to kick a loose rock backward. It rolled toward the guard and she moved out of the way. Zel did this a few more times, but it slowed them down just as much as it slowed the guard. By now, the shaman, Grand Stallion, and the tribal leaders were at the bottom of the incline. Some of the faster centaurs were there as well, and a few of them stopped to draw arrows from their quivers.

“I’m throwing it!” Mike pulled the cork and Zel came to a stop. Mike chucked the vial down the incline, watching it clatter off a few rocks and then roll to a stop several feet from the shaman.

As if her tail had caught on fire, Zel bolted up the hill so fast that Mike nearly fell off. Ratu squeezed tightly to his neck, and he had to slap her a few times to get her to loosen. He held on to her now with both hands, the trail so steep that he wished she had a proper saddle.

There was a loud boom behind them. He looked over his shoulder to see a dark cloud of smoke swirling around the centaurs, engulfing them completely. They vanished, the cloud catching up to the guard who pursued them and nearly making it to Zel’s feet.

A breeze from the mountain caught the smoke and dispersed it downhill. As the smoke dispersed, he could make out silver and pink sparkling motes that drifted across the centaurs. Those who were still far enough away ran from the cloud as their brethren fell down, clutching their chests.

“Is that what I think it is?”

Zel laughed, then found a flat area to turn around.

“The difficulty was creating a dispersion method that would allow the pollen to hover without just blowing it away but also keep it confined enough so that it wouldn’t catch you in the blast.” Her face then turned bright red. “The other problem was mixing it into the powder without accidentally inhaling it.”

The rocky trail they were on ascended rapidly with a series of narrow switchbacks that had Mike looking straight down into the chaos below. Sliding both hands around Zel’s waist, he held on tight as she continued upward at a leisurely pace.

Down below was an entirely different story. The guard who had been chasing them was already running back to the others below, a frantic look on her face, her hands running across her body. The tribal leaders stood perfectly still for several seconds, their flanks rippling as they fought the impulses that the Mandragora pollen had triggered inside of them.

The shaman was the first to break. She turned her backside toward the tribal leaders and moved her tail to one side, wiggling her ass back and forth while squeezing her breasts. Such was the ferocity of her groping that she pulled off some of the decorative feathers and beads in the process, scattering them on the rocky ground.

The Grand Stallion was the first to respond, his massive, swollen member swinging below his belly as he trotted toward her, his legs shaking with excitement. His front half lifted to mount her, and he grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her head back while thrusting his giant cock inside of her. The shaman let out a cry, the skin on her flanks rippling while he pounded her.

The centaur who had been chasing them rejoined the group. Struck by indecision, she approached the closest centaur and knelt down to suck the cock of one of the tribal leaders, her mouth stretching wide as she took an impossible length into her mouth. He had his face buried in the ass of one of the female leaders, eagerly running his tongue through her folds while swatting her tail away from his face.

A chain of centaurs formed around them. The guard was mounted by a male hunter who pounded her from behind and the female leader was mounted from the front, gagging on the large horse cock in her throat. It was like watching a twisted game of Tetris, only the pieces were all horny centaurs, and several of them fell over each other trying to lay claim to a piece of ass.

“Holy shit.” Mike said, his eyes on the giant orgy below. There were easily twenty or thirty of them now, and Mike marveled at how each one to join the group managed to find somewhere to connect. Small fights broke out as both male and female centaurs were pulled from their partners to couple with someone else, partners being exchanged without a word.. They yelled, moaned, and cried out in agony, all fighting for sexual release.

Down the hill, a few smaller clusters of centaurs had formed where the smoke had drifted, and Mike recognized a couple of Orion’s hunters from the mountain. Orion was nowhere to be seen, and Mike’s best guess was that he was probably almost at the ocean by now, if not running back. He couldn’t decide if Orion would be happy or upset that he had missed out.

“They’re going to be so pissed when that wears off,” Zel said, her eyes on the path ahead. “You have no idea.”

“How long will that be?”

“That’s a good question. It’s good for at least one orgasm, but it might last longer because of something else I added to it.”

“My semen?”

“Nope. Fairy cum.” The back of her neck turned red. “I’ve been, uh, collecting some of that too. I have a theory that the magical properties of their natural lubricants would strengthen the natural properties of the pollen. Either way, we both know that first orgasm will be pretty intense, and I’m hoping that they will be too exhausted for immediate pursuit.”

“That was not the answer I was expecting.”

“To be honest, I ran out. We can discuss that at a later date.”

Down below, the Grand Stallion let out a shriek like a wild boar and fell away from the shaman, his cock leaking sperm on the ground. No sooner had he left than another male took his place, and he knelt down to pick up his staff, trying feebly to point uphill at Zel and issue commands. However, his cock grew hard again and he tossed the staff to one side, then yanked a male off of a female and took his place.

“Looks like it’s good for a bit longer at least,” Mike pointed out.

“Yeah, well there’s going to be hell to pay. Centaurs have strict laws against infidelity in the herd, and I imagine they are going to spend weeks trying to sort this one out. I’m also betting at least a few pregnancies result from this, and I’m grateful that I won’t have to help with birthing duties. Hold on.” Zel braced a hand against a rock and jumped, using her arms to pull them up.

“This path is terrifying, by the way.”

“More terrifying than being down there?” she asked.

“No,” he admitted. What would have happened if he had been caught down there? Nothing good. The way the centaurs were attacking each other told him he would get tossed around and possibly trampled. “Do centaurs really go up this way?”

“This path is a shortcut to the tower that was carved for emergencies only. So the answer is no, not regularly. My people only came this way if there were intruders trying to break in to the tower, but they quit doing that after Emily and the Snow Queen took up residence up there. Once they were inside, they locked it up and nobody could get in.”

“When was this?”

“It happened either when I was young or before I was born, it’s hard to remember. They would pop in and out of the valley, and Emily attempted to find out information about the tower from the centaurs. They treated her very poorly, so she and the Snow Queen used to just come down into the valley and mess with us from time to time. Nothing serious at first. But after they moved into the tower, strange magic could be felt coming from the tower day and night. Months passed by, and then nasty storms arrived and flooded the valley out. Centaurs died in the deluge, so several of us went to demand justice.”

“I bet that went well.”

“That’s when we discovered that Emily had left. The Snow Queen froze the mountaintop and created that thing you saw, the dragon, to protect her. She mainly keeps to herself, but every now and then some foolish centaur would get the idea to go after her. They were never seen again.”

“So how did you get to Earth?”

“My aunt figured that if Emily had left, there must be some sort of portal. She hunted for it extensively along the mountain, careful to avoid that thing, and finally found it in that grove of trees. For over a year, she used a variety of communion spells to communicate with earth and forest spirits in an attempt to figure out how to use it. Eventually she spoke with some creatures who had seen the portal in action, and you know what happened next.”

“I do.” Down below, a couple of centaurs had wandered away from the orgy and collapsed on the ground. Mike and Zel were gaining in elevation quickly now. “Looks like a couple of them are done.”

“Up ahead is one of the wider switchbacks. Why don’t you hop off my back? I’m getting tired and I think we have a good enough lead.” He saw the area she spoke of and slid down with her help once they were there. Ratu fell away from his neck and transformed in midair, her adult form appearing in front of them.

“Now that was exciting,” she said, gazing down below. “I can almost smell their arousal from up here.”

“Thanks for the archery spell, by the way. I was worried it wouldn’t work.”

“Me too. I nearly ripped one of your arms off by accident.” Ratu shook her head. “Control spells are dangerous when you make a body do something it isn’t really capable of.”

“Like archery?”

She shrugged. “Your body is capable, but untrained. For it to seem natural, I literally took control of your arms and made them do my bidding. You could have fought me if you wanted, but it would have been difficult. The same spell to make you outrun the centaur, however, would have easily broken your legs.”

“She’s right,” Zel added. “I’m just glad you had a plan. I heard the centaurs talking about what you said about Orion, so a bunch of them came to the Trial just to see him kick your ass. If they hadn’t, we would have had to run through them to get up here.”

“What about your father? Did he at least seem glad to see you?”

Zel let out a sigh, but remained silent. He decided to leave it alone.

They continued up the long trail, and Mike became winded. Ratu seemed fine at first, but eventually turned back into a snake and rode on Zel’s back. They both were wheezing for air by the time they reached the top of the incline, and a wider trail appeared that wound around the mountain.

“That was the hard part,” Zel said. “I wish I had some water, my head is starting to hurt.”

“Same.” His shirt was soaked in sweat. Down below, the centaurs had set up what looked like a triage center of sorts. Some of them were still fucking in tiny clusters, but the rest had been scattered about. Tables of supplies had been set up, and he could make out poultices being applied.

A few hunters were now ascending the trail, forming a single line. There were ten of them and they were carrying an assortment of weapons.

“Shit. They’re gonna catch up to us before we get to the tower.” Zel’s shoulders slumped. “I’m too tired to run.”

Ratu reappeared, a crooked grin on her face. “I’ve got this.”

She moved her fingers in an intricate pattern, summoning beams of light into her hand. They coalesced into a sphere of light that swirled with color, like a lava lamp in fast motion. “Find a rock, something you can throw.”

They looked around, and Mike found a jagged stone that looked decent. He handed it over, and the light soaked into it like water into a sponge.

“You’re not going to hurt them, are you?” Zel asked.

“The thought crossed my mind, but no. I don’t think your people are bad. They’re just stubborn and a bit misguided.” Ratu took the stone and hefted it in her hand. It glowed brightly for a moment and she threw it.

Arcing through the air, Mike would have lost track of the stone if not for the glow. It flew fairly far, bouncing a few times until it landed still quite a distance from the hunters. Shortly after landing, a giant plume of glittery smoke boiled out of the stone and over the mountain, causing the hunters to flee down the trail. Many of the centaurs below shrieked in terror and dropped everything they were doing to get away from the oncoming cloud.

“It looks just like the sex grenade.” He watched as one of the last pair of mating centaurs tried to escape the smoke, the woman hopping forward with the man still thrusting into her.

“Won’t work like it. That cloud will hover for a bit and then drift down toward the valley. Eventually someone will get caught in it and realize it’s just an illusion, so we should probably get going.” Ratu took Mike by the hand and started up the trail. “Let’s go.”

They fled up the hill, ignoring the occasional cry of terror that drifted over the mountain. Mike couldn’t tell if the screams had stopped or they were now too far away to hear anything as the trail ascended into the mountain, boxing them in. They came to a crossroads and Zel took them to the left up a winding trail that look very unused and washed out in a few areas. Crude signs warned intruders to go back, but they disregarded them and trudged forward.

Eventually they got to a path that led farther up the mountain, but Zel led them down a smaller path that went downhill. The small mountain range was mostly rock by now, and they moved through the cool shadows of the mountain as the sun crept toward the horizon. A chill wind ate through his clothes and banks of snow appeared as if from nowhere. Soon they were walking through a small snow drift toward the edge of a cliff.

Once they were near, the trail descended sharply along the cliffs edge and there it was, the tower. It hadn’t been visible from the mountain due to the large stone formation it looked like it had been carved out of, but it stood several stories tall, proudly overlooking the valley beneath it. The path terminated at a large gap in the ground and they all stopped.

The tower’s drawbridge was pulled up. At the edge of the precipice was a drop of at least a few hundred feet, but it was hard to tell.

“Any thoughts on how to get across?” Mike looked at Ratu and Zel.

“No ideas from me. My people had no interest in getting in, and we are shit at rope climbing.” She looked at the cliff. “You might be able to scramble across the stones of the mountain, maybe.”

“I’m going to veto that unless you have a potion that lets me climb like a spider. Or float. Or teleport.”

“Even if I did, they took all my stuff. Not super happy about that, but…” she shrugged, her breasts rippling under her shirt.

“Ratu? You got any tricks?”

“Yes, but there is an anti-magic aura around the stones. If you flew over there, you would feel a brief static shock and then fall.” She looked up. “I see windows. Maybe if we had a long enough rope and a grappling hook?”

“Fuck. I was really hoping we could hide here until early morning and then sneak out through the portal when the centaurs were sleeping. Any chance we could make the portal from here?”

Zel shook her head. “That whole area is a mess right now. Even with the trails intact, that’s at least a couple of hours from here, and it’s going to get very dark on the mountain. We could find a light source, but then they would know right where we are.”

“Wonderful.” He hung his head. “I really don’t have any ideas right now.”

They stood there in silence, and he was about to suggest that they go find somewhere else to hide when the drawbridge suddenly lowered. It took several minutes before scraping gently onto the stones by their feet. He took a tentative step onto the thick, wooden planks. Bands of iron reinforced the structure, and he walked carefully across, his eyes on the large opening.

A tiny ball of light shot toward them and hovered halfway across. It expanded, revealing Daisy. Her torso and waist were covered in yellow furs, and her arms and legs were dark black. She signed something to Mike, then pointed down the mountain.

“I’m sorry Daisy, I don’t know sign language.” He held up his hands apologetically.

She signed something else, pointing to herself and then him.

“I know your name because I saw one of Emily’s memories. The one where you guys met Bigfoot. Way before all of this craziness.”

Her limbs became a blur of movement as she hastily signed something else.

“I have no idea what you are trying to say. Slow down.”

Daisy pantomimed opening a bottle.

“Is that why you lowered the bridge?”

A nod.

“Okay then, so we can stay here for the night?”

Another nod.

“Is... is the Snow Queen here?”

This time, Daisy shook her head.

“She’s telling the truth,” Ratu said, her eyes briefly blazing with magic. “I don’t sense Yuki or her magic anywhere nearby, though I do detect traces of... something. Nothing that worries me.”

He let out a sigh. Finally, a stroke of good luck. He crossed the drawbridge, grateful at how wide and stable it was. Behind him, Zel’s hooves clinked against the metal bands when she walked. Once they were across, Daisy flew into a small room nearby and fiddled with some levers that moved easily when she pushed against them with her whole body.

Behind them, the drawbridge pulled itself up, clunking into place.