

Breakdown in Negotiations

Mike pulled his shirt on in front of the bathroom mirror, Naia watching him from the tub. He could see the look of concern on her face, knew that the question was coming, and he had no idea how to dodge it.

“Are you okay?”

He let out a sigh. “No.”

“Tell me.”

He didn't want to. He never wanted to talk about it with anybody. Yet, when he turned to face her directly, he remembered that she was the other part of his soul. She completed him in a way he couldn't quite comprehend, and the fact that he wanted to hide his feelings filled him with shame.

“The fast version.” He stood right in front of her. “Cecilia took the souls of the poltergeists with her.”

“That I know.”

“When she did, I saw... things.” Even now, it was a fading memory, a dream not meant to be remembered. Something about the light had called to him in a primal way, a way that surpassed even his love for Naia and the others. It had been terrifying just how close he had been to simply giving everything away just to step into its warm comfort. “It was a place of pure peace, just a shoreline on the waters of eternity, I guess. And I wanted to go, but I heard a voice. My dad's voice. I knew it was him, but I couldn't explain to you how I knew, and all he did was say my name. I wanted so badly to meet him, to ask him all the questions I had, but...”

Naia grabbed him, hugging him tight against her. “Death comes for us all. You got to see what awaits after we pass, but only a piece of it. The terrifying part of dying comes from letting go of this world and still not knowing what comes next.”

“I guess.”

“Your father will wait for you. I need you here now.” She fixed him with those deep, penetrating eyes of hers. “When you die, you go beyond those shores. What you saw was just the doorway. Don't let that experience fool you into suddenly knowing what comes for any of us.”

“Why was my dad there?”

“Often we find those we miss the most waiting for us on those shores. It is no big surprise that you would hear from him. You will walk those shores one day and find out for sure, but today is not that day.”

“I just...” He put his forehead to hers, unable to voice it aloud. A swirl of complex emotions ran through him, everything he had been forced to experience at the same time. When the light had washed over him, he had been forced to confront his entire life, condensed down into mere moments. Once Cecilia had vanished, those thoughts and feelings unpacked like a can full of spring-loaded snakes, overwhelming him.

It's okay, lover. Naia's voice echoed in the back of his mind, her arms squeezing him tight. He took a deep breath and let it go, the emotions flowing out of him. *Give it all to me. My waters are deep.*

He stood there for a few minutes, his emotions rushing from him like the tide going out. When he finally let go, she kissed the tears from his cheek.

“Better?” she asked.

“Once I get Jenny back.” He wiped his face on his sleeve.

Outside his room, he heard one of the planks squeak. When he walked out of the bathroom, he saw Sofia duck her head to walk through the doorway.

“Is this a bad time?” she asked.

“No, I’m good. What’s up?”

“Tink came and got me just now. She said you’re going after the Rat King again and I wanted you to have something first.” She held out a piece of fabric. “I’m not done with the rest of it, but wanted to give you what I had.”

“What is it?” He watched her unfold it. The fabric shimmered oddly beneath the light, both purple and black. Once unfolded, he realized he was looking at a vest.

“Do you remember when we were in the Labyrinth and found Ratu’s skin?” She handed it over to him. “Naga skin is notoriously durable. I used some to make a nice pair of oven mitts, but had plenty left over and decided to make you some clothes from it.”

“That’s... does Ratu know you made me a vest out of her old skin?”

“She does. It was her idea when she found out I had taken some. She even helped me preserve some of its magical properties. It’s strong against fire and earth magic and is very hard to puncture. You can’t wear anything under it though, it has to be against your flesh. It was supposed to be a full tunic, but I ran out of time, so this is what I have.

“Thank you, Sofia.” He took off his shirt and slid the vest on, covering up his scars. Once against his skin, the fabric tightened, molding itself to his torso. It was uncomfortable at first, but the cool fabric warmed up to match his body heat and became a bit more pliable. He realized that he could see no seams and wondered how she had stitched it together.

Sofia looked at him oddly, then let out a sigh. “Try not to die.”

He thought briefly about Cecilia. Some day, she would take him to that shore. For now, he could wait. “I’ll do my best.”

“Good.” She leaned over him to check the fit, then gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “Put your regular shirt on over it. That way nobody will suspect you’re wearing it.”

“Good idea.” He slid his shirt back on, chasing away the chill of the room. “Are you coming with us?”

She shook her head. “The rats are officially in the Library. As much as I want to help, those little fuckers are tearing up the place and destroying irreplaceable books.” She shook her head. “If they chew a hole in the wrong place, we could end up dealing with something far worse than rats. Remember, the Library used to be tied to other places in the world. A hole in the right place could let anybody in, geas be damned.”

“Shit.” He strapped on his dagger and stuck Zel’s vials in his pocket. “Guess I better go cut off the head of the snake. Pun intended.”

“You’re going to kill the Rat King?” she asked.

“Smash stupid fuck.” Tink stood in the door, her eyes on Mike. “Husband smell different, like snake face. We go now.”

“What on Earth is that?” Mike asked her. The goblin was holding a strange looking club that looked like it had been reinforced with thick bands of metal.

“This is Tink’s Rat Smasher. Big surprise for Rat King.” She hoisted the club over her shoulder and left. He followed her out and down the stairs, bidding farewell to Sofia outside of the office. He watched her disappear through the portal, the light vanishing and becoming a simple bookshelf once more.

“I wish this place had a user’s manual.” It was easily the hundredth time he had wished it.

“You and I both.” Beth stood at the base of the stairs in a pair of jeans and a sweater, the rat next to her looking nervous. He narrowed his eyes at the rodent, fighting the urge to give him a kick.

“Lead the way,” he told it. The rat nodded, then took them up to the second floor. Mike expected to go in one of the doors, but was surprised when they walked into the servant’s room.

“We closed this one up,” he said, but the rat pushed on a hidden panel in the wall, revealing a thin hallway. It went between the rooms, leading deep into the house.

“Secret passage,” Tink said sagely, walking in front of him with her goggles on. “House have normal secrets too.”

“I guess.” He followed behind her, turning on his flashlight. The hall was dusty with large cobwebs in the corners. Rat prints in the thick dust let him know they were on the right trail.

“His Lordship will not be expecting you, so we will proceed with caution when we reach the royal chambers.” The speaker adjusted his plastic glasses, his whiskers trembling. “He is in a poor mood since the demon doll burned down one of his favorite rooms.”

“How large is your kingdom?” Beth’s question was innocent, but Mike’s mind immediately went to how many rat traps he would need to order from Amazon.

“We number in the thousands and our rooms in the hundreds. We live in the forgotten places, the lost temples of the Maya, the pyramids beneath the sands. When you see an abandoned home off the highway, we are there. A broken down factory in the city, we are there. A shipwreck off the coast of-”

“We get it!” Mike didn’t mean to yell, but it had slipped out. The rat’s voice had been steadily climbing higher, grinding down on his nerves. “If the rats live in all these great places, then why the fuck do you want my house?”

“Your home is bigger than all of these places combined and it is safe. The Rat King wishes to expand his dominion.”

“I’m afraid that eminent domain only applies to the government in the human world,” Beth told him. “Your king cannot simply take away my client’s home.”

“We do not follow the laws of the human world. The laws of nature are far stronger.”

"I'm guessing we're about to find that out," Mike said, his eyes on the hole in the floor up ahead. Was he about to walk into an actual fight? Could he kill the Rat King? In the back of his mind, he had always wondered if he could kill somebody to protect his family, and he was having a tough time seeing the Rat King as a person. The speaker stopped just before the hole and held up a paw.

"He is holding court. We must be cautious or his subjects will attack you."

"Holding court?" Mike looked at Beth.

"Kind of like civil suits. Or schmoozing at a party. Or whatever." She shrugged. "But it means a lot of them will be there."

"More to smash." Tink's voice came out as a low growl. She shifted the club on her shoulder. "Tink tired of rats."

"Same here, Tink." He watched her jump into the hole ahead of him and land with a loud thud and a swearing streak. "I guess I'll go down and give you a hand," he said to Beth.

"Why?" Beth sat down and turned while dropping, her fingers grabbing the ledge. She let go and fell the last couple of feet, landing far easier than Tink had. The rat jumped down without any issues, landing in a crouch. "You coming?"

"Yeah." He sat down like Beth had and slid forward, rolling over onto his stomach. Unlike Beth, his legs swung too far on his descent and he lost his grip. Tink and Beth managed to grab his shoulders, preventing him from smashing his head, but his combined weight carried them all to the floor with a bang. The air rushed from his lungs and something popped in his back, sending pain through his ribs.

"Husband okay?" The goblin was currently pinned beneath him, her voice muffled by his neck.

"Yeah, sorry." He stood up and checked his pockets. To his relief, the vials were still intact and his dagger was in place. He helped Tink stand. "Let's continue."

They stood in a long hallway which terminated at an elevator door. When it opened, he saw a familiar sight. It was the Rat King's throne room. He sat on his throne, leaning his head on one paw and holding his makeshift scepter in the other. The emerald gleamed in the lights of the room, and he saw that countless rats were piled along the edges, all turning to regard him. The Rat King sat up, adjusting his crown.

"You dare to bring humans here?" he hissed, smacking the butt of his scepter on the table of his highchair. "This is treachery!"

The rats around the room started closing in, teeth bared.

"Please, Your Majesty!" The speaker put himself between them and the rats, his hands outstretched. "They have come to get rid of the doll."

The rats withdrew, glittering eyes looking to one another and then the Rat King.

"Your champion has been defeated," the Rat king informed them. "We have trapped her in a church where she can do no harm."

"False." Beth spoke now, her eyes narrowing at the king. "Whatever prison you can put her in is temporary at best and will only stoke her fury."

"Who is this creature who speaks so freely in my court?" the king demanded.

"I'm a lawyer," Beth told them. "And I'm here to straighten this out." Mike nearly laughed when he saw the rats move away from her. It was clear they were uncertain what the word lawyer meant, and Beth showed no fear of them.

"Speak, lawyer." The Rat King stroked his beard.

"We are here to retrieve our friend Jenny. You destroyed her home in your attempt to scare us out of ours. If you let us retrieve her in peace, we would be happy to let you keep the rooms you have already claimed outside of the main house."

"You think you can come here and negotiate terms with me? I will accept nothing except your absolute surrender." He waved his scepter, the emerald glowing with a sinister light. "Even now, the portal to her church is being sealed as we speak. When we finish, she will be across the great waters in the old country."

"Seriously?" Mike stepped in front of Beth, his hand on the dagger. "We came here once to greet you with open arms and you dropped us down a hole. You trash my house, release dangerous spirits, and now you're going to trap my friend somewhere we can't find her?"

"Silence!" He slammed the scepter down again, the light flashing. From behind the highchair, a dark shape stepped free, drawing its blade. The suit of armor gleamed in the light of the desk lamp, the rats around it cheering wildly. The visor was up, and Mike could tell that it was empty. It was yet another automaton.

The Rat King pointed the scepter at Mike. The emerald sent a beam of light into the the suit of armor, light that swirled around it like a swarm of fireflies. "Kill him," he ordered. The suit of armor charged at Mike, blade held low to stab him in the gut.

"Fuck!" Mike braced himself for impact, but it never came. Tink had stepped around him, bringing down her heavy club on the outstretched sword. The club struck hard enough that it ripped the gauntlet holding the sword free of the suit.

"Tink hate metal man!"

She charged the armor, clobbering its legs. The metal bent inward, the suit limping awkwardly in a circle, still trying to get at Mike. She pounded it with the club, knocking it on to the ground where she stood over it, hollering and caving in the breastplate. She grabbed the helmet and ripped it off, tossing it into the crowd of rats that had been stunned into silence. Some of the closer ones ran at her, claws outstretched.

"Tink hate filthy pooping rats!"

Tink's movements seemed clumsy at first, but Mike realized that she was swinging the club hard enough that her whole body moved with it. She was using her entire body as a counterweight, allowing her swings to carry her around in a steadily growing circle. The first rat that made it to her was smashed, its limp body colliding with the one behind it. Tink was vicious, bringing the club around to kill those brave enough to get near her.

"And Tink hate you!"

Her wild swings had placed her in the center of the room, fifteen feet from the Rat King. She twisted the handle of the club and the metal pieces sprung outward, unfolding to reveal a thick hole in

the top of the club. Several lenses flicked across her field of view, her goggles glowing from within. She fell onto her back, using her feet to aim the club at the Rat King.

She yanked on a metal latch and a harpoon, roughly half the length of the club, launched out of the opening, piercing the Rat King through the chest and pinning him to his chair. His eyes were frozen wide in surprise, the chamber now completely silent.

Tink grabbed the small cord attached to her spear and gave it a hard yank. The chair tipped forward, the rats scattering out of the way. When the Rat King fell to the ground, his scepter clattered across the floor where Beth quickly grabbed it. His tiny crown rolled across the floor and bounced off of Tink's bare feet. She picked up the crown and put it on her head.

"Goblin law. Tink kill king. Now Tink king." She picked her club back up, giving it another twist. The mechanism pulled the metal pieces back into place, and she hefted the club onto her shoulder. "Fight all challengers, smash into jam."

There were several moments of silence. The speaker of the rats finally broke it.

"You... you killed our king."

"Your king killed himself the moment he threatened me." Mike pointed at Tink, who bared her teeth at the rats. "You thought the doll was my champion, but you were wrong. Tink is my champion. And unless you're hiding an even bigger suit of armor or a sofa with chainsaw arms tied to it, I'm guessing that my champion smashed yours."

"That... that..." The speaker's mouth opened and closed several times. "I don't know what to say."

"Tink say give creepy doll back or Tink smash whole kingdom." She leered at the rats surrounding her. "Make rat paste, feed to snake face, order of new Rat King."

"She can't be king. She isn't even a rat!" The speaker shook his head. "They will never listen to you, only one of our own."

"But they might listen to you." Beth walked up behind Tink and took the crown off her head. "Maybe we can arrange a truce between your new kingdom and our own? You seem like a reasonable rodent, and a truce with the Radley House is preferable to what we could do next. I know a minotaur who is ten times scarier who would love to level this place just for the fun of it."

"This is... that is..." The speaker flinched away from her when Beth crouched down in front of him, but she gently placed the crown on his head. The rats in the room chattered amongst themselves.

"What do you think, Your Majesty?"

"I... I..." His whiskers twitched, and he turned to face the congregation. They all stared blankly back. Clearly this was a turn of events none of them had expected. He took off his glasses and pretended to polish the non-existent lenses. "Does anyone else lay claim to the throne?"

The rats in the room looked to each other and then at the fierce goblin in the center of the room. Perhaps there were some among them that had aspirations of royal grandeur, but Mike sincerely doubted that any of them wished to face Tink and her murderous club. A ripple started in the mass of fur as a small group of rats bowed, starting a chain reaction through the chamber. Eventually, the

congregation had become perfectly silent, their tails lifted in the air and curling through that of their neighbor. Mike hadn't realized just how long their tails were.

The speaker rat stood just a little higher, his nose sniffing at the air.

"Very well then. I accept."

-

"You had a spear gun hidden inside your club?" Beth asked Tink. They were being led down a long hall surrounded by dirt, insulation, and drywall. The rats that were taking them threw cautionary glances at the group, clearly still afraid.

"Secret weapon for bad king." Tink smiled, all her teeth showing. "Rope in case of big fall, but work here too."

"You really are something." Mike patted her on the head, making her beam happily. He felt supremely bad about the whole encounter; he had been next to useless. Even Beth had been able to negotiate with them afterward while he just stood and watched.

Guess I can't fuck away all of my problems, can I? The stray thought made him snort out loud, and he ignored the look he got from Beth.

They finally arrived at a small hole in the wall. He could tell it used to be larger by the discolored material around it. The rats around the hole were chewing on a strange material and sticking it into place to plug the hole.

"By order of the king, cease!" The speaker had come with them, the crown perched magically atop his head. He now wore the red cloak of the old king, whom the other rats had promptly devoured. The new king had informed them that this was how they preserved their magic upon seeing their looks of disgust.

The rats stopped, gazing at the new king in amazement.

"Widen the portal for our guests. By Royal Decree." Gone was the nervousness in his voice. He held the meter stick scepter in one hand, the emerald gone. Beth had removed the gem upon Mike's suggestion and convinced the rats that it was now considered a token of their allegiance. It had promptly vanished in her pocket.

The rats looked at each other and shrugged, then spit out what they had been chewing. They went to work, gnawing on the surface of the wall until it could be comfortably walked through. Looking through the hole, Mike saw that he was staring down at the floor of an old church. The pews were broken apart beneath them, tossed around the room as if an earthquake had hit.

"I guess we need to go in there." He looked at the rats. "I guess do you have some rope or a ladder we could use?"

"Go get them some," the king commanded. The rats scurried off, leaving the group behind. Once the others were gone, he turned to face the group. "Your friend murdered her way through our tunnels and we discovered, quite by accident, that the church weakened her. We sealed her in the crypt beneath, but she still managed to smash up the place. I really hope that you can convince her to forgive the actions of our late king."

"We'll do our best." Beth crouched down, a smile on her face. "I think the new king will do a much better job, don't you?"

The new king pawed at his cheek bashfully. "Yes. My ascension is quite unorthodox, but not entirely unheard of. I fear that the doll is but one of your many allies. The previous tenant of your home was quite formidable indeed."

"Emily." Mike sat on the floor. "You knew her?"

"I have been the mouthpiece of the king for many years. I was present for their negotiations." He stood now with pride. "I could tell you many things, if you wished."

"I wish." Mike cocked his head.

"And once you present something of value for trade, I will gladly give it to you."

He fought the urge to grab the rat by the scruff of his neck again. "Excuse me?"

"It is our custom. Emily promised us ownership over your home upon her demise in exchange for our services." His whiskers twitched.

"Yeah, well she was planning to screw you over. She was trying to become immortal." He sighed. "And cause me headaches, apparently."

"Can the trade be anything?" Beth asked.

The rat nodded. "Something of equal or greater value."

"How about a name? A human name to symbolize our friendship." She smiled. "Friends call each other by their names."

"Um... what kind of name?"

"How about Reggie? It's short for regent, which is kind of like a king."

"Reggie?" His nose twitched. "I think I like that name."

"So Reggie." Mike leaned against the wall, his arms crossed in front of him. "You've got a name, we want information. What was the deal that Emily made with your people?"

"My kind are able to chew holes in the fabric of reality. There are certain rules we have to abide by, hence why the portals are not always perfect." He pointed to the one in front of them. "She found us by making a portal of her own, a process which can take quite a long time for even a powerful sorceress. For the rats, it can be a matter of minutes if pressed for time."

"And?"

"Emily had us chewing holes into some very old, very forgotten places. Places that had been sealed away, either by accident or on purpose. She was hunting down powerful artifacts and didn't have the time to search via portals of her own."

"So what was she looking for?"

Reggie shook his head. "She never told us. She simply gave us descriptions of where she wanted to go and we did our best. The walls of this place are like magic, enabling us to chew almost anywhere. We quickly discovered hazards in some of these places, and she used her magic to keep us protected."

“Did she find what she was looking for?”

“I think so. One day, we chewed our way into a tower, a place overlooking a large valley of green with a river down the middle. Her description. We were warned that a dangerous foe lurked inside who would kill us on sight, and that she would handle it from there. She was gone for several days before returning.”

“And what did she have with her?”

The rat pointed at Beth. “My king spotted the gemstone in her possession, but only briefly. She promised us more work soon, but needed some time. A few days later, she tried to purge us from the house, but rats are clever. We had several tunnels hidden all through the house and she sent terrifying beings after us that were easily lost. A small tunnel, no bigger than a rat, was chewed into a place she called the Vault. It was there where we reclaimed the emerald in hopes of buying peace, but our king discovered it could be used to animate furniture and chose to wield it as a weapon.”

“So all your traps were for her?”

“Or for the creatures she sent.” Reggie shivered. “We built our tunnels to keep the colony safe and sealed the doors on our floor. Then, one day, the attacks stopped. We tried to venture out, but could no longer step foot past the stairs. Many of our old tunnels would suddenly turn back on themselves and we were forced to remain and wait.”

Mike leaned forward. “Wait, she just disappeared?”

“Yes. We had always been forbidden to leave the second floor, but had free access to come and go as we chose if we stayed unseen. But then we couldn’t leave at all, forced to remain in the tunnels we already had.”

“The spell.” He looked at Beth. “She made herself forget.”

“How would that accomplish anything?”

“The geas. Until the Caretaker discovers that part of the house, it’s like it doesn’t exist.”

“But the second floor has always been there. Even if Emily forgot about it, the others would still have access.”

“True.” Something was nagging him, an idea in the back of his mind. “The house expanded when you moved in. Do you think it would collapse again if you moved out?”

“Doesn’t change the fact that you would still remember the rooms. It seems like much of the home’s magic operates on memory. The expansion maybe relies on some sort of minimum occupancy, or something similar.”

“Tink, what do you—” He cut himself off. Tink was catching a catnap next to the portal, her club clutched tightly to her chest. He would ask her later. “Based on your logic, what would happen if you moved out? Would the house shrink? What if I made myself forget the second floor after you left?”

“Logically? None of this makes sense.” She picked up a stone and tossed it into the hole. It fell to the floor of the church below. “But fantasy logic?” Yeah, I can see it.”

“That sounds like a lot of planning.” If that was the case, does that mean that Emily had kicked someone out of the house? He knew that she had done so to Garrett, but the rats had made it seem like

a recent event. It didn't make much sense, not based on the memories he had shared with Emily. "When we get back, I'll see if Naia can let me back into Emily's memories. I bet there's a clue in there."

"You can do that?"

He shrugged. "Just the one time. It was... interesting." He had re-lived a sexual encounter inside of Emily's body, one that he often thought of. He had also re-lived a magical sexual assault that had left him feeling terrible. The experience had taught him not only about Emily, but himself. "I guess I'm more afraid of what I might learn about her now. When I did it last time, she was happy and, well, normal. Then an old acquaintance of hers started some trouble and the experience changed her. I think it changed all of them. I know it changed me."

"So even Emily had her problems. Do you think that's why she started manipulating magic?"

"Maybe." He frowned. "The rats said she opened a portal. Do you think she did it herself or did somebody help her?"

"Does it matter?"

"I guess not. But if she did it herself, it meant she learned how to do magic." He thought about being in bed with Zel, briefly controlling how the magic flowed through him. He wasn't certain that he was ever going to be able to do anything but create a magical orgasm feedback loop, but it was a start. "I was under the impression that using magic is difficult."

"I guess. I'm afraid you're an expert compared to what I know." She sighed. "I've got a demon stitched to my soul and have to avoid mirrors for the foreseeable future. I'm not entirely certain how you are able to handle all of this so well."

"I had a shitty childhood. You quickly learn that when you finally have something worth holding on to, you fight with every breath to keep it." His eyes fell on Tink. "Especially when you know they would do the same for you."

"I think I'm beginning to see that." When Beth said this, he noticed she was giving him a strange look.

"They're back." Reggie waved over the returning rats. They were holding a large coil of rope. "Let's get ready."

-

When the rope was tossed into the hole, gravity pulled it straight, making it look like a tightrope from their perspective. Tink elected to stay at the opening and watch their backs while Beth and Mike descended.

Mike went first. Beth watched him slide awkwardly down the rope and then let go too early, falling the last few feet. A cloud of dust billowed out from him.

"I'm fine," he called up, muttering something under his breath. "Jenny, are you there?"

When there wasn't an answer, Beth followed. The rope burned her hands and she nearly fell, her descent finally halted by Mike. The floor creaked sadly under her feet. She looked around the church, noticing that what little light there was came from gaps in the boarded up windows.

"Do you smell that?" He sniffed the air. She noticed it too.

"It's humid. I smell dust, rain and... plants?" The air had a very earthy smell with the scent of moss and grass. "I think we're in the jungle."

"Wait." Mike looked up at the ceiling and then out one of the dirty windows. The glass was cracked where she could see it. "This isn't like the castle in the sky. We're on the ground, wherever we are."

"Which means we are outside of the house." She felt her heart briefly stop. "If the Society finds out..."

"Oh, I doubt they know. And even if they did, we're only going to be here a few minutes." He turned his attention to the back of the church. "They said they sealed her in the crypt. I'm hoping the stairs are back there?"

"Yes!" Reggie called down to them from up above. "We trapped her in an old coffin and wedged it shut with a cross."

"Yeah, I've felt that way before too." Mike winked at Beth. "She really does have a temper."

"Agreed." They walked toward a door in the back. The door frame was falling out, the wood rotted clean through. Insects scurried away from the beam of Mike's flashlight and she caught a glimpse of a centipede nearly a foot long and gasped.

"Yeah, I'm barely holding it together myself." He shivered, the beam shaking. "Some of these look big enough to take off a finger or something." He found a set of concrete stairs at the back, waving her over. "I kind of wish I'd brought a face mask or something. There's mold everywhere."

"I think some of that is moss," she replied, but couldn't be sure. The walls were coated in a thick growth that she didn't want to touch. The thought of inhaling spores made her cough out of reflex. They walked together down the stairs and stopped at the bottom when they heard a loud thump.

"Jenny? It's Mike. We're here to rescue you." They stepped out into a large room underground with several tunnels spread out beneath it. Most of them had collapsed, and Beth saw plenty of human bones that had spilled out of the niches carved in the wall.

"Jenny?" She saw an old coffin sitting along the far wall. It was far newer than the rest of the church. Scattered around the coffin were the corpses of several rats and a giant wooden cross had been wedged between the top of the coffin and the ceiling.

The coffin shook, the cross knocking dirt loose from the ceiling.

"Jenny!" He handed the flashlight to Beth and ran to the coffin. Using his magic dagger, he quickly sliced a hole in the end and the doll tumbled free onto the cold dirt floor. Her dress was in tatters and her hair full of dirt. He scooped her up like a small child and hugged her to him. "I'm so glad you're safe."

Beth couldn't help but smile at the sight of a grown man hugging a doll. He brushed the dirt off of Jenny and walked back toward Beth. "Okay, let's go," she said.

"Jenny?" He was looking at the doll suspiciously now. "Jenny, are you here?"

"What's wrong?"

"I... I can't explain it, but when I let her out, it felt like she... left." He handed Beth the doll. "Here, see if you feel it too."

"I'm not sure—" she froze, contemplating Jenny's limp form. Gone was the familiar sinister aura from the doll. "You're right."

"Jenny?" He looked around, walking toward the back of the crypt. "Are you there?"

Above them, they heard the pews all slide across the floor, a noise that made them both jump. The temperature in the room dropped dramatically, causing her teeth to chatter. The flashlight's beam dimmed, revealing that the emerald in Beth's pocket was now glowing bright enough that she could see it through her clothes.

"Oh shit." Mike pushed past her and ran for the stairs, stopping when he realized that Beth still had the flashlight. "C'mon, hurry up."

"But how can she leave the doll? I thought she needed a host?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, but I'm guessing it has something to do with the nuclear powered glow stick in your pocket." He followed her up the stairs, but they both slowed when they got to the top. Gone was the musty darkness of the church, replaced by the smell of summer and a steady stream of daylight. They walked out into the main hall, and she turned off her flashlight.

"This isn't the same church we were in before." It looked fairly new, the pews recently polished. She looked out the window and realized she was looking at a town. "We're somewhere new."

"Not quite. Look harder." He tapped the upper part of the glass. "That distant hillside. What does it look like?"

She squinted, trying to figure out what he was seeing. It took a few moments, but she realized he hadn't been pointing at the hill, but the cloud above it. It was perfectly stationary, painted on to a distant canvas.

"I don't understand." It was like they were inside a giant diorama. "Where are we?"

Mike grabbed her arm and pulled her down as a small group of people walked by the window. They carried baskets and random goods slung to their backs, and she recognized the outfits they were wearing. "Were those puritans?"

"I guess so." He stood back up. "Jenny, what are you doing?"

The ground rumbled and suddenly a dark spirit stood just to the side of one of the buildings. Her dark hair hung over her face, her fingers outstretched. Long tendrils of green light streamed from Beth to Jenny, connecting the two of them through the stone. Jenny wagged her finger back and forth like a metronome, then vanished.

"She's using that emerald." Mike sighed. "Great."

"I thought the rats used it for bringing furniture to life? How is this remotely the same?"

"That sounds like a question for Ratu. The extent of my expertise is a knife so sharp it can cut a spirit." He shrugged. "It looks like she is draining its magic."

A voice boomed at them from all around, causing them to duck. It spoke forcefully enough that the windows rattling in their thin frames.

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Jane.

Where Jenny once stood, there was now a young girl with freckles and pretty brown eyes, a smile plastered on her face.

Jane was a good girl who loved her family and church and god.

A beam of light illuminated her from behind as Jane hugged a bible that appeared in her hands, then folded her hands together as if in prayer.

“We’re inside her head now, aren’t we?” Beth asked. It was like when she had spoken to Jenny in the dollhouse version of their house, only on a much larger scale.

“Yep.” He sighed again, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “This is her version of a tantrum.”

They heard the tinkling of bells by the front door of the church. It opened by itself, a large exit sign appearing above it.

“I guess we go that way.” Beth suggested.

“Jenny? We don’t have time for this!” Mike banged on the window and the ground shook beneath them hard enough that he fell. “Ow, shit.”

“I think we need to go along with it for now. C’mon.” Beth helped him up and they walked out the door together. They stepped out into the village and stopped to look around. People wandered around the village in small clusters.

She was a lovely girl who walked every day from her home to the well for some water.

Jane swung her bucket melodramatically, the spotlight following her progress. They walked behind her to the well near the center of town. Beth noticed that the well wasn’t very far from a set of gallows.

“Jenny, I—” Mike was knocked off his feet by the bucket Jane threw at him. He hit the ground with a loud thud and a new bucket reappeared in Jane’s hands. She scowled at him.

“Shhh,” Beth cautioned, helping him back up. The entire village had frozen in place, their heads turned toward the two of them. She waved her hand, imploring them to keep going. “We’re very sorry, please continue.”

The villagers waited several moments before resuming their movements. Jane took her bucket and lowered it into the well. To pull it back up, she had to bend over, the curves of her ass pressing against the homespun fabric. A second spotlight illuminated a man standing back by one of the houses, his eyes locked on the view.

Every day, she would catch the eye of a young man in the village. He was the son of a wealthy landowner and both of them were of marrying age.

Jane pulled the bucket out of the well and turned around, promptly spilling it on her blouse. She tried to cover herself up, her nipples now rock hard against the fabric beneath. The man stepped forward, kneeling to help her with the bucket.

But what Jane didn’t know was that someone else already had designs on the young man and his fortune.

The scene froze and became dark, a third spotlight appearing. From behind a nearby house, a young woman with blonde hair twisted into a braid snapped the bundle of sticks she was carrying in half. Beth heard Mike gasp.

The young woman looked just like Elizabeth, one of the Society witches.

Jane was unaware of the danger until it was too late. The lights rose and the figures in the village had moved. They surrounded the gallows now, but the hangman's noose had instead been replaced with a wooden stockade. Jane was crying, pleading silently with the townspeople.

Accused of witchcraft, she was forced to endure the stocks for three days. Every day, she asked god to clear her name, to absolve her of her crimes. But no help ever came.

"Why is she making us watch this?" Beth asked in horror, staring at the villagers. They were throwing rocks and rotten vegetables at Jane, causing her to cry out in agony. In the crowd, Elizabeth smiled, her hand on the back of the young man. In her other hand, she held an incomplete doll. It wasn't nearly as refined as Jenny's current vessel, but recognizable nonetheless.

"I don't know." He looked at her, his eyes shimmering. "But this is her story, and I think we should listen."

The eventual trial was brief, but no help ever came. They listened in horror as Jane was sentenced to death by fire, watched the smile grow across Elizabeth's face when her competition was finally out of the way.

On her final night, she cried for her lost life. She wept for the lost moments she would never claim, the family she would never have. Hers was a life cut short, and there was no salvation to be had.

The scene changed one last time. The villagers were piling up the logs around her, Jenny crying silently. Beth turned away once the logs were lit, but Mike never looked away, anger shining in his eyes. From where she stood, she could see Elizabeth doing something with the doll, watched the wispy spirit enter its body.

On that day, Jane learned there were far worse things than death.

Elizabeth took the doll and threw it in the well, waving as it fell into the darkness.

"This is terrible," Beth whispered, watching Elizabeth disappear back into the crowd. The air was thick with smoke, obscuring the village around them. Time moved in slow motion, then came to a stop, the villagers frozen in time. They could hear the sound of Jane sobbing from the well, the sound growing louder. The small, ragged doll climbed out of the well, sprawling out on the dirt. Mike walked toward it and knelt down.

"I'm so sorry," he told her, holding out his hand. "You didn't deserve that fate and I wish I could change it. But the one thing I can do is take you home."

The doll regarded him with button eyes, then looked around the village. It seemed disoriented, wobbling back and forth on its soaking wet legs. Mike picked it up and cradled it like a child. He tilted his head forward as if listening, but Beth didn't hear a sound.

One moment he was holding the doll, the next he was embracing Jenny's spectral form. The temperature dropped dramatically, the village vanishing from view. Beth exhaled a large cloud of fog, rubbing at her arms.

Jenny was sobbing. Mike held her tightly against him, his hands rubbing her back. The village around them faded from view, turning into smoke. They were back in the crypt now, the stale and dusty air filling her nose. She coughed sharply, inhaling the mist that now surrounded her. Her blood immediately boiled with sexual arousal, and a feminine voice filled her ears.

I need you to sleep for awhile. It was Jenny's voice. If you don't mind.

"Why?" Beth looked at Mike, but his far off gaze told her that he was caught up in another vision.

I have unfinished business. She could hear the grin in Jenny's voice. As Jane.

"Are you going to use my body?" she asked.

Not like before. I just need... privacy. No prying eyes, no whispered lies, just a little fun before Jane's demise.

Beth rolled her eyes. "I agree, but only if you promise to come with us when you are done messing around."

I promise. The mist swirled through her and she lost consciousness.

-

"Jenny? Beth?" The world around him was dark, and Beth was the one with the flashlight. He tried to feel around, but ended up walking several feet without bumping into anything. He swore under his breath, a river of profanity that would have made Tink proud. The ghost had been whispering something to him earlier, but he couldn't remember what it was.

Beth's voice spoke from the darkness. "Jane spent every evening praying, hoping that God would hear her. The nights were cold and lonely, stuck in the stocks and forced to watch the stars travel across the night sky."

A spotlight appeared on Beth. Her eyes were closed and her breath came in foggy bursts. She pointed behind Mike, so he turned around to see the image of Jane stuck back in the stocks. Jane was bent over and locked in place, unable to leave.

"Jenny?"

"Jane saw everything she had ever hoped for in life fleeing from her. That was, until the night the stranger came." This time, a spotlight targeted Mike. He held his hands over his eyes and looked up, but the light came from nowhere.

"Jenny, what are you-"

Call me Jane! The whole world shook, wind whipping across him hard enough that he hunched over to avoid falling.

"What's going on?"

"You see, Jane had seen and done a lot of things in her life, but there was one thing she wanted to do most of all." Beth had continued her narration. "It saddened her to admit it, but the village had not

heeded her words of denial. She had been accused of bewitching the landowner's son and the evidence of witchcraft was all about. She knew full well that there would be no divine salvation and so she mourned the life she was about to lose."

Mike stood up and brushed the dirt out of his hair. "And?"

"She prayed to God for a great many things." The light around Beth dimmed and brightened around Jane. She was whispering, so he walked closer to hear better.

"Bless me Father, for I have sinned. I have had many impure thoughts of late and have found great satisfaction in the secrecy of the barn with John, the young man I have been accused of bewitching. We have done a great many things together, and I suppose this is my punishment for these things, but I swear that I am no witch."

Her cheeks flushed. "But my Lord, there is one thing I still have not done yet. Though the pleasures of the flesh have been many, I regret to admit that I am filled with sadness at the idea that I shall die never knowing the sensation of a true coupling. While I should be filled with anger and resentment of my own demise, I strongly mourn that I may die a virgin. If I am to enter your eternal kingdom tomorrow, I pray that you let me know the true pleasure of carrying a man's seed inside me."

"The stranger overheard Jane's pleas for help." Beth said, and the light over Mike grew even brighter. A stream of green light flowed out of Beth's pocket, swirling around the clearing.

He let out a sigh. This was apparently the one thing he was going to be good at. "Okay. If you want to play, so be it." He wondered how much of this was influenced by the emerald. The last thing he needed was a fuck gem in the house.

"Lord, who is that who comes toward me?" Jane's brown eyes met his, her body swaying from side to side in the stocks.

"I'm just a stranger passing through." In the swirling darkness, he heard the canned cheers of a studio audience and they were now visible, silhouettes tightly clumped together. He fought the urge to roll his eyes. "Would you like some help?"

"Mine is not a plight that I can escape from. It is the Lord's will." She fluttered her eyes at him. "But perhaps the Lord has something else in mind for me?"

The stocks slowly rotated as if on a giant pedestal. Her ass was on display for him now, and she wiggled it enticingly.

"Um... yes. Yes He does." Again the audience applauded, and Beth clapped her hands as well. He walked up to Jane and placed his hands on her waist.

The connection was instant. Cold spikes sunk into his flesh, Jenny's paranormal energy washing through him. It was the same sensation as letting a limb fall asleep for too long and then waking it up, the nerve clusters all firing at once. The energy circled through his body and focused on his groin, his cock immediately springing to attention.

"Um, Jane? What was that?"

When she spoke, her voice was a higher pitch. "Begin at the beginning, and go on until you come to the end. Then stop." He thought it odd that she would say it that way, but it sounded like good

advice. She sighed when he pulled up her skirt, exposing the creamy skin of her ass. She wasn't wearing any undergarments, which Mike felt was probably not very period authentic.

He ran his fingers across the back of her legs, then gave her butt a playful swat. Unable to move away, Jane let out a yelp. He swatted her again, but harder this time, then rubbed the skin where he had smacked her.

"You really are a naughty little spirit, aren't you?" He smacked her again. "Caught in the stocks with nowhere to go?"

"Mmm, I love it!" Her voice was Jane again, a full octave lower. "Please traveler, help me finish out my life with no regrets!"

"Uh... okay."

The audience was cheering for him now. Beth was now holding a sign that said **You Can Do It!** He tried to tune out the world around him, focusing instead on the creamy, untouched thighs of Jane in front of him.

"Okay, then. You want to get weird? Let's get weird." He reached inside of himself, finding the magic much quicker this time. He took his fingers and touched Jane's curly, unshaven pubes, slowly running his fingers towards her wet hot snatch. When he touched the fold of skin over her clit, he let the magic loose, sparks jumping onto her labia and crawling across her thighs.

The effect was immediate. Jane hissed and arched her back as far as she could, her body moving away from him. He stepped forward and slid his fingers around the outside of her labia, squeezing them together and allowing sparks to jump across his knuckles.

"You must be an angel!" Jane declared, then let out a long, low moan. It didn't take long before her body was racked with several tiny spasms, her hungry pussy dripping fluid onto the dirt below.

"That was easy." He withdrew his hands. The audience was going wild and he took a little bow. He turned around to leave and Jane was somehow still in front of him.

"More," she demanded, her voice husky. A ripple went across her body and she was briefly Jenny again. "When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day."

"You'll go blind," he muttered, focusing the sparks into his hand once more. He could see them, crawling across his palm, long before making contact. He touched her again, but this time held back. The sparks tickled the skin of his palms, then crawled up along his wrist, piling up on top of each other and forming a solid band of electricity. Jenny became Jane again.

"Please, sir, I crave much more than simple fingers. I desire to be spread open and filled, to feel that familiar heat inside my belly and, oh my god!" He had slid three fingers into her, his fingers making a triangle. He spread his fingers apart, letting the built up magic flow down his arm like water, filling Jane from the inside.

That cold chill went through him again, but this time it carried a taste of his own medicine. The sparks raced up his arm and jumped between his elbow and his ribs, then shot down his legs. He was suddenly rock hard, the sensation of his cock against the fabric of his pants so intense that he nearly blew his load.

“You may be Jane, but you’re full of Jenny’s tricks.” He commanded the magic to release its hold on him and move back into Jane.

When it hit her, she was Jenny again. The temperature around the room dropped and he saw another stream of green light from Beth’s pocket beam directly into Jenny.

That stupid fucking gem. Jenny was always a bit off, but he had no doubt that the emerald was powering this mass illusion of hers. The spectators were doing the wave around him now and he almost laughed. He stepped away from her and undid his pants, his cock springing free. He was leaking precum in massive quantities. He stepped toward her and gave the top of her buttocks a playful slap with his dick.

It was like changing channels on a tube TV. A brief second of static and she was Jane again.

“It feels so hot. And big.” She shook her ass from side to side. “Please, mysterious stranger, don’t keep me waiting any longer.”

“I don’t plan on it.” Despite being caught in her illusion, he felt oddly exposed knowing that he was actually in an old church in the middle of... well, somewhere. It suddenly occurred to him that the Society may have a way to track him in case he left. Yet another question for him to ask Naia or Ratu.

Well, if he actually remembered to. He teased her opening, rubbing the head of his cock against her soft, wet lips. She tried to push against him, but he leaned away, denying her further. He let the magic build inside of him, ribbons of electricity swirling around the base of his cock.

“I long for the-OH!” He slid in, marveling at how quickly her vaginal walls clenched him. Jane howled, his magic flowing into her from the inside. It erupted from her mouth and washed back over her before jumping into Mike again.

“Shit!” He grabbed the base of his cock and squeezed, holding back his own orgasm. The troublesome spirit was using his own magic against him! He debated pulling out, but didn’t want her to win. He used his hand to play with her clit, moving slow at first and then quickly. Jane screamed so hard that she forgot about the crowd, who had frozen in mid cheer.

She was Jenny again, her cold body reminiscent of Cecilia’s. More light surrounded her and she grunted, cracking the wood of the stockade as she flexed her arms.

“I wonder if the snow loves the trees and fields, that it kisses them so gently?” She turned her head a hundred and eighty degrees until she was facing Mike, her face twisted into a grin.

The weird shit she said he could handle, but the sudden turning of her head was to his advantage. His orgasm subsided and he grabbed Jenny’s thighs and lifted her legs off the ground, wrapping them around his waist.

More static, and then Jane was back. Luckily, her head faced the correct way.

“Bless me Father, for I am sinning!” Her head rocked while Mike pounded her, and she let out a tiny scream, the wood of the stocks creaking. He gave her ass a playful slap.

“Say eight ‘Fuck Me Mikes’,” he told her, smacking her ass again. “And, uh... beg for forgiveness?” This was the only time in his life he wished he had paid more attention in church.

“Fuck me Mike!” Each time she spoke, he swatted her on the butt, releasing his magic in small waves. She bounced them back into him, but he was able to handle the smaller influxes of magic. He

realized now that sometimes the easiest way to sink a boat was to use many small waves rather than one big one.

In his mind, he suddenly saw Naia give him a knowing nod.

He alternated his thrusting, moving quickly for a few seconds and then pulling himself out as slowly as possible, the head of his dick spreading apart her lips. Just as he was about to slip free, he pushed himself back in. He tried not to repeat the pattern, but by concentrating on his thrusts, he lost control of his magic. It ran wild back and forth over both of them, and he felt the feedback loop start to grow. However, he noticed that what she sent back was smaller than what he gave, sparks now jumping onto the stocks.

Jenny was back, her head still on backward and her mouth open wide. She cried out, the ground rumbling beneath his feet. Her wild hair parted and he got his first look into those dark eyes of hers. For just a brief moment, the black receded to reveal Jane's soft, brown irises. It was as if the veil of time had briefly parted, allowing both of them to exist at the same time. His body temperature dropped again, and they were both bathed in that green light.

Abruptly, she transformed back into Jane. Where Jenny was cool to the touch, Jane was still warm and full of life. He tried to reconcile the notion that perhaps Jane and Jenny weren't actually the same person. Jane's was a life cut short, whereas Jenny was the product of centuries inside a child's doll.

His body flooded with his own magic, and his cock threatened to burst inside her. He bit down on his lip to stave off his orgasm.

Jane pushed herself back into him, letting out a low moan that made the hair rise on his neck. Determined not to let her win, he commanded the sparks to jump back onto her and they sunk into her flesh.

"But it's no use now to pretend to be two people!" Jane's body flickered into Jenny's. "Why, there's hardly enough of me left to make one respectable person!" She let out a cry, shifting back and forth between Jenny and Jane, the darkness and the light. Jenny's head had snapped back in the correct direction, finally.

"You certainly feel like one person to me." He rubbed at her exposed asshole with his thumb and was surprised when he felt the sparks flow back into him from inside her. His cock twitched and Jane lifted her ass, clenching her vaginal muscles and pulling him farther in.

"How puzzling all these changes are! I'm never sure what I'm going to be, from one minute to the other." Her body was suddenly ethereal, then she regained her composure and solidified around him. The sensation was marvelous in the chill air, his cock exposed briefly to the cold and then warmed once more, but his body temperature had plunged low enough that he was shivering.

"Jenny." He grabbed at her hips once more, attempting to concentrate. She was draining him quickly, his energy flowing into her. "I need you to pull yourself together."

"I'm afraid I can't explain myself, sir. Because I am not myself, you see?" Jenny became Jane again, gasping loudly and struggling. She pushed back into him, the spectral hands of the audience now caressing the backs of his legs and pushing him forward.

He placed one hand on her hip and pushed himself in as far as he could go. At the same time, he pushed his thumb into her ass. She screamed and sent a massive charge into his hand. Once it entered

his body, he diverted it to his other hand. A good portion of it bypassed him entirely, flowing directly into her pelvis. However, it then made the jump to the head of his cock.

“Shit, oh shit, oh shit!” He let go of her hip and grabbed her by the hair, pulling hard. Her neck craned back and he felt a sudden shift. The feedback loop had been interrupted, the sparks all washing over her body at once.

The scream came from Jenny, then Jane, then all the shadows around him. Cacophonous moans of pleasure surrounded him on every side and he smiled, watching the world begin to melt around him.

Jenny squeezed down on him and the magic was suddenly his to contain. He pulled his thumb from her ass and grabbed onto her hips with both hands, yelling until his voice was hoarse. The liquid fire of his own magic was so hot that he couldn't even feel the reflexive spurt of his own orgasm — rather, it was the sudden flow of semen, the releasing of his own sexual pressure that he felt, filling up the ghost.

The sparks blasted across Jenny when he came and she screamed again, flexing her arms and shattering the stocks. She hovered briefly in the air, her legs wrapped around him still. The stocks disappeared as she fell to the ground, landing with a loud thud. The shadows melted away, leaving the two of them standing below the spotlight. He gasped for air, trying to regain his footing.

Jenny was facedown in the dirt, semen leaking from her pussy onto the ground. She let out a loud sigh of contentment, her body starting to fade from view.

“If you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain?” Her voice was almost a whisper, but he could hear it perfectly.

Of all the strange things she had said to him, this seemed the easiest to understand.

“Of... of course.”

Jenny arched her back one last time, her body aglow in green light. It swirled around her like it had around the suit of armor, flooding her with magic. She rolled over to face him, her eyes now composed of pure, green light. Her lips moved, but no sound came out. Suddenly, her eyes went wide.

“And burbled as it came!” Her voice was different now, a compilation of multiple voices all at once. She shuddered, her whole body racked with powerful tremors. Her body burst into a fog and swirled away, the room suddenly bright, blinding him. His outstretched hands closed on something hard, and he squinted, the green light fading away to black.

-

Beth opened her eyes, her joints stiff from the cold. She stood along the far wall of the church, the heat of the outside world working its way into her body. She blinked a few times, her eyes adjusting to the light. How long had she been out?

Mike stood over a busted church pew, his hands gripping the wood tightly. He was breathing hard, and she could see the sweat on his brow. His pants were around his ankles and his semen was all over the busted pew. His softening cock was one of the largest she had ever seen and she let out a tiny gasp of surprise.

He turned and looked at her, horror on his face.

“Oh, shit, it’s not... dammit Jenny!” He fumbled with his pants and fell, landing hard on the ground next to the mischievous little doll. Beth turned away, trying simultaneously not to laugh or think about how huge Mike’s cock had been. When he was finally quiet, she turned back around. He had tucked Jenny into his shirt and had placed both hands on the rope.

“Let’s... let’s go.” His cheeks were red, the veins in his arms bulging as he pulled himself up. Giggling quietly to herself, she followed.