

Sticky Situation

The Labyrinth beneath the Radley home was far larger than the plot of land above it. From a rocky ridge that overlooked the subterranean structure, Dana contemplated the new configuration. At the center of the Labyrinth was Ratu's lair, and the naga was constantly shifting the stone walls around to protect against intruders.

Dana found the behavior a little odd, honestly. With so many protections external to the Labyrinth, it was strange for the naga to maintain such a high level of security. Then again, the last time an intruder had made it in here, Ratu had almost been killed.

After adjusting her shoelaces, Dana walked down the winding trail that would take her to the Labyrinth gates, pondering the interdimensional nature of the massive cavern beneath the house. Was it merely an expansion of the enchanted home, or was it an entirely separate dimension that had been grafted on after the fact? Reggie had once explained to her that it was simply another space between spaces that had been utilized to its fullest, but she wasn't sure. She was curious about why the Labyrinth obeyed different rules than the greenhouse or the tower world, and strongly suspected that only Ratu knew the answer.

Dana approached the massive iron gates of the Labyrinth and stopped. Usually someone would be ready to greet her, but the entryway was quiet. She activated the mechanism that opened the gate. As she entered, a pair of rats appeared shortly after on the wall above. The rats used small hidden portals around the Labyrinth to act as sentries and had come to see what was happening. She gave them a wave. One of the rats waved back before disappearing from sight.

Once inside, she paused and looked to the left then to the right. Recently, Ratu had started doing themes in the Labyrinth at Yuki's insistence. The kitsune had been spending more time with the naga ever since Ratu's near-death experience. Dana chalked it up to the reclusive naga facing her own mortality. Yuki and Ratu had a lot in common and had become fast friends. They could both shape shift, and while Ratu was a demigod, Yuki could become one someday. Their shared love of magic gave them plenty to talk about, and it wasn't

uncommon to discover that Yuki had snuck away to hang out in the Labyrinth all day.

This month's theme was sandstone with glowing hieroglyphics carved into them. Jungle vines draped over the walls further in, and she could hear running water somewhere up ahead.

Dana waited a couple of minutes. It was strange that nobody had shown up by now to guide her. Usually it was Asterion, but he had been absent recently, spending the majority of his time with Beth in Oregon. Dana had heard through the rumor mill that Beth was focusing much of her energy on mastering her new nymph-granted magic, which apparently necessitated having sexy monster men around.

Naturally, that rumor mill was Lily. According to the succubus, Beth was getting so much man meat this summer that she could start her own sausage company.

The stray thought made Dana snort, and she covered her mouth as a relentless barrage of giggles escaped her. She eventually pinched her lips shut, rolling her eyes as she waited for her brain to reconnect to her mouth.

After five more minutes, Dana decided to start exploring. Whoever was supposed to meet her would find her eventually. Typically, the labyrinth was full of traps, but Dana had learned how to spot and recognize most of them. In fact, she had actually helped Ratu develop some newer traps that were more modern in design. For example, one of the Ratu's favorites was a trigger in the middle of a hallway that would initiate streams of fire that came from the walls.

With Dana's help, Ratu now had an obvious floor panel that activated poorly hidden fire geysers. The trap was psychological in nature, because if you tried to go around the panel in the floor, you triggered the smashing plates that crushed you into jelly. The only way to bypass the new trap was to deliberately step on the panel itself, which would create a burst of fire in the hopes of startling you onto the hidden triggers.

There were a few other traps Dana had helped build. Her personal favorite was a section of wall that looked roughly like a hidden doorway. The stone was a shade lighter than the rest, and an unnecessary torch hung nearby. It was meant to lure people into messing with the torch, which would open a pit full of spikes while bathing the area in flames.

Ratu *really* liked her fire traps.

While Dana navigated the early tunnels of the maze, a flickering blue light came down from above and hovered in her field of vision.

“Cerulea, is that you?” Dana watched the light transform into a tiny fairy with a blue body.

“Hi!” Cerulea waved excitedly at Dana. The fairy was a cross between a human and a blue beetle. The curviest of her siblings, little blue wings clicked behind Cerulia as she hovered, making the fairy sound like a cicada. “I didn’t know you were coming today.”

“Unplanned visit is all,” Dana replied. “I need to talk to Ratu about tracking a demon. Who was supposed to be watching the front?”

“Uhhhhh…” the fairy made a face. “That was supposed to be us, but we got distracted.”

“You don’t say.” Dana didn’t bother chastising the fairy. The fairy sisters were sweet, but struggled to concentrate on any task for a long period of time. Well, with the exception of Daisy. If Ratu had put them in charge of the entrance, it was likely that the naga had been trying to get the fairies out of her hair. “Can you lead me to the center?”

“Sure!” Obviously excited not to be in trouble, Cerulea turned into a blue ball of light and zoomed along the hallway. Dana jogged behind the fairy, who sped up until the zombie was running at a sprint.

At top speed, the trip through the labyrinth wouldn’t be very long. Cerulea guided Dana through unseen shortcuts, many that seemed nonsensical. Dana’s heightened strength and reflexes allowed her to easily hop low walls and swing across a small gorge. She had actually spent part of late spring taking private free-running lessons at a local gym. Her thirty-something instructor had been nice enough, though it was clear he thought she was into him. It wasn’t his fault that he mistook her longing looks for lust—the guy had smelled like fresh grilled steak and his muscles looked delicious.

Her progress in the class had been fast enough that her instructor had eventually suggested she begin training with a more experienced female instructor who worked there. Dana figured that her accelerated learning coupled with the hungry looks she kept throwing his way had become red flags for him.

She agreed to the transfer, but then quit the gym entirely before drawing any more attention to herself.

While running, she thought about her meeting with the Oracle. The enigmatic being had become a riddle for her to unravel, and she replayed their conversation in her head over and over, convinced that he had left a trail of crumbs for her to follow.

To begin with, what sort of being was the Oracle? She was fairly certain it was eldritch in nature, related to the ancient being she had the misfortune of encountering last fall. That one had dreamed up a monstrosity that had swallowed her and Lily whole, then barfed them up a week into the past. Creatures who didn't obey the rules of time and space were extremely dangerous, and she wasn't keen to interact with another.

The Oracle had been far friendlier than the creature in the Pit, which made her worry that the danger it presented was far more subtle. Would taking advice from such a creature lead her to ruin? Or maybe she could take the Oracle at face value, she had no good way of telling.

Cerulea led Dana across a rickety rope bridge that swayed over what could have been Class 4 rapids. There was a fairly large river that ran through the Labyrinth, eventually terminating in a lake. Dana wondered if Ratu had gotten around to installing the glass ribbons in this section of the river, but had no desire to find out on her own. It had been another idea Dana had given the naga, a way to build a defense into the river without importing and feeding piranhas.

She had found Ratu a razor sharp material that shared the same index of refraction as water, meaning it was essentially invisible. Anyone who chanced a swim risked being shredded apart by unseen blades. Ratu had seemed particularly interested in this defensive measure when first mentioned, as the river was a bit of a weak point.

The trip to the center of the Labyrinth took nearly thirty minutes, and Dana wondered if Cerulea had taken them on a longer path by accident. When they arrived, Dana was greeted by the sight of a large chamber with walls piled high with treasure. Gold, silver, and gems of varying value had been shoved into one corner while magical artifacts had been scattered around the lair, laid out on clearly marked tables and shelves.

Dana looked around the chamber for any sign of Ratu. She was a powerful sorceress with an expertise in the transfer and infusion of magical objects. Some day, Dana hoped that this knowledge would include reversing her undead condition. When she had been killed, a necromancer had bound her soul to her body, meaning that she could never properly cross over into the afterlife.

Ratu was fairly certain she could figure out a way to fix Dana, but Dana wasn't sure how much of that was optimism. Last fall, Dana had gone on a trip across the United States trying to track down magical objects. According to Ratu, the combined enchantments of these items could theoretically unlock Dana's soul from her physical body.

It was kind of silly that Dana she wanted in life was death, the same thing that every other creature had a natural right to. The thought of being trapped in a decaying body as the universe went cold and dark was a terrifying proposition. Luckily, Dana only experienced that particular terror during her random outbursts. It was usually mixed in with everything else, so got lost in the shuffle.

Over by Ratu's pavilion was a stack of metal drums that had been tipped on their sides. Dana knocked on one, revealing it was empty. She moved to the door of the structure and knocked on it to announce herself.

When nobody answered, she let herself in. The pavilion was magical in nature, bigger on the inside, just like the rest of the Radley house. From the entryway, she could look straight up and see almost a dozen levels that eventually terminated in an upper floor that she knew to be Ratu's personal quarters.

The staircase wrapped around the wall of the pavilion like a giant spiral staircase with flat portions that allowed entry into several different rooms. As Dana climbed the stairs, she got glimpses into Ratu's research projects, some in the middle of progress and others abandoned (or so she suspected). When she got close to the top floor, she heard sounds and spotted movement through one of the doorways.

These days, Ratu spent most of her time in this room. Dana walked in and saw a large acrylic tank in the middle of the space. It stood about four feet high on the sides and had been mounted to wheels. The tank was filled with a blue fluid that bubbled as if in greeting.

"I guess she's not home." Cerulea flitted around and landed on Dana's shoulder.

“Where else could she be?” asked Dana.

The fairy shrugged. “Somewhere in the Labyrinth, I suppose.”

Dana moved to the vat of fluid. “Let’s ask Opal”. She tapped on the side of the tank and took a step back. The blue fluid bubbled and coalesced until roughly half of it had formed into the upper torso of a woman.

The woman's body was reminiscent of Beth. Opal was a slime girl that had been accidentally created using Beth's DNA as a template. Lacking the ability to vocalize sounds, Opal greeted Dana with a series of hand signs.

“Good morning,” signed Opal. “How are you today?”

“I'm good,” Dana replied, signing and speaking at the same time. Even though Opal could hear, Dana's photographic memory had allowed her to learn ASL on an advanced level. Opal’s knowledge of ASL had been copied from Beth’s memories, meaning that she was limited to words Beth already knew. Conversing with Dana gave Opal the opportunity to learn and practice new words should they come up. “Any idea where Ratu is?”

Opal went through a series of signs, mixing up her words. She frowned and started over, spelling out many of the words. “She's bringing in more material in an attempt to stabilize my structure,” she replied.

Dana nodded. This was a familiar dilemma. When Opal had been created she had been capable of forming a lower body and even walking around. However, after taking a powerful magical attack that had blown her apart, she now had trouble maintaining a solid consistency. The poor ooze was confined to a tub until she could recover and learn how to regain her form and walk once again.

Ratu had narrowed her studies on this matter, focusing largely on polymer chains and trying to figure out what she could add to Opal’s body to enhance the molecular structure of the ooze. It was likely the empty barrels below were chemicals that the Naga had obtained in an effort to rebuild the slime girl.

“Do you think she'll be back soon?” asked Dana.

“Ith thith thoon enough?” Ratu replied from the doorway. Dana turned around to see Ratu was in her snake form. The naga was dozens of feet long with a head large enough to swallow a man whole. She carried a metallic barrel in her mouth and had spoken around it.

Ratu set down the drum next to Opal's tub and then transformed into her human form. When she finished her transformation, she collapsed onto a nearby sofa, huffing and puffing. Cerulea flew over to the chair and turned her back to Ratu, the fluttered her wings to create a cooling breeze.

"You're overdoing it." Dana shook her head. "You're supposed to be taking it easy."

Ratu shrugged, then held out her arms to reveal that some of her scales were cracked and bleeding.

"I have not gotten this far in life by taking it easy. My recovery has been a long journey already." Ratu turned her face into Cerulea's breeze and sighed. "Yet I fear it will be several months yet before I am back at full health. Usually Asterion helps me with these barrels, but he has been notably absent recently."

"Do you need my help bringing any more up?" asked Dana.

Ratu shook her head. "No, this is it. But I will need to go to my room and rub some salve into these lesions to keep them from getting infected." The Naga rolled her eyes dramatically. "I will admit that I have grown tired of my inadequacies, and greatly look forward to the next time I shed."

Dana moved to a nearby chair and sat. "Unless you need my help, I'll just wait here."

Ratu nodded and limped toward the doorway, using a cane she pulled from her robes. After the naga was gone, Dana shook her head and looked at Opal.

"She tries too hard. I wish she would take it easy."

"Only because she cares," signed Opal. "My problem frustrates her on a daily basis. Not enough progress."

Dana nodded in agreement. "I absolutely know that feeling. For example, my telescope project still hasn't borne any fruit." The logical part of her brain made it a priority to point out that a non-functional telescope hardly compared to what amounted to a physical disability. Dana's own problem had seen no progress, but at least she was able to go do whatever the hell she wanted.

She'd likely cringe at the statement in the days ahead.

"I don't suppose you brought me anything to read?" Opal asked.

“As a matter of fact, I did.” Dana pulled out a Kindle that she had put into a plastic bag and handed it over. “Sofia loaded a bunch of books on here she thought you’d like. You should be able to use it through the plastic.”

Opal took the Kindle and tapped the screen. A big grin appeared on her face. “This is far better than destroying books as I read them,” she signed, then glanced over at a miserable looking pile of books in the corner. Those had been Amymone’s leftovers, the dryad didn’t care much about most books after she had read them. Opal was unable to touch things without leaving a small remnant of herself behind, which meant that she was always running out of her own body. Dana could see blue smudges on the covers, and the pages were wrinkled from humidity.

Luckily, the slime girl was capable of transforming any moisture into more of herself, but that meant she had to get it from somewhere. Dana suspected that the barrel was meant to top Opal off. She popped it open and took a sniff.

“Is that petroleum?” she asked.

Opal nodded, her attention already on the Kindle. “It’s some sort of blend,” she signed. “You can’t tell from out there, but I’m running low.”

“Do I just pour it in?” Dana felt that would be an easy way to help the naga out.

Opal paused and looked at Dana. “Yes, but if you’re going to do that, could you move the Kindle? Just in case.”

“Of course.” Dana took the Kindle back from Opal and moved it to the other side of the room where a large table covered in textbooks had been set up. Dana realized that most of these books were on molecular theory and had been written in at least six different languages. Frowning, she wondered just how much Ratu had been teaching herself in order to help the slime girl to regain her consistency.

Magic and science rarely seemed to work together, but it now occurred to Dana that understanding how things worked on a molecular level would inevitably give Ratu an edge. The naga could use magic to surpass the limitations of science, but needed to increase her own knowledge base first. Dana wondered how many magic users would be willing to delve so deeply into science, or even had the intelligence and patience to get that far.

That was food for thought. With her new memory, she could have so much knowledge memorized, but it wasn't the same as application. She was essentially a chess computer that would know all the potential moves in advance, but would be unable to go more than a couple of moves out.

Shaking her head, she walked over to the barrel. This was something she could do without much brain power at all. She grabbed it by the rim and lifted. The thing weighed at least two hundred pounds, with the liquid inside sloshing as she carried it. Her permanent strength upgrade allowed her to lift things as if she was constantly undergoing an adrenaline rush. That was a fact grounded in science more than magic, but Dana didn't understand how it happened.

Her eyes shifted over to Ratu's table. What secrets were locked in Dana's cellular structure? How did magic keep her alive? She tilted the barrel while lifting it. The dark fluid drained, transforming into an opaque spot inside of Opal's light blue coloration.

"Does it taste like anything?" Dana didn't bother signing, since her hands were full.

Opal shrugged, causing a ripple to travel across her bare breasts. "Kind of," she replied. "I taste anything that touches me, but not in a way that would make sense to you."

"I get that." Hardly one to comment on the taste of anything, Dana moved to tip the barrel up even further.

This was a mistake. She was strong enough to hold the barrel up at an angle, but the barrel outweighed her and she was leaning too far. The mass of the barrel was more than enough to outweigh her, and she fell forward into the tank with Opal. On her way into the goo, Dana saw Cerulea bolt out of the room, leaving a trail of glitter behind her.

"Blergh!" Dana actually yelled something else, but her voice was muffled by the viscosity of Opal's body. She splashed her way to the surface, which took considerably more strength than expected. Powerful hands grabbed her underneath her armpits and lifted, allowing her face to at least break the surface.

She scooped goop out of her eyes and saw Opal staring at her, those translucent blue cheeks of hers taking on a pink tinge.

“I am so sorry, Opal. Uh, damn, this is awkward.” She put her hands on the side of the tub and tried to pull herself out, but the suction was more powerful than expected. If she wanted, she could pull a lot harder, but feared cracking the tank in the process. “A little help?”

Opal had an odd look on her face, the pink glow spreading down her neck and across the top of her chest.

“Are you okay?” Dana asked.

The slime girl moved in slow motion, her hands making words.

“I can taste you,” she said.

“Yeah, sorry. I showered this morning, but still...” Dana smacked her lips and frowned. There was a salty taste in her mouth, which meant she had swallowed some of the slime girl.

Opal licked her lips, then signed some more.

“I can taste *all* of you.”

“Of course you can, I...oh. Oh!” It occurred to Dana that Opal was a fluid, which meant every single part of her body was now technically touching Opal’s taste buds, whatever that meant. She had essentially dunked her asshole in the slime girl’s mouth. “I guess I’m *really* sorry, then.”

Opal’s features shifted, and she sank beneath the surface, her torso disappearing.

“Yeah, I’d be mad, too.” Well, if Opal even got mad. “So I’m kind of stuck, if you don’t mind, I’ll just...” A jolt of electricity fired up her spine, causing Dana to grab onto the sides of the tub. It was followed by the flow of heat through her hips and pelvis and her legs spasmed. “What the fuck?”

She licked her lips, then smacked them together again. Beneath the salty taste was something vaguely familiar. “Opal, why do you taste like spunk?”

Dana was sucked under the surface, her body sliding along the bottom. Beneath the surface, she found herself looking at Opal’s face as it hovered above her. Dana’s thighs were being kneaded by the slime around her, and Dana felt pressure along her nipples and vagina. Another shock ran through her, and she braced her hands against the sides of the tank.

“Has Ratu been feeding you magic spooage?” Dana signed, biting her lip as heat raced through her body.

Opal nodded, her whole face now pink. She licked her lips in anticipation with a very long tongue and raised an eyebrow.

“Well, yeah, now that I’m all worked up, go for—” Dana didn’t get to sign anything else as the slime pressed in on her, squeezing her entire body in one big hug. This wasn’t what she had expected today, but even if she got out, she was far too horny to make it home and find someone to fuck her.

She felt her pants being pulled off, and held her legs together to make it easier. Her panties were next, and now the pink slime was quivering against her bare pussy. Ripples traveled outward as Opal pressed against Dana, teasing her labia by vibrating.

Dana closed her eyes and leaned back, becoming lost in the sensation. Usually, she was ravenous to please her partner, but had no idea how to even accomplish such a feat with Opal. There was no discernible anatomy to interact with, so Dana decided to relax until something changed.

The teasing pressure became more insistent, and Dana spread her legs then gasped as Opal entered her body. She had expected a finger or even a cock, but it was semi-rigid fluid that forced its way inside, stretching her insides to the limit. This probably shouldn’t have shocked her—Opal was technically a Beth clone, after all.

That same pressure found its way to her asshole, but hesitated. Realizing this was the equivalent of asking for consent, Dana grabbed her butt cheeks and pulled them wide. *In for a penny, in for a pound*, she figured, then giggled. *A proper pounding, then.*

When Opal entered her ass, the pressure was so intense that Dana’s fingers started slipping against the interior of the tank. The sensation was overwhelming, and she half expected the tank to visibly as more of Opal forced its way inside of her. It was hard to tell just how much of the slime girl was inside of her now, but Dana noticed that her belly was visibly bulging outward.

Her eyes rolled up in her head as the vibrations moved from her clitoris and labia to inside her body. She tried to fold up her legs, but her body was being held still by Opal. When she attempted to at least move her arms, she couldn’t. Opal had her pinned in place.

Her bra was pulled down and tiny sucking mouths started nibbling the sensitive flesh below and around her areola. She hissed in delight, her nipples becoming rigid as they were sucked on by some unseen slime mechanism. The pressure inside her body increased as she was filled to the brim, the internal vibrations now spreading outward.

She moaned, and that's when Opal entered her mouth, the slime girl sliding down the back of her throat. All three of Dana's holes were now full. The vibrations inside of her shifted frequency multiple times, and a small, almost orgasm had Dana dragging her nails on the side of the tank and gouging the material.

Eyes wide, all Dana could do was stare at the ceiling of Ratu's research lab through the pink fluid that surrounded her. The vibrations kept shifting in pitch as more of Opal slid inside of her, her stomach now extended outward as if she was nine months pregnant.

When Dana finally came, Opal locked her in place as the vibrations all picked the same frequency and intensified. Dana was powerless, unable to even scream as her vocal cords were blocked off by the thick fluid in her throat. It was like her entire body had been transformed into one big vibrator.

Her orgasm sent a rush of heat running down to her legs, but there was no accompanying fluid. She felt it being sucked away, and the sucking mouths on her breast now pinched and tugged, triggering a second orgasm. Her whole body clenched up, but she was still unable to move.

She tried to shout "More!" but only managed a long grunt. Her vision was darkening as the slime girl continued compressing her. It reminded her of being strapped to the bed in the cabin as Mike had tried to fuck some sense back into her, and—

Dana came again, the memory now replaying in her head. She could remember the whole experience in its entirety, now reliving that sexual encounter while having a completely separate one. Her body didn't know how to process the information, so she felt it all. Mike's hard cock was inside her as electrical currents ran through both of them, but at the same time, she was getting the airtight treatment from Opal in the present.

Tears of pleasure were sucked away from her eyes, and she cried. The whole world had gone pink, and she had been so distracted that Dana had lost

count of her orgasms. They rocketed through her, Opal greedily sucking away all of her sexual fluids as the process started anew

Eventually, all good things come to an end. Dana cried out as Opal slid free of her and pushed the zombie's body up and over the edge of the tank. Raw emotions tumbled free as she fell onto the floor and wept. It was like a dam had burst inside her, and everything just came out at once.

A blanket was draped over her. Dana sniffed back hot tears and looked up to see Ratu smiling down at her with a cup of tea in one hand and Cerulea sitting on her shoulder.

"I blacked out for four hours after she did that to me," Ratu said with a wink. "She gets rather...excited when she can taste someone's genitals."

Dana tried to mumble something about a warning sticker, but still couldn't put words together. She did notice, however, that her body was completely dry.

"Enjoy the catharsis." Ratu moved over to one of the sofas and laid down on it. "I'll still be here once you're ready to talk. As for you." She turned her attention to the fairy. "Shouldn't you be watching the entrance?"

Cerulea stood at attention, then bolted out of the lab. Ratu smirked at the departing fairy, then looked back at Dana.

"She was really hoping there was something leftover she could nibble on." Ratu sipped at her tea with a grin. "I actually let them push me in one time. Zero regrets, personally, but I did lose an afternoon."

Dana turned to look at the tank, which was slowly turning blue once more. Opal's face appeared against the glass, and the slime girl winked.

"If I ever get the chance," Dana muttered. "I'm tossing Lily in you to see who wins." She flopped onto her back and stared at the ceiling. When the giggles came this time, she simply let them flow.

Tasia rubbed her eyes and yawned, then sat up in the back of the Expedition and looked out the window. They were in a parking lot that had been cordoned off with police tape, and a pair of squad cars sat guard at the entrances of the lot.

She checked her phone to see how long she'd been asleep. It was almost two hours since the mission brief had ended and they had headed to the scene.

"Hungry?" Lynn leaned around the passenger seat. She held up a pair of paper sacks.

"Yes, thank you." Tasia reached across the empty middle seat. Esteban and his team had taken the other Suburban, and were already parked next to them. Brother Julian was speaking with one of the officers, both of them holding cups of coffee. Typically, the Order just pretended to be feds, but there were rare occasions where the local law enforcement knew exactly who they were, or at least enough to not ask questions.

"You snore, by the way." Lynn smirked and turned her attention forward. "I've never seen anyone pass out so fast in a car."

"Yeah, it's kind of a thing now." Tasia opened up the bag and was happy to see a large sub sandwich inside. It was stuffed with different kinds of meat. "I don't suppose you got me—"

Lynn was already leaning over the seat with a large bottle of water.

"Thanks." Tasia took a minute to open the other bag. In all, she had a bag of chips and two 12-inch subs. It didn't take her long to eat them and she definitely wouldn't have to worry about the calories. Her new metabolism would take care of that.

Lynn got out of the car and met up with the others. Tasia looked at the building and scowled. Flowers, stuffed bears, and cards had been stacked up along the stop sign at the corner, and a couple of people stood outside the tape, their haunted eyes on the building.

The Sunset Lounge was covered in scorch marks, but Tasia knew those had been put in by the Order as a cosmetic smoke screen. To the local authorities and anyone watching the news, a kitchen fire had gotten out of control and people had trampled each other trying to escape. Over twenty people had lost their lives in what had been described as a tragic accident. Anyone with actual memories of the event had been immediately visited by the Order, interviewed, and their memories scrubbed after.

Finished with her meal, Tasia set the bags aside and climbed out of the Expedition. The others watched her with feigned disinterest, but she could feel a

mild tension in the air. Though everyone pretended to accept her, she knew there was still a matter of trust. It was annoying, but she could hardly blame them for it.

She sniffed at the air, pulling in the smell of grease, gasoline, and fresh poured asphalt from a couple of blocks over.

“Shall we?” Lynn gestured to the front door of the Sunset Lounge. Tasia nodded and followed her inside. Esteban and Julian followed them in while Luis and Courtney stayed outside.

“This way.” Lynn led Tasia across the dance floor of the Sunset Lounge. Abandoned purses, shoes, and cellphones littered the area, and Tasia caught various scents in transit, like blood, urine, and fear. It was hard to describe what fear smelled like to someone else. The closest approximation was rancid black licorice.

They walked up a flight of short stairs in the back to the VIP room. A sturdy set of glass doors was held shut by a red ribbon that had been wrapped around the handles. This had been put there by the Order, and would knock out anyone attempting to cut it apart. Lynn dismissed the spell holding the ribbon in place, then untied it and stuck it in her pocket. Once the ribbon was gone, the calm scene through the window of tables and chairs transformed into the grim reality.

Blood was everywhere. Handprints adorned the inner glass, and arterial spray had coated all four walls. In the back of the secluded lounge, comfy booths had been set up. This room looked like it was primarily geared toward shady business dealings.

“Looks nasty,” Tasia said, grabbing the handle of the door.

“Forensics is playing around with numbers, but...” Esteban shrugged. “We just aren’t sure what happened.”

“When I worked for Master Cyrus, he had this magic stopwatch that could reverse time. Anybody have one of those?”

“If we did, *you* wouldn’t be here.” Esteban’s eyelid twitched.

Tasia smirked and pointed up at the sign. “Well, it says VIP, so you all can stay out here. Be right back.”

She walked inside and let the door shut behind her. Her sharp hearing picked up Julian muttering to Esteban, and none of it was nice. If Lynn heard, she was ignoring it.

“Perfect,” Tasia muttered, careful to step around the pools of blood. The carpet was tacky in places, causing her shoes to stick. The whole room was a mess, so it was inevitable that she would touch some.

She moved to the corner and looked out across the room. According to the briefing, several people including the owner, Emanuel Oscario, had been in this room when they had been hit. The only survivors were a couple of scantily clad servers who had been bringing drinks in when everything started. Between all the screaming and spraying of blood, they had very little to offer in terms of information.

Which was why Tasia had been brought in. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply through her nose, the information filtering itself across her brain. Each person’s scent was different, their blood even more so. Before they had left headquarters, Tasia had been given a sample of blood and clothing from each of the victims. It was strange how her mind could hold so much information now from a quick sniff. When she opened her eyes, it was vividly clear which stain belonged to each victim.

She moved around the room, careful to breathe through her mouth. Once she was positioned along the other corner, she sniffed again. Looking at the floor, she could tell where people had been standing now, tracing their blood spray back to its point of origin.

“Interesting.” Oscario had been sitting with his bodyguards and some female escorts when the attack had occurred. Tasia knelt down by the table and took a whiff. It smelled of booze, sex, and cocaine. It also smelled strongly of the seven people that had been sitting there.

She didn’t recognize one of the scents. Narrowing in, she crouched down and sniffed the seat of the booth. Still new to the world of scents, the only information she received was that it was a female. Was it a survivor they had missed?

Discarded knives and guns lay on the floor, and she took another step back to ponder the room. Her sense of smell was getting overwhelmed, so she moved

out of the VIP room to see that Lynn was down on the dance floor talking to someone on her cell. Esteban and Julian looked at Tasia with interest.

“Well?” Esteban asked.

“May have something,” she replied, then tapped her nose. “Taking a break is all. There’s a lot of information in there.”

Julian nodded and looked at Esteban. “That’s fair.”

“Can you two scoot down the hall a bit?” She sniffed at the air. “Want to check something here as well.”

They obliged, moving down to the dance floor with Lynn. This part of the lounge was pretty clean, mostly due to the fact that nobody had been hanging around the doors. Tasia did a quick circuit, quickly locating the very faint scent of the servers who had survived and given testimony. There was no other smell. Whoever Jane Doe was, she hadn’t left through the doorway.

Tasia stepped back inside and sniffed around some more. With her sense renewed and most of the information parsed into her brain, she picked up a couple more scents. One was fragrant like patchouli and the other was sour. She moved around the room, tracking down the patchouli smell. It was a small patch of fabric that looked like it had been cut from a jacket. She gave it a sniff and then bagged it up. That was worth looking into.

The sour smell took her much longer to track, and she had to take a break again. By now, Lynn was pacing on the dance floor, clearly agitated by her call, but Tasia ignored it. Back inside the VIP lounge, she tracked the odor to a knife that had fallen between the cushions of the booth. Carefully sliding it out, she saw a smear of black on the edge.

That was the sour smell. It burned her nostrils when sniffed this close, and she bagged up the blade for further analysis. When she stepped out of the VIP room, Lynn stood with Esteban. She didn’t know where Julian was.

“Well?” Lynn cocked an eyebrow.

“We have at least one person unaccounted for.” Tasia jerked her thumb over one shoulder. “And she didn’t leave through the door. So either she got eaten by whatever tore these people apart, or she’s the one who did the eating.”

“Hmm.” Lynn scratched at her chin. “Anything else?”

“Yeah.” Tasia handed over the knife. “I think someone stabbed our attacker. No idea what that substance is, so it's worth looking at. I also have this.” She handed over the fabric.

“Great. That’s more than we had this morning.” Lynn took the fabric and handed it to Esteban. “But still no idea how our target got in or out?”

“Could have walked in, honestly.” Tasia looked at the VIP lounge. “There really isn’t a way to get in there, unless you go through the vents.”

“They’re pretty small vents.” Esteban looked up at the corners of the VIP room. The vents had been installed near the ceiling. “I don’t know what could have come through there and done all of this. Not without being seen, anyway.”

“Speaking of.” Lynn looked at Tasia. “I just got word that another facility got hit.”

“Damn. Casualties?”

“None, but...” Lynn sighed. “They were busted chatting with the Oracle. Sounds like they broke in using some sort of portal magic, the researchers are already looking into it. There isn’t much to go on, I’m afraid. There were two attackers, one who could change shapes and the other one may be one of ours.”

“One of us?” It was extremely rare for someone to leave the Order, but even more so for them to be dumb enough to come back. “Any ideas?”

“Probably a knight. She had one of our swords and fought pretty well with it.”

The information clicked like a lock slamming into place, and Tasia growled so loudly that Esteban’s sword was already in his hands.

“I’m warning you,” he began, but Lynn pushed his blade away.

“You know who they were, don’t you?” Lynn tilted her head. “Oh, shit! It was the succubus, wasn’t it?”

“She traveled with a witch who had one of our swords. We got into a fight and she kicked my ass.” Tasia fought for control of her body, forcing her fangs to slide back into her gums. Her claws retracted as well, and she turned away from the others, a phantom pain blossoming across her ribs. “Sorry, that’s a sensitive subject for me.”

Lynn put her hand on Tasia's back. "It's okay, I get it. Why don't you take a moment and I'll phone that in. That's important information to have."

The master swordswoman stared at Tasia for a few moments, then stepped away to make a call. Esteban stood nearby, his sword held casually by his side.

"If you're going to have trouble controlling yourself," he warned. "You and I are going to have problems."

She wanted to say plenty of things to him, but knew that none of it would be productive. Being nice would sound like an attempt to deceive while being mean would reinforce beliefs. Instead, she went back into the VIP room and took another look around.

Every encounter with the succubus had subverted expectations. She was already falling into the same patterns that had resulted in her failure as a knight. With her near transformation so recent, the smells in the room were magnified and she was ready to open her mind to any and all possibilities.

The sour smell was largely gone, but she could smell the patchouli scent somewhere else. Moving to the far side of the room, she stood on a chair to sniff her way up to one of the air vents.

The scent had faded from days of having cool air blown over it, but it was still there. She pulled the vent cover off and used the flashlight to look inside. The interior was about a foot across and eight inches wide. There were bloodstains on the metal, all dried up now. Behind the scent of patchouli and death, she picked up another scent.

"What are you doing?" Esteban asked, his head in the door. "Nothing could have fit through that vent."

"But it did," she countered, then hopped off the chair. "Go look for yourself. Whoever did this left through there, and took our Jane Doe with them."

"But that's not possible." He didn't argue any further, but went to look for himself. "Shit, you're right. How did we miss that?"

She didn't bother explaining it. If someone had tried to explain it to her a year ago, she would have blown them off. "Looks like we need to revise our options," she said.

“Agreed.” Esteban jumped off the chair. “Guess we need to get forensics back in here, see if they can get anything from the vents. We can pop out and see if we can find the exit.”

They left together, leaving Lynn behind on the dance floor. A quick examination of the roof found that the wiring for the air intake had been torn off, and a raccoon family had already started nesting in there. However, through the fragrant smell of rodents, Tasia detected the rest of their blood trail. Whatever had killed those people had left through a vent so small that only a child would fit. The options were already limited, but she was prepared to expand those options.

She just hoped Esteban and Lynn would be on board. The sun was already going down, and she couldn’t help but feel like she was being watched.

Lynn wrapped up her phone call and came outside the building. “We’re setting up shop nearby,” she said. “Got us a rental so we don’t have to make the drive. Some of the higher ups want to check in with you, Tasia, about their uninvited guests. Sounds like you’ll be doing that tomorrow. Forensics is coming out tonight to see if they can find anything.”

“I’ll stay until forensics gets here,” Esteban offered. He turned to Tasia and gave her a little bow. “Good work.”

She nodded in acceptance and stepped up to the edge of the roof. Esteban cleared his throat, reminding Tasia that the cops were still down below, now watching with interest. Tasia pretended to scrape something off her shoe, then made for the nearest ladder.

Feeling slightly vindicated, she descended with a smile. Once at the bottom, she waited for Esteban. Julian eventually emerged from the lounge, tucking a wand away. Tasia could smell the fresh magical wards in the air.

“Looks like we’ve got a plan, then.” Lynn jerked her head in the direction of her car. “Drinks are on me tonight.”

Luis and Courtney let out a cheer and climbed into the Expedition with Lynn. Tasia hopped into the back seat, determined to stay awake this time. Her stomach rumbled as they pulled away from the Sunset Lounge, turning out onto the main street.

She was asleep in minutes.

Lily sat on a rock overlooking a lake hidden away in the valley of the greenhouse. From the outside, the greenhouse looked like an antique from Victorian days, but somehow it contained an entire world. Nobody knew how far it went, but it was the perfect hiding place for when she wanted to be out of the house but not too far from home.

She picked up a flat stone with her tail and hurled it with enough speed that it skipped well over twenty times before clattering against large rocks on the opposite side. The water of the lake was eerily clear, and she wondered how deep it went.

“Damned spider,” she grunted for perhaps the dozenth time. Lily was mad that Eulalie had put herself in so much danger, but didn’t know how to explain to anyone else why her anger was justified. Last fall, when they had met the arachne sisters for the first time, they had also met their father, Darren. Plagued by cancer and nightmares from the war, Lily had decided to do the man a good deed and give him dreams of his late wife during their stay.

What had really happened was that Lily had been forced to sit through weeks’ worth of Darren’s memories inside the Dreamscape. She had watched both Eulalie and Velvet grow up in fast forward, or at least how he remembered them. Privy to sacred moments between father and daughter, she hadn’t just been a witness, but had actually felt the emotions involved. It was familial love, something she had never fully experienced.

And if she had done so when she was mortal, the memories had long ago been lost.

When Eulalie had risked her own safety, those painful emotions had surfaced. With Velvet gone, Eulalie was all that remained of Darren’s original family, and Lily was determined to keep her safe as a result.

Frustrated, she picked up an even larger rock and threw it across the water. It made a satisfying sploosh in the middle of the water, sending a geyser almost ten feet into the air.

“That was a good one.”

Lily spun in place, surprised to see Zel standing in the shadows. There was no way the centaur had snuck up on her, which meant she had been lost in her own thoughts. She said nothing, turning her attention back to the lake. “Can’t a girl get some peace out here?” she asked.

“I suppose, but someone is busy yelling and throwing rocks.” Zel approached the edge of the lake where the footing was better for her equine half. The two of them now stood about fifteen feet apart. “Imagine my surprise when I find someone hanging out in my special spot.”

Lily snorted. “Isn’t the whole valley your special spot?”

“No.” Zel picked up a leaf and examined it. “The land belongs to no one. We’re just here to become part of it.”

Lily fought the urge to gag herself. “So what makes this spot so special?”

Zel blushed. “It’s sort of where Mike and I...got to know each other better. He had gotten Dragon’s Breath pollen all over himself, and then on me, so I carried him here and we jumped into the water to rinse it off.”

“Still a better love story than...” Lily waved her hand dismissively. “You know what, never mind.”

“What were you going to say?” Zel asked, her head cocked to one side. She had several strands of hair braided and adorned with beads and a pair of feathers had been tucked into the top of the braid. Lily hated how cute this made her look.

“Nothing of value. I just have strong opinions about vampire novels is all.” She used her tail as a stool and sat with one leg crossed over the other. Staring out at the water, there were suddenly a lot of questions on her mind, and all of them involved Zel.

“So, what does it feel like?” Lily asked. “Being pregnant.”

“Uncomfortable.” Zel stared at Lily and lifted her tail, letting loose a hideously loud fart. “I’ve been holding that in for your sake, but couldn’t do it anymore, sorry.”

The succubus laughed. “It’s all good, I’ve seen the faces you all make when I teleport in. Is it the baby that makes you uncomfortable?”

“Yeah. Everything is squished around, and I’ll admit that I’m starting to wonder if combining human and horse anatomy was a mistake.” Zel rubbed her horse belly. “The foal keeps moving, and that doesn’t feel good either.”

“So much for the majesty of being pregnant.” Lily smirked.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t have minded just laying an egg like Velvet did.” Zel sighed and stared out at the water. “But I sure do look forward to meeting my child. It’s amazing to think that there’s a whole person growing inside me.”

Lily bit her lip and looked away. The hot emotions rolling around inside her were confusing. She didn’t like the conflicting feelings or the inner drama. She had no reason to be jealous of Zel. It wasn’t like she ever wanted to be pregnant or a mother. Both of those things sounded terrible. She would rather pull off her boots in front of everyone.

At the same time, it wasn’t fair. Zel was giving Mike something that Lily couldn’t, no matter what form she took. The two of them were now inextricably linked by the bonds of parenthood.

It also didn’t help that she was mad at Zel’s unborn child. When the baby came, it would strip away even more of Mike’s limited attention. How the hell was she supposed to compete with a child? It wasn’t like she could admit it. Being a bitch was an artform, one that she excelled at. But this matter was petty and sad at best, and she hated that she had no control over it.

“You okay?” Zel frowned at Lily. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to mention Velvet so casually. I forgot what she meant to you.”

“What?” Lily shook her head. “I just have resting bitch face. I’m fine.”

“You’re crying.”

Lily touched her cheek and discovered it was wet. She snorted, then wiped it away. “It’s probably just water that got splashed on me.”

“It’s not, and you know it.” Zel crossed her arms. “Look, I know that you two were close. Dana spends a ton of time here, and she’s told me plenty about your adventure last year. I also noticed how mopey you were after the funeral, and—”

“Go suck a dick,” Lily snapped.

“If I could ever lock Mike down for more than half an hour, I would!” Zel mimed giving a blowjob, pressing her tongue against the inside of her cheek. “My sex life has been pretty bleak recently, and I haven’t tracked down my last boyfriend for a booty call.”

“Your last boyfriend?”

“Yeah. He’s really nice. You’d like him. Stands about twenty feet tall, powerful limbs. Doesn’t like to travel, though.” Zel patted a nearby tree. “Looks kind of like this guy, actually.”

Lily laughed, the tension broken. “You fucked a tree?”

“To be fair, so has Mike. His tree was a lot hotter, though. Kind of balances out with her sense of humor, which is atrocious.” Zel winced. “Damn, acid reflux now.”

“Kid is already a pain in the ass like his daddy.” Lily looked out at the lake and let out a sigh. “If I tell you something, will you keep it to yourself?”

Zel nodded, her tail swatting away a fly. “Probably.”

“When you became chief of your herd, did you feel any different?”

“Technically, you’re asking a question, not telling me something.”

“Fuck you, I’m getting there.” Lily threw another rock.

“In that case, no, I didn’t. I kind of had the whole thing dropped on me. My people needed a leader, and I made the most sense. I had trained for it as a child, and seen my own parents lead. I knew the layout of the land and had a great relationship with Mike. It was largely a promotion of convenience, so when I was put in charge, I had two choices. I could try to be a leader first and put others’ needs above my own, or I could continue being myself and try to go from there.”

“Which did you choose?” Lily asked.

“I’ll let you know once I figure it out.” Zel chuckled, then picked up a piece of grass. She twisted it around in her hands. “So I didn’t feel different as a person, but I was scared all the time. Scared I would make a mistake or screw up. I feel the same way about being a mom. I’m going to have moments where I have to choose between the herd’s needs and my child’s, and will feel absolutely miserable every time I do it.”

“That sounds awful.” Lily absent-mindedly picked up her own piece of grass and played with it. “I figured that because you were the chief, you kind of just knew what to do.”

“I pretty much make it up as I go,” Zel admitted. “Yeah, I have plenty of experience to back it up, but I still screw up all the time. The herd forgives me for it, because they don’t know any better.”

Lily snorted at that. "I guess maybe I'm feeling the same way right now," she admitted. "But I don't have a defined role. I just kind of float where the wind takes me, here today, gone tomorrow."

"Why is that, do you think?"

Lily shrugged. "I spent centuries having a master who dictated my every move. This last year has been the first time I've truly been free, but..." She shrugged and flicked her blade of grass into the lake. "But I don't know what it is I want. I'm starting to think I never have."

"I don't think that's true. Maybe the things you want don't feel that big and kind of get buried in day-to-day dealings, but that doesn't mean they aren't important." Zel picked up another blade of grass. "Let's do an experiment. Demons can't lie, not when they're asked directly. You can deflect, dodge, or even bend the truth, but you'll know the truth in your heart the moment it comes up."

"I don't under—"

"What do you, Lily, want more than anything right now?" Zel cocked an eyebrow at the succubus.

To be loved for who I am. The answer was almost immediate, and Lily gasped at the intrusive thought. It cut so cleanly to the center of her issues, especially in regards to Zel and her foal. She was worried that Mike would somehow love her less or even forget about her. It was why she tried so hard to keep his attention, to remind him and the others that she existed. It was the kind of love she had experienced inside Darren's Dreamscape, the memory sticking with her like a cancer all its own.

"I hate that question," she snarled, then picked up a stone with her tail and chucked it out into the water.

"The truth is known to be difficult. For example, I have to live with the idea that there's a very real possibility that I may die during childbirth." Zel picked a few more blades of grass and wound them together. "Being angry at it doesn't help me."

Lily narrowed her eyes at the centaur. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"I shouldn't have to explain it. I have the uterus of a horse and the vaginal canal of a human woman. So on days like today, I come here to my special spot and try not to scream as I contemplate how my days may be numbered, or that I

may never get to meet my own child.” Zel wiped at her eyes, her hands now braiding the grass.

Lily stared at the centaur, suddenly aware of the bags under her eyes and how her face was slightly puffy.

“Surely there are options,” she began.

“No.” Zel held up a hand to silence the succubus. “This is a truth I have already confronted. It’s the same for any woman who carries a child, honestly. My tribe has some incredible healers, but I’m a unique case. Preparations have been made, but when the baby comes...we’ll just have to wait and see.”

“My problems suddenly feel small and shitty.” Lily crossed her arms and pouted.

“That’s not fair either. Our problems are different, that’s all. We don’t need and can’t compare them to each other.” Zel stood and walked over to where Lily sat and held out her hand.

Puzzled, Lily reached up and took it. Zel deftly slid a woven bracelet made of grass onto Lily’s wrist with a flower braided into the center.

“Nothing is forever,” she said. “We must appreciate the beauty of the things we have while we have them. If holding onto something is keeping you from experiencing happiness, then you need to let it go.”

Lily blinked up at the centaur, then examined the bracelet on her wrist. The flower in the middle had delicate red petals that matched her hair.

“Shit like this is the reason they put you in charge,” she muttered. “Can’t believe you put things into perspective with a friendship bracelet. Guess it beats a motivational poster.”

Zel shrugged. “We love the same man, yet do not compete for him. We both wish for the house to succeed. I would like to think that we’re friends, but I know we aren’t close. I have certainly enjoyed sharing my lake with you.”

Lily shook her head in disbelief. “Leaving already?”

“Yeah.” Regret colored Zel’s face. “Have to choose between myself or the herd, after all.” She started to move away and froze. “He’s moving right now.”

Lily could see Zel's stomach shifting. Without thinking, she placed her hand on Zel's belly, marveling at the presence she felt. It was a blank slate, taking in the world through a filter of darkness. If she wanted, she could slip into his mind and look around.

"He's sleeping," Lily whispered in awe.

Zel's eyes went wide. "What's he's dreaming about?"

Lily concentrated, her consciousness slipping through the void and resting just on the edge of the foal's Dreamscape. His soul was extremely fragile, and she dared not go any further for fear of harming the child.

"He's dreaming about your voice," Lily said, marveling at the cacophony of colors. The foal had no frame of reference for life, all it knew was warmth and the sound of its mother. Zel's voice was a muffled lullaby, the colors moving in tune with her words. "Do you sing to him?"

"I do." Zel's eyes were shining with tears. "He knows who I am?"

Lily wouldn't go that far. This was an unborn child, after all. Knowledge only ran so deep in a creature that was unaware it was alive. Still, she could see the child's soul, woven together from bands of light. She recognized one of the bands immediately. It was the same color as Mike's, blazing with a magic all its own.

Remembering Zel's question, Lily broke the silence. "He does."

"Wow." Zel wiped the tears from her eyes. "That's amazing."

"Yeah." Lily broke contact with Zel's stomach, her consciousness now fully in the waking world. The experience had been sublime, and she was busy processing the accompanying emotions from it.

"I was wondering what I should name him." Zel was giving Lily an odd look. "But I don't know if I should give him a human name for his father, or a centaur name for his herd. What do you think?"

"Why ask me?"

"Because you've met him." Zel laughed. "I must admit I'm a little jealous."

"Don't be. It's like peeking at a pie while it's still in the oven. Hardly a finished product." Lily contemplated the bands of light and what Mike would want. The man rarely thought of himself, always striving to do good for others.

“You should pick a centaur’s name. Something good that will help him fit in here, with the herd.”

“You think?” Zel asked.

“I know.” Lily took a step back and looked into the forest. “I guess you should probably go off and deal with your beheadings, or whatever.”

The centaur laughed. “Nothing quite that dramatic. We’ve got a new lead on where the mandragora may have set up a nest, but that’s it. Damn thing keeps stealing food from us, but we can’t figure out where it is and it won’t accept our offerings. Makes it hard to plan for livestock if we have to worry about them getting eaten overnight.”

“Can’t you just have your lackeys deal with your weed problem?”

Zel chuckled, adjusting the bags around her waist. “This particular issue requires my personal expertise. You’re welcome to come along if you’d like.”

“Nah. Sounds boring.” Lily looked out at the lake. “Think I’ll throw some more rocks before I call it quits.”

Zel nodded, then gave Lily a bow before trotting off. The centaur disappeared through the thick foliage, leaving Lily alone with her thoughts. She contemplated the bracelet on her wrist and let out a groan.

“Stupid bitch,” she muttered, picking up a rock. Lily had been perfectly happy hating on Zel before she had arrived, and now felt ten times as guilty after she’d been so nice. She skipped a few more rocks, then looked at where Zel had disappeared.

Her thoughts and feelings were complicated, but she now knew one thing for sure: If anyone ever tried to lay a finger on that foal, Lily would tear them apart.