

## Chapter LXXXIX: The Labyrinth and the Minotaur

The instant she said it, I noticed it, too — because I normally didn't give too much attention to things like worms and other underground bugs, owing to their much diminished senses, I had completely missed it before. Now, however, it was almost mind-boggling that I had actually managed to overlook it.

There was something inside the hill we were standing on.

“What the hell?”

I crouched down, and up above, my ravens swooped low, to see if they could see in the cliff face what I was sensing with my bugs.

“What is it?” asked Ritsuka.

“Something wrong?” Drake asked, too.

“There's a...structure of some kind carved out of the hillside,” I said. “And that's...a doorway?”

With Huginn and Muninn, I could see it, a marble structure built conspicuously into the dirt and the rock, white brick and tiles from top to bottom. There was no door or gate barring entry, just a square opening that was obviously manmade with stairs that descended down into the dark, lit only by sparsely spaced torches. The passageway was fairly narrow, narrow enough that three of us walking side by side would be uncomfortably close together, but, paradoxically, the ceiling was high enough that Rika could have stood on my shoulders and still would have had to reach up to touch it.

“A structure?” Arash said.

“It's...”

And suspiciously, my bugs were getting lost. Everything I sent in there, whether it was a flier or a crawler, got turned around almost immediately and wound up coming back the way it went in. They only made it far enough in for me to tell that there *were* turns in the hallway, sharp, ninety degree pivots that led further on deeper into the hillside.

It was almost like they were getting disoriented and losing track of direction in the space between torches, like those brief stretches of darkness barely dark enough to count as shadows played tricks on them — and therefore on me, by extension.

The absolute strangest thing was that the whole structure seemed to just lead off into nothingness, at least from the outside. It made my brain hurt to “look” at it, but the marble just seemed to fade off into the rock, or *through* the rock, like it was reaching out into some kind of fold in space.

I'd only seen that sort of thing happen a few times in my career, and none of those examples boded well as a comparison.

“I'm not...sure...”

Suddenly, it clicked, and a ripple of shock tore through my gut as I shot back up to my feet. In the background, a group of spiders immediately set to work, because if I was right, then *fuck*, we were absolutely going to need it.

“Hi-hey, Senpai,” Rika said nervously, “everything’s okay, right? We’ve been through some pretty hairy stuff! Whatever this is can’t be that bad, can it?”

“It’s a maze,” I said.

“A maze?” half of the group parroted. The twins immediately turned to each other and said, “Jinx!”

“Oh!” said Mash. “I’ve heard about that! Isn’t it possible to solve a maze by staying close to the same wall and always turning the same direction every time? Eventually, you’ll find the exit, because even if you take a wrong turn, you’ll wind up taking the correct path by elimination!”

“What?” Drake said incredulously. “That’s a thing? You can do that?”

Ritsuka blinked and looked at her. “Yeah. Is that...not a thing that people realized before our era?”

Drake shook her head. “I’ve never heard about that before today!”

There was just one problem with that idea.

“It’s not just a maze,” I reminded them, “it’s a Noble Phantasm, which means it won’t be that easy to beat.”

In fact — no, wait, just how many legends about mazes actually existed? I could only think of the one.

Emiya sucked in a breath. “Oh.”

I turned to look at him, his eyes wide, his face a rictus of shock. It seemed he’d come to the same conclusion as I had at basically the same time.

“You don’t think...”

I shook my head. “It has to be. Can you think of anyone else that fits?”

“I can’t,” Arash chimed in. “I’m just not sure how that particular guy wound up in this Singularity, of all places.”

Me, neither. Maybe...it had something to do with the island? Large swathes of Greek mythology had taken place on one island or another, so if this one had taken part of its geography from Crete... It felt like a stretch, though.

“Hey, hey,” said Rika. “Senpai, Emiya, Arash, you guys feel like sharing with the rest of the class?”

My lips pursed. “This isn’t just a maze, it’s a labyrinth. *The Labyrinth*, built by Daedalus.”

“Oh,” it was Mash’s turn to say. She looked just as unnerved as Emiya had. “So then, this Noble Phantasm...”

My mouth pulled into a tight line. “A Caster in his workshop.”

“H-hang on, we had a lesson on this, didn’t we?” Rika stuttered. She turned to her brother. “Right, Onii-chan? First from Senpai, and then Hot Pops told us what to do in a situation like this! In big, bold letters, even!”

Ritsuka nodded. “Don’t.” His brow furrowed. “But...do we have any other options? If this Noble Phantasm is the reason we’re trapped on this island...”

Yeah. The only way to leave the island was to get Daedalus to let us go, one way or the other. Now that we knew there was a Caster involved, it just became all the more possible that this was a trap and not a defensive posture from a wary Stray.

“Can’t we just run out the clock?” Rika said, sounding almost desperate.

“Run out the clock?” asked Drake. “Is that some expression from the future?”

Rika nodded. “This is a Noble Phantasm, right? Then he can’t just sit there forever! He’s gonna run low on energy eventually, won’t he? Poof! No more labyrinth!”

A good point. Except —

“He’s already held it for over an hour,” I pointed out. “That doesn’t mean he can keep it going forever, but if he’s on top of a ley line, it’s not that different.”

Rika turned to Mash. “Is he?”

Mash frowned and looked back down at the ground like she was looking through it.

“I...can’t say for sure,” she admitted. “There’s a ley line that runs through this area, I can feel it, but it’s all...tangled, somehow. U-um, out of order, sort of? Like someone attached a weight to a line of thread. Something’s pulling it out of its natural pathway.”

Like, say, a labyrinth that was fused into the hillside. If the owner had shifted the ley line by setting that labyrinth right on top of it, well, that sounded like something a Caster of that level of skill could accomplish.

“Guess that answers that question,” Arash commented.

“Yeah.”

We really *didn’t* have any other choices. We couldn’t wait outside for him to run out of energy to sustain the labyrinth, we couldn’t flush him out using my bugs, and while we *could* send just a single Servant down to check things out, the best one for that in terms of sheer survivability was Mash, and none of us would be comfortable sending her in alone. Not me, and certainly not the twins.

It was almost like the whole situation had been engineered such that we wouldn't have any choice but to venture inside to look for the Servant responsible. What else should I have expected from an inventor so clever that he had almost trapped *himself* inside of that labyrinth? The guy whose solution to being held captive was to build himself and his son a pair of wings from feathers, string, and some beeswax?

Fucking Tinkers. This place was going to be loaded with booby traps, wasn't it?

"Senpai, can't you just...you know..." Rika made a buzzing sound and waggled her fingers. "And look around that way?"

"I've already tried that," I told her. "They keep getting turned around. However else this Noble Phantasm works, it won't let us solve the labyrinth that way."

"Oh." Emiya held out a hand. "Trace, on."

A moment later, he held a large spool of yarn, roughly the size of a beach ball. I wasn't the only one looking at him strangely.

"What?" he asked, annoyed.

"That's...a big ball of yarn," Ritsuka said, speaking for the rest of us. "Just, um, why did you ever need that much?"

"Never knew a guy like you was that big into knitting," said Drake, sniggering. "Suppose it makes sense enough, seeing as you can cook so well."

Emiya rolled his eyes. "Give me some credit. I've told you before that I can make new things based upon stuff I'm already familiar with, right? It's the same principle. A standard yardage of yarn is about three-hundred meters, but I seriously doubt that would be anywhere near enough to cover a labyrinth that's probably measured in something more like a kilometer or two."

He held up the spool of yarn.

"All I did was up the length of the yarn. It really isn't as big a deal as you're making it out to be."

The most annoying thing wasn't that he was right, it was that his method was even more effective than mine. After all, he'd just made more thread in a few seconds than I would have with an hour to sit and let my spiders weave, and that meant the weaving I'd already had them doing was essentially wasted.

Well. It wasn't *completely* pointless. There were other things I could use that thread for, now that Emiya had so helpfully provided enough yarn to — hopefully — get us through the labyrinth.

"Good thinking," I said instead of anything else.

If we were going to be doing this, there was no sense in leaving my ravens out, so I called Huginn and Muninn back to me, and they swooped over, deathly silent. Drake startled.

“What the hell?”

They each alighted onto one of my hands, perfectly balanced.

“More pets of yours?” Drake asked.

“Close enough.”

And then they folded up into their storage forms and I arranged them back inside of my bag. Drake, watching, shook her head.

“Fuck it,” she said. “I’m just gonna write all that strange stuff off as magic shit.”

Fair enough.

“Trust me,” Rika told her, “you ain’t seen nothing yet.”

Her brother agreed with a nod.

I turned to Emiya. “How long can one of your swords last?”

He raised an eyebrow back at me. “As long as we need it to.”

That was certainly convenient. I nodded. “Then we’ll wedge it into the cliff outside and attach one end of the yarn there. One of us Masters will carry the spool and unravel it as we go. Ritsuka, are you up for that?”

“Yes.” He didn’t even hesitate.

Rika’s face contorted, pained. “Ugh. We’re really doing this, aren’t we? We’re actually going to fight a Caster in his workshop, even though that’s one of the biggest no-no’s on the list!” She sighed, and then jabbed a finger at me. “But I’m doing this under protest! I want it on the record that I was against this idea from the start!”

“Noted.”

She pouted, and with a huff, crossed her arms.

“I know this isn’t the best idea,” Mash said, “but, Senpai, we can’t afford to stay on this island forever, and the longer we leave him alone, the longer Daedalus has to set up defenses to protect himself. I-I think this is...as vulnerable as someone like him is ever going to get.”

A lesson I’d thought I drilled into them when we did that Caster simulation. Maybe on our next one, I’d arrange the scenario so that I could emulate days or even weeks of prep time. They would be miserable having to go through a gauntlet like that, but I think it would do them a world of good to see what a truly entrenched enemy was capable of.

“That doesn’t make me feel any better, Mash,” Rika said dryly.

“You’re worrying too much, Master,” said Emiya, smirking. “You’ve got me on your side, don’t you? Then there’s nothing to worry about.”

She grumbled, “That doesn’t make me feel better either.” She sighed again. “Let’s just get this over with.”

That, at least, I could agree with, so I walked over to the edge of the cliff. The angle of the slope made it impossible to see the entryway into the labyrinth, courtesy of how the lake had worn away at the rock and dirt — and wasn’t that a trip to think about, since this place was technically only a few months old — but we were essentially right on top of it.

“The drop is about twenty feet,” I told them, more for the twins’ sake than anything else. “The water should only be about knee deep, so we don’t have to worry about swimming or getting too wet.”

I took a step back, my lips pursing. It was fine, of course, for the Servants to ferry us down. We’d probably need a second trip to bring Drake along, but getting back up once we were done was honestly going to be the bigger hassle. Not by much, but a bigger hassle nonetheless.

On the other hand, Da Vinci *had* said something about a new function that could cushion our falls, right? There had to be a limit, so I wasn’t about to go skydiving to see if I could walk that off without trouble, but twenty feet wasn’t that big a fall. It should be well within the range of what these mystic codes were capable of, especially if, as I suspected, it was built based off of the function of my old flightpack.

“Uh, Senpai?” Rika said hesitantly. “I recognize that look. Please don’t do something crazy.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

“It’s not crazy, Rika. I’m just going to test one of the new functions of our mystic codes.” To Arash, I turned and said, “I’ll trust you to handle things if something goes wrong.”

Like if I broke my leg when I landed. Drowning in two feet of water would be an embarrassing way to die after everything else I’d been through.

Arash peered down over the edge of the cliff, then nodded. “Shouldn’t be any trouble.”

“Wha — hey! You’re not supposed to be encouraging her!” Rika squawked.

“Miss Taylor, are you sure this is a good idea?” Mash asked worriedly.

“It’s twenty feet,” I said, “not the top of the Empire State Building.”

“Just make sure you guys have your First Aid spells ready,” Emiya said, smirking.

I shot up an unimpressed look, then stepped back towards the cliff again. Arash shimmered, vanished from his spot, and reappeared down below, waiting for me to take the metaphorical and literal plunge.

Nothing else to it, so I hopped off, jumping forward just enough that I shouldn't hit anything on the way down. Behind me, Rika shrieked, "She actually did it!"

"Ah, quit your belly-aching!" Drake said. "That drop's nothing!"

Right before I hit the water, my body suddenly slowed, as though gravity had abruptly weakened to an eighth its usual strength, and with a soft plop, my shoes hit the surface and sank into the sand below.

"Looks like you were right," said Arash. "Nothing to worry about after all."

Everyone else crowded around the ledge, looking down over the edge, and when I looked up, I raised an eyebrow at the collective group.

"Not a scratch!" Rika remarked, amazed.

"Give Da Vinci a little more credit than that," I said sardonically. *Or more like Dragon, since she's the one who built the original anti-gravity function in my flight pack.*

It still amazed me a little that Da Vinci had actually managed to replicate it, although considering she'd figured out nanothorns, it probably shouldn't have. If Daedalus wound up even a fraction that talented, we might be in trouble.

Or we might have landed on a gold mine. If he wasn't working with the enemy, then two minds that sharp would be incredible.

"And you lot were so worried!" Drake chortled. She took a step back — "Hup!" — and then leapt down to join me. She landed in the water, knees bending to absorb the impact, with a significantly larger splash. She grinned back up at the group. "Come on in! The water's fine!"

It was actually a bit chilly.

Ritsuka looked at his sister and Mash, shrugged, and then jumped down. "Master!" Mash cried at the same time as Rika squeaked, "Onii-chan!"

Just like I had, he slowed right before he hit the water and landed with a gentle plop.

"Wow," he said, impressed. "That really *is* useful."

"S-Senpai!" Mash called. "Don't do that without warning!"

She jumped next, landing the easiest out of all of us so far, because she was a Demi-Servant, so of course she did. The water splashed up to her hip, and she grimaced down at the metal bits, particularly the greaves on her legs.

"I-I hope none of this rusts," she murmured.

Rika hesitated for a moment longer, then said, “Wait for me!” and leapt down. Just like her brother and me, her landing was soft and gentle. Up above, Emiya shrugged, vanished, and reappeared among our group.

“Huh.” Rika blinked down at herself and gave the water a kick. “That really was pretty cool! Man, Da Vinci really outdid herself with these things! I wonder how high we can drop from?”

“Maybe you should ask about the limits next time we see her,” I said dryly, “instead of trying to find out the hard way.”

“I’m not the one who decided to test it by jumping off a twenty-foot cliff,” she retorted, and she wasn’t entirely wrong, but I wasn’t about to admit that to her.

“So, this is it, then?” Drake asked, staring at the marble entryway to the maze. She grinned. “I got a feeling there’s some treasure in this place!”

“Not of a kind that will be of any use to you, I don’t think.”

“Ha!” she chuckled. “Only one way to find out, right?”

Unfortunately.

I turned to Emiya. “The sand will be too soft, so if you could get it in the rock or even in the marble itself, that should be enough to hold it without coming loose.”

“Hm.” He closed one eye and narrowed the other at the ceiling. A moment later, a basic-looking sword appeared in the air next to his head without any warning and shot off like a rocket, bouncing off the marble with a loud, echoing *CLANG*.

Rika covered her ears, shrieking, “A little more warning next time!”

Emiya clicked his tongue. “No good. That marble is tougher than it looks. I’d have to put in way too much effort to get through it, and there’s no way our host wouldn’t notice it.”

“He’s probably going to notice either way,” I pointed out.

“A fair point,” Emiya conceded with a nod. “Still...”

Another sword formed, and this one shot into the rock above the entryway, sinking up to the hilt without any trouble whatsoever. Next, he took the massive spool of yarn, leapt up to where the sword was lodged, and tied the end around the hilt of the sword, wrapping it around several times to make sure it was secure.

When he came back down, he tossed the spool at Ritsuka, who fumbled a little but caught it.

“It won’t hold up if something cuts the thread,” Emiya warned, “but shy of that, it should work just fine.”

Ritsuka nodded. “Right.”



“One last thing, then.”

I held out a hand, and a troop of dragonflies buzzed down, carrying a spool of silvery silk thread. I took it and sent them back off, ignoring the strange looks from most of the rest of the group.

“I’m not sure I’m ever going to get used to that,” Ritsuka said quietly.

“Me neither,” his sister agreed.

I started unwinding the thread and held the end out to Mash, who accepted in, confused.

“The last thing we want is for any of us to get lost,” I explained. “Mash, you’re taking point, so tie that thread around your waist. Emiya —”

“I’ll stay in spirit form,” he interjected, “and stick close to my Master.”

My lips pursed, but I accepted it for what it was and moved on. “Ritsuka and Rika are next, do the same. I’ll be behind you two, Drake will be behind me, and Arash will bring up the rear.”

“Oh,” said Mash. She started securing the thin silk thread around her waist. “Good thinking, Miss Taylor!”

“This is why they pay Senpai the big bucks,” Rika agreed. “If, you know, there was anyone around to pay us right now.”

“What happens if we *do* get ambushed?” Ritsuka asked. “Won’t all of us being connected like this make it hard to fight back?”

“Spider silk is strong, but not *that* strong,” I answered. “It should break long before we get dragged along by the fighting.”

Especially since this wasn’t Black Widow silk or Darwin’s Bark Spider silk.

“Fou!” the little gremlin popped up. “Fou, fou! Fou-kyu!”

Mash giggled and scratched under his chin. “Don’t worry, Fou! I’m sure as long as you stay with me, you won’t get lost either.”

Hope sprang eternal.

We took a few minutes to get everyone tied together, fastening the silk thread in loose but secure knots through our belts (for those of us who had them) and around the waist (for the Servants who didn’t). With the way it was arranged, all of us squishy humans — and the slightly less squishy Drake — would have no trouble staying together, and Mash and Arash at the ends could free themselves with virtually no effort and engage the enemy.

“Everyone good?” I asked once we were all tied together. A series of affirmatives answered me.

“Then let’s get going. Mash?”

“Right!” Mash nodded and manifested her shield. “Please follow me, everyone!”

She started walking, stepping down the stairs and into the flickering torch light of the labyrinth, and we all followed behind her like some sort of strange procession. If I thought about it, it sounded like the beginning of a bad joke: a knight, two kids, a supervillain, a pirate, and two archers walked into a maze...

Hell if I knew the punchline, though. As long as it wasn't "and they all wandered for the rest of eternity," I didn't particularly care.

The sparsely spaced torches were not any less ominous with my human eyes as we left the sunlight behind and descended into the labyrinth, and being inside of it myself did not suddenly make it any more possible to send bugs to scout out ahead. Everything I tried to use to navigate further in made it into the shadows between torches and somehow got turned back around, leaving me no other option than to keep them on the walls, floor, and ceiling within our immediate vicinity. As long as I didn't try to send them too far ahead of us or leave them too far behind, they didn't get lost.

As I should have expected from the mythical labyrinth. If solving it was that easy, then it wouldn't have been highlighted as one of Daedalus' greatest works.

The one thing I *could* do without any trouble was have my bugs travel along the thread Ritsuka was leaving behind us. I didn't know for sure whether it was because it matched the myth or just because there wasn't any way for them to get lost traveling in a straight line over an unchanging surface, but it let me ferry in emergency reinforcements without losing them somewhere between the entrance and our position.

The labyrinth, it turned out, was not a traditional maze, or maybe it would be more accurate to say it was more a traditional labyrinth than the later mazes that had false paths and dead ends, all things considered. That didn't mean that I couldn't see how easy it would be to get lost or turned around, because the entire place was uniform, and the only thing that broke the monotony was the turns, all of them sharp and square. If you had to stop and take a break, you might just forget which direction you were going and turn around.

I wasn't sure how long we'd been walking for when Mash suddenly stiffened at the front of the line.

"Movement up ahead, Master!"

A moment later, I heard it, the clicking and clacking of something moving along the marble surface, and as they passed through the light of a torch, I saw what Mash must have detected: skeletal warriors made entirely of bone carrying weapons made of bone. They were completely human from toe to neck, but instead of a head, they had only a set of shark-toothed jaws that sat atop their spines like bear traps.

"What the hell are those?" Rika demanded. "Skellies? Like back in Fuyuki?"

As though they had heard her, each and every one of the skeletons honed suddenly on our position and raced towards us at speed. They brandished their roughly hewn swords with obvious intent, but other than the clacking of their steps and the clicking of their bodies, they made no sound at all.

"Then they should go down just the same!" I told her as I lifted my arm. The image of a spider's thread snapping resounded in my mind.

“I hate mob type enemies!” said Rika as she lifted her own arm. “Gandr!”

“Gandr!”

Two of the group took our shots head on and scattered, clattering to the floor. The other ten kept coming fearlessly, as though they hadn't even noticed that two of their own had been destroyed.

That, too, matched their behavior from Fuyuki.

“Gandr!”

Two more shots took down another two skeletons, paring the number down to eight. It looked like Rika's aiming practice was really paying off, because she wasn't missing.

“Hey!” said Drake. “Why do you two get to have all the fun?”

She pressed herself up against my back, and my brain shorted a little as those massive things attached to her chest squished against my spine, and with one hand, she braced herself on my shoulder while she leaned out to the side and took aim with a flintlock in the other. The bark of her pistol reverberated off of the walls, drowning out the sound of another skeleton collapsing in a heap.

It took only a moment to recover my wits, and Rika and I squeezed off another shot each as the remaining group raced towards us.

They didn't even make it close enough to fight Mash. The remaining five went down one after the other with almost no effort, leaving us with nothing more than scattered piles of dark bone.

“Geez!” Rika complained. “I was expecting Indiana Jones stuff, not *Night of the Living Dead!*”

“Can't say as this was what I was expecting to run into down here either,” Drake agreed as she stepped back and the weight of her chest left mine.

Good grief. How had she not suffocated under those things?

“I'm...not sure why they might have been down here,” Mash admitted. “Maybe...they're the remains of those who died in the Labyrinth?”

“They look a little funny, though,” said Rika. “What's with their heads?”

“I thought it was just me,” Ritsuka added.

Maybe Chaldea had gotten a better read on them. If we were lucky, their instruments might even be able to map out the labyrinth for us as we went, which might not make that string unnecessary, but it would give us more wiggle room going forward.

But when I lifted my communicator and attempted to contact them, all I got was static.

Ritsuka's brow furrowed. “That's...a bit ominous.”

“More horror movie bullshit,” Rika said sourly. “I like my brain uneaten, thank you!”

“I don’t think you’re going to have to worry about that with these,” Emiya said as he shimmered into existence. He stepped forward and bent down to examine the bones. Whatever he found didn’t make him happy. With a click of his tongue, he went on, “Damn, I was afraid of that. I recognize these.”

“You do?” the twins said in stereo.

“Dragon Tooth Warriors,” he said distastefully.

Oh.

“From the legend of Jason and the Argonauts?” Mash said before I could.

Emiya nodded. “Although what they’re doing here, I couldn’t tell you. The Heroic Spirit they belong to has no connection to the Labyrinth or the Minotaur, let alone Daedalus.”

There was *a* connection between Theseus and Jason, I thought, but it was tenuous enough that I didn’t see the need to correct him. More importantly, there was no connection between the *Labyrinth* and Jason, except for Theseus, and three degrees of separation was too much even for me to believe it was possible.

“Great,” Rika grouched. “You realize that means we’ll see more of them now, right? This place was spooky enough without adding zombie bone monsters!”

“Ah, quite your belly-aching!” Drake said. “We took that lot down quick and easy, yeah? What’re you even worried about?”

“Fortunately, they *are* relatively weak and easy to put down,” I agreed. “Just be ready to use Gandr on them, Rika, and we shouldn’t have too much trouble.”

“I won’t let any of them hurt you, Senpai!” Mash chimed in. “None of them will make it past my shield! I promise!”

“You’re lucky you’re such a cinnamon roll, Mash,” Rika said. She shook her head. “Ah, whatever! I’m not going to let a bunch of skellies scare me! Not after I’ve been through Senpai’s funhouse of bugs and spiders!”

“It *is* kind of hard to beat that,” Ritsuka agreed, “even if we were never in any actual danger at the time.”

“Stop trying to make it worse!”

When the twins settled back down a minute later, we started back on our journey through the labyrinth. The walls around us remained perfectly uniform and without flaw as we walked — stepping carefully around the piles of bones as we passed the remains of the Dragon’s Teeth — and it was becoming increasingly obvious why this place had been considered such a nightmare to navigate, back in the myth. Everything looked the exact same, down to the etching in the reliefs carved up higher on the walls.

The mathematical precision involved in replicating everything down to the millimeter was mind-boggling, doubly so for a man who had existed somewhere around a thousand years before Pythagoras was even born.

Then again, the pyramids were the same way, weren't they? The ancient Egyptians had accomplished marvels of engineering and architecture that, to my knowledge, *still* baffled experts to...well, to the modern era.

Couldn't exactly say "to this day" when we were technically four-hundred years in the past.

True to Rika's prediction, we did in fact run into several more groups of Dragon's Teeth. Hampered as they were by the relative narrowness of the corridor, they weren't any harder to put down than they were the first time. In a wider area of engagement, I could see them being a little more challenging, but without the space to flank us and being forced to come from a single direction, the advantage of their numbers was massively curtailed.

And still, there was no indication as to their source. I wasn't sure who I was expecting to find if we did actually find someone. The myth, after all, technically belonged to Jason, but that didn't mean that Jason was the only one who could make them. I just wasn't sure where the limits of that logic ended either.

The Labyrinth stretched on. The spool of yarn in Ritsuka's hands grew ever smaller, although it hadn't yet grown small enough that I was starting to get worried, but neither did there seem to be any end in sight. The uniform structure of the walls didn't just play merry havoc on our sense of direction, it also made it hard to tell the passing of time or even distance, so it was almost impossible to say exactly how long we'd been walking or how much time had passed since we first entered.

With our communicators unable to even tell us the local time? We could have been walking for hours without realizing it.

"Geez," Rika grumbled. "Just how big *is* this place?"

"I don't know," I said.

Mash sighed. "Unfortunately, Senpai, the myth didn't give exact measurements, so there's no way of saying exactly how big the Labyrinth actually is. For that matter, as a Noble Phantasm, it doesn't necessarily have to obey the normal boundaries of physical space, so it's entirely possible that the Labyrinth itself is larger on the inside than the space it takes up on the outside."

Which would go a long way to explaining the oddities I'd noticed when we first discovered it. If it was a sort of localized dimensional pocket, then it might only take up a few cubic feet of the hillside, even though it was this big on the inside.

"So...what?" Rika asked. "Do we just keep walking until we find this Daddy guy?"

Her brother grimaced. "Please don't call him that ever again."

“Questionable phrasing aside,” I began, “it’s a good point. We can’t let him go for too long, but I think, once we reach the end of Emiya’s spool of yarn, we should turn back and start talking other options.”

Like nuking the whole place down to the bedrock. It felt a little extreme, but if we couldn’t negotiate and he wasn’t willing to come talk with us, then we’d have to take whatever way off of this island we could.

Ritsuka looked down at the spool of yarn in his hands. “We still have a ways to go, then.”

“Ugh,” Rika grunted. “Why can’t this guy be polite and meet us halfway? What, were we supposed to knock to let him know we were coming?”

Somehow, I didn’t think it was that simple.

“Should we call that Plan B?” Arash suggested humorously.

“If we have to,” I answered in all seriousness. “I’d rather not alienate a Caster as strong as Daedalus. He’s too useful to have as an enemy.”

“I’ll drink to that!” Drake proclaimed, and she reached into her cleavage again long enough to pull out her Grail and take a long swig of rum. When she was done, she stuffed it back in again. “Ah! Who cares if we get another mouth to feed when I’ve got all the food and drink I could ever need?”

“Servant’s don’t need to eat, Captain Drake,” Mash told her matter-of-factly. “A-ah, that is, regular Servants don’t, but a Demi-Servant like me does. I can substitute magical energy for a time, but eventually, I have to have food.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy a good meal, though,” Arash chimed in. “Just that we don’t need it to survive.”

“Geez!” Drake whined. “You Servants are cool in so many ways, but not getting to eat or drink? I don’t know how you can stand it!”

“When you’re a Servant yourself,” Arash replied, “you’ll understand just fine, I think.”

“Never!” Drake said firmly.

Abruptly, Mash gasped and stiffened. “This feeling...!”

The whole of the Labyrinth shuddered and shook, and even the flames in the torches flickered and wavered in their brackets. The thud of heavy footsteps echoed off of the walls, and a metallic whine scraped along the tiles like nails on a chalkboard. From further on ahead, something lumbered towards us, growing ever closer with each plodding footfall.

My mind raced through the possibilities. Had Daedalus been responsible for any automatons? I couldn’t remember. I wanted to say no, but the man was a brilliant inventor who had constructed functional wings from feathers, wax, and a bit of string, so underestimating his limits was the worst idea imaginable.

Emiya suddenly materialized, hands held out to his sides as his swords manifested. “Master!”

From up ahead, a massive, bronze-skinned hand gripped the corner of the wall, and then a head rounded the turn, a visage of a skeletal bull with a thick mane of white fur that almost swallowed the pair of enormous black horns jutting out from inside of it.

No, I realized. I’d been assuming from the start that this was the Noble Phantasm of Daedalus, because it fit the mold. He’d created the thing, after all. But he wasn’t the only one associated with it, was he? He wasn’t the only one whose legend had been defined by it. He wasn’t the only one who could be said to have it as a Noble Phantasm.

There was still someone else who had lived here, been trapped here, and eventually died here. Someone not traditionally considered a character or a person, someone that the legend of the Labyrinth tended to treat like a brainless, unfeeling monster.

But when you think about it, what was the difference between a demigod who was half divine and half man and a monster that was half man and half animal? If they were both half human, then didn’t that make them both human enough to become a Heroic Spirit?

“Servant detected!” Mash reported unnecessarily.

After the head came the torso, thickly muscled and criss-crossed with thin scars. Heavy iron bands wrapped tightly around the arms as though to weigh down the colossus stomping around the corner, and beneath a skirt the color of blood, more wrapped around the ankles. One in particular was attached to a literal ball and chain large enough that it could have slowed down a fully transformed *Lung*.

“Holy fuck,” Drake swore. “That fucker is —”

“The Minotaur,” I breathed.

The whole hallway shook and rumbled, and it took me an extra second to realize that it was the Minotaur *growling*. He hefted a pair of large polearms, halberds with sharp spikes on the end of the shaft and the back of the ax’s head. They looked like they could easily cleave me in half and still keep going.

And with a voice like an avalanche, he spoke.

“*Die.*”