**The Friendly Skies**

The air above the tarmac rippled like a sheet in the wind, the heat eating through the thin fabric of Mike’s shirt and making him sweat. The entourage had arrived a few minutes earlier than expected, meaning they had to wait for the private jet to come out of its hangar where the Order prepared the plane for the trans-ocean flight. He had no idea what this actually entailed, but the answer satisfied Ratu.

Flying used to give Mike anxiety, but any fear of heights had been squashed long ago by the piece of Abella’s soul that was now part of his. In the event of an emergency, it had already been discussed that Lily could easily carry him to safety while Ratu used her magic to protect Beth and Quetzalli.

Ingrid and Wallace stood behind them, looking very much like a pair of secret service agents. Mike kept noticing that Ingrid would stare at him when she thought he wasn’t looking. When he had inspected her soul, he could see a boiling mass of confusion coupled with desire and rage.

Lily seemed to notice as well. She kept smirking at the agents like she knew a secret. Other than some brief instructions when everyone was picked up, Ingrid and Wallace had said very little. There had been no sign of Cyrus and his team, but Mike already knew that they had arrived minutes after he had left. Kisa had contacted him via their telepathic link to let them know that they were just wandering the grounds and trying to chat up the centaurs, who they saw as humans.

Kisa had also informed him that Jenny was taking her new role as Head of Security very seriously. Reggie had even made her a badge for it, which was just an old silver dollar with a sheriff’s star drawn on it in Sharpie that had been hot glued to the outside of her dress. Apparently the cursed doll was now sitting on the porch swing with Cecilia, watching for any signs of trouble. Mike didn’t know if her sudden interest was because she cared about the house, or because he had given her permission to cause trouble if the Order tried to pull anything.

The doors of the hangar slid open, revealing a sleek looking white plane with glowing runes down the sides. Mike could tell that several strong enchantments had been placed on it, so took a few steps toward Ratu.

“Defensive?” he asked, knowing she could see them too.

“Indeed. Along with cloaking and…” Ratu squinted her eyes in the direction of the fuselage. “Interesting. Improved fuel efficiency. That’s one I haven’t seen before.”

The plane came to a stop nearby, and the cabin door swung down to reveal stairs. At the top, a pair of women in uniform waved for them to come over.

“Finally,” Lily muttered, hauling a massive suitcase behind her that Mike knew for a fact was just one of her illusions. Once created, it would only continue to exist as long as Lily remained within thirty feet of it.

One of the women came down the stairs and opened the luggage compartment in the belly of the plane. Mike and the others handed over the bags they had brought, then ascended the airstairs. The other woman, who wore Captain’s bars, smiled pleasantly at them and gestured for them to choose their seats. The interior of the cabin was nice and roomy, allowing up to three people to sit next to each other. The seats then alternated which side of the plane they were on, making the cabin appear like a lounge. Mike also noticed a few oblong seats in the back that looked like they folded down into beds.

“Welcome aboard.” The captain pointed to the overhead bins. “Make sure you tuck away any loose belongings before take off.”

“Will do.” Mike shoved his backpack into the overhead bin. Other than a couple of books, he just had a tablet similar to Abella’s loaded with movies. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had more than an hour to himself, and was looking forward to catching up on what had come out in the last few years. He started to sit by the window, but was interrupted by a tap on the shoulder.

“May I?” Ratu was standing right behind him. “I haven’t been on a plane before and heard the view is spectacular.”

“Oh, right, of course.” Mike took the middle seat instead. The seats were huge, upholstered in leather with moveable armrests and plenty of legroom. Beth and Quetzalli walked past his row, both of them smirking in his direction.

*Uh oh.* He watched as Lily entered the cabin and tilted down her sunglasses dramatically to inspect the surroundings. She wore a red sundress with a matching wide-brimmed hat and black thigh high boots. When she saw where Mike was sitting, she licked her lips and headed for the aisle seat.

“Excuse me, sir, but I think you might be in my seat.” She batted her eyelashes in his direction.

“Let me see your ticket,” he replied with a chuckle.

“Sure, I have it right here.” She handed him a slip of paper with a pair of tits drawn along the bottom and the words **The Order Eats Ass** written across the middle.

Wallace, who was now behind Lily, got a confused look on his face and reached past her waist to snatch the ticket from her hand. He studied it for a moment with a scowl, then balled it up and tossed it onto the floor.

“If you don’t want to come, you can fucking—” he was cut off when Ingrid put a hand on his shoulder and shook her head.

“Down, boy,” Lily muttered, then flopped down into her seat and crossed her legs. “If I’m too much for you, then maybe—”

“Enough.” Mike put his hand on Lily’s leg and squeezed. “If you can’t behave, I’ll make them swing over the house and we’ll drop you out.”

“You wouldn’t dare?” Lily raised a hand to her mouth in exaggerated shock.

“Can I push?” asked Wallace.

“We’ll aim for the fountain,” Ratu offered, then turned her attention out the window. “Maybe someone will try and catch you if they’re in a good mood. If not, maybe the tip of the fountain will dislodge that stick up your ass.”

Mike looked at Ratu in horror, then turned back to see that Lily was grinning. The succubus was thriving on the chaos she was sowing, and they hadn’t even taken off yet!

“Go.” Ingrid nudged her partner from behind. “She’s just fucking with everybody.”

Lily lowered her glasses and batted eyelashes in Wallace’s direction. “It’s very true. I do all of this for attention, but mainly because I have daddy issues and a history of bad relationships.”

“Ugh.” Wallace sneered at her then moved to the back of the cabin. Ingrid settled in a seat across from Wallace, then pulled a facemask from the pocket of her seat and slipped it over her face. It was clear she intended to sleep through the flight, or at least pretend to.

The captain gave some instructions over the intercom as the plane taxied out toward the runway. They got stuck waiting their turn, and Mike overheard Beth explaining aerodynamics to Quetzalli.

“So the wings don’t actually flap,” Beth said. “When the engines fire up, the plane goes really fast, which makes air move over the wings. See how they’re curved? There’s more surface area up top, which means—”

“The air molecules become less dense, causing lift from the higher pressure air below.” Quetzalli winked. “That part I get. But why not get assistance from the wind itself, or even some air spirits?”

“Air spirits?” asked Beth.

Quetzalli looked out the window. “Elementals, maybe, whatever you call them. It would take a really big pair of wings to lift up a creature of my…uh, something large, like a roc. A gargoyle is a perfect example, actually. It’s instinctual for magical beings, interacting with the natural world around them to buoy themselves into the air without the need for jet engines.”

“Elementals.” Beth stared off into space, suddenly deep in thought. Mike turned his attention forward again and saw that Ratu had pressed her face against the glass.

“Excited?” he asked.

She nodded, a movement which made her forehead squeak against the glass. “I remember when men were folding wings of wood and throwing themselves off of cliffs in an attempt to conquer the sky. I have never ridden on anything other than boats and buses in my entire life, and look forward to seeing the world as a bird does.”

“It’s not that great,” Lily offered. “Being on a plane just means you can see more idiots at once. Particularly over cities.”

“Surely such a sight would be cause for self reflection on the human condition? I can’t imagine people would look down on over a million souls below and not see how they’re part of a bigger picture.”

Lily frowned. “Unless a loved celebrity tells them how important everything is, they’re content to fester in their own stupidity, especially now that they have social media. It’s like a marinade for ignorance.”

“Social media?” Ratu looked at Mike for guidance.

The engines revved up and the jet started moving toward the runway. The naga spun in her seat and pressed her face against the window once more. Mike chuckled and rubbed her back, noticing immediately the large number of bumpy scales underneath. He could feel her flesh rippling as the plane accelerated, pressing everyone but Ratu back into their seats.

“Oh, I’ve missed this!” declared Quetzalli from behind him. Ratu had twisted her face to see the front of the plane better, and he fought back a laugh. He had never seen the prim and proper enchantress look so silly.

Once the plane left the ground and made its ascent, Ratu squealed in delight. “We’re going up! I can see the airport! Wow, look at how tiny all those cars are!”

“It’s like flying with a toddler,” Lily muttered, then handed over a pack of gum. “You should make her chew some of this before the pressure hits her ears and she cries. Passengers hate a screaming child.”

“You brought gum?” He took it from her and smiled when he saw it was cinnamon flavored.

“Not my first plane trip, Romeo.” She blew a bubble, then popped it obnoxiously. “Thought of it this morning when I saw all that Beth was bringing.”

Now that had him curious. “What all did she bring?” he asked.

“Snacks. Books. Movies. Pillow. Blanket.” Lily popped her gum again. “It’s at least a ten hour flight.”

“We can do it in eight if the wind is right.” This came from Wallace behind them. Mike frowned, realizing that the man could hear their conversation. “This plane is much faster than what you’re used to. Anyone else taking a direct flight is looking at almost twelve hours.”

“Damn.” Mike thought about his carry-on bag. Kisa and Tink had helped him pack it, but he hadn’t thought much about bringing entertainment. He had spent part of the morning trying to explain his absence to Grace, but the little Arachne got upset and hid in the attic. It also didn’t help that he couldn’t remember the last time he had spent more than a few minutes doing nothing. The house kept him busy from sun up to sun down and now he was just going to sit here half a day.

“Ah. Ahhh!” Ratu stuck a finger in her ear and wiggled it. “Ow, why is this so sudden?”

“Chew on some gum,” he said, pulling a stick for himself. The naga took a piece and inspected it with a frown.

“Oh, I see,” she muttered, then popped the stick in. “I hadn’t considered that we would experience such a change in pressure. I thought you said these cabins were pressurized?”

“They are,” Mike replied. “But not to sea level. Someone smarter than me probably knows why.”

He half expected Wallace to offer an answer. Ingrid was now reclined in her seat with her foot up on a stool that swiveled out in front of her. Mike found his own foot stool and pulled it out. If he was going to be bored, at least he would be comfortable.

The plane reached cruising altitude, and Mike heard the faint hiss of soda being opened. He looked back and saw that Beth had pulled a six pack of Sprite along with a huge bag of trailmix out of her carry-on, and was listening intently to Quetzalli as the dragon described nearby cloud formations.

“Damn.” Lily was looking back now as well. “What are the odds that she has booze?”

“Pretty good, I’m sure.” Mike got up and pulled his carryon from the overhead bin. He had crammed a few things in it, but it was stuff he thought he might need. Being honest with himself, he had been in a hurry and more worried about his daughter, which had resulted in a lack of preparation for his flight. When he unzipped the backpack, he discovered a ziploc bag underneath a folded piece of paper. He pulled the paper free and opened it, only to hear Lily snort beside him.

Mike smiled at the picture Tink had drawn of him plowing her from behind. She had colored it with crayons, which made it even more hilarious. At the top of the paper were the words ‘Come home soon!’.

“How many veins did she draw on your dick?” Lily snatched the paper away and scrutinized it. “This is hilarious.”

He snatched his letter back and tucked it into his bag. The ziploc bag came out and he laughed. Tink and Kisa had stuffed it full of Eggo waffles that they had toasted and then stuffed with peanut butter as if they were giant Oreo cookies.

“At least I won’t go hungry,” he said with a smile, then let out a gasp. Down in the depths of his bag, past his flip flops and shorts were a pair of canned beers. When he pulled one free, he winced when he heard the faint ripping of cobwebs beneath them. Scowling, he shifted his bag around to discover that Grace had smeared webbing all over the bottom of his bag. She had taken his bag away this morning before he could pack it, but he had no idea she had done this.

He did his best to scrape webbing off his beer before pulling it free. Lily had gotten out of her seat and was asking Wallace about in-flight entertainment. Ratu had her forehead pressed so hard to the top of the window that there were marks on her face when she looked away.

“I thought it would be more like a rollercoaster,” she told him, using her hand to elaborate. “A constant up and down motion.”

“Yeah, that would get old after a few minutes.” He cracked open his beer and pulled out his tablet. “I’ve got some movies saved on here if you want to watch one with me.”

“Movies?” Ratu’s emerald eyes lit up, and the scales on her neck and face shifted. They had become more prominent during the plane’s ascent and there was no doubting her nature now. “I can’t remember the last time I saw a movie.”

“Welcome to the 21st Century.” He offered her an earbud, which she scrutinized before jamming in her ear. Mike turned his tablet sideways and showed Ratu how to scroll through his movie library. “Any requests?”

She leaned into him, and the scent of chamomile tea drifted over him like a blanket. Ratu poked at his screen, then tapped on one of the pictures. “Who is that?”

“Chris Evans,” he replied. “And that movie is part of a series.”

“I wish to watch movies with him.” She wrapped her arm around his. “This man is very pretty.”

“Here, we’ll start with the one where he punches nazis.” Mike tapped the screen and watched the Marvel logo spin up. Ratu pressed into him, and he was suddenly conscious that her nipples had gone hard beneath her silken blouse and pressed into his arm.

Yeah, well, Chris Evans has that effect on people, he thought to himself with a grin. He couldn’ help but notice that the top of Ratu’s head fit perfectly underneath his jaw as she snuggled into him and watched the movie.

Lily managed to raise enough hell with Wallace that the man showed her where the mini-fridge was, and the succubus returned carrying an armful of snacks and a bottle of wine.

“Those assholes were holding out on us,” she declared loudly, then popped the cork on the wine. “There’s more back there if you want any.”

Mike made a point to throw a frown back at Wallace, who was looking out the window and likely feigning interest in a passing cloud. Ingrid was still in her seat with her blindfold on.

Lily licked the tip of the bottle seductively, then slammed the first third of it. “Oh, that’s way nicer than I expected,” she said with a giggle, then leaned against Mike and whispered in his ear. “Sleeping beauty is scrying.”

Mike shook his head and pushed the bottle away. “No thanks,” he told her, pretending that she had just asked if he wanted any. “Doesn’t pair well with my in-flight meal.”

“You’re lame,” she replied with a pout, then drank a bit more. “I’m gonna see if the girls want some.” Lily rose and sauntered back to where Beth and Quetzalli sat, most likely to pass along the information.

Ratu squeezed Mike’s arm and gasped in response to the movie. She had taken the tablet from him and clutched it tightly in her fingers. “It looks so real,” she whispered.

“Yep. They’ve gotten pretty good at that.”

“Indeed.” The naga licked her lips and looked at him. “Are airplanes always so cold inside?”

“They can be.” He turned around and looked at Wallace. “Do you guys have blankets?”

Wallace ignored him.

“It’s fine,” Ratu said, then ignited a ball of fire in her hand and set it to hover above their seat.

Ingrid practically leapt out of her chair and shrieked while Wallace ran to the back of the plane for a fire extinguisher. Ratu had unsummoned the fireball by the time Ingrid arrived, then smirked at the mage.

“I was getting cold is all,” she said with a sinister grin.

“No fire on the plane,” Ingrid said, her face so pale Mike thought she was going to pass out. “Never. I don’t care who you are, I’ll—”

Wallace took Ingrid by the shoulders and pushed her toward the back of the plane. He paused long enough to open an overhead compartment and pull out a stack of blankets, which he tossed down at Mike.

“Thanks,” Ratu said, then grinned. “It’s my first time on a plane. I apologize.”

Wallace grunted, then looked toward the back of the plane where Ingrid sat gripping the arms of her seat. “Yeah, well…no magic on the plane.”

He left to comfort his partner, who looked like she was going to be sick. Mike turned his attention back to Ratu and showed her how they could lean the seats back and then covered both of them with blankets in an attempt to keep her warm. Lily eventually returned to her seat with a couple of the books that Beth had brought along as well as another bottle of wine. The first one was already empty, the bottle now rolling around beneath her seat.

As for Mike and Ratu, the two of them watched the rest of the movie and she immediately requested the sequel, her body slowly entwining with his. They were about halfway through this movie when she shifted, her head brushing against his chin.

“Caretaker. A question.” The naga kept her attention on the screen as she spoke.

“If it’s about the plot, I’m afraid I’ve only seen a few of these movies. I was too busy with my magic house to watch them all.”

Ratu chuckled. “It’s not about that. Rather, I was curious. Does it offend you that I find this man to be so attractive?”

“Not in the slightest.” He had his arm around her shoulders, so gave her a reassuring squeeze. “Your feelings are your own. They aren’t mine to control.”

“I see.” She shifted around and put her hand on his chest. “What if I were to take him for a lover? Would that upset you?”

“Only if you didn’t get me an autograph.” He cast a glance over his shoulder at Beth, thinking briefly of her own relationships. As if sensing his attention, she looked up at him over the top of her tablet and winked. She and Quetzalli were also watching a movie. “I don’t own you or anybody. As long as your relationship didn’t threaten the safety of the house, you’d be free to pursue life as you choose.”

She let out a contented sigh and slid her hand beneath his shirt. He was suddenly aware of how warm her hand was. Shifting around, he adjusted the blanket just as Ratu’s hand slid lower and beneath the waistband of his shorts.

“Is it wrong that my lust for him has inspired this?” she whispered, her tongue flicking at the air. “That you are about to benefit from feelings that he has brought me?”

“I don’t know that this is the best place,” he began, but Ratu’s hand was suddenly on his cock.

“Discretion, then,” she cooed. “I want to see how many times I can make you come without our hosts noticing.”

He let out a tiny gasp when a second hand joined Ratu’s, then turned to look at Lily. The succubus was busy with her book, but her right hand had slid beneath the blanket as well and she flashed him a grin.

“Both of you?” he gasped as they started stroking him. Ratu continued to work the base of his shaft while Lily toyed with the head of his penis. A third appendage teased his testicles, and he realized Lily’s tail had come into play.

“That’s a neat trick,” Ratu muttered, her eyes still on Mike’s phone. He wasn’t sure if she was referring to Lily or the movie, but couldn’t bring himself to care. Lily’s tail slid along his cock to secrete a lubricant that both women now used to stroke him.

Lily didn’t reply, continuing to stare at her book. Her tail slid along his thigh while the women continued stroking him. He wanted to reciprocate, but his free hand was currently on Ratu’s hip. If he stretched, he could stroke her ass, but that was it.

“If you hold the tablet, I can—” He was silenced when Ratu put a finger to his lips.

“There’s always tomorrow,” she whispered. “For now, I just want to get you off.”

As she said this, Lily’s tail moved to the head of his cock and pressed against it. He felt it transform into a wet mouth that slid down onto his glans and started sucking.

“You’re the boss,” he replied, then bit down on his lip to silence a groan.

The two of them jerked him off while he got tail-sucked. Ratu kept watching their movie until Mike’s stomach muscles tensed up. The naga lifted her head long enough to look over the seats, then slid underneath the blanket and yanked Lily’s tail off of him to take its place.

Ever the gentleman, Mike paused the movie. He had to bite his fist to remain silent as Ratu’s long tongue wrapped around his shaft and squeezed as she blew him. Lily seemed content to allow the naga to have full rein right until Mike came. That’s when the succubus grabbed the back of Ratu’s head and shoved her all the way down.

He bottomed out in Ratu’s throat as she unhinged her jaw. Her head bobbed up and down beneath the blanket as she swallowed his load, then popped free. Mike looked over his shoulder to see if anyone had noticed. Other than a knowing wink from Beth, nobody else indicated that they had seen what happened.

Lily’s hand toyed with the head of his cock, keeping him erect. Ratu joined in, and the two of them teased him some more. Over his shoulder, he heard Ingrid squirming in her seat, as if she couldn’t get comfy. He wondered if she was still scrying them. If so, she was getting quite the show.

Smirking to himself, he allowed them to continue. Though he had just come, he no longer had a refractory period and was shooting another load soon enough, this time into Lily’s tail-pussy. Lily licked her lips and then belched dramatically.

They teased him like this for well over an hour. Eventually, the two of them gave him a break and allowed him to eat his snack. The co-pilot actually came back to show them where some food was kept, and Lily proceeded to make herself an enormous meal, which she devoured completely. Both Ingrid and Wallace were throwing her dirty looks, which Lily ignored.

Quetzalli’s face was pressed to the glass of her window so hard that her breasts were squished against the wall, and she was mumbling to herself about the various clouds she spotted, as if they were old friends. They were completely over the ocean without any land in sight. This was the most dangerous part of the journey. If the Order tried something here, Mike’s options would be very limited. Lily could fly him to safety, but they would all be in the middle of the ocean.

The thought gave him chills, but he relied on his magic to get him through. His danger sense didn’t so much as chirp, even when Ingrid disappeared back into the bathroom for over thirty minutes.

“I see it!” Beth cried, leaning across Quetzalli to look out the window. Lily was out of her seat, swaying back and forth, clutching her third bottle of wine.

“Yeah, vacation!” Lily stripped off her sundress over her head and threw it. She had on a red bikini underneath. “Spring break!”

“You need to control your help,” Wallace added. “This is hardly a vacation.”

“I don’t pay her,” Mike countered with a grin. “Let her be excited.”

The plane turned, and now the island was on his side of the plane. The ocean changed color as more of the shallows came into view, and the ominous dark blue was replaced by yellows and greens. The island of Maui grew larger as they circled the southern edge and dropped altitude.

“We’ve got a private strip,” Wallace announced as he sat in his seat and buckled up. “The landing is rough sometimes. Might wanna buckle up.”

Everyone obeyed. Just as the sounds of metallic clicking stopped, the plane hit turbulence and dropped. Quetzalli let out a loud whoop and began describing what had just happened to Beth. Ratu clung to Mike’s arm and buried her head in his chest.

“Oh, I hate that,” she whispered, just as the plane did it again.

“Think of it like a bus hitting a bump,” offered Lily. “I promise it feels worse than—”

The plane lurched again, and they were suddenly over a small airfield. When the tires hit the tarmac, the plane roared in defiance as the wing flaps rose and it slowed down. Glowing runes formed along wings and the whole cabin glowed briefly with a magical field that held everyone in place. They came to a stop in less than ten seconds before the field vanished.

“What the hell was that?” Beth asked.

“It’s a short strip,” replied Ingrid, who stood. “We usually land at the airport, but I instructed the captain to land here instead. Remember that data leak we discussed earlier?” She looked at Mike.

He nodded. “You think someone is waiting there for us?”

“I don’t. But your safety is my job right now. If someone is there, they’re gonna be waiting a long time.” She lifted the overhead compartment and pulled out her bag. “Once we’re ready, we can go.”

When the plane door opened, humidity flooded the plane. He heard Beth inhale the scent and let out a massive sigh. Lily had already grabbed her stuff and was running down the stairs.

“Welcome to Maui,” offered the captain from the door of the cockpit. Mike thanked both pilots and stepped out into the hot sun.

“Shit,” he muttered, his senses suddenly overwhelmed. He clung to the railing, afraid to let go for fear of falling.

“Mike?” Ratu was right behind him and she put a hand on his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he muttered. The island was so alive. The jungle nearby was a choir of whispers as the trees sang for afternoon rain. Through the thick of the wilderness, the alien thoughts of the arachnid population bombarded his mind. It took a few moments to steady himself and shut out the onslaught of information. By then, the others were watching him with curiosity from above.

“Problem?” asked Wallace.

“First time here. Just taking it all in,” Mike answered, then took the last couple of steps down. Even with a mental barrier erected, he could feel the energy of the island all around him. It was so different from the greenhouse or even the forests of Oregon.

“Oh my God, I can smell the ocean,” Beth shouted, which got her a dirty look from Lily. Ratu was by Mike’s side, a sad smile on her face. When he asked her about it, she just muttered that it reminded her of home and said no more.

A black limo was waiting for them, and once the luggage bay was opened, a member of the Order climbed inside to pull out their bags. Lily winked at Mike as the bay was cleaned out, then raised hell when her massive bag was nowhere to be found.

Mike and the others waited inside the limo as Lily caused a scene, shouting at Ingrid, the captains, and the ground crew. He almost felt bad for the people just doing their jobs, but they were part of an organization planning to betray him. If he didn’t let Lily blow off steam now, there was no telling what she might do later.

He chuckled quietly to himself once Lily was promised they would replace all of her belongings. If nothing else, he was interested to see what sort of crap she could get them to buy for her.

The limo had a minibar, and Beth helped herself to a sparkling water. Mike noticed that there wasn’t any alcohol inside and figured that Lily was likely the reason. She had been staggering around outside making a fool of herself after theoretically drinking three bottles of wine on the flight, so it wasn’t surprising to think they had called ahead to have it removed. When everybody was ready to leave, Wallace and Ingrid didn’t sit in the back. They sat up front with the driver.

“It’s so beautiful,” Beth said, gazing out the window as they drove down from the private airstrip. “I don’t know that I’ve ever seen so many trees.”

“It used to look like that everywhere,” Ratu added. “Back before humanity cut everything down. Imagine having to carve your way through the wilderness just to get anywhere.”

“Which is why some of us flew.” Quetzalli winked. “Being on the plane was both exhilarating and sad.” She opened her mouth to say something else, but Beth put a hand on the dragon’s knee and shook her head.

The car took them south first, then along the west side of the island. Mike lost track of how many resorts they passed and had to blink twice when they pulled onto a dirt road between a pair of dilapidated buildings. Wondering where they were going, he watched in awe as reality rippled and a tall building appeared before them. It had a modern look to the front and curved just like a palm tree. In the middle was an elevator encased in a glass tube that went all the way to the top. Out front, there was a massive fountain with a pair of attendants waiting by the edge of the street. The limo stopped and the doors were opened for them.

“Welcome to Paradise.” Mike thought the attendant was being cute, but saw that the word *Paradise* was mounted on the side of the building. “May we take your bags?”

“I wouldn’t,” slurred Lily. “They’re gonna lose them!”

“Don’t mind her,” Mike said, then slid one hand around Lily’s waist. “She’s drunk.”

The attendants, both men, smiled weakly, then accepted bags from everyone else and pulled the rest from the trunk. A woman with dark skin and a pleated headband came out to greet them. Mike could sense the magic buzzing around her.

“My name is Aurora,” she said, then turned to Mike. “Are you the Caretaker?”

“That’s me.”

“Good. I am the concierge, I have your wristbands right here.” She held up a small stack of black wrist bands. They were made from woven leather fibers with gemstones tucked between them. “You’ll need these to get around the resort.”

“Oh, pretty.” Quetzalli stuck her hand out and Aurora slid it onto her wrist. The woven bands tightened and Mike saw a flash of light from the stones.

“So what do those do?” he asked.

“There is a barrier around Paradise. Without these bands, you cannot cross the threshold without a member of our staff present. They also let our people know you’re supposed to be here, and under what guise. You are all registered as VIP, meaning that you have full access to the facilities as well as a personal guard.”

“And how will you know where we are?” Beth asked. “Through the bracelets?”

“Through the bracelets.” Aurora smiled and slid one over Beth’s wrist. “They also have a shield enchantment on them. It sounds like you all may be going on an excursion and a little extra protection is always welcome.”

“What a great idea.” Beth held hers out at arms length. “What do you think, Ratu?”

The naga inspected it as if it were a fine piece of jewelry. “It is rather lovely,” she said. “But I see that there’s also a tracking enchantment. You’ll know exactly where we are at all times.”

“For your safety,” Aurora added with a smile. “It’s a big island and we have to be able to find you at a moment’s notice.”

“Can we take them off?” asked Beth.

“No. The last thing we want is to lose track of a valued asset.” Aurora looked at Mike. “It really is for your safety, and the safety of our staff. They are quite comfortable, and you’ll hardly know they’re there.”

Mike looked at the others. Of all the things they had considered, a tracking device hadn’t been on the list, at least not one they couldn’t remove.

“Aw, don’t be a bitch about it,” Lily said, then held out her wrist. Aurora slid the band on and it tightened up on its own, the leather cords sliding through each other as the braids tightened. “They just want to help. Look at how pretty they are!”

With one motion, Lily lifted her right arm and then fell into Mike, causing him to stagger. When that happened, Lily shoved his right arm back and pinned it behind him. Her tail slid between them and raised up, now a perfect copy of his arm.

“Yeah, okay,” he said and watched as Aurora put the bracelet on Lily’s tail. The fake hand slid into his pocket where he jammed his own hand as he stepped away from the succubus. Her tail vanished. “Lily, you stink,” he muttered, pinching his nose.

“That’s because…” her eyes crossed and she let out a nasty belch, then puked on the side of the limo. In the ensuing chaos, Mike moved back, careful to keep his left hand hidden. Wallace stormed off in disgust as Ingrid sighed and grabbed Lily by the waist.

“I’ll take her to her room,” she declared, then marched Lily off. Mike joined the others as Aurora’s smile returned, and she took them on a tour of Paradise.

The resort was mostly empty. There were a few people lounging in chairs around the pool, but they all avoided eye contact with Mike and the others. A couple of them had strong magical auras around them, but Mike didn’t study them too hard. He didn’t need any extra attention of his own.

“So this place is typically used for our own people,” Aurora said, gesturing to the building. “Members of the Order often find themselves in high stress situations, and this is how we combat that. It also works as a retreat for people who have endured nasty psychic attacks, or even suffered through a catastrophic loss. We actually have similar facilities across the globe that cater to different types of people and mythological beings.”

“Like what?” Beth paused at a doorway and stared down toward the beach. Her gaze became distant.

“That’s not something we divulge, miss.” Aurora smiled. “However, as an example, this would be a terrible place for a vampire to unwind.”

“I thought vampires were evil?” Mike lifted an eyebrow. “Why would you host one at all?”

“It’s a big world, Mr. Radley, and it takes all kinds. By the way, that building by the pool is the beach bar. It’s open day or night. They’ll make you whatever your heart desires…within reason. We also have a formal restaurant if you prefer a sit down experience.”

“What about the beach?” asked Beth. “Do we have beach access?”

Aurora smiled. “We do. There’s a natural barrier that’s been enchanted to keep outsiders away. We call it the Cove. It’s technically the only private beach here on the island.”

“I want to go to the Cove,” Beth said, then turned to Aurora. “Where are our rooms? I want my bathing suit.”

Aurora chuckled. “You’re an ocean person, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea.” Beth’s eyes were practically sparkling.

Aurora led the way, taking them to a fourth floor suite with a massive balcony. There were six different rooms, and Mike was given the biggest one. Aurora gave them a wave and asked them to stop by the front desk later on if they had any questions.

Once the door was shut, Beth inspected the bracelet on her hand. Ratu did the same, but Quetzalli wandered outside to stand on the balcony.

“I should have seen this coming,” Beth said.

Mike held a finger to his lips and then looked at Quetzalli. “How’s the view?” he asked.

“It’s so lovely,” replied the storm dragon from the balcony. She turned to face them and her features twisted up. “Oh, right.” She came back inside and closed her eyes, spreading her fingers apart. A static field filled the room and the dragon pointed at two outlets, a lamp, and then a light over the room. One by one, they found the listening devices and had Quetzalli short them out permanently. Ratu did her own inspection of the room and disabled three different magical glyphs that did the same thing. They went from room to room and repeated the process, only to discover Lily in her own room, naked save for her boots and masturbating.

“What took you so long?” she drawled, then patted the bed. Mike said nothing and waited for Quetzalli and Ratu to sweep the room. Once it was clear of devices, Lily’s clothes appeared on her body.

“Seriously, what took you so long? I’ve been putting on a show for these perverts, but a girl has needs.” She pulled out her cellphone. “I already sent some pictures home, we’ve just been waiting for…there. Eulalie knows we’re ready.”

“Great. Also, thanks for this.” Mike pulled the bracelet out of his pocket. “That was quick thinking.”

“Anytime, Romeo. Eulalie is already working on a clone you can wear, just make sure to keep that one on you.”

He winked and headed to his room, where his stuff was waiting. He sat down on the bed and unpacked real quickly. He hadn’t bothered packing much.

“Hey there.” Ratu stood in the doorway. “Beth said she’s going to head down to the beach. Quetzalli might go with her. I guess that leaves me and you.”

“It does.” He stood up and handed her his bracelet. “I guess move it around for me.”

She chuckled and tucked the bracelet away. “How long until the rats get here?”

“Thirty minutes to an hour,” he replied.

“Good.” Ratu closed the door behind her and slid out of her shorts. The scales on her inner thighs glistened in the light. “Because I do believe there’s a debt to be paid.”

He paid it gladly.

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The field team was spread across three vehicles just a mile away from the Radley property. Cyrus sat in the passenger seat with a dossier in his lap, doing his best to feign scrutiny. On more than a couple occasions, he wondered if any of the others could sense his reluctance or uncertainty.

He had texted Mike shortly after his meeting with Ingrid two nights ago. It had been easy enough to lie and say that his new life had a few strings he needed to snip to keep curious friends and neighbors away. The Order was no stranger to extracting someone from a double life, but Cyrus needed to be able to slip back into his new routine with minimal effort.

In truth, he had been afraid that Mike would accuse him of deception. His initial interest in the home had been cautious curiosity, which had slowly become academic. Soon, his weekly visits had become the highlights of his month, even though Mike didn’t trust him to enter beyond the front door. There was a gentle camaraderie in the denizens of the home, and he felt a stronger connection to Mike, Lily, and Death than he had ever experienced with members of the Order.

Lily. He secretly hoped that the succubus believed him. Even if Mike doubted his intentions, it depressed him to think that she thought less of him. Maybe it was because she spared his life, or perhaps it was because he secretly enjoyed when she dropped by to give him a hard time. How many times had the two of them stayed up late arguing about morality? Or what about all the times she had dropped by to talk about her hobby of hunting down human shit bags to feed on?

The driver, a brunette mage named Laurel, pulled a phone out of her inner pocket when it dinged. “Mike Radley is in the air,” she said.

“Let’s go.” He watched the other two cars pull onto the road first before they followed. They didn’t want Mike second guessing anything before he left, or at least that’s what Cyrus told the Director.

Cyrus hadn’t been out of the game that long, but the Director had skyrocketed through the ranks as the older members had been picked off one at a time. Truthfully, he didn’t know much about the man other than that he ordinarily wouldn’t have been up for the position. Not only was he too far down the ladder, but the Council rarely promoted outsiders who hadn’t grown up inside the Order.

The men and women in the back rows said very little as they parked their car just inside the boundary of the property. When they all disembarked, the grounds keeping staff maintaining the vegetation along the outer walls immediately wandered away. Cyrus found it interesting that it was nigh impossible to track them visually. Sometimes he would blink and that was enough for the man or woman to vanish from sight.

“So just a few reminders, people.” Cyrus gathered everyone up in a circle. All together, there were sixteen of them. At least three of his people were rookies, so he had paired them with more experienced members.

“First of all, no hostile magic past this point.” He moved next to the stone wall and pointed up at the lion above. “We don’t fully understand the defensive mechanism of this home, but I have been assured that these lions are capable of ripping you in half. If someone does make that mistake, you are all under strict orders to not fight back.”

A man on the side shook his head in disgust. “So if they attack us, we just have to sit there and take it?”

Cyrus scowled. “If one person fires a hostile spell, we have one dead mage or knight. If six of you come to their aid, we now have seven people dead. This isn’t about bravery, proving a point, or fighting back. It’s pure action-reaction.”

The man seemed mollified, but Cyrus made a mental note to keep an eye on him. The last thing he needed was a troublemaker.

“We all have our primary mission, which is to protect this home from invaders.” This wasn’t true, but he said it for the sake of selling the act. “That means investigative procedures at all times. If you find an unsecured entry into the home, you are to report it to me immediately.”

This got a collective nod from the group. Already, men and women were doing a final gear check. The team as a whole was carrying enough priceless magical artifacts that Cyrus knew there would be an audit after this was done.

“In regards to our secondary mission, we do not want to disturb the locals under any circumstance.” For this statement, he made explicit eye contact with everybody. “You’ve all seen the dossier. If they decide we’re hostile, we leave. This is their territory, and you absolutely will not survive an encounter, no matter how fast you think your blade is.”

A few people looked away as if bored. Gods, where was their discipline? Had the Order fallen so far in only two years?

“Do you have any questions for me?” He scanned the group.

“I have one.” Laurel raised her hand. “Do I have it correct that only the Caretaker can gain us entry?”

“You do.”

“And everything we see here is an illusion?”

Cyrus nodded. “Yes. Unless the denizens interact with you in a way that disrupts the magic, you can’t trust any of your senses, or even your memories.”

“Okay.” Laurel turned her attention to the house and studied it. Cyrus didn’t like that look at all. She obviously had come up with an idea, and the fact she hadn’t shared her thoughts meant he had at least one rogue operator on his hands. He would definitely keep an eye on her.

“Well, that’s it for now. Alpha and Beta teams will establish a perimeter. Delta, you’ve got meal duty today. Gamma team?” He looked at the others then pointed at Laurel. The woman was far too competent to leave unsupervised. “Benson, I’m swapping you and Cole out for Laurel and Mads.”

Benson shrugged, and walked over to take Laurel’s place in Beta team. Cole, who was a rookie, followed close behind.

“Why are we shifting roles at the last second?” asked Laurel.

“A gut feeling,” Cyrus replied. “I have over sixty years experience doing this. I’m a miserable grouch. I’m an asshole. Whatever excuse makes you happiest.”

Mads, a bald thirty-year old who was Laurel’s knight, snorted and wandered over. Laurel looked suspicious, but said nothing else.

*Yeah, definitely something going on there.* It occurred to him now that when he had left his apartment this morning, Laurel had insisted he ride with her. She was clearly a head above the rest, but by how far?

The teams spread out and Cyrus began his work in earnest. He kept his mind a clean slate as he wandered around the property, making certain to reconduct tests that Mike had given him permission to do several times over the last year.

Most of what he had done on Mike’s property had been for the Caretaker’s own understanding of what was going on. Cyrus himself had been a subject for Mike’s own experiments. Since Mike was inside the geas, he had no real idea what anything looked like to an outsider. One day, he had Cyrus describe a small parade of women who had wandered around the yard. At the end of the day, Cyrus learned that all of them had marched around in different stages of nudity, but the geas had clothed them to avoid rocking the boat.

Mike had also hinted that the geas was alive, but hadn’t gone into much detail otherwise. Over a year ago, it had strengthened to the point that Cyrus had ben forced to test anew, astounded that not only had the results changed, but so had his memories. He hated knowing that the geas could manipulate his mind without permission, but the more powerful the spell, the fewer rules it needed to follow.

Laurel silently did a few diagnostic tests of her own, then wandered around in an attempt to speak with the locals. The groundskeeping staff was very adept at disappearing at the last moment, but Laurel managed to corner a couple and chat with them. It was clear she was trying to be friendly, but Cyrus recognized the mask she wore all too well.

*Friends today, foes tomorrow.* He looked up from the diagnostic runes he had drawn into the dirt with a silver-tipped wand. The runes glowed and faded into the ground, sending up a wisp of smoke. He coughed, the smell clinging to his nostrils.

“What are you doing?” Laurel’s voice surprised him and he immediately stood.

“Testing to see if the geas is causing space to bend.” He handed her the wand. “It was supposed to measure GPS coordinates, but it stopped working about fifty feet away from the wall.”

“Which suggests that the space is probably still folded.” Laurel twirled the wand in her hand. “I’ve been digging through the records and have a suspicion that the home has recently undergone a massive expansion.”

“Oh really?” She wasn’t wrong, but he wanted to hear why.

“Just look at the rest of the neighborhood. The houses are a tenth the size. The neighbors here are older and have plenty of stories of things they think they’ve seen. But do you know what I figured out? The geas may be able to alter memories we already have, but it doesn’t create new ones.” She gestured toward the front yard. “I can guarantee kids would have snuck in there just to look around, especially when this place was abandoned. And yet there’s not a single mention of it anywhere. It doesn’t even show up on social media until Halloween a couple years back, as if it came out of nowhere.”

“Huh.” That was a surprisingly astute observation from the younger mage. Cyrus scratched at his chin, and looked up at the house. “So if a basketball court appeared tomorrow, we would think it had always been there. People would remember seeing it. As for actually interacting with it…”

“Yep.” Laurel looked very pleased with herself. “I suppose you might get an anecdote from a neighbor about the time they crossed the court to retrieve a lost frisbee, but never a story about a pickup game that happened.”

“There you are.” A dark figure loomed over both of them, and Laurel took a step back in fright, reaching for her wand. Mads stepped forward and drew his blade, but Death just stared at the knight with eyes that blazed with curiosity. He shifted his gaze toward Cyrus. “I was wondering when we would meet again.”

“Um…uh…” Cyrus wasn’t certain how to respond at the sudden appearance of the Grim Reaper.

“Meet again?” Laurel sounded out of breath and immediately suspicious. “We’ve never met before!”

“Why of course we have.” Death sipped a cup of tea and turned his attention to Laurel. “How many times have you courted me, guided my hand, or even evaded my grasp? I have stood beside you in both your finest and darkest moments, and yet you all treat me as a stranger. For this reason alone, all of you can see me.”

“This isn’t possible,” muttered Laurel.

“It is improbable, unlikely, far-fetched, or perhaps just difficult to believe. Inevitable, yes, but impossible? I think not.” Death grinned at the three of them. “For you see, I eventually meet everyone.”

“You’re just a spirit,” Mads declared. “Trying to screw with us.”

Death chuckled. “Perhaps one more than the other. Or both. Maybe neither.”

Cyrus bit his lip to hold back a laugh. It was definitely the latter of the two.

“What do you want with us?” demanded Laurel.

“I am to be your guide, your liaison with the denizens of the house.” Death reached into his robe and pulled out a biscuit, which he dipped in his tea. “Mike Radley informed me that Master Cyrus was in charge and that he was old enough that he practically had one foot in the grave already.”

“Hardly,” Cyrus replied.

“What is he to you?” Laurel asked. “If you really are Death?”

The Grim Reaper loomed over the woman and then threw a glance at her partner. “Why, my dear child, he’s my best friend, my bosom buddy, my ride or die. We are even friends on Facebook!”

“He doesn’t have a Facebook account,” replied Laurel. “Not an active one, anyway.”

“Which is why I logged in with his phone and then accepted my own friend request.” Death shook his head. “And you young people think you are so good with technology.”

“C’mon, Laurel.” Mads put away his blade and jerked his thumb toward the greenhouse. “This guy isn’t worth your time.”

“And yet one day, you will have all the time in the world for me.” Death tossed the biscuit into his mouth and bit down, the confection vanishing from sight. “I’ll see you all soon enough.”

“Is that a threat?” Mads asked, his lip twitching.

Death contemplated the man then held up a finger. “You’ve just reminded me. We are almost out of chamomile.”

“Bah.” Mads stormed off and Laurel followed. Once they were out of earshot, Cyrus turned to the figure.

“So you’re my personal guide?” he asked.

“Indeed. We felt this was the safest way to establish open and honest communication, which is the cornerstone to—darn.” Death stared at the biscuit he had just dropped, then knelt down and picked it up. With a bony digit, he flicked a chunk of dirt off the corner. “It is a good thing that it has been less than five seconds.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” Cyrus mumbled.

“And yet, I do not care.” Death bit into the biscuit and made a face. “That is far grittier than I prefer them.”

Cyrus rolled his eyes and turned to look at Laurel and Mads. “I’m not being scryed right now. That was Ingrid’s trick and she can’t penetrate the geas from outside. We had a whole chat about it last night and this morning. She can be rather intense.”

“The woman from yesterday?” Death nodded knowingly. “She would see me clearer than most.”

“So what do you have for me?”

“This.” Death handed Cyrus a card. It was embossed with skulls surrounded by white flowers.

Curious, Cyrus opened the card and laughed. “It’s an invitation for tea in the garden this evening.”

“Indeed. Come.” Death gestured for Cyrus to follow. The two of them walked together into the backyard and past the fountain. Down by the wrought iron gate, a small structure was being constructed. It looked like a fancy shed, but only the frame had been put up. A diminutive woman in a hard hat held a nail gun while Yuki braced a piece of wood using a pillar of ice for support. Cyrus had formally met the kitsune last spring when she had joined them all for tea and a game of bridge.

“Stupid fucking nail gun!” The woman in the hard hat adjusted her safety goggles, slapped the side of the device onto a nearby rock, then fired it a couple dozen times. Cyrus gaped in awe when he saw the nails had been evenly distributed to hold the panel in place.

“Looks like it isn’t jammed anymore.” Yuki turned her attention to Cyrus and studied him for a moment, as if sizing him up. It was eerie how easily she feigned this being their first meeting, but he expected no less from a fox demon. “Good morning. You must be Master Cyrus. My name is Yuki.”

“A pleasure to meet you. What are you doing?”

“Building a tea house, what’s it look like?” Yuki picked up another panel and tossed it toward the building. Pillars of ice pinned the piece of wood into place and the short woman fired her nail gun a few more times, locking it down.

“There will be a table set up later. You can bring the others if you wish. It won’t be a problem.”

Cyrus nodded, but could already think of someone who would demand to come. “I’ll be here. Ten in the evening is rather late, though.”

“It’ll all make sense tonight.” Death handed Cyrus a biscuit and started to walk away, then turned back around and held out another piece of paper. “Though I was wondering if you could do me a favor.”

“What do you need?” Cyrus took the paper and unfolded it.

“Biscuits. We’re out.” With that, Death left him behind and walked into the house.

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“You wanted to see me, sir?” Ingrid stood at attention and waited for the Director to turn around. The man sat in front of a bank of monitors, examining footage of Mike Radley entering the building on at least three of them. Two of the monitors had gone blank, and a small one displayed a map of the resort with five colored dots. It was the group from the Radley house, each of them labeled with a letter. Mike and Ratu were currently sharing a room while Quetzalli and Beth were busy checking out the infinity pool on the balcony. Lily was in her room, probably sleeping off all the booze she had consumed.

The Director stood next to the map, tapping his index finger on Mike as if lost in thought. Ingrid waited one minute, then two. Wondering if the man hadn’t heard her, she cleared her throat. “Sir?”

“It’s disgusting, isn’t it? Consorting outside your own species. I see the appeal, but…” The Director turned around and sighed, then gestured for Ingrid to sit. “I read your report regarding the flight and must say I’m rather disappointed.”

“Sir?” Ingrid took her chair and felt suddenly small in the man’s presence. He had a magical aura that was almost tangible, the pressure pushing her into her seat.

“Not in you, no.” He waved dismissively in her direction. “Your report was impeccable, I’m referring to…this.” He spun in his chair and pointed at the looped footage of Mike entering the resort. “These women, they adore him. We had suspicions, but it would seem his actions on the plane confirm them. The man has a nymph’s magic, meaning that he will slake his thirst for flesh. Based on his psych profile, he desires control, consistency, and stability. Where better to find it than with women who rely on him?”

With a few more button presses, the ladies in Mike’s entourage got their own screens. One at a time, the Director gestured at the women. “His attorney. The intern. His spiritual advisor. And…” he stopped to double-check his files when he got to Quetzalli’s picture. “His life coach?”

“I have yet to catch the man in a lie.” Ingrid bit her lip. “I’m paranoid that he knows something is up and I’m getting half truths.” The truth stone in her pocket was only capable of operating in a true-false manner. It was a great tool as long as the target didn’t know how to bend the truth.

“Indeed.” The Director clicked a button and all but Ratu’s picture disappeared. “If they were all human, I could chalk it up to basic greed. But money means nothing to the naga, who can summon gems and gold from the earth itself. Their loyalty troubles me.”

“You think he’s controlling them?” Ingrid’s nails dug into the arms of her chair.

“Control comes in degrees. Do I think they are locked inside their bodies, screaming for freedom? No. The Order wouldn’t tolerate such behavior. We definitely don’t want a repeat of the Black Palace incident.” The Director sighed and leaned back in his chair, his fingers steepled together as if in prayer. “But that is a puzzle for another time. The merfolk want to meet him.”

“I see.” Ingrid bit her lip and looked up at the screens. Lily had left her room and was wandering toward the pool in a sarong and strappy sandals that came up to her knees. “Are you afraid of a diplomatic incident?”

The Director shrugged. “It can’t be much worse than letting a couple hundred of their people get boiled alive. The meeting will be during high tide in the Cove. I’m guessing he’ll bring his…entourage.” He spoke the word in disgust.

Ingrid nodded. “I’ll make sure he’s there. Do you want me to dissuade him from bringing the others?”

“No. For now, we play nice. I don’t want him to have any reason to believe we are anything but genuine. If things work the way I hope they do, he won’t learn about our deception until he gets home. Our team at the house has made some interesting discoveries already.” The Director made a face. “Though we did hit a snag. Mike set up a liaison for us at the house, a spirit claiming to be the Grim Reaper.”

“Sounds like a scare tactic,” replied Ingrid.

“Most likely. See if you can squeeze anything out of Mike about it tomorrow.” The Director gestured at the door. “You’re excused, Sister Ingrid.”

“Director.” Ingrid rose and left the room, then let out a sigh of relief once outside. Though the man’s behavior was cordial, even borderline friendly, there had been a cold fury beneath the mask. In all the times she had met with him directly, she had yet to feel such anger.

It was late, so she wandered out to the beach bar to grab a meal. Feeling rattled by her meeting with the Director, she was grateful that her work was done for the day and she could officially take part in the VIP treatment as well. She sat at the counter and put in an order for a burger and fries, then turned to watch the sunset.

The smell of her dinner reached her first, and she spun eagerly in her seat to begin shoving fries into her mouth, suddenly aware of how hungry she was. She was almost halfway through her food when she caught the smell of cinnamon and sunscreen and then Lily plopped down into the seat next to her.

“Hell of a place you’ve got here.” The intern’s breath reeked of booze, and she slid two empty wine glasses across the counter. “Also, you guys don’t water down the drinks like the places I’ve been to, so good on you!”

“Maybe we should start,” Ingrid muttered around her burger.

“You’re funny. I like you.” Lily leaned forward in her seat, her breasts nearly spilling out of her bikini top. “Do you know what your problem is?”

“No.” Ingrid picked up a nearby bottle of ketchup and poured it onto her plate. She was horrified when Lily grabbed some of her fries and dunked them in the sauce.

“You’re too uptight. You get to use magic and coexist with monsters, and that’s cool. Yet on graduation day from wizard school, the first thing you did with your wand was shove it straight up your ass.”

Ingrid choked on her food. Lily smacked her on the back, then handed her something to drink. Ingrid swallowed the offered glass, then coughed again when she realized it was the most alcoholic mai-tai she had ever experienced.

“There we go,” Lily cheered. “You stick with me, I’ll loosen you up.”

“I don’t need to be loosened up!” Ingrid dumped what was left of her drink and slid her plate away. “And I definitely don’t need advice from someone dumb enough to work as an intern for a millionaire!”

“Billionaire, actually.” Lily raised an eyebrow. “I’m surprised your people missed that.”

“B…billion?” Ingrid wiped her mouth with a nearby napkin. “He doesn’t have a billion dollars.”

“I want to set something straight with you.” Lily leaned forward and placed her hands on Ingrid’s bare knees. The intern leaned in close enough that all Ingrid could see was those shimmering eyes. “I am capable of things you couldn’t even imagine. But the one thing I will never do is lie to you.”

Ingrid’s mouth felt dry and a familiar rush of warmth traveled through her groin. “Just because you would never lie doesn’t mean you won’t mislead me.”

“Ooh, you’re a smart one, aren’t you?” Lily slid off her stool and stumbled on the heels of her sandals. Giggling, she wandered over to the edge of the pool. “But I guess you’d know about deception, wouldn’t you?”

“You’re drunk.” Ingrid felt a twinge of pain between her eyes.

“Perhaps. Or maybe I just want you to think I am.” Lily looked over her shoulder and grinned. “Your mysterious Order is like a stage magician, waving with one hand to get everyone’s attention while the other is pulling a rabbit out of a hat. So I have to ask you. What trick are you all trying to pull here? This,” she gestured at the building. “This is the hand wave. I want to know about the rabbit.”

“There’s no rabbit.” Ingrid shook her head and laughed. “Though I have to wonder about somebody who expects to be deceived.”

“Oh, my dear, dear Ingy.” Lily turned her attention toward the pool. “You think you’re playing chess, but you’re just the pigeon who shits on the board.”

“Bedtime,” Ingrid declared. “You’re embarrassing your bo—”

She was interrupted by the sound of tinkling water and turned to see that Lily had arched her back and was peeing in the pool. The stream traveled horizontally, which could only mean one thing. Lily did a little squat and shake at the end, then adjusted her swimsuit bottom before turning around.

“Everybody pees in the pool,” Lily declared with a smug look. “But only I have the balls to do it in the open. Next move is yours, Ingy.” The woman sauntered off toward her room, her balance suddenly impeccable. There was a moment of silence before Ingrid heard the bartender clear his throat.

“Should we, uh, drain the pool?” he asked.

“No. Let the chlorine take care of it.” Ingrid turned to look at him. “Also, let the staff know that the intern’s drinks are to be watered down from now on.”

The man nodded and walked away. Ingrid looked at the pool with longing and sighed.

“Wasn’t like I was going to get a chance to swim this trip, anyway,” Ingrid muttered. She hoped things were going better for Master Cyrus.

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It was evening now, and Cyrus stepped around the corner of the house to see that the small building had been completed. It looked very much like a traditional Japanese tea house, only the windows had been papered over so that the interior was concealed and it had been built on risers, leaving a three foot gap in the bottom.

“Are you sure about this?” Laurel demanded from right next to him.

“We’re about to find out.” Cyrus moved to the porch and knocked. The door slid open, to reveal Death wearing a white apron.

“Master Cyrus.” Death stepped aside to reveal a small room with a table and cushions to sit on. “Lady Laurel.”

“I’m not here for tea,” Laurel declared. “I’m here to make sure Master Cyrus remains safe. And so is he.” She jerked her thumb at Mads.

“But of course.” Death gestured around the room. “I would ask that anyone not having tea remain outside, but feel free to examine the room first. Once you are satisfied, you are more than welcome to wait for Master Cyrus by the fountain. There are chairs there.”

Laurel stepped inside the house and did a quick scan of the room. “You seriously built this just to have tea with him?”

“Yes. It’s called a teahouse for that very reason.” Death turned to Cyrus and smiled. “Ah, you brought the biscuits.”

“I did. Sister Laurel? I’ll be fine.” Cyrus tossed Laurel a gemstone, which she snatched out of the air. He held up an identical one. “I’ll signal you if something happens,” he said, knowing it wouldn’t be a problem.

The mage looked dubious, but wandered over to the fountain with Mads to sit. Cyrus shook his head and followed Death inside. Once the door was shut, Death gestured to a cushion where Cyrus took his place.

“This is all very nice,” Cyrus began. “But if you were trying to avoid suspicion, you failed.”

“The walls of this place are enchanted to prevent anyone from listening in. This also includes scrying. We needed a place where you could speak at length without fear of discovery.” Death knelt across from Cyrus and pulled out an antique Japanese tea set. He carefully poured some tea into four of the mugs and slid one across to Cyrus.

“Who are the other two for?” Cyrus asked.

“Us.” As if by magic, Mike and Kisa appeared on the other side of the table. Cyrus’ eyes went wide and he almost fell backward off his cushion.

“How?” he demanded, looking at Mike. “I heard you landed in Hawaii!”

“I did. The resort is very lovely.” Mike picked up his tea and sipped delicately at it. A wicked grin crossed his face. “But I forgot my lucky underwear. Thought I’d drop by and grab it, check in with the family, have tea with a friend. So…how was your day?”

Cyrus chuckled and scooted closer to the table. Of course Mike Radley would figure out how to cross the world in a matter of minutes. Picking up the tea, he grinned. “Let me tell you all about it…”