**A Family Outing**

Mike knelt at the bottom of a slide, his hands on the cool metal. The hot summer day had been chased off by a sudden thunderstorm summoned up by the dragon Quetzalli, who sat in human form on a nearby swing. The playground was empty now, save for Mike’s family. At the top of a slide, a young boy stood nervously eying the slide.

“C’mon, Callisto, you can do it. It’s actually a lot of fun.”

His son shook his head nervously, causing lanky hair to blow across his face in the breeze. “It’s too scary, and I’m too high!”

“C’mon, you should try it.” Mike patted the slide again. “That bracelet Ratu gave you will only last another hour, and then you’ll have to wait for her to recharge it.”

Callisto held up his wrist to look at the bracelet. What appeared to be a simple slap bracelet was in fact a magical device that the naga Ratu had crafted to grant Callisto a human form. The boy was actually a centaur, and had spent the past year espousing interest in learning how to walk on two legs and spend time in the human realm. Over a month had been spent planning this outing, and other than climbing to the top of the playground and freezing in place by the slide, the centaur had done nothing else.

In truth, the bracelet wouldn’t have worked if Callisto hadn’t accidentally shapeshifted into a human close to his first birthday. It had scared the shit out of Zel, his mother, and the rest of the herd. It wasn’t something he could control, and Ratu thought it was leftover magic from the time Mike had knocked Zel up while she was in a human-esque form. Like his mother at the time, Callisto had human-esque legs with horsehair and toes that were pinched together like hooves, which was why he wore long pants even though it was summer. His shoes were custom enchanted to look like sneakers. The tail that had been pulled through the back of his pants was a dead giveaway that he wasn’t quite human.

His half-sister Grace emerged from beneath the slide, her hair dangling as she clung to the bottom of the metallic surface with eight slender spider legs. She scowled at her brother and tapped on the metal sheet hard enough that she put a divot in it.

“Even your sister wants you to go.” Mike looked at his daughter. “And you need to fix your skirt if you’re going to climb upside down like that, young lady.”

Grace bared her fangs at her father and slunk back into the shadows beneath the slide. He was happy to see that she used the velcro on the front of her skirt to reattach it to her legs. Just because she was an arachne didn’t mean she could go around showing everyone her underwear. Her aunt Eulalie was already talking about making her wear shorts all the time.

If anyone was in the park, the sight of Grace would have terrified them to the core. Her lower body was that of an orb weaver spider, but she was still small enough that if she crouched down, she could pull her skirt over her legs and pass for a normal child in public as long as she kept her additional eyes hidden behind her bangs. They had brought her to the park in a wagon through a magical tree portal, right after Quetzalli had gone ahead and summoned enough thunder and lightning to scare away anyone lingering around. Abella and Mike had scoured the area to make sure it was empty first, and then a perimeter of magical wards had been established around the entire park. If anybody wandered in, Mike would know.

Taking them beyond the protective boundaries of his magical home was a huge risk. After much discussion amongst the adults, it had been Eulalie who was their biggest advocate. As an arachne who had spent her entire life locked away from the outside world, she was worried the disconnect would create a line of “us vs. them” in the children. The last thing Mike wanted was for his kids to fear the world he had grown up in.

“Try sitting on your butt first.” Mike patted his own behind for his son’s benefit. “You know, that gross thing under your tail.”

This made Callisto smirk. Even though he was a centaur and they pooped openly, there was something about human butts that often put the kid in hysterics. It must be a universal thing.

Callisto carefully sat near the edge of the slide, his fingers gripping the edges tightly. Tentatively, he slid forward, his fingers squeaking against the metal. Once his whole body was on the slide, Grace popped over the side and bit her brother’s fingers, causing him to release his grip on the sides and slide down screaming.

Mike caught Callisto at the bottom just as Grace disappeared back under the slide. “You did it!” he cried with excitement, lifting his son up and hugging him tight. Callisto was stuck somewhere between joy and terror, so Mike set him on the ground and held up his hands. “High five, bud!”

The centaur gave him a high-five, then looked down at his fingers. There were little red marks, but no punctures. Mike put his hands on his hips and walked over to where the slide and playground connected.

“Gracelynn Penelope Radley, what have I said about biting your brother?” He peered under the slide and saw that she was crouched upside down beneath it. The arachne hissed at him from her hiding spot.

Mike tilted his head to one side and frowned at her, unafraid. Eventually, Grace pouted and held her arms out for him. He helped her down, and she moved over next to her brother and butted her head gently against his chest.

Callisto hugged his sister. The two of them were close, despite their differences. Lily often referred to them as the Leg Brigade. The two of them were inseparable whenever Callisto came to the house for a visit, and it wasn’t uncommon to hear Callisto’s hooves on the hardwood floors as they chased each other around. Tink had even made him special rubber hoof covers to keep him from slipping and damaging the hardwood floors.

He walked with both of them over to the teeter-totter and showed them how it worked. Callisto asked a bunch of questions, but Grace remained silent. At eighteen months, she was non-verbal, which wasn’t that uncommon among arachne. Her aunt Eulalie didn’t have a whole lot of information to go off on, but apparently Grace’s mother, Velvet, had been the same way as a child.

As Callisto and Grace bounced up and down on the teeter-totter, Mike smiled. Shortly after Grace’s hatching, Callisto had become insanely curious about his little sister. However, his strange fear of Mike had prevented the two of them from playing together. It had become clear to Mike that Callisto saw the world in a very different way than anyone else did, one that nobody quite understood yet. Play dates between siblings slowly turned into special father-son moments that helped bridge the gap between them. Mike had asked Callisto once about why he used to be scared, and the boy had simply shrugged and said it didn’t matter, because he didn’t remember why anymore.

The trees rustled above Mike, though there wasn’t any wind. He tilted his head to listen. Trees didn’t often use words, but the ones in the park had grown up around humans and could sometimes speak in stilted sentences rather than stray thoughts and feelings. Words and images entered his mind and his brain worked overtime to decipher them.

Someone had entered the park. There were at least three people, and they were headed directly for the playground. Mike frowned, realizing that whoever was coming had bypassed the protective wards he had helped place. That meant trouble.

“We have company.” He frowned at his children, then looked at Quetzalli. The dragon was already sliding an enchanted napkin ring over her horn, which rendered it invisible. Abella emerged from the trees, her wings wrapped around her body like a cloak. She cocked her head to one side.

“I can hear four of them,” she said. “What do you want me to do?”

“If they bypassed the wards, they know we’re here already.” He bit his lip and looked at the kids. “Take Grace.”

“Come, hatchling.” Abella opened up her wings, revealing the stone body beneath. Grace was unnervingly quick, crossing the playground in seconds and leaping onto Abella’s body. She wrapped her wings around the child and moved back into the trees, becoming motionless. To a casual observer, she was nothing more than a statue, the arachne now hidden from view.

Callisto looked up at Mike.

“Where do I hide?” he whispered, tucking his tail down the back of his pants.

“Nowhere.” Mike knelt and ruffled his son’s hair. “You’re safe here with me. If something happens, you know what to do.”

Callisto nodded, fingering the bracelet on his wrist. He wasn’t a stranger to the odd happenings at the Radley house. Typically, the danger was fairly minimal, and it wasn’t any different here. If a fight broke out, he had plenty of aunts to run to as a safety net.

Mike sent a mental note to his familiar, Kisa, at the house. He felt her mind touch his, and then she was gone. Help was already on the way.

Three men and a woman appeared through the trees, all of them wearing business suits and looking like Secret Service agents. Two of the men wore slightly longer coats and had protective auras about them. He immediately suspected that they were knights of the Order. The Order was an international organization dedicated to keeping the boundaries between the magical and non-magical world intact. Other than Cyrus, a retired mage, Mike had never dealt with any of them.

“Mike Radley.” The blonde woman leading the group gave him a friendly wave, unaware that he could see her soul. It typically manifested as a fractal in most people, and he had learned how to read the shifting colors within to some degree. Right now, he saw deception with a healthy dose of caution. This was a woman who was ready to cause trouble if she needed to.

“Who?” he asked, playing dumb.

“I’m not here to do this dance with you.” She took off her sunglasses, revealing a pair of emerald green eyes that glowed. He could see the magic in her soul, slithering between the moving shapes like an ethereal serpent. This woman had some serious magical chops, and she clearly wasn’t afraid to show it. “My name is Ingrid. I’m here regarding one of your properties.”

Now this was a surprise. It had been well over a year since someone had hassled him about the properties that he owned. There was a giant patch of land in Oregon that had become a refuge for Native American mythical beings. Some land developers there had tried driving him out by building near his land, not realizing that Bigfoot had zero qualms about dismantling their machinery.

Then there was the castle in Ireland, but his only attempt to visit it had been disastrous. He used to get offers to buy it regularly until Eulalie had wiped its existence from the internet. Not an easy thing to do, but the arachne was a master coder. Now if someone looked it up by name, they got sent to a fake website that tried to sell them timeshares.

There was also a forest in the caldera of a dead volcano in Hawaii. Mike hadn’t visited it yet, but only because there was no easy way to get there. He had sent Beth some time ago to check it out, but between the landscape, the locals, and the super thick vegetation, there was no easy way up the mountain without hiring a guide. Typically, he used portals that magical rats could chew to travel long distances, but the exit had to be inside a structure that they knew about.

“I’m afraid all inquiries regarding my properties need to go through my attorney.”

Ingrid held up a manilla folder. “Mr. Radley, this is a matter of some importance. I represent an organization whose sole purpose is to protect the mythical creatures of this world from, well, humans.”

“Huh. I can’t believe you guys openly admitted mythical creatures exist.” Mike studied the woman and her companions. He knew more about them than they were willing to let on. Their sole purpose wasn’t protecting cryptids, but maintaining the order between the magical and non-magical realm by whatever means necessary. “I kind of figured you would give me the run around and talk about weather balloons or politics.”

“We’ve been watching you for some time now. We are aware of the mythical beings living in your home and felt it was prudent to be honest. That, and the storm earlier was definitely a magical anomaly, so why waste time beating around the bush? We call ourselves the Order.” Ingrid shook the folder. “Would you please look at these?”

He scowled at her, then reached for the envelope. If they were going to attack, his magic would warn him first. “We don’t have a problem, do we?”

“With you? No.” Ingrid shook her head. “Our main purpose is to maintain peace and secrecy. Based on our research, this is the first time you’ve left your property since moving in almost three years ago. You only ended up on our radar due to a local investigation.”

“What sort of investigation?” He took the envelope from Ingrid and undid the string holding it shut.

“Local cabal of witches were digging into your affairs, but they blew themselves up. That’s where we found notes and things about your home and its previous owner, a woman named Emily.” Ingrid looked down at Callisto. “Is this your son? He looks just like you.”

Mike pretended to be more interested in the contents of the envelope than Ingrid’s question. Callisto already knew better than to answer—his mother Zel had drilled it into him that he was never to speak to someone outside of the house without permission first. The only outsider he ever got to chat with was Cyrus, and it was on strict orders to be friendly and never mention his sister. Cyrus was still under the impression that he had killed Grace’s grandmother decades ago, and for good reason. If the man ever learned that he had failed to wipe out the last arachne, he would probably lose his mind.

He pulled a handful of photographs out of the envelope and frowned. “This seems a little dramatic. Why not just send me an email or something?”

Ingrid shook her head. “I can’t say much, other than someone has been monitoring our systems. You are an unknown quantity, Mr. Radley, and we would rather you stay that way.”

“I see.” It was the first thing she had said that he could truly agree with. Quetzalli moved up by his side, sliding her arm around his.

“Are you Mrs. Radley?” Ingrid asked.

Quetzalli smiled and shook her head. “I’m afraid not. Mrs. Radley is at home. I’m just helping out today.”

The pictures had been taken with a drone and were in black and white. Mike wondered about the lack of color until he saw a label in the corner that said infrared imaging. The first image was of a road that was torn apart by a mudslide. The next few photographs were buildings that had been hollowed out by fire. He had been handing them down to Callisto, who studied them with intense interest.

“Don’t show him the last couple,” muttered Ingrid. “It may be upsetting.”

Mike didn’t quite understand why when he got to them. It took him a moment to put together what he was seeing, a beach covered in men and women lying in the sand. However, instead of legs, they all had beautiful fins, and they were scattered about as if lounging. Finally, he spotted it. Several of them were staring at the sky, eyes wide and slack jawed. These were merfolk, dozens of them. They were dead..

“What caused this?” he asked, looking up at Ingrid. Quetzalli was staring at the images, her fingers now digging into his arm.

“We don’t know. However, we do know that whatever did this came from a piece of land you own, then returned there when finished.” Ingrid tilted her head to one side. “The Order is prepared to buy the land from you, so that we can go in and investigate. We’ve spent the last month trying to access the land, and think that whatever is keeping us out is similar to the geas on your home. We assume that a transfer in ownership will allow us unrestricted access to investigate.”

This made him smirk. Nothing was similar to the geas on his home, not anymore. “Well, it’s not for sale, no matter how many zeros are on the end of that number.”

“I’m afraid we need to act on this, one way or another. We are responsible for the safety of the merfolk colonies throughout the islands, and this is a tragedy we never want to see again.” She pulled another manilla envelope from her inner coat pocket and handed it over. “Inside this is a monetary offer and all the paperwork required to seal the deal today. This is the carrot, Mike Radley, and a rather generous one. I would like to warn you that you won’t like the stick.”

“My dad’s not afraid of you,” Callisto said.

“Maybe he should be.” This was from one of Ingrid’s lackeys. The man fixed Callisto with a hard stare, but the child yawned, suddenly disinterested in the conversation. It was also possible that Callisto hoped Mike would forget that he had spoken to a stranger.

“Cal, can you go play with Aunt Que for a moment?” Mike watched as Quetzalli escorted Callisto over to the monkey bars, then turned back to Ingrid. “So let’s cut the bullshit. You’re here for my land and intend to either buy it from me or take it.”

Ingrid nodded. “I think you understand the situation rather well.”

“Well, for reasons I can’t go into, I’m not going to sell it. And you can’t really take it, either.” He held up his hands defensively as her lackey folded his coat back to reveal a knife in his belt. “This isn’t a tough guy thing, I promise. It’s complicated.”

“Explain it to me.” Ingrid’s eyes were suddenly hard.

“Magically complicated. If I could, I would.” This was only partially true, but they were outsiders and didn’t need to know his life story. “But what I can tell you is that I have a duty to the land and whatever resides there. So instead of all this talk about the stick and carrot, how about secret option three? I go out there and help you figure out what’s going on, then we put it right together. Your colonies stay protected, I get to keep my land, and your higher ups can spend the money they saved on Bigfoot spray.”

Ingrid frowned. “I’m not sure that would work.”

He shrugged. “Either way, might want to run it by your bosses. But you should know that I’m involved now. I intend to investigate the problem and solve it, with or without you.”

“And you think someone like you can fix it?” Her lackey was giving him a hard stare, now.

“Of course I can. After all…” Mike sent a pulse of magic into a nearby tree, which started a chain reaction with the surrounding vegetation. The Order looked around in confusion, obviously sensing the magic but unable to track it. Despite a complete lack of wind, the branches of the trees shook dramatically, causing leaves to fall around the group. As the leaves fell, Mike used his mastery of electrical fields to spin them into tiny tornados that danced across the playground. Callisto clapped his hands in delight as the leaves were carried up into the air, creating a whirling fountain of green. Up above, thunder rumbled in the clouds, most likely summoned by Quetzalli.

“I am the Caretaker,” Mike finished. The leaves tumbled down around them, forming a circle.“Now if you’ll excuse me, I promised I would push my kid on the swings before we left.”

The Order stood there for several long moments, the men looking at Ingrid. She tilted her head as if listening to something, then nodded in Mike’s direction.

“We’ll be in touch,” she said, then turned on her heels and left, taking her minions with her.

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Ingrid sat in the back of the van, her eyes on the electronic tablet in her hands. It was a dossier that had been assembled on Michael Radley, now complete with a picture taken from a secret camera that Wallace had been holding.

After leaving the park, they had plugged directions into the GPS for a retired mage who lived in the area. They had wanted to bring him on board ahead of time, but directives from the top had been very strict, they would make no further moves until contact had been established with Radley. Her people had staked out the Radley estate for over a month now, waiting for the man to finally emerge.

“So what are you thinking?” In the seat across from her, Wallace was busy looking through a tablet of his own. The interior of the van was modified to allow the passengers to face each other. It was more of a mobile command center than anything else, but it did have a minibar stocked with snacks and beverages.

“Hard to say. I’m more interested in the woman who was with him and the boy.” She flipped to the pages they had marked Cal and Aunt Que. “I imagine the woman is probably a cryptid. There’s definitely something otherworldly about her. According to the few notes we have, her profile doesn’t match up with anything that lived in that house.”

“Hmm.” Wallace looked up from his tablet. “She seemed older, and she’s the boy’s aunt. That implies that she’s related to the boy’s mother.”

“And yet they look nothing alike. So unless the man adopted, he knocked someone up.” She double-checked Radley’s history. “But he’s way too old for the math to work.”

“Which means that either he is adopted and potentially a cryptid, or a half-breed.” Wallace marked something on his own tablet with a finger. “Half breed makes the most sense to me. Definite familial resemblance.”

“Agreed. Depending on what he bred with, we may be facing a massive violation of non-breeding ordinances.”

“However, he is in protected territory. No exposure to normals. As long as this kid doesn’t get out and cause trouble, we don’t have any right to move on him.” Wallace smirked. “The guy has been getting dirty with monsters. Who would have thought?”

“Sex with monsters isn’t a crime,” Ingrid said. “But it really should be.”

“Eh.” Wallace shrugged. “Monster is such a general term. Boning a vampire is way different than boning the Loch Ness monster. Crosses a few extra lines.”

“Not as far as I’m concerned.” Ingrid had been with the Order since childhood. She had been the sole survivor of a plane crash on a family trip when she was nine. It was a small plane, capable of sitting ten, and her family had purchased all the seats. An undiscovered flock of wyverns had attacked the plane in mid-flight, and after the plane went down, she had successfully hidden from them until the mysterious Order had arrived to save her. There was a thin line separating the real world from the magical one, and she was determined to destroy anything that dared to cross it.

“Estimated threat level?” Wallace raised an eyebrow. “Potential telekinesis, though it seemed like he was manipulating nearby trees. I felt all the hair on my arms stick up, so electrical fields, perhaps?”

Threat levels were a simplified way of looking at any potential target and knowing what measure of response was needed. Nixies and other faerie pests were considered Tier 5 threats—they existed, but rarely accomplished anything beyond being a nuisance. Rookies were often sent out to dispatch Tier 5 threats to work on their own teamwork, or as punishment. Some of the level 5s were, frankly, annoying.

A Tier 4 threat was something that could use magic and was intelligent or capable enough to do serious harm. A hedge witch might reach Tier 4 if she knew the right spells to seriously hurt another. Typically, magical creatures in the Tier 4 category were left alone, because they really only struck out in self defense.

“I’d put him at Tier 4,” she replied.

“His son thinks otherwise.” Wallace grinned. “He’d probably be embarrassed to know that his dad barely makes our list at all. If not for the cute little leaf show, I don’t know that he’d even pass 5.”

“I don’t give a shit what his kid thinks. Based on what we saw, the worst thing that guy has ever been through is a bad hair day and some chafing.” She thought back to that ridiculous pose he had struck. It had been the act of a carefree individual, a man without a care in the world.

“Are we talking about the same person?” Wallace tapped his tablet, flipping back through pages. “Did you even read his psych evaluation?”

“Several times. Let’s just say money apparently does buy happiness.” She groaned. “Please tell me you got a ping on that ridiculous title of his.”

Wallace shook his head. “Even in our library, the word Caretaker is pretty innocuous. Could be something he made up himself.”

“Damn.” She pushed the hair away from her eyes and sighed. The Director had been very adamant about how she was to approach Mike Radley, but she could feel that something was off. The man was supposed to be dangerous, and there hadn’t been any intel about children. Cal’s presence had made her own approach far softer than intended, and now she regretted even agreeing to speak with him again about the property in Hawaii. However, the Director had been listening in on their encounter with Mike through her earpiece. At Mike’s offer of assistance, the Director had practically shouted for her to accept. “Are we there yet?”

“Almost.” Wallace looked out the window. “So we’re pulling old man Cyrus back into the game?”

“Out of necessity, yes.” Master Cyrus had been one of the best mages the Order had ever seen, but his last mission had been an absolute disaster. His entire team had been killed, save for one of his knights. The whole thing involved a succubus, a dragon man, and rumors surrounding a blonde haired witch who couldn’t be killed. “But he knows we’re coming.”

“Kind of convenient that he is so close by. Coincidence?”

Ingrid snorted. “You really think an old school mage like him would be hanging around a place like the Radley estate without checking in with us?”

“Yeah. Guess you’re right.” Wallace looked at his tablet again. “Speaking of the improbable, do you really think Mike is hiding a Class 1 artifact in his house?”

“Like the Grimoire of Morgan Le Fey? Doubt it.” While cryptids and magic users had Tiers, magical items had Classes. The levels were similar, and anything with one attached was either under lock and key with the Order, or had been destroyed. There were Tier 1 threats out there that the Order hadn’t gotten rid of yet, but those were not for lack of trying. For example, there was a creature in the Berkeley Pit that they kept locked away from the public. If they knew how to get rid of it, they would have already. “You think a man who could change the world with Words of Creation would be messing around with his kid at the park?”

“Fair.” Wallace fell silent, his gray eyes focused on the scenery outside. The man had been Ingrid’s partner for almost twenty years, and seemed to have a supernatural talent for knowing when she needed to be alone with her thoughts.

The van pulled up outside of an apartment complex. Blake and Bradford, who were brothers, got out and opened the side door for Ingrid. She got out first, then waited for Wallace.

“Sword got stuck in the seatbelt,” he muttered, sliding his weapon back into its sheath. “Sorry.”

“Why even bother with a seatbelt? You have wards.” Ingrid rolled her eyes and walked up the stairs. An elderly resident came out of her home, saw the four of them, and promptly went back inside, muttering something about men in black. It wasn’t an entirely bad assumption, considering how much time and energy the Order had put into perpetuating the myth.

The Order had been hiding in plain sight for centuries now. Often, if someone shared a conspiracy theory involving aliens, lizard people, or phantom lights in the sky, the Order was involved. It was far easier to let the wackier theories gobble up any specific details about their activities. Nobody wanted to believe that the UFO they saw was a fairy cluster lost during migration, or that the lizard people were a newly discovered warren of kobolds. Sometimes, the story became so wild that the Order had people who actively promoted the tale just to further discredit the source.

Walking toward their destination, Ingrid marveled at all the wards that Cyrus had laid out. He had been surprisingly thorough—if they had been a hit squad, at least one of them would be dead already. This was a man who had prepared for the worst, which was good, all things considered.

She had worked with Cyrus a few times several years back and had a massive amount of respect for the man. Things inside the Order had changed rapidly in the last eighteen months. Something was hunting down their older members, retired or otherwise, and the loss had been staggering. Hundreds of years of collective knowledge and experience had been lost already, and the collateral damage meant pulling trainees up early just to meet staffing demands. It was clear that Cyrus had made preparations in case he became a target, and she wondered if things would look different in the hallway if he hadn’t known they were coming.

Looking over her shoulder at the men under her command, she frowned. The Order was being stretched thin. She often wondered if that had been the intent.

The old mage opened his door long before they could knock, revealing a thin man with a stern jaw. His face was pockmarked with scars and his hair had gone completely white.

“Brothers. Sister.” He stepped away from the door, allowing them to come inside. It was a small apartment with a decent view. “Please, come inside.”

Blake and Bradford took up positions in the kitchen, bringing in a couple of paper bags full of lunch from a nearby cafe. While they put together a meal for everyone, Ingrid sat with Cyrus and showed him the folders on the Radley Estate. The whole time the mage dug through the papers, he had a troubled look on his face. He dropped the folders on the table with a sigh and sat back in his recliner.

“Is everything okay, Master Cyrus?” Wallace leaned forward in his seat, watching the old man intently.

“I think I’m missing something here. I got a call an hour ago informing me that I’m being reinstated, but this…” he gestured at the paperwork on his coffee table. “This doesn’t seem like a case. What am I missing?”

Ingrid and Wallace looked at each other.

“To begin with, the situation in Hawaii is fairly critical. If Radley can get us onto that property, we can figure out how to stop whatever killed off all those merfolk. That was one of the colonies, essentially boiled alive in their homes before they washed up on shore. The monarchy there is in a full blown panic and they want answers now.”

Cyrus winced. “And you think Mike Radley is involved?”

“Personally? Doubt it.” Ingrid turned to accept a beverage from Blake. Bradford had put sandwiches and chips on a set of plates, which he handed out to everyone. “But he offered to come in and help, and the Director was very happy to hear that.”

“Oh? So does this mean I’m going to dust off my Hawaiian shirt and go with you?” Cyrus scratched at his chin, deep in thought.

“Well, you were, but not anymore.” Wallace took his sandwich and bit into it.

“It turns out the Director sees this as a way to kill two birds with one stone.” Ingrid tapped a picture of the Radley Estate. The place was huge, and looked like it would be perfect for hosting weddings and celebrity parties. “He wants to put you on point for an operation here. While Mike is helping us with our problem in Hawaii, you will be running a team here that will be looking into the Radley Estate.”

“Excuse me? Why?” Cyrus was suddenly suspicious. “I understand that you’re short handed, but why make me stay here and watch a house? And with a whole team? I don't get it.”

“This wasn’t the original plan, but the Director insisted on these changes. If Mike Radley is coming with us to Hawaii, it provides an unprecedented opportunity to explore the magic surrounding the home and perhaps infiltrate it. Rumors from the higher ups is that it’s a treasure trove of magic, and we don’t want that falling into the wrong hands.”

Cyrus leaned back in his chair, his blue eyes fixed on the opposite wall. He scratched at his beard, then picked absentmindedly at one of his scars.

“Will this be a problem?” Wallace asked. “You seem unsettled.”

“No, not a problem. This seems outside of protocol is all. If there’s no evidence of magical malfeasance, it almost sounds like we’re planning to steal from this man.”

“We are.” Bradford chuckled from the kitchen. “You’ve been out of the game. Some things have changed. It’s no longer about maintaining the balance, because our side is losing. Something or someone out there is trying to tip the scales, so now we need to be proactive.”

“Wait a second.” Cyrus picked up the folders in front of him and looked at the devastation from Hawaii. “Your mission is to figure out what caused this and get rid of it, right?”

Wallace and Ingrid exchanged a look.

“Or turn it into an asset if we can,” Wallace admitted.

“What Bradford said is true, Master Cyrus. The Order is looking for weapons. Whatever did this is a potential weapon. Since Mike wants to complicate things and call himself the Caretaker, well…while the cat is away…” Ingrid let the saying hang.

Cyrus scowled at the folder for a good minute, his features suddenly hard. “When the farmer knows his cat is gone, he lays traps.”

“We’re smarter than mice,” Bradford offered.

Cyrus looked at the men in his kitchen and sighed. “I used to think the same way. But then one day you realize that you’ve never been more than food waiting to happen.”

“If you can’t do this, I’ll let you tell the Director yourself.” Ingrid crossed her arms. “You are needed, Master Cyrus. Being part of the Order is a calling, you taught me that once. Why the sudden hesitation?”

“It’s because…” Cyrus sighed and rubbed his face. “I had finally adjusted to my retirement, that’s all. I am an old man, and even the Director knows that old men get stuck in their ways. But if you want me to help you with the Radley house, well…let’s just say I’m the right man for the job.”

“Good.” Ingrid picked up her sandwich. “Let’s talk about your new team.”

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After the people from the Order left, Kisa appeared with Yuki in tow. Once Mike explained that everything was fine and nobody needed to be killed, they put Grace back in the wagon and headed home.

Walking between the stone lions guarding the metal gate to his home, Mike paused long enough to pat the stone foundation of the fence. He could feel the magic humming inside as if it was an extension of himself. The lion above made a rumbling sound that sounded like rocks being tumbled, but remained perfectly still.

On their way up the long driveway, Tink came out of the house, fury in her yellow eyes. As the goblin approached, everyone scattered, leaving Mike alone next to the wagon with Grace inside.

“Hey, Tink, I—OW!” The goblin had run up as if to hug him, but had bitten his hand instead.

“Bad husband! Promise Tink no danger!” Her yellow eyes were rimmed with tears as she moved around him and held out her arms.

Grace leapt out of the wagon and into Tink’s arms, wrapping her legs around the goblins petite frame. She made a happy hissing sound as Tink stroked her hair.

“Tink take care of baby legs. No more danger!” She blew a raspberry at Mike, an action which was mimicked by his daughter, then the goblin stormed inside with the child.

In Grace’s first days, an immediate bond had formed between the arachne and the goblin. Mike certainly couldn’t explain it, but Tink was very protective of the child, and would sometimes hover in the background when others were playing with her. The playground outing had actually become an argument for her, because Tink wanted to go along but couldn’t.

“Damn, she’s really mad.” Kisa appeared from the nearby bushes and inspected Mike’s hand. “She even broke the skin.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I get it.” He looked at his wound and waited a few seconds before wiping the blood away. The puncture marks were already scabbed over. “I’m a little mad at myself, honestly. But to be fair, how were we supposed to predict the Order dropping by for a visit?”

“You should know to expect the unexpected by now.” She put her arm around his waist and nuzzled her head against his chest. “Speaking of, if Tink was this mad, I expect Zel to be equally so.”

“Oh, shit. Callisto, where are you?”

His son came out of the bushes, his slap bracelet already removed. Callisto’s centaur body was chestnut in coloration, which was slightly lighter than his hair. His son trotted up with a smirk on his face.

“You’re gonna be in trouble,” he said, stretching the last word out.

“Yep.” He knelt down and kissed his son on the forehead. “Even though it wasn’t my fault, those people came looking for me. I think playground trips may have been canceled for a while.”

Callisto frowned. “I kind of liked the playground,” he admitted. “And leaving the house. The outside world is interesting. I like how there are sidewalks everywhere.”

“That’s something we can work on later. But I wanted to say that I’m proud of how you conducted yourself. You didn’t say anything they could use against us and you stayed right by my side. Good job.” Mike held up his hand for a high five, but groaned when Callisto punched it instead. His son was smart enough to know the difference between a fist bump and a high five, but also knew that this drove Mike nuts.

“I’ll see you later, Dad.” Callisto trotted off toward the gateway that would take him straight back to his herd. It was a small building guarded by centaurs with a portal in the back. The guards bowed to Callisto out of courtesy, and then his son was gone. Yuki and Quetzalli had already gone inside the house. Abella was at her favorite spot on the roof, gazing down at the front gate.

“If you’re lucky, Zel will wait until tomorrow to chew you out.” Kisa looked up at Mike. “You should probably think about how you’re going to apologize.”

Mike laughed. “We’ll brainstorm something later. Come on, let’s get some lunch. I already texted Beth. I’m sure she’ll be here in a little bit.”

Lunch was fairly quiet, other than watching Grace drain a meat bag with her fangs. The little arachne slurped noisily next to Tink, who was throwing dirty looks around as if daring someone to say something. Mike took care of the dishes then went to his office. He waved to Death, who was sitting in the library next door. The library used to be a sitting room full of Egyptian artifacts, but after the home’s last expansion, the artifacts looked awkward in the much larger space. They had condensed the artifacts into one corner, turning it into a fancy reading nook, then curated the room’s book collection using recommendations from Sofia. The home library was large enough that it had a gallery that required a ladder on wheels for access. One of Kisa’s favorite spots was up there, a small picture window that overlooked the front yard.

At his desk, Mike tossed the folder down onto the oak surface. He had scanned the folder thoroughly before bringing it into the house—last time someone had handed him something like this, a fire elemental hidden inside had tried to burn the place down. Spreading the pictures out, he leaned over the desk and studied the images for any sort of clues.

“Mike?” Quetzalli knocked on the door of the office and walked in. “I was wondering if we could speak?”

“Of course.” He frowned at the dragon. Everyone in the house knew they could come to him for anything, but Quetzalli almost looked nervous. Considering she was actually a centuries-old storm dragon stuck in human form, it made him anxious knowing she was bothered.

“It’s about these images.” She moved to the desk and looked at the pictures. “I think I may know what did this.”

“Really?” He frowned. “Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

She sighed and sat in one of the nearby chairs. “I definitely wasn’t going to say anything in front of that woman from the Order, but wanted to speak about this privately.”

“Okay.” She had his full attention now. He moved in front of the desk and leaned against it. “What’s the problem?”

“Do you remember when we first met? In the fae realm?”

He nodded with a grin. “I do.” Quetzalli had even gone so far as to help him and Beth reach the faerie queen’s court, for which her punishment was transformation into a human. The spell would eventually wear off, but it was going to be decades at least.

“What did you think of me?”

“You were magnificent. You still are magnificent, but now you’re just fun-sized.” He winked.

This made the dragon laugh. “I’m glad you think so. But others do not think as you do. Dragons are a force of nature just as much as they are living beings. They were either worshiped or feared by humans. Once people stopped worshiping us, it was us that learned to fear them.”

“I’m sorry.” Mike sighed. “People suck, but you know this.”

“Not all of them. Some of my favorite people live here, you know.” She stood and moved closer to him, her purple eyes sparkling with their own inner light. “And because you’re one of my favorites, I need to tell you something else.”

“Oh?” He inhaled her scent. She smelled like the world did after a good rain.

“Not all of us fled. Many stayed behind, though most of them were slain. That’s what happens when the whole world is out to get you. But others remained because they slept through the rise of Man.” Quetzalli reached around him for the picture of the landslide. “It’s hard to see at first, but look right here.”

He followed her finger as she traced it down the page. “I’m not sure what I’m looking at,” he admitted.

“The hill is sloped this way, but the landslide is at the wrong angle. And this part right here?” She tapped the middle. “It’s very faint, but it’s a groove.”

“I’m still not sure what you’re saying,” he admitted.

“The dragons that stayed behind never knew that the others left. You see, some of them hibernate for decades or even centuries at a time. I think a dragon did this, one that has been sleeping on the island. And it’s just now starting to wake up.”

“A dragon?” He looked at the other pictures. “But why go after the merfolk?”

“They weren’t the target, nothing was. If this was a dragon, it’s been asleep for a very long time.” She put her hand on his chest. “And if we’re lucky, this may have just been an interlude. It got hungry, and dropped down to the beach for a quick snack, maybe some fish.”

“You’re saying it did all this because it was hungry for some midnight sushi?” Mike looked at the pictures again. “If that’s true, then what would happen if it actually woke up?”

Quetzalli made a face. “That’s just it, Mike. I don’t know. Maybe it’s about to wake up and we need to bring it here. Or perhaps it intends to peacefully sleep for a few more centuries. We’ll figure out what to do once we know. But now? These people, they want you to help. Whatever you decide to do, I trust your judgment. But working with the Order?” She shook her head. “I have a really bad feeling about them.”

“As you should.” Lily sashayed through the door, her tail whipping from side to side in time with her hips. “Hey there, Romeo.”

Quetzalli stepped away from Mike, which allowed the succubus to give him a hug.

“So what are those assholes up to, now?” She moved around him and picked up the photograph of dead mermaids. “If it was this, I say we gut them.” A switchblade appeared in her hand and she mimed stabbing the air.

Quetzalli looked at Mike expectantly.

“They want my help with that, actually.” Mike moved next to Quetzalli and took her hand. “And it sounds like I will need your help as well.”

“Mike wants the dragon’s help. What a shocking development.” Lily smirked at the two of them just as Qeutzalli scowled and pointed her fingers at the succubus. The ensuing electrical blast hit Lily hard enough that her horns and wings manifested behind her in response.

“Bitch,” she hissed, then smoothed her ruffled hair back down as her wings folded into her back. “Well if that’s how it’s going to be, maybe I’ll just stay home.”

“We’re going to Hawaii,” Mike replied.

“Yeah, okay, you’re going to need me. I’ve been there before, was a pretty good time.” She snapped her fingers and was instantly in a tight red bikini that left little to the imagination. “When do we leave?”

“Not yet,” Mike said with a laugh. “But I’ll tell you before we do, okay?”

“Okay.” She made as if to walk past him, then spun at the last second, grabbed him by the chin, and pressed herself against him. “If you take me to Hawaii, I will suck you dry, every day if you want,” she whispered.

“I…didn’t know you were that eager for a beach trip.” Mike’s mouth was suddenly dry, and he was rock hard. He had experienced on more than one occasion how eager Lily’s blowjobs could be, and this was no idle promise. If she said she was going to suck him dry, his orgasms were going to have the moisture content of talcum powder.

“Please. Once the others find out you’re going to the beach, you’re going to have plenty of helpers.” She licked his lower lip and left the room, leaving Mike with a very noticeable bulge in his pants.

Quetzalli looked down at his crotch and giggled. “I don’t suppose you would like some help with that, would you?”

“Potentially.” He allowed her to lead him out of the office, but left her at the foot of the stairs to go check on Grace. The girl was sitting on the couch, clutching the haunted doll Jenny tightly to her chest as Reggie sat next to her, reading her a book. It was a Winnie the Pooh pop-up book, and the Rat King was doing the different voices to the best of his abilities. The fairies Carmina and Cerulea had settled on the back of the couch, leaning forward with intense interest.

“Where’s Tink?”

Reggie shrugged, which always looked funny on the large rodent. He was about a foot tall, and was using his tail to help hold the book open.

“She informed me that she had an important errand to run,” he explained, adjusting his Mr. Potato-head glasses on his nose. The tiny gold crown on his head had broken recently and was being held together by a piece of tape until Tink or Dana could solder it back together. “And that she would return, eventually.”

“Jenny, you good?” Mike was almost afraid to ask the troubled spirit how she was doing. Ever since Grace had been old enough to climb, she had taken to scooping up the doll and taking Jenny everywhere with her. It was akin to allowing a child to play with a landmine, but the doll seemed to enjoy the attention. Jenny’s head did an ominous 180 degree turn so that her blank features could stare at him. The temperature dropped, and her voice filled the room.

“SHHHHHHH.” The doll’s head rotated back, and Grace gave her father a dirty look for interrupting storytime.

“C’mon.” He took Quetzalli by the hand, and led her up the stairs to his bedroom. The nymph magic flowing through his veins had him eager to ravish the dragon, and they climbed to his fifth floor bedroom. Ever since his home’s latest evolution, he was a little more isolated from the rest of the house, which suited him just fine. Not only did it mean he could go be alone if he wanted, but it also meant that sound wouldn’t carry.

Quetzalli was wearing a white button down blouse. She had already undone the top four buttons on her shirt, revealing large breasts that strained against a purple bra with white lace along the top. Quetzalli pressed herself into him and pushed him back through the door, revealing that the drapes of his room had been opened wide. The natural light of day filled the room, illuminating the goblin sitting on his bed wearing a red nightgown. She looked freshly clean, likely having used Naia’s tub for a quick wash in the en suite master bathroom nearby.

“Nope!” Tink slid off the bed as Quetzalli and Mike froze in the doorway. She crossed the room and swatted at the dragon. “Scaly butt leave now, Tink’s turn for fucking!”

“Tink, you’re being rude,” Mike began.

“Am not. Husband leave for island soon, Tink hear. No can go, but husband take big dragon booty, plenty of time for fucking!”

Quetzalli blushed, and then laughed. The silvery scales along her neck and cheeks shimmered. “She does have a point,” she muttered. “I will have you all to myself.”

“Not quite.” Mike contemplated the goblin. She was wearing a red gown that accentuated her hips, and all four of her nipples were prominent beneath the silken fabric. “And I hate myself for even saying this, but raincheck?”

Quetzalli’s whole face bloomed into a smile. The storm dragon adored anything cloud related. “You said that just for my sake, didn’t you?”

“I did.” He smiled for Quetzalli. “Someone needs me more right now.”

“Well then, Caretaker. Until next time.” She backed out of the door and pulled it shut.

Mike locked the door behind her and turned his attention to Tink, who was already back on the bed. “So you bit me earlier, but now you want to be nice?”

“Husband in big trouble earlier.” She put her hands on her hips and glowered at him. “Maybe even bigger trouble real soon.”

“Oh? What are you gonna do, bite me again?” He moved closer and noticed that she was squeaky clean. Usually there was some form of dirt on the goblin, because she spent half her time coordinating repairs on his home. Her still damp hair hung behind her, and she was only slightly taller than him while standing on his mattress.

“Maybe.” Tink licked her lips. “Tink bite lots of things.”

“Yeah, well…” Mike slid his hands along the outside of her thighs. It was apparent that Tink had hand stitched the garment herself, since it fit perfectly. Most lingerie companies didn’t cater to four-foot tall women with tails. “Maybe it’s my turn to do the biting.”

Tink cocked her head, then yelped when he pulled her legs out from underneath her so that she fell backwards onto the bed. Spreading her legs wide, he kissed his way up her calves. His teeth brushed against her skin, causing his goblin wife to tremble. By the time he was at her inner thighs, he was biting her. Goblin skin was tougher than leather, and biting was how they showed affection.

Tink moaned as he bit down on the sensitive flesh between her leg and her labia. He slid his tongue across her unique anatomy, teasing her double labia before landing on the other side of her pussy. He bit this skin too, and she grabbed the back of his head hard enough that her nails dug into his scalp.

“Husband hungry for Tink.” She moaned in delight as he pressed his mouth against her pussy and filled his hands with her ass. He lifted her slightly, pushing his tongue deep enough that he was able to touch the nub of her first clitoris with the tip of it. Goblin vaginas were built differently, and both of Tink’s clits were located inside her vaginal canal.

His magic wrapped itself around both of them, probing gently at Tink’s soul to discern her needs. When the magic had been new to him, he had heard Naia’s voice in his head, guiding him to maximize pleasure with his sexual partners. Though he no longer heard her voice, he could feel her guiding him from within, able to magically read his partner’s sexual desires without conscious thought. Tink loved it when he was rough and she was already squeezing his skull with her legs.

He feasted on Tink’s marvelous pussy, listening to her growls of content as he drove her closer to orgasm. His magic filled with the air with a faint hum as it danced along Tink’s body. She was mumbling something, but he couldn’t hear what it was through her thighs.

A hand undid the button on his pants, causing him to pause. With just a little concentration, he could sense that the hand belonged to Kisa, who had been hiding under the bed. He wiggled his head to try and see her, which made his ears pop free.

“Oh, don’t stop on my account,” Kisa told him. “We’re planning to have our way with you before you go.”

“You’re not coming?” he asked.

“Promised Tink I would help here,” she replied as his cock sprang free of his pants. “It also sounds hot as fuck. Not a fan.”

“I—” Mike shivered as Kisa’s rough tongue ran across the head of his cock. Tink squeezed her legs, forcing him back into position. If this was how the two of them wanted to do things, then so be it.

The cat girl under his bed pulled his pants down around his ankles, exposing the rest of his cock. She lovingly tugged at his testicles while jerking him off and licking him. He groaned into Tink, who giggled and pulled his hair. Kisa and Tink were exchanging words, but he couldn’t hear anything once again.

There was more giggling, then Tink let out a groan and came. The feisty goblin tasted of cloves mixed with sweat, and she squeezed Mike’s head so hard that he slapped the outside of her thigh as if trying to tap out. With a grunt, he dislodged his head and pulled free of her thighs.

“I’m glad you aren’t stronger,” he said, rubbing his jaw, then looked down at Kisa. The cat girl tried to sneak back under the bed, but he crouched down in time to grab her by the arms and pull her back out.

She giggled the whole time he tugged her out, then let out a belly laugh when he tossed her on the bed next to Tink. Kisa rolled over and teased Tink’s breast through her nightgown. The goblin rolled on top of the cat girl and the two of them started making out.

Mike watched the fabric of the nightgown slide over Tink’s hips, revealing her tail and bare ass. As Tink pushed Kisa’s shirt up to reveal the cat girl’s perky breasts, the goblin swayed her ass from side to side in an attempt to catch his attention.

“Message received,” he muttered, rubbing the head of his cock between Tink’s butt cheeks. This encouraged the goblin, who made a purring sound beneath him. He shifted his cock so that it rested against Tink’s labia, then adjusted the angle so that he could achieve penetration. The goblin’s smaller size ensured that her vaginal canal was very tight, and she let out a gasp as he managed to get the first inch inside her.

“Yeah, stretch her out.” Kisa put her hands on Tink’s waist to hold her still. “See how much you can fit in one go.”

“Stupid cat just jealous,” Tink muttered, then tugged on Kisa’s nipple. Kisa hissed in pleasure, arching her back and pulling Tink by the hair until the goblin was sucking on her breasts.

Mike chuckled at the two of them, then shivered as he managed to squeeze more of himself inside of Tink. Tink and Kisa were extremely close, and it wasn’t uncommon to have sex with one without the other showing up. Sometimes they fought, but it was all in good fun.

“Jealous of what? These?” Kisa pinched one of Tink’s nipples. “No, that’s right, you like it when I bite them!”

Tink spasmed as Kisa bit down hard on the top of her breasts. This caused Mike to slip inside even farther, and he wrapped his arm around Tink’s chest and pulled her into a sitting position, his cock still inside of her.

“Make a proper effort of it,” he said with a wink. Tink reached her arms over her head and ran her hands across Mike’s face as he fucked her from behind while Kisa mauled her breasts, pinching and biting. The goblin couldn’t take Mike’s full length without magical means anyway, so it was easy to keep himself inside of her.

“Yeah, you love this don’t you, being the center of attention.” Kisa pinched two of Tink’s nipples with one hand.

“Tink…bite…you…later!” She groaned, both of her legs shaking as she melted backward into Mike and let out a whimper. Fluid dripped down Mike’s cock as Tink came quietly, which was rather rare on her part. The goblin went limp on the bed, tipping forward and crash landing into the sheets. Mike’s cock slipped free with an audible pop.

“Mine,” Kisa declared, sucking him into her mouth. She slid out of her shorts and began teasing herself as she cleaned Tink’s cum off of him.

“You seem rather eager,” he said.

 She pulled her mouth off his cock and laid back on the bed. “Just want to give you a proper send off is all.” Licking her lips, she spread her legs wide and pulled him on top of her, using a hand to guide him. He slid inside with little resistance. As his familiar, she had gained some abilities that made her anatomy far more compatible with his.

Grunting, he fucked her hard, pounding her from above. For a few minutes, his world was nothing more than Kisa’s sweet cries and the creaking of the bed frame. Movement caught his eye and he saw that Tink was moving toward them with a devilish glint in her eye.

Mike pulled Kisa toward the edge of the bed and stood. The frame and mattress had been built so that he could comfortably stand and fuck anyone who happened to be there. Tink crawled on top of Kisa in a sixty-nine position, licking her lips as she went down on the cat girl while Mike continued to fuck her.

Kisa hugged Tink close, the two of them working each other over as Mike continued to fuck Kisa. It wasn’t long before the cat girl let out a hiss and dug her nails into the sheets, tearing the fabric.

“Fuck,” Mike muttered. Tink could stitch them back together later, but Kisa had ripped through the protective sheet underneath, leaving a scratch in the mattress. It wasn’t the first mattress he had ruined in the last year, and probably wouldn’t be the last.

At least it wasn’t on fire this time.

Kisa yowled and came a second time, then squirmed out from beneath both of them, gasping for air.

“No more, I quit,” she declared. “You can have him this time.”

Tink stood on the bed and pumped her arms triumphantly. “Tink always win,” she declared. “Husband lie down, get proper fucking!”

“Yes, ma’am.” He stretched out on the bed and sighed in delight as Tink mounted him, her face twisted up in concentration. It was already clear she was going to try and take him as deep as possible, it was a constant thing for her. She was already bouncing up and down, her clawed hands teasing shapes into the sensitive flesh of his belly.

“Tink is best wife,” she declared, leaning back and pumping him hard. His own orgasm was building, and he did nothing to hold it back.

“That’s right, she is,” he replied, staring into those beautiful yellow eyes of hers. They were shimmering with happiness as Tink forced herself farther onto him, squeezing his cock with her tight pussy.

“Tink love husband most.” She was rolling her hips from side to side. “Make husband happy.”

“Insanely happy.” He put his hands on her hips, allowing his magic to wash over her. It swirled around her body and danced across her horns before leaping free and fluttering back down onto him like snowflakes.

“Tink…give…husband…” She gritted her teeth and let out a growl, sinking one last inch onto him. He grabbed her wrists to keep her from scratching him as she came again.

Kisa appeared behind Tink, standing over both of them with a mischievous look in her eye. She put her hands on Tink’s shoulders and shoved down from above, causing Mike’s cock to wedge itself properly against the opening to the goblin’s uterus. For anybody else, this would be extremely painful. But for Tink, it was pure pleasure as the head of Mike’s cock forced its way inside.

She screamed, yanking her hands free and reaching back for Kisa. The cat girl pushed down even harder, but Mike wasn’t going to make it any further. He definitely wasn’t going to last any longer, either, because that sudden penetration knocked down the last of his resistance.

He came hard, the magic raining down on him fueling an orgasm that lasted far longer than usual. Every spurt of cum was a release, and he sat up and wrapped one arm around Kisa and the other around Tink, holding both of them against his body as he came in Tink so hard that spooge was now spraying down into his lap.

Tink bit down on his shoulder as Kisa’s lips found his own, and he rode the wave of pain and pleasure as his magic circled around all three of them until properly dissipating. It had taken him well over a year to figure out how to avoid the feedback loop, but the magic was finally under his control.

 All three of them collapsed on the bed, though Kisa was quick to roll away when Tink tried to pinch her. As Mike’s cock went flaccid, he slid out of the goblin, but held her tight in his arms. She was unusually clingy, but he wasn’t going to complain. He was likely to be gone dealing with who knew what for several days.

“Tink love Mike,” she whispered. “Give husband everything.”

“I love you, too,” he replied, then held her until she fell asleep. He brushed the hair away from her eyes, then gently extricated himself and pulled the sheets over her to keep her warm. Smiling at the content goblin on his bed, he got dressed and snuck back out the door.

There was work to do.

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It was evening before Beth finally arrived at the house. Mike was waiting for her out by Naia’s fountain while Lily sat nearby in a beach chair with a piña colada in hand. Beth made her entrance through a small shed built to look like the cabin. It had a portal that led directly to his property in Oregon, where Beth lived with Bigfoot and a dullahan named Suly.

“Good evening,” she said, her brown eyes sparkling with their own inner light. Mike could sense the magic inside her as his own reached out to greet it. They had both gotten their powers from Naia, the nymph currently singing for the birds that bathed in her fountain. “I heard we may be going somewhere fun?”

“Fun?” Lily sat forward in her chair and lowered her sunglasses. She was wearing them even though it was night outside. “Fun? You’re potentially going to an island paradise and the best word you can come up with is fun?”

“Maybe I’ve just never gone with the right person.” Beth winked at Mike. “But it sounds like Lily wants to come, too.”

“If I have to, I will sprout testicles and give away my left nut to come.” Lily sipped at her cocktail. “That’s how bad I want to go.”

“Just your left nut?” Mike didn’t want to ask, but he had to know. “Why not both of them?”

“Because it’s not No Nut November.”

From the nearby oak tree, a woman cackled. Amymone, the dryad, descended in a bundle of vines, her hands clamped around a book. “I told you he wouldn’t be able to resist asking!”

Mike looked at the dryad, who had a love of terrible puns, then back at Lily. Thinking of her earlier comment, he groaned. “Please tell me you two haven’t joined forces or something.”

“I’m just trying to make new friends, Romeo.” Lily pouted. “Thought you’d be proud of me for branching ou—”

Naia sprayed Lily in the face with water, causing her glasses to slip off. “It’s bad enough when there’s just one of you,” the nymph declared. She smiled at Mike. “Sorry that my sister is such a bad influence.”

Lily scowled at Naia, but it was all for show. She picked up her beach chair and moved it to the other side of the yard.

“Anyway, sorry I was delayed. Bigfoot and I were doing a perimeter check. Looks like something new may have snuck in.”

“Oh?” Mike frowned at this. Ever since his trip to Oregon a couple years back, cryptids kept crossing the border there. Most of the time, it was just creatures seeking sanctuary. The rest of the time it was trouble.

“Nothing major, Bigfoot is going to track it tonight. All signs point to something that just needs somewhere safe to be.” Beth brushed some hair out of her eyes and dipped her finger in Naia’s pool. “May I?”

“You may.” Naia winked at her.

Light emanated outward from Beth’s fingertips, and the surface of the fountain revealed an overhead map of the island of Maui. The image wobbled a little, then stabilized and zoomed in on the eastern side of the island. “Okay, so the property you own out there is right next to a place called the Big Bog. You’re actually tucked into an area that butts up against a National Park and a Forest Reserve.”

“That’s right,” he said.

Beth nodded and continued. “Anyway, I did a quick survey for you about a year back. You might not remember that I hired a private helicopter for a tour.”

“What?” Lily approached the edge of the fountain. “You went to Hawaii and didn’t take me?”

Beth ignored the succubus. “So you’re looking at a picture of the most recent satellite imagery of the island. Now let me show you what I remember.” She touched the water again and sent ripples out. A large portion of land appeared on this new map, distorting the edges of the island.

“It’s much bigger.” Mike rubbed at his chin. “So a magical boundary?”

“Yes. I couldn’t get a better look, because once the copter was close, the weather became too dangerous to fly and we skirted the edge of it. When I asked the pilot to turn around, he already thought he had. Definitely magic involved, and I wasn’t about to test its limits while hovering thousands of feet above the ground. Anyway, your plot of land is only a few square miles on paper, but this was so much bigger. It’s mostly rainforest, so you can’t see anything in there.” She stuck her hands together over the fountain, then waved them outward, zooming in. “It does look like there may be a river in the middle, though.”

“Interesting.” Mike pulled Ingrid’s business card out of his pocket. She had given it to him at the end of their meeting. “I don’t suppose we could sneak in, could we?”

Beth shook her head. “I suppose you could portal in and then have Abella or Lily fly you, but with the Order watching, they would catch on pretty quick. Maybe Kisa could go in and check it out, but that would be an extremely long hike. How many people can she cloak?”

“One adult, two if one of those adults is me.” As his familiar, Kisa’s magical ability to make her unnoticeable could be extended to him. “But proximity is key. We’d have to be huddled together.”

“If we didn’t know better, we would just go with the Order and help them.” Beth looked at Lily. “But I know that you don’t like any plan that involves them.”

Lily sighed. “Look, I’m not a reliable judge of character here, seeing as I’m on their most wanted list and would happily rip their heads off. These guys want whatever is on your land, and they’re gonna poke around until they get it. Unless you want them breathing down your neck for the rest of time, you’re gonna have to give them something. So no, I don’t like that plan.”

“They know you’re going,” Beth said to Mike. “You’ve already told them as much, with or without their help. And I would bet good money that they have that whole area surrounded. You won’t be able to get in and out, not without a fight.”

Mike sighed. Nothing ever seemed to come easy. “It almost sounds like you’re suggesting we tell them we’re buddies for now, but go in with every intention of betraying them.”

“Oh, that’s good. That’s real good.” Lily laughed. “We have them take you up the mountain, and then lose them on the inside, or lie to them about what you find. You could lose them at the boundary, really fuck up their day. I don’t like the idea of hanging around with Order goons all day, but it’ll give me a massive hard on fucking with them from the inside.”

“Which is what you typically do with a hard on.” Beth smirked. “So it looks like you have a call to make. Speak with their representative and see what they want you to do. We can make final plans after.”

“We?” Mike smiled. “I take it you want to tag along?”

“Consider it a field trip. It’s been a while since I’ve been to the ocean and I wouldn’t mind seeing it in a new light.” She touched the water with her finger and the image disappeared. “But that all depends on whether Dana is willing to stay behind. One of us needs to stay here, just in case.”

He nodded and looked at the house. Dana and Beth were the only other legal humans in the house, and he had left all of his properties to both of them. The magic of the house always ensured there would be a successor, otherwise the home and its properties would go into a deep slumber. Nobody was certain if the legal inheritance would bypass the effects of the geas, but it was better than nothing.

“Okay, well…Quetzalli is coming because it sounds like we may be dealing with a dragon. Lily is coming because—”

“Because she wants to and Romeo knows better than to say no.” Lily licked her lips. “And I’ll double check with Dana. She’ll go if you ask her to, but she’s happy enough playing mad scientist upstairs.”

The science project in question was an observatory that had been placed on the opposite side of the house from his bedroom. It had a massive telescope inside that magically looked into an alien sky. Dana had been drawn to it two years ago when it had appeared, and had been trying to rebuild the mechanism that shifted the telescope.

“Okay, so that makes four of us. I’ll check with Yuki and Kisa, see if they want to come. I plan to check in with Cyrus and see what his take on the situation is. Ingrid can sweat it out this evening and I’ll give her a call in the morning. That’s the plan, unless someone disagrees.”

“I disagree.” From the back door of the house, a beautiful woman with long, silken hair and startling green eyes stepped free of the doorway. Her golden skin was interspersed with fluctuating snake scales that scattered the remaining light of the evening.

“Ratu.” Mike bowed his head at the naga by way of greeting. “What brings you out of your Labyrinth?”

“Me.” Yuki stepped out from behind her. “I told her you were planning to go island hopping with the Order, and she thinks it’s a bad idea.”

“You do? Why?”

Ratu smiled. “You are about to spend your time dealing with men and women who would dismantle your life just to satisfy their own curiosity. The succubus aside, you need someone who has experience dealing with their ilk.”

“So…Dana should come instead of Beth?” He wasn’t sure what she was getting at.

“No, silly human.” She was close enough now to place the palm of her hand on his chest. Her eyes narrowed into vertical slits, revealing her reptilian nature. “I meant me. They are part of the reason why I’ve been hiding underground and I am well aware of how they operate. You need someone who can sift through their doublespeak and ambitions, someone who can recognize the magic that they wield. Together, we can handle whatever they throw at us.” She paused and looked to the sky. “I wish to properly see the stars again. I know that I can do this with you by my side. And where better to do so than from paradise itself?”

“You’re coming with us?” Mike was genuinely surprised. Other than a trip into a magical wardrobe, Ratu never had any interest in leaving her Labyrinth or her experiments behind.

“You have it backward.” She teased the edge of his collar with her finger. “This time, it’s you who is coming with me.”