

Double Crossing Bastards

It was roughly an hour after breakfast when Ratu found Mike in his office. He looked up from his laptop and smiled at her. She wore a green silken dress with flowers embroidered along the hem. The petals of the flowers fluttered in an unseen breeze as the naga sat across from him, crossing her legs in such a manner that he got a peek at her toned, inner thighs.

“Well, this is a change of pace.” He shut his laptop and leaned back in his chair. “I can’t remember the last time you weren’t in a kimono.”

“I wear them because they’re comfy and have pockets.” She snapped her fingers. Carmina, one of the fairies, fluttered into the room and landed on the desk. The little red fairy bowed her head at Ratu and awaited orders.

“Please, inform Beth that I have arrived.”

The fairy saluted, then shot out of the room, leaving a glittery trail in the air behind her.

“She seems overly obedient today. How did you manage that?”

Ratu smirked. “Naga’s secret.”

Mike snorted. “They’ll just tell me later.”

“Perhaps.” She slid a hand into her cleavage, then withdrew a journal. Mike could see reality warp around the edges of the journal as it exited the dimensional pocket she had somehow sewn into her dress. “Did you hear back from Master Cyrus this morning? I am hoping he has some insight for us.”

“He actually texted me last night before I could text him.”

“What did it say?”

“I won’t be meeting you for tea this week. The old job reached out and hired me to do some consultation. Afraid I’ll be a complete stranger for the next couple weeks, so don’t worry if you haven’t heard from me.” Mike was able to repeat the text from memory, since he had read it enough times.

“Sounds like the first part of the message is crystal clear. The Order tapped him for a job. But why the stranger comment?” Ratu opened up her journal and made a note to herself. “Do you think they’re assigning him to Hawaii?”

“I don’t know. But I imagine that whatever is going on, he doesn’t want them knowing that he drops by at least twice a month for tea and chess.” He gestured at her outfit. “Speaking of which, I assume you can get your clothes to behave when the Order comes by?”

Ratu lifted an eyebrow. “Perhaps, but I wonder if I should? They already know that the home is magic, that you have magic, and that there are magical beings who live here.”

“But aren’t you worried that they’ll target you or something?”

Ratu shook her head. “I’m a naga. They have dealt with my kind for centuries. As long as I don’t call attention to myself, they should see me as an ally.”

“But you said something last night, about how they were the reason you were in hiding.”

“Ah. That.” She sighed and stared at the ceiling. “I’m not sure that’s something I’m ready to talk about yet. I was involved in a very unpleasant... incident that caught the attention of the Order. During their investigation, I was forced to flee my home and go into hiding. Not long after, I found a home here, away from prying eyes.” Ratu lowered her gaze, her eyes smoldering. “But I was all alone, back then. Even if he did remember me, I wear a different face now and have a new family, one that will stand up for me should I need them.”

“That you do.” Beth spoke from the doorway, then entered the room. Mike was suddenly distracted by her outfit. She wore a blue pencil skirt with a sheer blouse that revealed the bra beneath. When Beth pulled up a chair to sit, he got a brief glimpse of her cleavage as she leaned forward.

“Your eyes are going to fall out of your head,” Ratu told him. “Honestly, you should be used to this by now.”

Mike’s cheeks burned as Beth laughed. “Was he looking down my shirt?” she asked.

“He was.”

“Good.” Beth crossed her legs opposite of Ratu’s. “If my magic works on him, then it should absolutely overwhelm anyone the Order sends.”

“Wait a second.” Mike opened his third eye to get a look at Beth’s soul as well as her magic. He could see the lavender loops of light that had extended from

her and wrapped around his head. Ratu's head was noticeably clear of magical activity. "Are you targeting just me?"

"I am." Beth smiled, and the loops of light retracted. "I know better than to try this sort of thing on Ratu."

"Indeed." The naga smiled. "You should be more wary of others, Caretaker. We need to work on your defenses."

Mike sighed. He wasn't sure whether it had been nymph magic or the simple fact that Beth had a phenomenal pair of breasts. "I guess so. It was very distracting."

"And that's what we want. If I've learned one thing about the Order, it's that they have a penchant for underestimating what they don't understand. If they knew you could grab someone's soul and yank it from their body, they would have just put a bullet between your eyes." Ratu steepled her hands together. "We are playing a game of deception here. Anything we give them will eventually be used against us, mark my words. As I said earlier, they know you have magic, but not what kind."

He nodded. This was perhaps the fourth variation of this speech he had heard from somebody. Still, it was far better than the ass-blistering verbal assault he had received from Zel about Callisto's involvement at the park. He didn't even blame her for being mad. Afterward, with Zel's words ringing fresh in his ears, he went to the roof with a six pack of beer and sat quietly while Death spent an hour talking about his new favorite Netflix show.

The trio spent about half an hour discussing potential strategies, then moved outside to await the arrival of the Order at the table in the gazebo that had been built as an extension of the front porch. Well over a dozen centaurs were busy tending the massive garden below them, but the geas would likely make them look like gardeners to anyone Mike didn't personally invite into his home.

Right on time, a pair of SUVs pulled between the stone lions and onto the private drive that led up to his home. The lions would only activate if hostile magic was detected. So as long as their visitors were on their best behavior, they wouldn't be torn to shreds. The paved loop ended at a retaining wall well over a hundred and fifty feet from the front door. Ever since a car had been rammed into his front porch, he had made certain to put in contingency plans to avoid further structural damage.

Both vehicles parked at the retaining wall. Ingrid and the men from yesterday got out of one SUV while a group of men and women got out of the other. Mike frowned when he recognized Cyrus in the group.

“Don’t say anything,” Ratu muttered, then reached over and squeezed Mike’s knee beneath the table. “Assume they can read lips or magically hear you from this point forward. Also, one of them is carrying a stone of truth. They will know if someone lies.”

He nodded, then stood to greet their guests when they got near. Ingrid, Cyrus, and the aggressive lackey from yesterday walked up the hill toward the gazebo while the other members of the Order spread out across the massive yard. It was immediately apparent that they were inspecting his property, but he couldn’t be certain for what.

“Thank you for coming,” he said with a fake smile. “Please, have a seat.”

Ingrid nodded, then took a chair opposite from Mike. The other man and Cyrus sat down.

“You have a lot more people than yesterday,” Mike said. “You expecting trouble from me?”

The lackey snorted. Ingrid threw him a dirty look, then turned toward Mike. “Not really. They’re here as part of today’s discussion.”

“Okay then. Let’s discuss.” Mike sat down. “By the way, introductions are in order. Ingrid, this is Beth, my attorney.”

Ingrid leaned across the table and shook hands with Beth. Mike could feel her magic washing outward, and saw that Ingrid’s eyes dipped to Beth’s breasts.

“And this woman over here is Ratu.”

“Is this also your attorney?” The lackey gave Ratu an appraising look. “What firm are you hiring from?”

“She’s more like a spiritual advisor, matters of the soul and all that.” Mike bit his tongue before saying any more. He could sense the animosity washing off of the guy. “I find that it’s cheaper than having an attack dog who barks all the time.”

This got a smirk from the man. “My name is Wallace. I’m Ingrid’s partner.”

“You’ll have to forgive Wallace. He can be an asshole six days a week.” Ingrid gestured to Cyrus. “This is Master Cyrus. He’s a specialist in dimensional magic.”

“Mr. Radley.” Cyrus rose and shook Mike’s hand. The tiny scrap of paper in Cyrus’ palm had something sticky on it that made it easier for Mike to hide as he withdrew his hand.

“Well, thank you again for meeting us here. This is a far better place for a chat than the local playground.” Mike paused as Lily walked up with a large serving dish and a carafe of coffee. The dish had several different sweets along with mugs for everyone. Everyone but Ingrid grabbed something from the tray while Lily made herself comfortable in an empty chair.

“And who is this?” Wallace asked. “We have your attorney and your priest, so I wonder if she’s your servant?”

“That’s Lily. She’s my intern.” Beth toyed with the collar of her blouse, which caused the top button to come undone. “She might take some notes while we speak. My memory is good, but I like having a written copy for review.”

“Interesting.” Wallace smirked. “Do you all live here with Mike?”

“No, of course not.” Beth grinned at Wallace. “What would the neighbors think?”

“I do,” Ratu conceded. “This home is a safe haven for me.”

“Safe from what?” Ingrid asked.

“It’s a big world,” Ratu replied. “Speaking of worlds, why do we need a dimensional expert at our table?”

Cyrus cleared his throat and leaned forward. “Mr. Radley, we understand that you have offered to help the Order with its mission in Hawaii. We are under the assumption that the magic of your home is somehow tied to your well being.”

“Go on.” Mike was insanely curious what the scrap of paper in his hand said, but knew better than to look now. He noticed that Lily was desperately trying to make eye contact with the old man and her blouse had also come unbuttoned at the top. She had a pencil and paper, but all she’d done so far was draw stick figures with dicks for heads.

“With your absence here, the Order has generously decided to leave behind a team to ensure the security of your home.” Cyrus held up a hand before Mike could protest. “And I have no doubts that you have magical defenses of your own.

In fact, I am fully aware that a magical enchantment is preventing us from seeing the true nature of your gardening staff. For example, that young man over there.”

Mike turned his head to where Cyrus pointed. Suly stood at a nearby bush, pruning some roses that had bloomed earlier in the week. The dullahan waved at everybody and blew Beth a kiss before continuing his work, all while black mist leaked from the slit in his neck.

“He kind of looks like a discount Edward Scissorhands,” Wallace mumbled.

“And I suspect his pale countenance is related to his magical genealogy.” Cyrus turned back to the table. “It is clear you have a community here. One of our missions is to ensure that magical communities remain safe from outside threats. Once you join our efforts, there exists the possibility that someone who seeks to exploit these individuals will become aware of your home and come snooping around.”

“It kind of feels like you're the ones who are snooping around.” Lily pointed to a member of the Order who disappeared into the hedge maze. “How can we be sure that you aren't here to exploit the locals?”

“You can't.” Cyrus sat back and sighed. “But trust needs to start somewhere. We are trusting that you can actually assist us with our problem in Hawaii. Time and effort have already gone into making preparations for you to join the team that will push up to the crater and examine the threat. We know very little about you or the creatures who live here. What better way to build relations with the Order than to allow our people to set up a small security team to ensure that everything remains safe during your absence?”

“Or you could just fuck off.” Lily picked up her coffee and sipped it. “Since you're worried about time and effort and all of that.”

“Do you let your intern speak for you?” Wallace asked, his cheeks turning red.

Mike shrugged. “It's so hard to find good help these days. Besides, I like the mouth on this one.”

Cyrus cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. “Look. I understand that we're just a bunch of strangers who have arrived on your doorstep, Mr. Radley, but we have come to you with open hands in the hopes that—” Cyrus reached for his coffee and promptly dropped it on the edge of the table. The mug exploded, sending shards of ceramic and coffee everywhere.

Wallace and Ingrid immediately grabbed napkins to hand to Cyrus. Mike looked down at the piece of paper in his hand. It was a list with five items on it.

1. Establish contact
2. Assess potential threats
3. Try to arrange tour of grounds
4. Inspect boundaries of geas/enchantment
5. Arrange travel itinerary for Radley family

The third item had a star next to it and had been underlined. Mike crumpled the paper up and stuffed it in his pocket as the Order team quickly settled. Beth had leaned forward to hand them more napkins, and both Wallace and Ingrid were having a tough time not looking down her shirt.

Cyrus was trying to tell Mike something, but couldn't, not with the Order around. Even the list had been innocuous enough that Mike realized the mage might be worried he would be found out. Still, the message had been received. Mike sighed dramatically and stared up at the roof of the gazebo as everyone settled, then looked at Cyrus.

"I have some apprehension over leaving an armed force at my doorstep," he admitted, choosing his words carefully. "Yes, my home has certain defenses. Serious efforts have been made to break inside."

"Oh?" Wallace perked up.

Mike waved him off. "Look, there's a lot to accomplish today, but I can tell you right now that I am stuck on this idea of extra security in particular. Perhaps a compromise is in order. If you would allow me to show Mister Cyrus around, he can tell me more about what it is you all can do for me to bolster my defenses. In the meantime, you two can make travel arrangements with Beth and Ratu about Hawaii. I trust their judgment."

Ingrid nodded eagerly, then looked at her partner. "I feel this is the best use of our time."

"Lily?" Mike looked at the succubus and grinned. "I saw that one of the Order wandered into the hedge maze earlier. Will you please double-check and make sure the Jabberwock hasn't eaten him?"

Lily held back a grin as she rose, then grabbed three donuts.

"I'm sorry, a what now?" Wallace looked uncomfortable. "Did you say jabberwocky?"

"Jabberwock," Mike replied. "And yes, we have one."

"And you just, what, didn't feel like mentioning it?" Ingrid looked like she was going to rip his head off.

Mike shrugged. "I don't mention lots of things. As long as your guy doesn't provoke it, there won't be a problem. Since you didn't come here to start a fight, I wasn't worried. Mister Cyrus, shall we?"

"It's Master Cyrus," the mage replied, moving uncharacteristically slow. The two of them wandered away from the gazebo and toward the far edge of the property. The centaurs watched them with curiosity as they crossed the lawn and approached the tall stone barrier that separated his property from the neighbor's. To be honest, the sheer size of his home looked ridiculous in comparison to the nearby houses. A long-term project he had been working on was to buy up the surrounding homes so that he could eventually gate off the road leading to his house. Other than the house across the street, the rest of his block was still adamant that they weren't going to sell, and Mike wasn't about to force them out.

"So you think your people can help us protect this place?" Mike asked, unsure how to begin.

"Not in the slightest," Cyrus replied with zero humor in his eyes. "In fact, this is a planned deception."

"Beg pardon?" Mike noticed that one of the Order's women was nearby. He kept an easy expression on his face so she wouldn't come any closer.

"They originally came for your help, this much is true. However, the higher ups want what's on your property and decided to use your absence to acquire it. They are putting me in charge of a team." Cyrus scratched at his whiskers and inspected the stone wall as if it were a work of art.

"And?" Mike didn't know what else to say.

"This doesn't set well with me. Something isn't right." Cyrus moved along the wall, his back now to the front yard. Mike fell in step beside him. "In the past, we've made such moves, but nothing so blatantly duplicitous. You explained to me once that nobody could enter without your permission, yes?"

"This is true," Mike admitted.

“Good. Because under no circumstances should you grant it. Since the Order is planning to double cross yo...do you have any idea how deep the barrier goes? I imagine the geas is a giant sphere.” Cyrus’ tone shifted.

Mike realized the shift meant they were being scryed. “I can’t say for certain, honestly. I’ve never seen the bottom of it, but the top seems domed.”

“Which makes sense, because spherical symmetry is far more efficient than—” Cyrus frowned. “Sorry. I’m not entirely sure whether it is you or me they are watching.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Like I was saying, we should make preparations. I need you to agree on allowing us a ground team, or something nearby. Remain suspicious of our intentions, otherwise they will think this was suddenly too easy.” Cyrus abruptly changed topic again and asked Mike about weather anomalies, whether the home had ever changed shape, and if his water came from the city or some unknown source beneath the home. Mike answered the questions he could, then came up with some of his own that pertained to Order security.

They had walked around the perimeter of the building in time to see one of the Order agents staring into the open door of the greenhouse. Mike casually jogged over in time to see the agent’s face go blank as if he forgot what he was doing. When he saw Mike and Cyrus approaching, he gave a polite nod and wandered off.

“That was weird,” Cyrus commented.

“Satisfy my curiosity. When you look in the greenhouse, what do you see?”

Intrigued, Cyrus opened the door and looked inside. His face screwed up in concentration and his eyes kept going blank.

“That you need to prune back some of your plants,” Cyrus muttered, then closed the door.

Mike suppressed a laugh. The interior of the greenhouse was essentially a different world, and Cyrus had been unable to see it. They had experimented with the geas on a few different occasions, such as having Cyrus look in the windows of the house, but Mike had never brought the mage to the backyard. Ever since he had upgraded the magical enchantment protecting his home with a drop of Santa’s blood, he had yet to discover any gaps.

They were at Naia's fountain when Cyrus abruptly turned toward Mike. "Okay, here's the deal. I'm going to try and break into your home, and I'm going to try damned hard. I assume you will find a way for me to remain in contact with you. It can't be digital. The Order monitors everything, and then they'll know something is up. And yes, they were telling the truth when they mentioned that someone outside our organization is watching us. Without knowing who it is, I don't want to put you all in additional danger."

Mike knew better than to bring up the fact that Eulalie had likely hacked everything the Order already owned. "I'm not too worried—"

"No. Don't blow me off. This guy has already taken out entire teams. He knows our movements, but we have no idea who he is. All we have is some grainy footage of a guy in a trenchcoat wearing a hat."

"Hmm." Despite the lack of description, that rang a bell for some reason. "Kisa, whom you've met before, is staying behind."

Cyrus nodded. "Can make herself invisible when she wants, that will be perfect."

"Also, we have someone on the roof who can hear everything you say. And on the porch as well. Communication will be one way, because once they interact with anything outside the geas, they can be seen."

"Good." Cyrus seemed to deflate a bit. "I am so sorry about all of...this fountain is impressive, has it always been here?"

"No." Mike looked at Naia's fountain. The nymph was busy making faces at the Order man from earlier who was inspecting the water as if he hoped to find some loose change. Despite the water in the fountain's basin literally bending in mid-air and forming into shapes, the man seemed oblivious. "It used to be much smaller, too."

"Fascinating." Cyrus gave Mike a weak smile and the tour continued. The mage no longer broke character as they finished their circuit of the house and ended up back at the gazebo. Lily was guiding the knight that had wandered into the hedge maze back out, her hand supporting his upper back.

"What happened?" asked Cyrus.

"He was unconscious. It could have been a few things, since we do have some fae residents in the maze that don't like being disturbed." The shit-eating smirk on Lily's face gave away that she had jabbed the man with her tail and

knocked him out. Still, none of what she had said so far was false. “But he will be fine.”

Cyrus nodded and waved down Wallace, who looked like he was ready to vault the railing of the gazebo. “It’s okay,” he shouted, then looked back at Mike. “Let’s finish this discussion with the others.”

“Agreed.” They went back to the table and took a small break as Ingrid checked on the sleepy knight. Satisfied that the man hadn’t been harmed or tampered with mentally, she rejoined the group.

“Well?” she asked.

“Mister Radley has agreed to give us access to the grounds. The individuals living here will not bother us as long as we don’t bother them.”

“But wouldn’t it be easier for us to protect your property if we could set up inside?” Wallace waved at the large home behind them. “Looks like there’s plenty of room.”

“No.” Mike crossed his arms. “The last time I let someone in without properly getting to know them, they got the Little Shop of Horrors treatment.”

Both Ingrid and Wallace stared at him like they had no idea what he meant.

“You know, the musical? Starring Rick Moranis? It’s a classic.” He looked at Beth, who shrugged. “Regardless, your people can’t stay here. If that’s a deal breaker, too bad.”

“Now, now, we can still accomplish our goal from outside.” Cyrus looked directly at Ingrid when he said this. The woman relaxed, and looked back at Mike.

“Then that is your decision,” she stated. “So let’s discuss what we arranged. You and your group of...helpers will be given room and board at a special facility created for humans and cryptids alike that is shrouded from the public eye.”

“It’s a resort, Mike.” Beth looked like she could hardly contain herself. “They built a safe haven for visiting dignitaries and cryptids. It’s down by the beach and everything!”

Mike heard Lily emit a girlish squeal. When he turned to look at her, she pretended like it hadn’t even happened.

“It’ll be the VIP treatment, I assure you. I will be your personal valet while we’re there,” Ingrid said, then looked over at Wallace. “Well, we both will, but I think you’ve already figured out one of us is nicer.”

Wallace shrugged. “I scored low on hospitality, but am great at mixed drinks.”

Holding his emotions at bay, Mike studied Ingrid. This was clearly part of the ruse to lure him away from home so they could poke around. It made him angry that they were planning to deceive him, but he couldn’t let it show. He had a job to do, and they were only a means to an end. Eventually, he shifted his gaze to Ratu. The naga gave him a slight nod.

If the Order wanted to play games, that was fine. He needed to figure out what was happening in Hawaii regardless of the bullshit they were about to pull, and already had an idea about how he was going to accomplish it.

“Looks like we’re going on a trip,” he said. “Naturally, when not pursuing the issue of my property, I assume we are free to wander the island?”

“Sort of. You will have an escort.” Ingrid’s face was all business now. “As an asset, we can’t risk losing track of you.”

“And by escort, she means us again.” Wallace pointed at Ingrid then back at himself. “Once we step foot on the island, you’re in our care.”

“More like custody,” Lily grumbled.

“I don’t see why you would care,” Wallace countered. “It’s only him that we need. You can do what you want, if he even lets you come.”

The grin that flitted across Lily’s face genuinely worried Mike. It wasn’t the snarky smile of a succubus holding back anger or a sarcastic remark. No, this was the look of a woman who absolutely, positively had decided that she was going to cause trouble.

“Of course I’m coming,” Lily purred. “Interns get shit pay and no benefits. You’d better believe I’m taking a free beach trip. That, and you heard him. He likes my mouth.”

Both Beth and Ratu snorted at this. Wallace seemed to find it funny as well.

“Good. If this is settled, then our flight leaves tomorrow morning. That should give you plenty of time to pack.” Ingrid, unphased by Lily’s remark, stood and held out her hand. “If you think you can manage to be ready by then.”

Mike took her hand in his own and smiled, seeing an opportunity for mischief. This woman knew damned well that they were setting him up, and he couldn’t help but want her to get just a taste of the trouble that the Order was in for. His magic pulsed deep within him, and he sent a tiny surge of it into her body. Ingrid’s pupils dilated for a moment and she inhaled as if surprised.

“I’ll pack my bikini,” he said. “In fact, I should probably make sure it still fits. Shall we?”

Beth, Ratu, and Lily bid the Order farewell and watched as they gathered up their crew and left. At least twice, Mike caught Ingrid staring at him, but she would look away at the last moment. Once the Order was gone, he headed inside without a single word, the others right on his heels. He waited until the door was closed before addressing them.

“They genuinely need our help in Hawaii,” he began. “But are planning to break in here while we’re gone.”

“Did the old man tell you that?” Lily asked. “Because I got something similar from Rip Van Winkle in the maze.”

“Yep. They put him in charge of the operation and it isn’t sitting well with him.”

“As it shouldn’t.” Ratu stared thoughtfully out the front window. “The Order isn’t beyond this sort of duplicity, but it is rather uncommon.”

“Well, he seems to be on our side for now, but needs his efforts to look genuine. Also, he’s being watched and needs a discreet way to stay in contact with us. Thoughts?”

“I’ll speak with Eulalie. We can set up a couple of rat portals in Hawaii, give us a way to go back and forth as we please.” Lily smirked at the others. “That way, we aren’t trapped there and can come home in a hurry.”

“And I’ll speak with Yuki about bolstering defenses. After meeting with them, I have a few ideas about their protective measures and think we can bypass most of them.” Ratu winked. “They’re going to wish they never set eyes on your house.”

“Yeah they are.” Mike turned to Beth. “I wonder if you’re thinking what I am?”

Beth chuckled. “I’ll talk to Jenny and see what she wants to do.”

The drive back to the hotel felt much longer than twenty minutes. When they arrived, Cyrus announced that he wanted to have a meeting with his team regarding initial findings on the Radley home. Since Ingrid wasn’t needed for this, she told the team that she needed to make some calls of her own and check in with the Director. The whole time, she was busy tensing her legs and trying not to feel the fabric of her pants against her crotch.

In those final moments at the Radley house, something had happened to her. It was like a long-built dam of desire had burst, and she couldn’t remember the last time she had felt so damp below. Even worse, she couldn’t get Mike’s face out of her mind, nor forget the feel of his skin on hers. It had taken everything in her power not to melt down in front of the man, to find a reason to stay in his presence. On the ride home, she had checked herself for magical compulsions, psychic attacks, anything to explain her current state of mind.

She had come up empty. Her best guess was that Mike had somehow triggered her own natural desires, bypassing years of training and self control. Thinking back to his dossier and the rumor that the home contained a nymph, she should have been more careful. Nymph’s could confer blessings that gave mortals supernatural powers, and it occurred to her now that Mike had likely used that magic to ensnare beautiful women such as his attorney.

Wallace silently followed her into the hotel, as if caught up in thoughts of his own. The man was her constant companion, someone she could rely upon to have her back whenever she needed it. The elevator ride to their two room suite was agonizing as Ingrid shifted, her thighs rubbing together. Wallace beat her to the room, swiping his card to unlock the door.

The moment the door was open, she pushed him forward, using her foot to close the door. Wallace looked confused at first, his eyes scanning the room for potential threats, but said nothing when she pressed him against the wall and forced her crotch against his. He was already rock hard, and she suspected she knew the reason why. Beth had been practically eye-fucking both of them throughout the entire meeting.

She and Wallace had been together long enough that this wouldn't be the first time they found sexual relief in each other's arms. There was usually a frantic energy to it, but even more so today. Ingrid slid Wallace's belt off in one smooth motion, but the knight was far less graceful. He simply grabbed her shirt and pulled, scattering buttons along the entryway and revealing her bra-covered breasts.

Ingrid managed to free his cock just as he grabbed her by the hips and lifted her onto the nearby counter of the kitchenette near the door. He pulled her pants down and the scent of her musk filled the air.

"Damn," he muttered, then buried his face in her crotch. Ingrid groaned, her fingers sliding through his hair as his tongue found her clit. Her whole body was hot, and she squeezed her own breasts, moaning when she discovered how sensitive they were.

"You're aware that they did this, right? Mike and Beth?" She looked down at Wallace, who paused his oral ministrations.

"And?" He looked up at her. "Doesn't matter where you get your appetite as long as you eat at home."

With that, he resumed snacking on her snatch. He was good at it, but not good enough to push her over the edge. She savored his attempts for a few more minutes, then pushed him away. Sliding off the counter, she grabbed his exposed cock and marveled at the heat of it. His cock dripped with precum that clung to her fingers, and she stroked him as she led him into the bedroom. He slid out of his coat and laid back on the bed, his arms outstretched.

"Good boy," she muttered, happy that he was content to let her take charge. She lowered herself onto his cock, momentarily quenching the flames inside her belly. Sex with Wallace was typically unremarkable, but the feel of his rigid length inside of her seemed to ground her chaotic libido.

Fucking Mike. She wasn't certain how, but she knew that he was responsible. It wasn't a spell, she knew that much for certain. Her body was warded at all times and she would have detected it. No, it was likely a manifestation of whatever the nymph had done to him.

She could picture him now with that stupid smile on his face, and the way the wind seemed to position his hair perfectly as if he was in a movie. His hands had been strong, yet soft to the touch. She could imagine them running across her

shoulders and pressing her down onto the bed, ensuring that she achieved maximum penetration.

Ingrid would never mention that she had stared more than once at the bulge in Mike's pants and wondered just how big his dick was. That was a cock she wouldn't mind studying, and—

She shook the stray thoughts from her head and groaned, grinding against Wallace. When she rolled her hips just right, her clit would pop free from its hood. The knight had arched his back to allow her a better angle for this, and she dragged her nails across his chest. Tiny sparks appeared near her fingertips, the result of Wallace's own magical protection from harm.

Would it feel this way with Mike? Would she even be able to take his entire length at once? Why did these thoughts plague her so much? Her mind now filled with fantasies of Mike Radley, she shifted her hands off of Wallace and grabbed onto the headboard. The wood protested as she squeezed, and she rolled her hips even faster.

Would he take her from behind? Or would he force her to lie on her back and be subservient, like those women he surrounded himself with? What kind of lover would he be? Would she enjoy obeying his commands, or would she fight to be in charge?

Wallace grabbed her breasts, and she exploded, soaking both of them in cum. Other than a long, drawn out grunt, she remained quiet, not wanting to disturb anyone in an adjacent room. Her legs shook as she slid off of Wallace, then knelt down to take his length in her mouth. She jacked him off with one hand while sucking on the head of his cock, running her tongue across the sensitive flesh of his penis until his hips bucked. Moving her head away, she pointed his cock toward his stomach and watched in fascination as a copious amount of cum coated his belly. Ingrid hadn't seen her partner come this much in a long time.

"Damn," Wallace whispered, reaching down to touch Ingrid. She tilted her head away to avoid him. Sentiment wasn't part of the job and never had been. There had been a need and her partner had been there to fulfill it.

"I'm going to wash up," she declared, then left Wallace behind in his own mess. She went to the kitchenette and washed her hands, then used a rag to dry her crotch. This became an exercise in futility, so she opted for a quick shower instead, during which Wallace joined her. There was nothing sexual or romantic about it and the two of them were dry and dressed less than ten minutes later.

Ingrid pulled a tablet out of her bag and unlocked the device. Within minutes, she found herself looking at pictures and video footage of the Radley home. Not only had they collected data with body cams while they were there, but her team had installed cameras and mics across the property. After organizing the data, she initiated a video call with the Director.

In less than a minute, the man answered. The Director sat at a desk, his fingers steepled together as if he was deep in concentration. His military haircut was offset by the dark goatee he sported, and his unblemished skin had olive undertones that gave him a slightly ethereal look.

“Report.” His voice was deep and smooth and made her think of a jazz singer.

“Initial contact established,” she said, tapping the folders on her screen to send them over. The Director’s eyes focused on a different part of his screen as he looked through the files she had just sent. Clearly something caught his attention, because a smirk appeared on his thin lips.

“Are they coming to the resort?” he asked.

“They are. It sounds like he’s bringing an entourage, though.” Ingrid opened up an image of Mike at the table with the others. “The woman in the white shirt is a local attorney, you should have a dossier on her already. The one with highlights is an intern, but we haven’t figured out who she is yet. But the spiritual advisor is likely a cryptid, though I’m not sure what kind.”

“Naga.” The Director leaned off-screen and returned with a bottle of water. “It’s mostly in the skeletal structure, but you can see her scales in a couple of these pictures, particularly along her neck and shoulders.”

“Oh.” Ingrid noticed them now, grinding her teeth in frustration. How had she not noticed them before? Mike’s careless grin manifested before her, and she shook it off. How much of their meeting had been a distraction? Had it been intentional? Or was it simply the carefree act of a man who was clearly running a fuck farm at his house?

She hated to admit it, but she had clearly underestimated the man. In the future, she would have to be more careful. He was a wild card, that much was obvious.

“How many people is he bringing with him?” The Director motioned to someone off camera and was handed a stack of papers and a pen.

“I think the final number is five, if you include him.”

“Hmm.” The Director signed his name on the documents and handed them back. He pulled a file from beneath his desk and stared at it. “According to the intel we discovered, the house is protected by a gargoyle. Do you think he’s bringing her in human guise?”

“I don’t. And I believe the intel to be dated. Mike claimed to have a Jabberwock on the property and the truth stone confirmed it. I’m forced to believe that we are underprepared for this operation.”

The Director frowned, then typed something on his computer. “A Jabberwock? Like from Alice?”

Ingrid shrugged. “I guess. Nobody saw it.”

“Hmm.” The Director stared into space for a few moments, then looked at her. “We’ll redirect more assets to the house operation, then. The primary focus will be on gathering intel, and once Radley has resolved our problem out here, then we will move forward with operation Eminent Domain.”

“Do you really think he’ll just sit by and let you take his home?”

The Director chuckled. “He won’t have much of a choice. Even if he escapes the resort, what’s he going to do? Swim? Based on your notes, as long as he’s alive, we have a shot at entry. This Historical Preservation Society was obviously a front for a cabal, but they detailed a ritual we can use to break the geas if we can learn how to bypass the lions. We have options, Sister Ingrid. Your only focus should be on keeping Mike contained while we utilize them.”

“Understood.” Ingrid watched the screen go black and sighed. She didn’t know why, but she had a bad feeling that things weren’t going to be as easy as everyone else believed.

Ratu climbed up the stairs, listening to the wood creaking softly at her passing. Her palm glided along the well-oiled railing until she was on the fourth floor. From there, she could look down at the foyer of the home. A pair of rats wandered by, followed by a yellow flash of light as Daisy shot through the house. Ratu licked her lips, tasting the scent of the home and rolling it along her tongue.

This was a good place. It had taken her a couple of years to admit it, but she felt safer within these walls of wood than she ever had beneath a mountain of

stone. Down the hallway was Yuki's room. She lifted her hand to knock on the door.

"Come in." The door opened by itself, revealing Yuki's bedroom. Several easels had been set along one wall where natural light from a circular picture window could fall on them. The kitsune stood out on the balcony, her hands on the stone railing and her tails swishing behind her. Sometimes her five tails would pass through each other as if they were illusory, but each one was very real.

Ratu stepped out to join Yuki. She put her hands on the railing, her fingers sliding into tiny grooves that had been carved there by unknown artisans.

"So they're planning to betray us." Ratu leaned forward, her hair drifting on the breeze. "Cyrus revealed that they're hoping to break in while Mike's away."

"Shit." Yuki turned around and sat on the railing. "Guess that means I'm definitely staying here."

"Looks that way." It was something the two of them had discussed earlier. They were the most powerful magic users of the house, meaning it would be a bad idea for both of them to be gone at the same time. "Besides, your skillset wouldn't be as effective in a tropical location."

"Why? Because it would take way more energy to do this?" Yuki summoned a snowball into her hand and threw it at an angle along the roof. It arced through the air and exploded into powder on Abella's crouched form.

"Rude." Abella shifted only to give Yuki the finger.

The kitsune giggled, which got a sly grin from Abella. Ratu laughed as well. The gargoyle had lightened up significantly since her early days in the house. She remembered a stoic defender who rarely interacted with others, but now Abella could be seen chatting up any number of people. On more than one occasion, Grace had spent the evening on the roof while Abella read stories from her tablet to the little arachne.

Happiness had become the lifeblood of the home, and there was no doubt in Ratu's mind that Mike was at the heart of it. He had grown exponentially since their first encounter when she had tried to snare him in an enchantment to protect herself. As he grew in power, she had seen him shy away from the corruption that had gobbled up Emily.

"We each have our strengths," Ratu replied, tilting her head back to allow the sun to shine on her chest. Where Yuki's magic was almost solely in the domain

of ice, her own foundations were in fire and earth. Sunbathing wasn't just a comfortable pastime for Ratu, it also empowered her magic. "Besides, I definitely don't need to be around Cyrus any longer than I have to."

"Why not?" Yuki leaned forward, her ears twitching with curiosity.

"We've met before." Ratu frowned. "Many, many years ago. He was part of a squad that came hunting for me."

"And he didn't recognize you?"

"No. I wore a much different face back then. I doubt he would ever realize we've met, but I tend to act out of an abundance of caution." Ratu sighed as old memories dredged themselves up from the mud to reveal their sharp edges. "It was back when I was a river god in what is now Indonesia. I had fled my ancestral home in India and established myself as a local deity. That was mostly accidental, as the locals had discovered that their good fortunes were timed around my arrival. I had changed my face once already in an attempt to blend in with nagas indigenous to the area."

"Why were they hunting you?"

Ratu stared at her hands, then picked off a couple of scales. She wasn't entirely certain where to begin. No matter how deep she pushed the past, it still hurt to examine it.

"They weren't technically hunting me. A rogue naga had arrived in the area, stirring up trouble. This one was particularly duplicitous, because he would manifest and rain terrible magic down on the mortals, but only in his serpentine form. Eventually rumors spread and the Order arrived. What I could not predict was that he would poison their ears, convincing them that he had information about who was causing trouble."

"Wait, so you're saying he stirred the pot and then blamed you for it? Why?" Yuki's tails swished behind her, making a sound like silk across stone.

"Because he couldn't find me on his own." Ratu lifted her eyes to meet Yuki's gaze head on. "He had no influence in the area, so brought in people to assist him in his search. With the Order's help, they were able to track me. You see, I had made a critical mistake during my divine reign. In my attempts to avoid scrutiny, I had created a small paradise for the people who survived on my river. If nothing bad ever happened, certainly there should never be a reason to come investigate. But this became the means by which I was discovered."

“Damn. What happened then?”

“I was attacked. The Order and the naga were formidable, but it became clear during our confrontation that he had been using them. You see, the Order wanted to take me in. They had questions and needed answers. But my pursuer was not interested in their questions. Once he saw me, he attacked the Order, and it was through my intervention alone that they survived.” Ratu could hear their screams across the decades, men and women caught up in a storm of earth.

“What was this asshole’s deal? Sounds like a real piece of shit.”

Ratu chuckled. “Indeed. He was very angry with me because I humiliated him in front of our entire tribe, ruined his reputation and destroyed his status. I became his obsession, his sole reason for existing. And despite not seeing him for centuries, that look of sheer delight and anger when we met once more...” She shivered, picturing those cruel, mud-flecked eyes.

“Who was he?” Yuki was leaning forward so far that it looked like she could tip at any moment.

“My betrothed,” Ratu replied, closing the door on her feelings. This was a story that had remained untold since Emily had found her running from the Order. “We grew up together and were always close. It was a long engagement and neither of us were in a hurry. But as the wedding drew closer, he changed. We went from being equals to...I’m not entirely sure. His kind words became sharp, and his actions rough. He became jealous of others who spent time with me, and I eventually realized that the man I was about to marry had been wearing a mask my whole life.”

“And so you left him?”

Ratu nodded, staring at the ground. “I did. The night before our wedding, he came to my room and asked to talk. He used sweet words to convince me that the stress of the wedding had caused these outbursts, and that he couldn’t wait to spend the rest of our lives together. We were planning to move into a mountain range to the north and start a tribe of our own. During this talk, I forgave him, and that’s when his mask slipped one more time.

“You see, our engagement had been long, and we had been lovers for some time. But for weeks before the wedding, I had stopped having sex with him as a form of protest. Upon being forgiven, he demanded that I make up this lost time and spend the night with him. When I told him no, he struck me in anger. That was when I understood that he would never be worthy of my love, and it hurt. He

knew how to act around others, how to sweeten the air with honeyed words and elevate his own status. And so I fled in the middle of the night.” Ratu hugged herself. It suddenly felt so cold.

“And he came after you?”

“Not quite. I used an enchantment to create a simulacrum, an illusory double made of clay, and left it in my stead. During the ceremony, it openly accused him of his transgressions. He didn’t realize that he was dealing with my clone, and so struck it down in front of everyone. This single act divided the tribe, and he was sent into exile by his own family. Still, I couldn’t trust anyone with the secret of my location, and—”

There was the gentle click of stone on stone, and Abella was there, embracing the naga from behind.

“I know this pain,” she whispered. “And I am sorry to hear that you do, too.”

Surprised, Ratu was about to say something else when Yuki hugged her also. Both women clung to Ratu like she was about to disappear. It was actually kind of silly. In fact, she would have told them how silly it was if the dam inside her hadn’t broken open just then, soaking all three of them in tears.

It was almost dinner time when Mike stepped into his backyard. He had spent the better part of the afternoon packing and making plans with everyone else regarding the home’s defenses while they were gone. After a visit to the Library, Eulalie was now ramping up her digital infiltration. If the Order ever found out that a good chunk of her hacking was just magical rats who could plug in a USB drive, they would be both angry and embarrassed.

What used to be a handful of steps to Naia’s fountain now involved two flights of stone stairs and navigating beautiful topiary shaped like magical creatures. This was partially the work of the centaurs, but most of the job was done by Aymone. Though the dryad was locked to her tree, she could influence all of the plants on the property as long as the roots of her tree could reach them.

At the bottom of the stairs, he smiled at the sight of Callisto and Grace sitting on the edge of Naia’s fountain. Next to them, Death was busy telling a story, his bony hands waving around dramatically. He had pulled his hood back and now wore sunglasses and a baseball cap with a Punisher skull on it. Naia sat behind all

three of them, her chin in her hands as she listened in on the story. When Death pantomimed swinging a bat, Mike chuckled to himself.

“And that is how I helped Santa Claus save Christmas yet again,” Death declared, then looked up at Mike. “Though I suppose your father has already told you that story.”

“He hasn’t! Why didn’t you tell us you saved Santa again?” Callisto’s tone was accusatory.

“That’s a good question. Death, are you filling my children’s heads with nonsense?”

“Why of course, Mike Radley. What better use does nonsense serve than to stuff it into a child’s head and grow their imagination? It’s like fertilizer.” Death knelt down to look at both children. “Though I admit I may have embellished some parts.”

“Uncle Deaaaath.” Callisto rolled his eyes in a way that only a child could, then looked at Mike. “Mom is looking for you.”

Mike scratched the back of his head and winced. “How mad is she?” he asked.

Callisto shrugged. “She’s referring to you today as ‘that bastard.’”

“That’s an improvement from yesterday, then.” He held out his arms and Grace scrambled his way, only to climb up his back and cling to his head and shoulders. “That’s not what I had in mind,” he muttered.

Grace hissed and started chewing on his hair.

“Cal, go let your mom know I’m here for whatever she needs. I have to speak with Aunt Naia.” Mike looked at the nymph and realized his son was still standing there. “About grown up stuff.”

“Aw, man.” Callisto trotted off toward the greenhouse. Death declared that it was tea time and left them alone.

“Hello, lover.” Naia smiled, her eyes flicking up to where Grace clung to him. “I don’t know what you need from me, but you’ve still got a pair of little ears.”

“It’s not you I need to speak with.” He raised an eyebrow. “If you catch my drift.”

Naia pouted. "And here I thought you were going to spend some time with me before ditching us all for an island paradise."

"No place on Earth could compare to being by your side." He reached up and poked his daughter's belly. "Hey. I don't care if you chew, but no pulling."

Grace hissed in agreement, content to munch on his hair. He probably shouldn't let her do that, but he had already committed to the idea that there were worse ways to screw up his magical half-breed children.

Naia closed her eyes for a moment, the fountain swirling into intricate shapes behind her. The runes on her body glowed, and when the nymph opened her eyes, the pupils had changed from blue to gold.

"Greetings, Caretaker."

"Hestia." Mike bowed his head in respect, causing his daughter to tilt forward and almost fall. "Thank you for meeting with me."

"Of course. We have much to discuss." The nymph, now possessed by the goddess Hestia, reached out and patted Grace on the head. "She is growing so quickly."

"Yes, she is." Though Hestia was privy to events that occurred inside the home, he treated her like a visiting relative and talked about his family. He had learned shortly after his first meeting with the goddess that she enjoyed hearing accounts first hand from him. She also didn't always manifest when requested. Mike hadn't met many gods, but had learned they all had their quirks.

"I wanted to speak with you about the Order and Hawaii." Mike sat on a chair by the fountain's edge, which caused Grace to shift to his chest and start chewing on the collar of his shirt.

"What would you like to know?" Hestia asked.

"Is there anything about Hawaii you can tell me? Quetzalli thinks there might be a dragon there."

"Interesting." Hestia closed her eyes for a moment. "I'm afraid there isn't much I know, the secrets of the island were never mine to possess. It was one of the first properties acquired by a Caretaker, but not in the traditional sense."

"Oh?" There were numerous properties across the planet like his own, each one host to a god and part of some big event called the Great Game. Typically, these properties only changed hands when the mortal in charge of them died. If

that person was killed by another player in the Great Game, the property became part of the winner's collection and was passed on. It was how Mike owned a cabin in Oregon and a castle in Ireland, as well as the land in Hawaii. He had no part in acquiring them, but they were now his. If the owner died of other causes, however, the magic of the property would seek out someone qualified to take over.

Hestia nodded and opened her eyes. "Instead of someone being defeated, the land was given to a prior Caretaker by its owner. Whoever was caring for the land decided it would be in better hands this way. I don't know what circumstances prompted this, but I vaguely recall it had something to do with its guardian."

The guardian of a property was a mythical being in charge of selecting a new player. In Mike's case, the guardian had been Naia. During the selection process, she could have simply drowned him if he was unfit to take care of the home. In a lot of ways, he was still uncertain why she had chosen him in the first place. He had moved into the home as a damaged, emotional mess, and there was really no reason for her to have let him survive their encounter.

Yet here he was, the man in charge of a home full of monsters who all got along and helped raise his children. In his case, Naia had chosen correctly. The journey had been fraught with peril and the temptation of power, but he had yet to succumb as his predecessor Emily had.

"Do you remember anything about the guardian?" Mike shifted Grace so that she chewed on the other side of his shirt. Luckily, she wasn't a drooler.

"I don't. Could be the geas, or could be that I never knew." Hestia's eyes shimmered. "Now ask me about the Order. My time is growing short."

"Can the home protect everyone from them in my absence? I have every reason to believe it will, but..."

"You want reassurances." Hestia nodded. "Your family is safer now within my walls than it has ever been. It would require either gross negligence on their part or an unforeseen act of magic to breach this property."

Mike let out a sigh. "Thanks. That's what I was worried about the most. I must admit, I'm hesitant about leaving, but I get the feeling that it's the right thing to do."

Hestia nodded, then reached out for him. Her fingers stroked lightly at his cheeks, sending a cool tingle through his whole body.

“Trust your instincts, my champion.” Hestia’s eyes fluttered and her eyes changed blue again as the goddess withdrew from Naia’s body.

“Oh!” Naia exclaimed, then shivered. “I always feel so warm when she’s been here.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” Mike ran his hands through Naia’s hair, then had to pull a strand of it out of Grace’s mouth. After Hestia had revealed herself, Mike had made the goddess promise to speak through Naia only with her knowledge and permission. Naia had been more than willing to accommodate the goddess, but Mike felt a lot better knowing that the nymph was a willing participant.

“There you are.” Zel came around the side of the house, followed closely by Callisto. The two trotted over in unison, but Callisto stopped at Amymone’s tree when the dryad showed him a book with a dragon on the cover. He could already read on his own and had found a kindred soul in the dryad, who was willing to read anything to or with him.

Mike covered Grace’s ears. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Zel rolled her eyes. “I’m not going to yell at you again. Not yet, anyway. Plenty of time for you to get into trouble.”

He nodded. “I’ll do my best to avoid it, but it has a habit of finding me.”

She groaned and shook her head. “It really does. Which is why I would prefer there be no more field trips with our child.”

Mike opened his mouth to argue, but closed it. The last thing he needed was to start an argument with Zel right before leaving. It was something they could talk about after he came back. “So what do you need me for?”

Zel pulled a pouch that had been strapped to her waist and handed it over. “I made some potions for you and Beth.”

The handcrafted leather pouch was sealed with a strap wrapped around a button. Mike undid the tie and opened the pouch to reveal a few screw jars with yellow balm inside.

“The yellow stuff is sunscreen. It’s completely waterproof and will repel both bugs and sharks.”

“Sharks?” He opened a jar and sniffed it. It had a vague vanilla scent. Grace promptly hissed and hopped down to the ground and wandered over to join Callisto and Aymone. “How do you know it repels sharks?”

Zel shrugged. “I don’t question the alchemy of ancient centaurs. When they say it repels sharks, I believe them. Not like I have a good way to test it out.”

“Good call, and...” Mike laughed and pulled out a slim vial of a glittering red powder. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Mandragora pollen? Yes.” She chuckled as her tail swished back and forth. “That’s all I was able to collect from some dying pods in the woods. We still haven’t located the main plant. I almost wonder if it’s underground.”

“It could be,” said Aymone from her tree. “If it would ever send some roots back up here, I would ask it for you.”

“We would love that. The last thing we need is to run afoul of that plant.” Zel looked at Mike knowingly. “Especially if it’s hungry.”

Mike nodded, knowing full well what the plant was capable of. “So do I throw this?”

“You can. This version is water soluble, so you could dilute it.” She put her hands on his wrists. “Be very careful with it.”

“Yes, ma’am. Anything else?”

“While you’re gone, we’re going to increase the centaur presence in response to the Order, but only through the greenhouse. The rats are already shutting down shortcuts to prevent unauthorized access. So if you need us, you’ll have to come the long way.” She wrapped her arms around him and squeezed. “Now promise me you’ll come back safe.”

“I promise.”

“And what will I do if you break that promise?”

“Find me, bring me back, then kill me?”

“Good. We understand each other.” She stepped back and held him at arm’s length. “Our son needs you. I need you. Don’t forget that, you bastard.”