

The Naga, the Fox and the Wardrobe

The door of the wardrobe didn't move.

Puzzled, Mike grabbed the handle even tighter and pulled again, but it still wouldn't budge. The wardrobe felt like it had been anchored into the wall, the door completely immobile. Frustrated, he tried rattling the door when he realized that he had missed one very important detail. Right below the handle was a small keyhole.

"Ugh." He got ready to kick the wardrobe out of frustration when he remembered that he had a key sitting in his dresser. It was the one he had found last week in the downstairs front closet. Excited, he started running back to his bedroom, pausing immediately upon entering.

"What the fuck am I doing?"

He turned back and stared at the mysterious wardrobe. Even from here, he could feel its pull on him. What could be on the other side of those doors that entranced him so? It wasn't just curiosity or a need to feel like he was making progress with the house. Something magical was trying to lure him into the wardrobe, and he wondered if it had his best interest at heart.

He moved toward the wardrobe again, but turned at the stairs, running down them once he looked away. Already, the mystical pull was fading. Once at the bottom, he went out the back door to find Zel, Abella, and Naia sitting around the fountain.

"Hey, I need a favor." He sat on the water's edge. "There's a key in the top drawer of my dresser. Can somebody go get it and give it to Naia?" He briefly explained the magical compulsion of the wardrobe to all of them along with the memory of Emily using portals to travel. "I don't want to go wandering in without thinking things through first. I'm fairly certain that it goes somewhere, but don't know for certain, and I'm worried the key may have the same spell on it or something."

"I'm on it." Zel walked to the house, her hooves clomping on the wood once she was in the door.

"Someone's learning caution," Naia said, kissing Mike on the forehead. After waiting a minute, she vanished with a splash then reappeared, the small key in her hand.

His heart pumped frantically, and his hand shot out to grab it from her. At the last second, he closed his fingers and pulled his hand back. He knew he had made the correct decision.

"Hold onto it for me? Until I'm ready."

She grinned. "Yes, but only for a bit. Anything I take down there alters the flow of my spring, and I'm running out of good places to shove things."

"I'll deal with it soon." He let out a sigh of relief when Naia swallowed it and it vanished from sight. "I just thought it would be best if I didn't wander off to some other part of the planet with nobody knowing where I went."

"Agreed." Abella put a hand on his shoulder. She smiled, the fused crack in her face glinting in the sunlight. It was the stone equivalent of a scar, yet somehow the flaw looked good on her. It traveled down her forehead, across her eye and then along her cheek. "We can't bail you out if we don't know where you are."

He smiled but didn't feel good about it on the inside. "Well, at least I know I can count on you."

She smiled, her azure eyes glittering in the daylight.

Zel stepped out of the backdoor, her hooves clomping on the pavement.

“Check it out!” She lifted up her skirt to reveal that she had put on a pair of Mike’s boxers. “There’s even a tail hole in the back!” She spun around to reveal that she had practically destroyed the fly of his underwear by pulling her tail through.

Naia laughed, the sound snapping Mike out of his funk. He stood up and gave Zel a hug. “You can keep that pair. I don’t need them anymore.”

“Really?” She did a little spin, releasing her skirt. “They aren’t as lacy as the ones Abella showed me on her tablet.”

“You’ve been showing her underwear on your tablet?” he asked the gargoyle.

“A bit of this and that.” Abella shrugged, crossing her arms. “Sometimes the people in my videos wear underwear.”

“But never for very long,” Zel added. “If they know they’re going to have sex, why do they bother getting dressed at all?”

Of course. Mike laughed again, the tension caused by the wardrobe fading from his mind. “If Abella’s been showing you porn, I suspect you have lots of questions, actually. We can address those later.” He turned his attention to the nymph. “Naia, do you know anything about the wardrobe?”

“Doesn’t ring any bells, lover.” She sat on a fountain of water. ‘It feels the same as earlier. I don’t remember, but I feel like I really should.”

“That’s a shame.”

“I would like to look at it with you,” Zel said. “I think it’s fascinating that you have an enchanted wardrobe.”

“Who has an enchanted wardrobe?” Ratu came out of the backdoor, her white kimono decorated with a golden dragon that flew around on the fabric, spiraling around her chest before disappearing.

“I do. I think I’m being magically compelled to check it out.”

“I see. I would love to take a look at it with you. But first,” she held up the magical emerald. “Naia, if you would?”

The nymph sighed. “Toss it in.”

Ratu obliged, the emerald splashing in the fountain and then disappearing. “I had a breakthrough this morning regarding that particular piece of magic.”

“You did? What is it?”

“It’s interesting, that’s what.” Ratu sat on the edge of the fountain and hiked up her kimono, revealing her scaly legs. She turned to lie on her back, unfolding the front of her kimono until she was barely covered. “The sun feels good today.”

“Ratu, c’mon.” He sat next to her, wondering what she was up to.

“Rub my feet and I’ll tell you.” She gave him a wink, and he rolled his eyes. He took her demure foot in his hands and began kneading the flesh around the base of her toes.

“Ah, that feels good. Anyway, like I was saying, the emerald is one of the more amusing trinkets I’ve come across. Bluntly put, it grants you a wish.”

“Wait, what?” Mike stopped squeezing. Ratu gave him a small kick with her free foot until he continued.

“You heard me. Nothing big, mind you, but it can do little things. It calibrates to your heart’s desire, and that’s what its function becomes. Magic like this is extremely powerful. If you desired money, the emerald would attune to that desire and help you find it. If you wanted power, it could do that. That’s why I wasn’t able to figure out what it did for so long. I didn’t have a strong enough desire for its abilities to manifest, so it’s just been sitting on my desk, raw potential waiting to take form.”

“Oh, like a magical catalyst!” Zel exclaimed, then ran to the garage and returned with a notebook. From where he sat, Mike could see that she was drawing the emerald from memory.

“That’s another way of putting it. Mike, are you doing something different with your hair?” Ratu was looking at the top of his head.

“What?” He stopped rubbing her feet and felt his hair. “No, why?”

She shrugged. “Looks different today, like it’s fuller or something. Anyway, the previous king of rats wanted an army to protect his people. Thus the emerald gave him the power to animate furniture. Our desires are largely open to interpretation, so the gem does its best to accommodate.”

“But then what was the deal with Jenny?” he asked.

“Oh, that’s my favorite. Your little friend is cursed to live in a doll forever. As a result, her desires are a little out of whack. What happened when she was under the effects of the gem?”

He blushed. Everybody had heard from Tink about the incident in the church. It wouldn’t have bothered him as much if it hadn’t happened in front of Beth. “She trapped me in a dream and seduced me.”

“You are half correct. Oh, yes, I love it when you hit that spot.” He was now squeezing the space between her big toe and the one next to it. “I am under the impression that Jane wanted certain experiences prior to her death. Her desire manifested as a grand illusion, allowing you to be with her intimately. Part of me wonders if her memory hasn’t been permanently altered as a result. She may truly believe now that your interaction occurred so many centuries ago.”

He frowned, thinking back on the encounter. “That makes sense, I guess. But it was more than that. Jenny was being weird and kept transforming into herself. It seemed like she was talking to me, but also like she was just babbling.”

“That’s something I don’t have an answer for.”

“Hmm.” He continued rubbing, working his way back toward her heel.

Abella flew off, no longer interested in the conversation. The blast from her wings disturbed the loose dirt around the fountain, scattering it outward.

There was something more to what Ratu had said. “Jane wanted a future more than anything, not just sex. So why just that moment? Why not bring her back to life or something?”

“A future, huh?” Ratu turned her head toward Naia, her outstretched hand playing in the water. “Any ideas, nymph?”

“You said that she was saying weird things, right?” Naia held up a sphere of water. “Like what?”

“I don’t remember, honestly. She kept changing back and forth between Jenny and Jane, which was pretty distracting. I did notice the emerald kept feeding her magic, and her eyes were glowing. Now I’m worried because she hasn’t spoken to anybody since then.”

“A spiritual manifestation like that must have exhausted her.” Ratu flicked the water. “Now I wonder something. You say that Jane desired a future. How would the gem interpret such a thing and give it to her?”

“By letting her see the future! Like a prophecy.” Zel said, underlining something on the page. Everyone looked at her. “Weird phrases, glowing eyes. All the hallmarks of precognition.”

“Seriously?” He looked at Ratu. “Is that possible?”

“Perhaps.”

He sighed. “That kind of makes sense. It almost seemed like Jane and Jenny were two distinct beings. Is the emerald powerful enough to treat someone like that as two separate people?”

“I imagine so. Jenny is a bit of a special case. She is unable to move on, trapped on the material plane. The rules are likely different for her.”

“Okay, so now that we know what it does, what now? Should I have you destroy it? It seems like it would be fairly dangerous.”

“Maybe. I see no reason to rush though.” She winked at him. “And neither should you.” She poked him with her free foot. “Unless you have somewhere else to be?”

He laughed. “No, I really don’t.”

Mike continued to rub her feet, listening to the others talk. If Jenny really had seen the future, what had it been? His thoughts had been all consumed by Cecilia’s absence as well as Emily’s mysterious schemes. The embarrassment involving Beth hadn’t helped matters either, forcing him to put it out of his mind. He had no idea if it had been real or a dream, but ultimately it didn’t matter.

“When do you think we could examine this wardrobe of yours?” Ratu asked, snapping him away from his thoughts.

“This afternoon, I guess. I would like to check in with Reggie and Tink first so they know where I’m going. Then we can properly prepare.” *If such a thing was even possible*, he thought.

“Sounds good. Come and get me when you’re ready. I’m just going to soak up some sun.” She slid the kimono off her body, lying naked on the stone wall, soaking up the heat from the sun. Snakeskin patterns shifted on her flesh and she closed her eyes, a thin smile crossing her face. Soon she was scaly from head to toe, and he couldn’t help but stare at her for a little bit.

"I can't wait to document it. Sounds like the wood itself is enchanted. If so, I wonder if I could find a way to grow some." Zel shut her notebook and tucked her pencil behind her ear. "I'll be around." She blew him a kiss and disappeared into the garage.

Mike sat on the wall, watching Ratu doze. Naia's birds were singing her various tunes, landing in the upper tier of her fountain. He fought the urge to go on about his business, choosing instead to enjoy this moment of peace. A strange feeling in his gut told him that it would be the last one for a while.

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Beth opened her eyes, blinking several times. She had fallen asleep at the desk in the office, her laptop still open and some documents spread out before her. Yawning, she checked the time. She must have conked out over an hour ago.

Stretching her arms, she couldn't help but lean back and stare at the moulding on the ceiling. The grooves had dirt and what looked like soot in some places, which wouldn't entirely surprise her. She grabbed her coffee cup and lifted it to her face.

That was odd. It was still mostly full. She sipped at it and made a face. It had gone cold.

Her cell phone rang and she was tempted to let it go to voicemail until she saw that her phone was displaying a picture of a young woman with red and black hair with a cartoon halo over her head giving the camera the finger.

"Lily?" she answered. "When did you put your picture on my phone? Hell, when did you get a phone?"

The succubus chuckled on the other end. "When you were sleeping, of course. I put myself in the night before I left."

"Figures." Beth pushed off the desk with her foot, and the chair she sat on spun around to face one of the windows. "How is Colorado?"

"We're not in Colorado anymore. Haven't been for a couple days."

"Where are you?"

"California." Lily sighed. "We ran into some problems on our way here and things got... complicated."

"Are you okay? What about Dana?" Beth hadn't gotten a chance to know the zombie very well and had more than a little anxiety about letting her roam the countryside.

"We're fine for now. I was calling home because I need money for a plane ticket?"

"To where?"

"I would rather not say. I just need some numbers from you so I can finish paying online."

"I thought Dana couldn't ride on a plane? Something about biting the other passengers."

Lily chuckled again. "She's too big for carry-on, but not for checked bags. I'm traveling as you, by the way. Have you ever wanted to join the Mile High Club?"

“Please don’t fuck people looking like me.” She frowned. “There’s no way she’s going to pass for luggage. Isn’t there a weight limit?”

“A hundred pounds is the limit.”

“There’s no way Dana weighs less than a hundred.”

“She does without her legs.”

It took Beth several seconds to process what Lily had just said. “Care to repeat that? I think I misheard you.”

“Her legs come off. Well, they can, and we can put them back on later. I have them in my carry-on.”

“That’s...” several words filtered through Beth’s mind. Disgusting, macabre, horrifying. “Don’t they smell?”

“Now now, that’s extremely rude. As long as she gets a good jolt of magic juice after we stitch them back on, she’ll be fine.”

“How do you know that?”

There was a long pause before Lily responded. “Like I said, things got complicated, but our girl is handling whatever death throws at her like a champ.”

“What about the x-ray scanners?”

Lily chuckled. “Tick-Tock is the bag. They can only see what he wants them to. That’s if he doesn’t just get up and walk around the scanner. Wouldn’t put it past him.”

“He?”

“That’s how Dana refers to him. Said since he was a grandfather clock, it only made sense.”

Beth sighed. “Please don’t get me banned by TSA. Or fuck people in my body. Promise me those things and I’ll give you what you need.”

“Yes, boss,” Lily replied.

Beth pulled out a credit card and read off the numbers. She wasn’t worried about the cost---Mike would reimburse her. “Did you get that?”

“Yep. Plane leaves soon, so gotta go. Tell Romeo hi for me.” There was a click and then silence. Beth lowered the phone, staring at it. What on earth was Lily up to?

Her phone dinged, and a text message came through. It was a photo of Beth with her tongue out standing in front of a mirror, a slender leg draped across her shoulder like a scarf. Behind her, Dana was busy trying to fit herself in a large suitcase, her head and one arm still hanging out.

“Holy shit.” Shaking her head, Beth put her phone away. It really was better if she didn’t think about what those two were up to, but she was happy that they were okay. Picking up her stuff, she looked at her computer screen.

“Weird.” Several documents were open on her screen, many of them pertaining to Emily’s holdings. Why had she been looking those up? She closed the windows and shut her computer down.

She had come to the office to avoid the hustle and bustle of the house. Sofia had gotten into an argument with the fairies after they got into the flour, and Tink was upstairs doing God knew what with a power saw and with the rats helping her. Her room was close enough to Mike's that she could hear him moaning in the bathtub.

The thought of him made the blood rush to her face. It was a frustrating feeling in a lot of ways, because she knew that the attraction was largely due to his bond with Naia. While he had been cute in a broken puppy kind of way when they first met, she wouldn't have bothered pursuing their relationship any farther. Now, however, he radiated sex appeal like a tiny star, yet acted awkwardly whenever she was around. She had noticed that he treated her differently than the others, and wondered if she was lacking the monstrous charms of the other residents.

Did she desire the man, or the magic?

It was a question she couldn't answer, but it made her stomach feel funny in a way that usually required a trip to see Asterion in the Labyrinth. The minotaur was more than happy to play with her, but he was more than a little short on ideas during sex.

Oh well. At least he took direction well. She picked up her coffee and remembered that it was cold once it touched her lips. Frowning, she set it back down. Her thoughts went back to Mike and the scene of him standing in the church, his dick exposed for her to see.

"Damn it." She stuck her head out of the office and waited. It didn't take long before one of the fairies shot past, likely looking for or running from trouble. Beth had realized that they were largely bored and needed to be given something to do.

"Hey Olivia." The green light returned and hovered in front of Beth. If she squinted, she could just make out the feminine form in the middle. "Can you go and ask Asterion if he can meet me at the greenhouse? Let me know when he is on his way."

"Okay," Olivia said with a giggle, and flew up the stairs toward Beth's room, eager to help out.

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Mike sat on the porch swing, letting the wind slowly rock him. Any moment he expected Cecilia to return, to speak to him in that fantastic foreign lilt of hers. Though the others reassured him that she was fine, something was bothering him and he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Something bugging you?"

He looked up and saw Abella's face leaning over the roof, her thick hair slowly succumbing to gravity. A sigh escaped him and he leaned back in the swing.

"Yeah. I thought that dealing with the former rat king would give me a break, but between whatever Emily was doing and Cecilia being gone, I just can't seem to relax. I feel like something is about to happen, and I'm worried it's going to happen when I go in that wardrobe. I'm also worried about that emerald. If it was so powerful, why did she just give it to the rats?" He looked at her. "Oh, right. Ratu learned that the emerald can apparently grant wishes or something like that."

"So I heard." She tapped her ear knowingly. "Even up here, I could hear you all talking."

"Right." He seemed to forget that. Abella, the home's stone guardian was always watching, always listening. "So yeah. Something is bugging me, but I have no idea what."

“Here.” She held out her hand.

“What?” He reached out, expecting her to hand him something. Instead, she grabbed onto his wrist and casually pulled him off the porch, his legs dangling over the yard below. With a flap of her wings, they took to the sky and she did a quick spiral of the house. His stomach threatened to leap out of his body while he watched the ground below twist back and forth.

They landed by the turret on a flat piece of roof. He sat down and Abella leaned against the roof, her tail twitching back and forth.

“I want to show you something.” She crouched down, lying flat against the roof. “Get down or he’ll see you.”

“He?”

“Mister fancy pants.” She placed her hand on his head and pushed him prone. They laid this way for several minutes, and Abella lifted her head just enough that she was gazing across the yard. Several minutes passed, and Mike wondered if he was in danger.

“There he is. Move slowly.”

He sat up and saw Sebastien slowly cross between the two lions. He twirled his cane and leaned on it, his eyes on the house.

“What are we doing up here?”

“Blowing off steam.” She reached across the roof and picked up a large brick.

“Where did that come from?” he asked.

“Construction site down the road.” She grinned. “Keep watching, this really pisses him off.”

“Okay.” Abella cocked her arm, her eyes narrowing. After a couple of seconds, she flung her whole body forward, the brick sailing through the air and smashing through Sebastien’s skull. His upper body exploded into sand, his limbs twitching as his golem fell apart.

Abella’s wings beat quickly and she soared down to where the sand was busy trying to reform. Flapping her wings, she landed hard, scattering the grains with heavy wing beats. The sand tried to resist her at first, attempting to reform into Sebastien, but she kept at it, swirling him apart. Eventually, the sand had been scattered into the bushes and grass, and she took off, flying back to the roof and landing gently.

“That really pisses him off,” she said, making a fist. “Takes him nearly an hour to reform.”

“That is pretty funny.”

“He has another one down the block that watches me do that.” She pointed and he followed her finger. This version of Sebastien was dressed as a jogger, his arms and legs pumping as he ran. “I don’t dare fly past the lions to try it with him while he’s watching me. He’s carrying a wand in his shorts and I don’t want to get blasted out of the sky.”

“Good. I don’t want anything to happen to you.” He leaned against the wall of the turret. “So is this what you do for fun? Throw bricks at that asshole?”

“One of the things.” Her cheeks darkened. “I often hear you with the others, so that causes, um, distractions.”

“I see.” He looked around, realizing that nobody would wander by to bother them. Even the fairies weren’t flying around up here. He had realized lately that it was difficult to truly be alone with anyone in the house. It was becoming a regular waystation for all the creatures under his roof.

The breeze was nice, but not as nice as the smile on the gargoyle’s face.

“Maybe I could use a distraction.” He moved closer and touched her skin, his fingers sliding up the thick marble of her thigh. Her flesh yielded only slightly when pressed, but her skin was perfectly smooth, like polished marble. “What do you think?”

“Out here? In the open? What would the neighbors think?” She winked at him, tilting her leg in his direction, opening herself up.

“Huh. It occurs to me that I don’t actually know my neighbors.”

Abella laughed. “They have almost no idea you exist. The geas messes with their squishy little brains. When Emily first lived here, there were a couple of them who threw neighborhood parties in the summer and stuff like that. She described it as recognizing someone you hadn’t seen in a while, but couldn’t put a name to the face. She would just introduce herself as the new neighbor, but apparently some of the people would actually notice the house for the first time, so she quit doing that.”

“Interesting.” He stroked her inner thigh, his fingers running along the creases. He wondered how her muscles were able to flex, if it was driven by magic or if her cells were a unique blend of minerals. “So the house sort of fades away.”

“Yep. Your eyes have difficulty focusing on it, like it’s trying to blend in with the landscape. I’ve watched plenty of people walk by and look surprised when they see it, but then they just keep on going as if they’ve already forgotten. When Tink was little, she used to conduct experiments with the geas, to see what people noticed or didn’t. As long as there wasn’t a physical interaction, anything abnormal simply didn’t register with whoever was looking.”

“Physical interaction?”

Abella laughed, pulling up on his shirt to reveal his stomach. “Tink got grounded once for using a stick to trip people as they walked by. People came to the door to yell at Emily for letting her kid wear a Halloween mask in the summer while harassing them. They forgot about it later, but she didn’t like that Tink called attention to herself like that.”

He chuckled. “I can only imagine.”

“So I have a question.” Abella touched the scar tissue along his side. “How did this happen? It feels so different from the rest.”

“Car accident.” He sighed. “I was in a pretty bad accident when I was younger and almost died. The car caught on fire and I got burned and cut up pretty bad. Luckily, it was mostly superficial, but it didn’t heal well enough to cover it up.”

“It feels different than the rest.”

“Yeah. Scar tissue is different from regular skin, because of how it grows.” He touched the scar on her face. He could feel the slight indentation where it sank in, the stone becoming dark and revealing glittering granules inside. “But it’s different for gargoyles. You cracked instead of getting burned.”

“Yeah.” Abella blushed. “I thought it would be worse, but Beth helped me fix it as best as she could. It will fade, but will take several centuries.”

“Yeah, well maybe my scars would fade if I could live that long. Humans aren’t that great at living past that first century.” He let his hand fall onto her chest, moving it over her right breast. He loved how it felt, that unyielding smoothness.

“The first century is super hard on gargoyles too. It’s similar to a human’s teen years and many of us perished due to stupid decisions.”

“Such as?”

She laughed. “Scaring the shit out of people by pretending to be statues was a common trick, but the worst involved swooping down and picking people up and then dropping them. Gargoyles, for lack of a better word, can be dicks. It’s part of the reason so many of us were hunted and killed, and I can’t really blame humans for it. I might even argue that our behavior caused us to be hunted in the first place.”

“Did you used to do stuff like that?”

“Well...” she dragged the word out while unbuttoning his pants. “I spent more of my time pretending to be a statue just to people watch. But early in my adventures I was hiding in a large garden when I spotted the master of the house with one of his maids in the twilight hours.”

“Oh?”

She laughed. “He lifted her skirt and took her from behind. It was super casual, with no words spoken. I hung around the estate for many years and found out that he had several bastard children with the help. His own wife was no better. Theirs had been a marriage of convenience, to tie two families together in a trading company partnership. As luck would have it, both of them were very into women.”

“That must have made the hiring process easier.” He shifted, moving in front of her. “Can you scoot down a little?”

“Sure.” She lifted her hips and leaned back. “Like this?”

“Perfect.” He had no hope of being able to lift her himself. The base of her tail kept her hips off the ground and he ran his fingers along her thighs until they met in the middle. She let out a small moan, then reached between his hands to stroke his stiffening cock.

He explored the thin edges of all three of her labia, moving his fingers inside of her. He could feel that reflexive squeeze, but it was different from the other girls. Her vaginal walls rotated when she clenched, and her outer lips slid across each other like the aperture of a camera lens.

“Anyway, he would bring the maids out and fuck them, almost always on the same bench. I would sometimes stand there for days, just waiting for a closer look.”

“And they never noticed the strange statue that kept moving around?”

“Please. Rich people don’t know how many statues they have.” She slid her thumb over the head of his penis, teasing the hole with the edge of her thumb. “Do you like how that feels? I saw it in a movie.”

“Yeah, but be careful with your thumbnail.” He looked down at the dark talons on her hands. “That’s a sensitive area.”

“But the danger makes it fun, *non?*” She traced the edge of his frenulum with her nail. “I believe there’s a part of me that is far more entertaining than my hands.” She pushed his arms aside and sat forward, her mouth now inches from his cock. “And a lot softer too.”

“You’ll have to show--” he lost his train of thought when she inhaled him completely in one go. Her tongue wrapped around the base of his shaft, providing a smooth, slippery texture for him to slide forward along. The back of her throat slid over his glans and she gurgled, the vibration making his eyes roll up in his head.

“You are soooo good at that,” he told her, stroking her stiff hair. She stroked his balls, using one hand to form a ring around the base while the other hand ran circles across his testicles. He shivered, the pleasurable sensation just on the border of hurting. He thrust into her mouth a few times before she pulled herself free, leaving a string of drool from her mouth to his dick.

“Everything about you tastes so good,” she muttered, then stroked him with both hands before sucking his balls into her mouth. His hips jerked at the shift in sensation and she pumped him quickly with her hands. Abella’s tiny moans vibrated through his scrotum, the sensation again almost unbearable, but very enjoyable.

“You’re... you’re teasing me, aren’t you?”

She made a noise around his balls that could have been, “Uh huh.”

“Mmm. I like that.” He stroked the back of her head, biding his time. The magic was easier to rouse this time, tiny sparks jumping from his fingertips onto her back. The sparks tumbled down her body, struggling to stay attached. Eventually, Abella stopped pumping his cock and switched back, once again inhaling him into the back of your throat.

Gotcha, he thought, focusing the magic on the tip of his cock. He felt an intense spark jump from his cock into Abella’s throat and the sparks on her body all stopped moving.

“Mmph?” she asked, one hand going immediately to her crotch. He tensed up, another spark making the leap into her throat. Her obsidian eyes opened wide and her other hand slammed into the roof. She pulled her mouth off of him, and looked up.

“What... what did you do to me?” She was squinting, her eyes going lazy. She leaned back, sliding two fingers inside of herself. “Oh my god, what did you do?”

To be fair, he had no idea. He had figured the magic would have upped the eroticism, but not to this degree. Her natural lubricant dripped onto the roof and formed a small pool while she fingered herself. It didn’t seem to be hurting her at all.

“Just a trick I picked up.” He winked at her.

A growl formed in her throat and he watched as several black sparks came out of her body.

What the fuck?

She grabbed him around the waist and used one hand to aim his cock into her soaking wet pussy. He slid in, his cock parting her stiff folds. Once he was close to bottoming out inside of her, he felt his magic jump back into his cock.

Abella cried out a string of words in French. His whole body was tensed up and he could see the magic mixing now, the dark and white sparks briefly forming yin-yangs on their skin. It occurred to him now that electricity and stone probably weren't meant to mix, but it was too late. He locked eyes with the gargoyle as he pounded her, his hands on her sturdy shoulders.

She ran one hand up his side, her fingers digging in just a little too hard. Her other hand was stroking the base of her tail, her eyes rolling up in her head. She was whimpering now, her hips spasming beneath him. He found a great rhythm, the angle of penetration just right that he could feel the ridge of his cock rubbing against the upper wall of her vagina. He grunted and pushed into her hard, his cock flexing while it dragged along the ridges of her opening.

The back and forth of his magic created sparks that bounced off the roof and disappeared. Abella's moans were loud now, and she arched her back. The sparks along her skin were crawling down to her wet pussy, squeezing in with his cock.

He remembered the time they had fucked on the cliffs, how she had told him that she could absorb his energy and use it for herself. He paused, wondering if he should stop.

Her eyes narrowed and she let go of her tail, grabbing him tightly. "Don't you fucking stop," she told him, her voice dangerous. She pulled him in and kissed him, her lips smashing his.

Abella's hands were tight on his hips. Mike was no longer thrusting into her --- rather, she was pulling him in and out. He had his hands on her breasts, using them for balance. It would have been an impossible feat for any other woman, but her firm breasts were unyielding. Even with his full weight, his fingers just barely sunk into them.

'C'mon, I want to feel it," she rasped. "I want to feel that hot, human cum deep inside of me."

He moaned, his muscles unable to keep pace with her. Her strength was overwhelming, her fingers tight on him.

The sparks jumped across her skin, but seemed to have no effect. Magical pressure was building up, causing the hairs on his arm to stand on end.

"Fuck me! Fuck me!" Abella cried out again, and her hips trembled. The sparks crawled back along her skin, gathering on his arms and legs. His hands were shaking now, but not because of fatigue. He lifted them free of her, moving them down to her stomach. The air now sizzled with magical energy that didn't have anywhere to go.

His orgasm had built up to the point of no return. Her labia squeezed against him every time he withdrew his cock, gripping him tightly. She was trying to wring him dry and he was fairly certain that she would succeed.

The fiery sensation in his balls suddenly magnified, he was past the point of no return. He let out a cry and his cock tensed up inside of her. Abella grabbed him hard and pulled him as deep into her as he could go.

The remaining sparks jumped onto his body and he felt all of the magic stream into his core, through his legs, and then through the shaft of his dick. Instead of a normal ejaculation, he felt the

magic release itself all at once like a blast of lightning from the head of his dick. He screamed, but not in agony. Abella let out a cry of her own, her open mouth now filled with glowing blue lightning that danced along her tongue and teeth. The sparks leapt from her and back into him and he screamed again, his dick coating her insides with cum and electricity.

His throat was raw when a third blast came, and he swore he heard a thunderous rumble come from inside of Abella's belly. One of her hands slid free of his hip and slammed into the roof, gouging out a chunk of masonry. Her tail whipped free of his hand and slammed into a nearby wall, causing the siding to split and pop free. He lost control of his arms, his hands contracting into tight fists and his entire body became rigid.

The world went black, his mind barely conscious. He was only aware of the thick, stony body beneath him, of the thick legs around him. Time distorted, slowing to a crawl. Something inside of him shifted, his magic flowing out and rebounding violently and his heartbeat pounded in his ears.

Relax, lover. Naia's voice calmed him. In the darkness, he could feel her nearby, her cool fingers caressing his skin. With a snap, the world resumed and he fell forward, catching himself just in time before smashing his face against Abella's breasts.

"Mmm." Abella moaned as he slid himself free of her. Her labia tightened, squeezing every last drop of cum from his cock. Once he was out, he watched her labia tighten up, holding his essence deep inside of her. She helped him roll over and lay on her belly, his eyes on the sky.

Mike gasped for air, laying his head against her belly. Her wing curled around him protectively, shielding his eyes from the sun above. He looked at his hand, clenching it painfully. He felt like he had clung to a rope too long, his knuckles protesting when he flexed them repeatedly. The sudden stiffness in his joints dissipated, but his fatigue did not. He ran a hand through his hair, marveling at the amount of sweat.

Relaxing, he let Abella run her hand across his chest. He grabbed her other hand, giving it a firm squeeze. Several minutes went by, the burning in his lungs suddenly fading. He wondered if part of his sudden exhaustion was related to the torrent of magic he had unleashed. Was his magic dangerous? It had never occurred to him during his self exploration that maybe it was something he shouldn't be experimenting with.

Then again, nothing bad had happened so far.

"Sometimes I wish I was soft like you." Her voice broke the silence as she caressed his face, letting her fingers trail down along to his collarbone. "Soft and supple. Be able to ride in an elevator, or go on a carousel. To wear pretty dresses and makeup, to try on high heels or get hit on by strangers. By nature, my skin is strong, but I'm not sure that my heart is ready for the centuries of loneliness ahead."

"Why would you be alone?"

She smiled, but he could see the sadness in her eyes. "There have been many Caretakers, but none of them have taken an interest in me quite like you have. One day, you will die as all humans do. And when you do, you will leave a hole that likely won't be filled."

"Oh." He had hardly ever dwelled on what life would be like for the others after he was gone. Like most people, contemplating how the world would go on after his own death wasn't high on his list of priorities. What would happen to the house without an heir? For that matter, how often did a

resident of the house pass away? Some of them were immortal, but the others did have limited lifespans.

He thought once more of Emily. Was that why she had pursued godhood? To become immortal and care for the others? Was that why she didn't designate an heir, because she foolishly assumed that she would somehow live forever?

He rubbed his hand along the smooth stone of Abella's forehead. "I can't promise I'll be around forever," he told her. "But I will do my best to be around for as long as possible and to make sure my successor treats you well."

She chuckled. "Well, that remains to be seen. So far, though, you've already taken pretty good care of me." She opened her legs and teased at her opening, withdrawing a huge glob of sperm. "I used to fantasize that I would marry a human and we would have little half-breed babies. Cute little babies with small wings and huge smiles. My husband would come home from work and we would have a nice meal and read them stories before bed. Then he and I would cuddle in front of the fire and look forward to the days ahead."

"Can... can humans and gargoyles..." a large lump had formed in his throat.

"Oh, absolutely not!" She laughed and punched him playfully in the bicep. His whole arm went numb. "Even if we could procreate, you wouldn't survive the process."

"I don't understand. I'm fairly certain we've gone through the process."

"Only part of it. A gargoyle's anatomy is different. We have a mating ritual that involves flying high into the sky and then flying down toward the earth while we copulate. The act of diving causes a special stone in our body to shift and allow sperm into the womb, and then a gargoyle will fertilize and lay an egg."

"You lay eggs?"

She shrugged. "I could, but it takes a lot of energy. By nature, gargoyles only lay eggs when they can fertilize one."

"That sounds convenient."

She nodded. "It's become a bit harder since humans invented radar and air travel. When I say that we have to fly high, it's as high as our wings can carry us, far higher than any creature can go. The main reason we breathe is to take in energy, so technically we could just hang out up there if we didn't get tired. Have you ever seen a shooting star?"

"A few, when I was a kid."

She smiled. "Well, it's possible you wished on a pair of gargoyles. Our bodies can withstand the heat, that's for certain."

"You shouldn't be flying high enough to light up on re-entry though."

A weird look crossed her face. "What? Oh, no, the fire part. That's something else entirely."

Mike wanted to ask, but Abella stood up, grabbing another brick.

“Bet you a kiss I can hit his replacement from here.” She winked and chucked the brick. He sat up just quick enough to see a jogger collapse into a pile of sand. Clearly, Sebastien had thought the coast was clear and gotten closer.

“Guess I owe you a kiss. I wonder how long it takes him to make one of those?”

Abella laughed. “Longer than it takes to throw a brick.” She helped him stand up. “C’mon, you need to get ready. I’m dying to know what you find in that wardrobe, and you can give me that kiss after you come back.”

He smiled. “You can count on it.”

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“Okay, I guess I’m ready.” He looked in the mirror, then lifted up his shirt. The naga-skin tunic clung to him like spandex, the patterns shifting ever so slightly. He let go of the fabric and checked the small leather pouch on his right hip. Tink had made it for him, and he opened it up to reveal the vials that Zel had given him several days ago. The pouch was far safer than his pocket for keeping such valuable items, and he snapped it shut.

With the dagger clipped safely on his left hip, he realized that he looked less like a computer nerd and more like a rogue or a warrior, ready to leap into battle. He brushed aside his hair, marveling at how thick it felt. Even stranger, it didn’t lie flat but curled up in places making it look like someone had styled it for him.

Naia whistled appreciatively. “Looking good, lover.”

“Thanks.” He turned around and smiled. “Guess we just need to wait for the others. I’ll run out and reset the dial.”

“I’ll be waiting.” She vanished with a splash.

He didn’t hurry, instead pausing at the bottom of the stairs to watch Tink attach a small garage to Jenny’s new dollhouse. He stopped to inspect her work and with a smile rustled her hair before going outside. Halfway to the dial, he saw a large brick arc through the air and splatter the latest iteration of Sebastien standing out on the street. He looked over his shoulder and gave the gargoyle a thumbs up and a grin, then turned around to give the dial a twist.

“Twenty four hours,” he whispered to himself, then set the timer on his phone. Had Emily ever had to deal with a constant siege like he did? His enemy had been at the gates since moving in, and he feared they would remain until he could get rid of them. But how could he rid himself of a problem when he couldn’t even leave the safety of his own house?

“Focus,” he told himself. One problem at a time. He would go back in the house, open the wardrobe, and maybe find some answers that would help him deal with the nasty people who kept him under twenty-four hour surveillance. Or even find a way to use that gem. If he desired for them to go away, would the emerald give him the power to do it?

Stepping onto the porch, he cast a glance at the swing on the front porch. Still empty. Frowning, he swore to himself he would get to the bottom of her absence when he returned.

When he walked through the front door, Zel was waiting for him. She wore a backpack that he hadn’t seen before, but he recognized it as being made from the same fabric as her saddlebags.

"I'm ready." She smiled and gave him a mock salute, then grabbed his hand and practically ran up the stairs with him. When they reached the top, he saw Ratu inspecting the wardrobe, her hands hovering over the surface as if warming them over a fire.

"This thing has power," she said once their eyes met. "Go get the key and let's see what it does."

"On it." He walked into his bathroom and Naia was waiting for him, the key in her fingers. This time when he grabbed it, the compulsion was much weaker. Perhaps the wardrobe knew he was coming? It wouldn't be the first piece of furniture in his house to have thoughts and feelings.

"Come back to me," she told him, giving him a kiss.

"Always do." He walked back into the hall, the key pulsing with warmth in his hand. Once he got within a few feet of the wardrobe, the keyhole lit up from within, casting a wide beam of yellow light across the hallway.

"Wow!" Zel knelt down. "Do you think it's safe to look inside?"

"Only with your bad eye." Ratu winked at Mike, and he held back a laugh.

"Okay, let's see what skeletons we find in here." He stuck the key in the lock and the wardrobe shook. "I'm hoping not actual skeletons."

"Agreed," both women said. He turned the key and pulled the door open. The interior was dark and full of coats. He looked at the others and pulled one of the coats off the rack. It was a navy blue peacoat. "This isn't what I was expecting."

"Indeed." Zel took the coat from him and put it on. "Hey, it fits."

Ratu, however, was frowning at the wardrobe. She stuck her hand up and moved it toward the hanging clothes. "There's a breeze here. It's cold."

"Really?" Mike pushed the coats aside to reveal the back wall of the wardrobe. "Is there a crack or something?" He reached back to touch the wall, only to have his fingers slide through it as if it wasn't there. A chill sensation traveled up his fingers and he yanked his arm back. "Whoa."

"Fascinating." Ratu pulled a coat off of the rack and balled it up. She threw it at the back wall where it bounced off harmlessly. "It isn't an illusion, that's for sure. It has all the earmarks of an actual portal."

"So where does it go?" he asked.

"Let's find out!" Zel shoved passed him and stuck out her hands. She vanished through the wall and disappeared.

"Zel? Can you see anything?" Several seconds went by with no response. "Shit. In for a penny, in for a pound." He stepped into the wardrobe and walked forward.

The effect was instantaneous. Upon passing through the back wall, he was instantly somewhere else, somewhere much colder. He was in the woods and large snow drifts had formed around the copse of trees he had just emerged from. Shivering, he saw Zel's hoofprints in the snow.

"Zel?" The prints disappeared around some trees. He turned around to see Ratu emerge from the shadows, her kimono opening wide to reveal her long, slender snakeskin legs.

“Too cold,” she muttered, snapping her fingers. The flying dragon on her kimono blazed with light and the fabric expanded, transforming into a large, puffy coat with a fur hood. Thick mittens were attached to the sleeves by a string, and the coat parted revealing a thick set of fur lined boots.

“You look warm.” He hugged himself, the cold air sapping away his body heat.

“Ever since our incident beneath the lake, I’ve decided to be more prepared from now on.” She squinted her eyes against the white of the snow. “I didn’t think to bring sunglasses though.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty bright.” He pointed at the hoofprints. “She wandered off?”

“No, she ran off. You can tell by the spacing of the prints.” Ratu walked next to him and slid something into his hand. “I thought this might come in handy.”

He held the object up. It was the sun stone. He had forgotten all about it. Cecilia had brought it to him when they had stayed overnight in the greenhouse. It was a magic stone that could generate heat, but it required a kickstart. Smiling at Ratu with relief, he held it to his lips and blew warm air on it. Heat spread through the stone and it began giving off its own warmth. “Did you take this from the Vault?”

“I did. While Tink was reorganizing, I offered to hold on to a few of the less dangerous objects.”

“This is what triggered the eruption at Pompeii. You know that, right?”

“Don’t throw it in a fire then.” She walked ahead of him. “Let’s find our friend, shall we?”

They followed the tracks for a couple hundred feet. He was tempted to call for the centaur, but through the trees, it appeared they were on a large mountain. Would shouting cause an avalanche? And where exactly were they? He could see no other mountains in the distance, only blue skies.

Ratu didn’t seem concerned in the slightest. She was busy examining a nearby tree.

“It would seem to be some sort of evergreen,” she told him, touching the needles. A clump of snow fell loose at her feet. “We’re at altitude, apparently.”

“That’s... great?” He turned his attention back to the hoofprints. They meandered down a steep hill and out onto a bluff. Down below, he saw Zel standing near the edge, her attention on the landscape below. His feet crunched in the snow as he approached, filling his shoes with ice. The sun stone was helping keep him warm, but definitely not dry.

“Zel?” When he spoke her name, she flinched. He could see a large valley beneath with a large river running through it. A large herd of horses appeared to be running in the distance.

The snow here was deeper than his ankles, and he lifted his feet high to keep walking forward. Zel’s footprints were too far apart for him to walk in, and snow was rapidly accumulating inside of his shoes.

“We need to go back.” Zel turned to face him. “Right now. We can’t be here.”

“Why not?” He stood next to her on the bluff. Instead of a sheer drop off, they were looking down a steep, snow covered slope. Huge drifts of snow had gobbled up the landscape, and other than a few animal tracks, it was pristine.

“I suspected as soon as I stepped through. I’ll tell you when we get ba--” She froze, her eyes over his shoulder.

He turned around and saw that she was staring at a giant tower in the distance. It overlooked the valley and seemed to be made of large, interlocking stones that had been carved directly into the stone face of the mountain.

“Holy shit, that thing is huge!” He heard footsteps and turned around, expecting to see Ratu.

A woman had wandered out of the trees nearby, her hand clutching a walking staff. Her dress was made of a pale fabric decorated with thick red and white furs. Her white hair was thick and framed her narrow face. She drew back her hood, revealing that she wore a plain white eyepatch over her right eye. Her left eye was red like wine. At first he thought she was wearing earmuffs, but when they unfolded into above her head, he realized that they were large, furry ears.

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice trembling. It was soft, but firm. “Where are you from?”

Zel’s fingers found his and she squeezed him tightly.

“My name is Mike. I came here through a magical wardrobe.” He smiled and gave her a friendly wave. “I’m the new Caretaker, if you know what that is.”

She held her hand out, palm up, and then clenched her fingers. Her face twisted into a snarl and the nails of her fingers grew into daggers. The snow on the ground between them lifted into the air, collating into a gigantic spear made of ice.

“Not anymore.” She pointed a sharp finger at him and the icicle rocketed forward and hit him square in the chest. Fire blossomed through his rib cage and he felt the breath knocked from his body. The impact blew him off his feet and Zel’s fingers clamped down on his as they both tumbled over the edge of the bluff.

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“*Ta ma de.*” She closed her outstretched hand and ran toward the ledge. The icicle should have penetrated the human, maybe even pierced him through, but he had taken the brunt of it and simply fallen away from her, dragging his escort with him. She could smell blood in the air and saw a small amount of it on the fresh snow.

It was nowhere near enough. Looking over the ledge, she saw that the man and woman had triggered a small avalanche, and were now sliding down the mountain and far away from her.

“Daisy.” She waited a couple of seconds for the fairy to appear before her. “Find them and report back. I’ll be up here.”

The fairy saluted and shot down the mountain, her light disappearing in the distance.

A blast of cold air ruffled her furs and she pulled her cloak in tighter. It was likely that she had killed him, but she needed to be sure. Once she knew he was dead, it was time to resume her rightful place.

It was time to become the new Caretaker.

Her ears lifted, the sound of soft steps in the snow alerting her to another presence. Turning, she saw a woman in a thick coat emerge from the trees. She could feel a surge of strength from this woman, an instant connection through magic much like her own. Her lips parted and she bared her teeth, a low growl emanating from the back of her throat.

“Steady sister, I would talk first.” The woman’s skin flashed through a series of snake skin patterns. “You may call me Ratu. I am a naga.”

“I can smell you from here.” She sniffed the air, scowling at the scent of dirt and snake oil. Worst of all, she could smell the scent of that man on the newcomer. “You may call me Yuki. As a fellow shapeshifter, I know you know what I am.”

“A kitsune. Interesting.” Ratu crossed her arms. “I have a question for you, my tricky little fox. I was wondering if you had seen a man come wandering through here.”

“I did, but he got away.” Yuki pointed down the hill. “And when I find him, I plan on killing him.”

“May I ask why?” Ratu turned her attention to a tree, feigning interest. “I’m just wondering why the extreme hostility.”

“Are you with him?”

She shrugged. “In a way. I guess you could say I have a vested interest in seeing him succeed.”

Yuki frowned. “Seeing him succeed at what, exactly?”

Ratu smiled. “Protecting the others. That’s all he wants to do.”

“That’s how it always starts.” Yuki let her magic expand, her senses blending with the ice and snow. She could feel it now, feel the naga’s magic swirling around her like a tiny storm. “The last Caretaker wanted to protect the others so badly that she ended up turning on them. I shouldn’t have to tell you that humans are broken, unable to resist the call of power. They flock to it like bees to honey. Better to crush them when they are weak before they live to betray you.”

“This one might surprise you.” The naga casually summoned a ball of fire in one hand then tossed it to the other. The fireball grew in size until it was two feet across, spinning rapidly. “I’m guessing that this isn’t open to debate.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve eaten snake.” Yuki clenched her fist and hooked her fingers upward. Several large spikes of ice lifted from the snow, all pointed at Ratu. She pointed the end of her staff at the naga. “And I imagine you won’t last long in the cold.”

Ratu’s eyes narrowed dangerously, the swirling ball of fire casting flames among the trees. They ignited, the smoke swirling around her like a cloak of shadows.

“Silly fox.” She bared her fangs, her face rippling as she changed shape. “The furrrier they are, the quicker they burn.”

Yuki sent forth the spears of ice, her howls echoing off the mountain as the fireball descended on her and turned the world to mist.