

Just Breathe

The moment Captain Francois fired on Mike Radley, Ingrid's adrenaline surged and time crawled to a halt. She could see the pain and shock written across Mike's face as the impact of the musketball caused him to spin and lose his balance, tumbling backward over the crouched mermaid behind him. Leilani tried to stop him from going over, but it was too late. Momentum pulled them both over the cliff's edge and the darkness took them.

Ratu let out a primal scream, her skin rupturing to reveal scales beneath. Fire spiraled along her body as she raised clawed hands upward and summoned bursts of molten rock from the ground at Francois' feet. The Captain's smug look was replaced with surprise as he danced out of the way, suddenly very nimble compared to the man who had struggled to trudge up the mountain earlier that day. A golden sphere of light formed around him as he holstered his gun and pulled out a gem-encrusted buckler, keeping his sword raised.

"It'll take—" was all he managed to say before lightning split the sky.

Now blind and deaf, Ingrid stumbled around the rocks, crying out in frustration. A warm hand took her by the wrist and pulled her forward. Not knowing whether she was about to be thrown to her death or pulled to safety, she decided to take a chance and followed.

By the time her eyes had cleared, she realized they were running back into the forest. The trees had been blasted apart by the lightning into massive splinters that still glowed along the edges with heat, leaving them a path to follow. Ratu led Ingrid behind Quetzalli who was walking forward, a massive streamer of electricity connecting her to the sky as lightning spiraled out from her body. Skeletons and night marchers alike fled from her fury, disappearing into the trees. The ringing sound in Ingrid's ears abated, allowing Ratu's voice to finally penetrate.

"If there's anything left of him, leave him to me," she declared. Balls of fire now hovered around them like tiny moons, incinerating anyone who came close.

"You'll have to fight me for it," Quetzalli declared, her voice now far deeper than Ingrid had ever heard it. "I'll tear him apart."

Ingrid held up her wand, keeping it pointed at the trees in case something came out. She only used it on one occasion, when a night marcher tackled a

skeleton into their path. With a burst of light, she dispersed the night marcher, then destroyed the skeleton's skull. The bones rattled on the ground for several moments, then finally went still. The action felt small compared to the sheer magic pouring off the women nearby, but she needed to contribute somehow.

"Wait." Ratu held up a hand for them to stop, then moved to the nearest tree. She held one of her fireballs nearby and scowled at a bloody handprint. "I think this is his."

Quetzalli swore in an unknown language, then blasted a nearby tree in frustration. A powerful electrical field built up in the area, and Ingrid crouched down and touched her knees together, afraid she might be struck next.

"I can follow him," Ratu said as the field abated. "But we need to be quick. He has a head start on us."

Ingrid rose and looked back over her shoulder. As far as she could tell, they were only a hundred feet from the cliff. Quetzalli had summoned a blast of lightning that had launched Captain Francois at least this distance. She thought back to what Mike had said about the ultimate fate of the people waiting on his front lawn and shivered.

"I should...probably go," she said, her hands shaking as the adrenaline left her.

"We won't make you come with us," Ratu told her, then turned serpentine eyes on the forest. "But this place is crawling with dead and spirit alike. I would prefer you at least remain with us until you have a better chance of survival."

"I...okay." Seeing the wisdom in the decision, she limped behind the naga as they moved into the trees. Branches scratched at her exposed arms and legs, the sounds of the forest occasionally ruptured by a human scream. Wherever her team was, they were being slaughtered. The same fate likely awaited her if she went off on her own.

In all her time with the Order, she had never been in the middle of such chaos. There had been a few large-scale operations where things had gotten messy, but never to the extent that she had been separated from her team. As for Wallace, the man had been a constant presence, but now he was simply gone. When the fight had first broken out, he had saved her by leading a trio of night marchers away from the tent they shared. Ingrid had tried to follow, but between her twisted ankle and the sheer scope of how badly things had gotten, Wallace

had vanished into the darkness with the spirits hot on his trail. Left behind to fend for herself, she had been surprised when Mike Radley of all people had come to her rescue.

“Hold.” Ratu raised her hand and brought the group to a stop. She knelt down and pressed her palm into the soil. “Our prey is no longer running.”

“How do you know?” asked Ingrid.

“His vibrations have stopped. Either he is holding his ground, or has taken to the trees. Wait a second.” She scrunched up her face. “There are others, all converging on his spot. We must use caution.”

“It is they who should be wary of us.” Quetzalli’s hair billowed out behind her and the air crackled with energy. Up above, thunder boomed and the forest shook.

“What are you?” whispered Ingrid, then flinched when Quetzalli turned to face her with glowing eyes.

“Extremely pissed off.” Quetzalli raised a hand to her forehead and fiddled with something Ingrid couldn’t see. A silver band appeared between her fingers, and she slid it away from her head to reveal a magnificent silver horn. At the tip of the horn, streamers of electricity danced along the twisted surface.

“You think that’s wise?” asked Ratu.

“I don’t want to break it when I vaporize the Captain,” Quetzalli replied, shoving the ring in a pocket. “Try not to breathe in after I do it. You might inhale what’s left of him.”

“Holy shit,” Ingrid muttered under her breath.

“Indeed,” Ratu added.

They continued forward at a slower pace, pausing occasionally to listen to the forest. The night marchers appeared rarely now, but didn’t pay the trio any attention. Instead, they continued their hunt for the Captain. On occasion, a battle would erupt nearby between the spirits and the skeletons, but there was no sign of the living.

The thick canopy of the forest opened to reveal the masts of a ship sitting in a watershed that was filled by a ten foot tall waterfall nearly fifty feet away. Night marchers lurked along the edge of the water, and skeletal remains had been

scattered on the shore. On the deck of the ship, skeletons stood motionless, their eyeless sockets facing the marchers.

Quetzalli swore in a language Ingrid wasn't familiar with, and thunder rumbled overhead. "I can't hit him on that boat," she said, then crouched down by a tree.

"Hmm." Ratu joined her, then waved for Ingrid to come closer. The mage limped up and knelt between them. "Our prey has summoned his ship in the middle of the forest. The marchers seem very upset by his presence."

"They hate him," Quetzalli added, her eyes sparkling.

"How do you know that?" asked Ingrid.

Quetzalli shrugged. "I am uncertain, but I know this like I know my own heart."

Ratu cleared her throat. "Academically speaking, there is ample evidence to suggest a fairly large connection between the spiritual realm and the electromagnetic spectrum. It isn't a stretch to believe this may connect you with them." She summoned a ball of fire in her hands and cast it into the woods behind them. "Let's try a test of our own."

Puzzled as to why the naga had done that, Ingrid turned her attention back toward the ship just as Ratu's fireball emerged from a different part of the woods and smashed into the side of the ship. Before anything could burn, the water swirled up like a massive tongue and licked the flames away. The skeletons on guard lifted a variety of ranged weapons from spears to guns, and opened fire on where the fireball had come from.

All three of them crouched behind the trees and waited for the gunfire to cease. Ratu looked at Quetzalli first, then Ingrid.

"I did not expect guns," she said with a frown. "Some sort of magical shield, but modern weaponry?"

Ingrid almost laughed. "Yeah, well, we should have. The man has an actual skeleton crew. Why not give them guns? They wouldn't be effective on the spirits, but they work perfectly fine on the living."

There was a long moment of silence and Ingrid realized what she had just said. Quetzalli looked like she was going to burst into tears.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, remembering that Mike had been shot in front of them.

“We can’t dwell on that now, we have to—damn.” Ratu was looking at the ship. “I think we missed our opportunity.”

Ingrid moved to see what was happening. The ship’s sails had unfurled, allowing the craft to move toward a collection of rocks where the water poured over the edge. The hull seemed to melt around the massive stones that formed the retention wall and then the ship dropped far enough that only the top of the mast was visible.

Around them, the forest whispered in hushed voices as the night marchers moved to keep up.

“Is he really going to sail that thing out to sea that way?” Ingrid looked at Ratu.

“It changes shape. As long as the river is wider than a canoe, then why not?” The naga let out a frustrated sigh.

“Shh.” Quetzalli held a finger to her lips and cocked her head. “We need to get away from here.”

“Why?” demanded Ingrid.

“The spirits are frustrated they can’t reach him,” the silver-haired woman explained as she stood. As if on cue, somebody screamed in the distance. “So they turn their hunt towards those they can get.”

“So you aren’t going to chase him?” Ingrid asked.

“No.” Ratu looked at Francois’ ship, then up at the sky. “Without knowing more about his ship, we are just putting ourselves in danger. We should seek shelter from the spirits until we can plot our next move.”

“Maybe we should go after Mike, then?” The dazzling lights around Quetzalli’s horn faded from sight. “I was hoping we could take Francois down quickly, but this became complicated.”

Ratu nodded. “I am sure he requires our assistance. It will take us time to find him.”

If he survived, Igrid added mentally. She knew better than to voice the thought out loud. Nothing short of a miracle would have saved the man. Not only were they well over a hundred feet up over the valley, but the rocks and trees below ensured that the landing would be anything but gentle.

“Let’s stop by the camp first and get our supplies. We will have need of them.” Ratu looked at Ingrid. “We will look for your people as well along the way.”

“I...appreciate that.” Taken aback, Ingrid followed.

The sky rumbled, but instead of lightning, it was just rain. The women moved back to the camp, but it was devoid of life. Bones were everywhere, revealing that the skeletons had already come through and suffered losses. Ratu kept watch while Quetzalli went through their gear and repacked it, combining the important contents of Mike’s bag with their own. Ingrid was allowed to collect her own belongings, but it was clear someone had already gone through them and taken anything magical. Silently hoping that it was Wallace, she packed up some extra food and the group headed for the cliff.

Along the way, they were attacked twice by the night marchers, but Ratu and Ingrid were able to easily shake them off with their magic. Ingrid’s abilities were limited to the power of the wands she carried, but the naga’s supply of magic seemed inexhaustible. If Ratu had been awake when the attack first began, maybe the Order would have mounted a better defense and held the line. Ingrid’s ankle throbbed in agony, which broke her trail of thought. She forced herself forward through the pain to keep up with Ratu and Quetzalli.

Once at their destination, Ingrid and Quetzalli kept watch while Ratu knelt at the edge of the cliff and sent a glowing ball of light down the side. Several minutes passed, and the drumbeats of the marchers grew louder as they closed in on their location.

“They’re getting closer,” Quetzalli noted, her eyes narrowed at the winding path they had taken to climb the cliff.

Ingrid nodded, her heart pounding in rhythm with the drums. The occasional human screams had come to a halt, meaning that her team had escaped or been killed. She was too numb to process the latter thought, and focused her energy on watching the forest.

“He’s not down there,” Ratu said from the side, standing up as she tucked the glowing light inside her robes. For just a moment, Ingrid thought it looked like an insect. “Or rather, his body isn’t.”

“Leilani?” asked Ingrid.

“She is missing as well. Whatever happened, at least one of them survived to carry the other away.” Ratu let out a deep breath and put a hand to her chest. “But it is too dangerous to investigate further. For now, we can only hope.”

Shadows flitted around the cliffs as night marchers appeared. Quetzalli sent out several bursts of lightning from her fingers, which scattered the hunters.

“More of them are coming,” she announced, creating a sphere of lightning between her hands and then casting it down the mountain. As the glowing sphere shot down between the trees, the night marchers were briefly illuminated, revealing dozens of them.

“This way.” Ratu led them further up the mountain, then looked over the side. “It doesn’t seem like it, but there is a way down from here.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Ingrid replied, the glow from her wand faltering. She had used most of its magic in the initial attack, and the other wand would have to recharge before she could use it.

The naga led them onto a sharp outcropping as the night marchers emerged at the peak. More spirits appeared in the forest, blocking off their escape. Ratu crouched near the edge and tapped the stone beneath their feet. A crack appeared, and for a moment, Ingrid thought they would all slide down the mountain atop the massive slab. Instead, the rock beneath them shifted slightly to reveal an extremely narrow path below.

“I’ll go first,” Ratu said as she slid into the crevasse. Ingrid went next, tucking her wand away and looking back long enough to see Quetzalli face the spirits defiantly. Then she was shrouded in darkness for several seconds as she slid along her stomach and down onto the ridge below the cliffs. They were hidden by foliage that dangled down from above, and the only source of illumination was the starry sky seen through gaps in the clouds.

“Wait here,” Ratu whispered, guiding Ingrid’s hand to a pair of roots. The naga shifted past her, and then Quetzalli joined them. When Ingrid bumped into the silver-haired woman, she received a nasty shock and almost screamed.

“Sorry,” Quetzalli whispered. Up above, the rock shifted again and then Ratu moved past them.

“I’ve sealed the exit,” Ratu told them quietly. “We should be able to lose them if we’re careful. This spot is not easily reached from above.”

“Where are we going?” asked Ingrid, suddenly aware of how wet her hands were.

“There’s a refuge we can take down below,” Ratu replied. “The mountain told me about it.”

“Of course it did,” Ingrid replied. “She talks to ghosts, you talk to rocks. I’m just here as your token human.”

“You don’t have to come,” Ratu reminded her as she moved down the path.

“Of course I’m coming,” Ingrid said, her teeth gritted in frustration. “I’m relying very heavily on sarcasm to maintain my sanity.”

Ratu looked back at her and nodded. “As long as you keep your sarcasm quiet, this is acceptable.”

The narrow path was really just a rocky ledge no more than two feet wide in places that descended at an angle into the valley below. The heavy rain made the surface slick in places, but Ratu made sure to summon handholds for them to use. Up above, the drumbeats of the night marchers faded, but Ingrid knew better. Already, she could see torchlight twinkling in the valley below. It was an ancestral army, likely the biggest one in recorded history. The spirits of the island had gone to war, and she had been caught in the middle.

A chill had settled in the air, causing Ingrid to shiver. Ratu’s movements had slowed dramatically, likely a result of the temperature, but Quetzalli didn’t seem bothered by it. They were about twenty feet above the forest canopy when the naga let out a sigh of relief and vanished.

“Wait, what?” Ingrid fumbled around for the next handhold when her wrist was grabbed. She tried to pull away at first, but then allowed herself to be guided into a gap in the stone. In the dark, she waited patiently as Ratu repeated the process with Quetzalli.

“Where are we?” she asked once they were inside the cave.

“An old lava vent,” Ratu said. “Let’s go a bit deeper, and then we can light a fire. I’m freezing.”

The naga guided them into the darkness, sending her magic ahead in the form of several flaming orbs which illuminated the back wall of the cave. It was clear that the lava vent had long ago caved in, but this small tunnel still remained down below. A thin stream of water ran down the middle and disappeared through cracks in the floor.

The ceiling glistened with moisture as the fiery orbs coalesced into a small ball of fire in the middle of the room. Nearby, Ratu huddled over it, her skin so pale it was ghastly.

“If I lose consciousness, the fire goes out and we’ll freeze,” she explained as she shrugged out of her wet clothes. “You may want to find something we can burn in case I fall asleep.”

Nodding her understanding, Ingrid rummaged through her bag for a couple of firestarters, then grabbed a small hatchet and moved along the edge of the cave. Roots dangled from above, which she cut free and set near Ratu’s fire to dry. Quetzalli had stripped down naked as well, and was busy clearing a spot for the blankets they had taken from their campsite.

Once Ingrid had gathered sufficient material for burning, she moved next to the others and knelt by the fire, holding her hands out to gather its warmth. Nearby, Ratu and Quetzalli’s clothes were drying on a rock. Seeing the wisdom in this decision, she removed her clothing as well, but immediately changed into something dry from her bag.

“So what’s the plan?” she asked, keeping her voice low.

“We wait until morning.” Ratu yawned. “Then we begin our search for Mike anew. The night marchers should be gone by then, but we should plan for their return tomorrow night. Until we learn what has lured them out, we must assume it is related to our presence here.”

“And you have a way to find Mike?”

Ratu exchanged an odd look with Quetzalli, then nodded. “I suppose there’s no reason to keep this a secret anymore.”

"I agree." Quetzalli clapped her hands twice and a pair of lights emerged from beneath the blankets. One was green and the other blue. The lights flew over and landed on Quetzalli's leg, then transformed into a pair of insects.

No, that wasn't quite correct. On further inspection, they were women with insect-like features. Leaning in for a closer look, Ingrid realized she was staring at a couple of fairies.

"You have got to be kidding me," she muttered. "How are you going to get fairies to help out? They're notoriously unrelia—ow!" The blue fairy had picked up a small rock and thrown it, hitting Ingrid just below the eye.

"Mike has one with him," Ratu explained as she snatched up the blue fairy. "And they are quite good at finding each other if they *ever want to be fed again.*"

The green fairy let out a nervous laugh as her sister squeezed out from between Ratu's fingers and nodded her assent. Both fairies moved closer to the flames, and Ratu tossed some of the dried roots in, which started burning after a couple of minutes. The naga yawned and slumped in place, her eyes narrowing to slits as sleep came for her.

"I can keep watch," Ingrid volunteered. "I'm not tired."

"Good," replied Ratu, her words slurring. Quetzalli didn't respond. Instead, she wrapped herself up in the nearest blanket and curled into a ball.

A little surprised at the willingness of the others to trust her, Ingrid moved toward the opening of the vent, which was lit dimly from the fire. Moving on her hands and knees, she settled into a comfortable position with a view of the valley, or what she could see of it. There were dozens of flickering lights now, maybe even hundreds. The night marchers were certainly being thorough.

Leaning her head against the cold, damp stone of the earth, she allowed herself to process the events of the day. Was Wallace okay? Had anybody else survived? Why had Francois shot Mike? Why were the marchers out in such force?

Staring out into the darkness, wand held casually in her palm, it was easy for her mind to drift back to another cave on a different island. She was eleven, and her family had taken a vacation to Greece.

"Dad?" Ingrid lowered her disposable camera away from the plane's window. "Are we going to land on any of the islands?"

Her father laughed and rubbed her head. "Most of the islands here don't have airstrips, pumpkin. But this is a fun way to see them all, right?"

"Uh huh." Ingrid took a picture of her father, then cranked the wheel on her camera. "Why are they called the Cyclades?"

"Because they form a circle." Her mother sat in the row across from them, her face pressed against the glass. She turned to look at Ingrid, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "In Greek mythology, they used to be nymphs."

"What's a nymph?"

"A water spirit. They angered the god Poseidon, who turned them into islands." Her mom smiled. "I guess it was nice of them to make a neat little circle."

"Dad, who is Poseidon."

"God of the sea," he replied.

"And he's real?"

"Ugh, no." This came from the seat in front of her. Her older brother was ignoring the scenery out his window, focusing entirely on the handheld gaming system in his hands. "Poseidon isn't real. He's just like Santa."

"If he's not real, then how did these islands get here, dummy?" Ingrid stuck her tongue out at Ricky.

"Kids, enough." Her father patted her knee. "It doesn't matter how the islands got here, only that we get a chance to enjoy them for their beauty. The world is full of magic for anybody willing to see it."

"Huh." Ingrid raised her camera to take another picture but noticed a large shadow had appeared over the wing. "That's a really big bird."

Her father looked past her out the window. "That shouldn't be—"

She never heard his next words as a screeching noise filled the cabin of the Twin Otter airplane, followed by a loud pop like opening a shaken can of soda. Winged creatures latched onto the plane, things that were all scales and fangs as they started stripping chunks off the fuselage. The plane tilted dangerously to one side and a scream came from the cockpit as it was filled with fire that streaked down the aisle and scorched Ingrid's parents. Her father wrapped his arms around her, protecting her from the worst of the flames.

Ingrid shifted against the cold stone of the cave, her eyes tracking the torches in the valley below. Even she shied away from the vivid memory of her own father burning alive as he used his body to shield her. The cold damp of the cave called to her, and she slipped into her memories once again.

The plane would have crashed nose down if not for the drakes frantically clawing at it, attempting to carry it back to the nest. Everyone screamed when it skipped across the ocean surface before slamming into the sand, and Ingrid found herself hanging upside down, her hands dangling.

Her mother moaned in the seat up ahead. Her father had gone still, the light in his kind eyes burned away by the anguished expression on his dead face.

The drakes landed nearby, leaving clawed prints in the sand as they peered in the aircraft's broken windows. A smaller one shoved its face through Ingrid's window, causing her to scream in panic. This immediately mobilized the drakes, which flooded through the busted cockpit and began dragging off bodies. Ingrid undid her seatbelt and watched in horror as both her mother and brother were dragged out of their seats.

The only reason she was able to escape was her small size. Crawling on her belly, she was able to squirm past spilled luggage and another passenger who had managed to fall free of their seat. Toward the tail of the plane, the hull had split, allowing her to squeeze free before the monstrous lizards could reach her. The shrieks of terror from the cabin were rapidly replaced by the sounds of happy drakes tearing apart their meals.

As she ran, she was knocked down from behind by the claws of a drake that had been circling overhead. Her hand chanced upon a ragged piece of wreckage, slicing open her own palm as she grabbed it. Picking it up, she swung it at the beast behind her. Though she didn't hurt the creature, the attack startled it enough that she was able to run another thirty feet or so to a nearby cluster of rocks on the edge of the beach. The opening was just big enough for her and her newfound weapon to squeeze through. The drake that had chased her on foot squawked in indignation as it shoved its head through the opening and missed its meal by less than a foot.

It was there that she maintained vigil for the next four days. She watched in silence as the drakes carried off the remains of her family, shivering when the tide came in and covered her ankles. To stay alive, she licked moisture from the walls and slashed at the drakes whenever they shoved their heads into her sanctuary.

She got lucky a couple of times and managed to slash them in the eyes, which discouraged them from further activity. It was there that she had learned to hate the magical world, fueled by her desire to survive. She was little more than prey, watching silently from inside her cave with grim determination.

That sense of hunt or be hunted had never really left her. Perched up in her hiding spot in the cliffs, she vowed to survive this, too. Behind her in the cave, she could hear the occasional shifting of its occupants. With Wallace absent, she felt vulnerable, but having Ratu and Quetzalli by her side gave her comfort. Though she had reasons to doubt their intentions, they had done nothing to earn her distrust. Whatever happened next, she wouldn't have to face it on her own.

Long hours passed in her drowsy state. Sometimes she would blink for only a moment and discover that the torches had changed position entirely. The steady beats of the night marchers ebbed and flowed like the tide, and she stared out at them until they became tiny motes of light that floated on an inky canvas. They gathered together in the darkness, creating a face that looked like her father's in his final moments.

Ingrid's eyes snapped open and she blinked rapidly, visions of the past fading like smoke caught in a breeze. Down below, long shadows had appeared between the trees as the first light of day kissed the mountainside. There was no sign of the night marchers.

"You're awake."

Startled, Ingrid looked to the other side of the opening to see Ratu sipping from a tea cup. When she tried to sit up, she realized that she was beneath a blanket.

"Oh, fuck me, I fell asleep on watch." Ashamed, she pushed away the blankets.

"Hardly." The naga grinned. "When I came to take your place, you tried to argue with me that you didn't need sleep. Your body told me otherwise, so I simply waited for you to lose consciousness and covered you up."

Ingrid winced. That hadn't been very professional of her. "Why not move me to the fire?"

Ratu shrugged. "You seemed happier out here, though I can't explain why." She stuck a hand into her sleeve and pulled out an additional tea cup. "Would you like some?"

"Please." Ingrid leaned forward to accept the cup from Ratu. The naga picked up a kettle resting on a stone nearby and poured it into the cup. The two of them sat in silence for several minutes, drinking their tea. Eventually, Ratu shook her sleeves and a blue creature tumbled free.

"Cerulea." Ratu pinched the fairy's wings and lifted her so they were at eye level. "Time to get to work."

The fairy dangled there for a few seconds before yawning, then shook herself free of the naga's fingers. She dropped toward the ground, but stopped in mid-air, her wings fluttering.

"Go," Ratu commanded. "Find Mike."

Cerulea did a pirouette and then saluted Ratu before turning into a ball of light and shooting out of the lava vent's mouth like a bottle rocket. Ingrid watched the fairy vanish into the woods below.

"You really think she will find him?"

Ratu nodded. "She'll find her sister," she replied. "And then report back."

"So what do we do until then?"

The naga sipped at her tea and then gazed down into the valley. She let out a sigh and relaxed against the stone wall behind her.

"Enjoy the sunrise," she replied. "Because you never know if it will be your last."

Though the words were ominous, Ingrid couldn't help but agree.

Mike hovered in the void, pain and light shifting back and forth behind his eyes as he wavered on the edge of consciousness. It was a strange place between awake and the Dreamscape where time had no meaning, but he couldn't quite enter either world. Memories fluttered like butterflies, slowly assembling into a picture of what had occurred.

The dull throbbing in his shoulder started beating in time with his heart, sending ripples through his entire body. With each thud, his mind coalesced, allowing him proper conscious thoughts once more. He had been shot, that much he remembered. Then he fell? His last thoughts had been for Opal's safety. He didn't want her vessel getting lost or falling into the wrong hands, so had tried to set her free in those final moments.

Opal. Ratu. Quetzalli. They were likely lost on the mountain, probably being chased by night marchers and skeletons. These thoughts shook him fully awake and he opened his eyes to reveal only darkness and panicked, realizing that the void itself had followed him. His body was numb and all he could hear was a dull roar. After all his near misses, death had finally caught up to him.

Sadness and anger flooded him at the realization that he had let everybody down. Even worse, his children were now without a father, and they would experience the pain of losing a parent early just as he had. Tormented by this realization, he cried out in agony.

Upon opening his mouth, water flooded in. The void latched back onto him, pressing against his lips. Startled, he coughed as the liquid was sucked from his mouth, realizing that the void also had a tongue. He was being held in place. Puzzled, he went still to assess his surroundings. Up above, flickering lights came into view and then vanished. Their light wasn't enough to pierce the darkness around them, but it did illuminate the scales along Leilani's neck and shoulders as the mermaid held him close.

"Mmph?" he asked, realizing that it was her mouth pressed against his. She dropped her hand along his arm until she found his hand, then gave it a squeeze.

"Mmph," she replied, then blew a puff of air from her gills into him before breaking away and shifting back. He could barely make out her face beneath the water, but she pointed upward and then held out a fist. When it was clear he didn't understand, she grunted and spoke to him through the water in a whisper.

"We're being hunted," she said. "I'm giving you air so we can stay safe down here."

He looked up again and studied the twisted lights. It took a few seconds for him to realize that they were the spectral torches carried by the night marchers. Somehow they had survived their fall and were taking refuge in a body of water.

Shivering, he rubbed at his arms, and Leilani came back to him. She held him close and pressed her lips to his once more, breathing air into his lungs as she rubbed his arms and back. By accident, she bumped the spot where he'd been shot and he moaned in pain.

Realizing he might be bleeding out underwater, he tried to explore the wound with his fingers. Leilani didn't move to stop him, and he was more than a little surprised when he discovered that the injury had been packed with some kind of material. It hurt to touch it, so he decided to leave it alone.

How long had they been down here? He shivered again, and Leilani pressed her body against his. If they stayed down here too long, he would end up suffering from hypothermia.

The mermaid seemed to understand this and slid her hands beneath his shirt. The water warmed around her hands, causing him to remember that she could use magic. Opening up his Soul Sight allowed Leilani to appear before him in an ethereal form. He broke away from her lips and looked down at her hands. Her magic swirled around his torso, heating the water to warm him up.

As Leilani tried to warm him, he dug through his clothes for Opal's vessel. Realizing it was gone, he also felt around for Daisy. Could the fairies even breathe underwater? He was certain she would have left long before drowning. Leilani watched him do this, then got his attention by holding up two fingers.

He nodded, and she followed up by pointing to the surface and then flashing him the Okay sign. Relieved that they were safe, he allowed himself to relax. It was likely going to be awhile.

Leilani pressed her mouth to his and breathed more air into his lungs. Up above, the torches brightened as more night marchers arrived. Mike wasn't sure if they just couldn't come in the water, or if they didn't know he and Leilani were there. Either way, they weren't currently fighting for their lives, so that was always a plus. The roaring sound was a nearby waterfall, but he assumed it must be too small to hide behind. It was enough to cast ripples along the surface, which was why the lights were constantly wavering.

The throbbing in his shoulder diminished, which he attributed to the coldness of the water. Leilani pressed herself against him, and he noticed that her hands were starting to linger in certain places. Her hands explored his chest, and sometimes his biceps as she tried to keep him warm. Though it wasn't an ideal

situation by any means, his cock somehow managed to direct enough blood flow away from his body to make a valiant effort at rising to the challenge.

You're not helping things, he thought at his penis. It flexed involuntarily, reminding him of a shrug.

Being able to see Leilani's soul, he could tell that touching him was having an effect on her. The next time her hand lingered on his chest, a pink light briefly filtered through her spirit and he recognized it immediately as arousal.

His cock twitched again, reminding him that he was alive. This caused his magic to awaken, and suddenly it was now a two against one battle of wills. On the one hand, he was currently submerged in cold water while hiding from vengeful spirits that would probably tear him apart given half the chance. His brain told him this was a very bad thing.

On the other hand, he was currently lip locked with a horny mermaid. His body and magic were both of the opinion that this was a very good thing.

The next time Leilani's hand lingered, he put his own over it. He actually felt her breath hitch in response, and he darted his tongue into her mouth.

"Mmh?" she asked, her thumb rubbing the edge of his nipple.

"Mmhmm," he replied, then moved his hand off of hers and onto her chest. Her breasts were buoyant beneath the water, which allowed him to easily slip them free of their confines. Her nipples were already hard, and he mimicked her actions.

Leilani actually let out a full throated chuckle as she explored his body more thoroughly with her hands, becoming aggressive. She undid the button of his shorts and slid her hand down his back and onto his butt. Her hands were warm against his skin, sending tingles of pleasure up his spine. Instead of simply breathing back and forth, their tongues now slid over each other in a seductive dance that soon had Mike even harder.

Though he was disappointed that he couldn't appreciate the mermaid visually, he was given ample time to explore her assets with his hands. She made girlish little moans in his mouth while he played with her breasts, so he decided to take a small risk and broke off their kiss, then lifted her body so that he could suck on her nipples.

He was delighted to hear the tiny gasps of joy from her as she fought to keep her voice down. This only served to heighten his excitement, and he continued to feast on her breasts as he slid his hands along her waist and toward what would have been her butt.

Leilani was obviously more responsible than he was, because she forced him to come up for air. Once their lips met, she dropped her hand to his cock and stroked it, sending waves of heat into his body. He moaned for her, causing the mermaid to shiver in delight.

Moving his hands to the front of her body, it occurred to him that he actually had no idea where her vagina might be. He aimed for the general vicinity and moved his palm across her smooth scales. Leilani caught on pretty quick, and guided his fingers to a thin seam he would have otherwise missed. Unsure how to best proceed, he massaged the area with his fingertips, eliciting a sigh from Leilani.

The seam in her scales softened, allowing his fingers access. There was a bulbous nub inside that was clearly the mermaid version of a clitoris with a tight vaginal canal beneath. Though he couldn't see what he was doing, his magic guided him. His thumb was able to hold the seam open and rub her clit at the same time, all while he teased her with his middle finger.

Leilani's lower body spasmed, and they sank deeper into the lake. He broke their kiss to equalize the pressure in his ears, then watched in awe as Leilani lowered herself to take his cock into her mouth. Delighted at how warm her mouth was, he did his best to ignore the memory of just how sharp her teeth were.

The seconds ticked away as they floated in darkness, with Leilani fellating him underwater. He tried to enjoy it, but the lack of air to breathe soon became a distraction. As if realizing this, Leilani came back up to kiss him some more, her mouth slightly bitter with the flavor of his own precum.

"Mmph," she squealed as she positioned herself, using a hand to hold his cock in place while running that seam along it. The scaly folds parted almost immediately, allowing his cock to slide inside her. It only made it an inch or so before she grunted and had to stop. He passed the time by playing with her clit some more while it was still exposed. This served to drive her nuts as she thrashed around in the water, occasionally breaking contact with his mouth and causing bubbles to stream to the surface.

It was a little awkward, but he was able to wrap his legs around her hips and pin himself in place. He didn't so much thrust himself into her as he pulled her whole body down, creating a weird sort of underwater dance that allowed him to gradually sink deeper into her core. Though he seemed to bottom out early on, Leilani encouraged this behavior despite her initial tightness. Eventually, the soft tissue inside her vagina would shift dramatically, allowing himself to slide in even further.

Thinking back to the slender, prehensile cocks of the mermen, the inner anatomy of mermaid pussy made slightly more sense as he continued on his quest to drive himself ever deeper. After several minutes, Leilani tapped him frantically on the shoulder and moved her head to speak.

"No further," she whispered in his ear. "I don't go any deeper."

Surprised, Mike used his hand to feel the base of his cock. He easily had at least an inch left outside. He made a noise that sounded like a question, then pulled out a bit and gave her a little thrust.

"Oh, yes, please," she moaned in his ear. He repeated the action, driving a gasp from her body. Pleased with himself, he continued to fuck her under the water until he remembered that he needed air. He made another noise and pointed at his mouth.

"Right, sorry." Leilani breathed some air into his lungs, then moved her lips to his ear once more. "Fuck me like one of your land girls," she muttered before locking lips with him again.

Seeing this as a royal command, Mike did his best to obey. The water resisted his movements, but it was apparently more than adequate for the mermaid. She started humming her pleasure into his mouth, occasionally stopping to kiss him properly. Unable to see or even properly breathe, Mike realized that he was completely at her mercy.

The thought turned him on even more. His magic flowed through Leilani, taking her measure, and he became rough with her in response. She crooned in delight as he squeezed her ass, then moved his hands to her breasts. The mermaid's magic caused the water to swirl around them in a vortex that held them in place.

Leilani pulled her head away and arched her back, pressing her breasts into Mike's face as she opened her mouth in a silent scream. Her vaginal walls clamped

down on him and undulated, as if attempting to milk his cock. The rapid squeezing had the appropriate effect, but the princess squeezed so hard that his cock popped free just as he came. His magic almost felt disappointed that he had blown his load in the water, and he watched in amazement as his shimmering spooge crackled like a bioluminescent jellyfish as it hovered up between them.

“Oh, darn,” muttered Leilani as she opened her mouth and attempted to suck some of his jizz into her mouth. Muttering something about watered down semen, she gave up and nuzzled into him instead, nibbling playfully at his lip until he kissed her again. She let out a coo of delight, but seemed satisfied to just float there with him and wait for the light of day up above.

Mike felt his magic disperse and return to its slumber. The sex had been fun, but relatively anti-climactic. Not everyone could be a magical nymph in a bathtub.

Leilani broke their kiss again and moved her mouth to his ear. “I’ll have more room for you when I’m in human form,” she whispered. “I’m not letting that cock of yours out of my sight.”

He made a grunt of approval, which caused some bubbles to come out of his nose. Leilani resumed her task of keeping him alive by breathing for him, her arms sliding over his body some more to keep him warm.

Losing track of time, he fell into a bit of a meditative trance, focusing his energy on staying conscious. On occasion, he felt a pulse of magic in his shoulder, but was uncertain what it could be doing. Leilani teased him on a couple occasions, but other than touching his cock a few times, never took it any further.

Up above, the golden glow of sunrise chased away the shadows, revealing that they swam in a pool that was maybe thirty feet deep. Down below, Mike’s shorts rested on a rock, and a few tiny fish swam along the edges of the pool. Certain that the night marchers had officially moved on, Mike looked to Leilani and pointed up.

Leilani bit her lip and looked down at his semi flaccid cock. A tiny tendril of semen clung to it like seaweed, and she collected it with her thumb and stuck it in her mouth. Licking her lips, she nodded, then pointed up.

Mike surfaced slowly, fighting the urge to wipe the water from his eyes. A scan of the shore revealed that nobody was nearby, so he swam over to the closest rock and pulled himself onto it. The moment he was out of the water, his muscles failed him and he went limp.

“Okay, yeah, I should have expected that.” Hours of treading water topped by fucking a mermaid was not something the human body had been designed for. Behind him, Leilani surfaced and swam over. She tossed his shorts onto a nearby rock, then slid along his backside and rested her head between his shoulder blades.

“I have no words,” she muttered, nuzzling against him. Her breasts pressed into his lower back, giving him an idea for a new kind of massage. “I don’t think amazing even comes close to describing it.”

He smiled at the compliment. “I’m built differently than other humans,” he explained. “Just in case you think that’s something a regular guy could do.”

“Oh, I know it isn’t. You’re the legendary Caretaker, after all. In this moment, I can’t tell you how pleased I am that you’re a man.” She moved off of his back so that she could lay next to him, gazing into his eyes with adoration. “If I tell you something, you have to swear to secrecy.”

“It depends on the secret, honestly.”

Leilani considered him for a moment, then moved in close and dropped her voice to a whisper. “It is considered a blessing to have the ability to form legs,” she explained. “The people of my culture will give you many reasons why, but there’s an unspoken reason.”

“Which is?”

“It lets us hook up with human men.” Leilani grinned. “And women, too, though there’s no shortage of those under the sea.”

“I’ve heard that they’re better down where it’s wetter.”

“Of course they’re wetter, they’re underwater.”

“Oh.” Well, not all of his dumb jokes could land. “So you sneak onto the shore a lot?”

The princess frowned. “I have, but never for a sexual interlude, honestly. Since I’m part of the royal court, I am watched more closely. We have a whole cautionary tale about royalty falling for land walkers. It never works out.”

“I’m sure.”

“But I have lived vicariously through my handmaidens.” Leilani grinned, revealing those shark teeth of hers as she moved closer to him. “Maybe even perhaps had them reenact their escapades with me. My only regret right now is that I have never fucked a man outside of the water.”

His cock twitched in response, but Mike knew better than to indulge his curiosity right now.

“I have a question,” he replied, hoping to change the subject. “What did Wallace do that has your entire kingdom so angry with him?”

“Oh. That.” Just like that, the arousal in her voice diminished. “I would prefer not to talk about it.”

“That bad, huh?” Mike grunted as he pulled himself up into a sitting position. “Did he make a pass at your mother?”

Leilani laughed. “Oh, that would be too rich. No, my mother is quite the..um...” She made a face. “I’m trying to remember the human word for it. Sleuth? Sloth?”

“Slut?”

“Yeah!” Leilani belly laughed, then rolled onto her back. “She’s so horny that she’d suck a barnacle off a rock if she thought it would return the favor.”

“Now that’s an image,” Mike replied with a laugh as he took off his shirt and tried to squeeze the water from his shorts.

“Let me help with that,” Leilani offered. With the wave of her hand, water bubbled up out of his clothes and moved back into the pool. “I’ll tell you what he did if you promise to never bring it up again. It’s repulsive.”

As if she feared the merfolk ancestors themselves would suddenly rise up from the grave and hear her, she whispered it in his ear. The moment after the forbidden knowledge entered his mind, he burst into laughter. Leilani scowled and crossed her arms, but Mike waved his hands at her apologetically.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m only laughing because I thought maybe he said or did something culturally offensive. I didn’t expect something that disgusting is all. Wow.”

Her features softened. “You said you wouldn’t talk about it.”

“And I won’t, I promise.” He slapped his cheeks in an attempt to knock the grin off his face. “I just need a moment to let it sink in.”

“Okay.” She scooted onto the shore and wiggled her tail. Light shimmered along her scales as it split apart and transformed into a pair of thighs that immediately had Mike’s attention. “As long as you aren’t making fun of me, I think that’s fine.”

“I’m not, I promise.” He patted her on the knee and let his hand linger a moment. “In fact, I’ll make it up to you sometime. Maybe help you with that ‘on land’ fantasy of yours.”

Leilani’s cheeks darkened, her eyes suddenly full of hope and determination. “I warn you that I’ll take it personally if you don’t.”

“Then let’s figure out where to go from here, shall we?” He stood up to put on his clothes, but crouched back down when he heard movement among the trees. Holding a finger to his lips for silence, he summoned a lightning spider in the palm of his hand and got ready to toss it out.

A short figure pressed forward through the leaves, and Mike closed his hand, dispersing his magic. Opal approached in human form, her head cocked to one side as she dragged Leilani’s bent trident behind her. While her facial features were identical to Beth, she actually stood about six inches shorter now, and her hair was largely a blob that dangled over her shoulders. Circling over the slime girl’s head like a halo was Daisy.

“I’m so glad to see you two!” He moved forward and carefully hugged Opal. If he squeezed too hard, she would end up sticking to him. Even so, tendrils of slime clung to his arms. “I was worried you might have been hurt in the fall.”

Opal, unable to speak, started signing. *I tried to catch you by grabbing onto the trees, but you were too heavy and I fell apart, she explained. Couldn’t pull myself together fast enough to come after you. We hid from the spirits.*

“Sorry I broke you apart. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

I was more worried about your shoulder. I plugged it up for you. For emphasis, Opal poked him near his injury. Remembering the wound, he inspected it in the light of day. The edges of the wound were ragged and new flesh was already forming. However, there was a pale blue plug where it hadn’t quite mended yet. When he probed the wound, it no longer ached as it had.

“Are you the reason this healed so fast?” he asked.

No, she signed, then held out a small ball. *But I did pull this out.*

“What is she saying?” asked Leilani.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Princess Leilani, this is Opal and Daisy.” He held out a finger for Daisy to land on, then showed her to Leilani. The little fairy bowed. “Neither can speak out loud, but they can hear you just fine. She was telling me that she caught us on the way down.”

“Oh, that makes so much more sense!” Leilani stepped toward them, understanding in her eyes. “Before we hit the ground, all these tentacles burst out of your chest and grabbed onto the trees. They slowed us down some, but then they snapped and we still fell about fifteen feet. Once I realized we had both survived, I dragged you to safety before the night marchers could find us.” The mermaid gazed up at the distant cliff, then back at Mike. “Where did they come from?”

“I had them hidden on me,” he explained. “As a safety precaution.”

“Interesting. You kept these two inside your body, then? Is there anyone else in there?” She moved close and lifted his shirt, but he swatted her hand away playfully.

“They were in my clothes, not me. And it was just these two,” he said with a laugh, then looked at Opal. “Are you guys okay?”

Opal and Daisy both nodded, but this time, the fairy started signing.

Have been waiting nearby to rescue you. Spirits are very angry.

“I didn’t need rescuing this time, but I appreciate it. Have you seen the others?”

Opal shook her head. Daisy pointed toward the mountain and signed the word for sister.

“So they’re nearby?” he asked.

Daisy took off and flew straight up in the air. After a few moments, a little blue light appeared, followed by a couple of birds who were trying to snap Cerulea out of the air. Both fairies descended, but not before Daisy slapped one of the birds hard enough that it left behind a small cloud of feathers before flying away.

“There you are!” Cerulea dropped like a stone into his hands.

“What is that?” asked Leilani with wide eyes.

“Daisy’s sister.” He held Cerulea up to his eyes. “Where are the others?”

“Holed up in a cave thataway!” Cerulea bounced on her feet as she pointed back the way she had come. “Ratu and Quetzalli are there, and so is the mean lady!”

“Ingrid?”

“Yep!” Cerulea nodded proudly.

“So I guess we head there, then. Lead the way.”

“Nope!” Cerulea shook her head. “Can’t! There are skeletons in the forest.”

Leilani grunted, then gnashed her teeth so hard that Mike winced at the sound. “That bastard,” she said. “I haven’t had a chance to tell you what happened last night. The Captain informed me that my mother wished to speak to me through his magical shell, but we needed to keep it discreet. He led me to the edge of the camp and then destroyed the barrier keeping the night marchers out.”

“So he let them all in?” Mike rolled his eyes. “Never mind, of course he did.”

“Yeah, but here’s the thing. The marchers weren’t there for me. They wanted him even more.” Leilani shivered. “When they chased him off, I ran to try and lead them away from the camp. But I didn’t know that he had summoned his ship, which meant his crew could help him.”

“The dead guys?”

She nodded. “He has power over those who lose their lives to the sea. It is also why he has been a powerful ally. On more than one occasion, he has summoned his army from the deep—”

“Wait, army?” Mike’s jaw dropped. “He has a skeleton army?”

Leilani nodded solemnly. “They cannot survive long outside of the water unless they are on his ship. So he keeps them stashed in the depths, buried beneath the sand where they won’t be discovered.”

“Shit.” Mike looked down at his feet, then up toward the sky. “I guess it makes sense. If he’s a Player in the Game, it’s not like he’s just on a pleasure cruise around the world. Does he have any other powers I should know about?”

Leilani shook her head. “In the hundreds of years we’ve known him, the skeletons are the ones we find most frightening. If there are others, they have gone unnoticed.”

“Hundreds? What the hell?” Mike groaned. “How come this guy gets to live hundreds of years?”

The princess laughed. “That’s because he found the Fountain of Youth! He used to go back every decade or so and drink from it, but I found out from my mother recently that it dried up before I was born. Francois is now stuck getting old like the rest of us.”

“Huh. I see. So the Captain is facing down his own mortality, huh?” He wasn’t sure what to do with that information, but it was probably important. “Seems to be the same problem everyone I deal with has. Would it explain why he would try to take you out?”

She shook her head. “Honestly, my best guess is he intends to turn my people and the Order against you even further. If I had died, your friend Beth would be in peril, and conflicting accounts of what happened would further muddy the waters. But when things went wrong, his hand was forced.”

“Why did the night marchers go after him?” Mike asked.

“No idea. But one of them actually pushed me out of the way to get to Francois.” She sighed. “I suspect my own mother thinks I’m dead, so your friend is likely in danger.”

“Not if I can help it. I can get word to my people, don’t you worry.” He turned to look up the mountain. “I suspect our answer to all of this lies up there. Cerulea, I need you to fill Ratu in on everything we talked about and see if she and the others can continue the climb and meet us up there. Can you do that?”

The fairy gave him a salute, then turned into a ball of light and shot into the air. One of the birds that had chased her before took off from a nearby tree in an attempt to catch her.

“Will she be all right?” asked Leilani.

“She’ll be fine,” Mike replied. “Even if that bird could catch her, I know she could handle it. Right Daisy?”

Daisy nodded, then scrambled up his arm and sat on his shoulder. Opal handed the trident over to Leilani, who looked at it sadly.

“It was my father’s,” she said. “Won’t be much use in a fight, now.”

“Can you fix it?” he asked.

“Me? No. But it is fixable.” She held it up and stabbed the butt into the ground to use as a hiking stick. “So where are we headed?”

Mike pointed up the mountain. “That way,” he said, then sat on a nearby rock. “But first, I need a few minutes to check in with the others and let them know I’m okay.”

Leilani turned away from him and stared out into the forest. “Then allow me to watch over you,” she said, the muscles in her arms tightening. “I will guard you with my life.”

Though it was a bit dramatic, Mike appreciated the sentiment. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and sent his thoughts home to Kisa. Now that the Captain had made his move, it was time to make some moves of his own.

Beth was still lying in bed when she heard someone knock on the door of the suite.

“I’ve got it,” Lily said as she crawled from beneath the covers and slapped Beth’s exposed ass. “Since somebody is all tuckered out.”

“Mmf,” Beth replied, then hid her head under the pillow. Dinner with the Director had taken an unexpected turn last night when the man failed to show up. This meant ordering a ton of room service and staying up all night eating while watching an action movie marathon with Lily. The succubus had taken it upon herself to transform into the various male leads, which had led to a very exciting evening between the two of them.

Late in the evening, Beth asked Lily if she ever did something similar for Mike. Lily had laughed, and admitted that Mike had, but many of her transformations had been into video game and book characters he had crushed on when he was younger. While this revelation opened the door to more possibilities

for Beth, she was insanely curious to know if Lily had ever fucked Mike while pretending to be someone else in the house and asked her that.

“Oh, I’ve tried,” Lily had admitted. “But when he figures out it’s me, he makes me change back. Something about morality and scruples. Why? Is there someone you’re curious about?”

Back in the present, Beth felt a tail snake up her leg before ripping the covers away. Groaning in protest, she tried to take the blankets back, but Lily was too fast.

“The Director wants to see you for breakfast this time.” Lily handed over another envelope. “Oh, and apparently he apologizes for standing you up last night. Something something Order business.”

“Was he at our door?” Beth asked with a yawn.

“Nope. Sent a lackey.” Lily sighed and opened up the closet. “So what are you wearing for your big date? Something that accentuates your hips? Or will you be all business in a bikini?”

Beth slid free of the bed and pushed Lily out of the way. “I can dress myself, thanks.”

“But of course, dahling.” Lily sashayed out of the room. “I’ll be out here trying to find something to watch on the telly.”

Beth looked through the outfits in her closet and picked a simple white dress that paired well with a pair of brown dress sandals and a paua shell necklace she had brought. She turned on the faucet in her shower and jumped in, shivering beneath the cold spray. It helped bring the morning into focus, and she washed the sex out of her hair. With a wave of her hand, the water leapt off her body, and she stepped out of the bathroom completely dry.

Slipping into her outfit took only a minute, and she stepped out of her bedroom into the suite and stopped. Lily was standing in the kitchen, her fingers pressed into the granite so hard that it had cracked. Standing on the other side of the counter was Kisa with a serious look on her face.

“What happened?” Beth asked.

Lily didn’t respond. Kisa cleared her throat and then sat on one of the stools.

“They attacked the house last night,” she began. “Or tried to, anyway. Don’t worry, everyone is okay. Jenny let them off with a warning.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Beth asked.

“The Captain tried to kill Mike at roughly the same time.” Kisa sighed. “Apparently that douchebag was trying to kill the princess and frame Mike for it, but took the opportunity to shoot him, too.”

“He was shot?” Beth took a step forward, but Kisa waved her back.

“He’s fine, because he’s Mike.” The catgirl chuckled. “But now we suspect that the Director was in on it, which doesn’t make sense. The Order seemed to have no idea who the Captain even was. So either the Director is keeping secrets from the Order, or there’s something else going on here.”

“Damn.” Beth fiddled with the shell necklace, twirling it with her fingers. “My bet is on the secret agenda. He was supposed to have dinner with me last night, but cancelled at the last second. Now we’re having breakfast.”

“He probably wants to cut a deal.” Kisa slid off the stool. “As far as anybody knows, the Order team was wiped out and Mike died. And we’re going to keep it that way for a little bit longer, if we can.”

“But what of the merfolk?” Beth frowned at the idea that she may be dragged out to sea and charged with regicide.

“Leilani and Mike have gotten rather close, apparently.” Kisa laughed. “Like we should expect anything different. She said that without evidence, the council will wait at least a couple of days before coming for you. But if that happens, you are to remind her mother about the green flash incident.”

“The green flash incident?” Beth was familiar with the phenomenon. On a clear day, it was possible to see the sun turn green for just a second at sunset, a trick made possible by the refraction of light through the atmosphere so close to the equator. “What does that even mean?”

“It’s code for something meant to keep you out of hot water. But it’s highly likely that you’re in danger.”

“That’s nothing new.” Beth looked at Lily. “Are you okay?”

“Mike doesn’t want her coming after him,” Kisa explained. “And she didn’t like it.”

“Of course I don’t like it,” Lily snapped. “It seems like every asshole here wants a piece of him, but nooooo, he’s just going to ignore that and go looking for a dragon instead! It’s bad enough I lost a bet with Lala over this, but now I’m stuck here playing babysitter!” She took off her tracking bracelet and tossed it to Kisa. “Fuck it. My talents are wasted in this room. Kitty cat, you get to be me from now on.”

“Wait, what?” Kisa’s eyes grew wide as Lily walked to the balcony, her body rippling as she transformed into a vaguely familiar man dressed as one of the attendants.

“I’ll keep your sweet ass out of the fire,” Lily declared in a man’s voice as she pointed at Beth. “You keep that asshole distracted while I dig through his shit.”

“Lily, wait!” Beth didn’t get to say much more. The succubus walked out onto the balcony and jumped over the edge. “Won’t somebody see her?”

“Nah. There’s a hole in the surveillance right there.” Kisa took a banana out of the fruit bowl and started to peel it. “I scoped it out after my first trip here and told her about it in case we needed an escape route.”

“I thought the portal was the escape route?”

Kisa shrugged. “It’s always better to have more than one,” she said. “Oh, and Tink isn’t coming back any time soon. She got pretty defensive about the kids so has gone home to, and I quote, ‘sharpen hammer for ass ramming.’”

“How do you sharpen...nevermind.” Beth sighed as she moved toward the door. “Anything else I should know?”

Kisa shook her head. “That’s it for now.”

Beth nodded, then moved toward the door. “Well in that case, I guess it’s time for me to do my part. See what I can get out of the Director before somebody tries to take me out.”

“This vacation isn’t exactly relaxing,” Kisa declared, then kicked her feet up on the table. “If you need me, you know where to find me.”

“That I do,” Beth replied as she opened the door to go have breakfast with the enemy. “That I do.”