

Signs of Cracking

Despite the rising summer sun, the temperature in front of Mike Radley's home was downright cold. Members of the SoS and the Order huddled together by the command center in order to share body heat, casting wary glances toward the house. Cyrus, who had spent the night on a spare cot in the tent, stepped out into the chill and pulled his coat around him. Noticing the pained expressions on the faces of others, he feigned rubbing his arms for warmth. They needed false sympathy from him, not the knowledge that his coat had been enchanted for bad weather.

"What's with this cold?" he asked a group of men standing away from the others, already knowing the answer. Yuki was fully responsible for the chill in the air. If it hadn't been in the upper eighties the day before, he was convinced snow would be drifting from above already. Neither the SoS nor the Order had been prepared for the sudden dip in temperature, and cold weather gear was being rushed to them from a storage facility nearly six hours away.

"No idea," said one of the men, and the group opened up to allow Cyrus to stand among them. "Don't you guys know some spells to keep warm or something?"

"Sure do," he replied, then stuck his hand in a pocket and pulled out a pair of rods. "You ever see these before? Tuck one in the back of your belt and it will keep you from freezing up. Here, let me show you how the enchantment works."

The group huddled around Cyrus, blocking outsiders from seeing him. The mage reached deeper into his coat and handed over a few magazines full of bullets.

"You've got almost forty," he whispered. He had managed to pull two other mages to help him with the project overnight, banking on their fear of the house and personal inability to question superiors. In less than a moment, the magazines disappeared, the rounds to be dispersed later.

"I'm sorry that I've only got the two of these," he said, raising his voice for anyone listening. "So you'll have to share. They last about twelve hours, but you can charge them up by putting them near something hot, or boiling them in water for ten minutes. Hmm. For you guys, this might work the best." He tucked one of

the rods into the collar of someone's tactical vest to ensure airflow. "Don't put them in your pockets, though. They might overheat in a disastrous way."

"Damn." The merc snorted, rubbing at his chest. "Feels like I'm standing by a fire already."

Someone else snagged the remaining rod from Cyrus, and the men started making jabs at each other. One of them clapped Cyrus on the shoulder, and their eyes met.

"You're a good one." A hint of a smile lit the man's eyes.

Cyrus nodded, but said nothing. He had essentially just signed their death warrants with those bullets. Moving away from the men and toward the house, he paused near the bottom of its stoop to look up at the roofline. Squinting in concentration, he noticed immediately that the house was different again. For the life of him, he couldn't remember what had changed. Had it always been this small? Was it the paint? He had a sudden urge to wander off, to go do anything but sit in the vicinity of this structure. If not for the discipline of the people behind him, how many would have left already?

Was the fact that the house was trying to push him away akin to the feelings of its denizens toward him? Or was it simply because he had never been invited in?

He heard the quiet mutterings of the men and women behind him go silent and dropped his gaze from the roofline. A dark figure stood on the porch. Death was holding a cup of tea in one hand and a paper-wrapped bundle in the other.

"I say, good morning!" the Reaper declared, silently padding down the stairs. "You all are looking quite dreadful. Perhaps you're still tired from all that activity yesterday, breaking and entering can be quite the endeavor."

"Fuck you, Pumpkin King." One of the mercs stepped forward, racking the slide of his rifle. "How about I plant one right between your eye holes?"

Death paused, his eye flames burning intensely inside his skull. "I do believe consent is required before any type of penetration occurs. You certainly do not have mine." The Reaper lifted the mug to his lips and a gunshot rang out. The mug exploded in the Reaper's hands, showering him with tea and ceramic shards.

Cyrus had ducked out of instinct, but was already running. A couple of Order members saw this and reacted in kind, but the SoS stayed in position,

including the idiot who had taken out Death's mug with his pistol. He wasn't entirely certain how Death would react, but the old man didn't want to be at ground zero when it happened.

"I see." Death shook the tea off his hand. "Well, my job was to come out here and try to make peace, but apparently—"

Another gunshot rang out. A step on the porch cracked as the round went straight through Death.

"See, I told you," said another merc. "Incorporeal. He can't do shit to us."

"Well then. I guess I won't be needing this." Death tossed the paper wrapped bundle onto the ground. It burst open, revealing a massive danish. Some members of the SoS aimed their guns at it. "You only get so many years to be alive. Clearly, you should spend what time you have left working on your manners."

Another shot rang out, this time hitting a window. The glass cracked but didn't break, the bullet passing cleanly through the pane.

"Well, if anyone would like to chat with me, I'll be in my tea room." Death, to his credit, didn't look at Cyrus when he said this.

"Yo, fuck your tea room!" This came from one of the knights, who was suddenly emboldened.

"You are officially uninvited," Death declared. "Don't bother coming."

The Reaper turned and walked back into the house, the door banging shut behind him. Cyrus came out from his hiding spot just around the corner of the tent. The men who had run alongside him now looked at him as if he were a fool, but he no longer cared. He stared at the window that had been shot. It was no longer damaged, but nobody else seemed to notice this.

"Fuck, when are we moving in?" he heard someone muttering.

"I hope it's soon," someone else replied. "The sooner we burn this shit to the ground, the better."

Cyrus made himself scarce, moving to the edges of the mercenary camp before sliding over to the side of the property. It was a short walk to the backyard, which felt wrong to him. He had vague memories of long walks with both Mike

and Death around the property, but couldn't quite remember any details of the property.

"He'll meet you in the back," said Dana through his earpiece.

Cyrus cleared his throat and looked around. Nobody was nearby.

"Where's the queen?" he asked.

"Sleeping," Dana replied. "Eulalie was up all night trying to buy off the SoS, but they won't budge on account of their reputation. When they turned down a payment of fifty million to just walk away, she actually threw a chair."

Cyrus' eyes bulged out of his head. "You all have fifty million?" he whispered.

"Eulalie does, but that's a long story. After that, she tried to find another paramilitary group she could pay to fight the SoS, but apparently nobody will do it because we're in the middle of a US city. She did manage to fuck up your supply chain, though. Don't be surprised when the tactical winter gear is a no-show."

Cyrus rubbed his eyes. "I'll do my best," he muttered. The back of the house came into view, and he marveled at the sight of a winter wonderland. Massive blocks of ice had been formed into barriers that surrounded the fountain along with the nearby tree. He was uncertain how to pass through until a slender figure emerged from the wall itself.

"It be a bit tricky," said the gardener. "But naught more than an illusion. This way." At first, it looked like he stepped back into the ice, but Cyrus realized that the wall had been cut at an angle and there was actually a slim passage there. He held his arms against his sides as he squeezed through, then emerged near the fountain. A young woman in a black leather dress stared up at him and growled, but the gardener put out his hand.

"Easy, lass," he said. "Remember, this one is a friend."

The goth girl sniffed the air loudly, but said nothing. The gardener gestured to Death's tea house, and Cyrus thanked him before proceeding. Massive roots had wrapped themselves protectively around the base of the oak tree, and the terrain was difficult to navigate. He tripped a couple of times, then lost his balance and fell face first toward the ground. A mere moment before breaking his face, the foliage beneath him flexed and caught him by the shoulders, leaves caressing his face as he was pushed back into a standing position.

“Oh, um...thank you.” He adjusted his coat and turned to the gardener. The man stood on the other side of the fountain, a bucket in one hand and scissors in the other.

“Wae’nt me,” he said with a sly grin. “But the gratitude is appreciated, I assure you.”

Cyrus nodded and continued toward the tea house. Upon entering, he saw Death sitting at the other end of the table with an apron wrapped around his waist and a platter stacked full of snacks in the middle of the table.

“Welcome, friend.” Death bared his smile at Cyrus. “Help yourself. I’m afraid we’re out of danish.”

“So I’ve heard.” Cyrus sat down at the table and then leapt to his feet when he saw Jenny the doll sitting on the other side of the table from him. “Oh, shit, sorry. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I have come as well.” The soft, regal voice came from his left. For a moment, Cyrus felt like he was staring at a stuffed dog of some sort, but his vision blurred and the stuffed animal picked up a small sandwich with dextrous hands. Atop his head was a gold foil crown and he wore plastic glasses that looked like they had been stolen from a child’s toy. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Master Cyrus.”

“You’re a rat.” Cyrus’ words lacked tact, but the creature’s sudden transformation had caught him off guard.

“Point in fact, I am the Rat King. My name is Reggie.” Reggie pointed up at his crown, then picked up a paper star cut from yellow construction paper. “I am also officially Jenny’s deputy.”

“Rat...King?” Cyrus made a face and sat back on his cushion. “Does that mean that you and Eulalie...”

The rat shook his head. “Our regencies are unrelated. You are here today because we wanted to talk about strategy. According to Eulalie and Dana, your people are getting ready to make a move that will seriously impair their health.”

“You’re also here for tea,” said Death as he started pouring the amber liquid into teacups. “It has already been too long since last we shared a cup.”

Cyrus looked at Death, then turned his attention back toward the Rat King and Jenny. He swallowed the lump in his throat. "Indeed."

"If you have anything you can share that will increase the efficacy of our defenses or perhaps preserve the lives of the men and women who serve you, now would be the time to mention it. We do not wish ill upon you—" Reggie paused as the daylight coming through the paper windows somehow flickered. "Allow me to correct myself. I, personally, do not wish ill upon you or your people."

"Noted." Cyrus looked up to see Death holding out a cup of tea, which he took. "Are you not attempting tea ceremonies anymore?"

"I am not." Death sighed and looked wistfully at the ceiling. "It was quite enjoyable at the time, but in order to better myself I made the mistake of turning to the internet. Were you aware that you can ask questions on something called a forum?"

"Of course."

Death handed Reggie a tea cup. "I'm afraid I got into an argument with some of the people there. After detailing what I thought to be a lovely ceremony, I was chastised for being misinformed, problematic, and..." The tiny fires swirled in Death's sockets. "Ah, that's right. I was called a troll."

"A troll?" Cyrus asked.

"We're getting off-topic," muttered Reggie.

"Indeed." Death set an empty cup in front of Jenny and pretended to pour tea in it. "I do not wish to bore you with details about the conversation, but someone made a point of asking me what color my skin was. Naturally, I told them that I didn't have any, and the conversation devolved from there." The Reaper sighed again. "Yuki Radley assured me that my heart was in the right place, but I find myself wondering if I should take up a different hobby."

When Death sat next to Cyrus, the mage patted the Reaper's knee. "I've never been to a tea ceremony before, but I enjoyed the one you made for me."

"You are too kind." The swirling flames in Death's skull steadied a bit. "But King Reggie is right, we are rather off-task. Our time is short and we must make the most of it."

"Is anyone else coming?" asked Cyrus. "Or is it just us?"

“It’s just us old people today.” Reggie smirked, which Cyrus was ashamed to admit made him look adorable. “Everyone else is doing the jobs Sheriff Jenny handed out.”

WE’RE GOING TO PLAY ANOTHER GAME declared the doll in a psychic voice that penetrated Cyrus like a blade. The plates and cutlery on the table rattled as the temperature in the room dropped.

“Out of curiosity, what have you done with the missing people?” Cyrus sipped at his tea. “Is this chamomile?”

“A special blend,” replied Death.

“It’s very good.” Cyrus drank some more and smacked his lips. “So do you all have Mads locked up in your basement or something?”

Jenny made a hissing sound, but said nothing else. Reggie looked at the doll in confusion, then back at Cyrus. “We haven’t taken any of your people,” said the Rat King. “Or if we have, we’ve already given them back.”

Cyrus frowned. There were too many variables right now, but he had no reason to doubt the Rat King’s words. “You really didn’t take them?”

Reggie, to his credit, gave Jenny a hard look. “If you did something, Mike will find out later,” he said. When the doll didn’t respond, he shrugged. “It wasn’t us.”

“Huh.” Cyrus scratched at his beard. “I was just curious is all.” He reached across the table to the plate of snacks and picked up a butter cookie. “In that case, I think you’ve already answered all of the questions I had.”

“Is there nothing you would add, Master Cyrus?” Death put a biscuit on a plate and slid it over to Reggie. “What about your people?”

The mage sighed and stared down at his hands. “They aren’t my people,” he said with sadness. “They have been guided down a dark path, I’m afraid. The Sons of Sin mean your family great harm, and the Order intends to see the deed finished. In the hours to come, there will come a point when the men and women of the Order will be forced to make a choice. If they refuse to fight, or perhaps even run away, I only ask that you allow them the chance to survive and learn from this experience. Maybe that will guide them toward a better tomorrow for everyone.”

“And what of those who fight?” Reggie’s dark eyes shimmered.

Cyrus looked over at the terrifying doll and raised his cup. “In that case, they’re all yours sheriff.”

The atmosphere in the room shifted, and he felt rather than heard cackling laughter. Even Reggie shivered, but the rat said nothing.

“That settles it.” Death shook his head. “I do feel bad for what is about to occur, but it cannot be helped.”

“I agree.” Cyrus set down his tea and looked at Jenny. Even though the doll lacked facial expressions, it felt like she was looking through him. “So would you like to hear the plan I came up with?”

By the time he finished sharing it, Jenny’s laughter echoed from every corner of the room.

Singing birds roused Mike from his slumber. He blinked the sleep from his eyes and sat up in bed to be greeted by the sight of jungle and a nearby bluff. It took a moment for him to remember where he was before he let out a yawn and stretched.

A thick mass gripped him by the calves, pulling so hard that he almost slid down the bed. Syrupy blue tendrils wrapped around his torso as Opal pulled her amorphous mass on top of him, her body thickening into place on his chest. Where her heart would be, he saw her crystalline vessel floating much like an organelle in a cell.

“Good morning.” He yawned again. Last night had been spent speaking at length with Pelé and Di about the eggs. The eggs were elemental in nature, capable of recreating and sustaining the magical ecosystem of the world once they hatched. If he properly understood the ramifications, he could absolutely bring magic back to Earth in a way that hadn’t been seen for centuries. But that would also mean gathering the attention of the Others, which would result in his world getting eaten.

He wasn’t certain yet what he was supposed to do with the clutch, but at least they wouldn’t hatch on accident. They could only be hatched once the final egg was fertilized, the dragons immediately imprinting on whoever was present.

In fact, Mike actually had the means to fertilize an egg back at his home, but doing so would mean a serious setback to Dana's journey to undo her undead status.

Eventually, exhaustion had settled in and he started asking the same questions over and over. Di had declared him unfit for further conversation, and Pelé had taken him and the others across the lake. Ingrid remained unconscious for the trip, which Mike had found worrying.

Once on land, Ratu had used her earth magic to carry them back to the top of the hill. Back at the cabana, a massive feast had been prepared for all of them, cooked and set by the spirits who obeyed Pelé. Mike had eaten his fill, then crawled into bed with both Ratu and Quetzalli at his side and promptly lost consciousness.

I'm hungry, signed Opal.

"I'm sure there's plenty of food leftover," he replied.

The slime girl leaned forward and emphasized the shape of her eyebrows before wiggling them lasciviously. While Opal was perfectly capable of eating human food, in a lot of ways, she was like Dana. She needed magic to sustain herself, and her favorite food was currently brewing inside Mike's balls.

"I don't suppose you'll let me drink some water first?"

Opal shook her head with a grin, a pseudopod sliding free of her waist to push down the waist of his pants.

Mike chuckled. "Okay, I get it. But I want to remind you that I need to be functional today. You're gonna have to go easy on me."

Opal pouted in response, then flopped her head inside out so that she could watch his morning wood spring free of his shorts. The cool mountain air tickled a little, and he shivered in anticipation.

The slime girl rippled, then turned forward to face him. Grinning mischievously, she leaned forward, her suddenly massive breasts pressing into his chest and molding to his body. She started jerking him off with an elongated arm, her sticky hands now slippery. Her arm moved up and down, squeezing rhythmically with more than five fingers.

Mike groaned, lying back and allowing Opal to do all the work. She jerked him for a couple of minutes, then shifted the palm of her hand onto his glans. As

she rubbed the head of his cock as if polishing a knob, he felt the crease of her hand thicken and then part like a labia.

“What are you doing?” he asked, lifting his head to look through her translucent body. In awe, he watched as his cock sank into her palm then into her forearm, magnified slightly by the refracting light of morning. Opal grinned at him, then sat up and fucked him with her hand pussy.

The head of his cock made it nearly to her elbow. When her arm had taken the full girth and length of his cock, she massaged his balls with her fingers. Using her whole arm as a piston, she jacked him off in this manner for a couple of minutes, then sank her hand down one more time and held still.

Through her translucent flesh, he watched the slime shimmer and turn pink as it began to swirl. Opal had created a tiny vortex inside her arm that swirled across his sensitive flesh, alternating direction every inch or so. When she lifted her arm again, a powerful suction pulled extra blood to his cock, and he groaned as he laid back on the bed.

“This is certainly new,” he muttered as Opal arm fucked him for several minutes in this manner. Between the swirling, the suction, and the ball massage, he could feel a powerful orgasm building. However, the best was yet to come. The head of his cock tingled as slime teased the thin opening of his cock, a very thin pseudopod stretching down and sliding along his urethra. His hips jerked on their own in response to the stimulus, the sensations very similar to a small orgasm.

Down, down the pseudopod went, seeking out that which Opal desired most. While it had been no surprise that the slime girl was capable of utilizing his semen to prolong her own existence, it was her manner of acquiring it that was different. Opal didn't just want his cum—she wanted it straight from the source.

Mike gasped as the pseudopod eventually reached the base of his shaft, then hummed. His whole cock vibrated from the inside as Opal continued her handjob, a big grin on her face. Her whole body was slowly turning pink now in reaction to his own arousal. Tiny sparks formed along his shaft that turned into motes of light that floated up her arm where they spread apart inside her body.

His eyes rolled back as the pseudopods reached the path that branched away from his urethra and to his seminal vesicle. A heavy feeling settled in his crotch as Opal teased him both inside and out. His magic continued to build up as if the slime girl was a massive capacitor, which he knew from experience she was

about to become. It was the reason he had to take the whole day off if he allowed her to prolong things, because—

His back muscles tensed, followed by his midsection as Opal leaned forward and pressed into him. Her soft breasts melted around his torso, forcing his magic back into his skin. Mike's cock flexed and he cried out, startling nearby birds into flight. His orgasm was heavy and plentiful as Opal coaxed long, pearly strands out of his body that traveled up her arm and toward her core. The magic reverberated back through Opal, turning her entire body pink as she opened her mouth in a silent cry of her own, her body bucking as pieces of her broke away and soaked the bed.

Mike held his breath as Opal continued pumping him, stretching his ejaculation out for nearly twenty seconds as she continued to milk him, but even she had her limits. Using just her hand, she got tired, and the pseudopod in his cock withdrew. Opal quivered for several seconds before melting into a goopy puddle on the sheets. Mike rolled out of the way and nearly fell out of bed with his shorts around his ankles.

"Hot damn," he muttered as he lowered himself to the ground. Up above, he heard happy burbling sounds from Opal as she digested her meal. His legs shook when he tried to stand, and a hand appeared from nearby to help him up.

"Thanks," he muttered as he stood, now facing Lily. "Oh! You made it!"

"And my timing was perfect," she purred, her eyes looking past him at the bed. "If I had come a minute earlier, you would have been out for days after the two of us fought over you and took turns. You would have been completely useless for days."

Mike snorted. "Like you're one to talk. I seem to recall someone needing to take some personal time off after she fell into Opal's vat."

Lily sighed. "If only you had been there. Not that I had any holes left to be penetrated. Maybe she would have shared?"

"Or drained us both dry." Mike fumbled with his shorts. His hands were still trembling. "My fingers don't work right now."

"Let me." Lily helped him button his pants, but not before copping a feel. "As much as I would love to indulge myself, it seems like there's no shortage of work to do. The only reason I got to come was because the others are busy

monitoring the Order and I sort of assigned myself the job while the cat watches our suite in paradise. Such a well-oiled machine you've left running things while you're gone."

Mike nodded. "Where is the exit portal?" he asked.

"Inside the house. We didn't want to risk the Order stumbling onto it. You've got a closet behind the laundry room that wasn't being used."

Mike frowned. "We don't have a closet behind the laundry room."

"You do now." Lily shrugged. "Don't take my word for it. You'll see it when you stop by. The others are eager to see you, you know?"

"I bet." Before going to bed last night, Mike had taken pictures of the cabana with his phone and handed it off to the fairy girls. The three of them had flown down the volcano in Maui until his phone had picked up a signal, at which time his pending messages to Eulalie were finally sent. "How bad is it at home?"

Lily sighed. "Honestly, Romeo? It's hard to say. If we wanted to, it would be pretty easy to just go out and exterminate everybody. But that would complicate things here, wouldn't it?"

Mike nodded. "There's something in the ocean," he explained. "The merfolk were never the target. I hate this term, but they were absolutely collateral damage."

The succubus groaned. "Ugh, of course. So, what, we just need to pound the crap out of a kaiju and we can be done here?"

"Something like that. But I suspect Captain Dickhead is involved. I would have to be pretty dense to think otherwise. And the Order is clearly in on it."

"Actually, they aren't." Lily frowned and leaned against the wall of the cabana. Mike couldn't help but notice the cute tank top she wore over a bikini. It was surprisingly modest for her. "See, shit has gone down a bit back at Paradise so I've been snooping around. The Director absolutely has a raging hard on for you, but I really don't think that he and Francois are working together."

That was surprising, but he believed her.. Mike leaned against the wall next to Lily and she tilted her head onto his shoulder. He felt like he was missing something, a piece that would tie the whole puzzle together. Making gross assumptions, the beast from the deep was likely working for Captain Francois, and

the target was the eggs. If Francois was controlling giant sea monsters, it was no leap to assume that he wanted the eggs for himself. And it wasn't like Mike could casually move the eggs. The volcano was acting as an incubator to keep them alive, the tremendous heat actually powering an array of runes that ensured each of the eggs was being provided the elemental magic it needed.

"What does the Director want?" Mike turned his face toward Lily, the scent of her hair tickling his nostrils. "I mean, I know he thinks the house has something, but this feels oddly personal."

"I'm still working on that. Other than seeing him at breakfast with Beth, the man has remained locked in his office. I can't even get in. The place is heavily warded. If I could just get a drop of his blood, or something to track him by, I could go to him in his dreams and dig around his head."

"I see." He rubbed at the bridge of his nose, then paused when Opal emitted a giant raspberry that broke the silence. Her surface was bubbling like thick soup in a pot, which Mike had long ago learned was how she expressed post-coital contentment.

"You're disgusting," said Lily. The pool of pink slime on the bed was already turning blue again, and a single hand formed above the puddle, fingers curling up into a rude gesture. "By the way, Death says hi and that he misses you."

The rude gesture vanished, followed by a slew of hand signs.

"Yeah, I'll tell him hi back. No, I won't hug him for you." Lily was about to say something else when Ratu stepped around the corner of the cabana. She was in a white dress, much like the one Pelé wore. In her hands was a wicker tray with some food.

"I see we have company." She smiled demurely and looked at the mess on the bed. "I'm grateful to see she left you intact. We have much work to do today. I brought breakfast. Pelé needs to speak with you right away at the guest cabin."

"This place has a guest cabin?" Lily looked around the corner of the cabana. "Just so you know, Romeo, if you ever come here with me, I sleep in that bed with you, okay? Minus the cum stain over there."

This time, both of Opal's hands appeared, middle fingers raised.

“The people that once took care of this place lived here with their families,” Mike explained as he grabbed a sweetroll off the tray. “The guest cabin is just what we are calling the home where Ingrid slept last night.”

“I see. And how is our little narc doing this morning?” Lily leaned over and took a bite of Mike’s pastry before he could.

“I’m afraid that’s what Pelé wishes to discuss with you.” Ratu’s features darkened. “She still hasn’t woken up.”

“Shit.” Mike stuffed the rest of the roll into his mouth before Lily could steal anymore. It tasted of guava and starfruit. “Leath teh wa.”

Ratu frowned at his slurred speech and turned away. Mike was distracted with thoughts of Ingrid and missed what Lily said to Opal, but a third hand had appeared from the gelatinous mess to give her the finger again, so he figured it wasn’t important.

The other homes were built along the edge of the cliff, not nearly as visible as the cabana. It was where the Kahu had stayed, ready to serve her own people or Di at a moment’s notice. Di was largely self sufficient, but the dragon did get lonely. For the last century, she only had Pelé to talk to, and the goddess was frequently busy.

Which reminded him. “Ith Queth—”

Ratu turned her head at him and hissed. “Swallow your food before speaking,” she scolded. “And to answer your question, Quetzalli is down visiting her sister. They rather enjoy each other’s company.”

Mike nodded, and then stopped at the edge of the cabana to grab a canteen that hung from a peg. It was filled with water that had already warmed beneath the sun’s light, and he drank his fill as he followed Ratu. Behind him, he heard Lily snicker and then whisper “You got in trouble.”

They followed the naga to one of the other homes. The buildings were old and clean, but otherwise unused. Constructed of teak with thatched roofs, the door swung open to reveal a room illuminated by a single gas lantern that sat on a nearby table. Pelé stood at Ingrid’s bed, a worried look on her face.

“There you are.” Her eyes shifted past Mike and focused on Lily. “Demon.”

“Old lady.” Lily stuck out her tongue at Pelé and moved to sit back in a nearby chair. Pelé looked at Mike with a hint of irritation.

“She has not yet awoken,” said the goddess. “After discussing with Ratu, I am under the belief that Di’s appearance was too much for this one’s mind and it may have fractured.”

“So what can we do?” asked Mike. Pelé stared at him for a few seconds, then looked at Lily.

“I thought that’s why you brought her. Can she not enter the minds of those who slumber?”

Lily smirked in her chair. “I can indeed.” She leaned forward, her tank top hanging down to reveal her breasts. The bikini top had vanished. “But it’ll cost you.”

The volcano rumbled, causing everyone but Pelé to look around in alarm. Ratu fixed the succubus with a fearsome glare, which the demon promptly ignored.

“This one is spunky.” Pelé wrinkled her nose at Mike. “And, I assume, lava-proof?”

“Yep.”

The goddess chuckled. “Such a woman would have vexed me in my youth. You must be some kind of saint to put up with her antics.”

Mike nodded. “It’s on my resume,” he replied. Lily protested loudly from her chair.

“So you think you can help her?” Pelé sat on the edge of Ingrid’s bed. “Are you even sure you want to help her?”

“Her loyalties may be divided, but for now, she’s one of us.” He looked at Lily. “And if nothing else, we need her. She knows how the Order operates and might be able to help you with that problem you mentioned earlier.”

“I suppose. You always were a sucker for a damsel in distress.” Lily hopped to her feet and walked over to the bed. “You’re lucky that you weren’t in trouble when he met you,” she said to Pelé as she sat next to Ingrid. “We’d be picking out wallpaper for your room, already.”

The volcano rumbled again and Pelé looked at Mike.

“You’re sure about the lava?” she asked again in an innocent tone. Ratu actually snorted.

Lily cleared her throat and crawled on top of Ingrid. Closing her eyes, she pressed her forehead against the slumbering figure. Nearly a minute passed as everybody waited.

“Romeo.” Lily’s eyes snapped open. “We’ve got a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” he asked.

The succubus winced and rolled off to the side. “It’s a real mess in there,” she declared. “Like, shit city, and Ingrid’s the mayor.”

“Why, though?” Mike looked at Ingrid, then Pelé. “You said Di scared her?”

Ratu cleared her throat. “You must understand, even the sight of a dragon from a distance can cow a mortal, and Di is a particularly powerful one. Unprepared, a human could expect feelings of hopelessness, despair, and blind terror. I have heard stories and even witnessed humans who have gone mad at the sight of a dragon. When we first came upon Di, she took us in her mouth to transport us here. Ingrid screamed until she passed out, and now here we are.”

“So we can’t wake her up?”

Lily shook her head. “She’s not truly asleep. This is more like a Humpty Dumpty situation. And apparently my...disposition makes me an unreliable guide.”

Pelé chuckled. “I can’t imagine why,” she said wistfully.

“So what can we do?”

Lily bit her lip and contemplated Ingrid. “You said we need her?”

Mike nodded. “It’s also the right thing to do,” he added.

The succubus groaned. “Okay, fine. Shit.” She gestured for Mike to come over to the bed. “In that case, I need your help. If we go in there together, I think I can tape the cracks together long enough for you to bring her out. But I’ll warn you, she might not be...good when she gets here. There’s quite a bit of trauma.”

Mike had already grabbed a chair and moved it to the side of the bed. "I'm familiar with trauma."

"Is this really the best idea?" asked Pelé. "You realize you're about to go into this woman's head, her Dreamscape, yes? If madness has taken her, it may claim you as well."

"Oh, Romeo here is a Dreamscape expert." Lily wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"It's true," Mike added. "Not a big deal, but I've had plenty of practice. You'd be surprised how many people are in my head right now."

"I..." Pelé frowned for a moment, then nodded her head. "Never mind. Proceed."

"C'mon, Ingy." Lily took Mike by the hand and then pressed her forehead against Ingrid's again. Her tail whipped out and stung Mike in the leg. "It's gonna feel so good with both of us inside you."

"Lily, be—" Mike never got a chance to say nice, his head lolled to one side as his body tried to fight off Lily's sleep venom. When he didn't fall asleep right away, Lily frowned and stung him again.

"Keep forgetting you're almost immune to this now," she muttered as her tail pumped him full of sleep juice. "I have Tink to blame for this. I don't know, maybe just let it happen? What if I say pretty please?"

Mike shivered as a sense of weightlessness formed in the center of his chest and he floated away into the darkness. It felt like nearly an hour passed before the weightless feeling went away. What he had mistaken for darkness was now a black sand beach. Harsh waves gouged themselves against the rocks, slicing away bits of land as they receded. The sky was fractured, as if it were a dome made of broken glass.

"Is this...my Dreamscape?" He stood and surveyed the area. This island was very different from his own.

"Not quite." Lily stood behind him, a serious look on her face. "You're currently in someone else's head. If your own Dreamscape wasn't so strong, I wouldn't even allow you to think about doing something like this. Hold on, let me check something." The succubus stared intently through Mike, as if reading a distant teleprompter. "Think of your brains like two computers running the same

video game. The actual data is on your hard drive and Ingrid's, and you are mostly just sharing stuff like current position and inventory. I'm the server that connects you, and we want to avoid anything else that could actually cross over, like a virus."

"That's...yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Didn't know you were so technical."

The succubus blushed. "Don't mention it. Like, really. I pieced that together from a prior meal."

Mike nodded in understanding and moved to Lily's side. He took her by the hand and squeezed. "Hey. You are what you are and I accept that. You don't have to hide it from me. I love you just the way you are."

Lily's face went through a range of emotions. Finally, she scoffed and shrugged her shoulders. "It's no big deal, just figured you didn't want to hear about all the guys I've been with is all."

"I appreciate that." He wasn't fooled in the least by her demeanor. When he pulled on her hand, she followed. "Now let's go find ourselves a mage."

The halls of Paradise were typically quiet, other than the occasional patrolling knight or visiting guest. Today, however, Beth could feel a tension in the air that made her a little nervous. She was lying on the pool deck in her one-piece, staring out at the waves as they crashed into the sand, creating foaming tidepools that drained seconds later. While trying to concentrate on the ebb and flow of the water, the eerie sense that she was being watched by unfriendly eyes kept her distracted. The last time she had experienced such a thing was that first summer at the cabin in Oregon when her lack of awareness had nearly gotten her killed.

This time, she was far more prepared.

Lily had popped out a bit ago to go check on Mike. Beth had been hesitant to be left alone, but the succubus said she'd only be gone a little while. Kisa was up in the bedroom playing guard duty, and Beth wondered for the tenth time if perhaps she would be better off sharing the space with the cat girl.

Still, it wasn't like she was helpless. If anyone tried to come after her, precognition would give her at least a couple of seconds to react. Being near to so much water, she would actually have more of an edge here than anywhere else.

Looking out at the tidepools, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. She could feel them, the water swirling across the soil, then permeating down through microscopic tunnels left in the sand. Tiny creatures affected the flow of the water as they shifted around looking for their next meal or to avoid becoming one. When the water surged onto the beach, it almost felt like the blood in Beth's body was moving with it.

Nearby, Beth heard someone sniff. She opened her eyes, and looked at her phone, using the reflection of the screen to see who was standing behind her. Up on the patio, a trio of massive columns formed a partial wall that separated the deck from the glass walled dining rooms. A figure in a white button-down was partially visible, mopping at her eyes with a small rag.

It was Aurora. Beth hesitated for a moment, then stood and walked toward the columns. The hostess immediately tried to duck out of sight, but Beth circled around the back and stood between the woman and the dining room door.

"Excuse me," said Aurora as she clutched her clipboard to her chest. The dark rings under her eyes were visible through her concealer. "Did you need something?"

"I did, actually." Beth stepped forward and held her hands up to the woman's face. "May I?"

Aurora looked up at her with eyes that were irritated from crying. "May you what?"

Beth allowed her magic to manifest and then wrapped it around the woman. She used it to exude trust and safety, but nothing more. "I can tell you're having a tough time with something," she said. "While I probably can't fix the issue, I can at least make you a little more comfortable."

"I don't know—"

"Your nose is raw from the sniffles and the skin under your eyes is starting to crack from wiping tears. I can fix that."

Aurora sniffed, doubt in her eyes. "Why would you do that?"

So you'll shut the fuck up. The intrusive thought came in Lily's voice. Beth assumed this was just her brain's attempt to lighten the moment.

“Because I can.” Her fingertips glowed. It had nothing to do with the magic she was about to perform, but Beth figured it was a nice touch.

Aurora closed her eyes and nodded. Beth placed her fingertips on Aurora’s temples and her thumbs on the woman’s cheekbones. Closing her eyes, she forced the woman’s sinuses to clear out and used her magic to accelerate Aurora’s healing. This trick wasn’t good for anything worse than a paper cut, but blood was essentially just water with some extra stuff in it.

When Aurora opened her eyes again, most of the redness was gone. Beth took a step back and examined her handiwork. “I got most of the dark circles,” she said. “Another layer of makeup will probably cover it up.”

The woman sniffed experimentally and then bowed her head. “Thank you. You really didn’t have to do that.”

“Are you upset about what happened on the mountain?” Unless Aurora was going through a nasty breakup, this was the most logical assumption.

“It’s...I don’t know that we should—”

Beth waved dismissively. “Oh, don’t worry about it. I’m already aware that the prevailing theory is that Mike is the culprit and that we’re the bad guys. So don’t worry about beating around the bush with me.”

The hostess frowned. “That’s, uh...”

“It’s fine. I could tell you were hurting is all. For the record, he’s not responsible for it. The attack on your people.” Beth turned to head back to her chair.

“Who was?” Aurora’s voice was strained, but had an edge to it.

Beth contemplated how to answer. She had been inclined to help the woman, and now had the same urge to continue speaking with her. Normally she would say nothing, but right now, her gut said that they should talk.

“They were attacked by night marchers. Your people set camp and had the spirits locked out. Later in the night, Captain Francois broke the barrier in order to cover up an attempt on Leilani’s life as well as Mike’s.” Beth noticed that Aurora was holding her breath. “Francois is some type of necromancer. He has a literal skeleton army that travels with him. They helped take the Order down and all hell broke loose.”

“How do you know all this?” she asked. “We haven’t been able to get hold of anyone.”

Or so you’ve been told. Beth thought back to breakfast with the Director. “I heard it from Mike himself,” she replied. “And when he comes back with Ingrid and Leilani, they’ll vouch for him.”

“Ingrid survived?” Aurora’s eyes flicked back and forth along the deck, verifying that it was empty. “Did...did anyone else?”

“I’m sorry, I honestly don’t know.” Beth shook her head. “From what I know, it was chaos. My own people barely survived, and they got separated. Still, it’s a pretty big jungle, so maybe someone got lucky.”

“Maybe.” Aurora looked down at her clipboard. “My older sister was one of the guides for that mission, and I...she’s all that I have.”

“Then I hope she made it.” Beth put a reassuring arm on the woman’s shoulder. “This sounds silly, but would you like a hug?”

“Um, I...” Aurora lowered the clipboard and stepped into Beth’s embrace. She let out a few sharp cries of agony, and Beth held her tight as she swaddled Aurora in her magic.

Warmth. Safety. Hope. These were things she could give her, even if the reprieve was only temporary. Beth said nothing, content to let the hostess break protocol and just cry for a few seconds. When the woman was done, she wiped her eyes and took a step back.

“Thank you,” she said, then cleared her throat. “I, um, should get to my duties.”

“You probably should.” Beth smiled. “But definitely stay out of our room. Lily is going for shock value now.”

Aurora actually snorted. “She’s the most difficult person I’ve ever dealt with,” she said. “All of you are. Well, not all of you, I mean—”

Beth laughed. “It’s fine. We all live together, trust me, I know.” She moved back toward her chair and stared out at the water. “Think I might go for a swim, see what the merfolk are up to.” She hadn’t made any efforts to speak with them since the incident with Ano. The incident had been slightly mortifying, and her focus had been on sticking around the resort in case her own people needed her.

Now, however, she wanted to get away from that creepy vibe that followed her like a storm cloud.

She wandered the edge of the beach for a few minutes, then started walking along the dock. Beth was nearly halfway down when she spotted movement beneath the water. At least three merfolk disappeared from sight as she continued out to the edge where she sat and stuck her feet in the water.

“Ano?” Staring down at the water, she was a little surprised when he didn’t appear right away. Then again, she had bailed on him and not made any further efforts to come out here since yesterday. It wasn’t like she expected him to sit here all day, waiting to see if she would come back.

Leaning back, she let out a heavy sigh and stared out into the water. There were a few distant clouds that vanished over the horizon, but the skies were otherwise clear. If Ano didn’t show up soon, maybe she would just jump in and go for a swim of her own.

Ano surfaced rather rapidly, his waist and upper body popping up like a cork. “Lady Beth!” he declared, his body tilting back and splashing into the water. He stuck his arms behind his head and floated in place. “I apologize. I was out at the reef visiting with friends when I heard that you were coming.”

“That’s quite a swim,” she said, wondering just how fast merfolk could swim. It had to be similar to what a dolphin could accomplish, right? Probably faster because they could manipulate the water using their magic. “But thank you for coming.”

“Of course.” Ano smiled up at her. “Is there somewhere you wanted to go today?”

“Nowhere specific. I didn’t wear that sunblock today, so it won’t—” She had already been slipping into the water when she felt a chill run up her spine. For just a moment, her eyes locked on the horizon at the distant clouds, then she turned to look back down the dock.

“Is everything okay?” Ano asked.

“No. It really isn’t. I need to go back to my room.” Beth pushed her hands against the edge of the dock when she felt something grab her by the ankles and pull. She took a deep breath as she was yanked beneath the water, then sent a pulse of magic to her eyes so that she could at least see and hear what was about

to happen. Ano sank beneath the waves with her, but they were joined by a pair of merfolk who were currently holding her by her ankles.

“I’m sorry it had to be this way.” Ano gave her a weak grin and looked at the others. “He said it would be easier if we could get you into deeper water, but we were already nervous that you may have seen him out in the bay.”

Who? Beth mouthed, though she pretty much knew the answer.

“The Captain.” Ano sighed as the four of them sank to the bottom. “When the Queen learned that your Caretaker forced his will on the princess and abducted her, it was decided that the best decision would be to turn you over to him so that he could arrange a trade to get her back. I apologize that you’ve been caught up in—”

Beth glared hard enough at him that he shut up. Ano shrugged and turned away from her. “I’m sorry, Lady Beth.”

The merfolk holding her feet moved up to her arms and pulled. She tried to fight them, but doing so meant that she used up what limited air she had. Learning to breathe underwater wasn’t something she was going to magically master right now, which meant she needed to figure out a different solution. She couldn’t even kick or scream properly, not down here beneath the waves.

Scowling, she fixed the merfolk with a wicked glare, her magic churning deep within her belly. She would only get one chance at escape, and she needed to make it count. All merfolk had a relationship with the ocean that went beyond anything she had ever accomplished, so water magic wasn’t the answer. Fighting was out as well because they overpowered her.

They continued to pull. The ground dropped away beneath them, revealing smooth sand and the start of small coral colonies. Schools of fish watched their passage with curiosity before returning to all the things that fish did.

Beth looked at her captors. One was a man, the other a woman. Frowning, she decided to play all her cards at once and pulled her body forward until her hands were next to her face. The merfolk looked back briefly, but paid her no attention.

Opening her mouth wide, she bit the merwoman’s hand as hard as she could. The merwoman cried out in surprise and yanked her hand away, leaving a red cloud of blood in the water. Beth used her free hand to grab the merman by

the crotch and forced her magic into his body, causing his whole body to jerk erratically as he blew his load immediately in the water.

Ano was just turning around to see what had happened when Beth begged the water to carry her to shore on its waves. The merfolk were expert swimmers, but even they couldn't compete with the swirling mass that sucked Beth toward the surface and then carried her toward the beach. She made an attempt to body surf, but quickly lost control as the massive wave turned her upside down and slammed her into the beach with a thud.

Groaning, Beth tried to stand, but got caught in the face by another wave. She had been deposited ass first, and the sting of salt swished through her sinuses. Frantically backpedaling, her body was suddenly very heavy.

"Beth!" Ano called from maybe fifteen feet behind her. The sand trembled beneath her body, and she felt it shift and sink as the water pulled it apart. The water still ahead of her turned into a swirling mass that threatened to suck her out to sea, but she rolled sideways and avoided the artificial rip tide that Ano had created. Grunting, she closed her eyes and sent her will into the ocean, seeking out Ano.

If she wanted, she could spin the water in an attempt to pull him under. Or maybe she could ask the waves to dunk him and buy her a couple of seconds to pull herself onto the beach. But either of these choices weren't likely to work, so she relied on something else entirely.

Using her magic, she formed a massive fist in the water and punched Ano right in his mermaid's purse.

"Gah." The merman groaned as blue veins formed all along his forehead and temples. Beth felt his grasp of the magic release, and she scrambled to her feet and sprinted up the sand toward the chairs. A male member of the serving staff had stopped at the top of the hill, staring down at Beth in alarm. His eyes rapidly danced back and forth between Beth and the injured merman, then looked further out. Beth turned back to see dark shapes surface out in the bay, their piscine features twisted in anger.

"It's a bit too rough out there," she said, stopping by her chair to pick up her towel. She wrapped it around her waist, wincing inwardly at the scrapes all up and down her legs as they vanished into darkness. "Definitely a red flag day."

Beth turned back one last time, her eyes searching the horizon. She didn't know where Captain Francois was hiding his ship, but the man had just ruined the ocean for her. If he was lucky, Mike would get to him before she did.

"So where do you think we are, exactly?" Mike stopped to gaze back out at the ocean. The water was nearly black in places, and he had already seen a couple of those weird Dreamscape entities surface briefly to watch them.

"If I had to guess, maybe Mediterranean waters. This place seems like a proper bastardization of it." Lily tilted her head to one side and narrowed her eyes. "Something is coming."

"Ingrid?"

"Nope. We're getting close to where she's hiding, though. It's some manifestation of her subcon—there it is." Lily pointed up toward a winged beast in the sky that was already diving at them. Mike leapt backward, buoyed onto the wind like a kite as the creature crashed into the sand where they had been standing. The impact crater was nearly twenty feet across, and their attacker was busy scrambling to its feet. It looked like it was cobbled together from bits of leather and string with teeth made of jagged metal.

"Is that thing supposed to be a pterodactyl?" he asked. The pterodactyl-thing opened its mouth to reveal a ball of fire that it launched upward at the two of them. He shifted to the side, allowing the projectile to sail past him. "That would be a no."

"It's supposed to be a drake." Lily let the next fireball wash over her. "This thing is tied directly to some of her deepest fears and phobias. Do you want to take it out or should I?"

"Stuff in her head can't hurt me, right?" Mike floated to the side again as a fireball whizzed past him.

"This thing won't. It's just your basic nightmare material. Those things out there absolutely could, though." Lily pointed toward the water. Mike watched a shadowy figure dip beneath the waves. "You're technically more vulnerable here than your own skull."

"So I could just—" Mike fell out of the sky as the drake launched itself toward him. He landed harmlessly in the sand as the creature shrieked with fury. It

flapped its wings above him and then spat a jet of flames in his direction. Summoning up a wall of sand, he crouched behind it and let the fire wash over the top.

“You’re really overthinking this,” said Lily. “You’re in someone else’s dream. Everything in here is pretty much made of paper. It’s only as strong as you believe it to be.”

“That fire still feels hot,” he yelled back, wincing from the heat.

“Ugh, do I need to give you the speech from the *Matrix*?” Lily stood next to him now, tapping her foot impatiently.

“No,” he muttered. “But if you want to wear a certain leather outfit for me later...”

Lily’s outfit blurred and she was now in tight leather pants with a matching tank top that looked painted on. “If you impress me, I’ll let you nut in my ass while pretending to be the actress from the movie.” She lifted her mirrored sunglasses and licked her lips. “In the real world.”

“I am the One!” Mike loudly declared as he threw himself into the sky. The drake squawked in alarm as his fist slammed into its skull, crumpling the creature into a literal ball of paper that fell down onto the beach. The wind caught it, causing it to tumble out into the water where the dark things lay waiting.

Mike landed in the sand, laughing as he brushed himself off. “How was that?” he asked. Lily smirked at him and put her shades back on.

“I guess it was okay,” she said as she turned away.

“You’re a tease.”

“And you like it.” Lily swayed her ass as she continued along the beach. “Guess you’ll just have to wait and see.”

Mike groaned, but it was playful. This was simply the game they played. He was fairly certain Lily kept a mental list of all the things she had promised or threatened to do to him, so it wouldn’t surprise him if she waited thirty years to make good on her promise.

“Dear future me,” he whispered. “You’re welcome.”

The beach stretched dramatically, as if someone had grabbed the edge of the world and pulled it tight. A column of smoke appeared up ahead. Circling above were more of the macabre, patchwork drakes that they had already faced off against.

“So out of curiosity, what makes this different from a regular dream,” he asked. “You said Ingrid’s mind is broken, but other than looking spooky, this seems like an ordinary nightmare.”

“It’s stuff you can’t see.” Lily pointed at the sky. “Each of those cracks goes somewhere. Some to her childhood, others to adulthood. But they aren’t regular memories. They’re deep seated in very primal emotions. The core of who Ingrid is lies up ahead. If that sky were to crack anymore, she could end up trapped in an endless cycle of personal torment and might go catatonic. When I came in here earlier, she freaked out when she saw me and things got worse.”

“And you think I can do better?”

“She likes you.” Lily chuckled. “And I mean that in every way possible. We’re talking latent sexual awakenings, the whole nine yards.”

Mike ignored the comment. “Out of curiosity, why not just make yourself look like me?”

“Don’t mistake her mental fragility for weakness.” Lily turned to walk backward. “She would absolutely suspect something is up. In fact, she’s probably one of the stronger people I’ve met in this manner. The only reason this happened is because you’ve already made her question so many facets of her life. That, combined with the trauma of losing her partner and being forced to relive losing her family as a child, had her in a weakened state. Meeting Di tipped her over.” The succubus paused. “Seriously, though. How big is this dragon? In her memories, it’s practically the size of a skyscraper.”

“Not skyscraper sized,” Mike replied. “But she would struggle to fit in our front yard.”

Lily whistled appreciatively. “I’ve got to meet her.”

“If you do, play nice.”

“I always play nice.”

“She could swallow you by accident.”

“Kinky.” Lily paused for a moment and turned around. “Okay, she’s up ahead. Time for me to be the devil on your shoulder.”

“What does that even—” He watched as Lily shrank down to the size of Daisy and then flew to land on his shoulder. “I know for a fact that you could just turn invisible.”

Lily stuck out her tongue and licked his neck. “Get moving, Romeo,” she said in a high-pitched voice. “And try not to swallow me by accident.”

“Is this some new kink you have?”

The tiny succubus shrugged. “Unless you’re going to swallow me and find out, we’ll never know. Now get moving before this egg cracks for good.”

He looked up at the sky and winced. There were more cracks than ever, and pieces of the sky had fallen away to reveal dark spaces behind them. Instead of stars, he saw blinking lights that reminded him far more of hungry, glowing eyes in the dark.

“Lily? What am I looking at?”

“I honestly have no idea, Romeo. That isn’t something she’s creating. You need to hurry, otherwise I’m going to wake you up before we find out.”

Mike broke into a jog, the landscape blurring and smearing out behind him. The black sand became stiff beneath his feet, giving way to jagged rocks that broke through the surface like teeth. A column of smoke led him to the remains of a disproportionately sized airplane. It looked like something that was perfect for island hopping, but was roughly the size of a 737.

“Dream logic,” he muttered. The plane was magnified in size by its importance and the size difference between an adult and a child. His skin sizzled when he placed his palms against the hot metal, but it didn’t hurt. Inside, several people screamed as they burned away, a sound he was all too familiar with from his own nightmares. He dug his fingers into the fuselage which parted like clay. With minimal effort, he started peeling the metal back.

“I wouldn’t,” said Lily in his ear. “Her family died in this crash and were eaten by drakes. Whatever might fall out if you do that will be her worst visualization of the experience. Better you leave them in there.”

“Seriously?” Mike had a tough time ignoring the wails of agony.

“They aren’t real. You are, I am, and so is she.” Lily moved to the edge of his shoulder and pointed past the plane. “You’ll find her past here, tucked away in the rocks.”

Annoyed that he had to leave Ingrid’s memories to their fate, he found a gap beneath the broken body of the plane to squirm through. The aircraft tried to sink into the ground and pin him in place, but he ignored the heavy weight of the plane and the flames crawling across his body. On the other side of the plane, the sky was packed with more of the drakes, but they were busy circling above an outcropping of rocks that were steeped together in a manner that reminded him of a temple.

“In there?” he asked.

“Hurry,” Lily replied.

Mike ran toward the rocks. A drake landed in front of him, but he vaulted over it. When another swooped down to intercept him with jaws open wide, he dove down its gullet and pierced through the back of its body like a bullet.

“Do anything for you?” he asked the demon on his shoulder. Lily snorted, but didn’t reply. A third drake had crammed its upper body into a small cave partially flooded with water, its sinewy tail whipping back and forth. Mike grabbed the tail and yanked the creature out. Digging his heels into the sand, he twisted his body hard, causing the drake to spin in the air. After two good spins, he hurled the drake into the sky where it collided with several others. The beasts exploded into fiery confetti that rained down onto the sand.

“That may have done something for me,” Lily whispered in his ears.

“If that’s the case, I have the perfect fantasy we could explore,” he replied as he approached the cave. “But you’ll have to wear pink and promise to bake me a cake.”

“Leave it to you to complicate a simple plumber fantasy.” The succubus bit his ear lobe playfully. “I’ll put it on the list.”

“Yahoo,” he whispered in a bad accent, then stepped into the darkness of the cave. “Hello? Is anyone in here?” Snapping his fingers, he summoned the lightning spiders, which scattered along the inner rocks. Realizing that spiders may be too scary, he bent the dream to his will and forced them to turn into harmless balls of light. “Ingrid?”

“Daddy?” Up ahead, somebody sniffled. “Is that you?”

Mike felt his chest tighten at the sound of a child’s voice. “No, sweetheart, but I’m here to help you.”

“There are monsters outside. Big ones with teeth.” A crouched form in the back of the cave shifted and slid free of the darkness. It was clearly Ingrid, but the woman was now a young girl in a tattered blue dress. “They crashed my parent’s plane.”

“I know.” He took a step toward her, but Ingrid stepped back. The tinkling sound of glass on rock reverberated through the cave and they looked up at the darkened ceiling. Despite the cave only being maybe twenty feet tall on the outside, the cathedral ceilings disappeared into the darkness above. Cold water swirled in from outside, hugging Mike’s calves and sapping heat from them.

“The tide is coming in.” Ingrid hugged herself and shivered. “When it does, the crabs will try to eat the skin off your legs. You have to keep moving your feet.” The water had already crept up to her knees. “I want my mommy.”

Mike took a deep breath out of habit. He knew what it was like to be stuck in an endless cycle of self torment. It had taken Naia’s magic to snap him out of it, but even then, there had been a period of adjustment. Part of him was tempted to just grab Ingrid and drag her away from this place, but he doubted that would even work. After all, this dream was centered around Ingrid herself.

“So I’m still in my head and she’s in hers, right?” Mike looked at his shoulder. Lily wasn’t there.

“That’s right,” she replied from behind his ear. He assumed that she was hiding from Ingrid’s view. “You’re in her dream, but it’s your Dreamscape that is replicating what she sees.”

The cave shuddered. Mike looked over his shoulder to see that a drake had forced its oversized head into the entrance and was snapping at the two of them. Its teeth always just missed him, and the hot breath on his skin felt like a sunburn.

“Can I take it over?” he asked, looking back at Ingrid. She had pressed herself against the back wall and was already alternating legs to stand.

“Not really,” Lily replied. “She needs to cede control, but isn’t really aware that she’s in charge of this place.”

“I see.” Mike turned to face the drake. If he was going to get through to Ingrid, he needed to appeal to her logic. Right now, she was raw emotion and terror. If he wanted, he could pull the drake apart, but what then? Would another come take its place? Taking Ingrid outside would only force her to see the wreckage of her plane.

He took a step backward, followed by another. Each time, the drake became more aggressive, its teeth gnashing just inches away. It couldn't really hurt him, but Ingrid didn't know that. The moment his back hit the wall, the cathedral-sized cave folded in on the two of them, the walls now narrow enough that he had to turn sideways.

“There isn't room for both of us,” Ingrid whimpered as the drake snapped its teeth.

Mike turned to look at her. “There is if you don't mind getting picked up,” he said. “My name is Mike, by the way. We met before.”

There was a flicker of recognition in her eyes, but it was brief. The drake let out a shriek that shook the air, its jaw open wide. Mike reached out and snatched its tongue, then yanked so hard that the creature slammed its head into the rocks. The creature withdrew its head, leaving him alone with Ingrid.

“We did?” Ingrid studied his face, her eyes wide in the darkness.

Mike summoned a ball of light, which he held out in front of her. “Maybe you could be my helper,” he said, putting the ball of light in her hands. “I can keep you up out of the water, and you can hold that up for both of us to see. What do you think?”

Ingrid hugged the ball of light to her chest like a security blanket and nodded. Mike knelt down and let her scramble onto his back. The two of them barely fit, but when he rose, little crabs fell off of Ingrid's feet.

“I don't remember this part,” she said, and a ripple went through the dream.

“That's because this is new,” he replied. “I wasn't around on the day of your accident, but I am today.”

“That makes sense,” she muttered as she toyed with the light. “When the plane crashed, others survived, you know. I was the only one small enough to escape.”

“That happened to me once,” he replied, leaning against the wall. Crabs swarmed his legs, taking phantom chunks out of his skin, but he ignored them. “I was in a car accident and it caught on fire.”

“I know,” Ingrid whispered, her voice suddenly mature and distant, as if it were coming from outside. “I remember it from your file.”

“When you’re little, everything is at least ten times scarier because the world seems so big. We like to think it will be easier once we’re all grown up, but I don’t think that’s true. Even as a grown-up, a lot of that stuff followed me.” Outside, a drake shrieked and pressed its face into the opening. “Not now, we’re talking,” Mike said, and another ripple went through the dream. The drake nodded and moved away.

“That didn’t happen either,” Ingrid said, her voice once more coming from outside the cave.

“That’s because I’m here,” Mike explained, though the drake’s reaction lacked any real logic. “I’m like Gandalf, or whatever. I drop by and impart knowledge, and nothing bad happens while I’m here.”

“I never watched those movies.” Ingrid shifted on his back. “Dragons terrify me.”

“Well, the dragon was primarily in *The Hobbit*, but that’s okay. Are you scared of them because of the drakes?”

He felt her nod against his back, but her voice came from elsewhere. “That’s what I thought they were when I was a child,” she said. “They’re not really the same, but that doesn’t really matter now, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t.” He felt a presence watching them and felt Ingrid tense up so hard that the cave actually squeezed them. He looked toward the entrance and saw a massive eye peering into the cave. It looked suspiciously similar to Di’s. “You’ll have to come back later,” he told it. “We’re talking about important stuff right now.”

There was a long pause, and the eye vanished, followed by the tremors of something big walking away.

“It listened to you,” she said.

“Of course it did,” he replied. “I’ve really only met two dragons, but both of them were very friendly to me. Maybe I’m part dragon?”

“I doubt it.” Ingrid’s voice was child-like once more. “Maybe you’re just very brave. I wish I could be brave.”

“Bravery means being strong even when you might fail. You seem pretty brave to me, facing down all these monsters while stuck in a cave.”

“I’m not brave,” she replied. “I’m just a kid.”

“Kids can be brave. It just looks a little different.” The tight walls of the cave loosened up. “I have kids. Did you know that?”

“Kids?” asked Ingrid from outside the cave once more. Mike considered the child on his back. Was Ingrid’s mind in two separate places? Clearly, both halves were listening to him “I thought you only had one?”

“Nice going,” muttered Lily in his ear.

“My youngest is very shy,” he replied, cursing himself. Talking to Ingrid had reminded him of Callisto and Grace, and he had slipped into Dad mode. “Doesn’t talk to anybody, so I don’t take her anywhere.”

“Maybe taking her places would encourage her to speak more, or whatever.” The child on his back shifted her weight, then wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’m really tired.”

“I bet you are. If you want, we could probably find somewhere more comfortable to sit. I know a place that isn’t far from here where you could relax.” He had an idea, but needed Ingrid’s cooperation.

“But what about the drakes?”

“They’re not invited,” he said. “And can I tell you a secret? You have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“What is it?” This time, he heard both adult Ingrid and child Ingrid answer him.

“I live in a house full of magical people,” he said, looking over his shoulder. The young girl’s eyes had gone wide. “They taught me how to use magic. Maybe they’ll teach you magic, too.”

“I already know magic.” Adult Ingrid spoke now, her voice coming from the shadows. The entrance of the cave vanished and they were plunged into darkness, save for the magical light in the child’s hands. Adult Ingrid stepped forward into the light, her features twisted and angry. “And it wasn’t enough.”

“Enough for what?” he asked.

“I devoted my whole life to becoming stronger,” she said, sneering at the two of them. “To be able to face off against the things that lurk in the dark. And it wasn’t enough.”

“How do you figure?”

“I’m still here.” Ingrid pointed a finger at the younger version of herself. “A part of me never left this cave, Mike. I pursued magic so that nobody else would become that scared little girl, forced to lick condensation off the walls for days to survive while the crabs ate her feet.”

“And?” Mike turned to face Ingrid, one arm protectively wrapped around the girl on his back. “There’s no magical spell that can fix the past, you know.”

Ingrid sighed and turned away from him. He noticed that the darkness seemed to eat her away, leaving only bits of her behind. “How did you do it, Mike? How did you move past what you went through as a kid?”

“I found people to support me. They became my family.” He moved toward Ingrid. “It all started when I met some incredible women that taught me it was possible to be amazing, no matter what or where you came from.”

Ingrid looked over her shoulder at him, her features dubious. “You’re really going to tell me that you found inner peace just by meeting some people?”

Mike shrugged. “Well, that’s just it. I got lucky. That’s sort of my thing these days. I was given an opportunity to better myself and I took it. But you don’t have to take my word for it, you can meet them for yourself.”

“We’re the only people in here,” said Ingrid. “This is a dream, right?”

He nodded. “It might be a dream, but it’s very real. I’m not just some figment of your imagination. I’m actually in here, with you. Do you remember anything that—”

The ground shook beneath him, and Lily yanked hard on his earlobe.

“Not yet,” she whispered.

Mike stared at Ingrid for several seconds as the dream stabilized once more. He looked over his shoulder at the child on his back. “So are you ready to see some magic?”

“I already told you. I know magic.” Adult Ingrid crossed her arms.

“I’m going to show your inner child a different kind of magic.” Mike turned away from Ingrid. “You’re welcome to come too, if you want.”

Ingrid snorted, but took a step in his direction. “You don’t actually have to carry her,” she said. “She’s not real.”

“That’s not true for a moment.” Mike reached over his shoulder and patted young Ingrid on the head. “She’s every bit as real as you or I. Besides, if I don’t carry her out of here, how will she ever escape this cave?”

“Good job, Romeo. I’ll do the next part.” Lily slid into Mike’s collar and vanished. Ingrid followed behind him once he started walking, the dream crumbling in places as they walked toward a distant light. It was similar to the entrance he had come through, but daylight and seagulls had replaced a crashed plane and drakes.

“This is my home,” he announced, stepping onto the soil. He paused to set young Ingrid down, the girl now rubbing her eyes. “My house is just up the hill.”

“This is stupid,” muttered Ingrid. Even though she had stepped free of the cave, the darkness clung to her like ink.

Mike shrugged. “Better than having crabs eat our feet.” He looked at the girl at his side. “Are you hungry? I have a friend who loves to cook.”

Young Ingrid nodded, and he took her up the beach to the house. Ingrid stood in the background as Mike introduced her younger self to everyone who came out to greet them. They spent the majority of a day there, visiting with the others and playing games. Naia initiated a massive water fight that nearly everyone participated in, and Sofia kept bringing out huge trays of food which the child ate greedily from. Cecilia taught everyone a song in her native tongue, then spent an hour sharing fae songs with them that had Mike on the edge of tears more than once.

On three different occasions, the drakes arrived. Each time, they were torn apart by Abella, who kept her eyes on the sky. Young Ingrid hugged the gargoyle more than once in appreciation.

It was late afternoon when Lily came sauntering down the trail, a smug look on her face. Both adult and young Ingrid noticed her, but neither paid her any mind.

“It’s only been half an hour in the real world,” she said, leaning in to place a kiss on Mike’s chin. “But I think it’s working.”

“Really?” He looked at the adult version of Ingrid scowling from the sidelines. “It doesn’t seem like it. And which version is really her, anyway?”

“They both are. But you knew that already, didn’t you?”

He shrugged. “I suspected, but I’m hardly an expert.”

The succubus slid her arm through his. “I’m having very unclean thoughts about you,” she said with a grin. “It’s too bad we have company. Think of all the fun we could be having.”

“Put it on the list.” He gave her butt a playful swat and noticed immediately that she was wearing leather pants. “Out of curiosity, how much of this will she even remember?”

Lily thought for a moment before answering. “As far as I can tell, not a whole lot. Her mind is still fragmented, but at least it’s calm. You’ve got your work cut out for you, but I have faith.” She pecked him on the cheek, made sure child Ingrid wasn’t looking, then grabbed his crotch. “I’m doing this in real life, too. That old lady is giving me a real dirty look.”

Mike winced. “Just so you know, that’s Pelé.”

“I know.” Lily bit his lip playfully and wandered toward the beach. “Don’t mind me, I’m just here to get a tan.”

Thinking on Lily’s words, Mike watched both versions of Ingrid, curious what it would take to wake the women up. The child version seemed perfectly content to be at the center of attention, but adult Ingrid was just a bundle of anger, watching from the shadows.

It was nearly sunset when Tink and Kisa led young Ingrid down to the beach to look for rainbow-colored seashells. Ingrid the adult finally stepped free of the sidelines and shook her head as she watched her younger self go running off.

“It isn’t fair,” she muttered, her eyes glistening. “She looks so...happy.”

“And you think she doesn’t deserve happiness?” Mike raised an eyebrow at Ingrid. “Don’t you deserve happiness?”

“You act like my therapist.”

“I’ve had a lot of therapy.”

Ingrid turned and looked back at the house and all of its people, scattered across the grounds. “I don’t pretend to fully understand all of this,” she said. “But I suppose it has its place.”

“This is home. Home is where your heart is.” Mike gestured at the women around him. “No matter what happens in my life, these are the people who are waiting to be there for me. In return, I’m there for them. We’re a family.”

The mage gave him a hard stare. “I’m not falling for that found family bullshit. Relationships are transactional. You can try to sell me on love and happiness, but in reality, none of these people would be here if you didn’t have something to offer them.” She pointed at Abella, who stood nearby with her arms crossed and her eyes on the sky. “She’s your muscle. You give her a place to stay, she beats shit up for you. And then there’s Ratu. Magic. I’m not sure about the goblin, I have huge doubts that you keep her around to clean stuff.”

“Fix stuff,” Mike corrected. “And just because we all have our parts to play doesn’t mean we’re lying to ourselves.”

Ingrid snorted. “Mark my words. One day, this place will fall apart because someone won’t be pulling their own weight. Everything will collapse.”

“You have trust issues.”

“That’s because the only person I trust is myself.” Ingrid pointed at her face. “I became strong so that I would never feel like that little girl again. And you know what? I let myself down. That fear, it all came back to me when we were chased by spirits, attacked by skeletons, and then that dragon—”

“You don’t actually trust yourself.” Mike shook his head. “You can give me speeches about the way things actually are, but you’re wrong.” Almost like magic, everything fell into place.

“Prove it,” said Ingrid. “Prove me wrong.”

“Oh, that’s easy. That little girl, the one down at the beach. You said it yourself earlier, that she doesn’t matter. She saw and experienced terrible things that you, as an adult, have to live with. Well I hate to tell you this, but you’re still that little girl. When we grow up and become adults, we don’t magically stop being the people we were. We carry them inside us.

“When I was little, my mother was a tyrant. I spent a lot of years trying to forget, but even just the memory of her was enough to yank me back to years of emotional abuse. Nobody was there to take care of that small, frightened child. And yes, it took a bit of magic and more than a few lucky breaks, but I learned that even though I’m an adult now, that child still exists. If I don’t take care of him, who will?”

Ingrid groaned. “Ugh, this is more of that ‘love yourself’ bullshit. I hear it in therapy all the time.”

“Wrong.” Mike gestured toward the beach, where young Ingrid and Tink were dancing around a massive conch shell covered in glitter. “That little girl watched monsters eat her parents, but still has enough love in her heart to trust a green-skinned stranger to show her wonders on the beach. Where’s your sense of wonder, Ingrid? When did you forget how to find joy, to see the magic in ordinary things? You’ve worked so hard to drive that little girl away that the only reason she’s still stuck in that cave is that you refuse to acknowledge that part of you. I’m glad that you’re a survivor, I don’t need to explain that to you. But until you learn to love that little girl, that forgotten part of yourself, you will never be able to thrive.”

Ingrid’s face turned red and she drew a wand from her pocket and pointed it in his direction. Mike crossed his arms and glared at her.

“Go ahead. Setting me on fire won’t change the fact that you aren’t whole. And while you will never truly be whole again, she’s the closest thing you will ever come to it.”

“You don’t understand,” Ingrid hissed, tears in her eyes. “It’s too hard.”

“Hard things are worth doing.” Mike stepped forward and touched Ingrid’s wand. It popped like a bubble. “So maybe it’s time you get to know yourself a little better. C’mon. I’ll help.”

He took her by the hand, and she wordlessly followed him down to the beach. Child Ingrid paused what she was doing to watch them approach, a technicolor crab in her hands. Slashes of red, blue, and green were all over her arms.

“Look what I found,” she declared, then ran up to herself. “This one doesn’t bite, he just leaves paint marks!” Sure enough, the crab took a swipe at her fingers, leaving behind a streak of gold.

Ingrid let go of Mike’s hand and knelt in front of her younger self. Mike took a step back and watched, the surf becoming loud enough to drown out their conversation.

“You’re giving me DILF vibes so hard right now,” said Lily from nearby. She was sitting in a lounge chair with a massive margarita glass stuck in the sand. “Not going to listen in on their conversation?”

“Nope.” Mike moved to sit with Lily. “Some things are meant to be private.”

They watched and waited as Ingrid’s inner child showed her the things she had found on the beach. There were plenty of tears followed by laughter, and Ingrid eventually looked up at Mike, nodded, then crouched down to pick herself up. Together, they walked along the beach until they disappeared like ghosts.

“Good job, Romeo.” Lily pushed him down on the chair. “Guess who’s stirring in the real world? I’ve slowed things down a bit. You can totally have your way with me for a couple of hours if you want, it will only be a minute there.”

Mike grinned. “You know, that sounds like a lot of—” He heard a loud crack from above and rolled onto his back as a pane of glass fell out of the sky and shattered right next to them. Up above, a dark void had formed and eyes, hundreds of them, peered through the gap.

“What the actual fuck?” Lily jumped to her feet. “I understand why we saw them in her head, but they shouldn’t be here! Why are they here?”

“That would be my fault, I’m afraid.” The husky voice carried over the surf, and Mike turned his head to see Titania standing atop a nearby rock, all four of

her arms crossed over her chest. “They sensed my presence and have latched on. A temporary issue, I assure you.”

“Wait, what are you—” Lily popped out of existence, leaving behind rainbow smoke.

“What did you do?” Mike asked, looking at where Lily had been.

The Queen of the Fae stepped down onto the beach, silver and golden flowers forming beneath her feet. “You and I need to have a talk, Caretaker. The fate of your world depends on it.”