

Sudden But Inevitable

Beth stood on the dock, watching as the boats carrying Mike and the others vanished around the edge of the island. She held a mimosa in one hand and clutched her hat against her head with the other to keep the wind from carrying it away. She was a little frustrated that she couldn't go with them, but it did come with certain perks.

Nearby, a figure surfaced from the water. It was a merman with a smooth, glistening torso and well defined pecs. He had dark skin and raven colored hair that had been decorated with glass beads. Thick tribal bands had been tattooed along his chest and shoulders, creating shadows that somehow gave him more definition.

"Will you be joining us today, Lady Radley?" His smile was genuine, and he extended a hand toward her. "I was informed you may enjoy a tour of one of our local reefs. It's off limits to all but our most distinguished guests."

Beth grinned and drank the rest of her mimosa in one go. "I would be happy to join you," she said. "What is your name?"

"I am Ano." The merman used his tail to propel himself out of the water enough that he performed a bow. "You will be in my care today."

"Lovely." Beth took off her hat and pulled her sundress over her head. She was wearing a purple one-piece swimsuit with white stripes along the edges. "I'll be with you in just a moment."

She walked toward the beach where a young woman, an Order attendant, was waiting. Beth handed over the hat, empty glass, and sundress.

"Can you make sure those don't blow away?" she asked. "Looks like I'm going swimming."

The woman nodded, then took the bundle up to where breakfast had been served. Aurora stood there, her eyes on the horizon as if she was deep in thought. Beth wasn't certain what the woman might be thinking about, but figured it probably had to do with Lily refusing to leave her room again.

Thinking of the succubus, Beth turned her gaze upward. Lily was watching from above, and took a moment to give Beth the finger.

“Never change, Lily.” Beth smirked and turned her attention back toward the dock. Ano was bobbing up and down with the waves, patiently watching her. She tried to act casual, her hips swaying as she walked to the end of the dock.

“Are you ready?” asked Ano with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. “Did you want to bring your snorkel gear?”

“I don’t need it.” Beth leapt from the dock, summoning her magic. The water embraced her when she broke the surface, helping her sink to the sand fifteen feet below. Her magic helped her to maintain a thin bubble of air around her eyes, allowing her to see as if she was using goggles. Ano was ten feet back, hovering above the sand as he watched her.

Pinching her nose, Beth blew outward in an attempt to equalize the pressure in her ears. This was something she hadn’t quite figured out how to do using her magic, but she would get there eventually. She swam toward the merman, who held out his hand.

“Let me know when you need air,” he said, his voice soft against her ears. His lips hadn’t moved, which meant there was likely magic involved. Beth vowed to pay close attention and see if it was something she could imitate. She took Ano’s hand and allowed him to pull her as they headed away from the shoreline.

They swam for several minutes before she tapped Ano’s arm and he took her to the surface. While she could hold her breath for a really long time, she couldn’t do it consecutively, so they swam along the top of the waves for a while, with Ano’s tail propelling them forward at high speed. The occasional merperson was sometimes spotted below, interacting with animals or collecting trash.

“Picking up after humans is a full time job,” Ano noted when Beth stopped for a minute to watch some merchildren gather up plastic bags into a ball that they tucked into woven seaweed tote bags. She nodded sadly at him and then they continued outward. Almost half an hour after leaving the shore, the azure depths around them vanished as a small hill made of sand and coral emerged from the darkness.

The tapestry of life painted across the raised ocean floor was far more elaborate than anything Beth had ever seen before. Vibrant colors and an abundance of wildlife held her attention for so long that the burning in her lungs was the only indication that she was out of breath. Ano assisted her to the surface, where she bobbed up and down in the waves, gasping for air.

“There’s no need to rush,” he reassured her. “We’ve got plenty of time.”

Beth smiled at the merman, then allowed her body to float along the surface. He was right, there would be ample time for exploration. She was all nerves and excitement right now, and her magic wasn’t helping. It was forming new connections in the sea, acting like sonar as it swept across the coral below and explored the depths of every nook and cranny. If she closed her eyes, she could see everything in her mind’s eye. The ocean was a place of power, and she was officially plugged into it.

“I’m ready,” she said, then took a few deep breaths before commanding the water to pull her beneath. Ano followed, diving upside down and hovering nearby as Beth descended nearly thirty feet to the aquatic world below. She pinched her nose and blew the air out of her ears.

The marine life swirled around her, inquisitive about this new interloper. Local fish formed a circle, eyeing her curiously as her feet reached the bottom. She closed her eyes for a moment to take in the distant song of some whales off the coast, the meaning of their words almost intelligible to her. Kneeling in the sand, she sank her fingers deep into the grains. Tiny creatures emerged from nearby holes to come visit, and a thin stream of bubbles squeezed between Beth’s lips as she giggled with joy.

Ano watched her in awe, still hovering inverted nearby. Beth could see that his nostrils had actually folded shut on their own, and a thin line of gills had opened along his neck and jawline. Holding out her hands, she stifled a laugh when a brave parrot fish swam close and attempted to nibble at her fingernails. Though she had been born above the waves, this place truly felt like home.

She lost track of time as she navigated the reef, greeting creatures who came out to meet her every time she descended back into their world. Some of the smaller fish swam in her shadow, as if she had become their guardian from predators. A sea turtle came in from the depths of the ocean and swam around her, breaking away only to chase down some delicious seagrass.

As the early hours passed, she couldn’t help but cast her gaze in Ano’s direction. The merman had remained largely silent, his own eyes eager on her. On a couple of occasions, his semi-erect cock emerged from a sheath underneath his scales, dancing around like a fishing lure before going back into hiding.

Years of sexual fantasies about the merfolk were now culminating into a single moment, and Beth was absolutely determined to explore this whole new

world to its fullest. During a particularly deep dive, she made long eye contact with Ano and pulled the top of her swimsuit down to reveal her breasts. She squeezed them a few times, then made a come hither gesture in his direction.

Ano sank into the depths with her, his cock sliding free of its sheath and twitching in anticipation. Unable to speak to the merman, Beth communicated with her body, pressing herself tight against him. She ran her hands across his powerful chest and shoulders before placing her lips against his. As their tongues intertwined, Ano's hands found her hips and he pressed himself against her as their bodies spiraled beneath the waves. His fins were soft to the touch, and Beth squeezed his ass, or whatever it actually was. Now wasn't the time to ask.

The merman was kissing his way down her neck when she grabbed his cock and was more than a little surprised when it grabbed back. Excited to explore Ano's body, Beth teased the head of his shaft with her thumb and started jerking him off. The merman tensed up, then let out a groan of pleasure as he blew his load in the water.

Frowning, Beth watched as the prismatic spray of mer-cum drifted away from them to be eagerly gobbled up by the fish. The cock in her hand was already softening, and Ano had started to drift away.

Wait, what? Stunned, she swam to the surface, pulling the straps of her suit back up and over her shoulders. When she broke through the waves, she waited for Ano to appear. The merman was all smiles when he did.

"Sorry about that," he said with a grin. "I find the idea of you very exciting is all."

"That's okay," she replied. "Do you think you could get it up again?"

"Oh, certainly," he said. "Though if you want a proper floundering, you'll want to get the bottom of your suit off so that I can get all the way in before I come."

She chewed on those words for a moment, a frown forming on her face. "You don't think you can get it in before you come?"

Ano's delight faded from his face, and he shrugged his shoulders. "I may get in a few thrusts if I try really hard. Actually, that lotion you're wearing will probably help. I might even last a whole minute!"

“My lotion? Do you mean my sunscreen?” She was puzzled now. “How would that help you last longer?”

“It smells pretty bad,” he admitted. “But that can be a good thing!”

Horrified, Beth held up her arm and took a sniff. All she got was the scent of salt and water.

“I stink?”

Ano nodded. “It’s why nobody else is around,” he said. “They can all smell you from a mile away. It’s pretty bad.”

“But...you’re still here.”

The merman nodded. “Of course I am. It’s my job to escort you, after all.”

Mortified that she had essentially given a handjob to her security detail, Beth scrunched up her face and turned her back on Ano. “I need to go back to my room for a bit,” she said, trying to keep the misery out of her voice. Her enchanted morning had just turned into a miserable afternoon.

“Of course.” He started swimming toward the shore and Beth used her magic to follow, no longer bothering to hold Ano’s hand. Cursing inwardly at herself, she made the return trip in silence. Once the dock was in sight, she bid Ano a proper farewell and swam the remaining twenty feet to the structure.

Beth dangled her body in the water for a moment, then sighed and pulled herself up and onto the dock, sliding forward on her belly. She rolled over and contemplated the cotton-candy clouds above for a few minutes, her hair drying in the sun.

What a fucking waste. Not only had Zel’s sunblock made her a pariah among the merfolk, but her attempted hookup with Ano had ended prematurely.

“Never fuck your heroes, I guess,” she muttered, then flopped onto her stomach and got to her feet. Tomorrow she would forgo Zel’s sunscreen in favor of something better that wouldn’t drive the other merfolk away, maybe Aurora could recommend something. She definitely wouldn’t bother with merman dick. Her lovers at home had spoiled her, and she wasn’t about to settle just to check another monster off her list.

After a quick rinse in a shower by the dock, Beth used her magic to dispel the water and then retrieved her dress and hat from where they had been stowed away. She noticed that the Order’s personnel lingered along the periphery of the

property, clearly monitoring her but not engaging. She took the stairs up to the Radley suite, then used her bracelet to buzz in and found Lily sprawled on the couch with Tink. On a nearby table, used plates had been stacked high enough that some had started to topple.

“I thought you were going swimming all day.” Lily picked up the remote to pause their show, but Tink slapped it out of her hand before she could press anything.

“Tink not finished,” the goblin declared, then made a show of turning up the volume. Curious, Beth moved to see what they were watching and laughed when she realized it was a cheesy rom-com.

“That’s absolutely not what I pictured you two watching,” Beth said on her way to the bedroom to get changed.

“Yeah, well...it’s very different from the lives we live.” Lily strolled into Beth’s room and tossed herself onto the bed. “So, girl talk! You fucked a merman, didn’t you?”

Beth sighed and shook her head, hooking her fingers through the straps of her swimsuit and pulling it down. “It was pretty much over as soon as it began.”

Lily laughed, grabbing Beth’s pillow and clutching it to her chest. “I’ve heard rumors that they can’t handle pussy, but didn’t imagine it could be so bad! Did you at least—”

“Nope!” Beth was naked now, hopping on one foot to slide into a pair of white panties. “Not even close. Got my engine revved, but didn’t go anywhere. I’m the physical manifestation of hot and bothered.” Once her underwear was on, she put on the matching bra. Maybe she’d wear something nice to dinner and have an extra glass of wine to take her mind off of things.

“You don’t say?” Lily’s eyebrows lifted and a grin crossed her face. She sauntered over to the bed and sat down on the edge, her clothes briefly blurring until she was in a black and red bra. “How hot and bothered, exactly?”

“Uh...” Beth stared into Lily’s eager eyes. “If I’m being honest, I’m pretty horny, but it’s a fairly specific itch.”

“Oh? What do you have in mind?” The succubus licked her lips, then held up her fingers to reveal long fingernails. “Keep in mind I’m *very* good at scratching things.”

“It’s not important.” Beth knelt down to pick up her suit and then took it to the bathroom to hang over the shower door. When she returned, Lily was sitting up in bed, her back to the headboard and stroking a blue cock between her legs.

“I’ve been thinking,” Lily said. “We don’t spend enough time together.”

Beth paused, lost in contemplation. Lily slid toward the edge of the bed and stood, her cock bobbing up and down to an unheard beat. It had thick ridges all down the side, and looked vaguely familiar.

“Is that my Delightful Dragon?” Beth asked, realization dawning on her.

“Nope!” Lily knelt down and pulled a box out from under the bed. “This is your Delightful Dragon!”

She opened the box to reveal the familiar purple dildo. Lily held it next to her own cock to show they were identical in shape and size.

“Why do you have one of my sex toys?” Beth asked.

“Your Delightful Dragon is essentially a collectible now,” Lily declared. “It also happens to be what I claimed the Order lost in my luggage. Eulalie sold it to them using one of her dark web accounts, which allowed her to see what crypto accounts they were using. Beautiful little act of duplicity, they paid almost three hundred bucks to get it here by this morning.”

“I don’t appreciate anybody going through my stuff,” Beth said, snatching the dildo away.

“Then consider this a peace offering.” Lily pouted and stroked her cock. “I borrowed your dildo for nefarious purposes, so now I’ll fuck you with a proper copy. It’ll be like hooking up with an old fling, only he’s much better in bed now.”

“And has fantastic tits.”

“I can become more manly for you if you’d like.” Lily’s body started shifting, but Beth held out a hand to stop her.

“No, not necessary.” She stared at Lily’s cock, then allowed her eyes to wander up the rest of her body until she was staring into the succubus’ eyes. “The dichotomy is kind of hot.”

“Oh?” Lily squished her breasts together with her hands, then blew a kiss. “I take requests, in case you want something special.”

“No, I’m...” Beth’s eyes traveled down Lily’s body to her massive cock. The Delightful Dragon had been good to her over the years, but in the end, it was still just a dildo. Sure, some creative placement had heightened the experience, such as mounting it to the side of her bed, or even just sticking it on the floor. But never had the opportunity arisen to actually be fucked by it. She vaguely remembered asking a former boyfriend if he’d consider wearing a massive cock-sleeve to bed, but he hadn’t taken the request very well.

“What do you think?” Lily stroked her dragon dick, causing a large bead of precum to form on the head. “Wanna be a bad dragon with me?”

“You make a compelling case.” Beth licked her lips in anticipation. “Out of curiosity, how...organic is it?”

Lily pondered the question for a moment, then grinned. “Why don’t you come taste it and find out?”

Beth pulled her hair back as she knelt on the bed and took it in her hands. Lily’s cock was warm, almost hot. “Is this technically your tail?” she asked.

“Yep. Fun little trick of mine.” Lily gasped when Beth licked the head of her cock. “Oh, you don’t waste any time.”

“When it comes to massive monster dicks, I try not to.” Beth licked the head of Lily’s cock again, then tried to take it in her mouth. It was wide enough that she couldn’t get the first ridge past her lips, so she focused on using her tongue. Lily groaned and ran her fingers through Beth’s hair.

“You’re pretty good at that,” Lily said. “But rumor has it you’ve had a lot of practice.”

Beth ran a hand up between Lily’s legs and was surprised to feel the thick folds of the succubus’ labia. She created a powerful vacuum with her mouth on the cock and then slid a finger into Lily’s pussy. The succubus groaned and threw her head back as her hips bucked forward. Beth pulled her mouth off of Lily’s dick and then slid onto the bed properly until the two of them were face to face.

“I’ve had a lot of practice with men. Women, though? Not so much.” She pushed a strand of hair away from Lily’s eyes. “But I’m a fast learner.”

“Consider class in session, then.” Lily’s eyes sparkled, and then their lips met.

Beth had been with Asterion and Sulyvahn almost exclusively in the last couple of years, with the occasional dalliance with Mike. None of these men kissed her quite like Lily. There was a softness to her touch that pulled Beth in and made her feel light-headed. Firm fingers traced lines along the sides of her breasts, taking a break only to pull off Beth's bra.

Now fully topless, the two of them continued to make out. Beth stroked Lily's dragon cock, taking time to fully explore the ridges with her fingertips. Even though it was identical in shape and texture, there was a pliability to it that the dildo simply couldn't match. She was wet with desire, eager to feel the differences inside her.

Lily rolled them over, putting Beth on the bottom. As they continued kissing, Lily slid her hand between Beth's legs, teasing the slick labia that eagerly parted in advance.

Without any other communication, the succubus pushed Beth's legs apart, placing her hips between Beth's thighs. Lily's cock was so massive that it rested above Beth's belly button.

"N'gah!" Lily broke the kiss, causing a single strand of saliva to briefly connect them. "Sorry to break the flow, but I need a better angle."

Beth nodded with a whimper, then raised her hips in the air as Lily scooted down, using the head of her cock to tease Beth's clitoris. Grinning from ear to ear, the succubus pushed the head of her dragon dick down until it was at the correct angle for penetration.

"I don't know," Lily muttered, scratching at her chin. "It's gonna spread you pretty wide."

"Don't toy with me," Beth muttered, then attempted to scoot her body down. "It'll fit just fine."

"Will it, though?" Lily wiggled her eyebrows. "Cause it looks like you're already spread pretty—"

Beth wrapped her legs around Lily's waist and squeezed, forcing the succubus to slide inside of her. The cock was massive, and while Beth was absolutely capable of stretching to accommodate, the process still took several seconds.

Screwing up her eyes, the intense feeling of being stretched by the dragon was simply too much. Beth let out a groan that turned into a scream, her hands sliding off of Lily's torso and slapping uselessly at her legs.

"Oh, wow, you're tight like a virgin," Lily said as she pulled herself partway out. "Can you take all of it?"

Beth gasped, then sank her nails into Lily's thighs and tried to pull her back inside. "Don't you fucking dare pull out," she whimpered.

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of it." On the word dream, Lily rammed her hips forward. The sudden internal pressure caused Beth's stomach muscles to spasm, and a miniature orgasm ripped through her inner thighs, causing her legs to go limp. "In fact, I can't remember the last time I was with someone who could take it like you can!"

"More," Beth begged, then gasped when Lily teased her left nipple. "Please, give me more."

"Huh. I usually have to remind people to beg. You really are a fast learner." Lily grinned and started a slow cadence, pushing Beth to her inner limits first, then pounding her mercilessly for several seconds. Beth quickly lost track of time, her head buzzing with pleasure as Lily fucked her senselessly. When her first big orgasm came, she soaked the bed with her cum. Lily simply giggled and kept going, driving Beth to an even more intense orgasm several minutes later.

Outside Beth's room, the sound of the TV increased in volume, then finally stopped. The door opened and Tink walked in, carrying a massive sandwich in her hands.

"Oh, did you want in on this?" Lily picked up the Delightful Dragon and waved it in Tink's direction. "I've got a spare if you want it."

"Tink fine." The goblin walked over to a chair in the corner and sat, pulling her legs up so they were crossed.

Lily slowed down her thrusts, giving the goblin a weird look. "Really? I figured you would be all over...this."

"Only if husband here," she replied, taking a bite out of her sandwich. Large gobs of mayonnaise fell onto the front of her apron, which she scooped up with her fingers. "Hookup with Kisa sometimes if extra horny."

"You're...just gonna sit there and eat a sandwich?" Beth frowned at Tink.

“Tink’s show is over,” she replied. “Big butt too loud, Tink got curious.”

Beth reached over her bed and got a hold of one of her slippers. With her left hand, she threw it at the goblin, missing by almost a foot.

“Get out,” she ordered. “You can’t just eat a sandwich and watch us. We aren’t your entertainment.”

Tink rolled her eyes dramatically and slid off the chair. Without another word, she exited the room, making a point of pulling the door shut harder than needed. Beth looked at Lily, and when the two made eye contact, they started laughing.

“What the hell was that about?” asked Beth, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye.

“Only she knows,” Lily replied, then thrust forward playfully. “Hey, did you want me to come inside of you?”

Beth scowled playfully. “That depends. Whose cum is it?”

Lily played with Beth’s breasts, tracing circles around the nipples. “One hundred percent organic succubus cum. Won’t get you pregnant, but I can make about half a gallon of the stuff if you want me to. I can do all kinds of tricks with it, do you have anything in mind?”

Beth licked her lips, picturing the dragon dick inside of her. “Can you make it hot?”

“Dangerously so, but I’ll keep it at a safe temperature. How much of it do you want?”

“All of it.” Even now, Beth’s vagina was tightening up in anticipation. “Big fantasy of mine, you know.”

“I’m aware.” Lily picked up her pace, pinning Beth to the bed. “Any other requests? I can look like whoever you want.”

“This...is...good...” Beth suddenly found it hard to breathe. Her pelvis suddenly felt like it was about to burst, she was being stretched so much. “Are you...making it bigger?”

“You’d better believe it. I’m about to flood you with so much steaming hot dragon cum, it’s gonna ruin this mattress.” Lily picked up her pace until the breath was being driven from Beth’s lungs whenever the succubus attempted to bottom

out. Beth looked down between her legs to see the width of Lily's cock was more like an arm than a cock.

"Oh, shit," Beth hissed, her magic creating a vortex of raw energy inside her body.

"Yeah, that's right, I'm gonna fill you with so much dragon cum that you won't be able to walk without looking like a raincloud full of milk." Lily continued thrusting, the ridges on her cock hardening. "You can't wait to feel that heat deep inside, can you? To feel my cum leaking down your walls?"

"Mmh. MMH!" Beth felt her magic stretch and then snap like a rubber band. Tendrils of cerulean light burst from her legs and spiraled around them, unseen by Lily who continued to pound her mercilessly.

"Yeah, that's right! Take my cum!" shouted the succubus, and her cock flexed so hard that Beth was lifted off the bed. "Oh, shit!"

When that first spray hit Beth's innards, the vortex exploded. Bands of light wrapped themselves around Lily's hips and the succubus let out a yelp of surprise as they were forced together.

"What is this?" she cried, then her eyes rolled up in her head. "Oh, hell yeah, I can feel you sucking me in!" She started spasming, black and red veins appearing along her neck and forehead as she came again.

Beth cried out in sweet agony as her body was stretched and flooded with hot liquid that eventually burst free of her vagina and sprayed Lily's stomach, soaking the bed. The room filled with the sounds of their moans as they continued to come together, Lily eventually going limp on top of Beth.

Panting with exertion, Beth let out a gasp as Lily's cock slid out of her, sending a fresh flood of fluids onto the bed. Whimpering with delight, she pulled Lily forward and kissed her, trying to convey her gratitude with just her lips. They made out in this manner for several minutes, caressing each other's bodies.

"Fuck!" Tink was back in the doorway, holding a mop in one hand and an envelope in the other. She stared at the floor with a mixture of awe and disgust. "Tink no clean this up. Tink quit."

The goblin threw her mop on the ground and left, then returned to toss the envelope onto a nearby chair. "Letter came for big butt lawyer, maybe read soon." Tink surveyed the floor one last time, then let out a chuckle as she left the room.

Beth closed her eyes and took a deep breath, her magic returning to a resting state. "I don't suppose you have a quick way to clean this all up?" she asked.

"I can clean up after myself," Lily replied, then snapped her fingers. The steaming spooze that coated Beth's legs and lower body disappeared. "I'm afraid you'll have to clean up your own mess."

"Fair enough." She slid to the edge of the bed and groaned as she sat up, her pelvis sore. "It's been a while since I've felt this way," Beth said, rubbing her lower belly. "As for the hot cum, well...that's the kind of thing a girl might write poetry over."

"It was some of my best work." Lily used her tail to snatch up the mop and toss it toward Beth while she picked up the envelope. She unsealed it with her fingernail and laughed.

"What is it? Noise complaint?" Beth picked up the mop and leaned it against the headboard. The sheets were soaked. She would have to change them once her legs didn't feel so wobbly.

"Worse." Lily held up a small card with the Paradise logo embossed on the back. "Dinner invitation. Looks like the Director has requested an audience with you."

"With me? What for?"

"Maybe he heard you suck dick like a champ, and—" Lily ducked when Beth threw the mop at her. It clattered against the wall and fell. "Anyway, he expects you at nine. Formal attire is requested."

"So the beast rears his ugly head." Beth let out a sigh and moved to the edge of the bed where the floor was dry. "I think I'll take a shower and then clean this up. We can discuss our options for tonight. I get the feeling this request is more of a demand than anything else."

Lily nodded, then tossed the envelope on the chair. "Agreed. Speaking of that shower...would you like some company? I'll wash your back if you wash mine."

Beth appraised the succubus for a moment, then grinned. This was a vacation, after all.

“Why the fuck not?” she replied, then led the demon into the bathroom. Beth turned on the spigot and noticed Lily get a far away look in her eyes. “You okay?”

Lily snorted. “Yeah. Had a weird feeling is all.”

“Like what?”

The demon grinned. “Almost lost a bet is all. Now where’s your loofah? We fucked, so I definitely get to wash your tits.”

“Look alive, people.” Darius stood near the front of the Command Center, an image of the Radley home projected on a wall behind him. The man was wearing a sleeveless shirt and sunglasses, despite the fact that it was almost four in the morning. Small tables had been shoved together, each one stacked with gear and laptops. A small crew of men monitored the screens, double checking surveillance equipment that had been mounted to helmets. “It’s nearly go time.”

The room was composed of Order personnel and the SoS, all of whom went quiet. Cyrus stood at the back of the room, doing his best to look moderately interested. The truth was that he was exhausted. It was long past his bedtime and he had been too afraid to sneak away for another nap. The last thing he wanted was to be excluded from whatever the SoS was doing.

Everybody went quiet as an aerial photo of the estate replaced the house behind Darius. He picked up a thin rod and gestured toward the front porch.

“This mission has been under seal up until this point, meaning that there are valid concerns regarding psychic incursions. The last thing any of us want is for someone to know what we’ve been hired to do. To that end, I need our client to understand that we have perfected certain drills using special code names.” Darius looked over at Laurel, who nodded to show she was listening. “So even if something manages to read our minds, they might only get the code itself and not the meaning behind it. Those few seconds of confusion can be the key difference between victory and failure.”

Cyrus nodded in approval. The Order had used similar protocol decades back. Since then, they could now train against mental incursion, but that required magical training that mercenaries wouldn’t have access to. Darius was essentially letting the Order know that they would still be partially in the dark.

“Now I will say that you’ve all seen the brief. We’ve got some cryptids floating around that may cause us a problem. Our snipers are watching for the heavy hitters, but the Order here will assist us with the small fry.” Sketches of different creatures appeared briefly on the wall and then moved into position around the house. “The intel on these things is old, so expect surprises, people.”

Darius took a few minutes to talk about each potential creature along with their strengths and weaknesses. Cyrus knew all of this information, since it had been in his dossier, so tuned out the briefing as he scanned the room. The SoS had formed into teams with members of the Order for support. The laptop crew was busy outfitting the teams with their cameras. Laurel raised her hand once Darius was finished. The squad leader stared at her for a few moments, then nodded his assent.

“I also wanted to add that we have seen evidence or heard rumors of the following creatures.” Laurel gestured at the man controlling the projector, and several images appeared on the screen. Cyrus was surprised to see the gardener from before, as well as snapshots of a few other denizens he had seen from afar.

“You need to assume that none of them are human,” she explained, clicking through the images. “We also have reason to believe that the hedge maze out front may have ties to the fae realm, so avoid it if you can.”

At the mention of the fae realm, a few members muttered amongst themselves. Darius silenced his men with a cold stare, then nodded for Laurel to continue.

“We also want you to be aware of the following entities.” Laurel pointed at the wall as a picture of Jenny standing in the window appeared. For the first time, Cyrus noticed that a paper star had been stuck to the doll’s dress. “This is an entity that goes by the name Jenny. We aren’t entirely certain what kind of spirit she is, but suspect she is capable of getting inside your head.”

Darius gave the picture an odd look of recognition, but said nothing.

“I also want you all to be aware of this guy.” Laurel moved to the front of the room where an image of Death was being projected. The Grim Reaper appeared as an eerie mist, his skull like a floating mask. “He claims that he is a physical manifestation of Death, but I have my doubts. We’ve had people from our psych team analyze his interactions with staff here, and their evaluations range wildly. Maybe he’s a harmless specter with delusions of grandeur, or perhaps he’s a psychopathic spirit who can rip off your face.”

“He’s Death,” Cyrus said from the back of the room. Men turned around to look at him. “Take it from an old soldier. You recognize it when you see it.”

Laurel snorted. “You’ll have to forgive Master Cyrus. He’s actually been having tea parties with this particular entity.”

Somebody actually laughed, which earned the man an elbow in the ribs. Cyrus shrugged nonchalantly. “I just figured I would weigh in, is all,” he offered.

Of all the people in the room, only Darius seemed to take the comment seriously. Low murmurs built for a few seconds, at which time Laurel moved away from the projector and allowed Darius to take over.

“So allow me to explain why we’re here today.” Darius used his pointer to tap on the image of the house that had reappeared. “Our intel says that this home is warded specifically against hostile magic. The Order decided it was time to think outside the box, which is where we come in. Based on some preliminary tests done by Sister Laurel, physical acts of aggression do not trigger the home’s defenses.”

Test? What tests? Cyrus tried not to look surprised. After all, he was just an old man desperate to get back to retirement.

“This home has certain assets that our client is looking to acquire. So in a few minutes here, Operation Breach will be a go.” Darius pointed at Dirk, who stood nearby. “Team leaders should have already received your roles.”

“They have, sir.” Gone was the cocky bastard from earlier. In the presence of his superior, Dirk was all business.

“Good. Map, please.” Darius stepped back as an interior map of the Radley home appeared. Cyrus leaned forward in interest at the realization that this map did not match the hand drawn one they had taken from the Historical Society. This one was hand drawn as well, but didn’t quite look right either.

“Where did you get this?” asked Cyrus.

Darius ignored him. “Our point of entry will be through the front door. Alpha and Bravo teams will be responsible for a Sweep and Clean on the main floor. The interior of the house is going to be different from what you see here, but you can use this map as a sign post. The house expands, but what was there still remains in some form.”

“How the fuck does he know that?” muttered Eulalie in Cyrus’ ear. The mage desperately wished he could respond, because he had no idea.

“If you encounter any hostiles, neutralize them by any means necessary. Once we are inside the home, the Order will be able to use their magic, so they can properly assist.”

“Who is this asshole?” Cyrus heard Eulalie mutter something to someone else. “I’m still listening, I need to go check on something. If you haven’t heard back from me, try and slow them down or cause a distraction.”

“What?” Cyrus had accidentally responded out loud, but rolled with it when people looked his way. “This catches me off guard. I didn’t think we were here to neutralize anybody, that’s all.”

“If our intel is correct, Mike Radley is in possession of several dangerous beings and artifacts.” Laurel’s eyes were gleaming like a mad woman now. “I hate using the term, but this really is an ‘us vs. them’ situation.”

Darius’ eyes were so cold and intense, Cyrus felt like the man’s gaze was boring a hole straight through him. “Is there a problem?”

Cyrus screwed up his face, trying to find the words. “This man, the creatures here are his family. For gods’ sake, his son is in there. You say neutralize, but are we really about to kill a child?”

“There’s a child?” Darius turned that cold gaze of his on Laurel.

“Yes,” she admitted. “The juvenile from the initial contact report. Radley has a son.”

“Price goes up for kids,” Darius replied.

“Consider it done,” she replied, then pulled out her phone. “I’ll have it wired.”

“Good.” Darius looked at Cyrus dismissively. “Were you assigned a breach team?”

“I wasn’t,” Cyrus admitted.

“Good. Then you can stay here while we go in. Delta and Epsilon, you’ve got the upstairs.” Darius continued giving out orders as Cyrus slumped against the wall, his mouth hanging open. Through a speech about secret corridors and

something about a labyrinth, all Cyrus could hear in his mind was how casually the man had dismissed killing a child.

When had the lines become so blurry? He had done questionable things in the name of preserving the balance, but had he ever been as cold as Sister Laurel? Did the Director know? No, that was a stupid question, of course he knew. The Order had gone through changes, this was true, but Cyrus certainly didn't recognize the monster it had become.

He fingered the edge of the wand beneath his coat. If he were to trigger the protective wards of the house right now, would they come for just him, or would they destroy everybody in this tent? No, he remembered now. The home's defenses would take him down and nobody else.

What about Darius? Could he put an arcane blast between the man's eyes? Looking at the mass of men before him, he realized he would just be cutting off the hydra's head. How many could he take down with him? Would it be enough to stop them?

His heart pounded in his chest as he slid his hand around the wand beneath his coat, trying to figure out the best way to target multiple people before they took him down. Was he really prepared to do this?

"I'm back," Eulalie said in his ear, and he loosened his grip. "Just checked with a higher power. Let them come, it will be fine."

Stunned, Cyrus released the wand. He wanted to argue, to warn the girl that she didn't know what she was going up against, but he had to trust that Eulalie knew better than he did. Was someone waiting just beyond the front door to take down the SoS? What power did the house have access to?

"No, really, it'll be okay." The Rat Queen's voice was reassuring, confident even. "Apparently the geas has it covered. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy the show."

Cyrus let out a sigh, which caught Laurel's attention. She wandered across the room to stand by his side, her arms crossed as she spoke quietly.

"You good?" she asked. "Because you can leave if you want."

"I'm okay. Besides, I'm here as a consultant. You may need my advice."

“Your current position is more ceremonial than anything else. If you wanna bail, I’ll cover for you.” Her voice was soft, and if he didn’t know she was a backstabbing bitch, he would be fooled into thinking she cared.

“Oh, I could do this all morning. It’s just...the kid comment hit me wrong, that’s all. I know these guys are vicious, but to think they would take money to kill a kid...”

“Some of us have done it for free.” When Dirk spoke from the other side of Cyrus, the old man flinched. He hadn’t even noticed the mercenary approach.

“For free?” Cyrus whispered.

“All of us are ex-military,” Dirk said, his jaw set. “When your country asks, you deliver. Some of us liked it, some didn’t. That’s part of what makes us the Sons of Sin, you know the deal.”

“But you charge extra.” Cyrus shook his head in amazement.

“It’s to pay for the extra therapy,” Dirk replied. “Most of these guys here are already dead on the inside, they just want the money to enjoy what little time they’ve got left before going out in a blaze of glory. It’s hard to enjoy yourself if your job messes you up on your days off.”

“What kind of therapist do you have that can talk you through...that?”

Dirk shrugged. “Mine lives on the East Coast and we video chat every other Tuesday. Some of us just snort mountains of cocaine. We’re kind of a judgment-free organization like that.”

“Hmph.” Cyrus stared down at his feet and realized that both Laurel and Dirk had noticed how distressed he was. If he had pulled his wand, he may have only gotten a single shot off. He was getting sloppy. “It just took me by surprise.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Dirk placed a hand on Cyrus’ shoulder and squeezed. It may have looked friendly from the outside, but the grip was borderline hostile, meant to convey a very different message. “That’s why you hire guys like us, to do the things you don’t want to.”

Darius was still wrapping up his orders, tasking his different teams with code phrases like Beat the Meat and Freeze Tag. The picture of the house was now replaced with a bank of screens, each cluster belonging to a separate team. As cameras were switched on, Cyrus found himself viewing the inside of the Command Center from a dozen different angles.

“Okay, boys, it’s time to earn those paychecks. The team that finds any primary asset gets two months off, paid.”

“Hooah!” shouted the SoS as they exited the Command Center and took up their posts. Darius stayed behind and stood with his arms crossed with his gaze on the wall projection. An assistant helped fit him with a fancy headset that he attached to a device on his belt.

“Teams check in,” he said, and a nearby speaker crackled to life.

“Alpha team, in position.” There was a brief pause before the next team checked in. A camera drone hovering overhead captured the six teams as they formed a semi-circle just past the porch. The men of the SoS drew their weapons as they prepared to storm the house.

“What a bunch of chodes,” Eulalie said. “I feel like I’m watching a *Call of Duty* fan film.”

Cyrus wasn’t sure what that meant, but he was holding his breath as Alpha team advanced, weapons drawn. One member of the squad was carrying a metal net with disruptive runes on it. If the banshee made an appearance, it would burn her like fire.

“Are we a go?” asked Alpha leader.

“You have my permission to enter.” Darius studied the data stream without blinking, his fists clenching and unclenching. And what was with the weird phrasing?

When Alpha team made it to the door, the squad leader jiggled the handle, confirming that it was locked. His team spread out, guns aimed at the windows.

“Porch secure,” said Alpha leader. “Time to force entry. Beta team, proceed.”

The Beta team came running up with a battering ram. Alpha spread out, their backs to the exterior as Beta team used the ram on the door. It took them several good whacks before the door splintered in. Someone reached through the hole to unlock the door from the inside.

“Cats and mice,” said Darius. The other teams swarmed the porch as Alpha and Beta team ran inside the door. On the big screen, Cyrus watched a hurried sweep of the first room. The furniture was covered in drop cloths and the living

room looked much smaller than expected. No lights were on in the home, and there was no sign of movement.

“Clear,” whispered Alpha leader as both teams moved away from the foyer to make room for the others. “Next team, move in.”

Delta squad moved in and immediately went up the stairs. Beta team was conducting a sweep of the small office just to the left of the doorway. Furniture was moved out of the way by the first teams to make room for the next, and the house was quickly packed with mercenaries and members of the Order.

Nobody was home. There was no movement whatsoever within the house. Over the course of an hour, Cyrus watched with immense pleasure as the SoS methodically searched the home from top to bottom. Every door was opened, and every dresser was checked. It was as if nobody had lived there in years.

Darius was staring so hard at the wall that Cyrus wondered if the canvas would somehow tear under the man’s baleful gaze. Darius was particularly interested in having Epsilon team open a closet door after shifting the knob in a certain pattern, as if it would somehow trigger a secret opening. When nothing yielded results, he finally commanded a retreat and waited for his men and the Order to return.

Laurel was one of the first to make it back, and she looked like she was going to be sick. She immediately spoke to Darius in hushed tones, and the man listened with his head tilted toward her. When she finished, he looked away as if deep in thought.

The men of the SoS packed into the Command Center, many visibly frustrated. One man had stolen a doll with a porcelain face from one of the rooms and was busy inspecting it when Mads snatched it out of his hands.

“Are you fucking crazy?” he asked before throwing the doll out the door.

“It’s just a doll,” the man countered with a shrug. “Thought my niece might like it.”

“Nothing in that home is what it seems,” said Darius, his voice cool. “And it would seem that our attempt to breach it has yielded zero results.”

“It must have been an illusion.” Laurel raised her voice to be heard over the low murmuring. She turned her attention to a mage nearby. “Did you attempt any dispels while you were in there?”

“I did, Sister Laurel.” The mage gestured up at the wall. “I would also like to point out that the home clearly has at least three floors from the outside, but we couldn’t find a staircase past the second.”

“And it was way smaller on the inside,” said a nearby SoS merc. “I counted paces and it was less than a third of the size. I’m more inclined to believe that what we see from the outside is the illusion.”

While leadership conferred privately, the men and women inside the tent chatted amongst themselves, sharing theories and experiences. Laurel looked on with visible frustration while Darius stared at an image of the home. Every now and then, the man raised a hand to his cheek as if to twirl an imaginary strand of hair.

The low din of the Command Center was interrupted by an eerie howl from outside. Weapons were drawn as something large brushed by the side of the fabric walls, causing the structural rods to groan. Runes ignited, lighting the darkened space as protective wards activated.

Darius held a finger to his lips for silence, followed by a series of hand signs. The squads shrank inward, weapons pointed out. Cyrus realized that they intended to shoot outward if something tried to come in, so managed to squeeze between two of the squads for safety. A few men in the center of the circle had their weapons pointed toward the ceiling, in case something dropped from above into the middle of the group.

These were men ready to shoot their way through anything that came at them. The room had become tense as mages summoned magical auras to surround themselves and those nearby. The cloth flaps of the Command Center pressed inward as if something was testing the perimeter, then moved away.

Outside, somebody giggled.

“Ring around the rosies,” it sang, the voice feminine and childlike. It came from above, causing the mercs to aim their weapons upward. “A building full of pussies. Assholes...assholes...you should have...KNOCKED!”

The whole structure shuddered as if caught up in a violent wind. The SoS held their fire, but tightened up their formations. Cyrus crouched down and drew his wand, his breath coming in jagged bursts.

Over the sound of the fabric being wrenched about, a chorus of voices sang. The words were unintelligible, but accusatory. It sounded almost like children singing, but there was a malevolent energy behind their dulcet tones.

“Sir?” Dirk’s eyes were focused on the front door.

Darius licked his lips, then turned his attention to the projection screen. “I need eyes outside,” he said. Someone behind Cyrus turned around to get on the computer, and the display of the house disappeared. Black screens appeared, all of them displaying the same two words.

No Signal

“Cameras are all down,” muttered the operator. “Drones aren’t responding either. We’re in the dark.”

“I need a volunteer.” Darius scanned the room and a few hands went up. His cold gaze swept across everybody and finally settled on the man who had brought the doll inside. “You.”

“Fuck me,” muttered the unfortunate merc as he rose from a crouch. He turned to the man at the computer. “Beta Zero Seven.”

The operator clicked through some menus, and the merc’s camera came online with B07 highlighted in the corner. The mercenary crossed the room and adjusted his helmet straps before hunching forward by the door. He flipped his M-4 Carbine to full auto and nodded to another SoS merc who stood nearby.

“Ready,” he muttered and pushed his way out the flap, weapon raised. The other mercs sealed the flap behind. Cyrus turned his attention to the monitor and felt his stomach clench at the sight of a single doll sitting on a wooden chair about fifteen feet away. The merc turned left and right, revealing that other than the doll, there was nothing else outside.

“Is that the entity from before?” Mads asked. Laurel studied the screen for a moment, waiting for the man’s camera to stop sweeping back and forth and focus on the doll.

“It isn’t,” she replied. “That looks like the one you threw out of here, doesn’t it?”

“Sir.” The merc’s voice crackled over the speaker. “It’s holding something.”

Cyrus looked again and realized that the doll in the chair was holding a piece of paper. The merc's breath hitched as he moved closer, then knelt down to pick up the paper. The night vision made the letters hard to see.

"What does it say?" asked Darius. The merc's flashlight clicked on, revealing letters written in calligraphy.

"It says 'Tag, you're it.'" The mercenary was about to say something else, but his vision abruptly shifted and he was yanked off his feet. He screamed in panic, and the sound of gunfire filled the air. The SoS ducked as bullets ricocheted off of the enchanted flaps of the Command Center.

"Alpha squad! Form up and—" Dirk didn't get a chance to finish as the mercenary was thrown through the front entrance of the Command Center. He crashed into Alpha Squad, who been prepping to go. The men of the SoS were quietly barking orders to each other as the Order looked to Laurel for instructions. The room went still as a solitary piece of paper fluttered through the air, falling like a maple tree seed. Laurel, who was nearby, snatched it out of the air and studied it.

"Tag, you're it," she muttered. "It's what the doll was holding."

"It says something else on the back." Mads took the note from Laurel and flipped it over. He frowned in confusion. "You can keep her? Keep who?"

Alpha Squad tried to help the mercenary to his feet, but he was clutching his ass in agony. They lowered him to the ground and rolled him onto his side. That's when Cyrus saw the cloth limbs dangling from between the man's legs.

"Oh, fuck me," somebody muttered as a flashlight was clicked on. The mercenary on the floor wept softly as everybody stared at the doll that had been shoved halfway up his ass.

The sounds of the forest had quickly become lost in the cadence of beating drums. Mike and the others were running uphill now, eager to get to the next plateau where Wallace and one of the scouts waved frantically.

With Ingrid on his back, Mike's lungs worked overtime as he somehow sprinted past members of the Order, the mage clinging to him for dear life. The jungle below them had filled with the rustling cadence of marching warriors.

“C’mon! We’ve got a clear spot up here!” Wallace disappeared from view once Mike got closer. By the time he finally crested the rise, he let out a gasp of relief to see that a few trees had been cleared already and white rope was being strung between others as the Order set up a defensive perimeter.

“You can put me down here,” Ingrid said. “I have no idea how you did that. It’s like you’re part horse or something.”

“Centaur, actually.” He fought back a grin when Ingrid touched her pocket with a frown. “I’ll be back.”

When he made it back to the top of the trail, he could see that Ratu and Quetzalli were in the middle of the pack. The naga seemed to have no trouble keeping pace, but Quetzalli was struggling with the extra weight of Mike’s bag. Jogging back down the path, he quickly reached the pair.

“You go ahead,” he said to Ratu as he took his bag back from Quetzalli. The dragon looked relieved. “They’re setting wards up top.”

“On it.” Ratu took three steps forward and her features melted away as she formed into a massive snake with Ingrid’s bag in her jaws and her own strapped to her back. A few members of the Order stepped aside as the naga shot past them, her slithering form quickly ascending to the plateau.

“Maybe we should have ridden on her,” Mike muttered to himself, wondering if that would have worked. “Are you good?” he asked Quetzalli.

“I’m better, but...” she looked over her shoulder. Leilani was dragging behind, pain written in her features as she struggled. The Captain watched her intently, but didn’t seem inclined to help out.

“Shit,” Mike muttered, noticing flickering lights in the forest below. They looked like torches between the trees. “You go on ahead. I’ll see if I can’t help Leilani.”

“Watch your back,” she muttered, then resumed her climb, sweat pouring down her back. He watched her for a moment to make certain she would be okay, then continued down the trail to Leilani and the Captain.

“What’s the hold up?” he asked once he was close enough. Francois threw him a dirty look, but said nothing.

“It’s me,” groaned Leilani. “My legs are not accustomed to climbing such a steep trail. It feels like they’re on fire!” Her eyes widened as a distant horn echoed across the terrain. “They are coming for me,” she whispered.

“Can’t you do something?” asked Mike, his eyes on Francois.

“Like what?” Francois countered. “I am unable to carry her, if that’s what you are asking.”

“Then I can do it.” Mike got ready to abandon his bag, but Leilani waved him off.

“You don’t understand,” she replied. “My people, our bodies are built for the depths. We weigh more than a human does.”

“My guess is somewhere around 140 kilograms,” added Francois. “So more like carrying two people.”

Mike paused and thought it over for a moment. Carrying Ingrid had been difficult, but doable. But could he have carried two of her? Maybe if he hadn’t already carried somebody else.

“Damn,” he muttered. “Night Marchers, they’re spirits, right? Ghosts?”

Francois shrugged, sweat pouring down his forehead. “Essentially.”

“Is there any way to chase them off?”

Leilani shook her head. “No. They usually ignore humans if you bow before them and avoid eye contact. Not true for my people, though. The Night Marchers are warriors from a different time, and are unaware that we are no longer enemies. If you’re traveling with me, they will show you no mercy, you have to get away!”

“Francois? That sword of yours work on spirits?”

The Captain scoffed. “Of course not. And even if it did, there—”

The man danced to the side as a spear shot toward him, clattering hard against a nearby rock. He scowled in frustration at a dark shadow below that disappeared into the woods.

“There are too many,” he replied.

“Go.” Leilani fixed both of them with a stare, then reached for the trident she carried on her back. “My fate is mine alone.”

“I will tell your people it was a warrior’s death.” Francois did a mock salute and turned to sprint up the trail.

“Some guardian he is,” Mike muttered with a shake of his head. “Put that thing away. There will be no last stands here.”

“My legs, they feel so wobbly.” Leilani’s voice wavered. “I don’t think I can climb any further.”

“Move your ass, princess.” Mike stepped past her, his eyes down on the forest. He sent his thoughts out to the woods, begging them for help. Below, the trees rustled as if the wind was pushing through them. Though the jungle couldn’t slow their pursuers, it could tell him where they were coming from.

“Mike, I—” Leilani let out a cry when a dark shadow stepped from behind a cluster of rocks about fifteen feet away. The shadow had haunting eyes that flickered. As the spectre solidified, it looked like a man who had been dipped in clay.

Mike sang the banshee’s dirge, careful to keep his voice low so it wouldn’t carry up the hill. The shadowy form rippled like water struck with a pebble, then vanished from sight, dropping a spear onto the ground. The spear turned into mist and faded away.

“What just happened?” Leilani demanded. “Were you singing?”

“You know how it is. Some songs are obnoxious, but still get stuck in your head. Spirits really don’t like that, it can haunt them for centuries.” Mike turned and pushed her up the hill. “Go. Now!”

The Night Marchers made good time up the mountain, but Mike got advance notice from the trees every time some of them drew near. Though the banshee’s cry wasn’t enough to guide them to their eternal rest, it absolutely disrupted their ability to maintain form in the waning light of day. By the time he and Leilani made it up the hill, both of them were out of breath. The whole hillside had erupted in drums and rhythmic chanting.

Ratu and Wallace met them at the edge of the clearing, pulling both of them to safety as spears shattered against stones that the naga summoned from the earth as barriers. They ducked beneath a rope adorned with tiny, decorated flags, and then collapsed in exhaustion.

The drums drew close, and Mike tensed up as the first shadows appeared. Dozens of spirits followed, wielding ancient weapons of war. Though the chanting

came from the ancestral Hawaiians, their lips never moved as they wandered around the clearing. Anytime a marcher would approach one of the warded ropes, it would become disoriented and walk away.

Ratu knelt by Mike's side to help him up. "As long as you keep your voice down, they won't know we're here," she whispered. As if to illustrate her point, Wallace picked up a stone and threw it away from the camp. It struck a distant tree, and a bunch of spirits immediately headed off in its direction.

"Princess." Francois knelt down by Leilani's side. "I have apparently failed you and am no longer worthy to be your guardian."

"It is not your fault," she replied. "The Caretaker was able to scare them off using his dark magic."

"Then I am in his debt." Francois looked at Mike, but his eyes remained cold. "Thank you, Caretaker."

Mike didn't bother replying. The man was so full of shit that it wasn't worth his time. He rose from a crouch and surveyed the camp. Protective runes had been carved into the trees, and glowing rods had been planted in the ground. A light mist formed around the ground just outside the camp as the Night Marchers continued their hunt, allowing them to vanish into the shadows at will.

"So they can't see us?" Mike moved toward the edge of the clearing. The nearby spirits didn't react to his presence.

"It's a combination of spells," said Ratu. "They consecrated the ground using four different methods and I used one of my own. Though the spirits suspect we are nearby, they cannot see or touch us as long as the barrier remains unbroken."

"Thank the gods." Mike followed Ratu over to a small cluster of stones that were still wet and dirty from where she had pulled them from the earth. Quetzalli sat on one, her sad gaze lingering on a spirit that flickered out of existence as it accidentally crossed the barrier.

"They are unhappy," she said, her eyes misty. "Can you not feel their sadness?"

"I really can't." He sat next to the dragon and took her hand. "Are you okay?"

She shook her head, causing platinum locks to bounce across her shoulders. "I'm really not. It's a lingering sadness, like something terrible has happened. There's also anger. Such is the existence of a lost soul."

Unsure how to help the dragon, he just sat with her. After a tense hour of monitoring the night marchers, the Order quietly set up camp for the evening. Due to the hasty assembly of the campsite, this meant awkward placement of the tents as well as clearing out some additional brush inside the perimeter to make room for tents. While Francois was busy with his tent, Mike asked the local spiders to drop down and check on the man just to see how he was doing. Though none of the arachnids bit him, quite the stream of French profanity came out of the Captain as he struggled to erect his tent.

When the stars emerged, nobody could enjoy them. The number of night marchers had increased, and there were at least a hundred swarming the area, searching for their prey. Dinner was cold food consumed in silence. Ratu, Quetzalli, and Mike all sat at their makeshift table, eating quietly as the Order established sleeping arrangements among themselves.

Stars continued to blossom across the darkened sky. Ratu summoned a couple of small fireballs to hover nearby and provide light. The Order had lights of their own, which turned them into mere shadows as they moved among their tents. Mike was surprised when one shadow turned out to be Ingrid limping over to join them. The mage sat slowly with a wince. She made a sigh of annoyance when Wallace came over to help her.

"I'm fine," she grouched, then waved him off. "I don't need a nurse."

"Whatever you say," he replied. "But I did pack the outfit." He winked at Mike, then wandered back to his tent. Ingrid looked at Quetzalli and Ratu for a moment, then turned her full attention to Mike.

"Thank you for earlier," she said, then dipped her head. "I don't know that I would have made it without you."

"I'm sure that somebody would have helped out." He looked at the Order team that had come with them. "At least, once the marchers showed up."

"Wallace would have dropped everything he was carrying, it's true. But we would have been fucked. Half of the stuff we used to build the ward was in his bag. He likes to be prepared."

"A good motto," Mike added solemnly.

Ingrid looked up at the sky and sighed. "I've never heard of so many night marchers showing up in one place," she said, her gaze on the first twinkling stars up above. "They're restless spirits, but certainly not this aggressive."

Mike looked out into the forest. The night marchers were nearly invisible now, he could only see them if they stepped into a beam of light. His connection to the woods and the spiders allowed him to sense their passage, though. They melted in and out of existence, singing their songs of war.

"Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you again. I know we kind of come off as bastards, but the Order really are decent people." Ingrid started to rise.

"Do decent people hire mercenaries to break into other people's homes?" He watched the woman carefully as she looked at him in confusion.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm talking about the guys on my front lawn. The Sons of Sin. Kind of a dumb name, when you think about it."

Genuine confusion appeared on Ingrid's face. "I don't know anything about mercenaries on your lawn."

"And perhaps you don't. But I do know that breaking in was the plan this whole time." He leaned back in his makeshift seat and crossed his arms. "And don't bother denying it. If you do, I'll just ask you again while holding that rock you keep in your pocket."

Ingrid's mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water until she closed her eyes and groaned. "This isn't about to become a problem, is it?" She opened her eyes and looked toward where her companions were.

"If you're asking if I'm about to freak out and start a fight, the answer is no. You are safe with us. For now, anyway." Visible relief crossed Ingrid's face as she put a hand in her pocket. "What happens next is up to you, really."

"So you've known for a while."

"He has," Ratu replied. "Long before we ever came out here with you."

"Then why come?"

"That's what he does." Quetzalli smiled in Mike's direction. "He helps. We're all here to help."

“But on our own terms,” Mike added. “So I ask again. What sort of decent people try to rob a man while he’s helping them?”

Ingrid sighed and looked up into the sky once more, pondering her answer. “The answer isn’t simple,” she began, but Mike cut her off.

“It really is, though. You guys lured me out here and intend to rob me. Right now, you’ve got a team of mercenaries in a Command Center ready to break into my home. They’ve got guns, Ingrid. Guns. Your organization told me that you were there to protect my family in my absence, and they planned this instead.” He was careful to keep the anger out of his voice to avoid catching anyone else’s attention.

“I don’t understand. Why admit you know this? You sound so calm.”

“Oh, I’m far from calm. As for why I told you, I want you to grab on to your magic crystal so that this message comes across loud and clear. Go on, grab it.” He waited for Ingrid to stick her hand in her pocket again. “You see, I believe that everyone is capable of good things, even when they’ve lost the ability to tell the difference between what’s right or not. Even though your people scheme against me, I’ve shown you kindness. Okay, so maybe I jerked you around a little bit. I have my flaws.”

This elicited a snort out of Ratu. Ingrid, on the other hand, was hanging onto his every word.

“Tomorrow, we’re probably going to make it to my property. I really don’t know what’s going to happen next, but I will say that I don’t trust anyone outside my family. When we get there, I’m expecting a big revelation, followed by an even bigger betrayal. Maybe you all draw wands on me, or maybe that bag of dicks snoring over there tries to kill me. Who knows? It’s inevitable.”

“We weren’t planning to betray you,” Ingrid countered. “We still need your help.”

“And you’ll get it,” he replied. “This situation involving whatever waits for us up the mountain, I’m going to fix it. And when I do, I’m going to ensure that my solution doesn’t harm Leilani’s people. You have my word on that. I could just say fuck you and walk away, but I won’t. And do you know why? Because even though the line between good and bad is blurry sometimes, I still remember how to step back and actually look at the damned line. Can you really say the same about the Order, anymore? What about yourself?”

Ingrid was silent, her eyes boring into his. Mike leaned forward and held his fingers up together, forming a streamer of sparks that warped into a tiny glowing ball that hovered over his fingertips.

“Life is a path, and we wander off of it sometimes. That’s what family and friends are for, to help guide us back when we stray. They act as a guiding star.” The tiny ball ascended away from them toward the night sky, flickering as it expanded and changed colors. It eventually split into smaller motes of light that vanished among the leaves. “My family are my stars. Every single one of them. If the Order decides in their infinite wisdom to take one of them from me, well...”

“The consequences would be dire.” Ratu completed his sentence with a smile, but her eyes had narrowed to eerie slits. “You assume that we have stepped into your world, a place we don’t understand, but it is actually the other way around. Your Order claims dedication to their precious balance, but this man here epitomizes it. His world is far larger than anything you’ve encountered, and it’s only going to get bigger. It is you who have stepped into his world.”

“Later tonight, when you find a way to magically contact your Director to report in or whatever, I want you to tell him something.” Mike leaned toward Ingrid, his expression now serious. She shifted uncomfortably, but didn’t move away. “My family never needed protection. It’s your people who did. Whatever that little man has planned for my home, you should know that the people he put on my lawn are nothing more than a handful of mice tossed into the lion’s den. If they poke around too much, if they decide that they’re in charge of where the line is drawn, there won’t be anything left of them by the time we get back.”

Thunder rumbled ominously overhead, causing Ingrid to look up. When her gaze returned to Mike, there was fear in her eyes.

“Why tell me all this, then?” she asked. “Why let me know you’re onto us? You still haven’t explained why.”

“Do you remember when you took the time to explain how my magic affects normal people? That conversation was the result of a woman who cares about others, even if I think some of your values are misaligned. The Order is broken, Ingrid. Something fundamental has been lost, and until good people like you realize that, it’s only going to get worse.” His eyes softened as he scooted forward, sitting on the edge of his rock. “It’s okay to be broken. It’s not okay to take it out on everybody else.”

Ingrid watched him carefully for nearly a minute, then nodded and staggered to her feet, refusing help from Quetzalli. The mage limped back over to her side of the campground, disappearing into the darkness. Mike watched her go, then looked over at Leilani, who was about thirty feet away. She sat next to a small fire, her knees clutched to her chest and misery on her face. Francois had turned in early, his booted feet hanging out of the open flap of their shared tent. The mermaid princess made eye contact with Mike and then looked away as if in shame. She had been silent all evening since her rescue from the marchers.

“That was a little heavy handed,” commented Ratu, breaking his focus. “But necessary.”

“I have a good feeling about her,” Mike replied, and meant it. “I don’t know what it is, but I see some of myself in her. By the way, nice touch with the thunder.”

Quetzalli winked in response.

“You think she could be our ally?” asked Ratu.

“Maybe not. But I don’t think she has to be our enemy.” He looked back toward the Captain’s tent as Leilani reluctantly crawled inside. Thinking back on what the princess had told him, he wondered how he might get her away from Francois. If anybody here was going to be an ally, it was going to be the mermaid. The Order couldn’t be allowed to follow him onto his property, and neither could Francois.

Leilani was a different story. Maybe it was because she had been honest with him. Maybe it was because she wasn’t human. Regardless, he would have to figure out how to steal her away once they reached the boundary of his property. If nothing else, it would help build a bridge of trust between him and the merfolk kingdom. Well, if they didn’t decide to murder him for abducting their princess. But that was a problem for future Mike.

It wasn’t long before Quetzalli announced that she was going to bed. Mike snuggled outside with Ratu, both of them watching the Milky Way crawl across the sky for another hour. The naga whispered stories to him about the forgotten constellations of her people as she pressed herself against him for warmth. Eventually, it was time to sleep, and the two of them crawled inside the tent. Mike ended up between Quetzalli and Ratu, the naga’s lower body transforming into thick reptilian coils that wrapped around his legs.

In the Dreamscape, he was able to properly check in with Kisa. Apparently Beth had gone to dinner with the Director, but that was the last the catgirl had heard of it. The Order and their mercenaries had officially experienced their first proper dose of Jenny, and were now huddled up inside their Command Center like frightened children. He and Kisa exchanged information and took a walk on the beach, the catgirl was telling him all about how Grace and Callisto had been playing tag in the house all day. Zel had wanted the boy to come home, but he snuck away from the centaurs when the house had gone on lockdown. Death was now wandering the halls of the Radley estate pretending he couldn't see Grace so she could set ambushes for him with Callisto's help. Mike strongly suspected that somebody had let them watch *Home Alone*, but Kisa wouldn't fess up to it.

The Dreamscape shattered with a scream, and Mike opened his eyes to hear panic and terror immediately outside his tent. By the time he pushed through the flaps, the forest had told him everything he needed to know.

The night marchers had broken through.

Sliding into his shoes and making sure Opal was in his pocket, he crawled outside, followed closely by Ratu and Quetzalli. Ratu summoned balls of fire that she threw into the air. The flames cast an eerie glow on the Order's campsite, revealing several dark forms locked in battle with the perimeter guards.

"How did they get in?" he asked, staring in horror as a mage was dragged into the darkness by a trio of shadows.

"Doesn't matter." Ratu made a series of gestures, then surrounded her body in a fiery glow. "We make our stand here."

He nodded and turned toward Francois' tent. The flap was open, and the soft glow of Ratu's fireballs revealed that the tent was empty.

"It looks like our princess is in another castle," he declared, then let out an angry hiss as a night marcher drew near. The spirit vanished from sight as Mike escalated his tone, using banshee magic to scare the marcher off.

"Watch my back," he said, then knelt down and grabbed hold of a tree root. Closing his eyes, he sent his awareness out. The forest could feel the passage of the night marchers as they walked the land, and Mike felt a small cluster of them almost a hundred yards uphill. Based on their movements, it seemed as if they were chasing somebody.

As for the Order, their team had dissolved. Whatever organization they had was now destroyed as men and women were chased into the darkness and hunted down. A spray of golden light illuminated Ingrid, who was lying against the base of a tree while using a wand to blast away attackers. Mike ran to her side and barely dodged the arcane bolt she tossed his way.

“Not a marcher,” he shouted, keeping his hands up where she could see him. When a night marcher stepped around the tree, Mike sang a high pitched note that caused the spirit to burst into motes of darkness that sank into the ground. “Where’s Wallace?”

“I don’t know.” Ingrid tried to stand, but it seemed like her ankle was still knitting. “The marchers shouldn’t have gotten in. We’re all scattered.”

“We can worry about that later. C’mon.” He grabbed her by the hand and pulled. She had a limp, but was able to move on her own. “They’re hunting Leilani.”

“Fuck.” Ingrid pulled a spare wand from her pocket and held it in her free hand. “Can you carry me again?”

He knelt down and she hopped onto his back, both arms extended over his shoulders. Ratu and Quetzalli moved to both sides of him as he began a cautious jog through the woods with Ratu’s fire leading the way. Small groups of marchers moved to intercept them, but Ingrid’s magic and Mike’s song was enough to chase them away. This greatly antagonized the spirits, and he could feel them forming a hunting party in the woods behind them.

Stepping over the mangled body of a knight, they passed between two trees and emerged on the edge of a ridge overlooking the valley below. The trees whispered to him, telling him stories of a woman of the ocean who had fled in terror from multiple pursuers.

“She’s up this way,” he said. “Is everyone still okay?”

“I fear no spirit,” Ratu declared. “Even if they were to surround us, I would burn the forest down around their feet to drive them off.”

“Let’s save that plan for last,” Mike muttered. “But I appreciate the energy.”

“They can be hurt by magic, but never truly defeated,” Ingrid added. “Even if you take one out, it will come back eventually. They’re like the terminators of the spirit world.”

“Terminators?” asked Quetzalli.

“Movie reference,” Mike replied. “Killer robots.”

“They should have stopped after the second one,” added Ingrid. “We need to keep moving. Leilani is in danger.”

“Sure thing, Sarah Connor.” Mike jogged up the ridge, once again using Ratu’s magic and the forest to guide him. The ravine to his left was so deep, it was just an inky void. Other than the stars above, the only other lights he could see were from cruise ships out on the horizon.

They were nearing Leilani’s location when Mike felt the mood of the forest shift. Blood had been spilled ahead. He came to a stop and set Ingrid down.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Something is wrong.” He put his hand on the closest tree and shut his eyes. He could sense the night marchers massing downhill, only to be frightened away by Ratu’s magic. The spirits’ passage did nothing to disturb the woods. This was their home. However, whatever lay ahead was not spiritual in nature. Branches had been broken and roots trampled. The spiders chattered in excitement as heavy booted feet disturbed their nests, and the air was filled with the sound of clashing of steel.

“Of course something is wrong,” Ingrid began, but Mike opened his eyes and shook his head.

“It’s not marchers. There’s something else out here,” he said, gesturing ahead. “Not a spirit, something physical, like a person. People, actually.”

“But who?” Ingrid asked.

He shook his head. “No idea. But we’ve got a problem.” Looking down the hill, he could sense the spirits closing in. “We’re stuck between a rock and a hard place. Ideas?”

“Retrieve Leilani and run like hell. Is there any other option?” Ingrid fired her wand at a trio of warriors who had scrambled over some nearby rocks toward their position. One fell, vanishing into the darkness and filling the air with whispers. Brief flashes of light in the jungle revealed that some of the Order were still alive,.

Mike grimaced. There were probably a dozen better options available, but he only had seconds to contemplate them. With adrenaline and magic surging

through his body, he couldn't come up with anything better. The longer he waited, the more likely it was that Leilani would fall to her pursuers. "Once more, into the breach, I guess."

The forest ahead bent away, expediting their passage. Ratu stayed at the rear of the procession, her flames now a pair of serpents that circled her body and breathed fire at spirits who came close. Quetzalli was panting with exertion behind Mike, and he could feel the humidity thicken as clouds formed overhead, blotting out the night sky. Ingrid's wands glowed with sinister energy, occasionally blasting a shadow that leapt out in front of them.

Foliage gave way to thick, jagged rocks. Up near the top, Leilani was frantically stabbing her trident down at her assailants. Mike sent lightning spiders ahead to help illuminate the area, and was stunned when the attackers spun around to reveal skeletons in ragged clothes. Several were armed with scimitars while the rest carried daggers, oars, and even a broken surfboard.

"What the actual hell?" muttered Ingrid. "Are those...zombies? Skeletons? Undead pirates?"

Mike didn't know the answer, but it didn't matter. The undead turned their attention away from Leilani, who now gazed down at Mike in relief. Dark blue blood flowed down her arms and torso, and she looked to be on the verge of collapse.

Ingrid's wands lit up and she started blasting. Arcane energy tore into the skeletal figures like shotgun rounds, blowing off limbs as Mike advanced. Serpents of fire ripped the skeletons away from the rocky crag, tossing them over the side of the mountain. Quetzalli held out a single hand and called forth a small bolt of lightning that blew up a pair of skeletons near the edge.

With the tide turning, the skeletons closest to Leilani spun around and tried to take her out. She stabbed down at them, then dropped her trident when her arm was slashed open.

"Damn!" Mike crouched down and Ingrid hopped off, her magic shattering a nearby foe. Dodging rusted blades, he climbed up the rocks and grabbed the skeletons from behind, yanking them off balance so they tumbled away. Leilani scrambled to her feet when he reached her side, her eyes filled with tears. Below, the forest erupted as night marchers appeared from the woods and engaged both the living and the dead in combat.

“Caretaker,” Leilani whimpered, clutching his arm for support. He looked down at the spectral melee below and felt his magic climb its way through his stomach and into his throat.

“Plug your ears,” he yelled, then took a deep breath and released the banshee’s scream once more. The air rippled away from him with magical fury, causing the skeletal warriors to clutch their skulls and sprint away, several of them falling off the mountain. The night marchers melted away into the darkness, their chants of war going with them. The women below all clutched at their ears, staggering around as his magic overwhelmed them. There were earplugs back in the tent, but the attack had been so sudden that nobody had grabbed them.

The magic cascaded down the mountain like thunder. In the distance, he could hear his scream echo back to him. If nothing else, he had bought them a reprieve, but his throat was now raw from the effort. Rubbing at his throat, he moved to help Leilani down the rocks when he felt her freeze in place. Looking up, he saw Francois stumble through the trees, his face and arms bloodied. He was clutching his sword in one hand and a flintlock pistol in the other.

“It’s about fucking time,” Mike declared, then realized his mistake when he felt Leilani slide behind him in an effort to hide. “Aw, fuck nuts.”

“Two for one,” declared Captain Francois as he leveled the flintlock pistol at Mike. “Some luck at last.”

Magic flooded Mike’s body as he twisted to one side, guided by precognition as Francois fired his gun. Mike’s magic ripped free of his body, forming into a sphere of electrical energy that attempted to push the bullet to one side. Neither his precognition or his magic was enough, and the impact of the musket ball to his shoulder twisted him sideways and caused him to trip over the mermaid trying desperately to hide in his shadow. The air erupted with fire and lightning, but Mike saw neither as he lost his balance and plummeted over the edge of the cliff, tangled up with Leilani.

Curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal, he thought to himself as pain flooded his body. His consciousness flickered as he used his good arm to unstopper Opal’s bottle, and then the whole world went dark.