

## Life and Death

The glass doors that led out to the patio made a soft shushing noise as they slid open, revealing a massive wraparound deck that extended over the Pacific Ocean. The waves beneath the Black Palace crashed into the concrete pillars like the steady beating of drums.

The Curator closed his eyes and inhaled the salt air, tasting it with all of his senses. Letting out a dramatic sigh, he grabbed the handles of the wheelchair and pushed his charge further out onto the deck. The man in the chair was strapped in tight to keep him from falling out. A dark mist followed them, a cloud of particulate matter composed of Amir's individual molecules being forced through the dimensional barrier to reconstruct his body.

"It's too bad you aren't cognizant enough to enjoy this." The Curator walked to the railing and lifted a pair of magical opera glasses to his eyes. By the power of thought alone, he was able to zoom in on the boats as if standing only a few feet away. Doing a quick appraisal of Captain Francois' armada, he shifted his attention toward the naval command that had formed up in a ring a few miles past them. "It isn't often that we get to be at ground zero for such well laid plans."

"My...ly." Amir's head tilted forward, revealing his exposed brain. About a month ago, his endless screaming had come to a stop, replaced by occasional vocalizations. However, he was still several months away from any sort of advanced thought. The Curator found the process extremely fascinating, especially now that the man was quiet for most of the day. If he could ask Amir what it felt like to be strained through the fabric of reality and actually receive a coherent answer, he would happily spend all day documenting the process.

"Yes, that's right, your Lily." The Curator lowered the opera glasses and frowned. "I do wish you had purchased additional real estate out here. It was interesting seeing the destruction of Paradise, but now I wish to view the coming battle on the eastern side of the mountain."

"My...ly," Amir replied.

"The sun will be up soon." The Curator grabbed one of the lounge chairs by the pool and dragged it over so that he'd have somewhere to sit. "What sort of surprises will the Caretaker show us today, do you think?" Mike Radley was either extremely resourceful or very lucky, the Curator hadn't decided which. However,

nothing had been quite so surprising as that little outburst from Paradise the other day. After watching a pair of naga topple the buildings, there had been a massive surge of magical energy. The Curator had no idea what it could have been, but the fact that the sky had cracked open for just a moment so that the Others could get a better view, well...

That had been very *interesting*.

“My...ly.”

“Perhaps. The succubus has been spotted here. If I thought acquiring her would ease your transition, I’d do so in a heartbeat. However, I fear that this isn’t the time.” He had done the math. Capturing the succubus would be a poor investment of his time and would likely cause him problems he didn’t feel like dealing with.

The sliding door opened and a young woman walked out. She wore a robe that briefly opened to reveal a bikini underneath.

“Have I missed anything?” The demon Legion grabbed another deck chair and dragged it up to the railing. She leaned out over the side and dangled her arms.

“Not yet. Though you did sleep through the evacuations.” The Curator had found that particular endeavor fascinating. The Caretaker’s people had managed to evacuate nearly all of Lahaina, as well as some surrounding towns. Still, their time had been limited, and even now, early beachcombers could be seen below scouring the sand for shells and other treasures.

“Hardly. I may have sent a few of my meat puppets to disrupt efforts a bit.” Legion set a bottle of champagne on a nearby table and went back inside the Black Palace. She came back with a pair of glasses and some orange juice. “Mimosa?”

“Please.” Though the alcohol would have no effect, it was more of a celebratory gesture anyway. Legion made the mimosa and handed it over to the Curator. He sipped at the concoction, and blanched. It was much too sweet. “I believe that we had a non-interference agreement where the Caretaker and his people are concerned.”

“Please. I didn’t interact with anyone from his household, only the people they were trying to evacuate.” Legion smirked. “And if you don’t like that I found a

loophole in our agreement, then you should have known better than to make a deal with a demon.”

The Curator nodded. “A wise assessment.”

“Anyway...” Legion made a face at him and then held up her glass. “I think a toast is in order.”

“I concur.” He raised his glass toward the skyline. “To the Captain, long may he sail. And to the results of well laid plans.” With any luck, he would be hearing from Elizabeth soon. The anti-scrying field around the society’s old underground facility had been a necessary precaution, but he hated being in the dark.

“To results.” Legion clinked her glass against his and took a sip. Down below, the people on the beach screamed in horror as skeletal hordes emerged from beneath the waves, marching toward them as the sun’s light kissed the ocean.

Behind them, Amir called out once more for his lost succubus.

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Beth stood near the edge of the pebble beach of Lelekea Bay, her eyes on the ships silhouetted on the horizon by the rising sun. The ocean currents out here were strong, but that hadn’t stopped the dead. There was an eerie stretch of completely calm water that extended out to sea for several miles where it terminated amongst the many ships that circled each other. The merfolk had been unable to disrupt the Captain’s magic here and had been sent to ply their talents elsewhere.

Across the island, the best areas for the dead to beach had been identified. The merfolk had sent their best magic users to create brutal riptides and slamming waves to destroy the invaders before they could reach the safety of land. This would slow them down, but it would not stop them. At some point, the dead would either start climbing cliffs to reach land or simply risk being destroyed. The merfolk couldn’t cover everywhere. There simply weren’t enough of them to make Maui inaccessible.

Leilani let out a contented sigh from her spot on a nearby rock. Between the two of them was a massive wooden crate that had been bolted shut. The word Fragile had been hastily written on the side.

“You get the feeling back in your legs yet?” Beth smirked in the mermaid’s direction.

Princess Leilani chuckled. "Perhaps. I didn't quite expect to be used so...extensively. My stomach muscles are sore."

Beth laughed again. Standing on the brink of war, it was either that or start crying.

"I must admit I was surprised to see the two of you together. I felt like an amateur." Leilani fingered the filigree on the shaft of her trident. "I honestly wondered if you might burst."

"I've had a bit of practice at it." Beth could feel her cheeks burning. While she hadn't been shy in the moment, thinking back on everyone else watching her was a little mortifying. She gazed out toward the Northeast at the aircraft carrier that was stationed there. Dozens of support boats milled around at its base. "Do you think those guys are gonna get involved or continue being useless?"

"Once they see the truth of things, all will change." Leilani turned her attention to the small hut that had been hastily erected in the early morning. It contained a portal to higher ground in case the two of them needed to escape. "What are the odds that Plan A works?"

Beth looked at the crate again. Inside was a tracking device along with a bomb that Tink had assembled last night from parts Eulalie had supplied. The goblin had been pissed to learn that she had been left out of the festivities last night, but happy to hear that the process had restored Mike's spirit.

It hadn't just been his spirit, either. The last time Beth had seen Mike, he had been carefully going over last-minute plans with Quetzalli and Di. His magic was so strong this morning that Di had smelled it from a distance. Beth wasn't entirely certain what that meant, but even now, with him somewhere up the mountain, she could feel his presence in the back of her mind. Through these most recent trials, he had yet again come out the other side stronger.

As for herself? Beth intended to catch up. She touched the Rod of Osiris tucked into the holster strapped to her thigh. Aurora had given the holster to her as a gift before leaving to help over at Lahaina. Based on undead distribution, the west side of the island was one of the primary targets of Francois' wrath. That meant the Order, along with Yuki and some of the others, were stationed over there.

Somewhere up above, Tink was watching them through the scope of the monstrous weapon she had created. Beth had no idea where the goblin had found

the time to modify a sniper rifle, but the thing was now mounted to a massive tree uphill with a series of counterweights and hydraulics that allowed the goblin to maneuver and aim the thing. Considering it now had a barrel length of nearly five feet, Beth was fairly certain the goblin could hit whatever she desired.

Out in the bay, the water dipped to reveal a legion of skeletons. They marched forward as one, their weapons clutched tightly to their chests. An aqueous simulacrum of Captain Francois led them, a twisted sneer fixed on his face.

“Is this it, then? Has the Caretaker finally seen reason?” The elemental gestured toward the crate.

“He wanted you to have this.” Beth patted the box. “So that we may end this battle before somebody gets hurt.”

Francois laughed, which came out as a gurgling sound. “People have already been hurt,” he said, gesturing toward the other side of the island. “I admit that your plan to evacuate people was a truly impressive feat, but I knew that you would ultimately fail. How many did you even manage to get to safety?”

Beth scowled. The night had been long, and even though the evacuations had gone smoothly at first, they had underestimated how many people would simply ignore all the warnings. People staying in independent lodgings had argued with Order personnel, and even though Dana and Asterion had gotten into a few fistfights, there had been plenty of people who had simply ignored orders to leave their rooms. At least one hotel lobby in Lahaina was packed with people who firmly believed the Order was part of some mysterious government coup, and had barricaded themselves inside.

“It could have gone better,” she admitted with a shrug. In all honesty, what they had accomplished in twelve hours was nothing short of miraculous. But it was hard to celebrate such success when their failures would be measured in lives lost. “So perhaps you understand why we’ve chosen this instead.”

Beth didn’t dare lie to Francois. There was no way of knowing if he could tell truths from falsehoods. If they were lucky, his greed would cause him to take the fake eggs back to his ship and Tink could blow him to hell. The fact that he had summoned and sent a magical avatar of himself indicated that he was far too cautious to fall for such a ploy.

The man grinned, then shook his head. "You must take me for a fool," he declared, then raised a hand. Behind him, the water shifted, briefly revealing hundreds of dead bodies, just waiting for their orders. Beth looked over her shoulder at the small hut and knew she was probably going to need it soon.

"Now why would you say such a thing?" asked Leilani, her hands tightening on the shaft of her trident.

"I am centuries old. I recognize a trojan horse when I see one." He gave the crate a kick. "My guardian tells me that he cannot sense their power." Out in the bay, several ships shifted away from each other on mysterious swells, giving Beth a clear view of the sea beyond. "The Caretaker has revealed his hand as both a traitor and a coward. He even sent a woman to do a man's job. If given the chance, I intend to drown him at sea just so I can make his corpse clean the toilets on my boat with his hands for all eternity."

He held up his aquatic fingers and snapped. The skeletons at his side rushed forward, only to sink waist deep into the gravel. The undead thrashed as they sank, then tried using their weapons as tools to dig themselves free.

"A clever parlor trick," Francois muttered.

"I'm glad you approve." Beth raised the glowing Rod of Osiris, power thrumming through her fingertips as she made the water beneath the ground churn. It had been an impromptu lesson from Ratu on the shores of Paradise, the two of them facing down a similar horde.

*"For me, it's not about sensing where the rocks are," Ratu had told her as a whirlpool formed in the sand. "But rather, where they aren't. By knowing this, I can demand they move accordingly, thus chewing my enemies to pieces. It's hard to move when the ground beneath your very feet betrays you."*

It was a similar process, only this time Beth had pulled in the ocean's water to saturate the ground to the point of instability. Truthfully, if she hadn't spent so much time worrying about quicksand in her own youth, this idea never would have occurred to her. It had been tricky to accomplish with gravel, but it was still effective.

"When I kill you, I'll try not to ruin your face." Francois walked backward toward the waves. "I wouldn't mind gazing upon it during those long, lonely nights at sea." Nearly a mile out, something large had started to breach the water, causing the remaining ships to tilt away from it.

“You speak as if you’ve won already.” Leilani readied her trident and moved by Beth’s side.

“Oh, but I have.” Francois looked over his shoulder at the two of them. “Ever since his mate was killed centuries ago, he’s been in quite the foul mood. It’s entirely possible I may have insinuated that the Caretaker bears some responsibility for this. It is rather a simple beast, you see.”

Beth didn’t respond. She was too busy watching the massive being that rose from the depths, revealing an elongated snout filled with teeth the size of cars. The creature didn’t have arms or fins, but it did have at least six tentacles attached to the trunk of its body. In the distance, alarms were being sounded from the aircraft carrier.

When she thought the beast was done, it rose even farther. It was far enough out to sea that it was hard to tell how tall it was, but she knew for a fact that it was bigger than any cruise ship she had ever seen in the bay. The creature opened its mouth and let out a shriek that caused Beth and Leilani both to clutch at their ears in pain.

“The kraken cries for your blood. If you can, run. He likes the thrill of the chase.” Francois tipped his hat and turned back into water, and that’s when the hordes in the bay charged forward.

Grinding her teeth, Beth tried to ignore the ringing in her ears as she raised the Rod of Osiris toward the approaching hordes. The skeletons charged forward, slowed only by the sudden riptide that Beth had summoned.

“We need to go,” Leilani shouted, blood running down from her ears.

“Not yet,” Beth replied, walking backward towards the hut. The glowing Rod in her hand was singing now, helping her manipulate the water in the bay. Though she couldn’t see it, Beth could feel the water resist as she took hold of a sphere of it roughly ten feet across. Straining with effort, she felt where the water wasn’t, which was all of the tiny little air bubbles trapped inside.

“Beth!” Leilani used her trident to smash a skeleton into the ground. It fought to get back up until she pierced its skull.

“GAH!” Beth forced all of the air into the center of the sphere, compressing it into a tiny space. Her ears were still ringing from the kraken’s cry, but she could hear her heart pounding. Even with the rising sun, the glowing orb of compressed

air was visible beneath the waves, just above the skeletal beings that walked the sea floor beneath it. With so much pressure built into such a tiny space, Beth's magic was strained to its limits.

Overhead, a pair of jets did a flyby of the kraken. It whipped a pair of tentacles out at incredible speed, just missing both of them. Beth ignored the distraction, her full concentration on the spell she had created. When the time felt right, she released the sphere, allowing the air to rapidly expand. Tink had described the idea to her in detail, and Beth wondered if this had even been worth her time and effort.

The surface of the water exploded in a violent spray. Beneath the water, a shockwave demolished the undead, busting them apart into useless fragments. Sadly, the skeletons already on the beach were unaffected, so Beth raised the Rod and used her command of the water to create a pair of tendrils that reached out to pull them back into the crashing waves.

"BETH!" Leilani speared a corpse wearing a button-up with pineapples all along the front, then used him as a projectile to knock down a skeleton in board shorts. "We have to go!"

Disgruntled, Beth turned and ran into the hut. Leilani was right behind her, the mermaid yanking the door shut and sliding the bolt across. They dove through the portal together just as the skeletons reached the building, their bony claws beating at the exterior walls. It didn't take long before they toppled the structure, causing the portal to collapse.

They were now about a half a mile uphill, standing just outside a hastily constructed building that looked like an outhouse. Down below, the bay was overrun with corpses as they scrambled up onto the rocks. There was clearly some confusion among the dead who had toppled the hut as they dug through the rubble, looking for their prey.

Out in the water, the kraken turned its attention to the aircraft carrier and its strike team. It smashed a tentacle through a destroyer and roared. Planes were already scrambling on the deck of the carrier, but Beth had a pretty good idea about what would happen next. The guns on the carrier would be of little use against the mythical being, meaning a one-sided battle with the Navy. Up and down the coastline, the undead rose from the water like slimy froth as they stormed the island with a single goal. Someone driving down the highway stopped to get out of their car for a better look.



Beth pulled the walkie talkie from her pocket. “Tink, we’re clear.”

Once the words left her mouth, the bomb on the beach detonated. Beth and Leilani crouched down behind some rocks before the shockwave reached them, clutching at their ears. Rocks and other debris showered the area, and a broken shovelhead landed nearby. Satisfied that they were safe, Beth peered over the rocks and saw that the pebble beach was now a massive crater.

“What the hell did Tink build that bomb out of?” Even though hundreds of skeletons had been destroyed, still more came in a steady march from the sea. Raising the Rod of Osiris, she pointed it out toward the water. Though she was nearly a mile away, the ocean could still hear her commands.

“Let me know if anything tries to kill us,” she said, glancing briefly at the kraken. It had wrapped its tentacles around the aircraft carrier. Air support was already raining missiles down on the creature’s back, but it didn’t even react as massive limbs squeezed the ship. The rest of the fleet were being bashed apart by flailing tentacles that tore through the ships like paper.

“I’ve got your back.” Leilani stuck the butt of her trident into the ground and stood watch as Beth commanded the waves to carry their burden back out to sea. She knew there was nothing she could do to stem the tide, but that wasn’t her job. All she needed to do was buy time and, if possible, find a way to lure Francois out of hiding. Through the walkie talkie, Tink chuckled. “Boom-boom, bony fucks.”

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Ingrid stood on the edge of Honoapi‘ilani Highway, her eyes on the rocky shores below. Skeletons clung to the rocks like sea urchins, their bony digits scrambling for purchase as they attempted to climb onto land. The waves were relentless, smashing the invaders into bits.

Still, it was a numbers game. The tide of undead had yet to show any signs of slowing, and for every skeleton destroyed, two more would take its place. Already, perhaps a hundred of them crawled across the dangerous rocks below, their lifeless eyes on the Order team above them. To the northwest, the kitsune Yuki had actually frozen the bay to keep them from making it to shore, but it was a band-aid at most. Soon, the heat of the day would be Yuki’s main enemy, and no matter how powerful she was, this was still an island near the equator, and she couldn’t fight the sun. This left less hospitable regions for the dead to make

landfall. They surged forward, climbing over the destroyed bodies of their brethren.

“I’ve seen enough zombie movies to know that we’re fucked.” Wallace stared down at the mess below and shook his head. “If we were smart, we’d leave now.”

“But we can’t.” Ingrid looked down the road at the hotels and buildings on the shore. She had been part of the disastrous evacuations in Lahaina. At some point, an asshole with a loudspeaker had announced that there was no tsunami and that the government was leading its citizens to the gas chamber. It also didn’t help that the tsunami shelters were technically for use *after* a tsunami, so a few people had caught on early enough.

Another contributing factor was that the shelters nearby were schools that should have been physically incapable of holding the amount of people they had stuffed in there. Right now, there were hundreds of puzzled tourists trying to figure out how they had gotten to the Big Island.

At some point, they had been forced to shut down the portals to keep people from backtracking. This meant they had to defend the people that had shown up too late to be taken to safety. This also included the assholes who had barricaded themselves into the hotels. Resources were stretched perilously thin as a result, leaving Yuki and the minotaur Asterion in charge of the tourist district.

“Oh, I’m perfectly aware that we’re stupid.” Wallace unslung the rifle from his shoulder and took aim at a skeleton that had made it further than the others. There was a crack of gunfire and the creature dropped to the ground, a massive hole in its forehead. “They say that God prefers fools and idiots. Either way, sticking around guarantees me a spot in Heaven.”

Ingrid rolled her eyes and raised her own rifle. She took out another skeleton that was approaching the road. Along the road, her team began picking off undead who made it past the dangerous shores. When they were clustered together, either a grenade or a spell sufficed. There were maybe twenty people total defending the road with another twenty a mile away doing the same.

An eerie cry broke across the island, echoing over the hills and raising all the hairs on the back of Ingrid’s neck. She shivered and looked to Wallace for support, but the man had visibly paled.

“This sucks,” he muttered, then shot another skeleton. “But I’m guessing it’s far better than what the Radleys are facing.”

Ingrid nodded. In a way, she wished that she had been part of the defense team protecting the volcano. Ever since returning to Paradise, it was clear that a distinct line had been drawn between family and outsider, and she certainly wasn’t family. Whatever happened next, she craved the opportunity to prove herself to Mike and the others, hopeful that maybe they would see what an asset she could be. She hated how confused she felt about the Radley family, a feeling exacerbated by the fact that she intended to leave the Order.

Soon, she wouldn’t have a place in the world. Where would she go? What would she do? These were the questions she asked herself as the dead stormed the shore, scrambling over each other in an attempt to murder those on the highway.

“Running low on munitions.” Wallace slung his rifle across his back and pulled his sword. “How much longer until they unveil this majestic plan of theirs?”

“When the time is right.” Truthfully, Ingrid didn’t know. This was a part of the plan that Beth and Pele had kept from the others and it drove her slightly mad that she hadn’t been included.

“Hey, you good?” Wallace turned his attention from the carnage below.

Ingrid shrugged. “Not really. Now isn’t the time or the place.”

“If it’s a confession of your undying love for me, well...” Wallace paused to behead a skeleton. Its body moved independently for a few moments before collapsing to the ground. “This is probably the *best* time and place.”

“You’re such an ass.” Ingrid drew a pistol and fired it point blank into the skull of a dead businessman. “Is there anybody you won’t hit on?”

“These guys.” Wallace slashed apart a bloated corpse, then whistled in appreciation at a woman in two-piece with only one arm. “Then again...”

Ingrid laughed. “You’re such a creep.”

He winked in her direction. “But I’m *your* creep.”

“For now,” she replied, her attention snapping back to the fight at hand. The team was forced to slowly move uphill toward the elementary school where at least a couple hundred people were holed up. By now, it was abundantly clear to

anyone watching that a tsunami wasn't coming. Some civilians were up on the roof, shouting instructions to people below. Cars in the parking lot were being moved to block doors and any other point of entry.

There was another loud cry that carried across the island. The waves surged out to sea, briefly revealing an army of undead that stood in single file lines, along with the merfolk that attacked them from above. Out in the water, several ships were now making a beeline toward the shore, their decks covered in undead.

"Ah." Ingrid frowned. "Those are going to be a problem."

"One we expected," Wallace replied just as someone nearby fired an RPG. It struck one of the ships, blowing out its side. Fireballs were launched from wands in an attempt to slow the vessels down, but the undead didn't require a safe landing. Burning ships slammed into the rocks, spilling their deadly cargo en masse. The undead scrambled over each other as they surged forward, catching the Order team unprepared.

"Fall back," Ingrid cried, using her pistol to pick off the faster runners.

"Which way?" Somebody asked.

"Toward the school," she replied, then lowered her voice. "You fucking idiot."

They continued uphill toward the elementary school, moving between the cars they had parked as obstacles. The dead were of a single-minded purpose, which meant they would usually climb over or under the vehicles rather than simply move around them.

A mage who had fallen behind tripped and fell. Ingrid started to run toward the woman and was surprised when a massive Hawaiian wielding a baseball bat beat her there. He smashed his bat through the skull of a nearby skeleton and then yanked the woman to her feet.

"Thanks," she replied, then sent out a sphere of force that detonated about twenty feet out, knocking the undead off their feet. Several other men and women appeared between the cars, all of them wielding some sort of weapon.

"Where did all these people come from?" asked Ingrid as she looked over her shoulder. There were nearly fifty people behind her, all of them native islanders.

“We live here,” replied the massive Hawaiaian. He was wearing board shorts and an unbuttoned Aloha shirt.

“But you were supposed to evacuate!”

The large man nodded. “That’s right, we were, and we did.” The man stepped forward to crush a skeleton’s skull. “I got to meet my ancestors last night. Can you imagine that? The warriors of old, guiding my family to safety. It really got me thinking about what’s important, and I wasn’t the only one.”

Nearby, a Hawaiian woman used a crowbar to block an attack from a skeleton. A surfer standing behind her buried his pickaxe in the monster’s skull, sending it to the ground.

“This is our island,” he said with conviction. “We aren’t just the people who live here. We *are* Hawaii.” Holding his bat in the air, he raised his voice. “Imua!”

“Imua!” The newcomers shouted in return.

"Imua e nā poki'i a inu I ka wai 'awa'awa a'ohe hope e ho'i mai ai!" The big man raised his bat and brought it down on another skeleton. “This is our island! We will defend it!”

Cheers rang out from the crowd and they surged forward. Ingrid watched in astonishment as the islanders started driving back the hordes.

“Damn,” Wallace muttered at her side. “I’ve got fucking chills.”

“Me too,” she replied, then unholstered her wand. “I bet that big guy takes out more of them than you do.”

“Now we’re talking.” Wallace whooped in delight and charged into the fray. Ingrid followed him, a pistol in one hand and her wand in the other.

*I just hope we make it, she thought as she ran toward certain death. Beneath her feet, the whole island rumbled and the skies above darkened. Because it sure feels like the end of the world.*

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The Caretaker stood on the edge of a cliff, his gaze on the valley below. The shores were dark with undead bodies as they scrambled for purchase, heading up the mountain in a surge of white and gray. Out in the ocean, the abomination that Francois had pulled from the deep was busy crushing an aircraft carrier in its

massive tendrils. Bombs seemed to have no effect on the beast, and it would occasionally let out a shriek that made Mike dizzy just hearing it.

This was it, his first official fight with another Player in the Great Game. If not for the actions of others throughout the night, the losses would already be incalculable. Francois was going all out in his attempt, leaving no stone unturned. These were the acts of a desperate man, and desperate men made mistakes.

“Are you ready?” Pele emerged from a nearby stone as if stepping through a cloud, one eyebrow raised as she looked out to sea. “It looks like he has already unleashed his pet.”

“You hurt it with fire before, right?”

Pele nodded. “I only had to boil several million gallons of seawater. As you can see, the creature is no worse for wear.”

“Are you ready?”

“I am. But we will have to wait a bit longer before we can spring our trap.” The goddess stood next to him and closed her eyes. “Your family’s actions saved many of my people, Mike Radley. I’m not certain how I could ever repay you for it.”

“Consider it a gift, freely given.”

Pele snorted. “You spend too much time with the fae.”

He laughed, then turned to look at the goddess. “I have a bit of a question for you about divinity.”

“Oh? And what questions would a mere mortal ask the gods themselves?” Pele pulled a flower from a nearby bush and tucked it into her hair.

Mike stared down at his hand and summoned a tiny lightning spider which danced around. “I’ve seen some things lately,” he confessed. “Involving my magic. I almost don’t want to say it out loud, but—”

“Then don’t.” The goddess turned to face him, her dark eyes blazing. “You know just as well as I do that words can have great power. What you are and what you are becoming are things that are best left unsaid. Speaking them into existence may actually hinder the process, or gain you attention you certainly do not want.”

“Something worse than this?” Mike gestured out to sea. The aircraft carrier was listing badly as the kraken pressed its massive mass against the vessel, causing the bulkheads to burst.

She nodded. “You must remember why the gods fled this world in the first place. Someday, you may grow tall like the Koa tree, but for now, you are still just a seed. Should that ever happen, *they* will take notice of you.”

“What are they, exactly?” Mike studied Pele, hoping for answers about the Outsiders. “Where do they come from? What do they want?”

Pele shook her head. “That’s just it, Caretaker. You can’t define them. They are beings devoid of rules or logic from a place of non-existence. As for what they want? They hunger. That is all. They would eat their way across the stars themselves, devouring time and space, just to fill bellies that lack dimension. They came here because they sensed our power, sensed what we are capable of. We aren’t even their prey, if you can believe that. Divinity is the sauce that makes the meal worth eating, and that’s all.” She shivered and put a fist to her chin. “Let us not speak anymore about them, lest they listen in. I would caution you to only dwell on them from the safety of your own home, because they are always watching. And they will certainly be observing this. You cannot concentrate power like this in any one place without repercussions.”

“I appreciate your guidance,” he said, then turned his attention down toward the bay. “I can’t believe all those people are going to die.”

“Not all of them. The merfolk will help where they can. But such a battle has not happened for many centuries, and definitely not out in the open. I just wish more of my brothers and sisters were here to help us.” Pele shook her head. “The old ways have been forgotten. The same thing that protects this world from those who would consume it allows acts such as these to occur.”

“I thought you said we shouldn’t talk about them anymore?”

Pele sighed. “I may be a divine being, but I’m not perfect. Are you ready for what comes next?”

Mike held out his hand and smiled at the golden mote of light that briefly appeared there. “I think so,” he replied. He felt like he finally understood his place in things. Ever since last night’s sexual buffet, his whole body was positively thrumming with power.

“Good. Then I shall await the signal.” The goddess turned to look toward the peak of the volcano. Clouds were starting to boil up above, and ominous thunder echoed across the island. “We stand on the brink of exciting times, Caretaker.”

“I’m ready for some boring times,” he replied. When Mike looked in Pele’s direction, the goddess was gone. He sighed and turned his attention to the kraken. The creature had compressed the center of the aircraft carrier and was actively shoving it under the water. Hundreds of men and women were in the water, likely in some stage of dying. Within minutes, they would all join the coming horde.

A jet shot past the kraken, but was snatched up in a tentacle. There was a fiery pop, followed by the spread of subsonic debris. All along the coastline, the Captain’s ghost ships rammed themselves into the shore, spilling their undead cargo. Skeletal armies ran inland, many of them heading into the forest below.

The sky broke, releasing a heavy rain. The ground rumbled as Pele readied her eruption. Mike clenched his fists, sending blue and gold sparks up and down his forearms. He couldn’t do anything yet, but when the time came...

Thunder rumbled overhead, followed by dozens of lightning strikes along the ridge. The kraken turned its attention toward Maui and let out a hideous cry. Tentacles flailing, it moved toward land, the water surging in front of it.

“That’s right, discount Godzilla. Get your ass over here.” Though he was stuck waiting, that didn’t mean he couldn’t help. A powerful vortex of mana spun inside of him as he sent his will outward into the land. Dazzling specks of golden light floated away from him like pollen, gliding down the cliff to the forests below. In his heart, he could feel the jungle come to life, the trees raising roots and lowering branches to slow the invaders. For a moment, he was one with the island, feeling the steady beat of its heart deep within his own.

Down below, the kraken grabbed onto the rocks of Maui and pulled itself onto land. It looked up toward Mike Radley and roared in fury, then began the long climb upward. The undead surged forward, vanishing into the jungles of Hawaii as they, too, began their murderous ascent.

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Eulalie stared at the bank of monitors, nearly ten feet tall and thirty feet across that had been arranged in a semi-circle. She dangled from a thick band of



silken webs that allowed her to twist and turn with little effort, her eyes shifting between all the screens. Three of the screens were currently blank.

“I don’t have all day, you guys.” She could hear the network of rats behind the monitors, shifting about as they finished plugging in the last few monitors. Cables dropped through the floor to the massive server room below, where an experimental supercomputer sifted through the data and attempted to parse out anything of worth. In truth, Eulalie had been debating acquiring it for the last year, and the assault on Hawaii had justified its theft. On the central bank of monitors, she watched as the dead smashed themselves against the exterior walls of an elementary school in Lahaina, the tsunami shelter closest to the sea. Up on the roof, the Order and some native islanders were busy smashing anything that crawled onto it. Down below, the cars that had been shoved up against the exterior doors were now being shoved so hard by the surging dead that the brickwork was beginning to crumble.

Her eyes briefly flicked to a different monitor with the names of anyone wearing a commlink. She clicked on Ingrid’s name and waited. After several seconds of no response, she moved down to Wallace and clicked on him.

The comm cracked to life. “Delivery or carryout?” he asked.

“Where’s Ingrid?” Eulalie could see the man on her screen. He was covered in blood, some of it his own.

“Inside blocking a hallway. Some of them got in through a busted classroom window. She probably lost her commlink.” Wallace grabbed a woman by the shoulder and pulled her back as a skeletal figure lunged from the wall and tried to grab her leg. It caught Wallace instead, who sliced off its hand at the wrist. “Are you guys going to do something anytime soon? I give us maybe ten more minutes before this place becomes a killzone.”

“Standby.” Eulalie clicked on Reggie’s name. “Queen here. How are the preparations?”

“Almost ready, Your Majesty.” Reggie’s voice was strained, the stress of working through the night having taken a toll. Currently, he was working on chewing a portal from an abandoned home on the big island to the school. “We should be done in about fifteen more minutes.”

“Copy.” Eulalie clicked on another name. “Queen to Dead Girl, I need an assist.”

“Where?” Dana’s voice was muffled.

“The elementary school.”

“Copy. I’ve got Lily with me, so we’re on our way. Over and out.”

Eulalie clicked on Wallace again. “Help is on the way.”

“Is it the snake?” Wallace asked. “She’s pretty badass.”

“Negative. Best I could do was a college dropout and her slutty friend.”

Eulalie smirked when she saw Wallace pause for a moment.

“Is there any way you could send the snake first and the slutty friend later?”

Wallace stabbed a dead surfer through the head. “Oh, nevermind. You just mean Lily, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“She’ll do.” Wallace touched his ear and the audio cut off.

The Arachne turned in her web and saw Sofia looking at the monitors, her massive eye studying each one. “How is our military doing?” she asked.

“Not good.” The cyclops didn’t look away from the digital feed in front of her. “They’re calling in an air strike, but our commander-in-chief believes that the kraken is some sort of AI generated hoax and wants better confirmation. Sadly, somebody has cut off exterior communications to the island.”

“Don’t want too many cooks in the kitchen.” In all honesty, Eulalie was more afraid that someone might panic and demand a nuclear strike. “How about naval support?”

“Well, after the carrier was downed, we’ve got a couple of destroyers headed our way. It also sounds like there was a sub in the area.”

“Really? I must have missed that.” Eulalie turned her attention to the feed.

“Was,” Sofia emphasized. “They lost contact a few minutes ago. Based on final transmissions, the kraken crushed it.”

“Damn.” Eulalie looked back at the elementary school, then turned her attention to another set of monitors. This one depicted the high school just down the road. The building had been easier to defend with the Order jamming cars across the doors. The people here had done a better job hiding from sight, which

meant the undead were either passing them by or headed toward the elementary school instead.

In the upper left quadrant, Eulalie watched a direct feed of Tink lying on her stomach and aiming a sniper rifle with her goggles on. She picked up her walkie-talkie and said something into it. On another drone camera, Beth and Leilani ran up a trail to higher ground before the area could be overrun by the undead. Eulalie had the drone follow them, then noticed the battery was running low.

“Damn,” she muttered. “Can you get Beth a fresh drone?”

“On it.” Sofia looked away from her screens and ran to the table behind them to pick up another drone. An assembly line of rats were busy swapping out batteries on a trio of drones that had already run out of juice, and one paused to shove a replenished one in Sofia’s direction. The cyclops took it and left the room to push it through a portal where it could be activated in Maui. By the time she came back, Eulalie had already programmed it to track down the one near Beth. Once it arrived there, a rat with a controller in another part of the Library would take over and pilot the thing, keeping Beth in sight.

The rats had taken to piloting drones quite well. It was already giving Eulalie ideas that she probably shouldn’t entertain, but that was a tomorrow problem. For now, dozens of drones were distributed throughout Maui, helping her monitor the Radley family as well as the ships in the ocean. Unfortunately, they had already lost several drones out there, either due to poor signal strength, the massive kraken destroying ships, or even just crashing them into ships by accident. So far, she had failed to identify Captain Francois’ ship. That was her top priority, other than keeping the others safe.

And so, she watched and reported. Tink almost never replied to Eulalie’s updates, but the Arachne knew that the goblin was taking it all in. Her interactions with Tink had been relatively limited in the past, and she was only now starting to understand the true range of Tinker Radley’s intellect. When the goblin had casually drafted a probability chart for undead distribution, it had taken Eulalie several minutes just to figure out what the hell she was looking at. Shaped charges along certain roadways had not only devastated Francois’ army, but had also diverted them along routes that slowed down their crawl. Sure, they were dealing with mindless hordes that couldn’t think beyond killing anyone that moved, but it was the scope of the operation that was mind boggling.

Back at the elementary school, one of the survivors had been pulled over the side by bony hands. Wallace, a pair of mages, and the biggest Hawaiian Eulalie had ever seen were now guarding the rooftop entrance from a rush of skeletons that were scrambling over the sides. The knight was tired, his sword in one hand and a shovel in the other.

Out on the road, a motorcycle gunned its engine, catching the attention of Francois' troops. Many of them turned in place to attack the newcomer, who aimed the motorcycle at a rock in the parking lot.

"Contact," said Dana through the microphone in her helmet. She hopped up onto the seat of the bike, crouching in place on the seat. When the wheel struck the rock, the bike flipped, launching the zombie into the air.

The moment happened so fast that Eulalie missed most of it. Dana twisted in the air, twin blades extending as she plowed into the attackers on the roof. Wallace and the others stopped to watch, staring in awe as Dana sliced away limbs or kicked skeletons hard enough that they were launched from the rooftop.

"What an entrance, ladies and gentlemen!" Lily was down on the street, wearing a ringmaster's outfit and holding a bullhorn to her lips. "What style, what panache!"

"Stupid demon fuck get off public comms!" shouted Tink through the channel. "Big important shout only!"

"There's nothing more important than the show, ladies and—" Whatever Lily said next went unheard as Eulalie muted her. The succubus smashed her bullhorn into the skeleton closest to her, then suplexed another into the ground. This sent the undead into a frenzy as they chased after the demon, who now wore a tracksuit and was using her wings for balance and speed as she ran away from the building.

Up on the roof, Dana had cleared it off and was now circling the edge to knock away stragglers. Wallace and the others had joined her, shoving the undead back. Eventually, Dana stayed behind on the roof as the others went inside. Wallace hung back to ask Dana something, then shrugged apologetically before heading indoors.

"What was that about?" asked Eulalie.

"He asked where I'd been all his life," Dana replied.

“What did you say?”

“Eating pussy.” Dana paused to look at the drone. “Then he asked if I’d ever consider eating sausage sometime. I told him I would, but only if his dick was bigger than Mike’s.”

Eulalie laughed hard enough that she choked on her own spit. Sofia glanced over in concern, but went back to watching the military once she realized Eulalie was okay.

“Big boom, seven minutes,” Tink said through the comm system. “No wait, make big ready.”

This immediately sobered up Eulalie. She clicked through the channels and checked in with everyone. Two minutes later, Reggie announced the portal was ready, and evacuations began for the elementary school. Drone footage shifted views as Eulalie turned the cameras toward the eastern side of the island, her hearts racing as the kraken began its slow ascent. The jungles were packed with thousands of undead, all of them moving upward in a tireless sprint. She checked the time every few seconds, then realized she had been holding her breath.

At exactly the seven minute mark, Haleakalā exploded. Several of the drones went offline immediately, but backups were already being deployed.

“Kick his ass, Mike.” Eulalie steepled her fingers and leaned forward, eager to see what happened next.

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Mike felt the eruption through his body as the ground trembled beneath him. He looked over his shoulder toward the peak of the mountain as thousands of tons of rock and soil were ejected into the sky. The swirling mass of dirt was caught up in the storm that Quetzalli had summoned, then smeared across the sky as the sun was blotted out.

Debris rained down on him, but he was safe beneath the extended wings of Abella. The gargoyle clutched a pair of protective earmuffs over her ears, which she had also stuffed with earplugs. Wearing similar protection himself, Mike asked if Abella was okay in ASL, to which she nodded. The ground continued to rumble as mud and rockslides were triggered all along the island, devastating Francois’ troops in their upward climb.

Down below, the kraken roared in fury, its eyes turning toward the pyroclastic cloud that now hovered overhead. In its depths, a serpentine figure uncoiled itself, gazing down at the kraken in fury. At the top of Di's head, a solitary figure clung to one of the dragon's scales.

Di opened her mouth, revealing an inferno of light and fire. She roared, sending a beam of energy toward the kraken. Its tentacles moved to intercept, and one was promptly severed. Mike watched in horror as the truncated limb moved to the side, the wound promptly sealing shut.

The dragon launched forward, slithering and sliding down the mountainside toward the kraken. On top of Di's head, Ratu extended her arms outward, magic blazing as she commanded the earth to rise. All along the valley, massive spires of volcanic rock, placed there overnight by Pele, rose to puncture the kraken's rubbery hide. The beast roared again, then slammed its tentacles into the ground to shatter the rock and free itself.

"A proper clash of the titans," Mike muttered. Up above, the sun was now blotted out completely, plunging the island into darkness. The sky rumbled and cracked as lightning crawled its way from the clouds down into the volcano's throat. Dozens of lightning strikes a second illuminated the battle below, but also revealed something else.

They appeared in small clusters at first, holding up torches in defiance. Then more came, the eternal guardians of Hawaii pulling energy from the sky to manifest. Tens of thousands of night marchers cried out together, demanding justice in their ancient tongue as they tore into the undead.

Chills ran up Mike's spine as the two armies met. The undead turned on the spiritual guardians of Maui, but were quickly overwhelmed. The cries of Hawaii's eternal warriors were punctuated by the sounds of weapons clashing, then drowned out by the sound of the kraken's screams. The mountain shook beneath Mike's feet when Di slammed her body into the kraken, knocking it over and causing it to tumble downhill where more spikes rose to greet it.

Despite being pincushioned by hundreds of jagged spears, the kraken continued to fight, wrapping a tentacle around Di's neck and smashing the dragon into the ground. Ratu tumbled free from her perch, then reappeared in serpent form. She struck out at the kraken's face, trying to blind it with her teeth. Flames wreathed her body, and a smell like burnt rubber reached Mike's nose.

Down in the water, the armada of the undead was coated in an eerie mist. Steam boiled up from the ocean, forming into a thick fog. Magical energy spiraled outward as the bow of a massive ship appeared. Poseidon himself was the figurehead, nearly thirty feet tall and clutching a trident. As the ship emerged, Mike could see the fiery rings of a portal tucked inside the fog.

“So that’s where you’ve been hiding.” It made sense that Francois would have a trick up his sleeve like that. Sure, he could make his ship big or small, but being able to tuck it away somewhere safe? Infinitely better.

Francois’ ship turned so that the port side faced the island. Cannons the size of tractor trailers emerged from its side, then aimed up toward the island and fired. Projectiles made of condensed magic slammed into Di, knocking the dragon away from the kraken.

“Fuck!” Mike looked at Abella, who nodded and spread her wings. The whole point of luring the kraken and the undead army into an ambush was to bring Francois out of hiding, but they hadn’t expected him to have this kind of artillery. Another cannon fired, and Mike watched in horror as a section of jungle below vanished, leaving behind a smoldering crater.

When the cannons fired again, a dome of stone appeared on top of Di, deflecting the round. More fiery bursts targeted the protective barrier, pummeling it into rubble to reveal that the dragon had disappeared.

“C’mon, it’s our turn.” Mike turned toward the gargoyle, who was already in the sky. Moving toward the edge of the cliff, he held his hands up and allowed Abella to grab his waist with her talons, holding him in place as she pumped her wings. Down below, he could see that numerous fires had broken out, the jungle crying out in pain and rage. Flocks of birds fled in a panic, some of them vanishing in the smoke. Out in the water, dozens of ships formed up around the flagship, their crews throwing spears into the water. From above, Mike could occasionally make out the glimmering shapes of merfolk warriors clinging to their prows. He pushed the button in his pocket for the general comms and spoke. “Beth, where are you at?”

There was a pulse of magic to his left, and he pointed toward it. Abella descended, then dropped Mike and threw herself to the left as a cannonball passed through the space they had been occupying. Mike fell almost a hundred feet before the gargoyle snatched him up, both of them rocketing toward the ground. The treeline behind them was peppered with car-sized cannonballs, which

stopped when Di broke free of the mountain just beneath the kraken. The dragon roared, showering the kraken with molten rock as Francois fired on both of them.

After they landed, Mike ran a few feet, clutched his stomach, then threw up. The freefall had been nothing short of terrifying, but it was the rapid catch at the end that had thrown his stomach for a loop. Spitting on the ground, he looked up to see Beth and Leilani standing in front of him. He waved weakly at both of them, then pulled off his protective earmuffs.

“Hey.” He spat again. “We need to get to that ship.”

“And do what, exactly?” Leilani looked toward Francois’ boat. “Fight our way through his crew and kill him?”

“Yep.” Mike took a swig from a water bottle that Beth offered him, then spat again. “It’s time to take him out of the Game.”

“Just wanted to make sure we were clear.” Leilani looked at Abella, then Beth. “So is it just us, then?”

Mike looked up at Di, who had tackled the kraken to the ground. The kraken slapped the dragon with a trio of tentacles that ripped away her scales, then slammed her into a rock. Bursts of lightning from above struck the kraken, but the beast ignored them.

“It’s never just us,” he said, then hit the public comms button again. “It’s time. Who’s with me?”

Lily appeared in a cloud of yellow smoke, her eyes gleaming with excitement. She tossed the scorched head of a skeleton to the ground, then winked at Beth. “What’ve you bitches been up to?”

“I need a portal,” said Dana. “Do we have one nearby?”

“I’ll send you the location,” replied Eulalie. “But there’s a pretty big horde between you and it.”

“Damn,” said the zombie.

“I’m stuck here,” Yuki said. “I’ve got this hotel wrapped in ten feet of ice to keep them out, but it’s not going to last forever. The assholes here ditched me to hide on the upper levels, so I’m on my own.”



“We’re stuck as well.” Suly’s voice came through the comms with extra static. “Cecilia and I are leadin’ the bone boys away from one o’ the shelters.”

“Tink ready.” The goblin said nothing else.

“I am here, Mike Radley.” Death’s voice also generated a bunch of static on the comms. “Or will be in a few minutes. I’m afraid my assistance is limited.”

“Whatever help you can give, we’ll take it.” Mike looked up at the sky again. Quetzalli had managed to blot it out all the way toward the horizon, but pockets had already opened up, letting beams of ghost-destroying sunlight through. “Best ideas for getting out to his ship?”

“My people are standing by.” Leilani gestured toward the ocean. “About a mile out, we’ve got a group who can manipulate the currents.”

“But won’t Frankie the douche just cancel them out?” asked Lily.

“Not with my help.” Beth held up the Rod of Osiris. “I think we can manage together.”

“It’s those cannons I’m worried about.” Mike moved away from the group so that he could see Francois’ ship through the trees. “If he sees us coming, we’re dead.”

“Ugh, fine.” Lily blew Mike a kiss. “But if a cannonball ruins my makeup, I’m going to make you eat my ass later.” The succubus unfurled her wings, her body shifting to look like Abella’s. She stuck her hands in her stomach and pulled out a thick piece of fabric. She allowed it to unroll, revealing a life-sized pillowcase with a topless picture of Mike on it. Beth laughed so hard that she snorted. Mike frowned, then looked up at Lily.

“That’s not something you just have, right? Like, it’s made out of demon stuff?”

“Can’t talk, I’m helping.” Lily blew a raspberry and took off, her faux Mike flapping beneath her as she soared toward the west. Within moments, cannon fire diverted in her direction, the succubus performing aerial maneuvers that Abella would have been incapable of.

“Let’s go.” Beth turned toward a nearby trailhead, then took a step back when skeletons burst free. Abella leapt forward and smashed her way through them.

“Go,” she shouted, using her wings to press the skeletons back. Mike took Beth and Leilani by the hand and ran for the nearest ledge. Leilani screamed when he jumped, pulling both of them over the side. They fell nearly ten feet before Opal’s tendrils shot out of his shirt, grabbing hold of the nearest trees to halt their descent.

“I hate this!” shouted Leilani.

“You get used to it!” It was a bald-faced lie, but Mike said it in the hopes that it might become true. Down below, the trees had tangled up dozens of the undead, who became far more animated at the sight of him. The jungle pulled their branches and roots out of the way to allow Mike and the others to pass. They jogged for nearly a mile before breaking free of the trees. The beach was within sight, but hordes of skeletal warriors still blocked the path.

They ran for the beach, Beth raising her Rod and Leilani holding her trident. The undead surged forward, their eyes vacant as they raised weapons to attack. Behind Mike, someone blew a long note through a conch shell, and then the night marchers charged forward, easily outpacing Mike and the others to push the invaders back. The spirits cleared a path for them to get to the water, and Beth pointed her Rod toward the waves. The water parted, revealing hundreds more of Francois’ army hidden beneath.

“I’m so tired of these guys,” she groaned, the water rising higher and forming into a massive fist. Beth’s face had turned purple by the time the fist smashed down into the attackers, either shattering them into pieces or driving them into the sand. “Leilani, get him out past the shallows!”

“Beth, what—” Mike looked back in time to see Beth’s eyes glowing with blue light as she summoned a sphere of water onto the beach. Leilani grabbed Mike and tossed him in before following. Once inside, the mermaid grabbed hold of his body just as the sphere launched the two of them through the air. There was another moment of weightlessness before they skimmed across the water, but Mike could no longer see. All he could feel was Leilani’s arms around him and the sensation of her powerful tail flexing and driving them ever forward.

By the time he surfaced, they were over a mile out. As they crested a wave, Mike could see the kraken and Di tumbling down the side of the mountain, flattening trees and leveling the terrain. The jungle was on fire in places, despite the light drizzle that fell. Lightning danced across the sky, penetrating deep into the clouds above. Ash drifted down on the waves, turning the water black.

Several merfolk popped up around them, forming a protective ring. As a group, they swam out toward Francois' ship, sinking deep beneath the water to avoid detection. Even so, spears uselessly penetrated the murky depths as the skeleton crews above rained projectiles down on them randomly.

Mike tapped Leilani on the shoulder and pointed at his mouth, letting her know that he was about out of breath. She pressed her lips to his and breathed into him, her tongue dancing along his. His magic rose up in response, but he tamped it back into place, promising it free run once this was all over. Somewhere up above, the cannons on the flagship boomed, sending small shockwaves through the water that stunned schools of fish near the surface.

A heavy current blasted the group, sending a few of the warriors spiraling off into the darkness. Linking hands, the merfolk swam upward, emerging in the center of a trio of boats. Before the undead on the ships could attack, the merfolk summoned a wave to lift their group up and onto the deck where they were immediately greeted by dozens of undead warriors wielding spears. The merfolk warriors sprouted legs and then slammed into the mass of creatures, driving most of them overboard using brute strength and water magic. The cannons on Francois' ship boomed again, the volley slamming into Di and the kraken. Di tried to take refuge beneath the earth, but the kraken ripped her free and slammed her into the ground. Di showered the kraken with molten stone from her fearsome maw, but the kraken took the hit and squeezed the dragon by the throat.

"We can't get any closer," said one of the merfolk, pointing at Francois' ship. "His control of the sea is stronger the closer we get."

"Then we won't take the sea." Mike looked toward the island and touched a button on his earpiece. When it didn't link him to the comms, he pulled a spare out of his pocket, sealed in a waterproof capsule, and replaced the broken one. "I need a lift," he said. "Can someone carry me to the ship? I'm most of the way there already."

"Cannon fire is too heavy," Abella replied. "I'm not fast enough to dodge them."

"I can come directly to you," Lily said. "But the statue is right. I can barely dodge them and I'm only carrying a decorative sheet. We need to draw his attention away."

“How do we do that?” Mike looked at Leilani, who had pinned a skeleton to the deck of their ship with her trident. The boats nearby had caught on to their presence, and he suspected it was only a matter of time before Francois realized he was nearby.

“What in the actual fuck is that?” Eulalie’s voice was barely audible, the channel crackling with interference.

“Eulalie? What is what?” Mike looked at Leilani, but the princess just shrugged and kicked another corpse off the boat. “Hello? Can anyone hear me?”

“I can hear you, Mike Radley.” Death’s voice cut through the static. “I apologize for my tardiness. I’m afraid it was rather difficult to get here. We caused quite the commotion.”

“Death? Where are you?” The ship Mike was standing on dipped down in the water, then was carried up on a wave that lifted it up above the other ships. For a moment, he got a clear look at Francois’ ship, the cannons shifting in place as they swiveled in his direction.

An explosion rocked the bow of Francois’ ship, followed by three more. Plumes of fire billowed up, swiftly gobbled by the storm raging above. Dazzling lights illuminated the sky, crawling out toward a lone ship in the distance. Electrical energy crashed against the mysterious vessel, feeding it power and causing it to glow ethereally. Spectral turrets shifted and fired on Francois again. Moments later, the deck of Francois’ ship exploded, showering the area with burning debris.

“Who is that?” Mike asked. “Is that the Order?”

“That is me, Mike Radley. Or rather, I have brought them here.” The static on the channel magnified, and suddenly Mike heard hundreds of voices whispering as one. Through them all, Death continued. “Once I found all the warriors who died in battle on Maui, I went to another place where many had perished in battle. You see, I knew they had a boat and might be able to help.”

“Those aren’t night marchers.” The realization of what he was looking at hit Mike in the chest like a ton of bricks.

“I was never asked to bring night marchers, Mike Radley. My task was to find the fallen warriors of Hawaii. Besides, these men swore to protect this land from all enemies, foreign or domestic.” The whispering in the channel intensified,

then went quiet just before the turrets fired again. “We were lucky they were still hanging around. You see, the men of the USS *Arizona* have been waiting for the final member of their crew so they can all depart for the afterlife together.”

“Fucking hell,” Eulalie whispered through the comms. “I can see them with my drones, all of them standing on the deck. The sailors.”

“See who?” asked Kisa. “What’s going on? Tink won’t let me borrow her scope!” Over the comms, Tink grunted as if she’d been kicked.

The USS *Arizona* fired on Francois again, and the Captain turned his ship to meet their attack. The ship entered another depression, blocking his view of the ghost battleship in the distance. Realizing that Francois was turning away from them, he touched his earpiece. “Lily, I need you here!”

There was a blast of sulfur, followed by the appearance of the succubus. She gave him a wink, then immediately lost her footing as the boat tilted beneath them. Lily fell into Mike’s arms, her breasts pressing into his stomach.

“Need a lift?” She looked up at him and grinned. “Least you could do is show me your legs.”

“Can you get me up there?” He pointed at Francois’ ship. A sparkling cloud of debris hovered behind it, the shattered planking now moving backward in slow motion as the ship repaired itself. Divine anger radiated from the ship, but Mike didn’t care.

“Do you even need to?” she asked. “From here, he’s definitely losing.”

The winds shifted, blowing holes in the clouds above to allow the sun’s light through. Francois fired his cannons, but Mike couldn’t see their target. However, he did see the tendrils of magic that crawled into the sky, manipulating the clouds and pushing the gaps toward the USS *Arizona*. The spirits of the *Arizona* had surprise on their side, but if they got hit by the sun, it wouldn’t matter.

“He won’t be for long.” Mike put a hand to his ear. “Death, can you ask the *Arizona* to start firing on the smaller ships instead? I’m about to go on board the big one.”

“I’ll let the Captain know.” Death replied.

“Let’s go,” Mike said, then grabbed Lily by the wrist. She licked her lips and extended her wings wide before throwing herself skyward just as the ship dipped

back down. It was a struggle to gain altitude at first, but Lily was able to spiral upward now that the cannons were no longer pointed their way. The merfolk abandoned the ship, diving for the safety of the water.

The kraken let out a roar from its place on the island, then threw itself back toward the water. Francois' ship was now on fire in more than one spot, but waterspouts had formed nearby to shower the flames and put them out. Even before the *Arizona* could adjust their aim, smaller ships started placing themselves between the two to form a defensive barrier.

Mike dangled below Lily, his eyes on the battle and carnage below. A few dead merfolk floated on the water alongside debris from dozens of ships. Maui was on fire, the pyroclastic cloud dipping toward the water and scorching the ships closest to it. He turned his attention to the deck of Francois' ship, then pointed toward the bow. The damage from the *Arizona's* initial attack had already been undone.

"Let's land there," he said, pointing toward the prow. Lily swooped down, letting out a cackle of glee when they landed. The two of them stood there for a silent moment as the undead figures moving around the deck paused to study them. Mike touched the button on his comms. "I'm in position," he said.

The undead charged forward, their weapons raised. Mike pulled the stopper on Opal's bottle, allowing the slime girl to emerge and crash into the attackers. Lily slammed her knee into the undead closest to her, then used her tail to sweep their legs out from beneath them. Several tense minutes passed as Mike stood there with his arms crossed in front of him, unmoving.

Hatches and doors opened in the planking, allowing more of Francois' crew to come out and join the battle. Lily and Opal were finally pushed back by overwhelming numbers, only for the undead to become scattered as Mace crashed through their ranks. The magical mace spun like a top, shattering bones on every pass over the ship.

"I'm not leaving," Mike shouted. "If you want to be rid of me, you're going to need to come out here and do it yourself!"

Francois didn't take the bait. Instead, the ship listed suddenly, turning almost sideways. Lily lost her footing and was nearly cast over the side while Opal clung to the deck. Mike leaned and grabbed onto the railing, unbothered by the sudden change in orientation.

The ship itself bucked, despite its massive size. A swell carried it up, then dropped them into a watery trench that threatened to wash him away. Lily was caught in the waves this time, sucked away by the surge. Opal wrapped herself around Mike's body, securely fastening him in place. When the wave was done breaking, the slime girl withdrew, leaving Mike perfectly dry. Mace hovered high overhead, the magical weapon doing its best to avoid getting wet.

In the bay, the kraken let out another roar that made Mike wince in pain. It was on its way, most likely eager to defend its master. If the kraken made it before Mike lured Francois out, he would have to go below decks to get to safety, and that meant the plan was ruined. Would the kraken tear the ship apart to find him? Just how stupid was the ship's guardian? Could he use it against Francois?

A dangerous plan suddenly put itself together in his mind. Cackling internally, Mike checked through his pockets to make sure he still had what was needed.

The kraken roared again, then sank beneath the waves of the bay, swamping several nearby ships. The wave the beast generated crashed onto the shore, smashing everything that remained.

"C'mon, Francois, I thought this was a battle between men. What kind of coward hides behind an entire army?" Mike turned his attention back toward the ship, hoping to see any sign of movement. "I mean, I came all the way out here. You may as well pop your head out and say hello."

When there was still no response, Mike sighed. He needed to goad the man out, but how? It was too bad Lily wasn't here. If she was, she would probably...

Groaning internally, Mike knew what he had to do. He took a deep breath and braced himself for what was about to transpire, mentally preparing for perhaps the dumbest thing he would ever do.

"There will be many stories told about this day," Mike shouted as he pulled the front of his pants down. "The funny thing about stories is people tend to focus on the stuff that really resonates with them, you know? Ol' Captain Francois was such a cowardly bag of shit that he stayed hidden inside his own ship, even while this happened."

Taking aim, Mike pissed on the deck. "Yep, that's right, folks," he declared. "Captain Francois is just as yellow as the piss running across the deck of—"

His magic just barely warned him of the attack, and Mike took a step to the side and ducked, the pistol round passing through the space where his head had been. Glancing up, he saw Francois standing nearby with another flintlock pistol, the man's face beet red with anger.

"Ah. There you are." Mike tried to stop peeing, but after a failed attempt to pinch it off, figured it was easier to just finish. "Is that a new gun? It looks like the old one. Was it part of a matching—"

"Arrêt!" Francois was trying to reload his flintlock. "What are you doing?!?"

"Uh..." Mike did a little squat, the stream finally abating. He gave his cock a shake and then tucked it back into his pants. "Peeing on your boat, apparently."

"What kind of a monster are you?" Francois' remaining eye was bloodshot with rage.

"Really? That's where you draw the line?" Mike was well aware that the ship was turning beneath them and had a pretty good idea why. "Murdering thousands of people is fine, but a little pee on your boat and you lose it? Isn't part of the boat literally called the poop deck?"

Francois shrieked something in French, then moved as if to aim his flintlock again. Mike threw out a spark of lightning which ignited the powder early, causing the gun to go off and fire a ball into the deck.

"This is a game we could play all day," Mike said with a grin. "Why don't you come over here so we can have a proper talk?"

"I am not stupid. You have that *goo* girl with you."

"Ah, right." Mike looked down at the pink and purple slime that held him to the deck. "So I guess you aren't as dumb as you look."

"When I kill you, I will come for every member of your family!" Francois shouted, revealing all of his teeth. "I will drown every single one of them at sea and force them to serve me for—"

There was a meaty slap, and Francois' body bucked out from underneath him, a fountain of gore spraying from his hip. The Captain gasped and fell limp on the deck, his fingernails digging into the wood as he cried out in pain.

Mike heard a single voice crackle through the comms. "Stupid fuck down," Tink growled.



“CARETAKER!” Francois struggled to rise, but his body failed to obey. “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME?”

“Me? Nothing, actually. My wife, though? Put a bullet through your spine.” Mike knelt and shook his head in disappointment. “She’s having a really bad week, you see.”

“No. NON!” Francois clutched at the deck and started weeping. His features aged further, but only slightly as he reached the limit of his time on Earth. “I was supposed to live forever!”

“Well, that ship has sailed.” Mike rose, the boat shuddering beneath them. “You broke rule number one: don’t fuck with the Radley family.”

Francois looked up at Mike in horror, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. “You...if...”

“My ride should be here in a moment.” Mike looked out to sea and saw a tiny gray speck heading in his direction. “As for what happens next, I guess that’s up to you.”

The water beneath the ship became choppy, the hull dropping into another trench. Mike kept his legs bent to avoid getting flattened against the deck when it reached the bottom.

“I suppose you think you’ve won,” Francois hissed. “And now, the spoils of war go to you, the mighty Caretaker. So what comes next for the family man? Will you sail the seas? Will you become a conqueror of men?”

“Hmm, what?” Mike looked down at the Captain. “Oh, you think I care about this thing?” He stomped his foot on the boat for emphasis. “I don’t give two shits about it. Why do you think I had you shot in the spine and not the head?”

“What?” A vein visibly bulged in Francois’ forehead. “Why?”

“It’s simple, really.” Mike knelt down to look at the man. He summoned his magic, spinning it into a vortex inside his soul. “You see, if I had killed you, that means I get what you have, right? They say boat ownership is a pain, so I figured I would skip it. If I leave and you die of old age, well, then I didn’t kill you, so the magic takes over and finds somebody new. But you know what? That can’t happen if your guardian is dead. Doomed to an eternity of sitting back and doing nothing, that’s what’s going to happen.”

“You...you’d turn your back on the power of the gods?” Francois’ voice was filled with disbelief. “On Poseidon?”

Mike shrugged. “Kind of. This is also a bit of a message for anyone else that comes for me in the future. You see, I’ve realized that, after today, I’m going to have a lot of attention. Anyone with a hard-on for the Great Game will consider making a play for what I have. When they do, I want them to remember that I was far happier letting this ship go to waste then claiming it for myself. A god willing to kill innocent people doesn’t get to play this stupid game anymore. You hear that, Poseidon?” He stomped his foot on the deck and wondered if he actually felt it shiver in response. “So I figure when the other Players hear about this, maybe the gods that work with them will second-guess pulling similar shit.”

The vessel shuddered again, and the bow lifted up. Mike heard water surge behind him, followed by the sudden presence of a massive beast. The kraken had arrived.

“So then you let me live.” Francois’ lips curled into a grim smile, convinced that he had managed to buy the time he needed. “Know that I will come for you, Caretaker. I will never stop until—”

“Yeah, yeah, fire and flames, I’ve heard this shit before, you guys need new material.” Mike stuck his hand in his pocket and closed his fingers tightly around the vial inside. “You know what, Frankie? Fuck you.” He pulled the vial out of his pocket, the contents inside glittering as his magic danced across the crystalline pollen. “And fuck your boat.”

Spinning in place, Mike threw the vial of mandragora powder high at the kraken’s face. The massive beast narrowed its eyes as Mike summoned his magic, blasting the vial with gold and blue lightning. The powder exploded, forming a glittering cloud that drifted into the kraken’s face. The beast blinked in surprise, then snorted and smashed a tentacle into the deck.

Opal released her grip on the deck, her body flowing back inside her bottle as Mike sprinted along the boat. The kraken roared and tried to grab him, but smashed a tentacle into the mast instead.

“Abella!” Mike screamed. He pointed ahead of himself, toward the other end of the ship. The gargoyle corrected her course, her wings spread wide.

“No, you idiot, what are you—” Francois slid across the deck of his ship as the kraken leaned forward, its bulk causing the ship to tilt dangerously. The kraken

wrapped its tentacles around the ship, its whole body shivering. The ship listed to one side, and Mike grabbed onto the railing and held on for dear life. A loud groan went through the vessel, the wood creaking under the strain.

Turning around, Mike summoned bursts of light into his palms and tossed them out toward the kraken. The beast made a rumbling sound deep in its chest as light danced along its body. Somewhere beneath its tentacles, Francois screamed in fury.

Grunting, the kraken adjusted its body, allowing the ship to go level again. Mike ran for it, the hairs on the back of his neck sticking up as the magic around him shifted. He looked back to see that a portal now circled the ship, revealing calm seas beyond.

The Captain was trying to escape. Turning around, Mike rolled his arms around each other and sent another blast of magical sexual arousal into the kraken. The beast was rubbing its body on the bow, the planking splintering and falling into the water below.

Realizing that time was limited, Mike made it to the stern and jumped. Abella snatched him up with powerful talons, her wings pumping with exertion as they swooped away.

“Turn around,” he said. Abella altered course and he found himself looking down on the kraken as it growled and thrust its body against the ship. A glowing portal now encircled the ship, the sky filling with mists as Captain Francois tried to escape.

Mike summoned his magic, letting it crackle between his fingers as his body became one giant dynamo. Taking a deep breath, he exhaled and sent his magic down, striking the kraken with magic sex lightning over and over again. The kraken rumbled, its eyes an eerie shade of red as it thrust its body forward once again. A thick, rubbery appendage burst through the upper decks, similar to the tentacles clutching the ship but with a massive, bulbous head. The kraken let out a cry as it came, blowing gallons of semen across the ship as a giant crack appeared in the hull.

“C’mon, you fucker, do it. Do it!” Mike showered the kraken with magic as the ship slowly drifted through the portal. A current formed beneath the ship, pulling it back out of the portal. Looking over his shoulder, Mike saw Beth standing on the bow of a small vessel, the Rod of Osiris glowing bright in her hands. The

ship was surrounded by merfolk who kept it steady as waves slammed into its sides.

The kraken continued thrusting its anatomy into the ship, caught fully in the throes of the pollen's influence. Between Beth's magical current and the kraken, the ship was now immobilized in the water. The portal shimmered and twisted, then started a slow pass across the ship, swallowing the kraken and its sex toy.

"No. No! **NO!**" Mike screamed, forcing his will out into the world. His magic transformed into a beautiful golden stream of electricity, flowing down from his fingers into the kraken. The beast shrieked and came again, the sound so loud that Abella dropped from the sky while clutching her head. There was the loud pop of a portal slamming shut, followed by a sudden rush of air, and then Mike and Abella were both underwater, sinking rapidly toward the depths below. The gargoyle released him, and Mike kicked his legs in an effort to swim to the surface.

Cool hands clamped onto his wrists, and a soft glow of light appeared between himself and Leilani. The princess smiled at him, then took his face in her hands and kissed him, breathing air into his lungs.

More merfolk appeared, their faces straining with effort as they held Abella by her arms and legs. They swam together as a group, dodging massive pieces of debris. When they eventually surfaced, Mike turned toward Francois' ship to see what had happened.

The portal had slammed shut, likely a result of the Captain's death. The closing portal had neatly bifurcated both the kraken and Francois' ship. The rubbery beast was already sinking beneath the waves as its guts spilled into the water. The ship spewed wood and magic into the sky, somehow expanding in size as it did so. The sky above rumbled, and the other boats in the water all became listless as the undead piloting them went still, the magic animating them now gone.

Mike and the others turned to look at Maui. The island was a smoldering mess, but he was relieved to see Di slowly climbing back to the peak of the volcano. He hoped the others were okay, too. Though they had been victorious, it had come at a heavy price and he was tired of paying it.

The world was about to become a very different place, for better or for worse. He looked over at Leilani, who nodded grimly, then turned his attention to Abella, whose eyes were barely above the water.

“Need a lift?” Beth leaned over the edge of a nearby ship. She used the Rod to help get Abella onboard, and when Mike and Leilani joined her, the ship sailed smoothly around the debris as it headed back to the island.

“So what comes next?” asked Leilani, her gaze on the bay.

“I’m not sure,” said Mike. “I never really thought about it past here.” The last forty-eight hours had been a whirlwind, and he was still trying to come to terms with everything. “What about for you and your people?”

Leilani shrugged. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “It’s going to be difficult to hide our part in things here.”

Beth, who stood at the bow of the ship, looked over her shoulders with a grin. “You’re still in charge of your people, right? Until sundown, if I remember correctly.”

“I am. Why?” Leilani tilted her head to one side.

Beth started laughing, but said nothing else. She made a quick detour to pick up Lily, who was busy trying to rescue what was left of a body pillow from the ocean, and then they all headed back to shore together. In the distance, the USS *Arizona* turned about, ready to return to her place of rest.