

The Road to Hana

When Mike's alarm clock chimed at 5 am, he let out a groan and tried to free himself from beneath the blankets. Realizing that someone had crawled into bed with him and was lying on top of the covers, he reached out a hand to touch the intruder and received a small shock for his trouble.

"Mmm?" Quetzalli rolled over and opened her eyes. She had brought along the blanket from her room, the covers now bunched up at her feet. When she tried to kick them off, the air crackled with static as the blankets all stuck together.

"You okay?" He pulled an arm free and reached across the dragon, hugging her close against him.

"I don't know," she confessed. "I found myself troubled in the middle of the night, so came in here to sleep by your side. I didn't wish to wake you."

"You could have." He gave her a squeeze. "What's up?"

Quetzalli rolled over to face him. "During our meeting with the merfolk, I was reminded that the human world is a dangerous place which has not been kind to dragons. This got me thinking that only a sad fate awaits whatever we find at the top of the mountain. Today's mission is but a harbinger of doom for one of the last remaining dragons on Earth."

"Honestly? I hope not." He pulled her in tighter, the air briefly smelling of ozone. "You know that we'll do right by whoever or whatever we find."

She nestled her head into the crook of his neck and let out a sigh. "You'll try," Quetzalli muttered. "But already you worry."

He put a hand on her head and stroked her hair. An electrical charge was already building up across the thicker strands due to her distressed condition. Quetzalli had largely learned to control her electrical abilities, but it required a calm state of mind to do so.

"If it was just the Order, I wouldn't be worried at all," he admitted. "But with the merfolk involved, things are far more complicated. That doesn't even factor in their special friend, the Captain."

She tilted her face toward his. "Do you really think he's another player in the Great Game?"

Mike nodded. "I feel it with every fiber of my being." Throughout the previous day, Francois had stuck to him like glue, even participating in the helicopter flyover. Although the man said nothing to him, every time Mike looked at the Captain, he was looking back. Last night after dinner, Francois had summoned his ship and returned to it with the princess, but Mike could feel the man's presence even now. It was like a mental itch he couldn't scratch, and he wondered what it meant.

"Is he here to hinder or help?" Quetzalli asked.

"That's a really good question. I can't tell if he's being cautious around me, or if he really is just a massive dick. But Ingrid didn't even know who he was, so that's something, I guess." He wasn't sure what the Order knew about his status or the Great Game itself, but if they learned that Francois could kill him and take possession of his home, then all bets would be off. If not for his desire to protect whatever was here on the island, he would have packed up and gone home through his bed portal last night. "Man seems like a massive douchebag, though."

"Mmm." She buried her face in his shoulder and clung tight to him. "I'm worried he'll try to hurt you," she mumbled into his neck.

"Me too," he replied. "But I'm expecting it, honestly. He might catch me off-guard at the moment, but it's like when you're expecting a sucker punch. I know it's coming, just not when. And you taught me so much about how my own magic could be used, both offensively and defensively. Really, a metal sword is probably one of the worst weapons he could use on me, 'cause I'll light him up."

That got a chuckle from the dragon. "If he hurts you, I'll turn him into a human lightning rod," she declared.

"Blast him right out of those stupid boots of his." Mike stroked Quetzalli's cheek and was glad to see that she looked more relaxed. "C'mon, let's go get some breakfast."

The two of them crawled out of bed and moved into the living room to find a very sour looking Beth staring in disgust out the window. Her hands were wrapped around a ceramic mug full of black coffee.

"Morning," Mike said.

Beth snorted in disgust. "I can't believe those fishy fuckers drugged me," she muttered. "I feel like such an idiot."

“They should have said it was more like absinthe than wine.” He moved to stand beside her and rubbed the small of her back. “But yeah, stuff had quite the kick.”

“Didn’t affect you,” she replied. “Or Quetzalli.”

“I spent hundreds of years eating fish-based meals,” said the dragon from the kitchenette. She was dropping bread into the toaster. “Though my body appears human, I am still very much a dragon on the inside. It may as well have been juice to me.”

“Which is a little silly, because a single glass of regular wine, and you get white girl wasted.” Beth shook her head with a chuckle and turned her attention to Mike. “I feel like I let you down.”

“Hardly.” Mike gave her a side hug and stared out into the water. Sure enough, the Captain’s ship was exactly where he felt it would be. The sails were unfurled now, but it was somehow motionless. He wondered if the thing was powered by thought alone or if it was alive. “Their first impression of you is more spring-break college girl than ass-kicking attorney. Since you’ll be hanging around with them today, you can use that to your advantage.”

“I guess.” She sighed. “Though I was kind of hoping to see the island.”

“They promised to take you snorkeling where humans aren’t allowed. It’s okay to admit that you’re excited.”

A small grin appeared on Beth’s face. “Okay, fine.”

“And you can stare at fish dicks all day.” Lily came out of her bedroom and scowled. “At least you’re going out. I get to be stuck here playing house sitter.”

“It can’t be helped.” Mike walked over to the succubus. “I’ll treat you to a real beach vacation once this is done, just you and me.”

Lily froze like a deer caught in headlights, then shrugged. “Hey, whatever,” she said. “But I’ll hold you to that.”

Ratu was the last one up. She wore a silk kimono with a pair of snakes that curled around her arms and torso, flicking their tongues at each other. As the naga moved through the suite, it was almost like she was gliding on air instead of walking. When she spotted Mike watching her in the kitchenette, she winked at him and poured water into a teapot she had brought from home.

“Don’t want to drink the Order’s tea?” he asked. “I’m sure they’ll give you some at breakfast.”

“They are a vast organization with ample resources.” She opened up a cabinet and pulled out a mug. “Yet somehow, they have imported only the finest mass manufactured garbage that can fit inside a tea bag.”

“You’re spoiled,” Lily declared from the couch.

“I am.” Ratu snapped her fingers, and the teapot whistled as the water inside was instantly brought to boiling. She dropped a diffuser into the pot and set it aside. “It also doesn’t help that the Grim Reaper has become quite the enthusiast. Last fall, he somehow tracked down a green tea blend in China that I thought was lost to history.”

Mike was about to ask how exactly Death had accomplished such a thing when there was a knock at the door. He answered it to see Wallace and Ingrid standing outside, both wearing khaki shorts and Hawaiian shirts.

“Breakfast,” Wallace said, then looked past him toward Lily. “You should come too. There will be plenty to eat. Heard they’ve got quite the selection of meats.”

“Meh, I’d rather get room service and masturbate in here.” Lily was tapping away at her phone. “I’m still pretty sad about my lost luggage, gotta get my dopamine fix from somewhere.”

Ingrid scowled at the succubus, then turned her attention to Mike. “We really would like it if everyone could come down for breakfast. The princess and her guardian will be there, and they may take offense knowing that a member of your entourage has blown them off.”

Mike knew this was another attempt to get a team inside his room. If Lily stayed inside yet again, they would suspect that he was up to something. “I’ll see what I can do,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to insult the princess.”

Ingrid nodded, then looked at her partner. “C’mon, let’s go.”

Wallace smirked at all of them before turning to follow Ingrid down the hall. Mike shut the door and let out a sigh. “Does anybody else think that guy is a massive asshole?”

Lily raised her hand. "It's part of what makes him so much fun to fuck with," she said with a grin. "So what's the play? We know that they're gonna send somebody once we all show up for breakfast."

Mike put a finger to his temples and wiggled his eyebrows. "Cat radio."

Breakfast in Paradise was at a massive table set up on a deck overlooking the water. Down below, waves lapped at the pilings which sent a gentle thrumming through the structure that Mike could feel in his sandals.

Aurora greeted them at the edge of the deck, then showed them to their seats. Ingrid and Wallace sat on one side of the table next to Princess Leilani and Captain Francois. Mike took a spot between Beth and Ratu. Quetzalli and Lily sat at the opposite ends of the table.

"Good morning, Caretaker. Glad you could finally join us." Francois smirked at Mike, his smile turning genuine when he turned to look at the others. "Though I suppose women as lovely as these need the extra time to get ready."

"Ah, good." Lily picked up her napkin and made a show of snapping it open before tucking it into her cleavage, which only served to expose more skin. "We're having misogyny for breakfast."

Francois' smile slipped, and he leaned back in his chair. "I jest. Much like the merfolk, I rise with the sun."

"Good for you," Lily replied, then picked up her menu.

"Is this one always so rude?" Leilani asked, her dark eyes on Mike.

"It's a cultural thing," Beth replied. "Bad home life before we got her. Pretty much a living hell. Can I get some coffee?" She looked over at Aurora, who was speaking into a headset with a hand covering her mouth. Undoubtedly, the woman was telling somebody that their room was empty.

Aurora dropped her hand and moved toward a serving table to grab a carafe. Everyone but Mike picked up their menus to see what was being offered. He already knew exactly what he wanted.

"I'll have a breakfast burrito," he said. "With scrambled eggs, skillet-fried potatoes, sausage and bacon. Shredded cheese throughout and melted cheese on

the top.” He looked at the server nearest him who was hastily scribbling his order. “And if you can dice up some steak in there, that would be good, too.”

“What is a boor-ito?” Leilani sounded out the word carefully.

“Oh, they’re great. You take something called a tortilla, it’s like a thin circular piece of bread, and it’s filled up with all kinds of toppings. Then you roll it up and eat it.” Mike smiled, happy to break the ice a little. Leilani had been unusually silent yesterday, other than her vague threats of violence against whatever had hurt her people. It had made the helicopter ride far more dramatic than it needed to be.

“Isn’t that a pizza?” Leilani looked at Francois. “Round bread with toppings?”

“Burritos are for peasants,” Francois declared, fixing Mike with a glare. “It’s just somebody taking your meal and stuffing it into a tasteless package.”

“I’ll have the burrito as well,” Lily declared.

“See?” Francois smirked. “Common folk love them, but they aren’t fit for royalty.”

“Don’t let this guy tell you what to do,” Lily said, leaning forward in her chair. She held her hand against her mouth and stage whispered. “Do you wanna hear a secret?”

Leilani looked confused, but nodded her assent.

“I think they’re great, and I was born a princess.”

Ingrid was mid-sip when this revelation was made, and managed to cough so hard she squirted water out her nose. Wallace handed her a napkin, and she stood and walked away from the others, cleaning her face with one hand as the other fumbled with something in her pocket.

“You are teasing me.” Leilani scowled. “I do not care for it.”

Lily sat back and shrugged. “You do you, Ariel.”

Leilani’s cheeks turned pink and Mike sighed inwardly. On the plus side, he had asked Lily to get uninvited from future meet-ups, so this was progress.

Ingrid returned to the table and sat down. “After breakfast, we’re going to take a boat ride over to the east side of the island. We have some cars there that will take us to an isolated location where we have some ATVs ready for use,” she

said. "A team has been prepped that can lead us to the summit. We're going to try and get as close to your property as we can before we have to bushwhack on foot. A detailed map of the area will be sent to you before we're done eating."

"Lovely." Ratu set her menu down. "I will also have a burrito, but with extra sausage on mine. Unless Captain Francois has any objections?"

Francois made a face. "It was just an opinion," he said. "I didn't want the princess wasting her time."

"I want a burrito as well." Beth handed her menu to a nearby server. "But nix the meat, I would like avocado and mushrooms instead. Extra cheese."

"I'll have the burrito, too. I'm not adverse to a little extra meat." Wallace winked at Lily, who rolled her eyes.

"And I..." Quetzalli began, "shall have the salmon on toast with poached eggs." When she saw the others looking at her, she shrugged. "What? The salmon sounds delicious."

Mike heard Ingrid mutter something about "these fucking people" moments before ordering scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. Aurora took off with their orders and disappeared into the building.

The food arrived quickly and was consumed. The princess had ordered a lavish fish plate that came later than everyone else's, but opened her mouth impossibly wide to eat most of it in a single bite. Her teeth were very similar to a shark's, and Mike made a mental note to avoid getting bitten.

Francois said very little and kept throwing dirty looks at both Mike and Lily. Leilani watched everyone with wide eyes which occasionally focused on Mike. He didn't know what the mermaid was thinking, but her glances unnerved him. Though she deferred to Francois, Leilani's attitude seemed far less hostile than his.

As they were finishing up breakfast, Aurora came storming up to the table, clipboard in hand. Mike used his napkin to cover his mouth and hide a grin.

"How the fuck did you get a goblin in here?" she shouted, slamming the clipboard onto the table. Everybody went silent and looked at Mike, who stared back at Aurora.

"Excuse me?" he asked, feigning shock.

“You fucking heard me!” Aurora stormed over toward his side of the table, but Ingrid intercepted her. “One of our people got bit, and she chased us out with a hammer!”

“Why were you in my suite?” Mike looked over at Beth. “We did put up the Do Not Disturb sign, right?”

Beth nodded. “Oh, absolutely. I made sure of it.”

“To clean your room!” Aurora took a step back and pointed accusingly at Mike. “But you need to tell me how you got a fucking goblin onto our property!”

“I summoned her.” Mike looked at everyone as if hoping for their support. “You know, to clean our room.”

“We have people for that!” Aurora slapped away Ingrid’s hands and took a step back. Ingrid, satisfied that Aurora wasn’t going to punch Mike, turned to face him.

“What do you mean you summoned her?” Ingrid asked.

“Just what I said. I knew we’d be down here a bit, but didn’t want anyone messing around in our room. So I summoned a goblin to clean my room.” He didn’t dare mention Kisa, who they probably hadn’t noticed. When he had telepathically called the catgirl earlier with his dilemma, Tink had been more than eager to help him out.

“From where, exactly?”

“She was probably at home when she found out I needed her. It’s a place that overlaps with several dimensions. I can’t properly explain it to you.” Mike knew that the truth stone in Ingrid’s pocket was agreeing with every word he said, and his answers were driving her nuts. “I have her clean up messes in my own house. She’s pretty great.”

“You expect us to believe you can just summon up a goblin to clean your damn house?” Ingrid stared at him as if in shock.

“No. But whether or not you believe me doesn’t matter, ‘cause I did.” He looked past her at Aurora. “I’m sorry your staff got bit, but if she chased you out with a hammer, it means you weren’t letting her do what she came to do.”

“I thought this property was warded.” This came from Leilani, who now wore a severe frown.

“It is,” Ingrid replied, then looked at Mike. “Or at least, it’s supposed to be.”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Mike replied. “I didn’t think summoning a goblin to clean my suite would be a big deal.”

“We have people here for that,” hissed Aurora through her teeth.

“You’ve said that already, but I’m a little particular about who I want touching my things.” He stood and gave a little bow to the princess. “Excuse me, but I must go take care of this.”

Leilani nodded, but said nothing in response. Mike walked back to his suite with Wallace and Ingrid in tow. When they got to the outside of his room, he saw drops of blood in the hallway that a staffer was trying to clean up.

“Ugh, I bet that stung,” he said, then looked at Ingrid. “You can tell your person not to worry about being bitten. Goblins don’t have rabies or anything. Well, I know this one doesn’t, at least.”

He carefully used his bracelet to open the door and stepped inside. Tink was kneeling in the kitchenette wearing a french maid’s outfit while sweeping a clean spot on the floor. Her eyes lit up when she saw him, but she hissed at Ingrid, who had pulled a wand.

“Wouldn’t do that,” Mike cautioned. “Last person I saw cast a spell at her didn’t survive.”

“Just...give it clothes, or whatever it takes to make it go away.” Ingrid lowered her wand, but kept a tight grip.

Tink growled at Ingrid, then gave her the finger. “Stupid girl never know when room need cleaning, maybe goblin stick around forever.”

“Ugh.” Ingrid lowered her voice. “She even sounds stupid.”

Tink drew the hammer from behind her back, but Mike snagged it before she could throw it. He gave her a stern look, and she crossed her arms and looked away from him.

“Unless there’s a good reason I cannot have my own cleaning staff, I would like her to continue her job.” He set the hammer handle up on the counter and turned toward Ingrid. “Besides, who is in my suite isn’t important. Right?”

Ingrid stared at him silently for several long moments, her eyes flicking back and forth between him and Tink. The silence was broken when Ratu and Quetzalli appeared exited the elevator and came down the hallway.

“Excuse us,” Quetzalli said, pushing past Wallace into the room. “We need to change into better clothes for hiking.”

“And we might be a while, seeing how us lovely ladies need time to get ready.” Ratu looked down her nose at both Ingrid and Wallace, then walked into the suite to go to her room.

“Yeah, that guy seems like a complete ass,” said Wallace, who noticed the look of surprise on Mike’s face. “And yes, I’m aware that coming from me, that’s saying something. We know almost nothing about him and he gives me the creeps.”

Ingrid looked at her partner, then to Mike. “The merfolk have never spoken a word to us about this man. Intel hit a match with the name, but the last guy who used it died 250 years ago.”

“Can humans live that long?” Mike asked.

Ingrid shrugged. “It’s extremely rare, but we’ve seen it. However, we’ve yet to run across a human that old who isn’t a complete bastard. It’s almost like that second century breeds contempt for your fellow man.” She looked past him down at Tink and let out a sigh. “How long does she stay summoned?”

“If you’re asking if there’s a limit to how long she’s here, no, not really. And since Lily was going to stick around anyway, I was going to have the goblin keep the place clean so your people don’t have to deal with Lily and her mess. It’s clear she’s causing problems, so the plan was to have her stay in the room.”

The mage chewed at her lip for a moment, clearly unable to formulate an argument as to why the Order needed to be in the room. Though Mike still didn’t know what sort of threat the Captain would pose, at least this battle over the room was something they had figured out how to handle.

“Really, Beth will probably be back and forth up here as well.” Wallace leaned against the frame of the door. “Since the merfolk decided to keep her on the property. Our people have plenty of other things they could be working on.”

Ingrid sighed. “It’s fine,” she said, a defeated look on her face. “We leave at the top of the hour. Please meet us down at the dock.”

“Will do.” Mike gave her a mock salute and shut the door behind them after they left. When he turned around, he saw Ratu run out of her bedroom and straight into his.

“I need to get something,” she called over her shoulder. “No time to explain.”

She closed the door behind her, leaving Mike alone with Tink. She smiled up at him, wiggling her butt back and forth like an excited puppy.

“Tink do great job!” she declared, then scowled at the hallway door. “Bite stupid bitch who call Tink an ogre.”

“That’s because Tink is the best wife.” He bent down to kiss her forehead. “Now I want to know where you got the maid outfit on short notice.”

“It was supposed to be a surprise.” Kisa stood up from behind the couch. She was in a maid’s outfit as well. “But if you all are leaving at the top of the hour, the surprise will have to wait.”

“Damn,” Mike muttered, contemplating the catgirl and the goblin. While they could probably make something happen, it would be rushed and he wanted to savor whatever scenario Tink and Kisa had come up with.

“By the way. You aren’t actually expecting us to clean this place, are you?” Kisa put hands on her hips, her tail flicking back and forth.

“No, no, of course not.” A wicked grin crossed his face. “But maybe if I need some turndown service, I’ll—”

Tink pinched his ass so hard he jumped. She walked backward toward his room with a smirk on her face as he followed. “Husband know who to call. We go now, Tink’s turn to watch Baby Legs.”

He watched them both slide under his bed and vanish. With a little sigh, he moved toward the closet where his hiking gear was stashed. Today was gonna be long, and he needed to be ready for anything.

“I’m telling you, that fucking doll is following me!”

Cyrus raised an eyebrow dramatically and turned in slow motion to look at the nearest window of the Radley home. For perhaps the fifth time today, he

found himself looking at a normal window, bereft of decor other than some light curtains.

“I still don’t see anything,” he said to a very frustrated Bradford, perfectly aware that somebody in the house was messing with the knight. Cyrus had met Jenny the doll on a few occasions, though it was usually at a distance. There had been a couple of times Mike had brought the possessed doll to tea and she sat in his lap, but Mike had assured him they would all be perfectly safe as long as Cyrus didn’t make direct eye contact. He had thought Mike had been kidding, but there was something about those porcelain features that gave him the heebie jeebies.

He didn’t know if the doll was just messing with the man or if he had done something to piss her off. Either way, the doll was the least of their worries right now. The last twenty-four hours had been a disaster. After tea with Mike the other evening, he thought things would be quiet for a while. That had been wishful thinking. The very next morning, he discovered that Laurel had gotten up before him and led the field team to do some preliminary work under her guidance. She was clearly trying to establish herself as a second in command, and he noticed that a few people on the field team were already deferring to her.

This put him in a difficult position. Ordinarily, he wouldn’t worry about it. He was meticulous in his work and didn’t really care what others thought. However, he was purposefully doing a bad job meant to look like a good one, and he knew Laurel was going to start producing results. When he had said as much to Death, the reaper had simply chuckled and wandered off.

An hour later, a member of the field team reported strange lights and then disappeared in the hedge maze for half the day, despite his team looking through it numerous times. By the time he showed up again, he claimed he had only been missing for a few minutes, and had no recollection of anything else. When Laurel had confronted Death over the matter, he had simply shrugged and declared maybe the man had stopped to smell the roses.

The groundskeeping staff kept creating projects on top of where his people were investigating, and they were starting to rightfully suspect that something was up. Mads had taken to following Cyrus around, claiming it was for his own protection. More than anything else, Cyrus worried that Laurel and Mads had figured out he was up to something.

Cyrus pulled a couple antacid chewables from his pocket and popped them in his mouth. At the rate he was going through them, he was going to have to buy more tonight. Everything tasted like chalk lately.

“There! She’s right there!” Bradford pointed at a different window. This time, Cyrus saw Jenny in the corner, staring down at the two of them. For just a moment, he heard a woman’s laugh in the back of his mind.

“I still don’t see anything.” Cyrus patted Bradford’s shoulder. “Why don’t you go take a break? This place, it’s different from what we’re used to.”

“We’ll see how different it is once we crack it open.” Bradford stormed off around the house, stopping long enough to slice the top off of a small shrub with his sword. Cyrus watched him until he was gone, then looked back at the window.

The doll was gone.

“He seems fragile.” Death startled Cyrus, causing his heart rate to skyrocket. He clutched at his chest dramatically, spinning to confront the Reaper.

“Don’t do that, you’re gonna give me a heart attack!”

“Nonsense. I would know if you were at my door.” Death chuckled and looked at the window. “Jenny likes him. Said he’s...he’s...” He scratched the back of his skull with bony fingers, then snapped them. “Delectable!”

“Are you sure that’s the word she used?” Cyrus moved away from the house and toward a small picnic table that had been set up near the greenhouse. He groaned when he sat, his knees and back protesting. Retirement had softened him more than he realized, and the long day of pretending to study the house was already wearing on him.

“It was. When I asked her for clarification, she said his fear was delicious.”

Cyrus shivered, grateful that the doll knew he was on her side. “I’m surprised he’s all worked up, honestly. She’s just playing peekaboo with him, right?”

“The scariest things are the ones we build up inside our mind. Perhaps he fears the unknown or maybe he worries that his mental faculties are failing him. For most people, it’s far more important to be believed than anything else. Being unable to trust your own senses is no different than being lost in the dark.”

“That’s fairly insightful.”

Death sat across from Cyrus and steepled his hands together. "I represent the great unknown, the darkness from which there is no return. Surely I've learned a thing or two here."

"You've learned plenty during your time at the house, don't sell yourself short. I assume we won't be having tea tonight?"

"You are correct. Perhaps tomorrow night I will have time." Death was referring indirectly to Mike's ability to drop by and check in personally. "Is there anything we need to discuss?"

Cyrus looked around to make sure none of his team were nearby. "The mage Laurel is my number one concern right now. If something happened to me, her approach to examining your home would be far more...aggressive."

"I see." Death pulled out his phone and started tapping on the screen. "I will let Jenny know."

"The doll has a phone?"

"We're on a family plan. She mostly uses it for scaring people on the internet. Mike Radley did have to disable her ability to call outside the family, though. She got in trouble for calling strangers in the middle of the night."

"Yeah, I can see why that would cause problems." He watched the house for a bit longer, then excused himself to check in with the rest of the team. Toward the front of the house, Laurel was busy taking a statement from Bradford, scribbling onto a small notepad with a pencil.

"Did something happen?" he asked.

"You may not be taking this investigation seriously, but I am." Laurel gave him a withering glare, one that was matched by Bradford. "I firmly believe Bradford has encountered a paranormal entity."

"Yes, and?" Cyrus waved at the house. "We're expecting the paranormal, remember? It's kind of like a zoo for one, actually."

"But a denizen of the house is making contact with him. Maybe it wishes to talk? What if it wants out?" She jabbed her pencil in his direction. "I feel that this is worth pursuing, even if you don't. Mads?"

"Hmm?" Her knight had been staring at the windows.

“Spirit board and spirit box.” She scowled at Cyrus. “Unless you have a problem with that?”

“Not at all,” he replied. Ouija boards had been around forever, but the spirit box was relatively new technology the Order had invented that had been leaked to the public. While it could be used to allow the living to commune directly with spirits, it was often misused for the purpose of amateur ghost hunting. “But to play devil’s advocate, what if the spirit is hostile? What if it doesn’t want you around?”

“Then we shall treat it as a hostile entity.” Laurel’s features twisted. “Master Cyrus, have you spoken with the Director today?”

Cyrus shook his head. “Last we spoke, I was given the impression that he only wanted to hear from me should we have something meaningful to give him. Lacking any discovery of merit, I have not checked in.”

“Well I called the Director first thing this morning. The Caretaker should be near or at his property already. If our timeline is correct, we only have the next two or three days to make progress. We aren’t going to make it through traditional methods. We have twenty-four hours to give the Director reason to believe that our mission here will be successful.”

“Or?” Cyrus held out his arms in a massive shrug. “What happens if we don’t?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Preparations are already being made.”

Cyrus didn’t like the sound of that, but kept his face neutral. Instead, he bowed his head in her direction. “Perhaps I should check in with him.”

“You can try, but it may be difficult. He’s currently monitoring the situation in Maui personally. I wanted to make sure that I fully understood what he expected from our mission here.” Her smug grin was made more alarming by the glint in her eyes. He had been right to worry about Laurel. It wasn’t just that she was clever, or good at her job. She was motivated, and eager to chase success.

“I see.” He scratched the back of his head and sighed. “I’ve been out of the game too long. But you all knew that before you even got here. I just want you to know that I appreciate the energy you are putting into this. I...I feel like a man out of time, Sister Laurel. Three years ago, you and I would be fighting to see who could accomplish more here, and I’ll admit that I’ve lost that edge.”

The light of triumph shone in Laurel's eyes as she nodded her agreement.

"But," he said with a finger held up. "I still have knowledge and experience that we should utilize as a team. So while you may be the cutting edge we need, I ask that you let me be the steady hand that guides you. The Director is our superior but, as you said, his full attention is on a different aspect of this project. I would hate for him to make assumptions."

The mage contemplated his words for several moments, then crossed her arms. "Of course, Master Cyrus. I didn't mean to overstep my station."

He knew it was a bullshit apology and she would do it again in a heartbeat. That didn't matter to him, though. For now, Laurel would give him just enough rope to hang himself in the eyes of the Director. His admission would be used to demote him, but that was fine. As long as nobody suspected his true intentions, he could still stall whatever the Order had put into motion.

A lot of his future plans hinged on Laurel's comments about those extra preparations. He spent a couple of minutes discussing next moves with Laurel, including some extra advice on precautions for the spirit box, then excused himself to check in with the Director. When he called, he got an underling who explained that the Director had gone dark to monitor the Hana excursion in real time, which meant Cyrus wouldn't get answers anytime soon. Disgruntled, he paced the front yard, doing his best to appear busy while pondering his next move.

Based on older protocols, he couldn't be sure what the Order would attempt. Knowing what he did about the house, it wasn't like they could just call in more mages. If they were going to attempt an assault on the house, they would have to find a different method, and he didn't know what that would be. His best guess would be some sort of long distance assault, but he assumed the protective magic was capable of defending from such an attempt.

"Ye look lost, lad." Cyrus was pulled from his ruminations by one of the gardeners he recognized, a man in dark leather who patrolled the rose bushes almost exclusively. "Seems ye've got a load on yer mind."

"Indeed I do." Cyrus saw that the man was snipping the heads off of roses and tossing them into a bucket. "Is there something wrong with those ones?" he asked.

"Aye." The gardener snipped another rose free. "The plant can only make so many. Once the flower has bloomed, it's served its purpose. I cut it away so that

the bush can make more.” He held the rose out for Cyrus. “But we can appreciate ‘em all the same. Struck down at the height of beauty for us to enjoy.”

“I see.” Cyrus waved a hand dismissively. “Sorry to bother you.”

“I don’ think ye actually be seeing what I mean. Perhaps ye should consider stopping and smelling the roses proper?” The gardener held out the rose again. “Go on, take it.”

Puzzled, Cyrus accepted the flower, but hid his surprise when he felt something else pushed into the palm of his hand. Out of the corner of his vision, he noticed that one of the knights was watching the interaction. He sniffed at the flower and let out a sigh.

“And did ye learn anything?” asked the gardener.

“No.” Cyrus handed the flower back, keeping the item tucked safely in his palm. “I’ve never been good at flower analogies.”

“Aye.” The gardener picked up his bucket. “Well I hope ye figure out yer problem soon enough. When something bothers me, my favorite place to sit is the gazebo. Nice and quiet, has a great view.”

“Uh huh, thanks.” Cyrus nodded and walked away, making brief eye contact with the nearby knight. There was a questioning look in the man’s eyes, but Cyrus just spiraled a finger by his ear, conveying that the gardener was just a chatty loon. He wandered the grounds for a couple more minutes before strolling up to the gazebo, the item still tucked firmly in his hand. It wasn’t until he sat down at the table of the gazebo that he dared chance a peek at the thing.

It was an earbud, colored to match his own skin. He feigned scratching at his ear and slid it into place. Almost immediately, a voice spoke to him.

“Took you long enough.”

Cyrus held back a grin, immediately recognizing the Rat Queen. That meant that Eulalie was somewhere nearby, perhaps even watching him.

“This is far better than a hood,” he muttered, hoping the earpiece could pick up his voice.

“Yeah, well, I don’t have enough hoods for everyone and didn’t want your friends to get jealous.” Eulalie chuckled on the other end. “Been awhile since we’ve spoken.”

In fact, he hadn't talked to her since the angel incident. He had often asked about her, but Mike always waved the question off as unimportant. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"I've had to stare at the bald spot forming on top of your head for the last day or so." Eulalie chuckled as Cyrus looked up, only to realize he was inside the gazebo and was staring at the roof. "We've been using drones, Cyrus."

"How did you get drones to work?" He scratched at his beard. "If you take them outside the protective boundary, they won't actually show you anything of value." Well, that wasn't necessarily true. The geas didn't care about him or his bald spot, so a drone would pick him up no problem.

"I'm allowed inside the house. Aerial footage will show me all the details of whatever I want to see. It doesn't hurt that I have access to the best drones a shadow government can buy." Cyrus smiled at Eulalie's smug tone. Though he didn't know what she looked like, it was easy to hear that she was quite pleased with herself. "Speaking of shadow governments, let's talk about yours."

"Not technically a government," he replied. "Though the comparison is apt."

"I recently had the good fortune of gaining access to the Order's financials. Well, the accounts I had missed the first time, anyway. You guys pretty much invented shell corporations, and I imagine you have a team dedicated to juggling all that damned money."

"Wait, you're in our bank accounts?" His eyes bugged out of his head.

"Not quite. Don't worry, old timer, your pension is safe from me." He could almost hear her think 'for now'. The Order's financial assets were spread across the globe, capable of making big purchases in pretty much any country. There were actual vaults stacked high with precious metals and cash just in case they needed something fast.

"What are you looking at?" he asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Some dark web type stuff. I do think it's funny that you guys actually have a Paypal account, but I was very interested to learn about some of your crypto activities."

He shook his head, then remembered she couldn't see him. Or maybe she could. It didn't really matter. "I'm afraid that I won't be of much help to you there. I barely understand it myself, but yes, the Order uses crypto." He didn't tell her that the Order had essentially invented Bitcoin for the purpose of anonymity. In a

world where information was becoming easier to spread, they needed a way to move large amounts of money without anyone knowing to whom it belonged.

“You all have a whole chain of transactions, most of which seem to be an attempt to bounce money around and make it harder to spot. But last night, the Order transferred fifteen million dollars into an account that definitely isn’t one of yours. Any thoughts?”

Cyrus frowned. Fifteen million wasn’t a red flag by any means. “That could be anything,” he replied.

“It could be. However, I learned that was just the first payment. They sent another five million shortly after. I’m tracking two of your planes right now, and it seems like they are making round trips to South America. They’re on their way back right now, actually.”

“You’re...tracking our planes? How? That shouldn’t be possible.”

Eulalie sighed. “I don’t have time to explain in detail, but I’m looking at falsified flight plans, fuel purchases that tell me how long they’re going to be in the air, money trails, and a bevy of data that points to conclusions I don’t much care for.”

“You got rats onto those planes, didn’t you?”

“I refuse to divulge my methods.” He heard her snort. “But yes. If it wouldn’t hurt the rats, I’d stick one up your Director’s ass just to see what makes him tick. No amount of magical warding will compensate for installing monitoring equipment directly inside your aircraft. I know where they are and how fast they’re flying. On a related note, who do you get your spy cameras from? The quality of the optics is fantastic.”

Cyrus grinned in spite of himself. He could hear the joy in Eulalie’s voice, reminding him of a kid in a candy store.

“Our technology department is top notch. I could tell you where they’re located, but perhaps you prefer the challenge of finding them instead.”

There was a long moment of silence, followed by a sigh. “I’m getting distracted,” she muttered, and he heard a sound that made him think she was smacking her own cheeks. “We’ll talk tech later. I need to know what you all could be spending money on that would end up on our doorstep.”

“What? Here?” He frowned. “Run that all by me again?”

“Within one hour of a fifteen million dollar down payment, your planes touched down in Ecuador. They are currently on their way back. These are your private planes, the ones you use for people. I want to know who they could be bringing back from Ecuador.”

Cyrus stared at his hands, deep in thought. They had a facility in Ecuador, but it was more of a monitoring station. Even so, they wouldn't require any sort of payment to show up.

“Private contractors,” he said, his thoughts suddenly grim. When Laurel had said that preparations had been made, this is likely what she referred to.

“What kind?” Eulalie asked. “Because as of right now, it seems very much like the Order is bringing in a small army.”

“But an army wouldn't be able to accomplish anything...right?” He scratched his head. “None of our people are in Ecuador, and I'm unaware of any magical assets there. That means they're bringing in outsiders, likely the human kind.”

“Mercenaries.” Eulalie could be heard typing on a keyboard, and she let out a hiss that caused the hair on Cyrus' neck to stand straight up. “Oh, fuck me, this is bad.”

“What's wrong?” he asked.

“If my data is correct, your boss hired a paramilitary group called the Sons of Sin.”

Cyrus gasped. “No,” he whispered.

“Yes. I have to go. It's time for a family discussion.” The earpiece went silent, and Cyrus gazed out at the front yard, his thoughts whirling. Right now, the Radley estate looked similar to a botanical garden, with staff wandering the property and tending the plants.

But if the Director really had hired the Sons of Sin, this place was about to become a battlefield. The Order rarely hired the group, but when they did, it was always a mission geared toward extermination. The Sons of Sin were some of the nastiest bastards on the planet, cold blooded killers for hire, and they were coming here. He had no idea what they had been doing in Ecuador, but there was no reason to doubt Eulalie's intel.

Cyrus rose to his feet, groaning at the ache in his lower spine. It was clear now that the Director had never thought Cyrus would succeed. Instead, he was only there to gather intel which he would hand over to the next person in charge when they arrived. Scowling, he turned to stare up at the house.

It was time for some preparations of his own.

A pair of speedboats ferried Mike and the rest of the team to the eastern side of the island. He sat with Ratu and Quetzalli in the back while Ingrid and Wallace sat up front with the driver. Supplies had been strapped to the other boat, things they would need for the brutal hike up to the Big Bog. There were only two ways to get there, and they weren't going to be able to fly in and climb down from above. Most of the land was protected by the government, and the Order had been unable to secure access from the Hawaiian Islands Land Trust. This meant starting the trek at the beach and working their way up the mountain.

Less than a quarter mile behind them, Captain Francois' ship glided across the water, keeping up with them. Every now and then it would fall behind and simply vanish into a cloud of mist, likely a form of magical camouflage. On more than one occasion, Mike caught Ingrid watching the ship with concern. Even though he was technically at odds with the Order, he appreciated knowing that she was uncomfortable with the man as well.

Princess Leilani sailed with Francois. Even now, Mike could see the princess standing at the prow of the vessel, her eyes fixed on the volcano. She had graciously declined riding with Mike and the others, citing that she would only travel with her guardian. Up on the deck, Captain Francois stood behind the helm, casually steering the ship with one hand while eating an apple with the other.

"I really don't like that guy," Mike muttered.

"It's not just you." Ratu wrapped her arm around his and leaned into him. Turning her head, she placed a couple of kisses on his neck, then whispered in his ear. "Are they looking elsewhere?"

Assuming she was referring to the Order, he nodded his head. Wallace looked like he was taking a power nap in the front of the boat, and Ingrid was focused on Francois' ship. Mike was unable to make out the name on the prow, but the impressively cut figurehead with the flowing beard made him think it was probably something manly.

“Yeah,” he muttered. Ratu ran her hand along his body, sliding it up under his shirt as if to feel his abs. He felt her slide something into the waistband of his shorts.

“Don’t react,” she whispered as she nibbled at his ear. “I mean, react to this, but not what I’m about to tell you.”

He smirked and leaned into her, putting an arm around her and playfully squeezed her breast through her shirt. Ingrid looked at them and made a point of turning away.

“You’re about to feel Daisy climbing up your chest,” she whispered. “Cerulea and Olivia will be with Quetzalli and me. I left Carmina with Lily back at Paradise.”

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Just a hunch,” she muttered. “After you left breakfast, everybody started chatting, and I overheard the Captain say something to Leilani in the lost language of Atlantis.”

“Can’t be lost if someone speaks it,” he replied.

Ratu bit his ear hard enough that he flinched.

“Please, continue,” he muttered, trying to ignore the pain.

“To clarify, it’s considered lost because the Atlanteans themselves are gone. I know the language because I needed it for disenchanting a bunch of their stuff over the years. They’re using you and the Order to take care of whatever is up the mountain. She asked him when he thought the tide would go out.”

Mike didn’t have a clever retort for that. “What does that even mean?” he asked, knowing perfectly well that it was a nonsensical question for a mermaid to ask.

“He told her as soon as the crabs finished their meal. I suspect their plan is to take you out once you’ve done whatever they think you’re going to do. Possibly the Order, too.” She nuzzled him extra hard, her hand moving up his chest to play with his nipple. A tiny pair of hands and feet crawled along his ribs as Daisy squeezed herself flat against his back.

“The enemy of my enemy,” he muttered.

“Mike, if the Order finds out the Captain can claim your home, we might lose our safety net.” Her voice was at odds with her amorous ministrations as she

licked the side of his neck. “The fairies are here in case we get separated. They can sense each other and we can use them to navigate if needed.”

“What else did you give me?”

“Knock it off you two.” Ingrid had a look of disgust on her face. “There’s no fucking on this boat.”

“Or if there is, make sure you bring plenty of fucking for everybody.” Wallace lowered his shades and grinned at everyone. When nobody responded, he sighed and sat back in his chair, resuming the power nap position.

Ratu had already slid away from Mike pretending to adjust her clothes. She smiled at him, but he could see the worry in her eyes. Once they started their ascent of the mountain, danger could come from almost anywhere. His safety was assured only until they reached their destination and completed their task. He couldn’t help but think about the sword at Francois’ hip.

He briefly wondered if Ratu had borrowed a collapsible sword from Dana, but knew that couldn’t be it. Not only would tucking a blade into his pants be silly, but he also had no idea how to use it. Over the last couple of years, he had worked on getting stronger and using his magic, but self defense with weapons hadn’t been part of the agenda.

The trip around the eastern edge of the island had them landing at a village built along the edge of the water. The buildings that dotted the hillside were beautiful and painted bright colors so they stood out against the green backdrop of the forest. In the distance, the volcano Haleakalā loomed over them like a silent guardian.

“That’s gonna be a long climb,” Mike reflected as their boat angled toward the pier. While they didn’t need to get all the way to the top, there were no discernable roads that he could see.

On the dock, a few Order members waited, all of them wearing bright Hawaiian colors and dark sunglasses. They looked like Secret Service agents on vacation, except instead of guns, they were armed with collapsible blades and wands, all in holsters strapped to belts and thighs. “How do people not notice you guys?” he asked Ingrid. “You look like mercenaries.”

She looked at the agents, then back at Mike. “You’d be surprised what people don’t notice. At a cursory glance, they’re probably just another tour company, or maybe just some weird tourists. People carry knives. It’s not that

uncommon. You shouldn't be able to see the wands, though. The holsters have a localized enchantment that make the wands look like something else, like a cellphone or whatever. When the Order does post-investigation surveys, people usually mistake us for law enforcement or park rangers. With Haleakalā National Park nearby, that's probably where people will think we're from."

"Are we going in through the park?" he asked. "To utilize their trails?"

Ingrid shook her head. "No. Normal people may mistake us for park rangers, but the actual park rangers will not. We can't chance running into people on the regular trails. I'm afraid you are too...memorable."

Mike looked questioningly over at Ratu and Quetzalli. Ratu's eyes were closed as she leaned back over the gunwale to expose her neck and chest to the sun. Quetzalli was leaning over the side of the boat, her silver hair billowing in the breeze while her large breasts jiggled in time with the waves the boat bounced over. "Yeah, I suppose that's the price we pay for traveling with them."

The mage looked incredulous for a moment, then shook her head. "I can't tell if you're ignorant or screwing with me."

He frowned at the mage. "Ratu looks like an Instagram model and Quetzalli is a curvy woman with silver hair and purple eyes. I'm aware they'd gather attention."

"I'm talking about you." Her features softened. "You really don't know, do you?"

"Clearly I don't. Care to explain it?"

Ingrid shook her head and chuckled. "I thought you were doing it on purpose this whole time, too. I was referring to you. Have you seen yourself lately?"

"Um, yeah? I'm not a vampire, I have a reflection."

She scrutinized him for a few seconds, then nodded. "After we dock, I want to show you something. It will only take a couple of minutes. Then you'll understand."

Curious, Mike nodded, then turned his attention back to the village of Hana. It was a secluded side of the island that was relatively untouched by commercial development. There were some people wandering the shoreline, some casting

nets out into the water while others looked like tourists. Nobody paid them any attention as they approached.

Mike looked back to see if Francois would dock his vessel, but it had shrunk down to the size of a catamaran as they neared the shore. Leilani dove into the water and vanished from sight, leaving Francois by himself on his vessel.

“Do you think he’s alone on there?” he asked Ingrid.

“I assume so. We haven’t seen anybody else on board.” She picked up a pair of binoculars. “Why? Do you think he has a crew stashed somewhere?”

He thought about his own home. Did the ship have its own kind of geas? What kind of defenses did it have other than the cloudy camouflage? Would Francois surprise them with a magical crew of men and women or would they be cryptids?

“Just wondering is all,” he replied. Ratu frowned in Francois’ direction.

Docking was a relatively silent affair. They were welcomed ashore as the Order pulled supplies from the other boat and loaded them into a pair of jeeps. Leilani appeared on the beach, wandering the shore as if looking for shells. She wore a green wrap around her legs and a yellow bikini top that contrasted nicely against her darker skin. The catamaran had shrunk down to a canoe, and Francois hopped onto the dock as the ship transformed into mist and flowed into the magical bottle at his waist. Francois was friendly with the Order, greeting each one with a smile and a handshake. Though Mike still got bad vibes from the man, Francois’ friendliness seemed genuine.

“Don’t let that fool you.” Ratu was standing right behind him now, her words soft in his ear. “You are that man’s competition.”

He nodded, grateful for the reminder. Quetzalli had left the dock and was walking the shore just behind Leilani, who looked back at the dragon with interest. The rising sun was scattering prismatic colors off of the exposed scales on Quetzalli’s neck and arms, which definitely caught the Order’s attention.

Ingrid watched the dragon for a moment, then walked over to Mike. “What is she?” she asked him. “We thought she was just some side piece for you, but it’s clear she’s something more.”

“What, the hair and the eyes didn’t give it away?” He smirked at the mage.

“I once watched a man get eaten from the inside by insects in a matter of seconds.” She scowled at him. “I thought her appearance was simply hair-dye and contacts, honestly.”

Mike pursed his lips as if deep in thought. “You should really be asking her,” he said, knowing Quetzalli wouldn’t tell anyone. “That’s her secret to share.”

Ingrid groaned and shook her head. “Of course you couldn’t just tell me. Look, can you at least tell me that she won’t hinder us? Looking at her, she doesn’t seem like the kind of woman who can handle the stress of bushwhacking up a mountain.”

“She can handle it.” Holding back a grin, he continued. “I once saw her eat a man from the inside using a bunch of insects.”

“Fuck you, Caretaker.” Ingrid’s eyes went hard. “Maybe this is a game to you, but this is my life. Do you know how many times I’ve watched someone I care about get killed? Maybe if you’d lost someone close to you, you’d understand.”

He sighed and turned his attention toward her. “I apologize,” he said. “I was trying to be funny.”

“Try harder.” She turned to walk away, but spun back around to face him. “Actually, stop trying. That would be even better.”

“I hear that a lot at home, actually.” He became serious once again. “But I really am sorry.”

Ingrid rolled her eyes and left to check in with the others. Ratu was staring up at the volcano, her emerald eyes glistening.

“I can feel it,” she said, awe in her voice. “The mountain, I mean. Millions of tons of rock and soil, permeated with the earth’s heat like the veins around a beating heart. It may be slumbering, but it is very much alive.”

He put a hand around her waist and watched the mountain with her. Where Ratu felt the magic of the earth, he could feel the life of the forest. It was like staring into a distant crowd of people and only hearing snippets of their voices. There was power here that he hadn’t felt anywhere else. In the tower world, mighty mountains loomed, but they were cold and lonely. Haleakalā had a presence that filled both his eyes and his mind, leaving him longing for more.

“What are you looking at?” The voice startled him, and Mike turned to find Leilani staring at them with curiosity.

“The mountain,” he said.

She nodded in understanding. “Haleakalā is very impressive. Once every five years, my people allow the bravest warriors able to make legs to make a pilgrimage up its slopes and bring back a stone from the highest peak. These stones are special to us, because they are a reminder that with enough time, anyone can touch the sky.”

Mike contemplated the princess. It was the first time he had seen her express any thought beyond vengeance or serving her people. Her perpetual scowl had been replaced with wide-eyed curiosity, and maybe even some trepidation.

“Have you climbed it before?”

Her eyes snapped toward him and she shook her head. “I was not old enough for the last pilgrimage, nor would I have been considered worthy.”

“But certainly you would qualify now.”

She nodded. “That is true. But my status as a royal means it would be difficult to convince the council to allow me to go. Every pilgrimage, there is at least one who fails to return.”

“What happened to them?” asked Ratu.

“The merfolk share a cautious peace with the humans of the island today, but we were often at odds with the kings of old. The spirits of the dead have not forgotten and will not hesitate to slay my people.” Leilani’s eyes glistened with excitement. “They are the Nightmarchers, the warriors of old.”

“Excuse me, the what now?” Mike gaped at Leilani. “We have to fight spirits?”

“Not likely.” Wallace came off the dock holding a trio of hiking bags. “They only come out after the sun goes down, and we’ll make camp if that happens. There are precautions we can take. Honestly, the Nightmarchers are kind of like the weather—no guarantee you’ll see them, and they usually leave well enough alone unless you piss them off. It’s part of the reason why this side of the island is so sparsely populated. In protecting this region from development, it actually caused the spirits to gather here naturally. Anyone trying to build is usually not a local, and we’ll find their equipment abandoned in the woods one day.”

“This feels like something you all should have mentioned.” Mike glared at Wallace.

“I ain’t afraid of no ghosts.” Wallace winked at Leilani and wandered off whistling the *Ghostbusters* theme.

“He is a disgusting man.” The princess frowned at the knight. “I wish we didn’t have to tolerate his presence.”

“What did he do?” Mike was insanely curious, but was interrupted when Captain Francois came up behind Leilani and handed her a bag.

“This is your pack,” he declared, his voice kind. He showed her how to loop it around her shoulders as the princess eagerly inspected the nylon straps. When Francois’ attention shifted to Mike, his features hardened.

“I assume one of your women will be carrying yours?”

Mike shook his head. “You are incorrect. I’m used to carrying my own weight.”

“We’ll see, Caretaker. I must admit I was shocked to learn that the Caretaker was a man. I guess that means Hestia is becoming desperate.”

“You know about Hestia?” This fact surprised Mike.

“I do. And the fact that you heard me speak her name tells me you’ve Awakened.” The Captain grinned. “I believe you may be the first Caretaker to accomplish this in a century.”

“Awakened?” Mike shook his head. “What does that mean?”

The Captain laughed and walked away with Leilani close behind. They moved to a row of black vans that waited for them up by the road. A couple of men from the Order took their bags and stashed them in the trunk.

“What an asshole.” Mike sighed. “Seems like this trip is full of them.”

Ratu nodded her agreement, then squeezed his arm when Ingrid approached.

“You ready?” she asked, then looked at Ratu. “I’m just borrowing him for a minute.”

The naga nodded and turned her attention to the beach. Quetzalli had crouched down in the sand and was poking something with a stick. The naga wandered over to see what she was doing as Ingrid led Mike up the main road.

He turned back and gazed across the water for a moment before jogging to catch up to the mage. "So what's the deal?" he asked. "You're being very mysterious, you know."

She ignored him, her eyes scanning their surroundings. Eventually she settled on a small group of tourists who had set up an early luncheon at one of the picnic tables. There were about six of them, four women and two men.

"There's a resort near here, very secluded," Ingrid explained, then gestured toward the table. "Tourists love to come here and just watch the water. Anyway, I want you to walk past them. Don't use any of your weird sex magic or anything, just let them get a good look at your face."

Though the request was strange, Mike complied. He casually strolled about thirty feet away, keeping his gaze mostly toward the water. The waves were curling over each other to splash onto the shoreline, scattering a mess of sticks that had washed up recently. It very much reminded him of the Dreamscape.

A woman screamed, causing Mike to trip. Spinning in place, he saw that the tourists were standing as a group while one woman pointed at him as she hopped up and down.

"Holy shit, it's you. It's you!" She ran his direction, freezing him in place. He didn't sense any danger, and nearly laughed when her floppy hat fell off her head and landed in the dirt behind her.

"Uh, yeah, it's...me?" The group congregated around him, eyes wide and in awe.

"Oh my god, I can't believe we're meeting...meeting..." One of the guys was snapping his fingers, as if the sound would somehow trigger the answer.

"I love all your movies," gushed one of the other women. "Can I get your autograph?"

"Movies?" He looked past them at Ingrid, who stood in the distance with her arms crossed and a grin on her face.

"Shit, shit, I don't have a pen!" One of the women ran back and grabbed her beach bag and a purse from the table. When she returned, she started handing

random objects to the others until finally digging out a black and white Bic pen, which she held up like a trophy.

Mike obliged the requests for autographs, and ended up signing someone's kindle, a leg, the top of one woman's boob, and some other random knick-knacks. They had him pose for pictures with them, all smiling in delight as he indulged their bizarre requests for poses. One of the men had Mike hold him as if the man had swooned, and everyone joked about how it was the perfect romance.

He finally extricated himself from the group with the excuse that his manager needed him, then jogged back over to Ingrid. The woman was smug as she waved at the group, then grabbed Mike by the hand and led him back to the pier.

"So who did they think you were?" she asked.

"I have no clue," he replied, realizing he still had the woman's pen tucked in his pocket. He would have taken it back, but didn't want to get caught up again. "What was that about?"

"You really don't know, do you?" She rolled her eyes. "It's probably the nymph magic in your blood. You are supernaturally gorgeous, and I don't use that term lightly. I thought maybe it was just something you kept doing, but I've watched you for days now. Even when distracted, there's this aura of desire that is frankly a little disturbing. You just feel like someone I want to be around, hang on all of your words, be your best friend, maybe."

"But you've never acted that way." He looked back at the group. They all waved at him, so he waved back.

"I'm a professional," she replied. "We're trained to resist charms like yours, but it's difficult. No doubt they'll post those pictures of you online and nobody will be able to figure out who you are. You look familiar, and have a face that others want to trust. It's why I don't trust you, Radley. The most dangerous things in the world always seem like the most harmless."

"That's a harsh assessment," he replied. "But also totally fair."

"You seemed surprised by their reaction," she added. "When was the last time you were around ordinary people?"

"Um..." Thinking back on it, the last time he had truly been in public was the day before he had inherited his house. The few times he had left the house, it had always been with Kisa so that people couldn't see him. He was no longer

human, he knew this already. But seeing how the others had treated him was more than a little mortifying. "It's been a long time," he finally admitted.

"And that's why we won't be taking public trails. The last thing we need is people chronicling your every movement." Ingrid stopped suddenly by the public showers and restroom. "I need to go before we leave. You might want to do the same, unless that's something you don't do anymore."

He watched her go into the bathroom then moved into the men's room on the other side of the building. Realizing this was probably the last moment of privacy he would have, he stepped into one of the stalls and pulled open the waistband of his pants. Daisy emerged from hiding inside his collar and climbed up on top of his head, then stretched her arms and legs.

Natural light filtered into the bathroom from an opening in the upper wall, the rays scattering off of the crystalline decanter in his hands. It wasn't very large, but he could see where the crack had been, now properly fused shut. Inside, a swirling purple fluid sparkled in the light. As he contemplated the magical container, a pair of tiny eyes formed behind the glass.

"Why, hello there, Opal." He smiled at the slime girl in her container. It had taken Ratu almost two years to not only heal the mysterious ooze, but to fix her core. Now capable of squeezing entirely into her vessel, Opal was able to go anywhere that her decanter would fit. "You ready for an adventure?"

The slime girl winked in response.