

Uncharted Waters

Mike stood near the bottom of the slide, his eyes up on the top platform. Up above, Callisto fiddled with the bracelet on his wrist, his mind obviously somewhere else. Underneath the slide, Grace was beating her hands softly on the thick polymer surface as if playing a drum.

“C’mon,” Mike said. “You can do it, it’s just—”

Callisto grabbed the bar above the slide and launched his body forward. The jets of water pushed him even faster, causing him to pass the bend in the slide and then launch off the small lip into the bay. A wave gobbled him up, the child surfacing several feet later.

“Swimming is still stupid,” he declared, frantically pinwheeling his arms. “If the gods had intended us to swim, they would have given—AH, NOOOOO!”

Callisto tried to doggy paddle away as Grace hurled herself into the water after him. Unlike her brother, Grace was naturally gifted in the water, and she swam along the surface until she was close enough to dunk him. He popped up another foot away, buoyed by several tendrils of magic.

Mike looked down at Beth, who sat along the edge of the dock with a book in her hand. She looked up at him and winked, then curled the fingers of her hand toward the shore. Both children were pushed toward the beach where Lily was lying on a towel and wearing a red and black bikini that left very little to the imagination. When the kids kicked sand up on her, she snatched Grace with her tail and lifted the child above her.

“What’ve I said about kicking sand?” she asked.

Grace blew a raspberry, then reached out and smeared sand-covered webbing on Lily’s chest. The succubus dropped the Arachne, who scurried off like a crab.

“When I get my hands on you,” Lily shouted, then turned to give chase. Both children laughed and giggled as she chased them up the beach toward the jungle. They were inside the secret volcano, but it was different now. The caldera had been split on one side, revealing an endless blue horizon that stretched as far as the eye could see. In the inlet behind them, Di’s temple sat like a silent guardian, decorated with shells and flowers.

“Lily’s surprisingly good with them,” said Beth, kicking her feet in the water. Now that the kids were gone, she pulled an orb of water from the ocean and let it hover over her palm. The orb shifted, transforming into a cube. Beth smiled, then concentrated on changing the shape again.

“She definitely has the energy for it.” He heard someone blow a conch shell and turned his attention to the ocean. “Oh, I think that means they’re back.”

Beth set her book down. “I wonder how it went.”

The azure water of the pocket world was disturbed by the shimmering scales of the merfolk as they returned from their hunt. Some of them surfaced like dolphins, doing aerial antics for those on the beach who might be watching. The kids stopped running from Lily and came down to the water’s edge, both of them clapping in delight. Down at the edge of the dock, Leilani surfaced, a huge grin on her face.

“You look pleased.” Mike sat down on the edge of the dock. “I take it that the hunt went well?”

Leilani nodded. “Better than expected! This ocean is not only better stocked, it’s *healthy*. We actually finished our hunt early and had the scouts explore to see if they could find a border or perhaps where it loops back around. This place is huge!”

“I’m glad.”

The mermaid pulled herself onto the dock, her tail melting into legs. She sat next to him and wrapped her arms around him. Her hair smelled of the sea, with bits of seaweed tangled in it.

“You didn’t just give us a refuge,” she said. “You gave us a home.”

“You mostly have Beth to thank.” He jerked his thumb at Beth, who formed the cube into a hand that waved back at them. “She’s the one who came up with the idea of making a sanctuary for your new colony.”

“Pele did all the work.” Beth leaned back on her arms to look at the two of them. The watery hand fell back into the ocean. “In all honesty, I was being a bit selfish. Since you were temporarily in charge of your people, I figured you could gift Paradise and the surrounding waters to Mike as a token of diplomacy or whatever. I wanted a piece of Paradise for myself.”

“It was my dowry to give.” Leilani winked at Mike. “They never would have let me just give you that land. But as a wedding present?”

Mike chuckled. “Yeah, well, I didn’t expect that angle either.” When the idea had originally been broached, the first thing he had done was ask Tink about it. While marrying Leilani for the sake of exploiting a merfolk loophole was the primary purpose, Tink was technically his only wife. Tink had immediately asked if Leilani was also a goblin. When Mike told her no, she had shrugged and declared she had no fucks to give over the matter.

“That reminds me. You gave me a raincheck on our honeymoon.” Leilani smiled lasciviously. “When do I get you all to myself for a few days?”

“When things calm down a bit.” Mike looked over at the kids who were dancing around the merfolk warriors that were pulling nets up onto the beach. The nets were packed full of fish, and a trio of centaurs who had been sent along as an honor guard were already digging up a smoking pit that had been packed with kalua pork the previous evening. The merfolk were cleaning the fish next to the dock, chatting amicably with each other as they handed prepped fish to the centaurs for cooking. Of all the things to happen in the last week, the strange bond between merfolk and centaur tribes was not one he had expected. Even now, the merfolk were eagerly chatting up the centaurs who had come to visit the beach. “Callisto is still having nightmares. Lily wants to go in and get rid of them, but Zel is making her wait so that he can actually process his feelings.”

“Well, when it finally happens, I intend to wear you out.” Leilani looked past him at Beth. “You’re invited, too. The more the merrier.”

“No thanks.” Beth gazed wistfully at the beach where Asterion was busy digging another pit for the merfolk. “I have other plans for my days ahead.”

“Your loss.” Leilani kissed Mike and gestured out toward the ocean. “Anyway, as far as we can tell, the waters around this island extend for at least two hundred miles before looping around. A few of my people want to put together a proper expedition. It’s been centuries since the merfolk have had somewhere new to explore. Does Pele have any idea how big it could be?”

He shrugged. “I don’t think she does,” he admitted. “It was sort of a...last second decision.” After the battle with Francois had come to an end, the others had gone back to Paradise to discuss the next steps. During the discussion about creating a sanctuary for the merfolk with Paradise, Pele had emerged from the

mountain and promptly asked Mike what he intended to do with Poseidon's body. The magic vessel, now split in half, was still spewing its contents out into the waves. Even though Poseidon himself had been nullified, the ship was still a part of his body and could easily become a weapon in the right hands.

Mike barely remembered the next two hours as a mad rush by the merfolk and Pele to capture and contain the god's body ensued. The rats had seen the portal for Francois' pocket dimension through their drones, and so Reggie worked with his people on accessing the plane. The remnants of Francois' ship were gathered up and pushed into the closest bay where a building with a portal to that dimension had been installed and lowered into the water.

Eulalie and Tink both monitored the cleanup operation while Pele went home with Mike to speak with Hestia. By that afternoon, a plan had been set in place and Pele herself had done most of the work with Ratu and Yuki's help. She had been present once upon a time when the Architect had transformed her sister Nāmaka into the island, and began a similar spell to repurpose Poseidon's body. The results of that spell had not only attached the pocket dimension to this place, but had transformed Poseidon into the very ocean surrounding it. Much like a world had once been created for the centaurs, now the same thing had been done for the merfolk. Those who had chosen to splinter away from the main colony now lived here, away from the world of man.

Mike had worried that Poseidon's wrath would somehow find him, but Hestia had reassured everyone that her brother no longer had any power after being removed from the Great Game. If anything, he was now considered part of Mike's property as a spoil of war and would bend a knee if he ever found a way to manifest again.

He looked over at the beach and laughed when he saw Callisto on Asterion's shoulders. The minotaur was pretending the boy wasn't there as he continued digging a second smoking pit. Grace was now climbing up Asterion's leg and hissing whenever he 'accidentally' dropped sand on her with his shovel.

"You've made a whole new world for us." Leilani sighed and closed her eyes. "A week ago, you were the enemy. Now? You're the guardian spirit of my people."

"I wouldn't go *that* far." Mike blushed, then cleared his throat. "All of this is just kind of something that happened."

“I know.” Leilani moved closer to him and grinned. “Which is why it feels so *magical!*” She grabbed him by the hand and pulled him into the water. The two of them sank down to the sands below, their lips pressed together as she breathed air into him. Her hands moved across his body, fumbling with the strings of his board shorts when a pulse of energy moved through the water from above. Mike broke the kiss and signaled that he needed to go up. Leilani took him to the surface and he saw Ratu standing on the edge of the dock, her arms crossed and a smile of amusement on her face. She was wearing a green and gold bikini, and the scales on her body shifted beneath the eternal sun.

“Having fun in there?” she asked.

“Just taking a quick dip.” Mike swam to the edge of the dock and pulled himself up. “Does this mean you’re done?”

Ratu nodded. “With my part, anyway. Do you have time to talk right now? Pele would like a word.”

Mike looked at Leilani. The mermaid sighed and tilted her head toward the beach.

“I should probably be helping them with tonight’s feast,” she said. “Besides, I’ll get you all to myself...eventually.” She blew him a kiss and then dipped beneath the waves, her tail splashing them unnecessarily as the princess swam for shore.

“You marry the most interesting people, Caretaker.” Ratu extended a hand to Mike and helped him stand. “I feel like we haven’t had a chance to talk about that, actually. Are you Prince Mike now? Or maybe you’re a duke. Does that title extend to everyone else? Tink would probably love that.”

“If I only ask one thing of you, it’s that you don’t talk about this in front of Lily.” He looked at the beach and saw that the succubus had turned into a child version of herself and was now clinging to Asterion with the children. The minotaur didn’t seem to realize it was her and was still digging his pit. “It would be all that I hear about for days.”

“An easy enough favor, I suppose.” She walked along the dock toward shore and Mike followed. The two of them walked up the beach and then along the shoreline of the lake. A small building with the word Village carved up top contained a portal inside that took them straight up to the old homes, which were now partially occupied by centaurs from Zel’s tribe. Some of them paused and

waved to Mike, and he waved back. There, another building with the word Temple was built near the cliffs. The door radiated heat, and Mike followed Ratu inside and they stepped out into Di's chambers. The dragon's head rested on the edge of the platform, her massive coils submerged in the lava. Standing beneath her was Pele, the goddess inspecting Di's scales.

"This has closed up nicely," said the goddess, indicating the remains of a large wound just under Di's jaw. "How about your ribs?"

"It hurts to breathe too deeply." Di's tourmaline eye shifted to focus on Mike. "Welcome back, Caretaker."

"Di. How are you feeling?"

"I am healing quite nicely." The dragon made a rumbling sound in her throat. The battle with the kraken had left her exhausted and near death. Ratu had helped her back to the safety of the sanctuary after the fight. "It will be some time before I can be a proper guardian, I fear."

"Don't you worry about that. It'll be a fight for anyone who thinks they're going to break in." The one thing Mike hadn't been able to do was close off the entrance in Maui. Unlike Paradise, which had been pulled away and incorporated into the secret island, Great Game rules apparently decreed that Players couldn't just remove themselves from reality. Pele and Ratu had significantly altered the topography around the entrance to make it impossible for anyone to casually hike into. At a minimum, they would need climbing gear and the ability to scale wet rocks.

As for those who did? Well, they would run into the volcano's newest, unofficial guardian.

"Where is little sister?" asked Di. "I miss her."

"She's out fixing some rogue weather patterns that she accidentally caused." Between the eruptions and monster storm Quetzalli had summoned, she had somehow altered the flow of air currents over the ocean, resulting in massive storms along the West Coast. "I'm sure she'll be back later, though."

"This is acceptable. Quetzalli sings to the eggs. I love listening to it." Di's eye shifted toward Ratu. "You seem to have recovered faster than I have."

"A perk of being much smaller. There's less of me to heal." Ratu gestured toward Pele. "I have brought him, goddess."

“At last.” Pele turned to face Mike, her eyes sparkling. “It seems that most of my work is done. Haleakalā has been stabilized, so the tremors will stop soon.”

“That’s great news.”

The goddess nodded. “As for my people, they have experienced a reawakening. Despite the efforts of others, they’ve been reminded that the world is bigger than they ever realized. Though many have invoked my name, it is only now that they believe in its power.”

“So you’re getting stronger?”

Pele nodded. “In a manner of speaking. With that strength comes some danger, I’m afraid. You see, my remaining kin may be scattered, but new belief in me will also empower them. There is a good chance these events may be the catalyst that usher in a new age, one that sees the return of the gods.”

Mike frowned. “You don’t think they’ll stay in hiding?”

She shook her head. “Some will, but others will see this as an opportunity to reclaim what they’ve lost. As they, too, grow in strength, they will be noticed.”

“By the Others.” Mike didn’t fear speaking of them in the sanctuary of Di’s temple.

“Yes.” Pele walked across the chamber to face him, then took his hand in hers. Her skin was cool to the touch, but he felt the heat of her soul beneath it. “And that is something you should also keep in mind. There are those among you who also grow in power. In the safety of your home, you will be shielded. But should you venture out, I would caution you to never concentrate your power unless absolutely necessary. There are already tales among my people of a massive serpent who alters the land as it slithers, and a woman with five tails who froze the ocean using her power. They’ve seen things, recorded them even, and they’ve become believers. That belief will be your strength, but it can also make you a target.”

Mike sighed. “Well it’s a good thing we’re not planning any more field trips,” he said.

“Indeed. But if you do, tread cautiously, Caretaker. I would not see harm come to you.” The goddess leaned forward, her words hot against his ears. “You have done me and my people an impossible service. I’ve also become quite fond

of your family and don't know that I can ever thank you enough. And thus, I mark you." She pecked him on the cheek, the chaste kiss of an old woman.

His magic practically boiled inside him, desperate to escape and unleash itself, to bathe itself in sustained passion. Golden motes of light burst from his skin, shooting into the air and forming into dandelion seeds that fell to the floor and were consumed by flames. Di snorted, blowing some of them back into the air.

Gasping for air, Mike grabbed Ratu by the hand, not daring to touch Pele herself. The goddess smirked, then took a step away from him.

"I guess I've still got it." Pele smiled. "I've marked you, Mike Radley, that fire will recognize you as one of its own. Never again shall it score your flesh nor should you fear its advances." Her eyes dropped to the scar tissue on his stomach. "I believe this to be a suitable gift."

"You...honor me." Mike bowed his head, trying to ignore the raging hard-on pressed tightly against his board shorts.

"Good. You should be honored." Pele laughed and ruffled his hair. "Now if you'll excuse me, there's a group of men on Oahu who are raising money to rebuild Maui. Naturally, it's a scam and they're planning to keep it, instead."

"What are you going to do to them?" asked Ratu.

"Suspend them over a pit of lava and make them beg for their lives." Pele grinned. "I'll drop a few in and let the others live. With my recent popularity, it's probably a good time to remind everyone that I *do* have a reputation in regards to my temper."

The goddess walked to the edge of the chamber and stepped out onto the magma. Flames wrapped around her, forming into a fiery vortex as she departed. Mike stared at the spot and blinked the spots from his eyes. Ratu chuckled and took him by the hand.

"She sure knows how to make an exit." The naga cleared her throat. "If you need some help with that, I'd be glad to assist you."

Mike turned hungry eyes on the naga, only to see the massive dragon looming in the background. Di grinned, her stony scales shifting along her length.

"Don't mind me," she said. "Just pretend I'm not here."

Mike laughed, then took Ratu by the hand and led her toward the door. "We can find somewhere more appropriate for this, I'm sure."

"Boo," called Di as the door closed. Mike and Ratu were now back in the village, his eyes scanning the buildings to find one that was unoccupied. However, the frantic energy of the village came to a halt when he was noticed, and a pair of centaurs came running up to him.

"Caretaker." One of them bowed, the other just fidgeted with her hands. "There was a problem with the offering."

"Offering? What offering?" He looked at the two of them. When they looked toward the cave behind them, he smacked himself in the forehead. "Yeah, right, what's wrong?"

"There are supposed to be three of us."

"Ah, okay. Um, I guess a raincheck, maybe." He looked at Ratu and sighed.

"Our loss." The naga grinned and kissed his forehead. "See you at dinner?"

"Of course." He watched Ratu saunter off and then ran with the centaurs toward the cave exit. The stone walls had dozens of runes carved into them, magic dedicated to identifying and possibly vaporizing any intruders. When they emerged from the cave system, he saw the remains of a large fishing net caught up in the trees.

"I've got it from here," he said, reassuring the centaurs and then sprinting into the jungle. It was raining again, and the trees shifted out of his way while bending their boughs to grant him cover. It only took a couple of minutes navigating the jungle before he found his quarry. Moving to stand on a rock, he scowled.

"What do you think you are doing?" He addressed the massive, dark green bulb that had wedged itself between a pair of trees in an effort to hide. "Spit her out, Sweetpea!"

The mandragora plant opened its blooms wide, disgorging a frightened centaur who gazed around in a panic. Mike moved to assist her, kneeling down and making sure she hadn't been hurt. Though she was unharmed, she stank of fish.

"Thank you so much," she said, her legs trembling. "I was so scared!"

“You’ll be fine, but I wonder...” Mike looked up at the plant. “How many times have I said “no eating your handlers?””

The leaves on the mandragora drooped, and he could feel alien waves of sadness touch the corners of his mind. The mandragora was much smarter than regular trees, but had a completely different thought process.

“They’re not going to bring you any more fish if you keep doing this.”

Another wave of emotions, followed by the taste of something coppery in his mouth. Puzzled, he looked down at the centaur, then back at Sweetpea.

“It says you have something tasty in your pockets,” he said, looking back at the centaur.

“I shouldn’t, I made sure to empty them!” The centaur stuck her hands in the few pouches she wore, then groaned. She pulled her hand back out to reveal something that looked like dried fish.

“What’s that?” Mike asked.

“Ahi tuna jerky,” the centaur replied. “One of the merfolk was handing them out earlier, I didn’t get a chance to eat it.”

“Let’s be more careful next time.” He took the jerky from the centaur and tossed it toward the mandragora. A vine from the bud snatched it out of the air and dragged it away. Shortly after the fight with Francois, the mandragora’s main bud had been spotted and moved here to act as a backup guardian. The plant was more than happy to eat anyone who managed to climb the mountainside. However, since the mandragora was supposed to do this only as a backup plan, it meant that the centaurs needed to feed it plenty of meat. “Can you walk?”

“Yes, thank you.” The centaur allowed Mike to take her back to the cave. She walked in silence, clearly embarrassed and bothered by her close call with the plant. When they got back to the mountain, Zel was waiting for them, her arms crossed over her chest.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, her voice stern.

“It was my fault,” said the centaur. “I had food in my pockets that I forgot about.”

Zel relaxed, but only slightly. “I was worried,” she confessed. Even though moving the mandragora benefited her tribe, Zel had still been worried about the

new arrangement. Ever since Ratu and Pele had certified that there was a zero percent chance of the mandragora escaping the secret bog, her only real concern was for the handlers who fed it meat. “Thanks for taking care of it for me.”

“I happened to be around.” Mike stopped in front of Zel and grinned. The centaur seemed to sense that she was no longer needed, so trotted into the cave. “So, how’ve you been? It seems like I haven’t seen you that much lately.”

“I’m almost as busy as the Caretaker these days.” Zel grinned at him, then lowered her gaze. Things had been a little tense between the two of them after Callisto’s return, but Mike recognized that as a function of nearly losing their child. It didn’t have anything to do with him. “Or so I’m told.”

“Really? Me? Busy?” He chuckled. “Those are blatantly false rumors. I wouldn’t dream of being busy.”

“So then you’ve just been avoiding me?” Zel smirked and took a step toward him.

“I’ve been extremely busy,” Mike said, backpedaling. “Up until just now, that is.”

The centaur laughed. “I’m aware that I haven’t been...pleasant to be around. I’m still...processing what happened to Callisto.”

Mike nodded, but said nothing. It was the easiest way to make room for someone’s feelings, after all. He had gotten that little nugget of advice from a parenting book that had nothing to do with centaurs or Arachne, but luckily kids were mostly the same no matter what species they were.

“And I’ll admit that I blamed you. Unfairly, by the way. Which made me mad at myself. And so the cycle continues.” Zel sighed and pulled something out of her pocket. “I was actually coming here to talk to you about something else, but heard that Sweetpea had eaten somebody.”

“Technically, she was eating someone’s snack. She just forgot to unwrap it, first. I’m going to have Amygone touch base with her and go over the rules again.” Even though Mike could speak with plants, it wasn’t with the same proficiency that a dryad could do it. The mandragora’s main bulb was here in Hawaii, there was a network of special boxes built by Tink and the rats that allowed the root system to be kept safe both in the greenhouse and beneath Amygone’s tree. “So, what did you want to talk about? I’ve got time right now.”

Zel stepped closer, her hooves pawing nervously at the dirt. "After you got Callisto back, we never really talked about everything that happened. I was just so grateful that he was alive. And then we had to bury our dead. The whole time I was standing there listening to my aunt administer final rights, all I could think was 'I'm glad my son made it.'"

"That's really hard." Mike took Zel's hand. "It's called survivor's guilt and I know what you mean."

The two of them exchanged a glance, but said no more on the matter. They both had their reasons for feeling it.

"Anyway, I threw myself into my tribe and my work, but we never really talked about it. You were true to your word, Mike. You went and got our son back. And after a few days, I felt guilty that I didn't come see you sooner." Zel sighed in frustration. "Sometimes I miss the simple days when it was just us and the forest."

"I mean..." Mike gestured at the woods. "That's exactly what we've got here right now. Just you, me, and the trees."

Zel studied him with her beautiful, brown eyes, then grinned and took a step forward. Mike heard the soft snap of a slap bracelet closing and realized that Zel had taken their son's enchanted bracelet for herself. By the time she stepped into his arms, her equine body had vanished, leaving her human below the waist.

"I thought that only worked for Callisto," he said.

Zel chuckled. "So did I. But somehow, it worked on Grace. I had Ratu look into it. Apparently the enchantment has been altered."

"By who?"

"That's a good question." Zel looked up into his eyes. "Callisto said that Grace did something to it when they were taken, but he doesn't know what. That doesn't make a lot of sense, right? Who could have taught her how to do that?"

Mike studied Zel's face, but his mind was on his daughter. Being an Arachne seemed to be the strangest thing about her, but that was just her appearance. What thoughts lurked in his quietest child? Her favorite stuffy was a possessed doll. She had cast a fireball spell using somebody's wand. Was she some kind of magical savant?

“I don’t think it matters,” he said. “What gave you the idea to try it for yourself?”

Zel laughed. “Callisto did. He gave it to me a few minutes ago when I got here. Said there was some time left on it and I should come see you.”

“We’ve got a good kid.” Mike tried not to laugh at the idea that Callisto was trying to be his wingman.

“Do you think you could play our song again?” she asked as she pressed herself against him. “I want to dance with you.”

Mike shook his head. “My current phone doesn’t have that song on it.” He had actually broken it during the fight with the kraken. Mike didn’t know if it was the ocean water, fighting the undead, or the magic lightning he fired from his body that had done it in. Either way, the warranty didn’t cover it. “But we don’t need music. We can just dance.”

Zel gazed up at him, her slightly damp hair clinging to her forehead. “Maybe we can skip the dancing,” she said, her lips slightly parted. “I think this bracelet only has about ten minutes left on it and there’s something I’ve wanted from you for a very long time.”

She kissed him, and heat surged through his body as he took her in his arms. The magic did all the dancing for them, ricocheting back and forth between their bodies and playing musical tones. The leaves shifted, giving them more cover from the rain as Zel practically tackled him to the ground. She unbuttoned her sleeveless tunic, releasing her breasts. Drops of rain collected on her chest, then rolled down to form thin streams of water that fell from her large nipples. Mike lifted his head to catch it, his tongue sliding along her areola. When he sucked a nipple into his mouth, Zel gasped and shuddered.

“I never get tired of that,” she said, then grabbed his trunks and slid them down until his cock popped free. Awkwardly, she lifted one leg over his waist and straddled him, then shifted her body so that his rigid cock lay against the curve of her ass.

When she tried to mount him, he grabbed her by the arms and pulled her down to kiss her instead. She squeaked in protest, then moaned into his mouth as his magic enveloped her. Zel placed her hands against his shoulders and rolled her hips, allowing his cock to slide along her wet slit. The air sizzled and popped as the magic connected them, and the centaur pushed herself free and grinned.

Without another word, she arched her back and used one hand to guide his cock inside of her, gasping as he pushed her open. Zel made cute, girlish noises as she forced herself onto his cock, her pussy gobbling it up an inch at a time.

“You don’t have to rush it,” Mike said.

“Eight minutes!” she gasped. “I’ve only got eight more minutes to get properly fucked!”

“Well, when you put it that way.” Mike lifted his hands, energy crackling between his fingertips. He placed one hand on her hips and the other on her breast. “Let’s see if we can’t catch up for lost time.”

He released his magic, letting it pour through her. Zel sat up straight and screamed, then came so hard that she froze in place, her eyes locked on the sky. Water poured down her body, forming into a pool around them that sparkled with energy.

Mike fought hard to keep her locked against his body as her hips jerked out of control. She cried out his name as he sat up and buried his face between her breasts. Zel hugged him tight, her heart beating so loud that he could hear it. He sent an additional current through her body, triggering another series of orgasms.

“It’s so good,” she cried. “You feel so good!”

“I love how you feel against me,” he mumbled between her breasts. When she came again, her fingers became claws that yanked his hair. He winced at the sensation, then made her come again.

“I love...how you feel...inside of me!” Zel was weeping now, all the pent up emotion of the previous weeks now flowing freely. This was no longer just about sex, or love, or even closure. It was about healing, and being reminded that they were still a team.

A centaur popped through the tunnel, likely attracted by Zel’s screams. When he saw what was happening, he shot Mike a thumbs up and galloped back inside the volcano.

“More. MORE!” Zel was now clutching Mike so tight that he could barely move. His magic was dancing inside her, making her body shake with anticipation.

“How much time do we have?” he asked.

“Th..three minutes,” she gasped.

“I can work with that.” Mike tilted her back until she was on the ground, then swung his legs around so that he was now on top of her. “Don’t forget to breathe.”

Zel cried out in joy as he fucked her, driving his length into her over and over. Golden motes of light now swirled above them, creating a vortex that reached up into the sky. Drops of water were pulled up after them, creating a swirling mass of water and lightning that made sounds like bells when they burst.

“Oh gods,” Zel whimpered, then locked eyes with Mike. “I love you, Mike Radley.”

“I love you, Zelenia of the Moon Tribe.” He grinned down at her, rain and sweat pouring from his face. A ray of sunlight illuminated Zel’s face, making her eyes sparkle. “I bet Ratu can make Callisto another bracelet.”

“His parents need this one,” she said, then wrapped her legs around him. “I want to feel you come inside me, Mike. Fill me up.”

“Are you sure?” he teased.

“One minute,” she whispered.

Mike sped up his pace, letting the magic roar through him. Zel emitted cries of joy when his cock flexed, expanded, then unloaded inside of her. When the magic tried to bounce back and forth between them, he sped up the process and came inside her again. Both of them were screaming now as torrents of cum gushed out of Zel and mixed with the rainwater beneath them.

“Ten,” Zel whimpered. “Nine. Eight.”

Impressed by her time-keeping abilities, Mike grunted and flooded her one last time. Zel was in a daze as he slowly pulled out, his cock leaking cum and briefly sticking to her thighs. He could feel the magic of the bracelet cease functioning and moved out of the way as Zel’s body returned to normal. She rolled on her side, gasping for air as her equine features returned.

Mike smirked at the sight of his cum running out of her pussy and down her back legs. He moved around her front and slid his leg beneath her torso. Zel sighed and clutched him like a drowning man grabbing a life preserver.

“I’ll never let you go,” she declared. “Not as long as I live.” A moment passed and she sighed. “Metaphorically, I mean.”

“I know.” He stroked her hair, which was now soaked and dirty from the ground. “This was nice.”

“Maybe you can have music ready next time.” Zel giggled. “Do you think Kisa could teach me some dance moves?”

“Oh, definitely.” Kisa stepped out of the shadows, clutching an umbrella. Zel actually jumped, her hind legs kicking a rock nearby and launching it into the jungle. “Didn’t mean to startle you. Felt Mike getting laid and wondered if he was fucking the plant is all.”

“That was a one-time thing,” Mike declared. “And technically, it wasn’t Sweetpea, but her daughter, or whatever.”

Kisa shrugged. “You wouldn’t be the first person in our house to fuck a vegetable.”

Zel narrowed her eyes at the catgirl. “Who have you been talking to?”

“I’d love to teach you some two-legged moves.” Kisa sauntered back toward the cave. “I’m also supposed to let you know that the luau will start at sunset.”

Mike watched Kisa leave, then looked down at Zel. “Is that why the centaurs plant so many root vegetables?”

“Eat my ass,” she muttered, her tail briefly lifting.

“Now that would make quite a meal,” he replied, then moved out of the way so Zel could get up. “I don’t know that I’ve ever heard you speak that way before.”

“You can blame Lily.” Zel rolled herself up and then stood. “Ugh, I’m all dirty now.”

“Want to come down to the beach? You can rinse yourself off in the water.”

Zel grinned. “Only if you promise to brush me after.”

“Done.” He stuck out his hand and she took it. They walked hand in hand back to the village, then down to the beach where the kids were now building a sand castle. The merfolk and centaurs brought out tables, constructed from timber collected from Maui. Gradually, the others trickled in, either going for a swim or visiting with the centaurs. Mike had just finished brushing Zel when a familiar voice spoke to him from behind.

“Is this Callisto’s mom?” Ingrid asked.

“You must be Ingrid.” Zel narrowed her eyes at the mage.

“I just wanted to apologize again.” Ingrid bowed her head. “For my part in everything. I see now that I’ve been wrong. For a long time anyway.”

Zel’s tail twitched in annoyance, but the centaur nodded. “We believe in second chances around here,” she said. “Don’t waste yours.”

“I won’t.” Ingrid looked at Mike. “Speaking of which, I won’t be staying for dinner. I appreciate the invitation.”

“Why can’t you stay?”

Ingrid looked at the people who had already gathered. “Honestly? This is beautiful. I wish I could be a part of it. But as you know, I’ve been questioned up and down by my superiors. There’s going to be a Council meeting soon and it’s pretty much going to be an interrogation. The less I know about this place, and your family, the better. I really just came to say my goodbyes.”

“I see.” Mike frowned. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I’m not sure,” she replied. “I’m just now learning that I’ve never been okay. Assuming they don’t kill me off, I’ll probably retire from the Order and try to figure some things out for myself.”

“Okay.” He patted Zel on the butt and the centaur stepped away. “You know that you can come to me if you need help, right?”

Ingrid nodded. “Aurora has your number and Eulalie’s memorized. If things go south, she’ll give one of you a call and you can come rescue my ass.”

“And we will.” Mike stuck out his hand. “Thanks for everything, Sister Ingrid.”

“It’s just Ingrid now.” She took his hand and blushed. “Well, it will be, anyway. Um...well, bye.”

The mage walked off stiffly, like her legs were a bit wobbly. A centaur escorted her out, taking her to whatever portal she had come in from. Mike wondered what was wrong with her, but was distracted by the sound of Death shouting from the water.

“I have done it, Mike Radley!” Death stood atop a surfboard carved from koa wood by the merfolk. The wave he had been riding was generated by a pair of mermaids who broke away from him as he glided up onto the sand. “Did you see me hang ten?”

“I missed it,” he said. “Why don’t you show me ?”

This turned into surfing lessons with the merfolk as the sun set. When the luau started, Yuki arrived with magical mirrors that she set up on the sand so that Naia and Aymone could see the party. The merfolk and centaurs took turns performing on the beach, followed up by a sizzling fire dance from none other than Pele herself. Her smoky dog companion wandered the tables, begging for food which the kids were happy to provide.

Mike sat at the table, with Leilani on one side and Callisto on the other. He stared out at the dark horizon and wondered what was in store for him next. With the events of the last week, he knew there was little chance they would be left alone for long. Who would come for them next? Would it be the Order again? It definitely wouldn’t be the SoS. Lily and Eulalie were seeing to that personally. But who else was waiting in the wings, eager to take from him all that he loved?

“You thinking about our honeymoon?” asked Leilani.

“Ew.” Callisto made a face at Leilani and grabbed his plate to leave. “Grownup talk.”

“No,” Mike confessed. “Just wondering what’s coming next is all.”

“Hmm.” Leilani laid her head on his shoulder. “Well you should know that you have the might of the colony behind you, should you need it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He heard a cheer go up from a nearby table. Curious, he turned to see that the merfolk and centaurs had gathered around Tink, who was gobbling down smoked fish and kalua pork with both fists. It was clearly an eating competition, and her competitors Asterion and Bigfoot sat next to her, their eyes wide in disbelief as she shoveled food into her mouth. Kisa also stood nearby, her jaw hanging open.

Feeling the need to intervene, Mike excused himself and jogged over. “Tink. Hey, Tink!” He had to shout to get the goblin’s attention. She had a handful of meat in both hands, which she stuffed into her maw. “What are you doing?”

Tink chewed her food and swallowed. When she spoke, it was through meat packed teeth. "Tink big hungry, win bet!" she declared.

"There's plenty of food, you can slow down," he said. "You're going to make yourself sick."

"Tink fine. Need big energy!" She leapt onto the table and patted her belly, which was already slightly distended from all the food. Bigfoot picked up his plate before the goblin could step in it.

"Big energy for what?" Mike asked.

Tink let out a whoop and jumped into his arms. When he caught her, she wrapped both arms around his neck and smooched his cheek, leaving a smear of sauce behind.

"Tink have big surprise," she whispered. "Finally get what Tink deserve."

"I still don't follow."

Tink grinned, then hopped down and grabbed Mike's hand. She placed it against her stomach. "Tink need big energy for baby," she declared. Everyone standing nearby went silent.

"Tink." When Kisa spoke, she sounded sad. "That's...you can't..."

Tink blew a raspberry at Kisa, then looked back at Mike. "Kitty cat say Tink can't, but Tink already did."

"You're pregnant?" Bewildered, Mike looked down at Tink's belly. "But I thought...we couldn't?" He had learned early on that he couldn't get Tink pregnant because he was human and she was a goblin.

"Tink make big Christmas wish," she whispered. "Magic made happen."

"Gods," he whispered in disbelief. "So this is real? We're having a baby?"

Tink smiled. "Husband get it now. Always a bit slow, but cute butt," she teased.

Mike cried out in joy and scooped up his goblin wife. Everyone standing nearby cheered, which caused others to come and ask about the news. Tink relished in all the attention, then declared she needed to get back to devouring everything in sight. Both Bigfoot and Asterion bowed out of the impromptu eating contest as Tink gobbled her way through most of an entire pig.

Mike couldn't be happier for the two of them. As he watched his beautiful goblin eat by torchlight, he couldn't help but notice that some of her crimson hair looked gray in their light.

The Council chambers were built much like that of any governing body, the chamber circular in shape with a large, flat panel on one wall that acted as a screen for the projectors. The chamber was like a small amphitheater with comfortable seats and large tables for each attended. Alexandros Laskaris sat toward the back of the room, his fingers steeped together as he looked upon the images above with intense interest.

The governing body of the Order had pulled together for an emergency session. It had been nearly two weeks since the eruption in Maui, and the Order and US government were working overtime to hide the details of what had happened from the general public. This was easily the biggest disaster in Order history, and Alexandros wasn't entirely certain how they would move past it.

The list of things to cover up was enormous. Cellphone footage of the undead surging up from the sea. More footage of ancestral spirits guiding people to safety. A kaiju sized corpse floating in the south Pacific. Hundreds of thousands of corpses in various states of decay. The evidence was immense, and that didn't include the small fleet that had been destroyed in battle, or the fact that the USS *Arizona* had risen from its watery grave to sail to Maui's defense, only to return later in the afternoon. Congressional hearings were already underway, but both sides were blaming each other, which was giving the Order more time to hide the evidence.

In a panic, one of the upper level members of the Order had sent out a burn team to destroy the evidence at all costs and blame the damage on the eruption. During the mass burn, the team had run afoul of Pele, a local deity. That team was now missing and the man who had sent out the command had disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

Alexandros wasn't worried about that last detail. After all, he was the one who had secretly arranged the man's assassination. A faction had emerged that thought burning it all to the ground might not be going far *enough*. Realizing that extremism had reared its ugly head, Alexandros had felt it prudent to eliminate the fringe element immediately. Cutting the head off a snake before it realized it had a body was the best solution to such a problem.

“As you can see, we’re dealing with a disinformation campaign of unprecedented scale.” Master Piero, a balding mage in his late sixties, looked up at the screens from a podium in the middle of the chamber. “In the last week, we’ve managed to discredit the invasion footage by claiming it’s from an unreleased film that a studio canceled for tax reasons. This, of course, was released by a disgruntled CGI artist who is mad that their hard work won’t ever be appreciated. Yes, there’s been pushback from the survivors of the attack, but their only allies right now are conspiracy theorists, so public opinion is on our side.” Piero clicked through some of the images. Luckily, Captain Francois’ forces hadn’t been zombies or any type of undead with infectious properties. “The kraken in the bay has been far harder to explain, however. There are plenty of private citizens who captured their own footage, so we have one team claiming it’s a PR stunt for the new Godzilla movie coming out next year.”

“That’s convenient,” said a woman in the back of the chamber.

“Not really.” Piero frowned. “There wasn’t one coming out next year, so now we’re in talks with our branch in Japan to grease some palms and make it happen. It’ll be costly, but it’s the only plan we’ve got.”

Alexandros shook his head. The men and women in the chamber had well over a thousand years of collective knowledge, but they were acting no better than children trying to hide the mess they made before their parents came home. There were people on the Council who weren’t even past forty, yet another result of whoever (or whatever) had been hunting down their ranks.

Images of the USS *Arizona* appeared onscreen and the room went silent. The ship had returned to its resting place, but the memorial itself had been damaged during the ship’s transit. The perpetually leaking oil now pumped out at a higher volume, staining the shoreline.

“This and the destruction of the naval fleet have been much harder to hide. I’m afraid far too many people saw the *Arizona* raise itself from the sea floor. Right now, we’re playing the angle that this was an event similar in nature to the Philadelphia Experiment. This has pulled the conspiracists over to our side in the public domain, so now they’re doing most of the work for us. The official word from naval command was that this was a failed test of experimental technology that resulted in the tragic deaths of thousands of men and women. A few people at the top fell on their swords for it, but they were well compensated.”

A man in the back raised his hands. "Can you remind me what happened during the Philadelphia Experiment?"

Piero sighed and rubbed a hand over the top of his head. "That was a joint operation with the US government involving a potential incursion. They thought it would be a good idea to use tech developed by Nikolai Tesla to figure out how we could potentially attack the Outsiders on their home turf. The results were disastrous, and parts of it were leaked."

Alexandros rubbed his temples. *We're a gross parody of ourselves*, he thought. Some of the Council members were administrators with no practical experience, elevated to their seats solely because of their age alone. Sadly, there were no better candidates to be had.

"So that's where we stand on cleanup efforts. The island itself is considered a disaster zone, and we've kicked most of the residents out until we can rebuild."

"What of the merfolk?" asked Master Liana, a mage in her seventies. "Have we heard back from them yet?"

Piero nodded. "We have. Their colony splintered after the attack. It seems that there was a power struggle regarding the merfolk helping this... Caretaker, and when the plan succeeded, a large number of them decided that it was time for a change in leadership."

"Where did they go?"

Piero shrugged. "We have no idea. But we do know that they took Paradise with them."

Susurrations filled the chamber as Piero tapped the screen on his podium and turned to face the screen. Images of Paradise appeared, followed by a map of Maui. He used a laser pointer to draw a circle along the coastline.

"It used to be here," he said. "Hidden behind a magical field to avoid detection. But now it simply isn't. The night after the attack, it disappeared. When we asked the merfolk about it, we were gently reminded that the land was theirs to begin with."

"So send a ground team," said Hitashi, a retired knight in the front row. The man had been pulled out of retirement, and had the attitude to match.

“We did. It’s gone. It’s like someone scooped it up and stitched the two pieces of the coast together.” Piero waited for the muttering to die down, then cleared his throat. “Look, folks, I won’t mince words. This event may be the beginning of the end of hiding magic from the public. No amount of smoke and mirrors is going to cancel out what thousands of people experienced in person. This is the day and age of information, and we simply can’t keep up anymore.

“But enough about the mess we’re cleaning up. The real reason we need to speak today is regarding this man right here.” Piero tapped his screen and a dossier sheet appeared. In the upper right corner was a picture of a man who looked like he had stepped out of a Hollywood movie. “Mike Radley, known to the merfolk as the Caretaker.”

“What kind of creature is he?” asked Hitashi.

“That’s just it. He’s human.” Piero scanned the chambers. “A few years ago, the man vanished after inheriting a house near the East Coast. He started amassing an Order dossier shortly after, but it consisted mostly of rumors. We’ve been piecing some of it together based on research one of our field teams did prior to the incident.”

“How did he get involved again?” asked Liana.

“He owns the property where the dragon came from.” Piero tapped his pad and an earth dragon appeared on screen, the image from one of the Navy’s drones. “We brought him in to assist us with an incident involving the merfolk. He was the catalyst for this entire event.”

“Doesn’t look scary,” said a man that Alexandros had never met. He wore a suit that was too large along with a poorly tied necktie. The man had even set his unfolded sword up on the table.

“And he isn’t, if reports are to be believed. He’s some kind of incubus, but not one capable of mind control, before any of you ask. The real problem is them.” Piero tapped the pad several times, and the screen came to life with video footage and still images of different women, all of them cryptid in nature. Video footage of a kitsune freezing an entire bay, screenshots of a succubus tearing the head off an undead tourist, a gargoyle punching her way through the side of a building. The chamber filled with muttering as these shots were displayed over the course of several minutes.

“Who are they?” asked Liana.

“According to Sister Ingrid, his family.” Piero tapped the screen a few more times and a satellite image of a naked woman near the summit of Haleakalā appeared. It looked like she was calling down lightning. “I would like to remind everyone that Sister Ingrid is currently undergoing a mental assessment due to the trauma of the event.”

Alexandros realized that he was now sitting on the edge of his seat. The footage itself was intoxicating, but not because of the cryptids on display. No, it was the way they worked together as a group. They had worked as one big team to dismantle the threat that Captain Francois had brought to the island, saving thousands of lives in the process. Piero spoke of magical portals, spirits brought back from the dead, and other feats that had people in the chamber muttering aloud. Alexandros became lost in thought, wondering what else the man was capable of.

“So it is based on this information alone that I suggest we officially classify Mike Radley as a tier 1 threat.” Piero looked out at the chamber and Alexandros sat up suddenly in his seat.

“Wait, why are we classifying this man?” He felt bad that he had clearly missed part of the discussion, but the room was already full of idiots. One more wouldn’t be notable.

“Because he presents a clear danger to the Order. Or have you forgotten about the failed mission at his home?” Piero touched his pad, filling the screen above with images from the Radley household and a top-secret facility that the Order had investigated after their mercenary team disappeared. “His people slaughtered our own.”

“I thought that was because we overstepped.” Alexandros frowned and looked at Master Liana. “Director Mohan decided to target the man’s family based on a personal issue from decades past. Someone from your team told me this.”

Master Liana nodded. “That’s true,” she said, turning to Piero. “I don’t know that the man needs his own threat level because of a failed militant action on our part.”

“Well, that’s just it. How do we know he won’t retaliate?” Piero crossed his arms.

Alexandros looked at his own pad and began clicking through documents. “I do believe we have testimony from Sister Ingrid saying that he won’t. He just wants to be left alone.”

Piero snorted. “Don’t they all?”

“If we classify him, then we can take him out.” Hitashi yawned, then sat up straight in his seat. “If he really has this much power available to him, he either needs to be on our side or ten feet underground.”

“This action lacks precedent. Even if we vote on this matter, there is no evidence of wrongdoing on his part.” Alexandros jabbed a finger in Piero’s direction. “You would need unanimous consent from this chamber, and you certainly won’t get mine.”

“Nor mine,” Master Liana added.

“I don’t need it.” Piero tapped the pad again and the images shifted once more. The screenshots displayed Mike Radley and members of his household dragging the Director away from what was left of Paradise. “According to witness testimony, the Caretaker took Director Mohan into custody. Kidnapping a member of the Order puts that under the jurisdiction of the local Director, who was taken. Therefore, we go up to regional leadership.”

“Which would be me,” said Hitashi. “I say we burn him at the stake.”

“Look, we—” Alexandros went silent as the chamber went dark. When the lights came back on, a woman in a regal gown stood in the middle of the council chamber, all four of her arms crossed in front. Her hair was the color of sunshine on a wheat field, and when he looked into her eyes, his heart was filled with the memories of his youth.

Piero drew a wand and pointed it at the woman, but it turned to smoke in his fingers. Hitashi put a hand on his desk to leap over it, but tumbled when his hand melted into the desk, his flesh fusing with the wood.

“I will make this brief,” said the newcomer, her voice like the clashing of silver bells. “I am the Queen of the Fae and I have come personally to deliver a gift.”

She raised one of her hands and snapped a finger. Instantly, the floor of the Council chamber was filled with men and women in green and gold tunics who

stood at attention, their eyes locked forward. Several people rose, ready for battle, when Liana rose from her seat.

“Stand down,” she cried, turning to face the Council. “Stand down, these are our people!”

Alexandros, took his hand away from the hilt of his blade and stared at the group on the floor in awe. He did recognize some of the people down there, but only vaguely.

“Correction. They were your people.” The Queen of the Fae gestured at the men and women. “Since they’ve been in my care, I have had them properly trained. You see before you the finest fighting force the mortal world has to offer.”

“That man isn’t one of us.” Hitashi was turned awkwardly, his hand still melded with his table. He pointed at a man with no hair and military tattoos on his bare arms.

The Queen shrugged. “This one may have been a mercenary. It can be hard to tell you apart.” She raised her chin to look down at Piero. “But I have brought them here as an offering.”

“What? Recompense?” Piero blinked.

“Hmm.” The Queen looked up at the screen and snapped another finger. A picture of Mohan appeared, his features strained with great pain as he aged before their very eyes. “You see, one of your number broke the rules of Hospitality and directly harmed some of my citizens.”

“Oh, fuck,” Alexandros muttered under his breath as he rubbed his jaw. He quickly texted his servant Basil, then set his phone down on the table.

“Hospitality?” Piero blinked in confusion.

“Does this one speak for you all?” The Queen smirked and addressed the chamber. “I would prefer to speak to whoever is in charge.”

“That would be me,” said Piero. He held up a tiny, wooden hammer which he hadn’t used yet. “I have the gavel.”

Alexandros slapped himself on the forehead and quickly rose, his chair sliding back and away from him.

“He does not speak for me, Your Majesty.” He glanced over at Master Liana, who nodded and also rose.

“Nor me, Your Majesty.” Liana looked at the rest of the chamber. “This is supposed to be a meeting of equals, he was addressing the chamber as a whole.”

“Interesting. Even now, you fail to be united.” The Faerie Queen turned to face Piero. “Such dissension in your chambers, and yet you simply stand there like a rabbit before the fox.”

Piero mopped the sweat off his forehead, then stood up straight. “I am in charge of this meeting,” he said, his face pale but his cheeks bright red. “So you will speak to me.”

“Very well.” The Queen studied him for a moment, then turned to the chamber. Above her, Mohan’s face stretched out in a silent scream. Alexandros wondered if this was actual footage of the man or simply an illusion.

“I demand to know the meaning of this.” Piero jerked his thumb at the screen. “If you have our Director, then I must insist—”

“He’s quite dead.” The Queen’s lips quirked up into a smile.

Piero and some others gasped. “You killed him?”

The Queen smiled. “He died of old age under my care.”

“Impossible.” Piero opened his mouth to speak again and butterflies flew out from between his lips. He gasped and choked as the insects kept coming, preventing him from taking a breath.

“Are you calling me a liar?” she asked, her tone like a blade being unsheathed.

“We mortals are prone to emotional outbursts,” said Master Liana, her fingers twitching by her side. “It may not have been an accusation, Your Majesty, but disbelief expressed out loud.”

Choking on insects, Piero pointed at Liana and gave a thumbs up. Almost immediately, the flow of insects ceased. Above the Council, the small cloud of butterflies fluttered about in confusion.

“I have brought these mortals to assist you in the days ahead. I believe it prudent to both our interests as recent events have made it perfectly clear that

warriors will be needed on this side of the veil.” The Queen gestured toward a woman who stood at attention. “They have spent nearly fifteen of your years in the fae lands, their mind and bodies sharpened like razors. After their poor performance at the Radley household, I saw fit to have them properly trained.”

“And this is all of our people?” asked Liana. “From the Radley house?”

“The ones who survived their training, anyway.” The Queen grinned. “The fae lands can be quite...detrimental to mortal life.”

A door at the top of the chamber burst open and Basil, Alexandros’ personal servant, came storming in, his face red from exertion. Upon seeing the Fae Queen, the man paused to collect himself, then walked down the stairs toward Alexandros with a tray in his hands. He set the tray down and whispered in his employer’s ear.

“What is the meaning of this?” asked the Queen, a diabolical glint in her eye.

“A proper welcome, Your Majesty.” Alexandros picked up the tray and then moved toward the stairs. “If I may?”

The Queen tilted her head in approval. Alexandros walked down the stairs, carrying the tray carefully so as not to spill the goblet. He stopped just before the Queen and then picked up the chalice.

“If I had known you were coming, I would have been a better host and offered you something sooner. Though I am not in charge of these proceedings, I do bid you welcome and offer you this courtesy.” He handed the goblet to the Queen, who took it. “It is a honey mead, Your Majesty, from my personal reserve. One of my favorites.”

“Is he serious right now?” asked Hitashi. Liana glared daggers at the man.

“Also, I would like to give you this.” Alexandros undid the necklace he wore and offered it to the Queen. “It is a lapis-lazuli that has been in my family for generations and holds much sentimental value to me.”

“Master Alexandros, I—” Piero held back whatever he was about to say as one of the Queen’s hands rose and she turned to look at him.

“At least one of you has manners. I accept the mead, Master Alexandros, but am curious about the necklace.”

“While my dealings with the fae have been few, I have done my best to uphold the old traditions. Please consider it a gift,” Alexandros replied, relying on years of training and stories from the Old World. “Freely given.”

The necklace disappeared from his hands and reappeared in the Queen’s fist. She examined the copper pendant with the inlaid lapis and smiled.

“It really has been in your family for some time. I can still smell the salt of the sea in your father’s, father’s hair off of it.” The Queen appraised him for a moment, then nodded. “I accept your gift, Master Alexandros.”

He bowed his head, then looked at Piero, trying to convey just how serious the situation was. The man was practically shaking now.

“If you don’t mind,” Alexandros continued, raising his empty hands, “I would prefer to be the one who addresses you for the assembly from this point on.”

“But doesn’t he have the gavel?” asked the Queen. Alexandros looked past her at Piero, who hastily tossed over the wooden instrument.

“It looks like I have it now,” Alexandros said, holding it up between two fingers to avoid looking like he held a weapon.

“Good.” She turned to address the chamber. “These men and women will walk through fire on your command. They will not lie, nor will they betray you. They are a clean slate, one that you should use wisely. However, should you give them an order contrary to the safety of my people, they will immediately slaughter the one who gave the command.”

“And what are the terms of such a wonderful gift?” asked Alexandros.

“Freely given,” replied the Queen. She snapped her fingers and the screen went blank. “In regards to your Director, it would seem any claim you have on the Radley household is unsubstantiated and would be a violation of your own rules.” She turned to look at Piero. “Though I suspect many of them have been bent or broken as of late.”

Piero swallowed so hard that Alexandros thought he may vomit.

“Furthermore, my kind has established an agreement of sanctuary on Mike Radley’s land. Even now, many of them are moving back into the homes that your people destroyed.”

“Our...apologies, Your Majesty.” Piero stammered over the words. Liana actually turned white.

“Well, now.” The Queen grinned at Alexandros. “I guess it’s a good thing he no longer speaks for all of you.”

Alexandros swallowed the lump in his throat. “Would this sanctuary be located at his home?”

“It would.” The Queen grinned, her teeth suddenly sharp. “Don’t misunderstand me, Master Alexandros. Mike Radley does not lie within my protection. But there are members of his household who are still my children. I molded them from the aether myself that they could serve my court for all eternity. Per a separate agreement, they work with the Caretaker, yet still remain under my care.” She slid a finger up Alexandros’ chest, the fabric parting as if cut by a scalpel. “Should harm come to them on behalf of the people in this room, I will unleash the Unseelie Court on this place and personally reward whoever can show you the most cruelty.”

When the Queen said Unseelie, the lights flickered and the sound of laughing children filled the room. Alexandros held perfectly still, trying not to look down at his torn shirt.

“And so I have spoken,” she said, then the lights flickered once more and she was gone. Piero was missing as well, the man’s shoes the only reminder that he had ever been there.

The Council chamber erupted, and several members tried to free Hitashi. Master Liana left the room with a small entourage, throwing a meaningful glance at Alexandros before she exited. Alexandros let out a sigh of relief and set the gavel down on the podium. He looked at the empty shoes on the floor and shuddered.

“Never apologize to the fae,” he muttered, unsure what fate the man now had in store. By doing so, Piero had inadvertently taken the fall for what happened at the Radley house.

The returned soldiers held perfectly still as they were questioned, but none of them answered. Alexandros went back to his seat where Basil stood, then nodded his approval.

“I appreciate your speed,” he said.

“Of course, sir.” Basil grinned. “I do wish they’d quit putting in more stairs every year, though.”

Alexandros chuckled, then looked at his tablet, still open and displaying data related to the Radleys. He stared at it for a long moment, then turned it off.

“Find me Sister Ingrid,” he said. “I would speak to her personally about these matters.”

“Oh?” Basil raised an eyebrow. “Will this be in an official capacity?”

“For now. I want to learn more about Mike Radley and his family.” Alexandros turned to look at who was left in the Council chambers. Even now, someone was using a knife to slice away the skin on Hitashi’s hand. “If we don’t act soon, we won’t have anything proper to raise from the ashes. If the Queen of the Fae is giving us soldiers, something big is coming.”

“I see.” Basil lowered his voice. “Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?”

“Only what I’ve asked.” Alexandros picked up his phone and put it in his pocket. He needed to make a call, but not yet. “Have Sister Ingrid meet me in my office.”

Basil bowed his head, then turned to leave. Alexandros heard a terrible ripping sound and turned to see that Hitashi was now free, his hand and forearm bleeding profusely as healers tried to put him back together. Sighing out of pity, he looked down at the fae-trained soldiers on the Council floor. Already, somebody was suggesting they be executed, just in case they were some kind of trojan horse.

“You,” he said, pointing to the closest soldier. “Have everybody fall in line and come with me.”

The motionless soldiers snapped to attention as the first one spun in place and said a single word in a language he had never heard. Moving in unison, they followed Alexandros up the steps and out of the Council chambers as the others gawked. He led them to one of the training rooms and ordered them to make themselves comfortable until he returned to take them to his fortress.

Satisfied, he returned to his office and found Basil standing there with a beleaguered young woman. Alexandros introduced himself to Ingrid as his servant left, locking the door behind him. They spoke at length, and it immediately became apparent to him that Ingrid was protecting Mike Radley along with his

family. Something had changed on a fundamental level for the young woman, and he couldn't be happier to see it.

Realizing that this was who he wanted, he summoned Basil back. When the butler returned, Alexandros ordered the man to prepare transport for the fae warriors along with Sister Ingrid back to his home. Confused, Ingrid allowed Basil to lead her away, leaving Alexandros by himself. He pulled the phone from his pocket and dialed a number from memory. When it clicked on the other end, the recipient said nothing, waiting for the code phrase.

"The wolf hunts to feed its belly, never for glory," he said. He could almost hear his daughter relax. "I'm coming to meet you in a couple days."

"Is everything okay?" Tasia asked.

"Things are complicated." Alexandros gazed out a window overlooking the courtyard where younger mages were training. Their instructor looked like she was no older than twenty-five. "But I think I may have just found you a new partner."

The Curator stood on the porch of the old plantation home, his eyes on the sun as it set over the forest. The world had gone silent as it always did when he was around. Sometimes, he missed the simple beauty of something as casual as birdsong or even the nighttime serenade of crickets.

However, being deprived of simple things gave him more room to properly appreciate the complex ones. Casting stolen eyes upward at the sky, he could still picture the telltale cracks left behind by the outsiders over the island of Maui, their hungry gaze on the Caretaker as the man had so casually dismantled a kraken of all things. The only reason the Curator had noticed was because he had deliberately been scrying the skies above the eruption to see if the outsiders would make another appearance. To his surprise and delight, they had.

There had been plenty of surprises on that fateful day, but there had not been ample time to appreciate them. With the Order, the military, and gods knew who else on their way to investigate, the Curator and Legion had boxed up Amir and traveled home via private jet. Even taking off had been a chore, as the runway had been choked up with hundreds of corpses that had simply fallen down when Captain Francois had died.

The man had been a useful pawn, but was a fool. If he had stuck to the plan, then there was a good chance he would have killed off the Caretaker and been done with it. Alas, the Director's past involving the naga of the Radley house had been an unexpected twist, one that had resulted in Francois making his move far too early.

At least, that was how the Curator saw it. He watched the sun descend past the treeline, then walked down the steps toward the old barn. It was time to get busy, and he did his best work at night, his faculties sharpened as a result of the vampire DNA flowing through his blood. Sure, there were some traits of vampirism that he found rather exasperating, but at least he had been able to dial down the worst of it, such as the genetic obsessive compulsions.

The old barn door creaked when he opened it. Sniffing the air, he took a look around to make sure that nobody had passed through recently. Pleased that nothing had changed, he opened the secret door beneath one of the stalls that took him to the basement he had installed here back in the late 1800s. Secret structures really were best utilized after the people who had designed and built them for you had died of old age.

Down in the concrete depths, he winced when his captives cried out, a couple of them screaming at him out of rage or fear, it was hard to tell which. He pushed open the door to one of the cells to reveal a young woman who cowered against the opposite wall.

"Please," she begged, but there was nothing she could say that he hadn't heard a thousand times before. He seized her with one hand and inspected her face to make sure that it had fully healed from her abduction. Whistling a tune to himself, he dragged the girl down the hall to the operating room. When she saw the table with the straps on it, she broke her wrist trying to get away from him. As he held her in place, she bit and scratched him, but he didn't deign to retaliate. Reacting to such a thing was beneath him.

That, and he might accidentally damage what he had come for.

Her eyes grew wide when she saw him pull his scalpel kit from a nearby cabinet, the blades glistening beneath the halogen light. He double-checked her restraints and then moved over to the wall where he had set up a turntable.

"I believe some Vivaldi is in order." The Curator picked up one of his records and turned to the woman on the table. "I do adore the Four Seasons."

“What do you want from me?” she asked, tears streaming down her face.

“You personally?” The Curator shrugged, then set the record on the player. When it was up to speed, he lowered the needle and sighed as the violins of the Spring Allegro played their opening notes. Turning around, he moved toward the scalpel kit and examined the blades beneath the light. “Nothing. You’re just here because I need the parts.”

Her screams didn’t last long, he saw to that. When he had what he needed, he set the compilation of flesh and bone in a padded cooler and then left the operating room. He walked down the long hall where his patient waited for him. The feminine form on the table was silent as he entered the room, as was the shadowy figure behind her. Machinery softly beeped, indicating that this woman was still alive.

“As promised,” said the Curator, opening the cooler and then holding up the skull and accompanying tissue he had just acquired. Sitting down at a nearby stool, he began the delicate process of properly rebuilding Sarah’s face. It had taken a couple of weeks to prepare her for this, as the damage had been quite extensive. The real difficulty had been the burnt tissue left behind. Fixing that had been a lot like unscrambling an egg, but he did enjoy a good challenge. He wasn’t sure if it had been magic or simply blind rage that had kept Sarah alive all this time, but would be sure to ask once she could communicate again.

The shadow watched as he molded fresh bone into place, the tissue folding beneath his fingers like clay. Hours passed as he reattached skin, using a combination of sutures and magic. By the time he was done, her face was swollen and unrecognizable, but would eventually become otherwise unremarkable. He leaned over her and inspected his handiwork, then nodded in satisfaction.

“Once she recovers, I’ve got a pair of donors lined up for her ears and eyes.” The Curator brushed what was left of Sarah’s hair from her face. Most of it had burned in the fire. “By the end of the month, your daughter will be ready to walk among us once more.”

Elizabeth’s shadow made a hissing noise like hot grease in a pan. The Curator wasn’t entirely certain if he was actually interacting with the woman herself or a chunk of her magic that had become imbued with her will to see her daughter survive. It honestly didn’t matter. Though academic in interest, even this version of Elizabeth was worth far more to him than what he could gain by taking her apart.

“I’ll be back tomorrow evening,” he said, then stood and left. Elizabeth’s shadow made a burbling sound in his direction, but continued to stand guard over Sarah’s new body. The Curator walked back to the house, then paused to contemplate the first rays of daybreak.

“I suppose I’d better check on my other patient.” He walked into the plantation house and went to one of the bedrooms on the second floor. Inside, Amir was strapped to a chair, his unseeing eyes focused out the window and a gag in his mouth. The Curator popped the gag and crouched down in front of Amir.

“Surgery was a success today. Hopefully Sarah is more careful with this face than the last one.” The Curator paused to lick blood off his fingers, then recoiled at the taste. “I can’t wait to speak with her about the Arachne who did this.”

“My...ly.”

“Indeed.” The Curator sighed and moved to the window. His current situation was hardly dire, but with Legion out running errands for him, he was rather disappointed by the lack of quality conversation. Looking at the woods, he thought on the problem of the Caretaker and how he might resolve it. A frontal assault on the house was suicide, plain and simple. Luring the man out would be possible, but what could possibly drag him away from the comfort and safety of his home?

“My...ly,” offered Amir.

“Yep, that’s right. Your Lily.”

“My...my...” Amir’s voice raised an octave, and the Curator turned to face him with curiosity.

“Oh? Is something on your mind?” It was a horrible joke, considering the fact that Amir’s brain was still visible. Every day, it gained a few more molecules. At this rate, he would be ambulatory in a couple of years.

“My...MY...MY!” Amir’s eyes went wide and his jaw twitched as he chewed on the word. “MY! MY!”

“I guess we’ll need the paralytic again.” Disappointed, the Curator reached into the pocket of his enormous coat to retrieve the sedative. Listening to Amir mutter endlessly about his succubus had been annoying, but at least he had been quiet about it.

“MY...EEEK! MY...EEEEK!” Amir was now yelling so loud that spit leapt from his mouth. “MY...EEEEK! RADLEEEEEEY! MIY EEEK RRRRRADLEY!!!”

“Huh.” The Curator watched as Amir screamed the Caretaker’s name over and over again for several minutes, his vocal chords breaking down from the strain. All this time, he had thought that Amir had been hung up on a demon, but this?

Well, this was *far* more interesting. It showed that there were higher thought processes involved, that Amir knew exactly who was the reason for his sad, sorry state.

Still, the Curator didn’t feel like listening to it. He injected Amir with the paralytic anyway.

Cyrus sat in the gazebo, his eyes on the children in the front yard. Grace was busy dangling from a metallic jungle gym structure while Callisto tried to scale it from beneath in his human form. The little centaur slipped and fell, but his sister grabbed him with one hand.

“Stay,” she said, casually raising him so he could grab the bar next to hers.

“No stay. Lunch.” Mike came out of the house with a tray covered in food. “I made you two some hotdogs.”

Grace dropped from the jungle gym and face planted on the ground. Cyrus let out a deep throated laugh at the sight of it. The little Arachne wasn’t hurt in the slightest, this was some weird game she had come up with. She remained motionless for several seconds and then hopped up and scurried toward the table in the gazebo where Mike set out their food.

“Not dead!” she declared, pumping her fists in the air while standing on the railing of the gazebo.

“Go wash your hands,” Mike said, then looked at his son. “You, too.”

“Aw, man.” Callisto sulked off toward the house. Grace hissed at Mike, then followed her brother inside. Cyrus smiled at them both, then leaned back in his seat, placing both hands behind his head.

The leaves in the front yard were just starting to turn yellow. The cool air of fall had finally permeated the boundary of the geas, causing the local fauna to

shift. Small colonies of brownies, gnomes, and other tiny fae living in the hedge maze had spent the last week preparing their homes for winter. Some would batten down the hatches and ride it out while others would migrate back to their world where it was much warmer. Up above, it was overcast. If Cyrus had to guess, it would probably rain later in the afternoon.

“How are you feeling today?” asked Mike.

“A bit restless is all.” Cyrus had been feeling a bit down the last month, which bothered him. Ever since being allowed inside of Mike Radley’s home, he had become a part of the family in a lot of ways. Cecilia and Sulyvahn had warmed to him almost immediately, and Reggie had been thrilled to have a new chess player in the house. Dana had been oddly absent, but she spent almost all of her time in that strange observatory of hers. Cyrus kept thinking he would drop by for a visit, but just never seemed to find the time. The days and nights were often a blur, and he wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Ah, there you two are.” Death came out of the house with a tray of tea. The reaper walked along the porch and down to the gazebo, a wooden cup in his hands. “I have just gotten back from my first surf lesson with the mermaids.”

“How did it go?” asked Cyrus.

“Swimmingly.” Death let his jaw hang open in a parody of laughter. Mike reached over to fist bump the Reaper.

“I don’t know who’s worse.” Cyrus shook his head in disgust. “What are you drinking?”

“Poi.” Death sipped at the concoction. “Pele made it herself.”

“You’ve been hanging out with Pele?” Mike raised an eyebrow. “I haven’t seen her in a few days. Where has she been?”

“Rebuilding Maui from the inside. Ever since it erupted, she’s had to redo the magma chambers beneath the islands. This would have been a lot more difficult, but ever since the Maui Incident, she has more believers than ever.”

“We don’t talk about the Maui Incident,” said both Mike and Cyrus at the same time. In truth, the Maui Incident was often discussed, but it was part of some inside joke Cyrus didn’t have all the details on.

Death chuckled, then held out his cup. “Would you like to try some?”

“No thanks.” Cyrus patted his belly, which pressed against the inside of his coat. The soft fabric rustled like leaves. “I’m still full from breakfast.”

“I see.” Death looked over at Mike. “Poi?”

“Sure.” Mike took a sip from the cup. “Hey, that’s pretty good.”

“Of course it is. Why would I ever...” Death trailed off as the front door of the house opened and an Arachne emerged. Cyrus felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end as a distance created by decades crumbled to dust. The mirror image of Ana Rae, the Arachne he had once hunted, stepped through the doorway, ducking her head to avoid the frame. Mike and Death watched her walk to the gazebo, holding Grace’s hand. When the two of them arrived, Grace broke away from the larger Arachne and patted the arm of Cyrus’ seat.

“Papa Cyrus,” she said, then snagged a hotdog off the table and shoved it in her mouth, smearing ketchup across her face.

“I see.” The Arachne cleared her throat, then did a strange sort of curtsy. “It’s nice to meet you, Master Cyrus.”

“Eulalie.” Cyrus recognized her voice right away, his heart pounding. “The Rat Queen.”

There was an awkward pause, which Eulalie followed up with a nod. “I just wanted to say, um...I know that it was you who hunted my parents.”

“Yes, it was.” Cyrus sat forward in his chair, his thoughts drifting. “It’s not something that I’m particularly proud of.”

Eulalie looked at Mike, then Death. The Reaper looked confused for a moment, then looked over his shoulder.

“Do you want me to leave?” he asked.

“No, sorry, this is just...weird.” Eulalie cleared her thoughts and turned her attention back to Cyrus. He noticed that she didn’t quite look him in the eye. “You can probably guess the reason why I never revealed myself to you. Obviously this is...complicated.” She indicated her body with a hand. “And I’m sorry I didn’t come visit you sooner.”

Cyrus chuckled, scratching at his beard nervously. “Yeah, well, I didn’t make it easy for you, did I?”

Again, an awkward pause, then Eulalie bowed her head. "I know this might not mean anything, but..." She cleared her throat a couple of times, and then Mike put his hand on her arm. When she looked up at him, he nodded and took her by the hand.

"Am I missing something?" Cyrus was confused.

"I forgive you. If my parents were here, they would forgive you, too. You tried to kill them, but it was a long time ago. Because of you, my family gets to live on, I..." Eulalie turned her attention to Grace, who had grabbed another hotdog and was eating it. Callisto tried to come outside, but a green hand grabbed his shoulder and dragged him back in.

"Aunt Tink," he whined as the door shut.

"Anyway, Grace is all I have left. I mean, yeah, everyone here is nice, too, but Grace and I, we're the last of our kind. I know that would have meant something to them is all. My parents, I mean. And my sister. Uh..." Eulalie looked at Cyrus' feet. "So...I just wanted to make sure you heard that. I hope it brings you closure."

"Thank you, Eulalie." Cyrus took a deep breath and sighed, his body suddenly light. It was as if a massive weight had been lifted free, but he couldn't be certain why. "I hope that we get the opportunity to speak more often."

Eulalie didn't respond at first, then nodded her head. "Yes," she said. "That would be great. I, um, have to get back to work."

"Rat Queen duties?" asked Cyrus.

Eulalie didn't respond as she hustled away. The door opened and Callisto bolted outside, making it to the gazebo in time to snatch a third hotdog from Grace's hands.

"I knew it," he said, turning his back on his sister. Grace tried to reach past him and steal his food. "You were going to eat them all without me!"

"That was...odd." Cyrus looked at Mike. "Is she always like that?"

"A bit." Mike looked at Death. "What do you think?"

The Grim Reaper seemed lost in thought. Grace grabbed the poi cup out of his hands and tried to drink from it, her upper lip now stained the color of taro. When Callisto saw this, he begged her for a taste, but the little Arachne scuttled

up the side of the gazebo and now stood upside down above her brother. Cyrus laughed at their antics.

The front door opened and Tink waddled out. The goblin was so swollen with pregnancy that it absolutely seemed like her belly arrived before she did. She made a hissing sound in the back of her throat, and Grace immediately dropped down from the ceiling and landed in a crouch. The Arachne offered the poi cup to Callisto, who made a face after drinking from it.

“Bleh. I don’t like the texture.” Callisto smacked his lips, then handed the cup back to Death.

“The texture is why I like it.” Death cradled the cup in his hand and watched while Tink washed off Grace’s face with a rag she pulled from her pocket. “A drink you can chew is its own novelty.”

Cyrus smiled at the sight of Tink cleaning the Arachne, of Callisto sneaking another hotdog off the tray, how Mike looked down at his goblin wife and children with a smile that ran deeper than the ocean. When Tink looked away from Grace, the Arachne slid beneath Death’s robes, vanishing from sight, but not before grabbing the last hotdog off the table. Mike Radley’s family was a large, confusing mess and Cyrus got to experience every part of it.

This summer had been chock full of adventures with the Radley children. They had gone on expeditions in the greenhouse, a late night snack run that had somehow taken him to an underground labyrinth under the house, and even a trip to a pocket world with a tower on top of an island.

When he wasn’t with the children, he was usually with Mike, Death, or Jenny. Ever since that night in the facility, Cyrus had been able to see Jenny’s true form whenever she was about. From what he heard, her soul had been properly detached from her doll, allowed to roam free without having to possess someone else’s body. Based on a lengthy conversation with Death, Cecilia, and Sulyvahn, the consensus was that Jenny still had unfinished business. Somehow, either the witch Elizabeth hadn’t died, or there was a tie with her offspring, Laurel.

No, not Laurel. Sarah. It was hard for him to accept that the troublesome mage had simply become host to another person. Mike believed that Laurel had died properly, which was some solace. Still, a life cut off so early was always a shame.

Tink was now crouched beneath Death, wrestling with a trio of legs as she tried to pull Grace free.

“Stinky baby legs needs bath!” she declared. One of her braids had come undone, revealing long strands of gray that Cyrus had never noticed before.

“No bath!” The edges of Death’s cloak billowed upward, revealing that Grace clung to the Reaper’s bony legs. Her face was covered in ketchup and mustard, and there was hotdog bun bits in her hair.

“Hey!” Tink kicked Death in the shin. “Bonehead do this on purpose, be like ghost!”

“Who, me?” Death surveyed the scene beneath him and then sighed. “Very well.”

The Grim Reaper went incorporeal, causing Grace to pass through him. The Arachne gasped and grabbed at the floorboards, successfully peeling one of them up.

“Nooooo!” she wailed, then let go of the floor to grab the railing. “No bath!”

Cyrus laughed. It started deep in his belly and spread, filling the gazebo and causing the others to stop and look at him. He couldn’t help himself, and he cried tears of joy when the goblin shrieked in horror as the planking ripped free of the ground.

It felt good here. It felt good to be home.

A mournful song pierced the air and everybody went still and turned toward the front of the house. Mike made a face and put his hand on Tink’s shoulder.

“No bath yet,” he said, then gave the goblin a knowing look.

Tink looked at Grace, then back at Mike and nodded. She stepped back and held out her arms for the little Arachne, who hopped into them. Callisto moved to his father’s side and clutched his hand.

“What’s wrong?” asked Cyrus as he sat up in his seat. “What’s that sound?”

“It is a song that is sung when one’s business is done.” Death set down his poi cup and looked at Mike. “It is time.”

“Time for what?’ Confused, Cyrus stood and watched as Cecilia appeared, her hair billowing behind her in a breeze that only she could feel. The banshee locked eyes with him, her sightless gaze taking him in as she sang. He didn’t know the words to the song, but was chilled when he realized she was singing for him. Panic rose in his chest, and he took a step back and knocked the chair he had been sitting in away from him.

“Cecilia, please.” Mike held up a hand and the banshee went silent. “We need a minute. Can you get the others?”

The banshee nodded, then vanished from sight.

“What’s happening?” asked Cyrus, his heart pounding.

“Walk with me, friend.” Mike looked at Grace, who was staring at Cecilia with rapt fascination. “Come on, kid. We’re going on a hike.”

“I would like to come as well.” Death set down his poi cup. “Lead the way, Mike Radley.”

They walked together, but Cyrus felt like the inside of his skin was itching. What was going on? Why had the banshee sung for him? He wasn’t dying! He felt fine!

“I demand to know what’s going on.” Cyrus lifted his chin indignantly as he walked beside the others. They had formed into a line and were walking around the side of the house. The centaurs who toiled in the front yard were suddenly active, galloping toward a couple of portals that took them back to their village.

“It’ll all make sense soon enough. There’s something we need to show you.” They were walking toward the greenhouse now, the door being held open by Abella. Cyrus had never had a chance to talk with her, but had seen her watching the house from above many times.

“Good luck,” she whispered, then bowed her head as they passed.

They paused at the top of the cliffs for just a minute. Tink whispered something in Mike’s ears and then smacked him on the butt before going back to the house. The group walked down one of the paths, Mike mysteriously quiet for most of it. Death seemed very solemn as well. Cyrus tried to press them for answers, the incident with the banshee already fading toward the back of his mind as if it had never happened.

Callisto walked next to Cyrus, a determined look on his face. Grace took up a position on the other side, but stopped at least twice to snatch up a bug and eat it.

He lost track of time and then came to when they stopped in front of a small garden by the edge of the centaur village. It was surrounded by a low, wrought-iron fence and contained dozens of species of flowers. In the center was a gray, marble obelisk roughly four feet tall.

“What is this?” he asked, looking to Mike for answers. “And why did we walk all this way? We could have taken the shortcut from the front yard.”

“We could have,” Mike admitted. “But I wanted to give the others a chance to get here first and say goodbye.”

Cyrus turned to see that most of the denizens of the Radley home stood behind them, their eyes fixed on the strange obelisk. Jenny hovered behind them, her head rotating so that her face was upside down. Ratu stood next to Beth, who was in front of Asterion. Bigfoot was there, too, though Cyrus had never spoken to the guy. In front of them all, Zel stood with her hands tightly clasped before her. Cecilia and Sulyvahn stood on both sides of her, their heads bowed.

“Is this some kind of joke?” Cyrus shook his head in disbelief. “This isn’t funny, Mike.”

“It never has been.” There was pain in Mike’s eyes as he leaned over the fence and flicked his fingers at the obelisk. The smooth surface of the obelisk rippled to reveal dark words carved into the marble, hidden by an illusion spell.

Papa Cyrus

Beneath it was the year of his birth followed by the current year. Cyrus staggered back, his hand going to his chest.

“This is a dream,” he said. “No, a nightmare.”

A firm hand closed around his, and he looked up to see Lily. There was anger in her eyes, along with sadness.

“This isn’t a dream,” she said. “Not this time.”

“But...why? How?”

“It happened the night you rescued my children.” Mike stared ahead, his jaw set in determination. “I didn’t realize it at first, but I did before we left the forest. You were killed while protecting Grace.”

“That’s simply not possible. If I was dead, that would make me a spirit, a ghost!” Cyrus looked at Lily. “You can see me!”

“I’m a succubus. Of course I can see you.” Lily didn’t even roll her eyes at him when she said that. This scared him more than anything else.

“But you, Mike, you can...what about...” Cyrus turned to Death, then Reggie. He started to hyperventilate as the memories of the last few months came back to him. It was weird that Dana hadn’t spoken with him once, and the others had seemed evasive, but it hadn’t bothered him in the slightest. He had been happy enough just feeling accepted.

“The children!” He looked down at Grace, then over to Callisto. “If I’m dead, how can they see me?”

“When my son was little, he was terrified of me.” Mike smiled weakly at his son. “We thought it was because I was a human and that he was scared of what was different. Later on, we figured out that he was scared because he can see souls. Mine is apparently very intimidating.”

Callisto nodded, then looked at Cyrus. “He’s shiny in all the wrong places.”

“No, this can’t be, I...” Cyrus looked at the obelisk and clutched the collar of his coat. It suddenly occurred to him that his coat had been burned up in the fight with Laurel. If so, where had this one come from? He studied the material in awe, hoping it would reveal its secrets.

“Steady, friend.” A bony hand settled on Cyrus’ shoulder. “Acceptance is the final stage of grief.”

“But I’ve been here this whole time, I...” Cyrus looked at the others, then down at his own hands. Had he been here this whole time? Ever since he had come home with Mike, he had never left the house. It only now occurred to him that he couldn’t remember which room was his, or sitting down for a proper meal. There were huge gaps in his memory that didn’t make sense, gaps that only now had come to light.

“Oh, gods.” Cyrus stared at the others. “They can’t even see me, can they?”

“I can see you.” Jenny laughed and then started messing with Zel’s hair. The centaur didn’t react. “Because you’re like me, silly.”

“Most of them can’t.” Mike looked over at Grace. “She couldn’t hear you for the first month or so, but she learned.”

“Why do this, then? Why keep it a secret from me?”

“Because Jenny said we should.” Mike looked at the hovering specter. “You probably would have found out at some point. The reason you remained behind was because you had unfinished business. Cecilia and Suly both agreed that due to your traumatic death, there was a chance you may become a tormented soul if you found out before that business was resolved. So we agreed as a family to do our best to help you finish it.”

“I didn’t have unfinished business though, I...I...” Cyrus thought back to the strange conversation with Eulalie. She had given him the forgiveness he had long wanted but never had the courage to ask for. Mike had given him a proper family, a place where he could feel happy.

Somebody sniffled. Cyrus turned to see that it was Lily. Was the succubus actually crying because of him?

“You deserve your rest, Master Cyrus.” Death gestured at the people gathered. “It’s not often you get a chance to attend your own funeral and say goodbye to your family and friends.”

Cyrus wanted to be angry, to lash out. The impulse rose within him, threatening to devour him from within, but the bitter desire melted away as his eyes settled on the children, both of them watching him with glistening eyes. That strange sensation of light filled him once more, and he recognized it for what it actually was.

Love. He had found people he loved who had loved him in return.

“You were this close just now, magic man.” Jenny pinched her fingers together and giggled. “There isn’t room for two angry spirits in this home. We would have had a *fight*.”

“I...suppose there isn’t.” Cyrus shook his head and looked at the obelisk. “I’m under there, aren’t I?”

“You are not.” Death’s eye lights burned brightly. “We could not find your body after the fire. This is not your tomb, Master Cyrus, but rather your memorial.”

“I wanted it put here,” said Zel, clearly reacting to Death’s words. “So that my people could see it every day. So that I could see it every day, and be reminded of the man who saved my son.”

“This ghost business still doesn’t make much sense, then, does it? Even if I had unfinished business, my body isn’t nearby. If I burned up completely, I doubt one of my belongings is under there. Therefore, there would be nothing left for my spirit to latch onto. How could I even manifest here, hmm?” It was one final denial, spoken in desperation. The darkness called to Cyrus, coaxing him to lash out.

Mike cleared his throat and gestured at Grace. “Show him.”

Grace grinned up at Cyrus, showing him all of her teeth. She pulled the dogtags from inside her dress and held them up proudly. “Papa Cyrus,” she declared.

“Flip them over,” Mike whispered.

The Arachne obeyed, the dogtags sparkling beneath the light of the sun. On the back of one of the tags was a single, bloody fingerprint that had been sealed in place with a layer of clear nail polish. “Papa Cyrus,” she repeated, pointing at the print.

“Oh.” It was all he could say, all the pieces falling into place. His last link to this world was a bit of blood left behind. “I see.”

“It’s why she has stopped taking baths,” Death declared. “She is afraid that you would wash away, somehow.” The Reaper narrowed his sockets at Grace. “Or so she claims.”

Cyrus chuckled, then wiped away a tear of his own. He contemplated the droplet on his finger and watched it vanish. After all, it wasn’t really there. Shaking his head, he knelt down and patted Grace on the head.

“No man left behind,” she said.

“That’s right, child.” Cyrus briefly placed his forehead against hers. He knew better than most the danger of a spirit staying behind past their time. His was up.

Even now, he could feel that same bitter rage threatening to rise up and consume him. Was this what had driven Jenny mad? He certainly didn't want to find out. "It's time for me to go, okay?"

The Arachne nodded solemnly. "Fucking hell," she whispered.

He looked over at Callisto and held out his hand. The centaur approached, then took it.

"You two look after them, okay?" He gestured over his shoulder. "And each other. Always. Like a knight and a mage."

"My mom won't let me have a sword," Callisto replied.

"Ask her when you're older." He grabbed both children and hugged them one last time. "And Grace? You need a bath. I can actually smell you."

The Arachne hissed in resignation, and Cyrus let her go. When he stood, Mike threw his arms around the man and squeezed.

"You're the reason we're all still here," Mike said, his voice shaking. "Thank you."

Cyrus nodded, then gently pushed the young man away. He turned to look at the assembly of magical beings, creatures he once would have hunted. Many of them were quietly shedding tears now.

"It was my pleasure. Um..." He looked at Cecilia and nodded, doing his best to maintain his composure. Madness was already pulling at him. Was this how it was for all spirits? What caused it? He shoved the questions from his mind, determined to take the next step. "I guess I'm ready to go now."

The banshee nodded her head and started singing.

"She only sings that song for family, you know." Death moved next to Cyrus and they watched as a portal appeared behind the banshee.

"Yeah. I know." Cyrus looked at the Radley family one last time. Callisto had moved to his mother's side, his fierce eyes on Cyrus. Grace stood next to Mike, her eternal stare watching with curiosity. "Don't forget to blink, kid."

Grace blinked exactly once. Cyrus felt pulled toward the portal and took his first step toward eternity, only to be blocked by Lily. The succubus hugged him

fiercely, her arms wrapped around her shoulders and mascara running down her cheeks.

“I hope you get laid in the afterlife,” she said, rubbing at her tear stained cheeks with a thumb. “You old bastard.”

“Temptress.” Cyrus pushed her away and smiled. “Thank you. For everything.”

“Fuck you for making me feel this way.” Lily wiped at her eyes and stepped back. The others were waving now, some of them shouting goodbye. Cyrus gave them all a wave, then looked at the children one more time. He turned toward the portal and took a deep breath.

“I’m just hoping it won’t be hot where I’m going.” Cyrus chuckled at his own grim humor and took another step toward Cecilia. This time, his foot hovered an inch above the ground when he did so. He felt lighter than ever, his body unraveling along the edges as if he was made of mist.

“It won’t be.” Cecilia took Cyrus by the hand. Her skin was soft to the touch. “It’s the shores of eternity for you.”

“What happens there?” he asked.

“Someone will come for you.” The banshee smiled, then opened her mouth and sang. It was a song of grief and mourning, but there was something else in that melody for Cyrus. It promised peace everlasting.

And so she sang for him as they walked together, time stretching until it snapped free of its tethers. They stood together on a beach of sand that glittered like diamonds overlooking an ocean made of stars. Cyrus cried at the sight of colors that he had never seen before.

“You know...you can be whatever version of yourself you want here.” Cecilia gave him a motherly hug and then touched the wrinkles on his face. “You could be young again.”

“I suppose,” he said, then smiled. “I think I’ll wear this face for a bit, still.. It’s the one I’m the most proud of.”

The banshee sang for him as she left, turning into a ball of light and then disappearing. He stood on the edge of eternity, gazing out at those blazing lights and wondering what they meant.

Cyrus waited. It could have been hours, days, maybe even years. Time didn't exist in this place, not in a way that made sense to his mortal mind, anyway. Though the view was perfect in every fashion, one thing was abundantly clear.

"I guess nobody came for me after all." Honestly, who would have? The only people in the world who cared about him had been left behind. He looked out at the ocean, half expecting to see a small boat paddling his way. Even if Charon arrived, it wasn't like Cyrus had a coin to pay for safe passage.

"I was just letting you admire the view, is all," said a man's voice from behind him.

Cyrus held perfectly still, afraid to turn and look at the speaker. He clenched his fingers, afraid of what he might see if he did turn around. The newcomer chuckled and put a hand on Cyrus' shoulder.

"I'll stand here as long as you want, buddy. We've got plenty of time, you know." The figure moved to stand next to Cyrus, his hands in his pockets. He wore a brown leather jacket and jeans, though stood barefoot in the sand. The lapels of his jacket were far enough apart that his dog tags caught the light, scattering it into different colors. "All the time in the world."

"But why you?" asked Cyrus, his throat suddenly dry.

"Because you're family." Darren cocked his head and held up a six-pack of beer. He ripped a can from the ring and tossed it to Cyrus, who caught it.

Cyrus didn't know what to say. Gazing out at eternity, he cracked open his beer and took a sip. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced. When he looked up at Darren, the man he had hunted so many decades ago, he saw no anger, no maliciousness. It felt like he was looking into the eyes of a brother he never knew he had. Darren radiated a sense of belonging that Cyrus had never experienced before.

"What happens next?" Cyrus asked, suddenly no longer afraid of the answer.

"Well, that's up to you. You've got a lot of freedom where we're headed." Darren opened his own beer. "But if you don't mind dropping by the ol' homestead, there's a few people there who would love to hear all about Grace."

Cyrus took another sip of his beer and smiled. Maybe eternity wouldn't be so bad after all.

“Let’s not keep them waiting.”