

In a Clutch

The mood amongst the SoS ranged wildly from somber to simmering rage. Cyrus watched as several of the men spent hours going over their weaponry, breaking down weapons and then reassembling them, just for something to do with their nervous energy.

Laurel's team was among the first to be sent on patrol after the doll incident. The mage had hesitated only briefly when Darius gave the command, and it became clear early on that arguing would be counter-productive. Rumors amongst the Order were already circulating that the Director had been pissed when their search had yielded nothing and the SoS had immediately doubled their price. With that much money on the line, it was clear that results were expected, and soon.

Darius had made several phone calls during this period, but Cyrus didn't know to whom. The man had spoken in at least three different languages, one of which he didn't recognize. He had asked Eulalie discretely if she was listening to those calls, but the Rat Queen was not. Apparently even magical rats had their limitations.

After morning came and they weren't attacked, a small squad of men took their injured comrade for medical treatment. Cyrus asked how they would explain the injury to the ER doctors, at which point some of the men had chuckled. Apparently if they said their buddy slipped and landed on it while naked, the ER would just assume it was a weird sex thing and ask no further questions. The old mage didn't bother inquiring how this was somehow common knowledge.

With the anxious energy building up, Cyrus decided to take a walk off of the property. The SoS wasn't paying any attention to him that he was aware of, which was for the best. Though a few members of the Order deferred to him, he had been completely supplanted by Laurel and the Director.

Away from the Radley estate, he made it a couple of blocks when Eulalie's voice chirped in his ear.

"You out?" she asked, her tone playful.

"No," he muttered quietly. "Wouldn't mind a nap, though."

“There’s a park up ahead on your left. You could probably find somewhere to lay down if you wanted. It’s rarely busy during the week.”

He cast his eyes up, but didn’t see whatever Eulalie was watching him with. The park was nearly empty, so he found himself a bench tucked away in a garden and stretched out, his hands behind his head.

With so much circulating in the back of his head, he doubted he would find sleep. At least, that’s what he thought, but when he blinked, the sun had shifted across the sky and was nearing the horizon. Yawning, he sat up and rubbed his eyes. He had slept for most of the day.

“I was wondering when you would wake up.” The voice made him do a double-take, and he realized he was sitting next to Dana. He hadn’t seen the zombie recently, but she looked to be in far better shape than usual. She was in yoga pants that left little to the imagination and a tank top that said *My Girlfriend is Hotter than Yours*.

“How long have you been sitting there?” he asked, scratching his beard.

“Not long,” she replied nonchalantly.

“About twenty minutes,” said Eulalie in his ear.

“Huh. Is everything okay?” he asked.

Dana slouched back in her seat, casting her sullen gaze forward across the park. “No,” she muttered. “Ever since your new buddies tried to break in, I’ve been asked to get more directly involved. That’s not good news for them.”

“What do you mean?”

She lifted an eyebrow. “To start with, I’m annoyed that I got pulled away from my project. But the real issue is you have a house full of women who are planning to absolutely tear everyone apart. Jenny has things under control for now, but the fact that the SoS hasn’t packed up means that they’re gonna double down.”

“Fuck.” Cyrus sighed. “You’re right, though. I just don’t know how they’re going to do it.”

“More like tripled down.” Cyrus’ earpiece filled with the sound of clacking keys. “More money is being transferred as we speak,” said Eulalie.

“They asked for double,” Cyrus replied.

“That’s not what I’m seeing. Roughly five times the original amount has been sent out to a couple of different locations. Based on some flight data I’ve been monitoring, I think the SoS is bringing in more people.”

“But why? It doesn’t make sense. The plan didn’t work.”

“You’re right, it didn’t. That means a new plan.” Dana took something out of her pocket and handed it to Cyrus. “You’re going to want to wear this.”

“What is it?” He opened his hand to reveal a silver band with symbols engraved on the inside.

“Something Zel and Yuki whipped up. If things get messy, that will help us know right where you are.”

“So you can save my butt?” he asked.

“More like avoid it. If a fight is about to start, we don’t want to accidentally trample you in the process.” Dana stood up and shoved earbuds into her ears. “Or drop a thousand pounds of ice on your head.”

“You’ve gotten stronger,” he said, noticing that something was very different about the zombie. It was how she moved that tipped him off. When he had first fought with her, it had been raw strength and stamina. Now, her movements were smooth and fluid, those of a practiced killer.

“Perhaps.” She contemplated him for a moment. “You’re a good man, Cyrus.”

“Excuse me?” He blinked up at her.

“There was a time when you could have taken the easy way out. You could have told those people everything you knew in exchange for getting as far away from here as possible. But you didn’t. Honestly, you deserve better.” Dana pulled out her phone and touched the screen. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m gonna go for a little jog. Not all of us can sit on our asses using drones.”

“You could be in here with me piloting them,” shouted Eulalie in the earpiece, causing Cyrus to wince. “Shit, I’m sorry, only she was supposed to hear that.”

Dana grinned, then jogged away. Cyrus watched her go, then smiled to himself as he rose from the bench. His joints actually creaked on the way up. That's what he got for pulling an all-nighter and then sleeping on a bench.

There would be plenty of time to rest once all this bullshit was over. He limped toward the entrance of the park and was grateful when the pain in his hip subsided by the time he made it to the sidewalk.

The SoS were planning something that would require more people. Shoving more mercenaries into the house wasn't going to be enough to change anything. What else could they even do?

He thought back to Dana's comment about being a good man. Hearing those words spooked him more than a little, because they reminded him of something that the Oracle had said when last they spoke. He had told the Oracle that he believed Mike Radley to be a good man, and was certainly better than either of them had deserved.

Thinking back to that meeting, he couldn't help but wonder if there was a clue in the Oracle's twisted words that would lead him to a potential answer to his current situation, but gave up. He hadn't thought much about their conversation since then, and it wasn't like he could ask. The Oracle had been moved last year after somebody broke into a top secret facility and nearly abducted the thing.

No, not "thing". Person was probably the wrong word for what the Oracle was, but it was the best word that Cyrus had. If there had been one regret about his time with the Order, it was how he had deliberately distanced himself from the mythical beings he had sworn to protect. In truth, the Order was all about maintaining the balance between the world of magic and humans, but that line had become so blurry recently that he could no longer see it. When he had left the Order, there had been good people there who still maintained that balance.

But he knew better now. Somehow, that balance had been tipped, and Cyrus wasn't even certain it was in anybody's favor except the Order itself. The organization he had devoted his entire life to had become the very thing he would despise the most. Those men on the front lawn of Mike's house were a testament to how far the Order had fallen, and he now faced a powerful machine that he doubted he could actually stop.

Standing on the edge of Mike's property, he paused to stare up at the stone lions. They were supposedly powerful protectors, but it was a fact he could only

take on faith. If the SoS had gone in with wands instead of guns, perhaps they would have been properly cowed. Looking at the small group of men and women that were essentially camped on Mike's driveway, he wondered what options were even left to him.

"Hey. Are you okay?" Eulalie's voice was quiet.

Cyrus shook his head and walked toward the tent. An inkling of an idea had formed in the back of his head, but it would be difficult to pull off. It would require a tremendous amount of stealth and would absolutely put his safety at risk.

But if it worked? The hired killers would be off Mike's lawn soon enough.

When he got to the tent, he noticed a few new faces among the SoS, but not enough to account for the newly hired forces Eulalie had reported. Near the front of the structure, Laurel stood by the entrance with dark shadows under her eyes. Her hair had come loose, and she looked like a woman on the edge.

"Are you okay, Sister Laurel?" Cyrus moved next to her slowly, wary of the wand tightly clenched in her hands.

"It's that stupid fucking doll," she muttered breathlessly. "We were using comms to keep in touch with the teams, but she hijacked them. It started with stupid shit like nursery rhymes, but then things got personal."

"How so?" Cyrus had to fight to keep a grin from forming.

When Laurel's eyes met his, he was slightly frightened to see a hint of madness in them. Clearly Jenny wasn't just hitting a nerve, but had somehow dug deep into Laurel's psyche and carved away a necessary piece.

"It's like she's inside my head," Laurel whispered, her eyes darting from side to side. "She keeps talking about things that only I could know, tormenting me with my own mistakes."

Cyrus looked at a few Order members milling about. They looked tired, but nowhere near as manic as Laurel did. While the doll was no mind reader, she was capable of picking up other people's emotions. If anything, she was playing Laurel like a fiddle. "Is she doing that to everyone?"

Laurel nodded, her pupils unnaturally wide. "They all heard her. She's been talking to everyone with comms, SoS, Order, it doesn't matter. But they all act like it's no big deal, like the things she is saying don't bother them. She keeps telling

me that it's because I'm weak, that I'm not strong enough, but she doesn't know me, Cyrus. She can't understand!" Her voice was rising in volume, and a couple of Order people threw her troubled looks before wandering away.

"Maybe it's time you stepped back for a bit," said Cyrus, but Laurel grabbed his collar with one hand, her wand perilously close to his face in the other.

"Don't you see? That's what she wants!" Laurel licked her lips, her eyes shifting to the house. "She knows that I have her figured out. Ooh, she knows, and that's why she's trying to get rid of me."

"I assume you stopped using the comms." Cyrus was stuck between offering genuine advice or simply letting Laurel lie in the bed she made. "That way, she won't bother you anymore."

As if on cue, a high-pitched giggle broke the silence on the front lawn. Almost immediately, weapons were drawn and everybody backed toward the entrance of the tent. Laurel was breathing hard, her wand pointed up at the house.

"Sometimes I hear her without the comms," she whispered. "I think she's out here with us."

"Where is Mads?" he asked.

"I. Don't. Know." Laurel was grinding her teeth now, her eyes darting back and forth. Cyrus put his hand on her shoulder slowly to avoid startling her. "One moment, he was there. The next? Gone!"

"C'mon," he said, pushing her toward the tent. "It's warded, which means you can get a break from the doll."

"She's not a doll, she's a demon." Laurel shuddered. "I'm supposed to be in charge of the perimeter."

"I'll take full responsibility. Blame it on me." He pushed a little harder. "You can tell the Director that I tried to pull rank. It's okay."

"Pulled...rank?" Hope and understanding appeared in her eyes. "Yes. You're pulling rank. The Director isn't here. He'll understand."

Nodding grimly, Cyrus guided the woman into the tent. Once they were safely inside the warded structure, Laurel visibly deflated as she found somewhere

to sit. She held tight to her wand as if it was a talisman, then slumped forward and closed her eyes.

“Jenny has that effect on people,” said Eulalie through the ear piece.

“Is the doll really a demon?” he asked, scratching his chin and pretending to talk to himself.

“No.” Eulalie chuckled. “She’s just had a lot of practice.”

“I wonder if we have anything in the kit from the Catholic church.” He wandered over to where the Order kept some of its supplies, muttering to himself to keep up the ruse. In fact, his idea from earlier was already evolving, and he made sure to wander past some members of the SoS on his way. “I don’t think holy water would work, but what if we had some sacred iron?”

For a moment, he thought the men were ignoring him, but one finally spoke up. “Sacred iron? What’s that?”

Cyrus looked up as if he hadn’t noticed the men there. “Hmm? Oh, sorry, just muttering to myself.”

“You said something about sacred iron,” said another man, his features hidden from view by a full-face mask. “And that demon.”

“Oh, you mean the doll?” He looked around to see if anyone else was listening. “We’re not sure what she is. I mean, we haven’t positively identified the type of entity yet, so it’s just a theory.”

“It’s a damned good theory.” The man leaned forward, using the butt of his rifle to support his weight. “That bitch didn’t just hurt one of our own, she disrespected us. If you think you have something that will hurt her, you tell us right now.”

“Uh…” Cyrus pretended to engage in an inner debate, then looked around again. Nobody in a leadership role was nearby, so he took a seat next to the armed men and nodded toward them conspiratorially. “I’m not really supposed to talk about this, but these are desperate times. I’m sure you’re all aware of the effect of iron on a lot of paranormal entities, yes?”

The men nodded. This was common knowledge. The science guys at the Order believed it had something to do with iron’s receptivity to magnetism, but Cyrus often felt like magic didn’t require an explanation.

“Well, you guys know that the Order is always coming up with new ways to protect themselves from...monsters.” For some reason, it was harder to say that word than ever before. He gestured toward the house for emphasis. “Demons, in particular, are extremely dangerous. Part of the reason for this is their rarity. Whenever we come up with something new, we might not have a chance to field test it. And if it fails, well...” He slid his thumb across his neck and made a cutting sound. “Innovation in this field is difficult for that reason.”

“That makes sense.” The masked man looked at his compatriots. “We’ve dealt with some demon shit before, but they usually run at the first sight of a priest or whatever.”

Cyrus nodded. “If that thing in there is a demon, I don’t think it would care if we brought a priest in.”

Eulalie chuckled in his ear. “You have no idea how right you are,” she muttered.

“Sometimes we run across demons who don’t give a shit about divine intervention. So that means weaponry. Demons are notorious for making you fight them up close. That way, they can get inside your head, just like this one is doing. Some are powerful enough to read your thoughts, even.” He looked over at Laurel, who was now biting her nails. Her performance was perfect right now for his needs. “So they decided to work on something more tactical. Something more...parabolic.” Now he looked at the barrel of the gun in front of him.

“Demon bullets?” The man snorted.

Cyrus waved his hand dismissively. “The bullet is just the delivery mechanism. Look, maybe it was stupid to even bring this up.”

“Keep talking.”

Cyrus lowered his voice. “I was part of this project. If you guys wanted me to, I could alter some of your ammunition. That way, if you get a clean shot...” He made a popping sound. “You’ll send her straight back to hell.”

The men all looked at each other, communicating solely through their eyes. The man in the mask eventually nodded, then looked back at the old mage. “And you said it will work?”

“Never field tested,” Cyrus replied with a shrug. “Which is why I hesitated to bring it up. But it definitely worked on demons we summoned. So unless all of them knew to collapse in on themselves in a ball of hellfire...”

“How many rounds?” asked the man. He pulled a spare magazine from his pocket and handed it over.

“Um...” This would be the tricky part. Sacred iron wasn’t even a real thing. What he really needed was a bullet he could hide an enchantment inside of, but one that the SoS wouldn’t default to automatically. That meant sidearms, or backup weapons. “9 mm rounds would be best, but they have to be hollow points. I need room for the reagent is all. It shouldn’t affect your aim. Maybe...twenty rounds by this afternoon?”

Already, the men were pulling spare magazines from their vests and checking them before handing them over. Cyrus got three magazines in total, tucking the ammo away in his coat.

“It’ll only take one shot,” he whispered, making eye contact with each of the men. “When I give these back, definitely spread them out. Also, it might be best to keep this info from the higher-ups. We already know the demon is getting inside their heads, and it’s definitely targeting the people in charge. If it knows what you all are up to...” he left the thought hanging.

The men nodded, and the masked man clapped a hand on Cyrus’ shoulder.

“You do your job, and we’ll do ours.” He fist bumped Cyrus, and then shoed him away in dismissal. Cyrus wandered toward the Order supplies and started digging through them.

“Seriously, though, you all have demon bullets?” Eulalie’s voice rose an octave in excitement. “That sounds awesome.”

Cyrus cleared his throat and crouched over a crate to hide his face. “No,” he whispered.

“Oh.” The Rat Queen sighed. “So since demon bullets aren’t real, I assume that means you’re up to something?”

“Uh huh.” Digging through the box, he found the reagents he needed and then stood. He was going to leave the tent and get started on his secret project, but he saw Dirk messing with the projectors. Darius, who had yet to leave the tent, was staring at the empty screen with his hands behind his back. A couple of

squad leaders were gathering around as the projector turned on, revealing a picture of the massive tree and Naia's fountain nearby.

"What's going on here?" asked Cyrus nonchalantly. "Do we have a lead?"

"That's on a need to know basis," said Dirk.

Cyrus held up his hands. "I'm not trying to pry. As you can see, we're having some leadership problems of our own and I'm currently in command." He tilted his head toward Laurel. The mage was lying down on her side and had fallen fast asleep.

Dirk looked at Darius, who remained silent for several seconds. The SoS commander looked at Cyrus with eyes that seemed to simmer with rage, but his face was neutral.

"We're planning a new approach," he replied, then gestured toward the images. "Since we cannot breach the perimeter of the house, we are forced to find a way to bring its denizens out. Your Director has asked us to secure the package via trading assets."

"Trading assets?" Cyrus frowned. "What assets?"

"That fountain is home to a magical nymph. If the supply of water becomes blocked, she dies." Darius gestured to the fountain. "So we're going to try and blow it up."

"What?!?" Eulalie yelled so loud that Cyrus flinched.

"Um, wait, so we're planning to kill the nymph?"

Darius nodded. "If need be. The real plan is to lure out the others and capture them. Then we can barter for what your Director wants. We have supplies coming right now in order to take them into custody, and have even hired a specialist to assist."

"A specialist?" Who on earth could specialize in detaining magical beings that wasn't already part of the Order? In his earpiece, he could hear Eulalie frantically chattering both to herself and somebody else, but was going so fast he couldn't understand her.

Darius nodded. "We have some other moving parts, but will start once we're ready. I assume we'll have your team's full cooperation?"

“Naturally.” With Laurel falling apart, he would be able to take command of the Order once again, if only temporarily. He thought about how best to guide his people to not only protect them, but Mike Radley’s family. Thinking about the bullets in his pocket, he wondered if upscaling his current plan was possible.

First, he would have to figure out where all his people were. With Mads noticeably missing, he suspected that Jenny had taken more than a few of them. Maybe he would find some mages willing to put in some extra time on his new project.

“Sir.” An SoS operative rose from his position by the computers and looked at Darius. “The specialist is here.”

Darius raised an eyebrow, the shadow of a smile appearing on his face. He looked at Dirk first, then his gaze settled on Cyrus. “Would you please bring in our guest?” he asked.

Cyrus nodded, then excused himself from the tent. Back outside, a sleek black town car had parked next to the other vehicles. When the doors opened, armed SoS agents emerged from the vehicle, their eyes intensely scanning the roof of the Radley house.

Curious who would require such a retinue, he watched in silence as a woman stepped out. She wore a simple dress and her long, braided hair had been tightly coiled up in a bun. He recognized her face immediately.

“You’re Elizabeth,” he said, locking eyes with the woman. Though she looked to be in her late thirties, he sensed that the woman looking back at him was far older than her outer appearance. “From the Historical Society.”

She smirked in his direction and held up a letter. “I am,” she stated, walking toward Cyrus. “Your people found me this morning, quite by accident, and I had a little chat with your Director. We came to a deal.”

“You were part of a secret cabal.”

“I was, and now it’s gone. Was pretty much being forced to work for them, you know how it is.” She smiled weakly and handed over the letter. “Per your Director, my eventual release hinges on my cooperation with your operation here. You’ll find me quite knowledgeable about what the denizens of this home are capable of.”

Uncertain how to respond, Cyrus opened the printout. He scowled at the letter giving Elizabeth full rights and access to his team, including a leadership role. It bothered him how easily he would have rolled with this if he didn't already know the whole operation was crooked. The Order was severely lacking in critical thinkers, and he knew now it was by design.

"Let's go meet the man in charge," he said and gestured toward the tent. Elizabeth clasped her hands together in front of her body and moved past him. Cyrus shivered as her shadow passed over him, sucking the heat from his body.

Turning, he followed her into the tent where she immediately walked toward Darius unprompted. The two gave each other a look of recognition, then turned their attention to the screen. In his ear, Eulalie had stopped chattering and he could only assume they were working on a plan of their own.

Once he was satisfied that nobody was paying attention, he snuck away. If he was going to make a difference, he needed to get to work right now.

Mike felt his magic stirring, eager to act, but uncertain how. The woman tilted her head, her dark eyes studying Leilani first, then settling on Opal. He looked over the stranger's shoulder, noting that she had actually emerged from inside his property line. There would be no safety for them if they managed to cross the line, so whatever came next depended on what the goddess wanted.

"I'm afraid you have me at a loss," he confessed, ignoring the spirits that had now packed in so tightly that he could no longer see through their ethereal forms. "I wasn't expecting to find somebody here."

"And you shouldn't have. My involvement in these matters was meant to be a secret, for reasons you will understand very soon." She walked toward Mike, divinity radiating from her like light from a star. "For you see, I am the final line of defense in this place, Caretaker."

"You're the guardian?" he asked.

She snorted. "Hardly. Consider me a very invested third party. The guardian of this place would recognize your authority immediately, perhaps even welcome you. I, on the other hand, am here to ensure that you are worthy of this place."

"By what mechanism?" asked Leilani, her voice quieter than usual.

“This man is an outsider, daughter of the waters.” The goddess stepped past Mike to confront the mermaid. “He knows not of the old traditions, nor can we expect him to understand. This place was never meant for his kind, and yet they have taken it. Our ancestral lands now belong to men and women of means, some who rarely walk our shores. These islands were not created for those who worship greed and power. I have been here since the beginning, and shall judge him in whatever manner seems fit.”

“I am princess Leilani, of the—”

The goddess held up her hand, and Leilani froze. “I’m not interested in your opinions. You have not known him long, and I can smell him on your flesh. When you get to be my age, you learn that the whims of youth are no excuse for the wisdom of experience.” She then turned to Opal. “As for you, I have no idea what manner of creature you are. You are made from the stuff of gods, yet your spirit is new like a child’s.”

Opal nodded introspectively, then signed to Mike.

“This is Opal,” said Mike, translating out loud. “She wants you to know that she means no disrespect, but she is unable to reply verbally.”

“You have interesting companions.” The goddess turned back to Mike. “And is that a fairy I sense?”

Daisy came out of hiding and gave a shy wave.

“Daisy is the same,” Mike added. “By the way, my name is Mike Radley. By what name may I address you?”

The goddess arched her eyebrows. “What an interesting way to ask that question.”

“I got into a fight once with the Queen of the Fae,” he explained. “I learned from her that names are important, especially to the gods.”

“And would you presume to know who I am?” she asked.

“I would not,” he admitted. “Before we came here, I studied some of the lore, but it’s been watered down. I’ve also learned a bit about how divinity works, and that who you used to be may be vastly different from who you are now.”

“Good.” She stepped forward, her face now inches from his own. Though the air was cool and wet, he could feel the intense heat emanating from her flesh. “How about now?”

He wasn’t about to be baited into such a trap. “I have some ideas,” he admitted. “But I would prefer to hear what you would like to be called.”

“Interesting. Very interesting.” Her eyes searched his, but he could feel her gaze across his very soul. “Arrogance is a natural byproduct of the quest for power. You radiate with strength, yet it would appear you are not one who seeks it.”

“That’s not entirely true,” he admitted. “I’ve worked hard to become stronger.”

“Working to become stronger is a far different path than simply taking that strength for yourself.” The woman took a step back and crossed her arms. “If I should let you pass, what comes next? Why have you come here?”

“I was brought here by the Order,” Mike replied. “They said a dangerous creature came down from this place and boiled the bay, killing several of Leilani’s people. They wanted my help in hunting it down.”

“And you believed them?” she asked.

“I wanted to seek the truth for myself. A creature capable of doing such a thing is dangerous, but it’s more important to understand why it happened.”

“And if there was a good reason? What then? Will you just walk away?”

“No.” Mike shook his head. “I need to learn what that reason was and find a way to fix it. This place has become a refuge for the merfolk, and I don’t want them to be chased away by a problem I could have fixed.”

“I see.” The ground rumbled, but the goddess didn’t seem to notice. “And what if I told you that I was the one who boiled the bay?”

Leilani flinched, but Mike kept his gaze on the goddess. “Then I would ask you why,” he said.

“What if you don’t like my answer?” The irises of the goddess blazed with fire.

“I doubt I would like your answer, regardless of your motivations. A lot of people died, and that’s never good. Still, I will ask what I can do to help.”

“Hmm.” The fire in her eyes vanished and she took a step back. “The Queen of the Fae taught you well.”

“It was not an easy lesson.”

“Lessons from the fae realm rarely are.” The goddess turned to look at the mouth of the cave. A small white dog emerged from the darkness, sniffing at the rocks before wagging its tail. “And what are you doing here?”

The dog barked twice, then came over to sit next to her feet. The goddess knelt down and rubbed the spot between its ears. Mike couldn’t help but notice that the dog itself wasn’t entirely here. Its body seemed more like thick vapor than anything else.

“Your companions have arrived,” she said, taking a step toward the cave. “It would be rude to leave them waiting.”

“So do I pass?” Mike asked, moving behind the goddess.

“For now.” She paused at the edge of the opening, her toes right at the property line. “My name is Pele-honu-amea. You may call me Pelé.”

Behind him, Leilani gasped, but Mike didn’t react. Pelé was perhaps the most infamous of the Hawaiian gods, notorious for her fiery temper. However, she was also a devoted protector of her people. Whatever came next, he needed to make sure he stayed on her good side. When Pelé continued onward, he followed.

They were only a few feet into the cave when Pelé paused and turned around. “Stop doing that,” she said. Mike looked over his shoulder to see that Leilani had bowed down, her forehead on the damp soil. Behind her, the night marchers had all vanished into the foliage.

“I mean no disrespect,” said Leilani. “And I apologize for not recognizing you.”

Pelé smirked and looked at Mike. “I have a bit of a reputation,” she confessed with a wink, then exited the cave and knelt by the mermaid. She whispered something in Hawaiian, and Leilani nodded, then rose. Together, they came back into the cave where Mike and Opal stood. Nearby, the little white dog wagged its tail.

“Does the dog have a name?” he asked. Opal signed at him and he nodded in response. “And can Opal pet him?”

“You may call the dog what you wish. As long as you speak from the heart, he will know you speak to him.” She paused for a moment. “As for petting him, that is also his decision.”

The goddess continued into the cave with Leilani right behind her, the two of them chatting in the native tongue of the islands. Mike looked at the dog and grinned. “So may Opal pet you?”

The dog’s tongue lolled out of his mouth as he stared up at Mike for several long moments. Eventually, his tail wagged and he moved toward the slime girl. Opal knelt down and started stroking the dog’s fur. Wispy tendrils of white curled around her fingers, reminding Mike of smoke.

“Is Smoke an okay name?” he asked. “For us to call you, I mean.”

Smoke barked in the affirmative.

“Awesome. C’mon, you two. We’re getting ditched.” He jogged after the others in an attempt to catch up. Behind him, Opal continued to pet the dog for several moments before rising. He had wondered more than once about getting a pet at home, especially for Callisto or Grace. However, Callisto had evinced no interest in pet ownership and Zel had explained that other than falconry, centaurs didn’t technically own any animals.

As for Grace, Eulalie had quickly explained there was a good chance the little Arachne may eat whatever pet they brought home.

The cave was cool at first, but the temperature quickly rose. Glowing moss along the roof illuminated their path forward, and the trail was smooth and well kept. After several minutes, the cave terminated in a waterfall, where Pelé and Leilani had come to a halt.

“This is it, Caretaker. Once we cross the veil, there is no going back from the truth.” Pelé turned to face him. “Just know that you have inherited a responsibility far larger than any you deserve.”

Mike frowned. “I know I’m a stranger in your land, but I promise I’ll work hard to be worthy of it.”

“You misunderstand.” Pelé’s voice softened. “When I say you don’t deserve it, I speak from a place of pity. From what little Leilani has told me about you, you sound like a decent man, maybe even an honorable one. I would not wish this fate on either.”

“Well...that just sounds ominous.” He took a deep breath and sighed. “But if I don’t do this, someone else will. Both the Order and Captain Dickhead want whatever is here, and I don’t trust either of them to do the right thing.”

“On this, we agree.” Pelé gestured toward the waterfall. “Come.”

Mike walked toward the wall of water, then took a deep breath and stepped through it. The water parted, revealing a series of stepping stones to a pond beyond. Instead of being deep inside a mountain, he now stood in a bowl shaped valley, filled with trees. Up above, cumulus clouds had piled into a massive mountain with a hole in the middle, allowing light to shine through. On the other side of the pond, a large cabana had been built along the edge of a cliff.

The others followed him through, the waterfall filling back in once Smoke and Opal had passed. Once on the opposite shore of the lake, Mike turned around and looked up the side of the mountain.

“This is an extra-dimensional space,” he said, then looked over at Pelé.

“It is,” she said with a nod. “Are you familiar with how these islands came to be?”

“Depends on who you ask,” he said. “Science says plate tectonics and volcanism. The stories say your sister tried to kill you.”

Pelé nodded. “And they are both true, in their own way. My relationship with my sister is complicated, but the islands are the result of our battle. My sister holds dominion over the seas while mine lies in the fire of the earth. When I was young, I was forced to flee our home by canoe. This was how I came upon Hawaii as it was, just a single island in the middle of the ocean.

“When my sister Namakaokahai learned of my location, she came for my head. I barely escaped that time, so hid from her wrath. Though her powers were great, her attention was divided. Instead of fleeing, I used my magic and cracked the earth, raising the next island in the chain. And so we repeated this process over thousands of years. Each time she came for me, Namakaokahai was stronger than before, forcing me to build my islands even higher. My strength improved as well, and I was finally able to create a place that even she couldn’t consume with her waves.”

“Kilauea?” asked Mike. “I read somewhere that you’re supposed to live there.”

“I like to travel.” Pelé grinned. “What use is immortality if I spend all of it in one place?”

“I’m kind of a homebody.”

The goddess snorted. “Hardly. Back to my tale, my sister finally gave up in her efforts to claim my life. Even gods grow up sometimes. But before she did, I was already planning the next step. It wasn’t until she failed to kill me on the Big Island that I realized I had outpaced her growth, and so this was my backup plan.” She gestured to the valley. “This is the secret island of Hawaii, hidden between the cracks of time and space.”

“You made a secret island and hid it inside of Maui?” Mike looked back at the pond in time to see Leilani jab at the water with her trident. She pulled out a large trout, which she eagerly consumed.

“Yes and no. I created this place, but I did not tuck it away.” She turned and walked toward the cabana. “That would be the work of the one you call the Architect.”

“Naturally.” If something weird had been built across time and space, he could count on it being the Architect’s work. “So does this mean that you are the host?”

Pelé paused and cocked her head. “Host?”

“The divine being used to create such a place.” He frowned. “Actually, that wouldn’t make sense. You created this island yourself, right?”

“I did. The Architect altered it for our needs. Come.” She took Mike to the cabana. Wicker chairs hung from braided ropes looped to the ceiling with a king size bed in the back. Flower petals had been laid in a circle at the foot of the bed.

“It’s beautiful,” he said.

“Yes,” she replied. “But that is not what I wanted you to see. This way.” She held out a hand, and he took it. Her skin was soft, and he felt his magic resonate in response to her touch.

“Oh.” Pelé pulled her hand away and gave him a knowing look. “I forgot about that. We should avoid skin contact.”

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

She chuckled. "I am the goddess of many things, passion among one of them. Your natural talents have ignited those feelings in me and I'm working actively to suppress them." Pelé looked past him to where Opal and Leilani stood, both of them now lavishing Smoke with attention. "I don't share well with others," she admitted.

"You lead, I'll follow." He gestured forward, and the goddess walked to the edge of the cliff. A deck had been constructed of stone with wrought iron railing around the edges. Down below, the bowl shaped valley was host to a lake in which a tiny island sat. A building had been constructed there, but Mike didn't recognize the architecture. Wisps of steam curled up from the water around the rocky shores of the island.

"It's pretty," he said.

"That was my sister." Pelé leaned against the railing and let out a sigh. "When the outsiders came, they destroyed the old pantheons and sent many of us into hiding. There were many gods of the ocean, and they were targeted first. Water is a natural portal to other realms, you know."

"I'm aware," Mike said, then gestured for her to continue.

"She barely survived her own brush with madness and it forever changed her. The gods themselves were asked to part with their powers, to disperse it so the old ones could not find their way back to Earth. She shed her divinity like a snake sheds its skin, then tucked it away in the depths of the waters. When the time came, she and the Architect came to me to ask for my help. That lake and the structure beneath it are her bones, laid to rest in this place."

"Did you have to give away your powers as well?" he asked. "When the Others came?"

Pelé nodded. "I did. While I may not be as formidable as I once was, I am still the goddess and protector of these lands. I am at my strongest here. But leaving Hawaii is no longer an option. Even setting foot on the shores of your land would take me too far from my domain, and I would be no more than a woman with fiery delusions of grandeur."

"I'm sorry." He leaned on the railing next to her. "That really sucks."

Pelé said nothing, her eyes on the island below. “My sister was tasked with hiding something,” she explained. “And I believe it is time for you to see it. But first, your friends.”

“What about them?” He looked back toward the cabana. Leilani was stretched out on the bed while Opal was sitting on the floor, rubbing Smoke’s belly. Daisy had joined in on the fun, burying her whole body in the dog’s fur.

“Not them. The others.” She pointed at the island below. “They are down there.”

Mike frowned. “Why? Did they do something wrong?”

Pelé chuckled. “They did not. But they came in beneath the earth and the guardian intercepted them.”

“So what is the guardian, anyway?” He followed Pelé as she led him along the bluff and onto a steep set of stairs that descended into the caldera. Looking back, he signaled to Leilani and Opal that they were okay to stay behind. Opal gave him a double thumbs up, and started signing to Smoke that he was a very good boy.

“It wasn’t just the arrival of the outsiders that weakened me,” Pelé said as they walked the stone stairs. Mike frowned when she realized he had dodged his question about the guardian. “I assume you are familiar with how belief and divinity are intertwined.”

“I am.” The gods needed believers to acquire more power than they had before. Someday, Yuki would go through the process, maybe even Ratu as well. As for Mike, he doubted he would ever experience such an apotheosis. He had zero interest in followers.

“Though their numbers were few, the native people here were strong in their beliefs. But some of the deities, they were too greedy. They created a system of taboos that the people would seek to break. So while the strength of our own pantheon was waning, the Christian god’s missionaries came along in the 1800s to finish the job. Losing so many of our followers all at once was like falling ill and never recovering.” Pelé looked back at him. “This was part of the reason my sister agreed to the Architect’s scheme.”

“Oh?”

She nodded. "Even though so many of our people had stopped believing in us, we never stopped believing in them. They are like our children, and we love them even though we've grown apart. My sister wanted to be part of that solution, to leave behind a legacy for our people."

"Out of curiosity, why not you?" he asked.

The ground rumbled beneath him, and Pelé sighed. "I've asked myself the same thing. Sometimes I wonder if my sister offered because she was hoping I would take her place instead. Maybe she did it solely so she could lord it over me from the afterlife. I knew that my people still needed someone to lead them if they ever strayed too far from the path. As for my sister, she realized that her own time was coming to an end."

"Because people stopped believing in her?"

The goddess stopped on the steps and looked back at him. "Belief is only one part of the equation," she said with a sad look in her eyes. "Do you know how many gods are in charge of the ocean?"

"Several," he replied. "Or maybe one with many names."

She nodded. "A fair statement. It's not just that my sister has domain over the ocean. She was the ocean. The spirits of the water were interconnected in a way, their territories often overlapping. Some of those gods are gone forever, Caretaker, stolen away by lack of belief or the poison you put in the water."

"Pollution?" He frowned. "Are you saying gods can be killed with trash?"

"Your body is a temple, is it not? If you feed it good food and take care of it, it serves you well. Pollute it with poor nutrition, drugs, and a hard lifestyle, suddenly your body fails you when you need it most." Pelé sighed. "For me, it wasn't pollution. It was watching my own children turn away from me. If you ever have kids of your own, I hope you never experience such a feeling."

She turned and continued down the stairs. "When it first happened, I believed my people would see through the lies and false promises of the missionaries. But I often forget that mortals are very much like children, willing to believe any fairytale they've been told enough times."

"God makes false promises?"

Pelé snorted. “No. But His missionaries do. That’s what happens when you stop speaking to them in person and leave an instruction manual instead. A lot is left open for interpretation and converting believers became more important than spreading the truth.”

“Which is what?”

“Every divine being has their own truth, Caretaker. To understand their truth is to know them better.”

“I see.” He followed Pelé down the mountain, already begrudging the climb they would have to make back up later. Maybe he’d luck out and there’d be a portal back up, or perhaps he could get Reggie to send some rats out this way to install one. The cabana would work, he just needed to snap some photographs on his phone and get them to the Rat King along with general coordinates to make it happen.

Down by the lake, the smell of sulfur came and went with the wind, and Mike paused to sniff at the air. “It’s safe down here, right?” he asked. “The air won’t hurt me?”

“If it did, you’d be dead already.” She grinned, showing all her teeth. “I’ve been manipulating the air this whole time. Otherwise, yes, you would have died.”

“Ah. Well thank you, then.” They moved toward the shore where a canoe had been pulled up onto the black sand beach. “It just occurred to me to ask; were you the one who boiled the water?”

Pelé paused to look at him, then nodded. “I was there when it happened, yes. And I helped.”

“Why?” he asked.

“I must show you something first,” she said, then gestured to the boat. “But then I shall reveal everything.”

Mike kept his mouth shut. This was one of Aymone’s least favorite story tropes, but he wasn’t going to call out Pelé on it. Not only was this a real life situation, but debating a goddess on the merits of proper storytelling was just a bad idea all around. Though Pelé was keeping her powers subdued, even a cursory examination of her soul was like staring into the heart of a hungry flame, eager to consume.

Pondering the many different reasons Pelé would have for flash boiling the merfolk, Mike tried to tune into cat radio while descending. He was never going to establish a proper connection with Kisa climbing down a mountain, but he would at least get a vague sense of her mood. After several minutes of concentration, he picked up a few bits of minor annoyance. Whatever was going on hadn't bothered the catgirl much, which was a good sign. He would make time to check in with her later.

"Does the sun ever set here?" he asked, realizing that it had been nearly evening when they arrived.

Pelé nodded, then looked up at the sky. "This place was originally built closer to the place of my birth, so it will go down in a couple of hours. The sky is nothing short of spectacular, though it will look very different from the one you're used to."

"Because it's in a different hemisphere?" he asked.

"No." They were almost to the bottom of the steps now. "Are you familiar with how a patchwork quilt is made?"

Mike nodded. "The general idea, yes."

"Good. This place was a scrap of fabric that was detached from our world. The hole was patched so nobody knows any better. You still have to store that fabric somewhere, Caretaker." She gestured toward the sky. "It is simple enough to assume that you are looking at light from our sun, but you aren't."

"That's...so you're saying this place is like a tiny planet in a different galaxy?"

"No. I'm saying that the sky above is a scrap as well. Someone has stolen a piece of the sky and placed it here." Pelé stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked back at him. "Do you know why the outsiders came to our world?"

"To devour everything, right?"

Pelé nodded. "They are powerful, interdimensional beings capable of swallowing worlds and eventually reality itself. But you can't think of it as large scale beings devouring our home as if it were luau pig fresh from the fire. What they consume is simply gone as if it never was. It now lies outside of time and space. As for what they leave behind..." She looked up at the sky. "This particular piece of sky was missed, left to float in the void. The Architect snatched it up and

stitched it to this place, creating a tiny, magical world capable of sustaining life on its own.”

Mike licked his lips in excitement, thinking of the tower world through the wardrobe at home. “Did the Architect make all the extra-dimensional spaces?”

“No. This is a power available to some of the gods, or those on their way to becoming one. There were other beings capable of magic this powerful, but they were wiped out centuries ago by a powerful wish.” The goddess turned away from him and headed for the canoe. “You can swim if you want, but the water is like a hot tub. I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“I’m always down for a boat ride.” Together, they pushed the canoe toward the water and got in. Pelé pulled out a paddle and dipped it into the water. She sang as she rowed, the canoe moving quite fast across the lake toward the small island. Mike leaned back and let out a sigh, his eyes focused on the sky.

“So everything out there is gone now?” he asked.

“It is. If you could fly into the sky, you would soon learn that there is no escape from here. It’s all looped in on itself, like those snow globes humans are so obsessed over.” Pelé chuckled. “I was always a fan of lava lamps.”

“You must have loved the seventies.”

“Free love? Passion?” For a brief moment, Pelé was no longer an old woman, but a beautiful maiden in her twenties. Her obsidian eyes sparkled like glittering diamonds and he felt his magic lurch hungrily in her direction. Suddenly, she was old once again and the connection was gone. “It was certainly an interesting time.”

“Did you...I mean...” Mike rubbed his chest. It felt like he’d pulled a muscle.

“There’s a reason I took this form, Caretaker, and clamped down on my magic. When I said that you and I are the same in many ways, I was not being hyperbolic.” Pelé leaned over the side of the canoe and let her fingers trail across the water. The boat continued moving on its own. “I must say that I am surprised that you are a man.”

“I get that a lot.”

The goddess leaned back and studied him. “I met your predecessor once. A woman by the name of Katherine.”

Mike frowned. "I don't think any of the Caretakers I've heard about were named Katherine."

"Your home is much older than you're aware of, Caretaker, and has been moved many times. I traveled there once only as a precautionary measure, to meet the person who would be entrusted with this place. For centuries, this island was passed down amongst native islanders, each of them granted the title of Kahu. They were meant to be the protectors of this place and the treasure it holds." Pelé shook her head. "It pained me to see the final Kahu hand over ownership to the one called Caretaker, but it was a means to an end."

"What happened?"

The water outside the canoe bubbled, and steam formed into billowing clouds. The jungle and sheer cliffs surrounding the lake disappeared in the fog that formed, and Mike found himself watching as spectral figures formed.

"That would be my sister," Pelé whispered. "She would show you herself."

The clouds shifted and piled on top of each other and the world around them transformed. It was in shades of gray, and Mike was now floating off the coast of what he could only assume was Hawaii proper. A large ship with massive sails approached the bay where native islanders watched in anticipation.

"The outside world found them," a voice whispered in his ear. "A harbinger of things to come."

The scene vanished, replaced now by islanders in battle with each other. Though the scene was gray, a crimson river flowed into the phantom ocean, staining the waves. An older woman wearing a dress and clutching a necklace made of shells and shark teeth stood watch from a bluff up above. Her eyes glowed like the moon, and she carried a large wooden staff with her. Mike felt an odd kinship with her.

"War among our own," the voice continued. "Like poison in a well."

The scene shifted again, and Mike saw the woman once more. She was speaking to some children and a pair of adults, and they were sitting in the same cabana from the top of the cliff. The adults seemed enraptured by what the woman had to say, but the children didn't look easily impressed. The scenes continued shifting until the woman was old and frail. When she passed on her staff to a younger woman reluctance was painted on the recipient's face.

“The Kahu always passed the responsibility to the next in line, but they were easily swayed by what the bigger world had to offer.” Mist caressed Mike’s neck, and he realized it was now so thick he couldn’t see the canoe anymore. “It was a life-long responsibility, but they no longer wanted it.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered into the fog, but got no answer. When the scene shifted again, it was similar to the first one. Native islanders were watching the waves as yet another ship arrived, but this one he recognized. It was the same one piloted by Captain Francois de la Douchebag, or whatever his actual name was. When it landed on the shore, the dead rose from the waves and spread out once they reached the treeline.

“He came looking for the fountain of youth,” Namakaokahai whispered in his ear. From the corner of his eye, he thought he could make out her body. When he turned his head to look, she was already gone. “But he discovered something far more powerful.”

“What was it?” Mike asked. The scene shifted, and he was looking at yet another woman carrying the staff. This time, she stood on a ridge looking down at the ocean as Francois and his army tried to climb up the mountain. At her side, Pelé stood with a grim look on her face.

As if in fast forward, the scene changed, revealing how Francois and his army drew ever closer to the top of the mountain. The Kahu used her staff to summon torrential rains and create mudslides, but the dead persisted. Eventually, the scene transformed so that Mike now saw the Kahu standing at the mouth of the cave, staring out into the Big Bog as torchlights moved toward her.

“It was all a part of the Great Game,” said Namakaokahai. “And so a drastic choice was made.” The Kahu and her family gathered at the mouth of the cave, grim determination on their faces as they fled out into the bog and up the steep mountain paths toward the top of the volcano. Once atop the ridge, the Kahu gazed down with tear-filled eyes and threw her staff into the jungle below.

“I don’t understand. She just...gave it up?” Mike felt fingers touch the back of his neck, and then the mists parted. The visions vanished, and he realized the hand touching him belonged to Pelé.

“She did. It was a choice made without my input.” Pelé’s eyes flashed, and the caldera rumbled. The fog disappeared, revealing that they were now across the lake. “You see, the Kahu had access to a place where all the players in the

Great Game can meet and speak, a type of dream world. It was there that she found someone like herself, a woman whose primary purpose was to guard and protect. Even better, she was land-locked, meaning that Captain Francois could not easily obtain his goals of conquest. And so this place was gifted away to become part of what would become your inheritance, and I used my powers to make the Kahu's family forget where it was."

"Damn." Mike shook his head and stared into the canoe. So much had already been lost protecting this place, and now it was under threat once again. After centuries of scheming, he had been lured here and the Captain had been waiting. "I knew that coming was a trap, but didn't realize how deep the plot ran."

"You have been the Caretaker for such a short time, yet have amassed tremendous power. I believe that alone is why you have survived." The canoe's bottom brushed against sand, indicating they had arrived. "And now it is time to show you that legacy, what this place was built to protect."

The structure was hexagonal in shape and carved from what appeared to be a single piece of stone. Mike felt like they were stepping into a temple, and was mildly surprised at how much warmer it was inside. In the center of the hexagon was a thick stone column. Along the walls of the room, ancient glyphs had been carved, all of them glowing in response to their presence. A set of stairs had been built nearby, and Mike realized that the temple itself was just the top of a tower set deep within the earth.

"I don't suppose there's a slide we could use?" he asked as Pelé moved toward the stairs. The goddess scowled at him, but then her features softened.

"I often forget that humor is a tool wielded by those who skipped leg day." She winked, then turned to begin her descent. "Maybe now that you're here, you can put in a rail to slide down on."

They descended into the ground, their passage illuminated by the runes in the wall. The temperature climbed, and Mike regretted not drinking any water when he had the chance. It wasn't until several minutes later that they emerged in a chamber shaped like a dwelling. Wicker furniture had been placed around the room, and he spotted Ratu reclining on a nearby chair.

"Hey!" He jogged past Pelé and was almost to the naga before she was on her feet. Before he could say anything else, she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed so tightly he thought his lungs might burst.

“You’re okay,” Ratu whispered in his ear.

“Yeah,” he gasped out. “But not...for...long.”

“You stupid, stupid man.” She let go and pushed him back, her fingers sliding beneath his shirt to where he had been shot. “You’re aware that naga hide would have prevented this, yes?”

He winced inwardly, then nodded. “Yeah, a mistake on my part.”

“A nearly fatal mistake.” She pulled him in for a kiss, but stopped when her eyes went over his shoulder to where Pelé stood. “My apologies,” she muttered as she stepped away from Mike.

“Don’t allow my presence to soften your reunion.” Pelé moved past the two of them toward a small opening in the wall. “Has the other one awakened yet?”

Ratu shook her head. “No. Ingrid is still unconscious.”

“What happened? Is she okay?” Mike looked around the room. “And where’s Quetzalli?”

“Ingrid had a very nasty shock, but we can deal with that later. Quetzalli is down below. Mike, things are about to get very interesting.” Ratu’s eyes moved back and forth between him and Pelé. “How much has the goddess told you?”

“Not enough,” replied Pelé. “I will remain here in case your friend awakens. The guardian can fill you in on the rest.”

Mike took a deep breath, already dreading the fact that stairs had been mentioned yet again. Getting back up to the cabana was going to be awful. “Lead the way,” he said.

Ratu took him by the hand, then paused to hand him something from inside her kimono. “In case you’re hungry,” she said.

The granola bar was already in his mouth, and he mumbled his thanks around the edges of it. Ratu pulled him through the stone dwelling toward a set of stairs behind the underground structure.

“Are Cerulea and Olivia with Quetzalli?” he asked.

“They are. Those two are having the time of their lives, right now.” They descended the stairs, which only made one revolution before terminating in a six-sided chamber similar in size to what was on the surface. In the middle of the

room was a hexagon engraved into the floor and decorated with gold leaf. “We can take this,” she said, pulling him tight against her. “Unless you’d rather use the stairs.”

“What is it?” he asked as he stepped onto the hexagon. The ground rippled like the surface of a pond, and then the six-sided platform descended. They were surrounded by polished stone as they continued deep into the earth. Sweat beaded up on his head, which he wiped away. “It’s really hot down here,” he said.

“It’s a volcano. Of course it’s hot.” She moved to stand in front of him, her hands reaching for his face. In her reptilian eyes, he watched as tears formed. “Mike, I...when you were shot...”

He pushed his forehead against hers. “I’m really sorry,” he said, his hands now on Ratu’s waist. “We knew something was coming. I should have been better prepared.”

“You gave me a home,” she whispered, her voice echoing off the stone around them. “And a family. I became part of something I thought I had lost, and when you fell away into the darkness, I felt like part of myself had been ripped away.” She trembled in his arms, then broke down. “Just hold me for a bit, so that I can convince myself that you’re really here.”

Shaken by the naga’s uncharacteristic confession, he obeyed. So many times he had ended up in danger to protect others, it had never really occurred to him how it felt for the others to see him risk his life. There were so many things he wanted to say to soothe Ratu, convince her it would be okay, but he decided that his presence would have to be enough. After all, the future was nothing more than a gift, and he could make no promises about it.

The smooth walls of the magical elevator slid away to reveal a massive domed chamber. Below them was a circular platform surrounded by flowing magma. Plants and flowers somehow bloomed down here, and a small pergola had been set up near the rim of the platform. Inside, Mike saw Quetzalli sitting on a stone, her face animated as she conversed with a large stone that had been set against the edge of the circle.

“Is she okay?” asked Mike.

“She is.” Ratu stepped away from him and adjusted her kimono. “You’ll see.”

The platform came to a smooth halt, and the two of them walked toward the pergola. A cool breeze came out of nowhere, and Mike closed his eyes and sighed when it ruffled his hair.

“This place is totally lethal, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Indeed. There is a powerful enchantment to protect the Kahu and their families. Anyone else coming down here would be at the heart of the volcano, smothered by lethal gasses if not boiled alive inside their own skin first.” Ratu pointed to the far wall of the chamber where magma fell from above, forming a curtain of molten fire. “Everything about this place was built to protect a single thing, which is behind there. If you try, I bet you can feel it.”

Mike stared at the flowing wall of magma, but was forced to look away. “The air might be safe, but that genuinely hurts my eyes,” he said. “Feels like staring into the sun for too long.”

Quetzalli turned to look at them, then jumped to her feet and ran. Ratu let go of Mike’s arm just as Quetzalli barreled into him, her arms wrapped around his body. He leaned his head to one side to keep from being impaled on her horn and then took a big step back to avoid falling over.

“Did Ratu already call you a dummy?” she asked from the crook of his arm.

“Yep.”

“Good.” She looked up at him, her eyes crackling with energy. “I am grateful that you aren’t as soft as other humans.”

“Same.” He ran his hands through her hair, feeling sparks crackle between his fingertips. “So what’s going on down here?” He looked back to where Quetzalli had been sitting and noticed both Olivia and Cerulea scrambling over the rock. “What are those two doing?”

“Playing with their new friend.” Quetzalli led him to the pergola, where he was delighted to see a basin full of water. He paused just long enough for Quetzalli to hand him a silver cup, then drank his fill. Sighing in relief, he looked at Cerulea and Carmina, who were casually ducking between thorny protuberances on the rock that looked like small stalagmites. “Are you two being good?”

Cerulea stuck out her tongue in response. Olivia giggled and hid herself behind a stalagmite, which melted away as the surface of the rock transformed. “Hey!” she cried, giving a nearby nub a kick. “Not fair!”

The stone continued to shift and two massive openings appeared near the top. A massive blast of air came from them as the rock lifted from the magma. What had been a large stone was revealed to be the snout of a massive beast as it lifted its head free of the magma pool and opened citrine eyes that were roughly the size of a man.

The dragon's head was supported by a serpentine neck adorned with glittering gemstones. As it gazed down at him, he felt an instant connection to the creature and knew that he was meeting the guardian of the secret island.

"My name is Mike Radley," he said, taking a step forward. "What may I call you?"

The dragon turned its face toward Quetzalli and let out a huff. When it spoke, the voice was like tumbling stones, yet held a feminine edge.

"You're right, little sister. He is cute." The dragon leaned forward and inhaled deeply, the air current causing Mike's shirt to billow upward. "For a human, anyway."

"Little...sister?" Mike looked at Quetzalli.

"An honorific among my kind," she stated with a grin. "Unless a dragon's lifespan predates yours by many centuries, in which case we use terms like mother or father."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Mike Radley." The dragon twisted her head to one side, then lay flat on the ground so that Mike was facing the front of her mouth. A pair of large whiskers unfurled from above her mouth and hovered over him. He held up an arm, which the dragon wrapped gently in a whisker. "You may call me Di."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Di."

"The pleasure is mine. It has been long since this place has had its protector visit, and I am glad to have you here." Di sniffed him once again, and then her powerful neck flexed. All around the chamber, he saw massive coils shift amongst the magma. "I am told you will have many questions."

"I will." He stepped toward Di and held his hand over her stony hide. "May I?"

"Please."

Mike pressed his hand against Di and closed his eyes. He could sense the magic moving through her massive body, intertwined so tightly with this place. In a way, it felt like he was standing before Naia, but the dragon's entire being radiated with peace and something else. He tried to discern the feeling, but it slipped away from him.

"I sense great power in you as well, Caretaker." Di chuckled, a noise that made the earth tremble. "What would you ask of me?"

"Are you a fire dragon?" he asked.

"I am of the earth," Di replied. It occurred to Mike that the dragon hadn't moved her lips at all. "Though there is some overlap."

"Do you know why I came?" he asked.

"I do." Di lifted her head to look down on him from above once more. "Because of what happened with the merfolk."

"What did happen?" he asked, squinting up at Di. The weird light of the chamber hurt his eyes and he made a mental note to see if his sunglasses had survived in his backpack.

Di's mood darkened, and her coils manifested in the magma once more. "I was awoken from my slumber," she said, her voice grim. "By a powerful enemy, one that lives in the darkest depths of the ocean. When I sensed its presence, I knew that I must rise up and drive it away immediately. And so I left this place, crawled down the mountain, and unleashed my fury."

"What was it?" he asked.

"I do not know," she replied. "I have never met its kind, and can only sense its malfeasance. I am blind to the spectrum your kind take for granted. Down here, in the depths, I can see you through the vibrations of the earth, sense your strength by how you walk across the stone. I can see the heat in your body, but little else about you.

"And so I asked the goddess to guide me to the sands to do battle with this beast. It was the same temperature as the water, and so the goddess used her magic to light the way for me. Despite my efforts, it kept coming out of the waves, desperate to ascend the mountain, but I refused. And so Pelé boiled the water, driving it away but not killing it. I regret the deaths that followed, but they are not my burden to carry."

Mike took a deep breath and properly digested Di's words. There was an unknown enemy here, and he would bet good money that the Captain was involved. Looking at the whole event through the lens of a plot to steal whatever treasure had been hidden here helped the pieces fall into place, but he needed to know one more thing.

"What is it that you're protecting, Di? Why was this place built?"

Di snorted, then turned her head toward the magmaflow behind her. A powerful thrum of magic manifested from the dragon, and the magma parted at the bottom like a pair of curtains. Her coils lifted free of the magma, forming into a narrow stone bridge connecting the platform to what lay beyond.

Mike walked toward the bridge, his heart pounding as he stepped onto the rocks. Quetzalli and Ratu joined him. The cool breeze ceased, and for a few moments, he felt the wrath of this place assail his skin.

"Do not tarry long in there," said Di as he neared the opening. "For that room was built for what lies within and nothing more."

Nodding, he stepped between the fiery ribbons of magma into a darkened chamber. The room was filled with elemental magic, but he could see nothing else.

"May I?" he asked, holding a hand aloft. "Just need some light."

"Of course," whispered Di through the stone walls.

With the snap of his fingers, he created a flickering ball of light and tossed it into the air. It hovered overhead, casting light on a group of objects in the center of the room. He originally mistook them for a collection of massive gemstones, each one the size of a child. But just as his magical senses touched the surface of the stones, he felt something reach back.

The stones were alive. He took another step toward them, suddenly aware of the heat in the room. Sweat was dripping down his face now, but he had to be sure. The stone nearest to him looked like a diamond, and when he put his hand against it, his mind briefly connected with the alien consciousness within.

"Holy fucking shit," he whispered in awe. "They're alive!"

"You can feel them?" Di's voice was filled with wonder. "That shouldn't be possible."

Mike moved to each egg, pressing his hand against their warm surfaces. He took a moment to greet them, to let who he was wash over the developing consciousness within. The only one that didn't respond was an onyx egg that reflected no light. When Mike touched that one, he sensed nothing at all.

Quetzalli and Ratu did the same, both of them whispering to themselves in wonderment. No longer able to tolerate the oppressive heat, Mike stepped away from the eggs. Without another word, he exited the chamber with Quetzalli and Ratu right behind them.

"Are they yours?" he asked, looking at Di.

"They are not," she replied, watching him as he walked across her body. "When dragons fled this world, those who stayed behind were hunted. Some of them fell in battle, and their eggs were rescued from those who would use their powers for evil. They were brought here to incubate for centuries until they were ready to hatch."

"So these are all the dragon eggs remaining in our world?" he asked.

"They are." Di's eyes glowed like twin stars above him. "Each one represents one of the elements. Some day, when the last one is fertilized, they will all hatch."

"But why?" asked Mike. "Won't they just be hunted?"

"They were never meant for this world, Caretaker." Di lowered her head until Mike could feel her hot breath on his skin. "These eggs were intended for another purpose."

"Which is what?" Mike looked at Ratu, then Quetzalli. They both seemed just as confused as he was.

"Alone, they will be powerful. But together?" Di's body sank into the magma, the molten rock flowing right up to the edge of the platform. "You could use them to rebuild the world."
