

The Company Man

Cyrus walked the long halls of the underground installation, his hands tucked into his pockets as he moved with the grace of a man his age. Maybe it was the lingering dampness, an old back injury, or perhaps the weight of the world on his shoulders that had him moving at a snail's pace. He had only been at the secret base for a few hours, but was already well aware that some of the others referred to him in hushed tones as The Fossil.

That was fine. They could call him whatever they liked. Right now, in this moment, nothing about himself actually mattered. He had received word nearly an hour ago that two assets had been seized and were on their way. In his hands was a file folder with a picture of Callisto Radley, taken at a park near the house. The boy was actually a centaur who had been taken from his tribe, which had been hidden away in the magical greenhouse.

The other asset was a young child who had been with him in the centaur village. Nobody knew her name or if she was even important to Mike, but that hadn't mattered. Darius had somehow led an assault on the centaurs by himself that had yielded rewards and created more than a few questions in Cyrus' mind.

Every moment up to this point no longer mattered. Cyrus continued his exploration in slow motion, hoping to come up with a plan. The ventilation system was far too small for even a child to squeeze through and monitored by a laser grid. This whole facility had been designed once upon a time by someone else for the capture of the cryptids in Mike Radley's home, and no expense had been spared.

The hallway he traveled now was like a tomb, eerily devoid of sound. He stopped every so often to lean against the wall as if to stretch. In reality, he was probing the walls with his magic, an old trick he had learned from a mentor long ago. What had his name been?

"Fredericks," Cyrus muttered, pulling at that thread. "Master Fredericks, during my field studies. Short man, black hair, had a scar from a vampire on his left cheek...no, wait, that was Brother Blake. He was there for the field study, which was taught by Master Fenton, not Fredericks. Fredericks was the name of...someone. Hmm." He let his fingers linger on the wall, the mana penetrating about six feet deep with no results. Cyrus had a last name once, but he couldn't

remember it. Back when he was a child, the Order had told him that last names were better off forgotten. That way, no being could gain power over them by using their true name.

He wondered what his last name had been. It started with an E...right? It felt strange to have forgotten something so important, but he had been young when the Order had scooped him up from the orphanage. Getting three square meals a day and being able to sleep through the night was a far better deal than waiting to starve to death in a Russian gulag. What sort of life would he have led if he had somehow managed to survive?

In all honesty, he probably would have died. Many from his hometown had simply ceased to exist. That's what happened when you were poor and unimportant. It was like everything about you was simply folded up on a piece of paper and tossed into a fire.

In the grand scheme of things, that had actually happened the moment Cyrus had joined the Order. Sure, people knew him or of him, but he would eventually become little more than a name in stories that others told. It wouldn't be the same as being remembered. For decades, he had held onto the belief that he was part of a giant family, one that looked out for each other. Thirty years ago, this was probably true. He fondly remembered the names and faces of so many men and women who had come before him, of listening to their tales with eager ears and lots of questions.

Maybe it had been a family back then, but not anymore. The winds of change had carried away fertile soil, leaving behind only sand. That was the problem with growing older than everyone else. You got to be alone with nothing but memories in the end.

Cyrus sighed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. His sinuses were a mess, and they didn't make the headache that had formed any better. A dull thud had appeared between his eyes, and it almost felt like he could hear it echoing off the walls.

"Cyrus?"

He turned to see Sister Laurel standing behind him, her chin lifted slightly as she regarded him with open disdain.

"That's Master Cyrus," he said.

“Not anymore,” she replied. “Last I checked, protocol dictates that proper titles are to be used with—”

“Oh, please. Don’t quote your protocols at me.”

Laurel regarded him coolly. “Any active members or former members who are in good standing,” she continued. “And as far as I can tell, you abandoned the current mission to take a job with the SoS. Until I hear otherwise from the Director, I consider you to be in poor standing.”

“Then let’s talk to him.” Cyrus almost smiled at the idea of learning how to get a message out. “Right now, if we could.”

“Radio silence for the next 72 hours is mandatory. I don’t care how much the Sons are paying you, I refuse to call you Master anymore. This may just be a job to you, but my job is a calling for me.”

Cyrus snorted. “I used to feel the same way. All it took to dissuade me of my own importance was a simple fall from grace. You are never more than one bad situation away from becoming an outsider. If the Director had seen what a mess you were only yesterday, you’d already be out the door. I seriously doubt he would have agreed to transfer you here.”

“It’s okay to admit that you need help.” Laurel sniffed. “While those moments weren’t my finest, I own them. As for my presence here, you have Darius himself to thank. He specifically requested me and my team.”

“What do you want, Laurel?” Cyrus watched in satisfaction as the young woman’s nostrils flared.

“I was sent to inform you that the assets are nearly here. They want you upstairs in the next ten minutes to prep for prisoner transfer.”

“They’re children, Laurel. Hostages might be a better word for them, don’t you think?”

Laurel actually gazed at him sadly. “You’ve lost your edge,” she said. “Nothing about that family is harmless, even if they are children. Do you know how many good men and women we probably lost today? I’ve heard rumors that it’s devastatingly bad.”

Cyrus almost snapped and told Laurel that the number was zero, because no good person would attempt to harm someone through their own children, but

kept it to himself. He needed everyone's trust for now, and it wouldn't surprise him if Laurel was somehow attempting to make him look incompetent in this job, too.

"What rumors?" he asked as he moved past Laurel and back toward the main facility.

"Not a whole lot," she said. "They were monitoring comms upstairs, listening only. Heard talk about dragons, an actual hell hound, and that doll appeared. But nothing for awhile now. They fear that everyone involved has been terminated."

"Damn." Cyrus licked his lips, then cleared his throat. He was afraid to ask, but had to know. "Did we, uh, get any of *them* in the process?"

"Not sure yet." Laurel sped up to walk just a little bit in front of him. "Hopefully we killed someone. It's never right when we lose one of ours and they don't."

Us versus them. Cyrus took a deep breath in through his nose and studied the ceiling for a moment. Such a simple ideology, summed up in three words.

"Well, hopefully we hear something soon." Laurel walked away, her footsteps echoing. Cyrus frowned, knowing full well that the woman knew how to move without making any sounds. The act reminded him of another drama queen he knew. "Also, I'm supposed to ask you if we should separate the assets."

There it was. A simple question, the trap suddenly laid bare. Cyrus was overseeing this part of the operation, true, but only a completely miserable asshole would separate two children. This was Laurel's way of testing to see if he was still with US, or if he had somehow sided with THEM.

"Of course we're going to separate them." He tsk'ed at her. "The boy's file says he's a centaur, but what about the girl?"

"Unknown. Human, we assume. It sounds like she came quietly."

"We have that cell for the succubus. Go ahead and toss the girl in there and we can put the boy next to her in the banshee's cell. That way, if we're dealing with the demon, we won't fall for it later." Cyrus secretly hoped the girl was Lily. The enochian seal was almost identical to the one he had tried to trap her in once upon a time, and she had escaped that with little difficulty.

“Hmm.” Laurel almost sounded disappointed. “Why next to each other?”

“They’re still children. Well, one of them is, anyway.” Cyrus cleared his throat. “If they were found together, it will probably be easier to ask them questions by threatening to torture the other. Those cells are separated by reinforced glass capable of stopping bullets and safely housing any animal on the planet. But that also means they can see each other. We’ll identify the weak link and make them talk.”

“Ruthless. Didn’t know you had it in you.”

“You should watch me clipping coupons,” he said. Cyrus heard Laurel bite back a laugh and tried not to roll his eyes. He had never hated the back of somebody’s head so much. If the little girl really was Lily, maybe he’d have her snack on Laurel before they headed out.

No, that was a thought too far. Now he was grumpy with himself for even thinking it. When was the last time he had gotten enough sleep? Maybe that was the problem.

The thought made him chuckle. Laurel looked back at him in confusion, but he ignored her. He no longer cared what she thought, or anyone else in this place, for that matter. With every step, he forged another band of iron from his will and wrapped it tightly around his heart.

He returned to the main bay with Laurel, taking a small detour on the way to use the bathroom. While in the privacy of his stall, he went through the contents of his pockets, triple-checking the magic and items at his disposal. Now that he stood waiting for Callisto Radley to arrive, he looked around the bay as if it was a giant chess set. What moves could he make, and in what order, to ensure the survival of himself and the children?

The members of the Order who were working there were his biggest problem right now. The Sons of Sin were weak against magical attacks, which was a defensive gap that the Order’s mages filled quite nicely. Cyrus would need more than just the element of surprise to break the kids out. As for the children, the boy was a centaur. He was capable of running, but where to? And what about the girl?

Staring hard at the door, his eyes slid to the mechanism that opened it. The device was a massive set of gears with a locking mechanism made up of separate pins. He had two ways he could open it with magical brute force, a possible third if

he could get his hands on an RPG, or maybe he could access the control room and simply open it with the press of a button.

He studied the various forces that had been gathered. At least six different SoS teams were in rotation on the door itself, which seemed like overkill. With two Order teams, there were nearly fifty people on this door at all times. This was the real reason the facility felt empty. It had been explained to him that the whole compound was capable of being run by roughly ten people, but that hinged largely on not needing to worry about a defensive force.

The comms inside the base were all hard-wired to prevent detection from the outside. They consisted largely of intercom systems which could easily be shorted with the lightning rod he carried. If he could activate the fire suppression system, that would provide more than ample confusion. He could get the doors open and make a break for it, no problem.

Well, it wouldn't be as long as he could figure out how to dodge bullets while towing two children by this afternoon. Even with the magical amulet in his pocket, he could only take a few direct hits. That also depended on the caliber of the bullet. When the bay door opened, he flinched at the sudden sound of turning gears.

"Jumpy?" asked Laurel with a smirk. She was definitely enjoying his discomfort.

Had Cyrus ever been this disrespectful to another mage? What if he set her on fire, just a little? Then again, the woman had already suffered a small mental breakdown this week. When people were pressed against the wall and forced to endure difficult circumstances, who they really were inside tended to leak out.

"What was that?" Cyrus pretended to unclog his ear with a finger.

"Nothing." Laurel turned her eyes forward and stood at attention. When the doors parted, a black van pulled through the narrow gap. The gears immediately reversed course, the doors sliding shut with a clomping sound that made the old mage's ears pop. When the vehicle came to a halt, an SoS team surrounded it, guns drawn. Darius himself stepped out from behind the driver's seat, his sunglasses still on despite being indoors.

Elizabeth, the witch, got out of the passenger side, took a moment to smooth down her dress, then moved to the side doors. "We need these two

alive," she said, addressing the men in the room. "Or the boy, anyway. We're not sure yet about the girl."

"Wait." Cyrus stepped forward, a hand outstretched. "If I may?"

Elizabeth stared at him in curiosity, her dark eyes glittering beneath the halogen lights. "May you what?"

"You're the ones who abducted them. They all have guns. Kids take a certain level of...deception." He patted himself on the chest. "Good cop, bad cop. I understand you want to pump these kids for information while they're here, and I'll squeeze every drop out of them as the friendly, grandfather type. If we need a heavy hand, Laurel is already a bitch."

Laurel squeaked in protest, but Cyrus ignored her. He looked deep into Elizabeth's eyes, trying to implore her to see things his way through body language alone.

"Anyway, it was just a thought," he said. "This whole thing is your show, one hundred percent. But you did contract with me specifically to care for whatever prisoners you brought in. I didn't expect kids, but we've already made small alterations to their arrangements to maximize containment and intelligence gathering efforts. I remember that you have a daughter, I saw it in the file. Hopefully you remember that a little bit of kindness goes way further with children than anything else."

Darius threw an odd look in Elizabeth's direction, as if curious to hear the witch's response.

"A sound decision," she said as she moved away from the door and gestured toward it. "Though child rearing is a bit different these days."

"Kids are always kids," Cyrus said as he put his hand on the door. From inside, he heard a bit of shuffling, followed by an odd snapping sound. When he opened the sliding door, it was to reveal a van bereft of seating. On the floor, a centaur boy sat awkwardly, clutching the hand of a little girl. She hissed at Cyrus, baring her teeth. "Hey there."

Callisto narrowed his eyes at Cyrus, then looked past him at the armed men. "We want to go home."

"I know you do. And you know what? I'm going to do everything in my power to help you do that. My name is Cyrus." He extended a hand in greeting,

the sleeve sliding up to reveal the bracelet that Dana had given him. It was a long shot, but the way Callisto's eyes flicked toward it and then widened revealed that the gamble was a success.

The little girl lunged forward and tried to take a bite out of his hand.

"Grace, no!" Callisto pulled his sister back and whispered something in her ear. She stared unblinkingly at Cyrus, her face somehow extremely familiar. Had he seen her around the house before? Her bangs hung across the front of her face, concealing her eyes.

"It's okay. I know she's scared. We can shake hands later, man to man." Cyrus took a step back and gestured at the mercenaries. "So these people here are the bad guys. But you knew that, right?"

Callisto snorted, clutching Grace. "They're assholes," he said. One of the mercenaries actually snickered.

"Yep, that's right. But these assholes are in charge. Now, if you and your friend here will cooperate, they'll let me take you to the special rooms we have set aside for you. But if you don't, there's a very bad lady over there who will probably hurt you if you disobey." He pointed at Laurel now, whose cheeks had turned red.

Callisto stared hard at Laurel in a defiant way exclusive to children. "Jenny says hi."

Laurel's hand actually moved toward her wand, but she restrained herself. Cyrus moved to block Callisto's view and shook his head.

"Now that wasn't very nice," he said, then held a hand to his mouth and stage-whispered. "But it was pretty funny."

The centaur shook his head. "We'll come. My sister might need help. Her legs are, um, weak."

Cyrus winced at the word sister, but the cat was out of the bag now. "I'll carry her if she lets me." He held out a hand for Grace, who gave Callisto a dirty look as she was pushed into the old man's arms. She was surprisingly light, but Cyrus still had to fight the ruffles of her dress. While she was shifting about, he noticed the green slap bracelet on her wrist.

"What a pretty bracelet," he said. "Did your mommy give it to you?"

Grace didn't answer. Instead, she stared through a blanket of hair into his eyes with an intensity that actually made him sweat a little. Where had he seen those eyes before?

Callisto grunted as he slid his equine bulk across the van and allowed Cyrus to help him out with a free hand. He stumbled a couple of times, causing more than one mercenary to raise their weapon. The centaur looked back at them, head high and shoulders thrown back.

Cyrus felt something at his side and looked down to see that Callisto's hand was brushing against his coat. The old man shifted Grace, allowing him to take Callisto's hand in his own.

"If you'll excuse us, we're going to head down to our rooms now." Cyrus squeezed Callisto's hand. "Let's give them a chance to settle for awhile, and then there will be time for questions."

Laurel opened her mouth to say something, but Grace hissed at her. Behind the mage, Elizabeth smirked, her head cocked to one side with her hands on her waist. She looked rather pleased with herself. Darius, however, looked like he was going to be ill. His skin had taken on a sallow cast. The man had seemed fine this morning. What had changed?

Laurel and her people left with Cyrus, staying back about twenty feet. When they got to the elevator, Cyrus cleared his throat and turned to face them.

"There's not a lot of room in here," he said, though the elevator was meant for cargo. "Perhaps you could take the stairs, or get it next time."

"We're supposed to—"

"That's an order, Laurel." Cyrus grinned. "If you disapprove, you should go tell on me and hope you get promoted."

The door slid open and Cyrus stepped inside. When he looked back, he saw that Laurel was apparently capable of turning a brilliant shade of crimson.

"Stairs would probably be best," he said. "If you run, you can make sure I didn't get ambushed by a pair of children."

When the door closed, he wiped the smile off his face and let go of Callisto's hand. "I have an itch is all," he said as he scratched his chin, then pulled a ring from his breast pocket. It slid neatly onto his pinky finger, and then he took the

centaur's hand again. When he spoke, he did so while looking down. "We don't have long. This ring will keep our conversation from being picked up by the microphone."

"It will?" Callisto looked up at Cyrus, then noticed how his head was positioned and mimicked him. "Okay."

"I need you to know I meant every word I said before." Cyrus wasn't certain how much to tell the kids, but they needed to know how bad the situation was. "They're planning to hold you here forever, no matter what you tell them. They want to blackmail your dad."

"I figured." Callisto grunted. "Aunt Tink explained it to me a couple of days ago."

"How did they capture you?" Cyrus looked over at the centaur. "Weren't you hidden by the house?"

"It was that man with the sunglasses." Callisto shivered. "He attacked the village with magical fire and a bunch of demons he summoned."

"Demons?" This was an interesting development. To his knowledge, nobody in the SoS was any sort of spell-caster, much less a summoner. Was this some sort of massive secret they kept, or was there something else going on?

"Yeah, I think a lot of people got hurt, maybe even..." Callisto trailed off. "When they found me, I tried to get Grace to run away and hide, but she refused."

"Why?" Cyrus noticed that the little girl had quite the grip.

"Because my dad told us to take care of each other." Callisto sniffed. "I wish she had just gone."

"She doesn't seem to talk much."

The centaur shook his head. "She can't talk yet."

"I don't suppose she's a half-breed like you?" Cyrus raised an eyebrow. "Depending on what she is, it might help us figure out how to escape."

"I'm really not supposed to say, but everyone will figure it out soon enough. She's a—" Callisto snapped his mouth shut as the doors to the elevator slid open. Cyrus hadn't even noticed they had arrived in the detention area already. Some

guards were waiting for them, weapons slung across their fronts. Cyrus pulled his pinky out of the ring and stepped forward with the children.

“Good afternoon,” he said, being sure to make deliberate eye contact with everyone. “These will be our guests, if you know what I mean. Are their rooms ready?”

Some of the guards exchanged looks, but didn’t bother questioning why the old mage sounded so cheery.

“They are.” One of the guards tilted his head down the hallway. “All nice and warm.”

“Great. This way, children.” They moved down the hallway to where the cells were set up. Callisto stopped outside the cell made for him, his eyes now shimmering with tears.

“I want to go home,” he said.

“I know. But look, this place isn’t all that bad.” Cyrus walked in with both kids and gestured. “Plenty of room to stretch.”

“For a human. There isn’t even a bed.”

“I’ll see about getting you one.” Cyrus gestured toward the corner. “This room was originally built for a banshee, so there aren’t any restraints. Why don’t you have a seat and I’ll see about getting you something to eat.”

Callisto said nothing, but now had a look of doubt in his eyes, as if he suspected Cyrus had tricked him. Uncertain how to secretly reassure the boy, he stepped away, taking Grace with him.

“As for you, this room is yours.” Cyrus walked just down the hall to the open doorway that awaited. A pair of guards had already closed and locked Callisto’s door and were headed toward Cyrus.

At the entry to the room, Grace let go of Cyrus and snatched the rim of the door with her fingertip, effectively halting any forward movement. Cyrus tried to push forward, but the child was impossibly strong, somehow capable of resisting him.

“Please,” he whispered. “I need you to trust me.”

Grace hissed in his ear, the sound like nails on a chalkboard, causing all the hair on his neck to stand on end. Cyrus grunted and pushed some more, which caused Grace's fingers to slip.

"Don't be like this," he begged, noticing that the guards had taken notice of his struggles. "Please, we need to—"

Grace's fingers slipped and both of them tumbled forward into the room. Cyrus lost his balance and fell, stumbling at the last second as Grace fell free of him. He took a knee and groaned as several old injuries dropped by to check in on him.

"Sir?" One of the guards now stood right behind him.

"I'm fine," Cyrus said, waving the man back. "I just tripped. It's fine."

The guard backed out of the door and took up his post. Cyrus rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. When he looked up, he saw that Grace was watching him, her eyes never blinking. The hair on her forehead had fallen back, revealing a series of obsidian orbs that contemplated him silently. He could see his own stunned reflection in each of them.

His heart jackhammered in his chest as he let his gaze drop to where the dark folds of her dress had ridden up to reveal a pair of human legs and no more. Letting out a sigh of relief, he shifted back as Grace grabbed the slap bracelet on her wrist and gave it a tug.

The bracelet slid free. Like a magic trick, her legs shifted forward and several more appeared, all of them glossy and dark. The little girl pulled her legs in to cover them with her skirt, effectively hiding her nature from view, yet she never broke eye contact with Cyrus. Grace pulled her bangs forward to hide her arachnid eyes from view, her gaze almost accusatory.

Cyrus struggled for air as he felt the light brush of thousands of legs reach across the decades to crawl once more across his body, hundreds of mouths biting and tearing at his flesh. Pulse racing, Cyrus bit back a scream as he rose to his feet and stumbled out of the cell.

There was the stench of blood and fear in the air as Mike stepped out of what was left of Death's teahouse. The remains had been cobbled together for a

portal, but that was about it. The mood was somber as everyone came through quietly.

Everyone except Mohan. Lily threw the man through head-first, where he collided with a stone statue that looked sort of like Abella. The others were already waiting for them, standing around the fountain with bleak looks on their faces. Mike noticed that almost none of them made eye contact with him, pointedly looking away in shame. Hanging from Aymone's tree were several men and women, all of them bound with spider silk and trying to call for help.

"Who are they?" he asked, gesturing toward the tree. His hands still shook from the surge of power that had almost claimed him on the beach. In the back of his mind, there had been the tiniest whisper that wanted to know if it was possible to snap a naga's neck single-handedly. It had taken everything in Mike's power just to cast Mohan to the ground to avoid finding out the answer. Though he knew that was the right decision, a large part of him still wished he had tried.

Eulalie hopped down from the tree, her features stricken. "Order and Sons of Sin we captured," she said. "We couldn't catch them all. We thought maybe Lily could take a look inside their heads and see where the kids were taken."

From his place on the ground, Mohan chuckled. Lily grabbed and lifted him by his feet with her tail, letting him hang upside down. It was probably just an accident that he banged his head on a nearby rock twice in a row.

"It won't work," he said smugly. "The only people who knew about the location are already there. Your children are gone, Caretaker, maybe forever. Now, I suppose I could ask Darius very nicely to return them, but that would require—"

Lily dunked him in Naia's fountain and let go. Mohan sputtered in rage and tried to stand, but froze as if held in place. His eyes lit from within as he attempted to rise, but couldn't. Naia emerged from the water, her once soothing gaze now like ice.

"Do you know where they are?" she asked.

"He doesn't," replied Lily. "I already did a deep dive in his head, which took me longer than usual. The guy is a pretty big asshole, which means I had to dig through a lot of shit to find what I wanted. After that, he let me watch how they set the whole thing up. Darius actually suggested that he find a secret location to hold them."

“And he targeted the kids deliberately?” Naia’s eyes flashed gold.

“Sort of. He wanted to take some grown-ups, but Darius was extremely confident they could get Callisto.” The succubus knelt by the edge of the fountain. “He agreed because he thought it would hurt Romeo the most.”

“So what next?” asked Mohan with a grin. “Do you plan on holding me here forever?”

“What do you say, Romeo? Is there something in the Vault we could feed him to?” Lily’s tail whipped back and forth. “Or maybe Naia could drown him.”

Abella slammed a fist into her palm. “I have some ideas,” she said.

Mike looked past all of them, his eyes on Zel. The centaur stood with her head high and shoulders back. It was clear that she had cried so hard that most of the blood vessels in her eyes had already burst.

He walked toward her, then stopped at arm’s length. From there, he could see the way her lips quivered as if she was struggling to hold the universe together and might fail at any moment.

“What does Centaur Law say?” he asked quietly. “If anybody has a claim on him, it’s you and your people. I understand he attacked the village?”

“People died,” she said in a whisper. “We weren’t expecting it.”

“Centaur, not people,” Mohan corrected. “I can hear you all perfectly clear, by the way. Don’t bother lowering your—”

The water devoured him, pulling him underneath. The seconds ticked away as he fought to get free, but couldn’t return to the surface. The members of the house watched in silence as the man slowly drowned, desperately summoning bubbles of air to breathe.

“Let him out,” said Mike. “But keep holding him.”

Mohan broke the surface of the water and let out a gurgling laugh.

“I see how it is, Caretaker! Not man enough to do it on your own, are you?”

Mike knelt at the fountain’s edge. “So if we ask real nicely, you’ll help me get my children back?”

Mohan smirked. "No. Asking nicely won't do it. I want her." He pointed at Ratu. "I want her word that she'll return with me and fulfill the pledge she made to stand by my side so many years ago."

Ratu looked at Mike with more than a little fear in her eyes. He realized at that moment that she would rather die than go with Mohan. However, if he asked her to go, she would do it just to help him.

"She doesn't belong to you," he said as he stood. "And she never will."

"Then you should probably just kill me," Mohan said, pulling dramatically at the collar of his shirt to reveal his chest. "Because I intend to come back for her, Caretaker. No matter how many times it takes, she will be mine again."

There were many things Mike wanted to say. He wanted to explain that he wasn't a killer, that his power might evolve in dangerous ways if used in anger rather than self defense. That there were so many better ways to work through problems than to trade lives like pieces on a chess board.

But in a way, Mohan was right. The naga had hurt his family gravely and would only do so again. Thinking of the many people who just died on his lawn and at Paradise, he took a deep breath and held it for ten seconds before letting it out.

"I won't kill you," he said, then looked at Zel. "Your actions hurt her people. Therefore, I leave your fate to her."

Mohan's laughter bordered on hysteria.

"Centaur? You're handing me over to horses?" The Director rolled his eyes. "What are they going to do, put me in stocks? Tie ropes around me and try to pull me apart? Even if I sat back and allowed them to harm me, they *couldn't*. They are an inferior species, just like mankind."

"Maybe I'll stuff dragon's breath up your ass." Zel already had a vial of the stuff in her hand. "Smack it with a paddle to break it until you pull out your own intestines."

"And there you have it, Caretaker. Childish threats. I ate molten rock as a child. Do you really think dragon's breath will have any effect on me?" Mohan laughed again. "Okay, then, centaur, I accept your punishment."

“Not so fast.” The voice that spoke was both old and young, filled with the forbidden promises of springtime. In the span of a moment, flowers bloomed across the surface of Naia’s fountain, trickling down the edges and onto the ground. The scorched earth surrounding the backyard erupted as blades of grass broke through it, reaching toward the golden figure that had appeared as if she were the sun. “I would make a claim on this one.”

“Your majesty?” Mike stared in disbelief at the Queen of the Fae. She was wearing a crimson gown with a dark crown of obsidian on her head. Remembering his fae manners, he knelt his head in reverence. “You honor us with your presence.”

“I am not here for you, Caretaker.” Titania’s golden eyes blazed as she studied him for several long moments. “Before you make any decision regarding this man’s fate, I have a claim of my own to make.”

“Then speak, Queen of the Fae.” Mike threw a warning look at Lily and was relieved to see that the succubus had not only moved away from her, but had taken on the guise of a child and was hiding behind Asterion to avoid notice. “We find ourselves in the middle of a difficult situation, but are willing to offer you simple fare should you desire it.”

“I won’t be here long.” Titania studied Mohan in the same way that she had looked at Mike. The gaze of the fae was inscrutable this time, but something Mohan saw had him shivering pathetically in the fountain. “You see, Caretaker, I have come on a matter of grave importance. I was informed that a rather egregious break in Hospitality occurred on these premises.”

“I wasn’t even here,” said Mohan with a sneer. “The fae have no claim.”

“You were the one who sent your people here. You gave them their instructions, all in the guise of luring the Caretaker to a different location just so you could betray him.”

Mohan actually paled. “And? I can smell death in the air. If anyone broke Hospitality, it was the Caretaker’s family.”

“Many of the dead were not your people. The others were not offered Hospitality and I care nothing for them.” Titania smiled, and it was terrifying. “Did not his people offer you food? Did they not offer good company?” The faerie queen surveyed everyone. “Where is Death? I believe he offered these things on your behalf.”

Mike frowned. Where *was* the Reaper?

“Death is not here, your majesty.” Eulalie stepped forward and did an odd curtsy.

“Interesting. I have not spoken with one of your kind in centuries.” Titania’s gown rippled, briefly turning green. “Where is he?”

“On a mission to recover the children, your majesty. He’s really good with maps, so I sent him, Bigfoot, Dana—”

Titania waved her off. “I don’t need details. Where is my daughter?”

Cecilia floated toward the fae queen and bowed. “Your majesty.”

“Did you witness Hospitality given?”

The banshee nodded. “In my own way, your majesty. The one known as Death offered them tea on many occasions. The mortal known as Cyrus accepted this Hospitality on their behalf while he was here.”

“Indeed. Where is your brother?”

“I be here, your majesty.” Suly stepped forward. There was a dark stain on the side of his head that was criss-crossed with black veins.

“You were hurt.” Titania’s voice was like a knife.

“I’ve ‘ad worse, yer majesty.” He bowed. “I be blessed that they forgot to use silver. I also witnessed first hand the break in Hospitality.”

Titania turned to face Zel. “It would seem that we have competing claims, Chieftain of the Moon tribe.” Her voice softened. “This man is responsible for the abduction of your child on a completely different property. However, he did break the laws of Hospitality to do so. I suppose we could debate which crime occurred first, but I would be happy to just grant you a favor and allow you to make the claim first.”

Zel scowled at Titania, her eyes briefly shifting over to meet Mike’s. He shook his head and then tilted it in Beth’s direction. Ever since Cecilia’s return from the Royal Court, the general rule was that no deals or conversations should be had with the fae without either Mike or Beth weighing in directly.

“I would like to...defer to my legal counsel on this matter.” Zel was practically grinding her teeth in anger. “I will abide by her words.”

"I see." Titania nodded demurely, an act that was somehow terrifying. The queen turned to Beth, who now stood at attention. "So, what say *you*, then?"

Beth cleared her throat. "Your majesty, it is common for the laws of this country to define legal consequences around whether or not there was intent. This can be the difference between manslaughter and homicide."

"I'm aware of your quaint interpretations, but please continue."

"It would be my understanding that Hospitality was broken the moment this man ordered the children to be taken. The moment of intent, as it were." Beth gestured in Mohan's direction. "So your claim would precede our own, should you and I agree."

"Interestingly enough, this was similar to the argument I intended to make. It would appear we are in agreement." Titania predatory eyes slid over Mohan. "Mohan of the Navaratna Clan, you and the people under your charge were offered Hospitality at this man's home. You were granted both company and something to eat, yet chose to take advantage of your host's kindness to steal away his children."

"He had no right!" Mohan shouted, launching spittle through the air. "This man took the love of my life from me!"

"You love no person other than yourself." Titania's voice was like an assassin's steel blade. "Blades of grass will never be trees, no matter how small you make yourself."

"I challenge him to a duel!" Mohan's features distorted as the scales beneath his skin manifested. "Mike Radley, I challenge you to—"

"Enough." Titania clapped her hands together and there was suddenly no air to breathe. Those who required it knelt down and gasped for several seconds before Titania clapped her hands once again. She turned to face Ratu. "How long do your kind typically live?" she asked, her tone suddenly sweet.

"Typically only a few hundred years," replied Ratu. "Though some do live to be a thousand, depending on their magical abilities. They may also live much longer if they're able to ascend."

"I see." Titania's eyes locked on Mohan. "Have you achieved immortality?"

“Not yet.” Mohan sneered at Titania. “My family will come looking for me. Anything you do to me will fall on whoever can be punished. By hurting me, you only serve to bring harm down on the Caretaker and his family.”

Titania nodded, then looked at Mike. “That was the truth,” she declared. “I’m afraid I will have to do something different.”

Mike took a step back from her. Everyone else but Amymone did the same. The dryad actually squeezed herself into a narrow gap in the trunk of her tree.

“Mohan of the Navaratna Clan, I have decided to give you your heart’s desire. You are sentenced to spend the rest of your life here with Ratu Radley, whereupon you will either ascend or die of old age.”

Everyone’s jaw dropped, including Mohan’s. Ratu stared in shock at the fae queen, her hands trembling.

Mohan leered at Ratu, then let out a laugh. “Did you hear that, Upala? Even the Queen of the Fae sees that my claim is...hold on, did you say Ratu Radley?”

“That is who she is, for better or for worse.” Titania unfolded her arms and lifted Mohan by the head with her upper arms while her lower ones held his body. He squirmed in her grasp as Titania spun him around to face Ratu.

Mike watched in horror as an eerie mana formed around Mohan. It had no color he could discern and was little more than an iridescent fog. The naga opened his mouth in a silent scream as he twitched in Titania’s arms, then eventually went still. The scales on his body rippled wildly, his skin growing loose and sloughing off in chunks.

“What’s happening?” asked Kisa.

“The rest of his life.” Titania’s eyes blazed with fury as chunks of snakeskin fell away from Mohan. “To him, we are near motionless statues as I feed him just enough magic to stay alive, his mind unable to properly connect with his body as roughly ten years pass for every second that I hold him. I did forget that naga like to shed, so this part is a little disturbing.”

Mohan’s open mouth sagged as he started to visibly age. Ratu gestured for Mike to approach, then grabbed him around the waist and pulled him close.

“Kiss me and make me yours,” she whispered, then pressed her lips against his. Mike grabbed her by the waist and dipped her dramatically so that her hair

draped like a curtain behind her. He nuzzled the top of her chest, one hand cupping her breast, then slowly worked his way up her neck until their lips met once more. She clung to him tightly, forcing Mohan to watch for hundreds of years as another man did to her what he could only dream of.

When Mike finally broke the kiss, it was to briefly see the misery highlighted on Mohan's face. The naga's eyes were bloodshot, his mouth open and drooling. In a matter of seconds, his body shriveled up and then turned to sand, leaving behind just a skull in Titania's hands and a serpentine skeleton that fell to the ground.

"It appears he failed to ascend. The Fae will let his clan know that he passed away of old age getting exactly what he wanted," Titania declared, then turned to Zel. The centaur took a cautionary step back, but the fae queen simply held out the skull and placed it in Zel's hands. "At no point was he physically harmed on your property. Now that my claim has been settled, you may have him."

Zel contemplated the fanged skull in her hands, her eyes wide and nostrils flared with fear.

"Oh, I nearly forgot." Titania gazed at the men and women hanging from Amynone's tree. "Some of these people are also guilty of breaking Hospitality. I am also displeased with the ones who attempted to capture and harm Cecilia and Sulyvahn. However, since these men and women were captured in battle, they are very much your prisoners. As such, their lives belong to you." She surveyed the mortals with the eyes of a predator. "Would you like me to take care of them for you?"

Mike stepped forward and stared hard at the men and women dangling from the tree. They looked upon him with pleading eyes.

"Can any of you take me to my children?" he asked.

Most of them simply stared in horror. A few of them nodded enthusiastically. Mike looked at Titania.

"Those ones are lying," she stated as if bored.

The Caretaker stared at his home's attackers for several long seconds. "Last chance. Does anybody here know where my children are?"

Nobody answered this time. Mike looked over at the queen of the fae.

“Your majesty, I must decline your generous offer to take care of them for me.” He waited until he saw the light of hope in their eyes. These people had attacked his home and were directly responsible for the loss of his children. There was a time and place for mercy, but this wasn’t it. “Instead, please consider them a gift. Freely given.”

There was no dramatic exit. One second, Tatania stood next to him, contemplating the people hanging from the tree. The next, she and their captives were gone as if they had never been there at all. Flowers bloomed all along Aymone’s branches where they had hung, the blossoms spiraling down the trunk to form a circle around it.

Lily stepped out from behind the tree and let out a whistle. “There’s a very short list of things I’m scared of,” she said. “That lady is definitely second on the list.”

“If she’s number two, what’s number one?” asked Kisa. She was also staring at Mohan’s skull.

“I must have screwed up my makeup this morning,” Lily muttered as she patted her cheeks. “Because apparently I look like a fucking idiot.”

“You could have just said it’s a secret,” Kisa said with a glare.

Mike looked over at Zel, who still held Mohan’s skull. When their eyes met, he couldn’t quite figure out all the emotions raging behind her gaze. Not knowing what to say, he turned his full attention to Eulalie.

“You have a plan?” he asked.

“I do,” she said, then looked at where Titania had been. “That...I didn’t imagine that, did I? What just happened, it almost feels like a childhood memory rather than just moments ago.”

“You get used to it,” Beth said, then made a face. “Kind of.”

“You should have asked her where the kids were.” Zel’s voice had a chill to it that made Mike shiver.

“The queen be kind, in her own way.” Suly stepped in with a shaking head. “But askin’ her fer favors is ne’er a good idea. T’would be a good chance she’d take yer kin in trade fer that information, or bring ‘em back herself after a hundred years.”

Zel stared at the skull in her hand, then dropped it on the ground. "What's the use of any of you?" she whispered, her voice trembling as the tears came. She galloped toward the greenhouse, rapidly wiping her eyes.

"Should you...go after her?" Eulalie asked.

"No," Mike replied, the hole in his own heart throbbing painfully. "There's nothing I can say to bring her peace. Now is the time for action."

Eulalie nodded. "Cyrus was recruited for some away mission by the SoS," she said, then pulled out a paper map of the area with a red circle on it. "I lost his signal here. I'm banking on the assumption that he was taken where the kids went, so I put together a team to go after them."

"Who?" He looked at the people already gathered.

"I sent Bigfoot, Dana, and Jenny. Bigfoot can teleport the team between the trees, so they should be there already. He can also communicate with the forest. Dana is there because she has the nose of a bloodhound and won't show up on a thermal camera. Jenny is there for backup." The Arachne cleared her throat. "Well, and we were all too afraid to tell her no."

"Is that it?" asked Mike.

Eulalie blinked and shook her head. "No. I also sent Yuki and Death. Yuki is there to counter that witch I saw and whoever summoned the demons."

"And Death?"

The Arachne nodded. "He's the perfect scout. Can't be harmed and has already memorized three different topographical maps of the area. If anything is off, he'll surely notice."

"What about Cerberus? They're an actual hell hound."

Naia frowned on the edge of her fountain. "They had to go back to the Underworld," she said. "Demons started coming through the gate when they sensed all the...deaths occurring. We had to lock the gate behind them."

"I see." Mike looked across the yard and then back at Eulalie. "Where's Tink?"

"Sobbing uncontrollably in the house." Eulalie frowned. "She's also doing something weird with a bunch of sniper rifles."

“Yeah, I’m gonna go check on that.” Kisa hopped to her feet. “Unless you need me here?”

“Go.” Mike sat on Naia’s fountain and put his head in his hands. “Is there any way I can catch up with them?” he asked. “Help them look?”

Eulalie shook her head. “You could, but you shouldn’t. There are so many of them and they’re all armed. You weren’t here when...they wouldn’t hesitate to put a bullet in you on sight.”

“That’s right. I wasn’t here.” Mike stared at his feet. “I should have been.”

Soft fingers caressed the back of Mike’s neck. Naia placed her lips against his ears and whispered, but the words resonated with the power of a goddess.

“I need you to come with me,” Hestia told him. “It’s a matter of grave importance.”

Mike lifted his head to see that he was suddenly alone. Behind him was a majestic fountain, spraying water high into the air. When he stood, it was to see that he now wore Hestia’s body in the garden of the gods. Their shared mouth opened, and it was Hestia that spoke through it.

“Another player wishes to speak with you.”

Cyrus stood over the toilet, his hands braced against the stall walls as he contemplated the mess in the bowl before flushing. Wiping some puke off his mouth, he walked to the sink and turned it on. Bending forward, he turned his face sideways beneath the spigot and rinsed his mouth out first before sucking down some cold water to help settle his stomach. He let the liquid run across his cheek, turning into little rivulets that flowed off of his beard like tiny waterfalls. When he stood, he grabbed some paper towels from nearby and used them to pat his face dry. Upon lowering the towels, he saw his reflection staring back.

With trembling fingers, he touched the heavy scars hidden beneath his stubble. Some decades back, some of his contemporaries in the Order had asked if he had become lazy with his personal appearance, or was trying to grow into the crazy old man look. The truth was far simpler. When his stubble was long enough, it was harder to see the patches where hair didn’t grow or to notice the deep gouges that lined his face, the product of being bitten hundreds of times by a tidal wave of spiders.

Cyrus rubbed his eyes. While they were closed, all he could see was the little girl in the cell. Around fifty years ago, he and his partner Jeffrey had been tasked with hunting down the last Arachne, a mission that he thought had been a mixed success. The target was killed, but Jeffrey had died in the process while Cyrus was left with an experience that often woke him up cold and sweating in the middle of the night. There was a sinking dread that followed the sensation of something tiny walking across his skin, and now he simply couldn't shake it.

His heart pounded in his chest so hard that he actually worried about having a heart attack. Taking several deep breaths, he attempted to enter a meditative state and calm down, to gather his wits and figure out what came next.

"Okay, the little girl is either...what you think she is, or it's just some freaky illusion." Cyrus kept his voice low and his words vague, just in case the bathrooms were bugged. The ring in his pocket only contained so much mana, and he would probably need it later. "So which is it? Are you losing your shit, or did you see what you saw?"

She had been strong, unreasonably so. He hadn't thought much of it at the time, but the pieces were slowly coming together. The girl had hissed at him, and couldn't walk on two legs. Was it an enchantment that had hidden them? He thought back to the Order's file on Callisto Radley. The boy had been human when they had taken photos of him at the park with his father, but he was clearly a centaur now. So they had the magic to do so, as it were.

He had carried her down to her holding cell, unaware of the danger. At any moment, she could have cracked him open like an egg, or sank her teeth into his neck. His heart was racing once more, and he let out a groan as he clutched the bathroom sink. Looking at his reflection, all he saw was a frightened old man, a poor fool officially in way over his head.

Sighing, he tilted his head back to stare at the ceiling. What did he do now? The answer had been obvious, but that had been before learning that Mike Radley's daughter was an Arachne. The creatures were little more than murder machines, apex predators that only feared fire and starvation.

Who had her mother been? It couldn't have been the same Arachne he had once hunted, she would have died of old age years ago. The logical conclusion could only be that she had reproduced, and that this child was her descendant. Were there more of them? He tapped his fingers on the sink, then thought back to

his last conversation with the Oracle where he had asked if the Arachne were still around.

The Oracle had gotten annoyed, but did eventually answer that no Arachne currently existed on Earth. But now that he thought about it, that was an entirely different answer than saying they were extinct.

“You hairy motherfucker,” he mumbled, closing his eyes. The Oracle liked toying with people. It was something he did to pass the time, most likely. That last conversation had been a little tense, and Cyrus couldn’t remember the exact words they had exchanged. But there had been something else.

The Oracle had asked about Mike Radley, had wanted to know if he would see past the moth-like exterior and treat it as a person if given the chance. That had been the gist of it, anyway. At the time, Cyrus hadn’t known for sure what kind of person Mike Radley was, but the words came back to haunt him like a ghost.

“I think he’s a good man. Better than you or I deserve, that’s for certain.”

“Damn.” Cyrus stared at his reflection. For the first time in a long while, he hated the person looking back.

Mike Radley was indeed a good man. After months of observation, Cyrus had no reason to doubt that fact. And right now, a good man’s children were locked away in a secret facility, perhaps lost to him forever.

Grace was an arachne. She had come along solely to protect her brother, which was atypical of her kind. The only time she had even fought Cyrus was to keep from being put in a cage away from her brother.

Good men brought out the best in people. Perhaps Darren had brought out the best in Ana. Mike’s children were certainly a reflection of him. Maybe it was time for Cyrus to bring out the best in himself. He took a moment to tidy up his appearance, then left the bathroom and headed back to the containment area. Grace sat in the exact same position he had left her, her unblinking gaze following Cyrus as he moved. Callisto had pressed himself against the glass closest to Grace, and it was clear that the boy had been crying.

Laurel and her team were down there now, the group using tables near the holding cells to go over some documents. Cyrus passed by, pausing long enough to see what had their attention. Several of them were questions the Order wanted

answers to. Most of the team was busy crossing some out while altering others so that the questions would make sense to a child.

A pair of knights were prepping medical kits for blood collection. Cyrus narrowed his eyes at this, but said nothing. Now wasn't the time, he needed to pick the right moment.

"I'll be back in about fifteen minutes," he said, making sure to address Laurel directly. "Do not start without me."

"Of course not." Laurel's reply was cool as she raised her eyes to meet his. "You're in charge, after all."

He nodded and walked away, then paused at the edge of the group. "That applies to everybody. Anyone who decides to start without me will answer directly to Darius and the Director."

Cyrus noticed that several members of Laurel's team suddenly had difficulty looking in his direction. Traitorous bastards, he thought as he headed for the elevator and went upstairs. He went to the infirmary first, and was pleased to see that it was empty. There were kits identical to the ones downstairs, and he popped one open to look inside.

Drawing blood from a cryptid wasn't done for medical purposes. It was how the Order could tag and properly identify a creature. Once Callisto and Grace had their blood taken, the Order would forever be able to track their whereabouts. Also, it meant that Grace's identity would be discovered. His own reaction had been bad enough, but the moment the others learned the truth...

He tried not to think about it. After stuffing his pockets with a few emergency essentials, he stood where no cameras could see him and used the syringe and four vials to draw his own blood. He struggled to find a good vein, a task already made difficult by only having one hand. Checking his watch, he saw that eight minutes had already passed.

"Fucking hell," he muttered as he fumbled with the vials. Once they were full, he slid them into his pockets and put the kit back. It wasn't like they were expecting to abduct any more magical children in the next couple of days.

By the time he was back in the detention block, only eleven minutes had passed. Laurel stood outside Callisto's cell, arms crossed as she watched a pair of knights wrestling with the centaur. Grace had scooted against the wall of her cell,

her face pressed against the glass and her human eyes intense. Cyrus had no doubt in his mind that she would come to her brother's aid. Was the girl powered by instinct, or was it actual, familial love?

"You two." He pointed to the guards at the entrance to the cell. "Are you deaf or just incompetent?"

They looked at him in puzzlement.

"Did you not hear me say that they were not to start without me?" Cyrus walked past them in a hurry to intervene. "Or did I simply get the dumbest fucking gun jockies the Sons were willing to hire?"

They muttered something behind his back, but he ignored it. Laurel had turned briefly toward him with a look of cruel amusement. Cyrus walked past her, too, then into the cell with the knights.

"C'mon, kid." One of the knights had managed to pin Callisto against the glass while the other tried to grab the centaur's back leg with a syringe in her hand. "If you'd cooperate, we'd be done already."

Cyrus cleared his throat. Both knights looked at him.

"We've got this," said the man pinning Callisto.

"Step away from the centaur." Cyrus squared his shoulders and filled his voice with iron. "Both of you. Now."

When the knights ignored him, he took a step forward and slammed his heel into the side of the man's knee. The knight's leg crumpled, causing him to lose his grip on Callisto. The centaur bucked, kicking the other knight in the stomach before moving away.

"What the hell—" Laurel's voice cut off when she noticed the wand pointed in her direction. Cyrus looked over his shoulder at her, their eyes meeting through the shimmering air surrounding his wand.

"I was hired by the SoS because you are unstable and incompetent. The real reason they brought you here was to keep you from fucking up the operation at the house." Cyrus turned to face the knights, who had moved to surround him. "I don't hold it against you that your superior gave you bad orders. How long did she wait before directly contradicting me? Was it after the elevator doors closed? Or did she count to ten first? Syringe, now." He held out his free hand.

The knight sneered at him, but looked up to see that the guards were now standing outside the door with their weapons raised. Reluctantly, she handed over the syringe.

“Today’s lesson is about departmental cooperation. The Order hired the SoS to capture these children and contain them. The SoS hired me to be in charge of containment. So really, who’s in charge of whom?” Cyrus moved toward Callisto, who was glaring at everyone. “Is it the woman who has her head so far up the Director’s ass that she can taste his lunch? The same person who fell apart after one scary encounter with a fucking child’s toy? Arm, please.”

Callisto reluctantly lifted his arm. Cyrus tucked his wand into a pocket, then leaned forward to block everybody’s view, including the camera’s.

“You’ll feel a pinch,” he said as he palmed a pair of blood-filled vials from his pocket. “I’m pretty bad at this.”

Cyrus jabbed at Callisto with the needle, but didn’t break the skin. The centaur cried out in false pain and stomped his back feet. Cyrus feigned filling up the two vials, then stepped back.

“No band-aids, kid. Put some pressure on it until it stops.” Callisto obeyed, covering his false wound with a finger.

Cyrus turned around. “From now on, we’re doing things my way or the hard way. For anyone curious about what the hard way entails, it does come with a one-way trip to one of the spare holding cells once I’m done with you. Are there any questions?”

Laurel started to sputter something, but Cyrus moved past her and grabbed the syringe from the other kit. The knights left Callisto’s cell and closed the door behind them.

“If you have a problem with me, you need to take it up with Darius. He’s my boss, now, remember?” Cyrus used his keycard to open Grace’s cell. “Okay, kid, Papa Cyrus needs to get some of your blood.”

He knelt down in front of the Arachne and held up the syringe. Grace stared at it for a couple of seconds before looking past it to his face.

How much did she understand, he wondered. There was a cunning intellect behind that gaze, but was it enough to play along? When he put that needle next to her skin, would she decide to pull off his head?

The thudding in his ears took over, and he took a deep breath in through his nose and stuck his hand in a pocket. He pulled out the shredded barbecue MRE he had taken from the command center.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, hoping to see anything in her eyes other than that cold, calculating look. “This is an instant meal, ready to eat. I’m afraid it’s all I’ve got on me at the moment, but here, look.”

Cyrus tore open the MRE and dug through the packet. “Ah, here it is. An oatmeal cookie. Do you like oatmeal cookies? I know I do.”

Grace continued to stare at him, her eyes briefly flicking toward the cookie.

“For gods’ sake, don’t you ever blink?” he muttered. Grace blinked exactly once.

“Anyway, I’ll let you have anything that’s in here if you’re a good girl and don’t give me any problems.” Cyrus unwrapped the cookie and stuck the trash in his pocket, which allowed him to palm the remaining vials of blood. “If you don’t want the cookie, we’ve also got beans. What about some shredded beef? I won’t eat it unless I have to, but that’s because I’m a vegetarian.”

At the mention of beef, Grace’s eyebrows lifted. Cyrus grabbed the beef packet and showed it to her.

“Do you want some? Here, let me open it for you.” Cyrus tore a small piece off the corner of the shredded beef packet. “We don’t have any plates, so the easiest way to eat it will probably—”

Grace snatched the packet from his hands and put it to her mouth. She squeezed the bottom with her hands, her eyes never leaving his as she slowly consumed the contents of the pouch.

“Well how about that? You really were hungry.” Cyrus moved his hands toward Grace’s forearm, then pushed up the sleeve to reveal her skin. “So you know the drill, you might feel a little—”

Grace reached down and grabbed his hands so fast that the lid of one of the vials popped off. Cyrus quickly capped it with his thumb, his eyes now locked with hers. He had accidentally pressed the needle against her skin, but it had bent. The Arachne studied him for several seconds, her nostrils flaring as she took in his scent.

This was the moment. The smell of blood was in the air, and it was his. She would be able to sniff him out no matter where he was, and that was if she allowed him to leave this room alive.

“That’s it,” he said, keeping his voice calm. “Keep being good for papa Cyrus. Let him take your blood for those grumpy people back there.”

Grace studied his face as if she was looking into his very soul. She took one last slurp of her meat packet and then dropped it on the ground. With her thumb, she hooked a chain around her neck and gave it a tug. A silver rectangle popped free.

“Papa,” she proclaimed proudly, her voice quiet as she pointed at the dog tag. Cyrus pinched the tag between his finger and thumb and turned it sideways to read the name. The whole world spun around him as he clung to that single piece of metal for support.

Darren. Nothing else on the dog tag mattered, because that name alone told him everything he needed to know.

“Papa?” he asked again, the chain rattling as his hand shook.

“Papa.” Grace smiled, revealing sharp teeth packed full of shredded beef. But her face no longer looked like the cold-blooded killer that sometimes haunted his dreams. It was the face of a child, overflowing with joy and pride at her first word. It was a moment she had shared with Cyrus alone.

He didn’t know what to think or say, not for several moments. Cyrus cleared his throat and then tucked the dog tag back into her shirt.

“Let’s put that back where it’s safe,” he said, his voice breaking. “It’s very special, and we don’t want to lose it, now, do we?”

Grace shook her head, her eyes wide. No, the thought of losing such a treasure was simply horrible, more horrible than the situation she found herself in, or so Cyrus gathered, anyway. He had never been around kids.

Clearing his throat, Cyrus took the vials of blood and set them on the ground. He used the cleaning wipe from the MRE to wipe some sauce off of Grace’s chin, then picked up the vials and the remainder of the food packet. When he stepped out of the cell, he handed the vials over to Laurel.

“Priority testing on those to figure out what she is,” he said. He turned to one of the SoS guards and handed him the MRE packet. “See if the boy wants any of the food in there. We don’t want our guests to starve. I’ll look into getting them some proper food but need to check in with Darius first to figure out next steps.”

The man nodded and took the packet from Cyrus. The old man looked at Laurel, who was now sulking over by one of the tables as she filled out some paperwork. He had no doubt in his mind that she would pull something else, but there wasn’t time to ponder what bullshit she would surprise him with later.

Cyrus headed for the elevator, his hands clenched tightly in his pockets. All he could hear was Grace’s voice in his head, that single word playing over and over again.

Papa. Darren was that little girl’s papa. So if Mike was her father, it meant that Grace was likely Ana and Darren’s granddaughter. Those two had obviously created a secret family, away from the world and those who would hunt them. Today, their world had once more collided with his in the form of a small child who carried her grandfather’s dog tag like a talisman and ate the world’s shittiest beef with a smile.

When the elevator doors closed, Cyrus pushed the button for the top floor and then burst into tears. He had tears for the situation he found himself in, tears for all the mistakes he had made, the people he had put in the ground, and the life he could have lived. They were tears of sadness, anger, and wrath, all of them dripping onto the floor to form a pool of regret.

Ingrid stood at the edge of the dock, her eyes on the horizon. She scowled with disdain at the distant water, hoping that Captain Francois’ magical cloaking system would somehow fail and she could organize a proper assault. Sadly, even the merfolk couldn’t find him, something about the magic of the ship being far stronger than even her own.

Behind her, the heat from Paradise had finally died down enough that people could properly approach the rubble. Order teams were now devoting their time to stabilizing the area. The structures had been so hot that there was no hope for anyone who had gotten trapped inside. Aurora had been able to create a list from memory of who should have been there, and most of the missing had been found dead. Everyone was careful to avoid the massive spiral of glass on the

beach. Even though it was no longer active, the sight of the ground sucking down the dead and churning them into a gory mess had been extremely unnerving, and nobody was quite up for walking across it just yet.

“There you are.” Wallace walked up behind Ingrid, one of his arms in a sling. The merfolk had set up triage for the injured, and Wallace was covered in small, sea kelp bandages. “Someone said you were doing a perimeter walk.”

“I was. The magical boundary managed to hold in all that smoke, but just barely.” While they had a million problems right now, the sudden, magical appearance of a collapsed, smoldering building packed full of merfolk would easily double that number. “We had to reinforce a few of the runes, which are deep underground.”

“Too bad Ratu couldn’t stick around. I bet she could have gotten that shit done quick.”

Ingrid’s heart fell. All she could picture now was the look of utter devastation on Mike’s face at hearing that his children had been taken. The man had left without another word, allowing Lily to drag the Director by his throat with her tail. Some members of the Order had tried to stop him, but Ratu had snapped her fingers and buried them up to their necks in the sand. Nobody else had tried to follow them as they stepped off the property, but Ingrid could only assume they had all gone home.

But what had shaken her even more was the absolute feeling of impending dread that had come crushing in on her from every direction. It had been a shared sensation, as several of the people present had cried out in alarm. Something about the Caretaker’s rage had triggered a very primal reaction, as if the skies themselves had cracked open and the gods above had found them wanting. She wasn’t certain what that could mean, but doubted it was anything good.

Ingrid looked down at her feet and saw a pair of bony fingers by the edge of the dock. She kicked them into the water.

“It is too bad,” she said, her voice quiet. “For all of them. And us, I suppose.”

“If you’re referring to the idea that our beloved Director essentially tossed us on a sacrificial altar in order to get back at an old girlfriend, I would have to agree.” Wallace stood next to her now, his features unusually pensive. “For me, what makes it worse is that if they had been weak, we never would have known.”

“Hm?”

“Think about it. Yeah, the Radleys played us for chumps, but we had it coming. Personally, I like the guy. Never took anything seriously, traveled with beautiful women, stinking rich, everything I aspire to. But if they had really been as incompetent as we thought? I doubt we’d even think twice about sacking his house. The Director would have dragged Ratu off without another word, and we would all be oblivious to the monsters we actually are.”

Ingrid nodded. “It kind of makes you wonder how many times we’ve already been the villain, but never even knew. How can we even trust the Order after this?”

Wallace shook his head. “I don’t think those are thoughts you should voice out loud, at least not for now. Something pretty big inside the Order needs to change, and we’re never going to change it from the outside. Once they know you feel that way, you’re out. For some people, perhaps that will be the best solution. But me? I still believe there’s plenty of good we can do in the world, but the best way is from the inside.”

“You’re suddenly very philosophical.”

“Didn’t you know? Multiple near-death experiences in the jungle does that to a man. We contemplate our own mortality, our place in the universe. Have we done enough? Or did we make things worse?” Wallace looked toward the beach where Aurora was. The hostess was speaking with Princess Leilani, who had stayed behind with the others. “I saw her sister die out there, protecting her knight and another mage. Tried to help, but they were too far away. All three of them died. Their lives were cut short trying to make a difference, but it didn’t matter in the end.”

“Maybe it did.” Ingrid looked at Wallace. “Maybe it served to make you a better person.”

Wallace shrugged. “Perhaps. There’s a lot that happened out there that I see whenever I blink my eyes. I don’t know how much of it you experienced, but those skeletons became savage. During one skirmish, they grabbed the knight standing next to me and pulled him apart, much like they used to draw and quarter people. It was essentially a cosmic coin flip that it was him and not me.”

“I’m sorry.” Ingrid sighed. “We’re all going to need so much therapy after this is done.”

The knight laughed. "There's going to be so much paperwork, I think therapy may be the least of our problems. We did sort of participate in a coup, after all."

"The evidence will speak for itself." Ingrid looked back at the wreckage of Paradise. "That man spent over three decades working closely with the Order. I looked up his record once, did you know that?"

"Doesn't surprise me." Wallace pulled a toothpick from his shirt pocket and stuck it in his mouth. "You always were thorough when it came to who we worked with and our targets."

"What could you possibly have in your teeth?"

"Fish." He nodded toward the beach. "Merfolk brought us some poke. They're trying to make up for their fuck up."

"I'm surprised they fed you."

He shrugged. "Probably didn't recognize me."

"Or you stole it."

"That, too."

She laughed. "At least some things haven't changed. The Director started as an outside consultant, primarily on earth magic. It's so hard to find naga willing to put up with our shit, right? Anyway, he helped out with a few hunts, always eager to please. Eventually got hired on full time about fifteen years back, took on a small leadership position. I almost trained under him when I was starting out, but I changed my mind to work with a mage directly in the field. Supposedly, he was an amazing teacher, got all sorts of accolades from his students. Once a position in Operations opened up, he applied and they seriously considered him. Eventually gets promoted to overseeing North and South American ops, and here we are."

"Well, it'll probably be the last time the Council hires a cryptid to do anything important. Once word gets out, I suspect a few of our affirmative action hires will be forced to step down."

Ingrid sighed and stared back toward the horizon. "And that's the problem. The Order needs to stop thinking in terms of us versus them. Mohan wasn't human, but so what? How many times has a human Director, President, or

whatever the fuck you want to call them done something similar? The only reason this feels so bad is because—”

“He went full Jafar and blew up a multi-million dollar property.” Wallace smirked. “It’s not much different than that woman last year who made twenty million vanish from our accounts before disappearing. Seems like there’s been a lot of that lately. The difference here is that we’ll actually have to clean up this mess instead of just pretending it never happened.”

“Yeah.” Ingrid watched a pair of merfolk weeping over the corpse of another. The dead had been laid out and covered with seaweed, human and merfolk alike. Tonight, when the tide came in, they would all receive a proper burial at sea. In the end, everything died. It was the one truth that men and most monsters lived by. “That’s if the merfolk even let us stay here. They’re being real friendly right now, but it wouldn’t surprise me if they kicked us off the lease.”

“Wouldn’t blame them.” Wallace shook his head. “Not even in the slightest.”

They stood there and watched the waves while the others mourned on the beach. Ingrid lost track of time, her heart full of bitterness. As if reading her mind, Wallace broke the silence.

“So what are you going to do next?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

The knight spat his toothpick out into the water. “There’s something different about you. Just a gut feeling, really. How many days until you tell the higher ups that you’re done working for them?”

“Is it that obvious?”

Wallace grinned. “Yep.”

“What about you? Maybe you could come with me?”

“And do what?” He shook his head. “I mean, yeah, I’ve seen some things, maybe even learned the lesson of the week. But I’m not the kind of guy to change things from the outside. Well, not quietly, anyway.”

“I see.” Ingrid frowned. “Do you think I should stay?”

“No.” The mirth in Wallace’s eyes immediately vanished. “This isn’t the kind of job you can do with doubts in your heart, no matter how noble. A moment’s hesitation will kill you, or maybe even kill the person who has your back. If you know this isn’t the life you want, you should bail. But...”

“But?”

“You should wait, just a little bit. Try and figure out a plan first. If nothing else, let them send you on a month-long sabbatical to rest up, do your planning then. That’s what I would do, anyway.” The knight pulled another toothpick out of his pocket.

“You’re ridiculous,” said Ingrid.

“Fuck you.” Wallace grinned. “I’m on vaca...” He cocked his head to one side, eyes focused on the horizon. “What the hell is that?”

Ingrid followed his gaze. It was a ship on the horizon, but it was difficult for her to see any detail. “It looks like a ship.”

“That’s an awful lot of sails for a ship, hold on a second.” Wallace left the dock and started wandering among the survivors, asking them for something. Eventually he returned with a pair of binoculars that had a crack through one lens. “Here,” he said. “I already looked, but think I didn’t see it right..”

Ingrid took the binoculars and looked through them. Three massive, tattered sails had been unfurled, the ship cruising across the horizon. It definitely wasn’t Captain Francois’ ship, or if it was, it had changed shape.

“It looks like a Spanish galleon.”

“Well, shit. That’s what I was thought I saw, too.” Wallace took the binoculars from Ingrid and looked through them. “There’s at least two...three more, now.”

“What the hell?” Ingrid took the binoculars back. After a moment of searching, she saw the ships Wallace had mentioned. They were far enough away that there was a haze around them, but she could see enough detail to tell that the ships looked old and cobbled together. Another one appeared on the horizon, but instead of sails, a series of massive oars rowed the boat forward.

“Looks like our buddy Francois is coming back with friends.” Wallace touched Ingrid’s shoulder, then pointed to the east. “Lots of them.”

As if appearing through a fog, dark shapes manifested across the horizon. At first, it was only a handful, but they simply kept multiplying. Ingrid lowered the binoculars in shock. Francois had returned, and it looked like he had brought an army. Or a navy. Whatever. The details didn't really matter. She counted nearly forty ships now.

"Go tell the merfolk," Wallace said, his features pinched. "Right away."

"On it." Ingrid ran down the dock, pulling out her cell phone as she did. There was one other person who needed to know that the Captain was coming back with friends. And even though they didn't deserve it, she prayed that the Caretaker would help them.