

Fire and Water

The spiraling staircase was narrow, barely large enough for two people to walk side by side. Ingrid licked her lips and let out a silent cough, hoping to hide the fact that she was just testing to see if the Director's spell had worn off. Though some of her abilities didn't need verbal components, there was generally some sort of vocalization required, much like the Kiai a martial artist might shout. It acted more as a mental focus than anything else, and Ingrid vowed to start practicing magic without it.

However, that was a future problem. Right now, she was descending toward the holding cells with a knight at her back. Without words to convince him that the Order was being duped by the Director, the only path remaining was action. With her hands bound in metal cuffs the Director had slapped on her and a wary captor, she was uncertain what that action would even be.

A tremor ran through the building. Ingrid and her escort paused, both of them looking up as a layer of dirt fell from the ceiling. She looked back at the knight, who simply shrugged and gestured down with his blade.

"Keep moving," he said. "I know you don't understand what's going on now, but a few days in Quarantine with a therapist will get your head back on straight."

Ingrid lifted her hands high enough for him to see her middle fingers.

"C'mon, Sister Ingrid, this is classic Stockholm Syndrome." The man sighed in disappointment. "Or some sort of enchantment, which is more likely. We had to sedate the survivors from your team. They were ranting like lunatics last night."

Ahead of them, a section of wall clicked open. Aurora stepped through, clutching a clipboard to her chest. For a moment, it looked like the woman was surprised to see them, but she collected herself.

"Director wants me to speak with her once she's secure," Aurora said, then lifted her clipboard. "To get some initial data for the Council to look at and maybe find some holes in their story. We're already re-classifying the Caretaker's threat level, but if he can do this..."

"Yeah, it's pretty bad. I heard they even sent most of the staff home to prevent casualties." The knight used the flat of his blade to push Ingrid against the

wall as they passed the hostess. "It sucks knowing that our own can be turned against us. Stay behind me."

"Of course." Aurora followed them in silence. There was another loud thud from above, but nobody stopped this time. Ingrid felt the spell around her mouth vanish, but said nothing. It was two versus one, now, and the odds were heavily stacked against her. They got to the bottom of the stairwell and stepped into a concrete hallway. At the end was a bank of cells with small monitoring windows.

"Where are the guards?" asked Aurora as she peered through the nearest window. "Shouldn't there be a full team watching them?"

"It's just me," said the knight. "The Director has the others taking the Caretaker to the docks to hand him over to the merfolk. They should be back—"

There was a loud crackling sound, followed by a solid thud. Ingrid turned around to see that the knight was on the ground, convulsing wildly. Aurora had dropped her clipboard and was clutching a stun baton, which she continued to jab into the man's back.

Ingrid watched in curiosity as Aurora shocked the man into unconsciousness. The hostess knelt down and searched the man's pockets to retrieve the keys to Ingrid's cuffs.

"What a fucking mess," the hostess muttered, then unlocked Ingrid's cuffs. "This whole thing is a fucking mess."

"Yes. It really is." Ingrid rubbed her wrists, then moved to the cell doors to look inside. Aurora unlocked the doors and pulled them open, which caused the occupants to rise and step out with trepidation.

"Sister Ingrid?" A young mage named Caleb looked at Ingrid in disbelief, then ran forward and hugged her. "You survived!"

"So I did." Ingrid tried not to tense up at the sudden bodily contact, but hugged the man back. "I was saved by the Caretaker's people."

"Leave it to that sexy bastard to steal all my thunder, then." Wallace stepped out of his cell, a wry grin on his face. He was covered in cuts, mud, and blood. His left hand was tucked into the waistband of his shorts, his forearm splinted with two pieces of wood and some fabric. "I went back for you, just so you know. It just took me a bit is all."

“Wallace.” Ingrid pushed herself away from Caleb, already ignoring the other survivors. Aurora was taking care of them with no issue, asking each of them about a woman named Theresa. “You look like shit.”

“Feel like it, too.” Her knight chuckled, then wrapped her in a tight hug with his good arm. “I followed your tracks to a cliff, but lost you from there. Was afraid they had pushed you off. That was how they got a lot of our people, you know.”

Ingrid nodded, trying to swallow the sudden lump in her throat. In retrospect, she realized she had given very little thought to the others. She wasn’t sure if it was just an emotional defense mechanism or something else. But with Wallace standing in front of her, all sorts of emotions bubbled to the surface now. He had been the one constant in her life all these years, the one person she could rely on, and he had disappeared during the fight, fate unknown.

And now he was back, her emotional rock returned from the dead. She told herself that the tears in her eyes were from the dust that kept drifting down from the ceiling.

“What the hell is going on upstairs?” asked a knight named Mila. She was covered in wounds similar to Wallace, but both of her hands had been wrapped tightly into fists with fabric that made her look like a back-alley streetfighter. There were bloodstains all along her knuckles, and at least a couple fingers didn’t look quite right.

“War.” Aurora looked at the men and women around her, her dark eyes filled with heartbreak and rage.

“Sounds like a fight, then.” Wallace crouched down and picked up the sword the knight had dropped. He gave the sword a light swing and then held it on his shoulder. “I don’t know about you all, but I had plenty of time to rest last night. Who are we fighting?”

Aurora shook her head. “I’m not entirely sure,” she said. “But it’s clear the Director betrayed us.”

“And the Captain is our enemy.” Ingrid stared at the motley group of people who watched her. Including Wallace, there were only seven of them. At least two were being held up by their friends. “The merfolk are on his side for now, but that will change once Princess Leilani tells them the truth.”

“And the Caretaker?” asked Mila. The ground trembled beneath them and all the lights flickered.

“He is who we are fighting for,” said Ingrid, glaring at the others, daring anyone to challenge her words. “There’s no time to explain, but we owe him big time. I owe him more than you could imagine.” She didn’t even fully understand why she had added that last bit. Ever since waking up in a strange bed with an old woman looking over her, Ingrid had a sense that Mike had somehow fixed a crack in her heart she hadn’t known was there. “So if you still want to follow the Director’s orders, let me know now so I can stick you back in your cell to rot.”

Wallace snorted. “Don’t worry. We saw through the Director’s bullshit once we got back, didn’t we?” He looked at the others, who nodded emphatically. “We figured out that Francois was controlling the skeletons and put two and two together pretty quick. I just wish more of us had survived.”

“More of us will fall if we don’t sort this out.” Ingrid looked at Wallace. “Right now, there’s a full scale military operation going on at Mike’s house. Our people are going to get killed.”

“You really think so?” asked Caleb. “They all seem so...goofy.”

Ingrid shook her head. “A deliberate farce. They didn’t want us to know how dangerous they were. It wasn’t a malicious act of deception. Rather, they just want to be left alone.”

Aurora stepped forward now, tears running down her face. “From what little I’ve seen upstairs, they’re still holding back.”

The whole room shook and the lights went out. Ingrid sent a pulse of magic into her fingertips, then formed a ball of light in her hands that cast eerie shadows on Aurora’s face. More dirt fell from above, and a crack had appeared in the wall.

“I don’t think they’re holding back anymore,” said Ingrid, who knelt down to pick up the unconscious knight. “Someone help me get him outside.”

The outer facade of the central tower of Paradise crumbled and fell away from the structure, scattering chunks of debris outward as the two colossal serpents tumbled behind it. Mike grabbed Kisa by the hand and yanked her out of the way of a large concrete slab that exploded on the sidewalk where they had been standing. Beth magically lifted water from a nearby hot tub and blasted it

into a pair of Order personnel to knock them away to safety as both Ratu and Mohan crashed into the ground.

“Run!” shouted Mike at the dumbfounded people standing near the burning restaurant. A merman was immediately crushed to death beneath Ratu whose body was covered in flames. Mohan slithered free, a cyclone of air carrying his bulk several feet above the ground. He smashed through the roof of the large dining room, sending staff members running for safety.

A figure sprinted away down the hallway, and Mike frowned to see that it was Francois. He looked at where the man had been and saw Opal reforming her body around a chunk of concrete that had landed on her.

“Are you okay?” he asked. Opal nodded, then gestured angrily in Francois’ direction. The man’s right arm was dangling like a loose noodle. Mike grabbed Opal’s vessel, allowing the slime girl to retreat so he could carry her.

The ground rumbled beneath them as Ratu lifted her head and hissed, yanking flames away from the burning restaurant. They swirled around her body and formed into a spiraling vortex above her head which then crashed down on the building Mohan had vanished inside. A gust of wind rocked Paradise, shattering windows as Mohan rose up from the restaurant.

Where Ratu looked like a python, Mohan had the hooded head of a cobra. Both of them bared their fangs at each other, and Mike observed in both curiosity and horror as their spells clashed.

To any outsider, it would appear that the snakes were simply having a hissing match, but Mike watched as spells were rapidly summoned and dismissed by both combatants. Ratu tried to form a fireball, which Mohan undid by starving it of oxygen. The Director then created whirling scythes of air that Ratu cast up into the sky where they fell apart.

Mike, Kisa, and Beth ran in the same direction Francois had, which was toward the beach. They were followed by Order personnel and a few stray merfolk. Paradise shuddered, and people cried out in fear from different levels as a mass evacuation took place.

A few mages attempted to stabilize the structure, unaware that Ratu and Mohan were still fighting and would bring it down soon enough. Kisa actually swatted a wand out of someone’s hand while Beth used the wand she held to

break the sprinkler heads. She sent the resulting spray of water down the hallway, blinding anyone who tried to run against it.

“Get to the beach!” Beth yelled at anyone who would listen. Mike wondered if she was sensing the extreme danger that he was, every fiber of his body screaming at him to GET OUT! Kisa stopped to help a merwoman who was limping, the cat girl straining when she couldn’t move the woman. Mike helped, the two of them dragging the woman down the hall.

“Keep running!” Beth waved her wand and the water pooled beneath the merwoman, allowing her to slide along the floor as Mike and Kisa pulled her hands. As if inspired, the mermaid took control of the water as well, sending high pressure jets forward that pushed debris out of the way and carried people faster than they could run.

They exited the long hallway along with several other people, everyone moving to get away from Paradise. The side building they had just left was still intact, but Mike heard a roaring sound, followed by a thud that he felt in his chest. A massive crack appeared along the decorative brickwork, and a chunk of the facade fell away to reveal the steel beams underneath.

The central tower in Paradise fell first, sending a cloud of choking debris out in every direction. Mike watched as it got caught up on the magical shielding and piled high like a stormcloud before blowing out toward the ocean. He wrapped his arms around Beth and Kisa just as Opal emerged, sheltering them with her gelatinous body. Sharp stones pelted the people on the beach, followed by blazing hot winds. The merfolk fled into the water while the Order waded out as far as they could.

Out on the beach, Mike spotted Francois down near the end of the dock. He was almost at his boat.

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath. Captain Francois was moments away from escape when a slim figure emerged from the waves, catapulting herself a dozen feet up into the air before throwing her trident at a downward angle.

Captain Francois didn’t make a sound as the trident pierced his chest hard enough that his body jerked backward through the air. He tumbled once along the dock and then went still, his remaining eye gazing up into the sky.

Behind them, Paradise rumbled as the remaining buildings started to collapse.

Ratu slithered up into a ball, her shifting coils protecting her from the shards of glass that rained down from above. The structure around her bent and shifted as she commanded the concrete to fracture and form into thick spikes that she drove into Mohan.

“Please. I command the earth just as well as you do,” he said, the words coming out as a long hiss to anyone else who might be listening. The spikes crumbled on contact with his body, the shards now caught up in the powerful vortex that surrounded him. He used the crumbled stone as projectiles, but Ratu’s face was hidden from view. Some of the stones were tiny enough that they actually exploded in the super heated air around her body. “And it feels like you’re out of practice.”

Ratu didn’t respond to him, not out of any sense of danger or inability to speak. Frankly, there was nothing to be said. Mohan had become a threat to her family, to the future she wanted to be a part of. If she could snap her fingers and rip his skeleton free from his serpentine body, she would simply do so and be done with it.

But Mohan was strong. He had always been an accomplished mage, and his elemental control of air and wind had been impressive even when they were young. When Ratu had gone into hiding, she had focused her energy on studying how magic worked at a fundamental level, which didn’t always help when it came time to fighting with someone. Did her fireballs burn brighter and hotter than ever? They did. But they still required oxygen to burn, which Mohan stripped away.

Still, while Mohan ran his mouth, Ratu used her mind. He constructed spellforms, both simple and complex, and she countered them on a foundational level. Commanding the wind to mix and churn? She added her own mana and made it spiral out of Mohan’s control. Highly pressurized bursts intended to pierce her hide? Poke holes in the side and allow it to flow away. They were at a magical stalemate, the two of them now physically assaulting each other in the hopes that they could break the other’s concentration.

She regretted the harm being done to Paradise, but only because she knew there was collateral damage. People had been injured and killed. Early on, she had seen Mike, Kisa, and Beth flee from the battle and could sense the Caretaker down on the beach, safe from the fight. Ever since she had nearly died in the

Labyrinth, she had spent time contemplating how to best use her magic should she find herself in such a bind again. Against Mohan, she would never hold back.

Sharp fangs pierced her side, but Ratu didn't counter with a bite of her own. The way she was coiled up now meant it would take too long to free her head, which would open her up to whatever assault he had planned. She flexed her body as if to do so, then tunneled her head beneath the soft sand as sharp blades of pressurized air bit into her scales and pierced her flesh.

Positioning her body underground, she burst up and slammed the top of her head into Mohan's lower jaw. The naga was caught off guard, causing him to tip over backward. When he hit the ground, it was with enough force that Paradise swayed dangerously. Sensing an opportunity, Ratu shattered the foundation with a thought in the hopes that she could drop the building on Mohan's head and maybe crack his skull.

He surprised her by squirming forward and away, digging his head into the ground and tunneling beneath Paradise. When he emerged, it was from the third floor, his mouth open wide as he came down on her from above. Ratu sent up a wave of fire to blind him, followed by a geyser of sand. The heat was intense enough that the sand melted, twisting into brutal spires that Mohan crashed against. He let out a hiss of pain before going back beneath the ground, the molten spikes breaking off as he disappeared.

"Is that all you've got?" he whispered, using the wind to communicate. A swirling vortex had formed above Paradise, Mohan's attempt to create a tornado. Ratu doubted the protective measures the Order had employed extended up into the sky. "You're no better than a human with a sharp stick."

Suddenly inspired, Ratu chased after Mohan, using the fire around her body to create tunnels of glass. Up above, she felt the seismic shift as Paradise toppled, large pieces of it collapsing now. The two of them chased each other beneath the ground, careful to avoid getting too close to the water table. Digging too deep could easily turn into disaster if enough water followed them.

Mohan didn't realize the trap had been set until he crashed into one of Ratu's tunnels, letting out a grunt of pain. While it was a simple matter to command the rock to break apart, glass was unexpected and didn't have natural fractures to exploit. Ratu slammed into Mohan from behind, sinking her teeth into his gut as he tried to coil up and escape.

When they burst free, it was through the rubble that had been the central building of Paradise. A cloud of debris had obscured the sun, the two serpents now coiled up amidst the wreckage. Though Ratu couldn't see anybody, she could still feel Mike's presence. Whether that was a function of his power or their personal bond, she couldn't be entirely sure.

"Are you finished?" asked Mohan. "This destruction was unnecessary and has only delayed the inevitable."

The vortex up above was closing in on them, causing larger pieces of debris to shift amongst the rubble. If his spell continued building for much longer, he would make any fight above the ground untenable. It would also serve to create large projectiles that would harm anyone still around.

Ratu couldn't scowl as a snake, but she would if it was possible. Summoning her magic, she created several flaming geysers that swirled around them, each one climbing into the sky to dance along with the vortex.

"You should know better." Mohan attacked her again, but she could tell his focus was on the vortex. Her flames threatened to go out, but she refused to let up. He was attempting to starve her magic of the oxygen it needed, believing the spell had been formed in an attempt to harm him.

On the contrary, she was taking a different tack. Her fire was hungry, and she poured her concentration into the spell, generating larger flames that attempted to consume whatever air they could. The air became so hot that nearby structures burst into flame, which ate away at Mohan's storm and formed fiery tendrils that reached into the sky.

Mohan likely caught on to her tactic, because he redoubled his efforts. He bit at her face, attempted to strangle her, and even tangled their bodies up like a massive gordian knot. She allowed instinct to take over, putting very little thought into their physical altercation.

As they fought, Ratu felt a presence at the edge of her awareness. Something was shifting rubble and squirming free from a ton of broken concrete. Uncertain what could have survived the collapse of Paradise, she rolled onto her side to try and catch a look.

It was a demon. Wreathed in fire, wings extended, the creature rose from the wreckage and sighed, her molten body shedding ash. The demon was naked,

unable to produce any clothing capable of surviving the inferno. When their eyes met, the demon licked her lips and winked.

Lily. The succubus was barely recognizable, a result of the flames. A creature of hellfire now, she crawled quietly toward the top of the nearest smoldering pile and extended her wings. Massive thermal currents ripped her into the air where she hovered above the fight, her body like a tiny star in the darkness.

Mohan squeezed, and Ratu's vision dimmed. Upon learning that Mohan had been behind everything, her first impulse had been to kill him, to prove to herself that she was stronger than he was. Only now did she see the problem with that line of thinking. For so many decades, she had been content on her own, believing that true power lay in the individual. Distrustful, she had put herself on a pedestal in the belief that nobody could be her equal.

But then she had met Mike, a man who had been happy to give her not only friendship, but the space she desired for herself. He rarely asked anything of her in return, and one day it occurred to herself that she enjoyed doing little things just to help him and the household out. Over time, she had gotten to know the others, to connect with them in ways she had long forgotten.

Most importantly, she had learned that she was no longer alone. Ratu was part of a family now. In her anger, she had almost forgotten this fact. She should never have confronted Mohan on her own, but the past couldn't be changed.

But now she was no longer on her own. It was time to ask for help.

"Kinky!" It was hard to speak now, and her flames were dying. What little air she could breathe was moving too fast, and not enough blood was flowing to her brain. "Get...kinky!"

Mohan actually released his grip a bit in confusion. "Kinky?" he asked. "I don't...um...was this foreplay?"

"Wasn't...talking...to you!" Ratu twisted her body around and slammed Mohan into the ground. He opened his mouth to sink his fangs into her, then froze in shock as the fiery figure up above crashed down into his mouth like a meteor. The naga choked and released his hold on her, his coils unwinding as he coughed and gagged on Lily.

"Wha...hrgg!" Mohan tried to vomit the succubus back up, but when he opened his mouth, it was to reveal Lily's tail briefly swaying about in the back of

his throat. He let out a cry and fell to one side, his body writhing in shock as steam escaped his mouth.

Taking a deep breath, Ratu swung her body around Mohan and concentrated on the heat and flames she could sense coming off of Lily. Mohan cried out in agony and actually belched up fire as Ratu regained control of her element. Up above, the vortex collapsed, allowing fire to rain down on the area. Ratu rose to her full height, the devastating heat swirling around her harmlessly.

She bit down on Mohan's neck, her fangs piercing his scales. The naga let out a gurgling cry, then recoiled away from her in an attempt to escape. With the remains of Paradise burning down around them, she picked him up and slammed him through the nearest pile of rubble, causing both of them to tumble free onto the beach. She could see the merfolk had summoned a sphere of water which was slowly boiling away over the bay. They were all gathered along the shoreline, many of them with their backs to the resort.

Something was wrong. With the two naga fighting, all eyes should have been on the naga combatants. Ratu was able to pick out Mike through the watery barrier. He and Kisa were standing protectively over injured men and women while Beth and Opal stood along the water's edge.

Ratu stared down at Mohan in rage. If she wanted, she could kill him. However, they were now down on the beach and she had no doubt in her mind that it would still take her several minutes to accomplish. To continue fighting would only put her family at risk.

Groaning mentally, she slammed Mohan's head against a rock she summoned from beneath the sand. The massive cobra sighed and went limp, his eyes on hers.

"Yield," she said. "Yield and I shall do you no further harm."

Mohan laughed, his jaws open wide with blood trickling from the corners.

"I yield, Upala." He rolled onto his back to reveal his belly. "You got lucky."

She ignored his response, but used her magic to bind him with his words. Should he attempt to betray her in the near future, it would cause him a great deal of pain and buy her plenty of time to respond to the attack. Her massive form shrank down and she was human once more. Mohan started to do the same thing, but paused halfway when a massive bulge formed in his neck.

“You can come out, Lily.” Ratu moved to Mohan’s side and gave the scales a playful kick.

Mohan’s jaws parted and Lily forced her way past his teeth with a grin on her face. The succubus was clothed now, her demonic features mostly hidden away. She stabbed Mohan in the roof of his mouth with her tail upon exiting, and the snake went limp as he continued a slow transformation back into human form. Ratu stared down at the quiet figure dozing on the sand, then looked up at the succubus.

“Was it everything you hoped it would be?” she asked.

“Not really.” Lily smirked. “I prefer guys who swallow.” She looked at the watery sphere. “What the hell is happening there?”

Ratu grabbed Mohan by the foot and dragged him toward the shimmering barrier of water. Mohan grunted in his sleep, but didn’t wake. “Let’s go find out.”

Leilani hated running. She didn’t like how the ground felt on her feet, the cruel way that concrete and stone somehow bit through the thick soles of her sandals, or the way her knees got jarred with every impact. Knees were absolutely the dumbest thing ever, in her opinion, and were proof that the gods truly hated terrestrial beings.

And yet, run she had. Straight across the pool deck and down to the beach. At least a couple of merfolk spotted her, but they ignored her when she asked about her mother’s location. Even from the shore, Leilani could sense several dozen of her people swimming around and waiting, as if in standby. There weren’t many merfolk who could manifest legs like she could, and she strongly suspected that most of the ones who could were currently up in Paradise.

Helping that bastard. Leilani tried not to grind her teeth while thinking about Captain Francois. The man had always gotten on her nerves, but she had always assumed this was just the generational gap. Even her mother had admitted once that she used to dislike Francois, but that had changed as she got older.

But now Leilani knew better. Francois had never been a true friend to her people. It had always been about his own quest for power and immortality. The man had the ability to change the world for the better, as she saw it. But he was a schemer. The attempt on her life had colored her previous interactions with the

man. If he had been willing to kill her to cement the merfolk's support in his plans, what other dark deeds had he committed in the same vein?

Out on the sand, Leilani sprinted the last hundred feet into the surf. She saw the Captain's boat floating at the end of the dock, a sight that filled her with anger and spurred her forward. The waves rose to greet her as she dove into the water head first, the water pulling her out into the depths. Her legs melted together back into a tail, and she let out a sigh of relief as she swam deeper into the bay.

The royal guard met her by the pilings at the end of the dock. They were a school of ten warriors, each one carrying a spear. They formed a semi-circle in front of her, and a woman in the middle wearing a coral necklace that denoted her as the captain held out a hand to stop her.

"Princess Leilani, you're alive!" The woman looked surprised, but there was something about the way she floated that warned Leilani that something was off. "We had heard that you were killed."

"A farce," Leilani declared. "Captain Francois attempted to assassinate me to lay the blame at the Caretaker's feet. I must speak with my mother immediately on this matter."

The royal guard looked at each other uneasily, and a few cast their gaze toward the surface and Paradise. Leilani let out a groan as she turned around.

"Seriously? I just came from up there." With a powerful kick, she headed back toward the shore, but a strong current pulled her back out to sea, causing her to essentially swim in place. Puzzled, she tried to change direction, but the current flowed in the opposite direction. She turned to look at the royal guard, who had formed a circle around her.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking you into custody." The captain looked apologetic. "We were warned that the Caretaker may have turned you against your people, so this is a safety precaution."

Leilani scowled, but bit her tongue. There were ten of them and only one of her. They were manipulating the currents to hold her in place, which was customary for prisoners.

Could she talk her way out? No, not if they were already under the impression she was compromised. Fighting wasn't an option. They were too far

away for combat, and throwing her trident would only confirm their false suspicions.

Sinking down into the water, she attempted to seize control of the water, but it was no use. Cursing inwardly, she stared helplessly toward the shore. She had had only one job, and had failed it already. Clutching her father's trident tight against her chest, all she could do was wait.

It wasn't long before the other merfolk in the bay suddenly became agitated. The royal guard holding her in place gave each other dubious looks moments before a group of merfolk entered the water. They were injured, several of them sporting massive burns. The last figure to enter was none other than Princess Kailani, most of her hair burned away. Her eyes were haunted, and it looked like she was having trouble swimming.

Another school of royal guard assembled around Kailani and assisted her out into the bay. They swam together toward Leilani, as if unaware of her presence. The royal guard tried to usher Leilani out of the way, but she fought. Forcing her to stay in one place was child's play, but moving her somewhere specific? Far more difficult.

"Mother! Mom!" Leilani hollered over her captors, then dropped to the bottom to smack the butt of her trident against a rock. "Princess Kailani! Over here!"

When Kailani looked up, her eyes narrowed. "Traitor," she said, her fingers trembling as she pointed in Leilani's direction. "You betrayed your people."

"I have not!" Leilani rose from the bottom and thrust her chest forward. "I even came back to warn you about Captain Francois' deception. The man tried to have me killed so he could turn our people against the Caretaker."

"That doesn't make sense," snapped Kailani. "We have always been against the Caretaker ever since she...he...*they* took that land from the native people!"

"Mother, that land wasn't taken, it was given away." Groaning in the way that only a daughter could to her mother, Leilani jabbed her finger toward the direction of the volcano. "The Kahu gave that land to the Caretaker to protect it from Captain Francois and others like him!"

"Falsehoods spouted by the Caretaker himself, I'm sure." Kailani sneered at her daughter, then looked at the captain nearest to her. "The Caretaker's people

are too strong above the water, but we can mount a defense here. We must ensure that none of them escape or else—”

“The goddess Pele told me herself.” Leilani stared hard at the merfolk around her, many of whom immediately turned in her direction. “She was up there, waiting to welcome us, to explain why that land must never fall into Francois’ hands.”

“You lie.” Kailani spoke harshly, but now looked unsure.

“I swear by the tides it is true.” Leilani looked at the men and women around her. “Pele was there when our people were killed. She was the one who boiled the sea.”

There was an outcry from several of them, but Leilani only had eyes for her mother.

“Why?” Kailani asked, suddenly fearful. “Have we angered her?”

“We have not. Captain Francois brought a fearsome creature up from the deep, and it was Pele and the volcano’s guardian who were forced to answer.” Leilani gestured at the surface where she could already see that part of Paradise had crumbled. “Our people died in order for him to lure the Caretaker here under false pretenses. My assassination was going to be the event that turned the merfolk and the Order against Mike Radley.”

“But why?” asked Kailani.

“So that he can live forever.” Leilani gripped the shaft of her trident tightly. A loud thudding sound propagated outward from the shore and shouting could be heard up top. “As for why he desires this so strongly, you would have to ask him.”

The merfolk muttered to each other as Kailani stared out into the depths. She clearly wasn’t swayed, but she no longer argued. In her eyes, a maelstrom of emotions boiled over. Grief. Denial. Rage. This was a man who had her implicit trust, and Leilani understood why it must be hard to process.

There was another loud thump, and now Paradise was in flames. The merfolk all moved to the surface, and Leilani felt the grip of the water on her body loosen. She joined her people as they watched Paradise in horror, the main structure shuddering from the impact of two massive snakes that now wrestled at its base. Her people and the Order fled for the safety of the beach, and she noticed with a smile that Mike was there, helping tow a merwoman to safety.

But her attention was caught by the figure running down the dock, a panicked look on his face. Captain Francois's arm hung poorly, and one of his eyes was swollen shut. He was already halfway down the dock, his boots thumping on the wood. The destruction of Paradise had the merfolks' attention, but Francois had Leilani's.

She dove all the way down to the bottom, her tail flexing powerfully as she raced ahead of the man. Even at full speed on the dock, he couldn't hope to keep up with a mermaid powered by anger, and Leilani surfaced ahead of him, letting out a shriek of rage as she hurled her father's trident straight into Captain Francois' chest. The tines caught him in the ribs and he jerked backward violently, his body flopping on the sanded wood as he came to a stop.

"Got you," she muttered as she fell back into the water where the royal guard caught up with her. She punched at them as they tried to wrestle her into submission, suddenly aware they had failed to contain her. Leilani no longer cared. They could spend all month debating about Captain Francois now, but it wouldn't change the fact that he was dead and no longer a problem.

Paradise smoldered, the beach now packed with members of the Order who had fled. The smoke was trapped by the magical barrier surrounding Paradise, which meant it could only blow out to sea along the beach. Ash and burning debris rained down from above, and people started coughing. The humans were moving into the water to get away from the intense heat being generated on the shore. Leilani laughed maniacally as her captors wrestled her to the bottom. If not for her royal status, they probably would have killed her instead.

CLACK

The noise was barely audible over the chaos up above, but Leilani turned her head to look for it. Sound was so fast underwater that it was often hard to figure out which direction it had come from, especially when you were in the shallows. She looked away from the shallows, her eyes scanning the darkness of the depths. With the sun blotted out by smoke, it was only the flames of Paradise that illuminated the shadows now.

CLACK

This time, her captors heard it, too. The royal guard turned away from Leilani, gazing out in the same direction she was. Something massive lurked in the depths, a rippling shadow the length of the bay that moved toward them.

Up on land, the firestorm exploded, temporarily illuminating an army of skeletons. They were hovering in the water in a perfect line, their ranks spreading out behind them. As one, they landed together in the sand, their bones and joints creaking in time with one another.

CLACK!

They leapt forward again, the waves propelling them forward as one giant mass. The royal guard let go of Leilani and turned to face this new threat. There were easily hundreds of them, the corpses of those who had perished at sea. Some had been picked clean of their flesh while others still rotted, surrounded by tiny fish that nibbled at them. They were armed with bladed weapons that passed through the water with ease.

“Defensive positions!” called out the royal guard captain, and they raised their spears. The merfolk shifted the currents in an attempt to force the skeletons back out to sea, but the undead just hunkered down, sinking their bony fingers into the ground to wedge themselves in place.

There was a loud splash as several skeletons threw themselves from the Captain’s ship, these ones wielding scimitars and spears which cut through the water with little resistance. The water became stained with blood as the undead murdered their way through the defensive line, breaking the ranks of the merfolk.

Leilani swam up and away from the royal guard. Had the Captain’s army gone berserk upon his death? No, that didn’t make sense. It was Francois’ magic that animated them in the first place, which meant...

Leilani broke the surface of the water and cried out as hot ash hit her in the face. She held her hands over her head to block the worst of it. Other merfolk had surfaced as well, some of them stabbing down at skeletons that leapt up to attack them. Turning her head, she saw a bloodied figure stumbling toward his ship at the edge of the dock, using her trident for support.

“What in the new moon?” Leilani tried to swim toward the dock, but clawed fingers grabbed her tail and dragged her beneath the waves. It was an undead businessman, his bloated face looking up at her as he tried to yank her

down to the bottom where more undead waited. She managed to swat him in the face with her tail and squirm free before heading toward the dock.

As the merfolk swam toward the shore, a massive, watery barrier was summoned to deflect the heat. The air was already so hot that it hurt to breathe. Leilani pulled herself onto the dock, her tail splitting into legs so that she could continue her pursuit.

“Francois!” She shouted. The man stopped and turned in her direction, his features twisted up in anger. Leilani could only stop and stare as the man’s broken arm twisted about, the bones locking back into place. Other than the three bloody holes in his shirt, there was no evidence of the fatal wound she had inflicted.

However, the man’s hair had turned a dull gray, and his young features were now creased with the wrinkles of age. His eye was no longer swollen shut, but the open lid revealed scar tissue beneath. He lifted the trident and pointed it toward Leilani.

“You,” he said, his remaining eye radiating malevolence. Dark shadows curled around his body, as if clinging to him for warmth. “You cost me nearly four decades!”

“I don’t...” She watched in horror as Captain Francois threw the trident. It hissed through the air, nearly faster than the eye could follow, only to pass directly over her head.

“Fuck!” Captain Francois screamed in fury, then turned to leap onto his vessel. Massive clouds boiled out from beneath as it floated away from the dock. He moved to the head of the ship and pointed a finger toward the shore. “I’m coming for you and yours, Caretaker!”

Leilani turned to look. Skeletons were storming the beach now, attacking anyone alive. The merfolk, who had dragged themselves onto the beach using their arms, attempted to use water magic to push the undead away. Mike stood behind Opal, who casually dismantled anything that came near her. The Caretaker was holding a piece of driftwood and swinging it like a club. He stood over a pair of injured workers, terror engraved on their sun-bronzed faces.

“Eat my dick, Blackbeard.” He gave the finger to the Captain. Several skeletons were attempting to move around Opal, but Ingrid and some other members of the Order had formed a protective wall around him.

“Don’t let Francois get away!” called Princess Kailani from the beach. She was bleeding from numerous wounds to her arms. Several merfolk stretched out their hands and summoned massive waves to topple the ship.

Somehow, at the last moment, the waves simply dissipated, leaving Captain Francois unharmed. His vessel continued into the bay under calm seas. More undead crawled onto the beach, eagerly slashing and stabbing whoever they could get ahold of. The heat from Paradise had become so bad that several of the merfolk summoned a watery dome to protect those above the water from it.

The survivors on the beach had nowhere to go. With Paradise lost behind them, all they could do was face down the never ending hordes. As the waters in the bay surged, it revealed hundreds of the creatures, their bony features fixed into permanent grins.

Leilani felt the dock creaking beneath her. She turned to look back and stared in horror at skeletal limbs that clutched the decking and pulled themselves up. Turning away from them, she ran toward her Trident, which was embedded in the beach just past the dock. A dead surfer with one arm took a swing at her, but she ducked underneath his arm and hip checked him back into the water. Once she had her trident, she turned toward the Caretaker.

“Mike!” Leilani made it to his side. Sweat was pouring down his face and he was covered in ash. “There are too many of them. What should we do?”

“That is a very good question.” An odd look crossed his face and he turned to look over his shoulder. “But I think we’re about to get our answer.”

The watery barrier parted, and Ratu came through, dragging a man behind her. Lily was next, the succubus wasting no time and leaping down toward the surf to smashing herself against the undead. She became a whirling dervish of destruction, dismantling the Francois’ army in gory fashion.

“Caretaker.” There were flames in Ratu’s eyes. “Overwhelming odds?”

Mike let out a laugh. “Aren’t they always?”

Ratu gazed at the dead as they continued to storm the beach. The rough waves were churning now, slowing them down. “I assume the merfolk are ineffective due to the Captain’s control of the water?”

Leilani bit her lip, uncertain of the answer. However, Mike just nodded.

“He still has a pretty strong connection here. It’s actually coming from his ship. I’m guessing a sea god trumps anything the merfolk could do.”

“Perhaps.” Ratu looked at Leilani. “Find me those with the strongest control of water, and hurry.”

Leilani spun in place to survey the beach. She spotted part of her mother’s retinue struggling for survival. When she ran up to help, Ingrid and Wallace followed her. They worked together to dispatch the skeletons attacking the merfolk, then directed the retinue to form up by Mike. Ratu gazed out toward the water, the wind whipping her hair around her like a cloak.

The princess moved along the beach, condensing the remaining merfolk and Order personnel into one location. This caused the undead to concentrate toward one area, which allowed the Order to mount a proper counterattack with Lily’s help. Once the merfolk were gathered, Ratu turned to address them.

“The Captain prevents you from pushing them back out to sea.” She surveyed the merfolk with a critical eye. A couple of merfolk tried to argue, but Ratu cut them off. “Don’t tell me I’m wrong, I can see how the mana is manipulated. He has commanded the ocean to push them onto shore. We can use this.”

“How?” asked Princess Kailani.

“Add your power to his. Demand that the water bring them all here.” Ratu turned to face the undead horde, kicking off her sandals so that she could bury her feet in the sand. “And have it do so *violently*. Those of you maintaining this shield, I need you to push it back toward Paradise to give us more room.”

Leilani stepped forward and raised her hands toward the water, doing her best to ignore the creatures that scrambled toward them in the sand. She asked the waves to bring her a bounty, to slam it onto the sand that she may gaze on it in wonder. At her side and behind her, she could feel the others doing the same, and watched as the waves churned wildly.

Beth moved to join Ratu, tiny spheres of water swirling around her. The naga whispered something in the woman’s ear, and the lawyer nodded. As the undead were washed onto the shore, the sand beneath them formed into a swirling mass. Jagged, volcanic rocks rose from the ground like teeth, and as the undead came forward, they were pulled into the rocky grinder. Ratu held perfectly

still, but Leilani could sense the naga sending her magic straight down into the ground.

The undead were being piled up, now, coming onto the beach so quickly that they couldn't even stand. The swirling sands expanded to claim them as well, along with a woman who tripped and fell into the vortex. She was rescued at the last moment by Lily, who was clinging to one of the massive stones as it moved past. Overhead, a quartet of fairies flew in lazy circles, everyone watching in awe as the undead were crushed and dragged down beneath the earth.

After nearly ten minutes of this, the bay was empty of attackers. Whether they had destroyed all the undead or Francois had called them back, it didn't matter. The merfolk sat down in exhaustion as the waters finally stilled and the natural rhythm of the waves returned. Leilani turned toward Mike and smiled, but his eyes were on the people who lay still on the sands around them.

"Damn," he muttered, his voice nearly inaudible. When his eyes met hers, he just shook his head. "I'm so—"

"Don't." Leilani pressed a finger against his lip. "The only one who gets to claim this tragedy has already run far from it. Do not take responsibility for the evil of others."

He contemplated her silently, then nodded. Leilani looked past him at Paradise, the flames now licking at the barrier.

"We should probably put that out," she said.

The merfolk nearest to her turned around to face the burning structure. Without the Captain's influence, it was far easier to command the waves. A thick mist formed above them, creating a water-laden cloud that rose up and passed through the shimmering barrier of water. A water spout appeared in the bay, which fed into the artificial rain cloud. When the rain fell, the runoff was black as midnight as it flowed back onto the sand. Water dripped down from above, soaking all who stood on the beach. The Director's eyes fluttered, but Ratu stood over him imperiously, as if daring him to move.

Order personnel stood nearby, gazing with uncertainty on their captured leader. Ingrid and her team moved among them, spreading word of his treachery. The merfolk whispered quietly as the fires were put out, trying to determine what their next steps were. Leilani found her mother sitting among them, glaring daggers out toward the sea.

“Mother.” She sat down next to Kailani.

The princess didn’t respond at first, her eyes glistening with either tears or rain. “Do you think he attacked the colony?” she finally asked with a furrowed brow. “Or was this assault just to ensure his own escape?”

“Send someone. The fastest swimmer we have.” Leilani rose and pointed at a merwoman she knew was a strong swimmer. “You. The colony needs to know what has transpired here.”

The mermaid hesitated long enough to make sure Kailani didn’t counter the order, then crawled on her hands into the surf and vanished. A couple others went with her to ensure the message was passed along, their tails splashing briefly before they vanished. An uneasy peace settled over the beach as smoke and steam drifted around them. The water barrier had come down, allowing everyone to see the smoldering ruins. A few people from the Order went to examine the rubble in the hopes of finding survivors. Leilani doubted they would be successful.

Mike moved next to Ratu and slid an arm around her waist. “Are you okay?” he asked. Leilani couldn’t help but feel a slight twinge of jealousy.

Ratu nodded, then tilted her head to lay it on his shoulder. Down on the ground, the Director made a gurgling sound in the back of his throat.

“How dare you,” he hissed. Nearby, a few members of the Order stood at attention as if realizing for the first time that the Director was present.

Mike scowled at the Director. “The only words I want to hear out of your mouth are the ones where you call off the attack on my home.”

A pair of knights looked nervously at each other, then pulled out their swords. A mage nervously lifted her wand as if to point it at Mike.

“Don’t.” Ingrid stepped between them and Mike, then looked at the others. “He’s not the bad guy here. We are.”

The Director sat up with an amused look on his face. “I never expected to be bested in a fight,” he admitted, rubbing his jaw. “Luckily for me, I’m not a betting man. You may have been stronger in this moment, Upala...”

“Ratu,” the naga corrected. She looked at Mike. “It’s Ratu.”

“It’s what I get to call you.” The Caretaker smiled briefly, as if lost in a memory.

“But next time, you won’t be so lucky.” The Director grinned, his lips stretching abnormally wide. “You should have killed me.”

“There won’t be a next time, Mohan.” Ratu shook her head. “You may have been running things for the Order, but even they will find fault with your actions. Once I leave this place, you will never see me again. I have a home I can go to, a family that I’m a part of. You have nothing. You are nothing.”

Mohan laughed, an unsettling sound that carried across the beach.

“Soon enough, you’ll beg. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Maybe we should just kill him.” Lily knelt down by Mohan, who glared at her. “Or maybe give him to the merfolk.”

“We...take no issue with the Director.” Kailani shook her head. “Our quarrel is currently with Captain Francois. As for our relationship with the Caretaker, I think my people would agree that we are...uncertain.”

Leilani sighed, but couldn’t help but agree with her mother. Captain Francois had attacked them, but it wouldn’t surprise her in the least if he claimed it was self defense. He was a man with decades of experience manipulating the merfolk from within. For now, she would have to settle for a lack of hostility.

“Let’s feed him to Di, then.” Lily jabbed at Mohan with a pointed finger. “I’d offer to snap his neck, but imagine that would be difficult.”

“Very. You may have me at a disadvantage now, but you’ll find that...” Mohan continued to speak, but Leilani felt a chill run up her back and looked away from the Director and toward Mike. The Caretaker had gone unnaturally still, his gaze suddenly to the north-east. A heavy presence filled the air, as if lightning was about to strike.

“What did you do?” Mike’s eyes snapped down toward Mohan.

The man smirked. “I’m sure you’ll find out soon—” Mohan gasped as Mike knelt down and seized him by the throat, then roughly lifted him into the air with one hand. Ratu’s jaw dropped, and the others nearby all took a step back as the air hissed with magic.

“WHAT DID YOU DO?” Mike’s voice tore the air, causing others to flinch away. In the ensuing silence, the faint chirping of a cell phone could be heard.

“I believe that’s for you, Caretaker.” The Director pointed at Mike’s pocket, clearly unperturbed by the fact that Mike was clutching his throat.

Mike pulled out his phone and studied the screen for a second. His eyes narrowed dangerously, and then he dropped the phone onto the sand. The skies above darkened and Mike Radley screamed.

The Director laughed.

Eulalie had looked away from the computer monitor for less than a second when activity at the command center exploded. Dozens of men and women stormed out all at once, creating multiple single file lines as they sprinted toward the back of the house. The Arachne almost knocked her headset off as she positioned the microphone in front of her mouth.

“They’re coming in hot by the garage,” she practically shouted. Two separate teams were climbing the house using ropes. A third team set up shop away from the house with a pair of mortars. By the time the garage was breached by the first wave, a shell had been launched that struck one of Yuki’s ice walls and exploded.

“What are they doing?” Eulalie watched in horror as another shell fell toward Naia’s fountain. Amygone’s tree swayed and detonated the shell early. Branches and burning leaves tumbled down into the water. The teams climbing the house were now in position, weapons drawn. By the time Sulyvahn made an appearance out back, they had opened fire.

“I need someone on those mortars. They’re just below the gardens, and...” Eulalie stared in confusion as the transport trucks started up and drove along the driveway to the command center. “They brought in the transports. Something is up.”

Another group deployed from the command center. This one was primarily composed of SoS members and they broke into a sprint toward the greenhouse. They were most of the way there when Cerberus intercepted them. This time, an icy simulacrum of Yuki rode on their back.

Eulalie scanned all the monitors, suddenly wary. Their last attempt on the fountain had been competent, but underwhelming. This felt extremely aggressive, as if—

The group assaulting Cerberus immediately split up and started kiting the hellhound. Yuki's clone froze the ground around them, preventing the iron spikes from being driven into the soil. Mortar shells continued to rain down on Naia's fountain, which was now being surrounded by the SoS. Ice walls were taken down with grenades, and a trio of knights were strapping the decoy Abella to a dolly to haul her off.

The Arachne shouted out everything she saw and the house responded. Sulyvahn mounted his horse and swung his head around in circles as he lashed out at their attackers with his whip. The plants all reached out to trip up or strangle those who passed, and Cerberus howled as the SoS peppered them with rounds.

Eulalie stared at the screen, an itch of an idea wiggling deep into her brain. There was something obvious here, staring her right in the face. The team on the roof was confronted by Cecilia, who snatched a man and tossed him off. The man was saved only by the safety rope he had clipped to his belt, now dangling above the team fighting Cerberus. Down below, the hell hound breathed hot fire in streaks that scorched the ground, narrowly missing her attackers on purpose.

Decoy. Bullets. Those two words spun circles in Eulalie's head, and she stared hard at the screen as she tried to figure out what her subconscious was telling her. It wasn't until a man opened fire on Cerberus' face that the pieces finally fell into place.

Cerberus was a being from the Underworld, capable of guarding the gates from armies of demons. If anything, their etymology was closest to a demon. When the SoS had trapped her last time, it had been with a magical sigil mostly attuned to demonic entities. If they knew such a thing could trap a hellhound, then why hadn't somebody fired one of their enchanted rounds to see if it dismissed her?

That left two options. The first was they were aware that Cyrus had betrayed them, and that the bullets would summon the wrath of the stone lions. If true, then Cyrus was likely lost to them, perhaps even killed for his deception. But if that was the case, then this new behavior made no sense, which led her to option number two.

They were saving those rounds. Why would someone willingly wait to dismiss the hellhound hunting them unless...

Eulalie gasped. Someone in the SoS had realized that the house had taken a non-lethal stance on the attack. In hindsight, anybody who knew Mike would assume this was the case, but then why put on such a big show all of the sudden? Why bomb the fountain and try to bring everyone out at once?

The Abella statue was hauled away via the garage route. Sulyvahn and Amymone tried to stop them, along with help from another Yuki clone. Eulalie felt all the data coalesce in her head and immediately became nauseous. The mercenaries had created a decoy of their own, which meant that something big was happening elsewhere. What could it be?

On the roof, Cecilia disappeared as a man peppered her with salt rounds, then reappeared near one of the turrets. A member of the SoS crouched down and held up a device Eulalie hadn't seen before which fired a shining net. It wrapped tightly around the banshee, and she cried out in pain as it bit into her skin. Down by the fountain, Sulyvahn stopped and held his head in a manner that he could glance up at the roof. It was during this moment that a sniper round struck him in the temple, causing the dullahan to topple from his horse. More rounds were fired, and Eulalie watched in horror as both Yuki clones shattered at the same time four of her cameras went off.

"Suly's down! Cecilia's been captured, and—" Eulalie caught a flicker of movement in one of the side monitors. The door of the greenhouse was shoved open and Zel came racing out, her features bloody and her face frantic. She was followed by several centaurs, all of them holding weapons. Immediately, those wielding bows launched arrows at nearby attackers.

Zel screamed so loud that her voice was picked up by multiple microphones.

"CALLISTO! CALLISTO!" Zel took another deep breath and turned her head. "GRACE!"

Eulalie felt the world drop out from beneath her. She stared hard into the monitors, her fingers trembling just above the keys.

"They've taken the children," she said, the words tumbling free from numb lips. "Lethal force authorized."

For several seconds, nobody spoke. The comms were silent as everybody processed this information. There was an eerie burst of static, followed by a single sentence.

“Play time’s over,” said Jenny.

Out in the front yard, the Jabberwock lifted its head free of the garden, roots stretching and dirt falling free as it launched itself at the command center. The windows on the second floor opened and a collection of dolls levitated outward like drones, all of them moving toward the mercenaries with arms outstretched as if they wanted hugs.

Down below, the front door opened and Yuki ran out with Dana right behind her, the zombie carrying a backpack. They were followed by Sofia, who sprinted madly toward the street with none other than Tink on her back.

“Where are they?” asked Yuki, her voice somehow calm. “Do you see them on the screen?”

“I, um...” Eulalie looked back and forth between the monitors. The Jabberwock had crawled across the top of the command center to crash into the first transport vehicle parked behind it. The massive homunculus was busy tearing the roof off to look inside. Cerberus had pinned down a group of mages by the house using dual streams of fire that had slowly come together. The hell hound now blew flames so hot that the ground glassed over with ash, consuming the magic wielders and leaving nothing behind. Aymone’s tree actively snatched up mercenaries, the vines forming into nooses that strangled them.

And then there was Naia. The nymph made an appearance, but the camera had trouble focusing on her. Her eyes glowed with golden light as she pointed at the men near her fountain. With a curled finger, she ripped all the water from their bodies, leaving desiccated corpses behind.

“I...I...I...” Eulalie looked at the greenhouse monitor. How had they gotten to the centaurs? It didn’t make sense, even if they had gotten in, it would have taken them a while to get down to the village and...

“FUCK!” The Arachne rewound the footage back to the earlier assault. Somebody had gone into the greenhouse during the first attack, a man that didn’t show up again when they had retreated. She scrolled forward through the footage, moving back and forth in an attempt to figure out what had happened next. It wasn’t until the fifth viewing of the current assault that she spotted an older woman in the center of the SoS as they neared the greenhouse. When she drew close, she simply vanished from sight, likely an invisibility spell of some kind.

Illusions, by nature, weren't malevolent. Much like the protective shields cast by the mages, it wouldn't have triggered the home's defenses. The earlier assault had been a feint, an attempt to learn more about the enemy, or so Eulalie had thought. In truth, it had been one, massive decoy in order to get a single person in position to take the children.

"I'm coming out," she said, stepping out of her web hammock.

"Don't." Yuki's voice was the epitome of frost. "We need your eyes right now. Figure out where they went."

Eulalie bit back a harsh retort and scrolled through the footage again. Out in the yard, the Jabberwock was now dispatching the mortars, tossing the men who manned them into the air and swallowing them whole. Yuki and Dana were near the command center now, but then parted ways. Dana took off her backpack and threw it into the command center while Yuki headed for the street. The people up on the roof opened fire on both of them, but Abella slipped free from her hiding spot and let out a blast of heartfire. The men undid their safety ropes and fled from the flames, and the heat melted Cecilia's net. The banshee charged forward and shoved two men off the roof before vanishing from sight.

The front door opened again, and Asterion emerged. He broke into a sprint as one of the transport vehicles tried to pull away. The vehicle was steering around the Jabberwock's tail when the minotaur leapt onto the hood. With a howl, Asterion slammed his ax through the windshield.

"Where are they? Where are they?" Eulalie kept going through the footage, trying to find some evidence of invisible passage. Then she slapped her forehead in frustration when she remembered the thermal cameras. She changed the filters on the footage and saw them this time. The witch approached the greenhouse and waited a few seconds before another figure emerged with a small figure slung over one shoulder. Behind them, Callisto was pulled out, his neck and waist on a leash. Invisible to the human eye, the four of them bypassed the yard completely and moved to the stone wall that surrounded the property. Dark shadows emerged from the woman that lifted the four of them over and away.

"Shit, shit!" Eulalie scrambled through her other cameras, hoping to figure out where they had gone. On the main bank of monitors, several mercenaries noticed the ominous dolls that chased their compatriots. These men immediately switched to their pistols and joined the fray, opening fire on the toys. Fiery white

rounds that blazed with rainbow light emerged from the barrels of their guns, which in turn tore some of the dolls apart.

At the entrance to the property, the lions blazed to life. Surrounded in hot, golden flames, they charged into the ranks of the SoS and tore through them like tissue paper. The remaining members of the Order were in a full panic now, some of them using attack spells of their own. The lions danced around the yard, targeting hostile magic users and anyone who shot at them. Several people sprinted madly for safety, their resolve finally broken.

“Eulalie.” Dana’s voice had a tense edge to it. “The command center is down. The kids aren’t in here.”

“They went over the wall on the south side of the greenhouse,” Eulalie replied as she pulled up some different feeds. She had installed a few cameras around the neighborhood and scrolled through the footage in the hopes of spotting them. A dark van pulled out of the driveway of the next-door neighbor’s house. The witch and a man in sunglasses were in the front seat. “They left the property already.”

“Good.” Jenny sounded like she was speaking through a tube filled with razor blades. Eulalie looked at the monitor and saw that the doll was hovering in the front yard, held in place by shadowy legs. Anyone who came within twenty feet of her had their heads rapidly spun 180 degrees. “We don’t have to be careful anymore.”

Men and women were flash frozen along the front yard as Yuki dashed between them, the kitsune already headed for the street. Cerberus howled and sent a blaze of fire out that consumed a group of men who opened fire on Yuki. Eulalie’s fingers danced along her keyboard as she opened up all of the nearby traffic cameras.

“C’mon, c’mon,” she muttered, then winced at the crack of a sniper rifle in her ear. It was followed immediately by a few more. On the main screens, several different people dropped dead on the yard. “Who is doing that?” she asked.

“Tink is,” replied Sofia. “She’s got the goggles on. Other snipers are down, by the way.”

In the background of the comms, Eulalie could make out the sound of someone sniffing. The sound briefly halted right before another shot was fired.

“Kill them all,” whispered Tink through the headset. “Tink kill everyone. Burn whole world down!” The rifle fired again and a mage by the front of the house dropped.

“Leave some alive,” said Dana. “We need to know where they took the kids and the people in the command center won’t be talking. Eulalie, any leads?”

“Not yet, I...” Eulalie stared helplessly at the cameras. She was able to monitor the van as it left the city, but it had vanished from sight before making the highway. The Arachne opened a city map and tried to guess where they may have gone, then groaned when she realized that there was a good chance they had been taken to the same place Cyrus had.

“I need someone to go get Uncle Foot,” she said. “Don’t tell him what happened yet. Bring him directly to me.”

“Any reason?” asked Dana.

“Because I need him to follow my plan instead of storming off in a rage.” The Arachne had no gods to pray to. For just a moment, Eulalie kind of wished they did. “If you just tell him the kids are missing, he’s gonna rip someone’s head off.”

“I’m on it.” Reggie’s voice crackled. “I’ll bring him right to you at the Library.”

“Thank you, Reggie.” Eulalie stared at the last image of the van, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. She took a deep breath, then another one. Closing her eyes, all she could see was her sister’s face.

“The Arachne are characterized by cold logic in the face of adversity,” she whispered, her fingers pressing into the desk so hard that the wood splintered. The words were from an old Order report she had found. “They have no emotional attachments, other than the desire to feed and then breed.”

Her hearts were racing as she opened her eyes and took another calming breath. “I am a variant,” she said, staring hard at the screen. “I have emotional attachments and lack the desire to breed. But I’m smart. Everyone always says how smart I am.” She looked down at the slivers piled up beneath her nails. Maybe if she was a true Arachne, this would be easier. “Focus on the solution, not the emotions. I need to be cold, colder than ice.”

Trembling, she pulled up Cyrus’ last known location. It had taken him over an hour to get there, which meant there was still time. She needed to put

together a team, someone to intercept the van if possible. Turning her microphone back on, she spoke.

“I need Yuki, Death, and Dana. Has anyone contacted Mike?”

There was silence for several seconds before Dana spoke. “I just let him know,” she said. “We need to get him home, right now.”

“I’m already on it,” said Eulalie as she sent Mike an address along with a door code. The rats had already let her know that the portal to Paradise had collapsed in on itself. Ever the meticulous planner, Eulalie had rented an airBNB just down the road from Paradise as a backup and would have the rats start chewing a portal there now. Taking a deep breath, she sat back in her chair and stared at the monitors. Now it was time for the worst part of all.

Waiting.