

Bad Behavior

The white marble fountain sat atop a large staircase that descended at least a hundred steps down to a massive hedge garden below. From Mike's place by the fountain, he could see the surly figure at the other edge of the garden. He crossed his arms over his breasts, then coughed to hide his embarrassment and let them hang by his side.

"It's a little weird, you know." When he spoke, it was in Hestia's voice. "Knowing that we're both piloting the same meat suit."

"You're telling me." Their shared lips twisted into a grin. "An unfortunate outcome of my current predicament."

"So how do I know which one of you is talking?"

Mike turned to see Kisa sitting on the edge of the fountain, her hackles raised in alarm as she looked around. Upon seeing him, she let out a sigh of relief. Kisa hopped to her feet and gave him a big hug, pressing her face into his breasts.

"Freaked me out for a second, I had no idea how I got here. Then I see you standing there in someone else's body. Damn, you're stacked." Kisa let out a purr from her new location. "Hey, I've got a really fun idea—"

"There's no time for that," Hestia said, pushing Kisa back. "We were summoned here by another player. You can choose to ignore the summons, but I thought you would want to meet with him."

Mike sighed and looked at the man lurking down by the gardens. "It's fucking Frankie, isn't it?"

Hestia nodded. "It is."

"What about the others?" asked Kisa. "I was sitting with Tink when—"

The goddess held up her hand and the catgirl went quiet. "You are still sitting with your friend. Time is different in this place. It is much like your Dreamscape." She turned her attention to Mike. "If you chose to, you and the Captain could speak for many days and only moments would have passed in your world. The gods all agreed early on that this would prevent players from being ruthlessly assassinated during such meetings. This space is safe for you. No harm can be done here."

“I don’t suppose we could make him climb the stairs?” Mike crossed his arms and sneered down at the garden. “If I can’t hurt him, it would be a little funny to push him back down.”

“Perhaps. But it would piss off his god.” Hestia made a sound in the back of her throat. “Who I might add has quite the temper.”

“So who is our lovely Captain wearing today? We talking Hades? Ares? Ralph Lauren?” Mike started down the stairs.

Hestia laughed. “I would remind you that our case is unique. The Captain and his god are two separate entities here, so it’s likely that he’s nearby.”

Mike noticed that the Captain stood at the edge of the garden and made no move to meet him halfway. The man looked much older than he remembered and was wearing a fancy gray cotton long coat with a matching tricorne hat. A sneer was fixed on Francois’ lips, which looked extra intimidating beneath his new eye patch. Since the guy was being a dick and time wasn’t actually passing, Mike took his time moving through the hedge garden, stopping occasionally to study the flowers. Several of them were made of light that sparkled when he touched them.

“Your friend is getting impatient,” said Kisa.

“Fuck him. He’s the one who called me here.” Mike frowned. “Which I could have ignored, yes?”

“You could have. But it would have been very rude.” Hestia plucked a nearby flower and tucked it in her hair. “Also, you never know what can happen at meetings like this. I’ve seen allies go to war over a few words, or enemies reconcile. And while this place seems empty, it has a memory of its own. When the two of you part, the others will know on what kind of terms. You may end up with an unexpected ally in the future as a result.”

“Or another enemy.”

Hestia laughed. “You seem to have no trouble making those.”

“She’s not wrong,” added Kisa.

“Alright, alright, enough girl talk.” Mike noted the shortest path through the hedges and moved to walk it. “Let’s go see what this assmunch wants.”

As they approached Captain Francois, Mike could see that the man was seething, but also looked very smug. There were many possible reasons that

Francois had called him here, but Mike immediately doubted he would like anything he was about to hear.

“Frankie. Good to see you.” Mike cocked his hip to one side in his best impression of Lily. “You’re looking well.”

“So it’s true. You wear the form of your goddess.” Francois smirked and tilted his head to look down his nose at Mike. “An interesting choice.”

“Ah, man, you saw through my disguise.” Mike pouted dramatically. “At least we didn’t show up in the same outfit. How embarrassing would that have been? People would think we were quite the pair.”

The Captain’s eye twitched in irritation. “I suppose you know why I’ve called you here.”

“I do.” Mike gave Francois a knowing look. “You saw how powerful I am and would like to apologize or maybe even surrender.”

The Captain’s face turned a dark shade of red. Before he could reply, a shadow fell over both of them. Mike looked up to see a man nearly ten feet tall. His hair and beard were long and wild, and his face was crusted with sea salt. He clutched a massive trident in one hand, which he tapped impatiently on the ground.

“Look upon me, Caretaker. My player may stand for your belligerence, but I shall not.” The newcomer scowled at Mike, his eyes filled with the fury of a hurricane. “For I am Poseidon, god of all the oceans!”

“Hello, brother.” Hestia took over the mouth. “We didn’t see you there.”

Mike almost laughed, withdrawing briefly from control of the body so that Hestia could remain composed for the two of them. He also noticed that nobody else had acknowledged Kisa standing just off to the side, her eyes wide as she watched the scene play out.

Poseidon didn’t seem pleased at the comment, but said nothing. Instead, he placed a massive hand on Francois’ shoulder, which seemed to give the Captain strength to continue speaking.

“I called you here because I want to negotiate,” he said. “For the eggs.”

“No.”

Poseidon chuckled. "You would be wise to hear the terms, Caretaker."

Mike sighed and looked up at the god. "I always thought you'd be taller," he said.

Francois rolled his eye. "Yes, we get it, you think you're witty. I've summoned you here to discuss ownership of the eggs. Ordinarily, I wouldn't stoop to this...conversation, but felt that perhaps we could settle this with words rather than further violence."

"I don't think there's really anything to discuss. You want the eggs to, what, eat them? Hatch your own dragon babies? Whatever it takes to live forever, right?"

Francois nodded. "I have lived for centuries, Caretaker, and wish to continue doing so. After the setback dealt to me at Paradise, I find myself with a reduced amount of time to pursue other avenues of immortality."

"Are there? Other avenues, I mean."

Francois nodded. "Naught more than rumors, but yes. You see, the Fountain of Youth didn't just keep me young by rolling back the hands of time. It also healed my wounds, and undid any harm that I've suffered. During the fight at Paradise, what little of its magic that remained was used up that I might survive. I now live on borrowed time as a result."

"And you're hoping I'll feel bad and give you those eggs to help out?" Mike shook his head. "I'm not sure I see why I should do this."

Francois growled. "It's rather simple, Caretaker. What is it you want most in the world?"

"A pair of shoes that go with all my outfits but are also comfortable." Mike lifted a shapely leg to reveal that he was barefoot. Poseidon made a noise in the back of his throat that sounded like a wave colliding with a rock wall.

"To be left alone." Francois glared at Mike. "Tell me I'm wrong."

Mike pondered the words for a moment, then nodded. "I won't argue. Getting caught up in stuff like this is...tiresome. But I also have a duty of care, hence the clever title. Wanting to be left alone includes those eggs, you know. Based on what little I know, at least a few dragons entrusted them to the original guardians with the idea that they'd be allowed to hatch and live someday."

Francois shrugged. "Life doesn't always happen as we think it should. Much like you, I stumbled into the Great Game. For me, it was a chance encounter. Lost at sea with no hope of survival, I spotted a ship on the horizon. Hoping that we had been rescued, I took the long boat by myself and rowed out to greet it. What should I find but a magic vessel with both an infinite supply of food and water."

"Which I'm sure you shared with your crew."

The Captain nodded. "You may think me a bastard, but I'm not a monster. My crew came with me, and we sailed together for many years. It wasn't until much later, after a failed mutiny that I learned that those who perished at sea would continue to serve me. For centuries, the bones of every man, woman, and child who fell prey to the depths became my crew. I amassed a secret armada, an undead army willing to follow any order I give them. That is what I came here to talk about, Caretaker. For you see, in exchange for the eggs, I offer you peace. Poseidon?"

The god rose his trident and swung it across the air above them. The sky rippled and formed into an overhead map of the island of Maui. All around the perimeter, hundreds of dots floated on the water.

"That is just a taste of what's to come. You see, in my previous bid for the eggs, I did not expect the interference of Pele herself. I believed my guardian sufficient to defeat the dragon, but could not compete with the bearer of fire herself." Francois spat on the ground. "However, my goal was to lure you out of hiding. I had heard you were new to the role, and thought I could take advantage of this fact."

"Yeah, you really didn't see us coming. We're full of surprises like that." Mike studied the Captain. "Out of curiosity, who told you about me?"

Francois grinned. "Perhaps that is information I could give you to sweeten the deal. I am prepared to offer you peace, plus the identity of my informant in exchange for those eggs."

"No offense, but I don't care how many skeletons you have. They're limited in what they can do. Even if you force marched a million of them up that mountain-side, my family would be capable of easily destroying them."

Poseidon smirked. Francois chuckled and rubbed at his jaw.

“Well, you see Mike Radley, the skeletons aren’t for you.” Francois clapped his hands together. “There are two sets of rules for the Great Game. The ones we cannot bypass, no matter how hard we try. Those are magically enforced. Then there are the unspoken rules created by our predecessors which aren’t official in the slightest. One of these unspoken rules is that we do not reveal the Game to the outside world. It is a game best played in the shadows, away from greedy eyes.”

Mike didn’t like where this was going. “And?”

Francois grinned. “I’m about to break that rule. Those dots represent ships, Caretaker. Ships that my minions have pieced back together. If you really want to see what you face, allow me to enlighten you.” He snapped his fingers, and the shimmering scene above rippled, shedding the waters of the ocean and turning into a topographical map. All along the depths, a white fog had formed. “And there are the rest of them, Mike Radley. My undead minions ready to march on the island itself. Not to take the eggs from you, you are right when you speak of their limited utility. Tomorrow morning, I intend to order them to march on the island of Maui where they will either slaughter every living human where they stand or drag them out into the water to replenish my forces.”

It was like a punch to the gut. Mike’s jaw dropped open as he realized the fog was simply hundreds of thousands of skeletons, primed and ready to invade.

“Even now, the US Coast Guard is mobilizing in order to figure out how best to identify and handle this threat.” Francois grinned. “But they can’t kill that which is already dead, Caretaker. Their guns will be useless, and when I sink their ships, I will add their corpses to my army. Pele is a formidable opponent, but she values her people far more than the continued existence of those eggs. She will have to choose what she wishes to defend.”

“This is madness.” Mike looked down from the map at Francois. “You would kill all those people? Just to live forever?”

Francois laughed. “There is no obstacle I won’t surmount to achieve my goals. So when I speak of peace, I don’t simply mean that you will be left alone. You’re still a young man, Caretaker. Imagine the decades ahead, trying to live with the knowledge that you allowed so many to be slaughtered. Tomorrow at dawn, should you not meet me on the shores of Hana with those eggs in hand, you will have war.”

Mike suddenly felt very small in the Captain's presence. This wasn't just some assholes on his lawn anymore, or a demon making trouble on his property. Innocent people were about to become caught up in all of this, families and children. He bit his lip in contemplation, trying to figure out the best course of action.

There were only two possible outcomes. He could hand over the eggs, but Titania had already explained to him why he couldn't do that. Francois was chasing immortality, but what else might he gain from acquiring the eggs? Mike looked up at Poseidon and remembered what Hestia had said about his temper. It was entirely possible that Captain Francois would return later to get revenge, and who knew what sort of powers he would have?

So, no, handing over the eggs wasn't an option. Mike lowered his gaze to the Captain, his mind racing with possibilities. A fight was coming, that was clear. But he was already in the middle of a fight of his own. The Sons of Sin and the Order had taken his children which was the problem he wanted to tackle right now. Frankie and his bullshit were a secondary problem at best.

But in his heart, Mike already felt pain for the people of Hawaii who didn't know that their own lives and families were about to be torn apart. He clenched his fists and felt a rush of divine energy flow through him.

"I need more time," he said. "I can't just bring you the eggs. They're being incubated."

Francois shook his head. "I know for a fact that you have some sort of magical shortcut set up already. The eggs will be fine outside of their incubator as long as they come straight to me."

"What about the Order?" asked Mike, desperate for something to cling to. "They're gonna be pissed when they realize you're about to ruin their whole 'magic doesn't exist' schtick."

The Captain laughed. "Why do you think I want those eggs by tomorrow morning? Even if they could pull their shit together, the Order couldn't mobilize a proper response by then, not on an island that is several hours away from anywhere by plane." He snapped his fingers and the ground around him rippled like water. "You've got around fourteen hours, Caretaker. Make the right choice."

"And what if I said no?" Mike's whole body tingled. "What if I said I would stop you?"

Captain Francois smirked. "Allow me to answer your question with an expression you Americans are so fond of using." The man chuckled and crossed his arms. "You and what army?"

With those words, he stepped forward and slid through the ground. Poseidon vanished as well, leaving Mike with Hestia and Kisa. They stood in silence, but Mike could tell that Hestia was seething. He could literally feel it in her bones, the desire to rip Francois to shreds. As the goddess of hearth and home, the man was attacking all that she held dear.

"Mike?" Kisa stepped away from the hedges, her tail drooping behind her. "What are we gonna do?"

"I don't know." Mike looked around and found a carved stone bench to sit on. When he sat, he had to stand back up and fiddle around with the fabric of his skirt to keep it from bunching. "Little help here."

Hestia took over and casually smoothed down the fabric so he could sit comfortably. Kisa sat next to him and put her head in his lap so that she could look up at him between his cleavage. He stroked her hair, trying his best not to puke. Could he even throw up in this place?

"What should I do?" he asked aloud, his emotions now overflowing into his eyes. He needed to save his kids. But he also had a duty as the Caretaker. His family was his world, but the actual world also needed his help. "Hestia?"

"I'm afraid I cannot advise you in this," she replied.

"Why? Is this another stupid rule?"

"No." The goddess' lip trembled. "I am uncertain what the answer is. Those children...you see, in all the years I have been part of the Great Game, I have yet to see or experience a family like yours. Former Caretakers took many lovers, but rarely were there ever children of any sort to walk my halls. I have watched your children learn and grow before my very eyes and think of them as my own.

"But as the goddess of hearth and home, I can almost feel the coming agony of those who will lose their loved ones. I am no warrior, my beloved Caretaker, and cannot offer you a strategy based on experience. Instead, all I have are opinions, and I'm afraid to color your decision with words of my own."

"Fuck." Mike stared into the distance. Kisa moved up on the bench and put her head on his shoulder.

“By the way, it’s freaky to watch you talk to yourself like that.” The catgirl nuzzled his breasts affectionately. “Do you want to hear what I think?”

“Yeah.” Mike laughed and wiped a tear from his eyes. “I would love to hear advice from anybody at this point. I’m feeling stuck.”

“Just because you’re the Caretaker doesn’t mean you aren’t also a dad. Or a husband. Or a lover.” Kisa wrapped her arms around his waist. “You can still be all those things, so quit thinking like only one of them. That piece of shit told you that there were some unspoken rules of the Great Game. I think I’ve thought of a couple unspoken rules of my own that might help.”

“Okay. Let’s hear them.”

Kisa let go of Mike and moved to face him. She took his hand in her own and gave him a long look. In it, he could see a reflection of all his emotions. As his familiar, he could tell their emotions were in sync. “Captain Francois brought up the Great Game for a reason. He tried to take you out so that he could just walk in and grab those eggs for himself. But he couldn’t. The guy fucked up. So what does he do next? He’s chosen the nuclear option and is gonna go all undead Normandy on us.”

Mike sighed. “I’m aware.”

“But, and here’s the really big question, why is he giving you time to think about it? If he knows you’ve got a secret shortcut, why not just tell you to bring him the eggs by dinnertime? Or be a big dick and demand them now?” Kisa put her hands on her hips. “If he doesn’t want the Order showing up, why give you such a long time frame to plan for something?”

“Because…” Mike looked down at his lap and frowned. Why did the Captain give them such a long time frame? What was so special about daybreak? If Mike didn’t bring the eggs, then Francois would—

“Night marchers.” Mike looked up at Kisa with wide eyes. “They actually came out early, and it seems like they were hunting him specifically. He’s afraid they’ll do it again because I bet there are easily thousands of them.”

“Shit, that’s right!” Kisa hopped up and down. “The night marchers might help us!”

“So that’s probably why he has a sunrise deadline. Once they come into play, he knows he’s fucked..”

Kisa nodded. "But that also means he thinks he can take the eggs before sundown. If he doesn't, then the marchers show up and ruin everything for him. So that's our deadline. If we stall him until sundown, we win. Who do you think will help?"

"The merfolk. Well, maybe." Mike frowned. He really didn't like the idea of asking anyone to potentially die for a cause that was his alone. "Why is it that the marchers can't come out during the day?"

"That's probably something you should ask Pele. The Order knows them pretty well, so Ingrid might know, too." Kisa bit her lip.

Mike nodded. At least he felt like they had some options and avenues to explore. "Okay, so let's get intel on the marchers and then see if the Order and merfolk might be able to help us out. What else should we do?"

"Well, that brings me back to those rules. We're all caught up in the Order's rules, the Great Game's rules, all that shit. What if we just stopped caring? Well, about the ones that aren't enforced, anyway. I bet the Captain thinks we're going to try and keep everything quiet so as not to upset the balance. But if we do end up fighting Francois, everyone on the island is going to see it. So why not go balls to the wall and give them a show they'll never forget?"

"I..." Mike looked up. "Hestia, if we did something like that, would it cause a problem?"

"Several, actually." The goddess made a face. "But the Great Game itself does not forbid it. You will gather plenty of attention from other...interested parties, though."

"Unspoken rule number one; thou shalt not do magic in public. Francois doesn't care, so no longer do we." Kisa held up a finger for emphasis. "So let's break that rule and give them hell."

"You said you had two unspoken rules."

"Unspoken rule number two." Kisa's ears went flat on her head and her voice became hard. "You don't fuck with the Radley family. That's a rule he's already broken, and it's time he pays up."

"While I agree with the sentiment, I'm not sure how that helps us."

“You’ve got a house full of very angry people who could really use something to do right now.” The catgirl narrowed her eyes. “Francois didn’t just call you out. He called us all out. This isn’t just your fight. It belongs to all of us.”

Mike took a deep breath in through his nose, then let it out. The catgirl was right. This was a problem everyone could contribute to. “Can we stay here for a little bit?” he asked the goddess.

“You can. Why?”

Mike cracked his knuckles and gestured with his hands. Before him, a trio of game boards appeared, all of them packed with different pieces that represented a member of his household. There were also hundreds of tiny little rat figurines. Kisa knelt down by the closest board to inspect a figurine that looked identical to her.

“Because I intend to use the extra time to come up with a plan.” Mike picked up Beth’s piece, the figurine warm in his hand. He studied it for several long moments, then set it back down. “We may be here a while.”

Kisa looked up from her figurine. “Does my butt really look this big?”

“Yes.”

The catgirl smirked. “Good.”

Mike opened his eyes to see that Beth was kneeling in front of him with a look of concern on her face. His eyes dipped briefly to the valley of cleavage this had put in his face, but it was mainly out of reflex. In that brief moment, his magic reached out for hers, causing Beth’s cheeks to turn bright red.

“How long was I out?” he asked.

“Maybe a minute?” Beth stood back and offered a hand. “Naia said you were communing with Hestia.”

“I was. That place is like the Dreamscape, I was there for...” He frowned, unable to quantify the time spent. Had it been hours? Days? It didn’t really matter. He let Beth help him to his feet. “I’ve got bad news. I met with the Captain in the garden of the gods. He’s planning to kill everyone on Maui if I don’t hand over the clutch that Di is guarding.”

“What?” Beth took a step back in shock. “How?”

“The guy has been saving up undead for centuries and is gonna let them all loose. We have until sunrise tomorrow in Hawaii to figure out how to stop him and protect the residents.”

“But that’s...” Beth cut herself off with the wave of a hand. “How are we going to do it?”

“I need your help. I need everybody’s help.” He looked at Eulalie. “You still have all those government contracts from doing odd jobs for them, right?”

“I do, but...” Eulalie fidgeted with her hands. “What about the kids?”

Mike narrowed his eyes. “I stayed much longer after the Captain left. I have a plan for the kids.” It had been a constant back and forth between himself, Hestia, and Kisa. Between the three of them, they had hotly debated all the possible outcomes as well as identifying the ones that were most likely to succeed. “I have a plan for everything.”

“There’s my little boy scout.” Lily sauntered over and leaned her head on Mike’s shoulder. “Always prepared for anything.”

“I’ve come to expect the unexpected. Beth, I need you back in Maui.”

She bit her lower lip and looked up at him. “What do you need me to do?”

“First, you’re going to speak with Pele. You’ll like her, she’s really nice. We need to know why the night marchers only come out when it’s dark, and to see if we can bypass that somehow. If we can get the marchers to come out during the day, we stand a very strong chance of saving the people who live on the island. I also want you to talk with the merfolk and get them on our side. We’re going to need their help as well.”

Beth nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will.” Mike felt his phone vibrate. He pulled it from his pocket and saw that it was a text. “It’s Ingrid. She’s letting me know that dickhead is on his way back and that she could use our help.” He handed the phone to Lily. “You’re my liaison with the Order. I need you to go as me, but take it seriously. No funny business. You know their people better than I do. Don’t just agree to helping them. Make them offer their help to us. I don’t want to get caught up in another

pissing match with their higher ups. Stay visible, I want Francois to think that you're me."

"Let's play the sexy shell game again." Lily's features rippled and she became Mike. "I'll try to remain the center of attention," she said in his voice.

The back door of the home slammed open. Mike looked over to see Tink storming out, her yellow eyes tinged with red. Kisa was close behind her, a worried look on her face. Tink threw a dirty look at Lily-Mike and moved to stand in front of Mike.

"Did Kisa explain what happened?" he asked.

The goblin nodded.

Mike sighed. "Good. What I need from you is—"

"No."

Mike blinked in surprise and noticed how quiet the backyard suddenly was. He looked at the others to see his own surprise mirrored in their faces.

"Why not?" Mike asked.

"Tink go after baby legs." The goblin stepped forward to stare directly up at Mike. "Nobody stop Tink."

"That's not going to happen. Tink, I know you want to go after the kids, but I need you somewhere else. Other families are in just as much danger, and I think you might be the only one who can figure out how to help them. You're the smartest person here by a long shot, which is why you're going to be in charge of everything over in Maui. Kisa will explain the plan we came up with, and I know you'll make it a hundred times better. Between your brain and Eulalie's tech, we have a chance of winning."

"Tink refuse." The goblin bared her teeth at him. "Go save kids."

"How are you going to do that?" Mike tapped the edge of Tink's goggles. "Are you planning to steal a car and catch up with the others? Shoot everyone you see until you find them?"

The goblin's lower lip quivered. "Tink do anything for family."

"Then I need you to trust me, to believe me when I say that the best place for you is over there." He looked up at the others. "Eulalie, you and Tink will take

point on this. You're also going to need the rats, all of them. Reggie, where are you?"

"Caretaker." The rat king hopped onto the edge of the fountain and bowed. "I am at your service."

"You have roughly twelve hours to figure out how and where to evacuate an entire island using portals." Amymone actually gasped at this. Lily broke into wild laughter.

"Are you sure that's the best idea?" asked Ratu, lines of concern on her forehead.

"No, I'm not." Mike looked at her sadly. "But it's what I've got. You're going with Tink. Everyone able to leave must go and help. It's the only chance we have. Whatever decision she makes, no matter how insane it sounds, do it." He looked back at the goblin. "Because I believe in her."

"Husband no go?" The goblin wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

"Not yet." He smiled and knelt down so they were eye level with each other. "The reason I don't want you going after the kids is because I am. In the same way that I believe in you, I need you to believe in me."

Tink sniffled. "Tink always believe in husband."

"I know." He shifted her goggles to place a kiss on her forehead. "And once I bring the kids home, I'll come find you. Then you can fill me in on the beautiful plan you've devised." He stood up straight and looked at the others. "So I guess I'll see you all in Hawaii."

"Not fair." Amymone pouted with her arms crossed. "Being stationary bites. I suppose you're just gonna leave Naia and me to watch the house while you're all gone?"

"I can seal the front entrance by shifting the earth." Ratu started walking toward the back door. "They'll have to climb the walls to get in."

"I'll see if the centaurs will shoot anyone who tries. They can be here for when the kids return. Hey, the jabberwock is still around, right?" Mike tried to look at Yuki, then remembered she wasn't there.

Eulalie made a face. "It is, but someone needs to hose it off. It's...a messy eater."

“Between the jabberwock and the lions, we should be okay.” Mike rubbed his forehead in frustration. Even though his body was fine, his brain felt tired. “Sorry, trying to keep everything straight. I need to get ready. Ratu, when you’re done sealing the entrance up, feel free to alter the walls to make them harder to scale. Before you head back to Maui, you should grab the wand of Osiris. We need every edge we can get.”

“What if Isis comes for it?” asked Beth.

“Even better. We could ask her to help us with our problem in exchange for its return.” Ever since claiming the wand of Osiris, Mike had tried various methods of contacting the goddess, but had failed. He sometimes wondered if she was like Freya and had hidden herself away to avoid the gaze of the Outsiders.

Ratu bowed her head in acknowledgement and then walked into the house. Mike turned to Beth. “Come with me.”

The two of them went inside, followed by some of the others. Eulalie squirmed through a portal to her lair in the Library along with Reggie and a bunch of rats. Tink and Kisa went upstairs to the bedroom, most likely for a proper change of clothes. Mike walked into the living room and looked around for several seconds before addressing a lamp by the front door.

“Hey, buddy, how are you doing?”

A thin metal arm peeled away from the base of the lamp and waved at him.

“I’m gonna need the Grimoire.” Mike turned his back on Tick Tock and Beth followed his lead. There was a flumping sound, and when they looked back at the mimic, it was a small treasure chest that opened with a chime. Inside lay the Grimoire of Morgan Le Fey. Mike picked up the book and patted the mimic affectionately. “Thanks.”

“What are you doing?” asked Beth.

“Breaking an unspoken rule of my own.” Mike held up the book. “I need a quick primer on how to use it.”

Beth stared hungrily at the book. “It’s addictive,” she muttered, looking up at Mike. “A shortcut that shouldn’t be taken.”

“Tonight is the night for shortcuts. I’m going to use this to get my kids back if I have to.” Mike cracked open the book and studied the blank pages within. The paper glowed ominously as words magically wrote themselves across the page.

“I guess, but even Yuki couldn’t track them with magic. The book is powerful, but if they’ve been hidden properly, it’s not something you can just brute force.” Beth frowned. “Not without using the more powerful stuff, anyway. But even looking at those pages might kill you.”

He waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, the book isn’t for tracking them. I already know how I’m going to do that.”

“So then what is it for?”

“Creative problem solving.” He snapped the book shut. “Getting the kids back is too important. Be prepared, remember? I promise I’ll only use it if I have to.” His mind immediately went to Emily and the power that had eventually corrupted her. Hestia had warned him about using the Grimoire for anything that wasn’t a natural extension of his own abilities and he intended to heed her advice.

Beth sighed. “Just think about what you need the magic to do,” she said. “Then open the book or flip the pages. It senses what you need and then shows it to you.”

“Thank you.” Mike stared at the tome, then looked over at Tick Tock. “Want to come with me? There will probably be snacks.”

The treasure box hopped up and down in excitement. When nobody was looking, there was a leathery snap and the mimic became a backpack. Mike put the Grimoire back in Tick Tock and then slung it onto his shoulders.

“You’ve got plenty of energy today,” he said, patting the straps. “Did you eat earlier?”

One of the backpack flaps unzipped and a red, fabric tongue lolled out. The Caretaker tightened the straps and moved toward the backdoor, but Beth stopped him.

“Let me talk to the centaurs for you,” she said, then leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek. “Go get your kids. Stay alive.”

“Beth.” Mike gazed into her eyes and then kissed her on the mouth. She melted into him, but only for a moment. Her magic sang out to his, causing it to resonate inside his body. When their kiss broke, Mike smiled and let out a sigh.

“It’s gonna be a long day,” he said, then moved toward the front door. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a tree to catch.”

“You know where to go?”

He nodded. “I just have to follow Bigfoot’s trail.”

“Weren’t you going to change?”

“Oh, right. I forgot.” He headed for the stairs and stopped at the bottom. “Hey, you still in there?” Mike poked the collar of his shirt. Daisy popped free and hovered in front of him. “I need your sisters’ help. Go get them. Oh, and please find me some rats.”

Mike jogged up the stairs to his bedroom and changed into clothes that didn’t stink of ash. By the time he finished, a few furry figures stood in his doorway.

“I need some of you guys to come with me,” he said as he tied his shoes. The rats looked at each other in hesitation, their whiskers vibrating with anxiety. “It’s not for anything dangerous,” Mike assured them. “I just need you around to open a portal for the kids after I find them is all.”

After some chattering back and forth, one of them stepped forward and did a little head bob.

“We come,” it said, and the rats gathered around his feet. They followed him down the stairs to the front room where Eulalie stood, her eyes on his while he descended.

“Mike.” The Arachne held up her weapon. “Take Mace with you.”

“Thank you.” Mike held out his hand and the enchanted weapon flew into it. He hefted the weapon over his shoulder. “I’m starting to feel like a one man army, here.”

There was a loud bang from the back of the house, and all four fairy girls came shooting around the corner, leaving glittering trails behind them. They giggled as they flew, then landed on the head of Mace.

“Forward!” shouted Olivia.

“To victory!” added Carmine.

“Death to our enemies!” Cerulea pumped her hand so hard that she fell off and had to fly back up.

“Good luck.” Eulalie stepped aside to allow him to pass.

Mike opened the front door and walked out onto the porch. He stared in horror at what was left of his yard, as well as what remained all over it. “That...is a lot of blood.”

“Watch your step,” Cerulea said from atop Mace.

“No slipping!” added Carmine.

Olivia put a hand over her mouth and gagged. Daisy just shook her head and signed at Mike.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

He walked across the yard to find the jabberwock, its stomach bulging out at an awkward angle. If he didn’t know better, it looked like the beast had swallowed a car whole. The jabberwock listened to its new orders and then shifted to take up a new napping location by the house. Its stomach bounced on the ground as it walked, causing the creature to wobble dangerously. Before it could reach the front porch, it made a retching sound and then vomited up the gore-covered front half of a black suburban.

“I definitely don’t want to see what comes out next,” Mike muttered as he turned away. He heard the jabberwock wretch again, followed by a noise that could only be described as a bag of soup hitting concrete. The rats at his feet gasped in horror. Cerulea dropped onto his collar and squirmed inside his shirt.

Mike spoke with the plants on his property and was led to a small copse of trees in one corner. They had been planted shortly after Aymone returned to life and were thriving quite well, though some of their leaves were scorched. A portal opened in one of them and Mike stepped through, emerging at a local park.

He traveled in this manner, bouncing across the city as he traced Bigfoot’s path. The trees were extremely eager to share that they had seen the cryptid come marching through. He was essentially a celebrity and trees loved to gossip.

Roughly twenty minutes later, Mike found himself in the middle of the woods. He stopped for a moment and cocked his head.

“Do you feel that?” he asked the fairies. The sensation was similar to hiding beneath a blanket and it took him a minute to realize that he couldn’t sense Kisa’s presence. Stepping back through the tree’s portal, he could once again sense the cat girl.

“Looks like I’m where I need to be.” Mike stepped back through and asked the nearest trees if they could point him in the direction of Bigfoot or the others. They rustled as if the wind passed through their branches, his mind filled with brief emotional snapshots of Bigfoot, Dana, and Yuki. Jenny was likely being carried and was beneath the tree’s notice.

“Alright girls, your time to shine.” He snapped his fingers and the fairies moved to hover in front of him. “Track down the others. Let them know I’m here and have a way to find the kids. Daisy, you’ll stay with me so your sisters can bring the others back.”

The yellow fairy saluted and buzzed into his shirt pocket. The other fairies shot off into the woods, spiraling upward to get a better view. Mike looked down at the rats by his feet.

“Keep up with me, but stay back a bit. If things get violent, I want you to hide. Let me know right away if you find an abandoned shed or something we can use to put a portal in.”

The rats nodded their understanding and clustered together off to the side. Mike summoned a hovering ball of light in his hands and sent it forward to light his way into the forest. The air was filled with the sound of insects and chirping bats and he looked up in the sky to see that a pair of stars had already emerged.

He made a soft hissing sound in the back of his throat and then used the banshee’s cry to amplify it. The sound itself was barely perceivable by human ears, but it wasn’t humans he was looking for.

If there was a secret base in the woods, great care had gone into concealing its presence. Undetectable by electronic or magical means, Mike was betting that it was probably expertly camouflaged, maybe even hidden below ground. What he needed was someone who knew the woods, somebody who could pass into such a place unnoticed and overlooked. The insects of the forest went silent as the arachnids emerged from their hiding spots, crawling down from the trees and

emerging from the litter of the woods to gather around Mike's feet. He told them what he was looking for and asked if they knew of any place where a bunch of humans had built a nest of their own or if they had seen his daughter.

None of the spiders in this part of the woods knew anything, but they were so entranced by the idea of Grace that they offered to help. They all understood the idea that their brood must survive at all costs and empathized with Mike's plight. The rats gathered on a stump to watch in horror as hundreds of spiders shifted beneath them in a pool of legs, then spiraled out into the forest to spread the word. Nodding in satisfaction, Mike checked Tick Tock's straps once more and gave Mace a casual toss into the air where the magical weapon hovered in place.

"Follow me," he said as he picked a random direction and started walking. The spiders leapt and jumped away from him, chittering in their own language to all who would listen. As the fastest spiders carried the message out to the rest of the woods, the slower ones gathered behind Mike to form a river of legs and hair that draped behind him like an ominous cloak that was darker than his mood.

The underground facility bore the silence of a tomb, despite the number of people stationed at the top floor. Bored mercenaries could be seen quietly playing cards as they maintained position, and one squad had huddled around a cellphone that was playing a John Wick movie. Cyrus watched them all from the comparative comfort of the comms room, his back to a new bank of monitors that displayed data from motion sensors along with thermal imaging.

"Got another hit." One of the men watching the consoles stood from his chair. "Sector 5."

Cyrus turned and watched as the main monitor changed channels to reveal a blurry figure sprinting across a clearing. Though the resolution wasn't great, the intruder was feminine and had multiple tails.

"Damn." Dirk sat back in his seat and sipped his coffee. "How far out?"

"Fifteen miles." The operator looked at Dirk. "So two miles further than last contact."

"Good." Dirk gestured at the monitors. "They're sniffing around, but not getting anywhere."

The mood in the room relaxed once more, and Cyrus turned to face the hangar bay. For the last two hours, there had been numerous sightings in the forest, but none of them seemed to come close to the entrance. There were at least two people searching the woods, now. Cyrus had learned early on that the dead zone that had been set up by the Society so many years ago was nearly four hundred square miles. The area was warded against any sort of wireless or magical communication and there were a number of enchantments that regularly swept the area for tracks and then erased them. As long as nobody opened up the doors and wandered out, they could hole up here for months without detection.

There was also a rumor that an escape tunnel was buried deep beneath the facility just in case of a breach, but Cyrus had been unable to confirm its existence. That would have made escaping with the children way easier.

Staring out at the mercenaries guarding the hangar, the mage let out an impatient grunt. Part of the reason he was even up here was that he had heard about Mike's family searching the forest. Originally, he had hoped they would end up nearby and he could simply go all out in an effort to blast through the hangar door and attract their attention. But clearly that wasn't an option either.

A side door opened and a short man carrying a stack of folders walked out. He looked at Cyrus and jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"They'll see you now."

"Thanks." Cyrus walked past the man and into a darkened room with leather chairs and a mahogany desk. Darius was reclined in the leather seat, still wearing his sunglasses. Standing at the corner of the desk was Elizabeth, her arms crossed as she stared at a large screen on the wall that displayed a snapshot of the video feed Cyrus had just watched.

This was the other reason he had come. He paused long enough to close the door behind him and then cleared his throat. "Evening," he said.

"Master Cyrus." Elizabeth didn't move, but her eyes slid over in his direction. "You have something to report?"

He nodded. "A concern, actually. But I would like to preface my statements by saying that there are no issues with the children and that they are still confined."

"I see." Elizabeth turned to face him. "Please. Continue."

“We seem to have a chain of command problem and I wanted some clarification.” Cyrus looked over at Darius, who hadn’t even moved yet. “Regarding Sister Laurel and the Order.”

“Is there a problem?”

“There is. Sister Laurel seems to believe that she should be in charge and keeps giving orders that countermand my own.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “And you can’t handle her?”

Cyrus shrugged. “Well, that’s the thing. She’s causing unnecessary discipline issues for me that include your men. I tell your people one thing, then she tells them to do something different. When I confront her, she becomes belligerent. I shouldn’t have to explain why this will cause future problems for all of us. I guess I’m uncertain why you included her in the first place. Surely you saw how she fell apart back at the Radley estate.”

“Ah, right, right.” Elizabeth looked over at Darius, but the man hadn’t budged. If Cyrus didn’t know better, the man was either asleep or dead. “I believe that may be my fault. I strongly insinuated that she would be in a leadership role here and perhaps she has taken my word a bit too far.”

The mage nodded. “That’s what she’s been telling your people. Let me be up front. I’m in this for the money. You tell me to jump, I’ll ask how high because you’re paying me enough. But you hired me as an expert. In my expert opinion, Laurel needs to go. She and the Order are a massive liability.”

“Hmm.” Elizabeth contemplated his words, then glanced over at Darius. “It’s probably time for us to have a more...formal conversation with her, anyway. The whole point of hiring you was specifically for your experience in this area. When you next see her, please send her our way.”

“I shall.” Cyrus threw one last glance at Darius. Was the man even breathing?

“You’re dismissed.” Elizabeth’s tone was suddenly hard and Cyrus snapped to attention. Something weird was going on here and he wondered how he could use it to his advantage. He gave both of them a mock salute as if nothing was wrong and then spun on his heels to leave. Out in the control room, he saw that Dirk had gotten out of his chair and was standing inches away from one of the monitors.

“What the hell am I looking at?” he asked as he fiddled with a knob by the screen that adjusted the contrast. The blurry figure in the video looked roughly ten feet tall. “Bigfoot?”

Cyrus walked past the men as they broke into a debate and headed for the elevator. It had been a couple of hours since he had last checked on the kids and brought them some bedding. He doubted they were asleep and thought it would be a good idea to check on them. Sadly, there was very little he could do to bring them any sort of comfort other than keeping them company.

If he was correct, Yuki, Bigfoot, and Dana were out in the woods. Was there a way he could get any of them a message? He wondered if Dana brought her drones. Could she even use them out here? What if he could breach the gates and set the woods on fire? That would probably get everyone’s attention.

The wait for the elevator felt longer than normal. Was it just nerves? Anxiety? When it arrived, Cyrus stepped inside and gazed down the hallway into the hangar. The SoS soldiers were being so quiet that he couldn’t hear them. As the doors slid shut, he wondered how many of them would die by his hand, and when. Would it be tomorrow? Two days from now?

He leaned against the wall and tapped his fingers nervously on the metal railing. What he needed was an ally, someone who could watch his back. Hell, he would take being able to ask someone for advice, even if it was Lily.

He chuckled to himself when he wondered what Lily would do. She would shapeshift, no doubt, and find a way to pick people off one at a time. But how did that translate to him?

See if anyone has an old man fetish. He could almost hear her voice in his mind. *I bet someone there wouldn’t mind a rimjob from a man who can’t even trim his beard right.*

As usual, dwelling on Lily didn’t help him out. He thought back to all the times she had come to visit him, to keep an old soldier company, as she had said. For the first year or so, he had wondered what her game was, but it occurred to him one day that maybe she was just as lonely as he was. An outsider that didn’t quite fit in with anyone.

No, that wasn’t true. The succubus had a family who accepted her for who she was. Cyrus stopped tapping his fingers and stood as the elevator slowed. Lily

didn't come to visit him because she was lonely. She had come because she knew that he was.

You're so moody. That's what she would say right now, and then make a comment about his scrotum, or about how he should hit up the widow down the hall for a blowjob. The woman had brought him cookies a couple of times, but he hadn't been interested. His attention was typically for the Radley house.

His interest had been academic at first, but that was a lie he still told himself. The truth was, he enjoyed his lunches with Mike. The two of them spoke of magic and the world around them, usually avoiding any talk of what lay within the walls of Mike's home. Cyrus liked to think that the two of them had become friends.

Oh, and Death! How many cups of tea had the two of them shared? How many maps had they pored over together? Cyrus would speak at length about the places he had been, and Death would listen quietly, the azure flames of his eyes flickering in interest. They spoke of wars, and books, and the life that Death had found among the Radley family.

It was a life that Cyrus now realized he so desperately wanted.

Shaking his head, Cyrus stepped out of the elevator. If he had to choose someone to talk to right now, it would be Death. The Reaper would listen to his problems and then offer him a cup of tea.

"This is an herbal blend," Cyrus whispered under his breath in Death's voice. "It will help calm your nerves and soothe your tummy." He smiled to himself. A cup of tea would be really nice right now.

"HEY!" Laurel's voice echoed down the hallway. "I'M TALKING TO YOU!"

Groaning, Cyrus broke into a jog. When he got to the cells, he saw Laurel had pressed her forehead against the glass of Callisto's cell. Her people stood by with awkward looks on their faces as the woman screamed at the centaur.

"What's going on here?" asked Cyrus.

"The boy started taunting her," said one of the guards. "Sir," he added.

"And you're just letting this happen?"

The guard shrugged. "You said not to let anybody in. This is...not that, sir."

The other guard piped up. "And he started it. The girl refused to lie down, and the boy said it was because she sleeps with her doll at night, that spooky one."

Cyrus watched in amazement as Laurel continued to shriek at Callisto through the glass. The centaur just smirked at her and turned around to show her his ass.

"Come play with me... come play with me." Callisto did a little dance as he spoke in an imitation of Jenny's voice. "Let's play a game, little girl, oooooooooo."

"SHUT UP! SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Laurel's eyes were bloodshot as she screamed, and her face was beet red now. Grace had scooted to the edge of her cell to press her own face against the glass.

"Sister Laurel." Cyrus looked at her teammates and cocked his head as if to say 'I told you so.' The knights and mages looked away, painfully aware that he had been right all along. "Sister Laurel."

"WHY DON'T YOU COME OUT HERE AND SAY THAT TO ME?!?" Laurel hit the glass with her fist. "OH, THAT'S RIGHT, BECAUSE YOU CAN'T!"

Callisto flipped her the bird. Grace mimicked her brother moments later with both hands.

"Sister Laurel." Cyrus put his hand on the glass next to hers and the woman looked up at him. Her eyes were feral when they settled on his, but Laurel took a deep breath and recomposed herself.

"Cyrus." She said his name like a curse.

"Darius wishes to speak with you." He tilted his head toward the elevator. "Right now, please."

"What did you do?" she whispered, her voice like nails on a chalkboard.

He shook his head. "Nothing. Darius, the man in charge of this place, asked me to send you upstairs right now to have a word with him about your leadership role."

"Well, good then." She sneered at him. "Because there are a few things I want to talk to him about, too."

He grimaced as she stormed off, followed by a pair of knights. When he looked inside the cell, he saw that the centaur had a shit-eating grin.

“You shouldn’t antagonize her.”

Callisto shrugged. “I’m just a child. Not my fault she’s too fragile for this line of work.”

One of the guards snorted. Cyrus looked over at Grace, who was once again staring straight ahead without blinking. “Is it true that she sleeps with Jenny at night?”

The centaur nodded. “It actually is. And no, I can’t explain it. Even I think it’s weird.”

“You seem so much older than your age.”

“Centaur mature quickly.” Callisto sounded tough, but Cyrus could see through the facade. The boy was picking at the edges of his shirt, the fabric already fraying in places. “Especially when they get abducted by assholes.”

“You shouldn’t swear like that,” said one of the mages.

“You shouldn’t abduct children, cocksucker.” Callisto gave the Order the finger as well. “Just wait until my dad gets here, he’s going to mess you up.”

“Your dad is in Hawaii, ponyboy.” One of the guards grinned. “He left you behind because you don’t matter.”

Callisto flinched as if physically struck. Cyrus turned to the adults in the room and crossed his arms.

“I’m instituting quiet time,” he said, his voice stern. “That’s an order.”

Everyone else wandered away from the cell and Cyrus shook his head. The people assigned to this unit seemed to think that watching these children was just a game, that they were harmless. If they only knew the truth about Grace...

He looked over at the Arachne, who sat calmly on the floor with her legs tucked beneath her skirt. A terrible idea was beginning to form in his head and he hated it. Looking around the room, he took a quick count of who was down there with them.

There was a guard on each door from the SoS, but that was it. The Order team currently sat at five people, three mages and two knights. He thought about

the people upstairs, all waiting for action from the outside. Like Elizabeth had said, it had been a very long day and everybody was tired. Darius had even been non-responsive. Everyone in the control room was monitoring the situation outside and Cyrus hadn't seen them check the interior cameras even once.

It was going to be a roll of the dice. Cyrus was never one to gamble, but the odds would probably never be better. He walked over to Grace's cell, used his keycard to open it, and walked inside. The others weren't paying much attention. After all, they thought Grace was just a scared little kid.

"Hey." Cyrus knelt down next to the Arachne. She looked up at him and bared her teeth in what he assumed was supposed to be a smile. "They say you can't sleep without your doll. Is this true?"

Grace nodded. Cyrus looked over his shoulder to see if the others were paying attention. The guards seemed bored, and the Order were just standing around and chatting.

"I can't sleep either." He put out his arms. "Want to go sit with your brother?"

The Arachne nodded and slid the slap bracelet out from her pocket. With a soft snap, the bracelet curled around her wrist and he watched the fabric of her skirt shift beneath her as her extra legs vanished. He picked the little girl up and was immediately stopped by one of the guards.

"What are you doing?"

Cyrus tilted his head toward the other cell. "Putting her with her brother so they can sleep. This place may be a prison, but we're not trying to punish them."

The man nodded and moved away. Cyrus opened the other cell door and walked inside. Callisto rose from his makeshift bedding and watched the mage with great curiosity as he brought Grace over and set her down next to her brother. He slid the magical ring onto his finger and gave it a twist.

"Can either of you use magic?" he asked. Callisto shook his head. Grace just stared at him, but he knew the answer to that. Her kind had never shown the aptitude for it. "That's fine," he lied, then looked over his shoulder to see if he was being watched. He wasn't.

Sticking a hand into his pocket, he pulled out the protective amulet and handed it to the centaur along with his key card. He also removed a pair of rings and a silver bracelet.

“Put these on when I walk out,” he whispered, then poked one of the rings. “That is for Grace. The rest are for you. The card will open the door if you need it.”

“Shouldn’t she wear more?” Callisto asked, accepting the items.

Cyrus shook his head. “You’re a bigger target and slower than she is.” He turned to see that they still weren’t being watched. Tugging at the sleeves of his coat to loosen them, he walked through the exit of the cell and pulled a rod from one of his inner pockets. The door slid shut behind him and he waved over to the Order.

“Which one of you idiots lost this in there?” he asked, holding up the rod. Curious, they came over to see what Cyrus was holding, the mages frantically checking their belts.

“What is it?” asked the mage closest to Cyrus. The other two stepped around the woman, eager to figure out what he was holding.

“Lightning rod.” Cyrus adjusted his grip and sent a pulse of mana directly into the device. The magic circulated through miles of intricately carved runes within it which caused the temperature in the air to drop rapidly as millions of volts leapt from the head of the rod and blasted all three of them back. The resulting thunderclap was deafening, buying him an extra second to step to the side and strip one of the stunned guards of his sidearm.

Without a word, Cyrus fired on both guards with it, putting four rounds in one and six in the other. By the time they slumped to the ground, the knights were on him. He ducked beneath a fist that cracked the tempered glass of the cell wall, then drew a wand from another pocket that had a tip which glowed white-hot. With a slashing motion, he sent a wave of compressed air directly into the first knight, cutting him open from hip to shoulder. The man fell dead, and Cyrus took his blade from him.

It was two on one, now. The knights stood on opposite sides of him, blades held ready to intercept any magical attack he made.

“What are you doing?” One of the knights shook her head in disbelief. Her eyes flicked to the cell. “I think he’s possessed!”

Cyrus took a deep breath and tucked the air wand into his belt as he drew another rod from a different pocket and held it in his off hand. He placed his back against the wall so that he could easily turn his head either direction to see his attackers.

“Possessed with good sense, maybe.” Cyrus flicked the rod. A sheet of ice formed beneath the knight, causing her to slip and fall when she stepped forward. The other knight moved in to attack him, which Cyrus deftly parried. The knight rained down blows in a fury, but Cyrus casually blocked or evaded them all. Though he wasn’t as strong as the knight he faced, he had decades of experience training and sparring with them. “You rely far too much on brute strength, by the way.”

The other knight was almost to her feet. Cyrus swapped the rod for the wand and sent a wave of compressed air in her direction. Unlike her counterpart, she used her blade to block the attack, which sent her across the icy floor like a giant hockey puck. He brought up his sword in time to block the next attack, but the impact was hard enough that his whole arm went numb.

“Give up, old man!” The knight pressed his weight into Cyrus, forcing the old man down to his knees. Cyrus jammed the ice rod against the knight’s hand and poured mana into it, freezing the man’s hand so quickly that the skin peeled from his knuckles. The knight withdrew, leaping back and taking a defensive stance. When one of the mages nearby groaned, the knight moved to stand over her.

“It’s a battle of attrition.” The knight knelt and helped the mage to her feet. The other two mages were rising now, their eyes fixed on Cyrus as they readied their wands. “There’s only one of you, Cyrus. Give up.”

Cyrus snorted, then shook out his arm. His fingers were tingling now, and he strengthened his grip on the sword. Swiftly tucking the ice rod back into his belt, he pulled out the lightning rod once more. A fine mist of particulates hovered in the air like a cloud, a result of the rapid changes in temperature and humidity. The element of surprise had gotten him far, but not far enough. The missing knight reappeared, blood running down from a cut in her forehead. It was five on one again.

“That’s Master Cyrus to you.” The old man grinned as he identified the threat level of each implements that the mages were using. He had learned once that some basic sleight of hand with a wand kept your enemies guessing, but

clearly that wasn't taught anymore. He knew what to expect the moment the mage on the left tensed up and sent mana through their fingers and into their wand. "Class is now in session."

One mage sent a barrage of dazzling lights directly above which was meant to blind Cyrus. He closed one eye and squinted with the other, allowing him to see just enough that he was able to dodge out of the way of a nasty thrust from the knight. Opening his good eye, he was able to duck beneath a fiery beam that carved a groove in the opposite wall. Using the ice rod, he created another sheet of ice on the floor to keep the others back.

"Lightning rod is on a cooldown," stated one of the mages. "It'll blow him up if he uses it too quickly."

"Someone studied." Cyrus raised the air wand in time to send a pressurized blast toward the nearest knight. This also served to intercept the fireball that had come his way, which sent it careening into the wall. In the blast, he shoved the ice rod in his pocket and pulled a rosary made of iron beads from his pocket. Pinching the cross in one hand, he used the others to violently yank the beads away from his body. When the rosary broke, the iron beads fired away from him with enough force that two of the mages were knocked off their feet. The nearest knight covered his face with both arms, his magical shield flashing with every impact.

Cyrus kissed the cross and threw it at the knight across the room. She flinched and swatted it out of the air. It clattered harmlessly to the floor where she stared at it in suspicion. When nothing happened, she smirked at Cyrus.

"You think you're—" The knight was cut off by the searing blast of holy light from the cross which blew her off her feet.

Cyrus turned to block an attack from the remaining knight. "Self defense rosary," he explained. "For when the church itself *is* the nest."

The knight drove his fist into Cyrus' face. He took the hit and tumbled away, his back spasming when he rolled across the floor. Cyrus brought up the sword to block the next hit, then pointed the lightning rod at the knight's head.

"Boom!" he shouted. The knight dodged away, but the rod never went off. Cyrus chuckled and got to his feet. The mage who was standing held up a knife with a glowing tip, then cocked his arm back with it as if firing an imaginary arrow.

"Ah, heart seeker blade." Cyrus frowned. "That's...unfortunate."

The mage's eyes flashed with victory, but then he was knocked to the ground by Callisto. The centaur started trampling the man, stomping as his hooves hit concrete and flesh. He looked up at Cyrus and grinned, unaware that the knight had moved nearby.

"No!" Cyrus held up his hands and watched in horror as the blade was brought down on the centaur. The amulet around Callisto's neck flashed, knocking away what would have been a killing blow. Still, the tip of the blade sliced deep into the centaur's face, causing the boy to cry out in shock and pain. Callisto stumbled and fell, staring at the blood on his hands in horror. That single moment of silence stretched for what felt like an eternity, broken only by the sound of an ominous hiss.

Grace threw herself through the open cell door, using both of her hands to swing her body toward the knight. The man didn't even have a chance to react as the Arachne wrapped her arms around his waist and then lifted him clean off the floor, her slap bracelet rolling away.

"BAD!" Grace declared, then slammed the man down onto the concrete.
"BAD! BAD!"

The man cried out once, then went limp as the small child repeatedly slammed him into the ground. The remaining mages looked at the little girl in horror, her arachnid features now on full display. One of them knelt to pick up the heart seeker blade that had been dropped, but Cyrus pulled out the lightning rod and blasted both of them once more. The runes carved into the metal were glowing white hot, an indicator that the artifact was likely to burst if he used it again.

Cyrus took a moment to survey the room, then lowered his weapons and sighed. He walked over to the Arachne and put a hand on her head.

"He's done, Grace. Leave him alone."

The Arachne hissed and dropped the unconscious knight, then moved to where her brother sat. Callisto looked up at the two of them with tear and blood filled eyes. Grace pointed to the wound on his face.

"Bad," she informed them.

"Am I dying?" Callisto asked, his lip quivering.

“What?” Cyrus actually chuckled. “No, you’re not. Head wounds can bleed a lot is all. You’ll be fine,” he said, taking a moment to inspect the wound. “It’ll probably scar, though.”

“Oh.” Callisto looked at the blood on his hands and casually wiped them on his shirt. “My dad has scars, I’ve seen them.”

“I’ve got a few myself.” Cyrus scratched at his beard, then stood. “Let’s take a moment to clean you up and then we’re getting out of here.” He looked over at the Arachne, who had picked up a dropped fire wand and was inspecting it. She opened her mouth to chew on the tip. “Don’t do that,” he said, then made an exploding motion with his hands. “This will be your head if you do.”

“Bad.” She nodded knowingly, lowering the wand.

“Yeah.” He couldn’t help but smile. “Bad.”