

Family Bonds

The forest was little more than a blur, finally giving way to a large slab of rocks that extended nearly a hundred feet in the air. When Mike Radley stepped through the damaged hangar doors, it was to the sight of Bigfoot, Yuki, and Dana huddled up behind a concrete pillar that was now supported by an ice wall nearly ten feet thick. Dead mercenaries littered the area, and the remainder had holed up toward the back of the room in what looked like a control center. When Dana poked her head around the corner, a rifle cracked and she barely dodged it. Along the back wall, a cluster of shadows had captured Mace, the magical weapon motionless beneath the dark tendrils.

He frowned. There was no way this last group of men should be capable of holding off Yuki, let alone the three of them. Still unseen, he took a moment to scan the room to see what the actual problem was. He spotted it when he saw that Yuki's ice seemed to truncate in a straight line that crossed the hangar bay. With no effort at all, he examined the magic in the room and saw the truth.

Crimson runes blazed defiantly in his vision, combined into a giant, magical circuit that created a disruptive field. The runes weren't just inscribed into the surface of the walls, but ran deep beneath the ground. If Ratu were here, she could probably disable them by manipulating earth and stone.

The fairies circled up on him to hide inside his collar, and he felt a surge of ice pass through his skull. He raised the Grimoire up in front of his face to catch the bullet that came his way, then moved to crouch behind a pile of rubble. His heart raced as gunfire shattered the concrete around him, but he swallowed his fear and examined the book.

The Grimoire was indestructible, and the round had flattened itself along the cover. Mike peeled it off with the tip of his finger and then studied the tome. He thought back to all he knew about his own magic and what Beth had told him. While running to the secret facility, he had felt the magic of the land on his back. Something was happening inside of him, some deep epiphany that was about to rise to the forefront. By opening this book, there was a chance he was about to throw away something precious.

If he wanted, he could scorch the earth and leave nothing but ruin in his wake. But that was a path he didn't dare tread. What sort of spell should he ask the Grimoire for?

"I need the power to protect," he whispered, and the book obeyed. The pages flipped open to reveal several variations of spells that would protect him from harm. He studied these for a moment, then looked across the room. Shaking his head, he looked at the book again.

"To protect others." The pages flipped some more, and then his precognition pulled his attention to a small projectile that bounced off the stack and landed a couple of feet away. He scowled at the grenade and his magic shoved it into the air with a burst of light and static. The grenade burst halfway back toward its sender, peppering the area with shrapnel and causing Mike's ears to ring.

The Grimoire's spells swam before his vision, each one calling to him. He didn't like how some of them whispered seductively in his ears, promising him their power without revealing the cost. The book actually trembled in his fingers, causing him to pause.

A shadow creature bubbled up from the ground in front of him, forming a pair of bladed limbs. Mike glanced up at it in anger as the manifestation raised its arms and took a step toward him.

"**NO**," he said, and motes of light leapt from his body, punching holes in the dark spectre. Turning his attention back to the book, he felt his anger growing. He didn't feel like fucking around with the Grimoire any longer. Why hadn't Beth mentioned the whispering to him? Surely she would have brought it up.

Or maybe she couldn't. She had warned him that the power was addictive, a free ride to greatness. Perhaps she hadn't heard the whispers, or the promises the book made. Was it the book itself, or the spells within that threatened to trap him?

"I see," he muttered, understanding the trap that had been laid. The Grimoire of Morgan Le Fey was a compendium of power without judgment. He knew very little about the ancient sorceress, but understood she would have no reason to omit spells because of the danger they posed. Ultimately, it was the burden of the person using it.

Another grenade came. This time, a lightning spider jumped off his shoulder and grabbed onto the projectile, carrying it back the way it had come. Mike winced at the loud boom, then turned the pages again.

It took some digging, but at last he found a spell that didn't promise power, didn't whisper to him like some insidious Shadow Man. It was a spell powered by his own magic and desire to protect the ones he loved. Rising from his hiding spot, he stepped to the left to dodge a quick burst of rifle fire and curled the fingers of his left hand upward.

His magic fled into the floor, raising a wall of silver and gold light that stretched to the ceiling. A squadron of shadows by the wall exploded into nothingness at the appearance of the wall, and fired rounds fell harmlessly on the other side. The others stepped away from the concrete pillar, looking at Mike in relief. He rose from his hiding spot, his whole body feeling strangely hollow. Though his intent was noble, he had stepped outside of his magical boundaries, and the price for doing so had left him drained.

"Thanks," said Yuki, then made a fist and created a large icicle which she pounded into the wall. The crimson circuits flickered in response, then sent out an arc of magic that tried to push her away. Dana ran to Mace's aid, cutting away the shadows to free the magical weapon. Bigfoot stood, his fur matted with blood. The cryptid moved toward the hangar door.

"The kids already escaped," he said, stumbling for the exit. "We need to catch up to them."

"Shit." Mike looked back at the opening. "Should we all go?"

"No." Yuki slammed a chunk of ice into the wall again, and the circuits faltered once more. "They'll only pursue us and make things worse. Once I break these runes, we'll make sure they can't."

Dana crossed the room to Mike's side. Her hair had turned gray, and there was a dangerous hunger in her eyes. "Tick Tock is chasing some of them through the other levels," she said. "Death and Cyrus were outside with the kids, but Elizabeth went after them."

"Fuck." Mike looked at Yuki. "Do you guys have this?"

“We do now.” The kitsune winked at him. “You probably don’t want to be around to see what I do to these guys.” Yuki glanced at Dana. “Or her, for that matter.”

Dana said nothing. However, she did lick her lips.

Mike nodded, trying hard to keep his gaze away from the corpses at the edge of his vision. It was clear that many of them were no longer intact. He caught up to Bigfoot, who was struggling to walk.

“You look like shit,” he said.

“Eat a dick.” Bigfoot snorted. “The last time I got shot this many times was when some idiot mistook me for a buffalo.”

“I thought bullets couldn’t hurt you?”

Bigfoot shrugged. “There were a lot of bullets tonight. Some of them were bigger than others. It’s a numbers game.”

“Will you be okay?”

The cryptid nodded. “The forest takes care of its own. Its magic will help me. Go find the kids. I’ll catch up when I can.”

Dana ran up to Mike. “Yuki says you’ll need this.” She placed a small, crystalline compass in his hand. “It’s pointing at Cyrus’ bracelet.”

“Thank you.” Mike looked at the direction the compass pointed and started running. A dark mass of arachnids chittered in frustration as they arrived at the facility only for Mike to leave in another direction. Their sounds of protest faded behind him as he ran into the forest.

He was perhaps half a mile into the woods when he heard a scream, followed by an explosion to his left. Stopping in his tracks, he turned and saw the eerie glow of flames across the treetops. The compass pointed away from the flames, but the thought of following the compass filled him with an icy dread that made him sick to his stomach.

Growling in frustration, he turned toward the blast and sprinted toward the flames as if his own life depended on it. All four fairy girls flew ahead of him, illuminating the trees. Mike could feel the forest crying out in pain as distant trees ignited. It didn’t take long before he found himself in another valley, this time with a figure shrieking on the ground and sending flames in every direction. From

where he stood, he could tell that it was a woman who was missing most of her face.

Staring in horror, he watched as she sent ropey blasts of hellfire out in a circle, then rolled onto her back and clutch her skull in pain. Her cries were garbled, due to her missing lower jaw. The flames were avoiding the woman, but had spread outward into the forest. Uncertain why his magic had led him here, a single word from the other side of the valley cut through the woman's screams.

"Grace!"

"Cyrus," Mike whispered, then ran a wide circle around whoever was casually burning down the world. The flames made the terrain difficult, but he managed to circumvent them. The woman was unaware of his presence, and he crossed the valley to find a wall of smoke. Covering his mouth, he walked into the burning woods toward the sound of the mage's voice.

"Grace! Get down from there!" When Mike found Cyrus, the old mage was on his knees at the base of a tree, clinging to it for support. Up above, the Arachne was staring at the flames in terror. Cyrus was covered in blood and ash, his features ghastly in the fire's light.

Grace had climbed up into the tree and was nearly fifteen feet off the ground. She was panting with exertion, clutching Jenny tight against her chest. When Cyrus screamed again, the Arachne acted like she couldn't even hear him. Flames from a nearby tree caused the child to hiss and scoot away.

"She's disoriented! Fire blinds her kind." Mike moved to the base of the tree. Cyrus turned to look at Mike, his eyes shimmering with thick tears.

"Oh, thank the gods," Cyrus said, then pointed up. "I'm not entirely sure what happened. We were fighting a witch and I got knocked out. I think Grace dragged me here, but got scared and now I can't get her down."

"She might not be able to hear you." Mike frowned at Cyrus. The old man was in rough shape. Looking up at his child, he could see nothing but terror in her eyes. "Does Callisto have the bracelet?"

"Yes." Cyrus groaned and leaned forward as if he was going to puke. "I thought I could get them out, I—"

“You did good.” Mike put his hand on the tree and closed his eyes. He could sense the tree’s fear of the flames, but there was nothing he could do for it. The Grimoire whispered softly to him, so he tossed the book on the ground.

Give me back my child, he said, pushing his will into the tree. The tree trembled in response, and then the large branch supporting Grace broke free. The Arachne was silent as she fell, and when Mike grabbed onto her, she let out a hiss and bit him.

“It’s okay, sweetie. Daddy’s here.” He clutched his child tight and pulled the compass from his pocket. It pointed back in the direction he had come, which would also take him away from the flames. Mike tucked the compass in his pocket and knelt to pick up the Grimoire. When he looked at Cyrus, it was to see the old man steadying himself as if he was drunk. “You need a hand?”

“Go, I’ll keep up.” The mage chuckled and spat, briefly vanishing behind a waft of smoke. “Promise I won’t just lie down and let those flames burn me.”

There was smoke everywhere, and Mike lost his way more than once. The fairies left the safety of his collar and glowed brightly from above as they took him back in the direction of the field. When he arrived, it was to see that the woman who had been screaming and spewing hellfire in every direction was being tended to by a dark figure who rose at his approach.

“Mike Radley.” Elizabeth glared at him with eyes he didn’t recognize. Her skin was peeled up in several places, revealing dark scales beneath. Ominous shadows clung to her like leaking oil, slowly pooling beneath her feet. With the flames at his back, Mike watched as his own shadow shivered and melted, flowing in the witch’s direction.

“Elizabeth.” Mike kept his face neutral. “You’re looking well.”

“How are you even here?” The witch glanced down at the woman on the ground, who was now silent. Mike realized that the faceless woman had been wrapped up tightly in shadows like a cocoon. “I thought you were in Hawaii?”

Sensing an opportunity, Mike took it. “Didn’t you know?” He summoned his magic, creating an electrical light show of dancing sparks all across his body. “My name is Mike Radley and I’m the fastest man alive.”

“I’m glad you’ve kept your sense of humor.” Elizabeth stuck out her hand and a staff burst through the ground at her feet. Atop of the stick was a large ruby

held in place by coiled roots. "It'll give me something else to carve from you other than your heart."

"There's only one of you and eight of us."

The witch sneered. "All I see is a dead man and his child."

Mike looked back to make sure that Cyrus had kept up with him. The man was in a crouch, using his hands to keep from toppling over. Unless the old mage was faking an injury, it was clear that he wasn't a threat.

From above, the fairies descended en masse, landing on top of Mike's head. They were bouncing up and down on his scalp, blowing raspberries at the witch. It was clear that he wasn't going to impress Elizabeth with numbers alone.

"I've also got this." Mike held up the Grimoire with one hand. Elizabeth faltered for a moment, her eyes dropping to the tome.

"You wouldn't dare," she said, her gaze shifting to Grace. "If we fight, I will try to kill your child. You can pretend to have the upper hand all you want, but we both know that nobody here can help you. Every single one of them is a liability."

"Hardly. They're my strength." His magic churned in approval of his words, but he was painfully aware how little of it remained. The Grimoire started whispering to him again, but he ignored it. "You and your people are always underestimating us, and it's only going to continue."

Elizabeth opened her mouth to say something, but the bundled figure behind her let out a cry of agony. The woman paused, clearly fighting the urge to look back. Mike recognized it as concern, but was a little surprised to see it on the witch's face. There was only one person in the world he knew of that she could care that much about.

"That's Sarah, isn't it?"

"You are not to speak of her." Elizabeth's eyes became wild. "You killed her."

"Technically, a plant did that, not me. But that's her soul in there now, right?" Mike narrowed his eyes. "Which means she's alive. The two of you have a chance to walk away. So what will it be? Do we put each other's children in danger, or agree to—"

Elizabeth thrust her staff forward, and the shadows beneath her ripped free of the ground, forming into serrated spikes. Opal burst free from her flask, shoving

Mike and Grace away as the slime girl caught the bladed barrage. Though unharmed, the slime girl was now tangled up in the rigid shadows.

Mike leapt away from the next attack, and a third one that followed. His magic churned in alarm as dark flames circled around his feet, sucking the heat from his body.

The fairies flew at the witch, but were immediately batted aside with the staff. Mike ran for the edge of the clearing, but the ground was ripped away from beneath his feet. He stumbled and fell, clutching Grace to his body. The little Arachne hissed loudly, her eyes scrunched up tight. An ominous wind blew across Mike's back, and he rolled over to see Elizabeth standing over him, an imperious grin on her face.

"It looks like you weren't the fastest man alive after all." The skin of her lips split, revealing more of the macabre vision that hid beneath the surface. She cackled and held up a hand full of dark fire, ready to smash it down on the two of them.

Then the spiders came. Dozens of them at once, ballooning through the air on silken strands. The ones that landed near her wrist were immediately consumed by the flames, but the rest landed on her shoulders and head, immediately scurrying around and finding anything they could bite.

THE BROOD MUST SURVIVE, they declared as one. Gossamer strands stuck in the witch's hair as hundreds more of them came, landing on the witch and immediately seeking out sensitive flesh.

Elizabeth flinched, then let out a cry of pain and grabbed her side. She slammed her staff on the ground and covered herself in flames, but that just forced the spiders to seek refuge anywhere they could fit. When Elizabeth screamed in fury, several of them crawled inside her nose and mouth.

Somewhere through the smoke, Cyrus let out a strangled cry of his own, but Mike couldn't see what was wrong. He got to his feet and ran away from Elizabeth, but looked back to see a dark carpet of arachnids had emerged from the forest, the swarm caught up to him at last. They flowed across Sarah's new body, and she struggled to free herself from her mother's magical bonds as they sank their teeth into her as well.

Looking away from Elizabeth and the burning forest, Mike ran with Grace toward safety. He made it to the treeline and then threw himself to the ground to

avoid a blast of hot green fire. When he got to his feet, it was to see the witch standing over him with shadows stretched out behind her like wings. Large tendrils had sprouted from her shoulders, each of them wrapped securely around the struggling form of Sarah. The witch's face and hands were bloody, the skin already swelling from all the bites.

They looked at each other for less than a moment, but an understanding was reached. There were no more words to exchange as Elizabeth raised her staff and pointed it in his direction. The book practically screamed for his attention, but Mike recognized the danger. Even if he had time to open it and cast something, there would be a price down the road, one far worse than this.

"NO," he said, and the book obeyed. Elizabeth froze up for a moment, as if in obedience. Shaking her head, she sneered and finished casting her spell.

Instead of closing his eyes, Mike faced his death head-on, clutching his child tightly in defiance. Elizabeth was so focused on killing him that she didn't sense the massive pine tree that ripped through the clearing like a spear, impaling her torso and yanking her body away into the burning darkness. Elizabeth's shadow tendrils were dragged along behind her, carrying Sarah away as well. Blinking in awe, Mike turned to see Bigfoot standing nearly forty feet away, panting with exertion and covered in pine needles. The cryptid limped over to Mike.

"Critical hit," he grunted, then fell on his butt and sighed. "You run too damned fast."

"How did you find us?"

Bigfoot chuckled. "This is the forest. Nothing happens here without me knowing it."

"You followed the spiders."

"Yeah I did." The sasquatch held out his arms. "Can I hold her?"

Mike handed Grace to her uncle and then went after Elizabeth. Roughly six feet of the splintered trunk had passed through her body, and she looked back at him with glassy eyes. The staff she had clutched was broken on the ground next to her, the gemstone shattered. Mike noticed the dark crystal around her neck and recognized it immediately. He pulled it off of her corpse and studied it. When he saw no soul lingering inside its depths, he shoved it in his pocket.

Of Sarah, there was no trace. With the flames building even higher, Mike went back into the clearing and managed to round up the fairies once more. They helped him find Opal, who had become lost in the smoke. The slimegirl went back inside her flask, and Mike tucked her away.

Eventually, he found Cyrus. The old man was leaning against a tree, clutching his head in his hands. Mike knelt down next to the mage and tentatively put a hand on his shoulder.

"It's me," he said, and Cyrus looked up and stared at him in disbelief.

"You came back for me?" Cyrus looked past Mike, then around at the burning woods. "Where's the child?"

"Safe. She's safe now." Mike held out a hand. "We need to get you to safety, too. Can you walk?"

"Are the spiders gone?"

"They don't like the smoke." Mike coughed and covered his mouth. "And neither do I, for that matter."

The mage took Mike's hand and rose. They navigated the scorched clearing and met up with Bigfoot, who cradled his niece against his chest. Her eyes were closed, and she clutched Jenny in her arms with her legs curled together into a tight ball.

Mike pulled the compass from his pocket and pointed in the direction of Callisto. The group made their way into the woods and found the boy nearly half an hour later. The centaur stood next to Death, his eyes going wide upon seeing Mike.

"Dad!" He galloped forward and hugged Mike so hard that they both nearly fell over.

"Hello, Mike Radley." Death adjusted his cowl and brushed some ash from his shoulders. "I found the boy while hunting a witch. Did you know she can fly? That's how she got away from me."

"Don't worry. Her bark was worse than her bite," Mike replied, his own tears mixing with Callisto's. When they finally broke apart, Mike noticed the cut on his son's face.

"Cyrus said it might scar," the boy said, looking at the mage.

Mike knew that he was right. This was the scar he had seen on his son's face in the future. He turned to look at the mage, who stood there silently, watching. Their eyes met and Mike was suddenly aware of the man's bleak condition, of what Cyrus had sacrificed for his kids.

"You saved my children," Mike said.

"Not quite yet." Cyrus smiled weakly. "We need to get them home."

Mike nodded and looked at Bigfoot and Death. "Can you get them home? I want to go back and make sure the others are okay. We're going to need them in Hawaii."

"This is a job we can do, but..." Death looked hesitantly at Cyrus. "I don't know how to ask this delicately. What would you like me to do about him?"

Mike looked at Cyrus, the man pale in what light there was to be had. Grace opened her eyes and turned to look at them. She pointed at her dog tags.

"Papa Cyrus," she said.

Mike stared at his daughter in astonishment, then looked at Cyrus. "She speaks?"

Cyrus nodded. "Apparently. Also...she may have picked up some words you don't approve of, though."

"Fucking hell," Grace added.

Mike took a step toward Cyrus and bowed his head. "Would you do me the honor of watching my children just a little bit longer? I know you're tired and deserve some rest, but...I wouldn't mind having an extra set of eyes on them while I'm gone. There's a really comfy chair in the living room that overlooks the front yard. It's my favorite place to catch a nap." He took a deep breath and then let it out. "My house is your house, Master Cyrus."

Cyrus smiled and let out a sigh. It was as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "You've got yourself a deal," he said.

"Thank you." Mike looked at Bigfoot. "Please help them get home, and send word to Zel immediately. Death, they're going to need you in Hawaii, so head there right away, please."

“After some tea?” asked the Reaper. “I wouldn’t mind fifteen minutes to myself after this ordeal.”

Mike chuckled. “Of course,” he replied. “But tea might be better with friends, and you sure have a lot of them in Hawaii who could use a cup, I bet.”

“Oh, I see what you’re doing.” Death’s eye flames flickered in delight. “I bet they would appreciate a good green tea to help lift their spirits.”

“They really would.” Mike looked at Callisto. “I’ll be home later.”

Callisto sniffled, then wiped snot from his nose and nodded. Mike took the tracking bracelet from Callisto and handed him the compass.

“Here. This will help you find me in case you need it, just like we found you.” Mike rose and took a step back. He wanted to go with his kids, but they would be safe once Bigfoot took them through the trees. “I’ll see you in a bit. I need to go help Aunt Dana and Aunt Yuki kick a little ass, okay?”

The motley group left, quickly vanishing between a pair of trees. Mike turned back toward the facility and started jogging, his legs sore and his heart full. When he got back to the facility, the sounds of gunfire had already diminished. Uncorking Opal’s bottle, he poured the slimegirl onto the ground so she could form next to him.

“Let’s clean this place up,” he declared, and then walked into the hangar with the fairy girls in tow.

Beth stood on the beaches of Paradise, her eyes on the massive balls of fire in the sky that Ratu had created so everyone could see. Along the sand, merfolk came and went as Leilani’s colony checked in with intel regarding Francois’ forces. A cabana made of stone had been constructed by Pele, who sat at a massive table beneath it. A three-dimensional map of the island and surrounding waters had been built in the middle, with tiny figurines which represented various ships and undead hordes approaching the island.

At the head of the table stood Tink. The table was big enough for her to easily walk along, and she was spouting half-formed words and gibberish while Kisa tried to translate for anyone who may be confused. At first, nobody had taken the goblin seriously, but after Tink had bitten three different merfolk and headbutted an obstinate knight, people had at least learned to get out of her way.

“Check here,” she shouted at a merman holding a spear while stamping her foot in a region of ocean about a mile south of Olowalu. “Big dip mean bone cereal!”

“She thinks there may be undead in that depression,” Kisa offered. The merman nodded politely at Kisa and jogged off to give orders to a team in the water. So far, Tink had identified nearly three dozen hiding spots based on topography alone. On a computer screen mounted to a pillar was meteorological data being streamed directly from satellites that Eulalie had accessed using a bunch of techno skills that made no sense to Beth.

Shoved up against the wall of the cabana was something that looked only vaguely familiar as a sniper rifle. Tink had removed the tripod from the gun and had been doing something weird with the barrel. When she wasn't busy barking orders, she would occasionally chew on what looked like a massive bullet and then study it with her goggles. Beth had no idea what that was about and didn't feel like asking.

Even the sight of Tink had set the Order on edge, as goblins hadn't been seen in over two decades and they were thought to be extinct. Beth wondered how many of them had even noticed Abella keeping an eye on things from the nearest building hastily assembled by both Ratu and Pele. The gargoyle's main job right now was to listen for dissent or attempts at mutiny.

With Paradise in shambles, the naga and the goddess had quickly thrown together a staging area made of rock and earth after gaining the merfolk's allegiance for the fight ahead. The buildings were bare bones, with a few windows for ventilation and a thatched roof cobbled together by the merfolk. However, these structures qualified for portals, which the rats had quickly chewed into the walls. Right now, Order personnel with family on the island were already helping their people evacuate. Apparently, the Order had bunkers hidden across the islands for scenarios similar to these. Sadly, these spaces were primarily for VIPs who were going into hiding, which meant they were already packed full.

While the rats opened portals, a few members of the Order had suggested that they be connected in a manner to allow the entire Order to assemble and send an army. Tink had immediately shot this idea down.

“Stupid fucks attack home when husband help them,” she had declared. “Probably attack Tink while defending island, make big trouble. Tink smarter than big idiots, anyway.”

Beth had agreed with this assessment. In fact, members of the Council, the governing body for the Order, had already made contact with personnel at Paradise in an attempt to do just that. Ingrid had briefly informed some guy in Europe that the situation was far too dire to try and wrestle control from the Radley family and hung up on him. Wallace had been contacted twice after the phone call with Ingrid had gone awry, but he had pretended that the connection was bad and hung up on them.

Aurora had immediately ordered Paradise personnel to ignore all phone calls from anyone who wasn't her or a one of their direct family members, which her staff obeyed. A small team of mages then tried to coerce a group of rats into opening a portal directly to one of the Order's main facilities in Europe. Eulalie and Reggie both had planned for this contingency in advance. After being bribed with cheese and crackers, the rats had opened a portal to the basement of an abandoned warehouse in Wyoming, then immediately collapsed the portal after the mages went through.

The monitor flickered and a cartoon depicting Eulalie's human face appeared. She had refused to come in person, a decision which the others had agreed with. Besides, the internet connection in the Library was simply the best on Earth.

"Okay, I've got intel from the military," the Arachne said. Tink stopped moving around placemarkers to look at the screen. "There's already hundreds of pages of data coming in, but we can sum it up succinctly by saying they're panicking. The Coast Guard made contact with one of the boats and were immediately attacked. We have the Navy in the area, but they aren't sure what to do. It sounds like the Order has already gotten in contact with them and the chain of command is breaking down."

"Breaking down how?" asked Beth.

"Have you ever watched a movie and thought to yourself, hey, the people in charge are really fucking stupid. Why are they wasting time arguing when they could be doing literally anything?"

Tink sneered. "Stupid fucks afraid," she said, her tail flicking a marker off the table. Kisa caught it and put it back in position. "Afraid to take blame after?"

"Yes, I've seen movies like that," Beth replied. "That's most movies, honestly."

“The Order is telling them to go ahead and sink ships. But Navy Command used a bunch of drones and didn’t spot any movement on the ships, so they think this is some type of massive psyop perpetrated by the enemy of the week and are refusing to cooperate. The Order asked to take command, the Navy told them to fuck off, and the President just learned today that magic exists and the state of Hawaii is about to be assaulted by thousands of skeletons.”

“The President...didn’t know?” Beth looked around the table and finally spotted Aurora. The woman was walking over with a tray of coffee.

“I can explain,” she offered, then handed Beth a cup. “Some time ago, it was decided the office of the Presidency was too volatile. By that, I mean a potentially new person every four years. The Order and some military higher-ups decided that it was best to handle things like this on a need-to-know basis. Even the people in the US government who are aware of the Order are only told a very small amount of what’s actually going on, which means there is quite a bit of distrust.”

Eulalie’s avatar folded her arms across her chest and looked very thoughtful. “That about sums it up. Based on my sources, the President thinks the Order is lying about what’s actually happening down here and is hesitant to tell the Navy to blow all these ships out of the water. So what we have right now is a stalemate based on incompetence and lack of trust. Three SEAL teams have already gone missing, which means the next step is to start bombing. But with so many of these ships, there’s a good chance they might strike a civilian target on accident. A military action this large will absolutely cause a PR disaster no matter how successful.”

“What about the locals? Surely they’ve noticed something.”

Eulalie scoffed. “The news reported that it’s a training drill before communications went down. Several fishing vessels have already gone missing, so people suspect something is up, but are blaming the government already.”

“Yeah, well, they’re really going to suspect something is up in a few hours when we drag them out of bed and send them somewhere else. Speaking of, do you have control of the tsunami alert system?”

Eulalie nodded. “I do, as well as every other alert system. When you’re ready, we can start pinging people in an attempt to get them to safety.”

“Coast first,” Tink declared, pointing along the edge of the island. “Too many tourists, biggest push.”

“My people have already evacuated some of the smaller towns.” Aurora handed a mug to Tink. The goblin took it and slammed the steaming hot contents, then tossed the cup over her shoulder where it shattered on the ground. Scowling with frustration, the hostess continued. “We’ve cleared out some of those areas, but people are scattered all over the island. It’s going to be really hard to track them all down.”

“We’ve accounted for that.” Beth looked at Tink, who was now frantically rubbing her tongue. “Cecilia and Suly are roaming the island and speaking with the marchers, letting them know what’s about to happen. They’ve been tasked with tracking down their descendants and guiding them to safety.”

“You’re using the marchers? People will be terrified!” Aurora handed a coffee to Kisa, who set it to the side. “How are your people going to talk to the night marchers? I don’t think they’re going to understand English.”

“This is a terrifying situation. This is essentially a mass invasion.” Beth felt her mind drift for a moment. She wasn’t sure what the rest of the night had in store for her, but she knew for a fact that she was standing at ground zero for a moment that would likely change the course of the world. “As for our people, they were created specifically by the fae to guide souls to the afterlife. The language barrier won’t be an issue for them.”

“Did somebody say afterlife?” A figure stepped forward as if melting out of the shadows. Aurora actually screamed and dropped her tray, which Kisa tried but failed to catch. A pair of knights came running over, but immediately halted at the sight of the Grim Reaper standing next to the table.

The Radley family all stared at Death in silence, both stunned at his arrival and curious about his next words. The Grim Reaper looked down at the spilled tray and just shook his head.

“I apologize for startling you,” he declared, then lifted his hands to reveal a tray of his own. A large teapot sat in the center, surrounded by several empty mugs. “I guess it’s a good thing that I brought along refreshments.”

“Death?” Beth looked at the Reaper, afraid to ask the question everyone wanted to know. She looked over at Aurora, who had already regained her wits. “Do you have something to tell us?”

“It’s a green tea,” he said, setting down the tray and pouring a cup. “It has antioxidants.”

Kisa elbowed Death in the hip. He scowled at the catgirl.

“Well?” Kisa put her hands on her hips.

“Well, what?” Death handed her a mug. “Don’t you already know?”

“No, you dumbass!” Kisa smacked him. “I can’t read Mike’s thoughts ever since he got to that place where magic is blocked!”

“Oh. OH!” Death looked at everyone. “Then you wouldn’t know. The children are home and they are largely unharmed.”

Everyone let out the breaths they had been holding. Tink said nothing, but now tears streamed free from beneath her goggles. She rubbed them away from her cheeks.

“What about others?” Beth’s heart was now slamming in her chest.

Death made a face. “Mike Radley went to assist them. It was my job to guide the children home and then come here immediately. I apparently have an important job to do.”

“That’s right.” Kisa looked up at the Reaper. “Cecilia and Suly need your help.”

“How may I be of assistance?”

“You know where everybody died.” Beth pointed at the map. “Right now, Cecilia and Suly are running everywhere trying to track down and speak with the night marchers. However, with your knowledge of maps and spirits, you can go right to the locations where they perished. They need to know that a battle is coming, and we need their help at sunrise.”

“I’m supposed to track down everyone who has died?” Death made a face. “That will take much longer than the time I have.”

“Not everyone. Hawaii’s warriors and its chieftains. Anyone who died in battle here would qualify. Also, Pele informed me that the most powerful shamans and warriors in Hawaiian history would be interred in secret locations to protect their mana and allow it to return to the island. If you can find the resting place of the old chieftains and kings, they should assist you.”

“And you believe they will be willing to help?”

Beth nodded. “The night marchers linger because they love this place. If you tell them that Francois is planning to kill everybody here, they will get involved. Tink?”

The goblin pointed to the relief of the island. “Marchers need go these places for sunrise,” she said, indicating markers made of wood with whimsical painted ghosts. “Spend night find family, take safety. Morning? Get ready for big kill.”

“Oh, and ask them to avoid these areas.” Beth pointed at a couple of signs that looked like knock-offs of the Ghostbusters’ logo. “That’s where we’ll have living allies. We don’t want them to confuse us with the enemy.”

Death scratched his skull for several seconds, then nodded. “I can already think of several places where many people died,” he stated, then picked up his teapot. “I was going to share this, but it seems I will need it on the long road ahead. May I have some rats to accompany me? It would behoove us all if I could traverse the terrain utilizing their skills.”

“We’ve already got a bunch of portals set up, but I’ll send you some rats in case you need them. Reggie is overseeing the evacuation of the Kaupo region. That’s not far from where the merfolk were boiled alive, which is probably where Francois is going to send his monster to try and get the eggs.” Eulalie paused. “Do we know what that thing is, by the way?”

Beth shook her head. “We think we have a pretty good idea, but won’t know for sure until it rears its ugly head. Di will be on standby in case it shows. The thing is apparently massive.” In fact, Pele had drawn a picture of the beast for Beth, but it hadn’t made a whole lot of sense to her. The creature had the face of a demon with the tentacles of a massive squid on the torso of a man. Sofia had found references to such a creature, but the only one known to exist had been slain centuries prior.

Then again, she couldn’t even be sure of that. Her mythology was largely based on a couple of coincidences and an old movie called *Clash of the Titans*. Sadly, Medusa’s head had been destroyed some time ago, which meant defeating an actual kraken was going to be far more difficult.

“When it shows its ugly face, the military will react for sure.” Aurora’s voice was trembling. For whatever reason, Death had her spooked. The Reaper noticed this and turned to face the young woman.

“Before I go, would you like a biscuit?” He stuck a hand in his pocket and pulled out a plastic-wrapped Biscotti. “I keep these on me for special occasions. It seems you could use a pick-me up.”

“Are you...real?” asked Aurora.

Death winked. “No matter what they say, I’m always real in the end. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve been given an important task.” With that, the Grim Reaper wandered onto the beach, causing merfolk and Order alike to scatter. “I shall see you in the morning,” he shouted. “Bright and early! No, not you, young man, I was talking to...no, I’m not coming personally to collect everybody, that would be... Can someone please help him? He’s crying now.”

Beth winced and turned away from the spectacle on the beach. Tink had gone unnaturally quiet, her gaze now fixed on the map. She licked her lips, revealing plenty of sharp teeth.

“Tink make better plan now,” she said, her voice almost guttural. “No more distraction, make huge plan, show husband Tink is best.”

The hours were somehow long, yet not long enough. Sometime after midnight, Beth was exhausted. She stared at the map, her eyes bleary as she contemplated the numerous markers that Tink had placed or moved around. The goblin was long gone, having headed out to meet up with Eulalie. The two of them were hashing out final details regarding military equipment that Eulalie had procured when Kisa, who had fallen asleep on a nearby chair, leapt to her feet, startling Leilani.

“He’s back!” she declared, then looked at the others. “Mike is home now.”

“How did it go?” Beth asked.

Kisa cocked her head to one side, then made a face. “Everybody made it home,” she said. “He’ll be on his way in just a bit. Apparently he needs to wash off...you know.” The catgirl made a face and pantomimed scrubbing her hands.

Beth sighed and sat back in a nearby chair. She studied the map, then checked a clock that someone had rescued from the rubble and hung on the closest wall. It was almost one in the morning now, and evacuations had been

underway for almost two hours. She looked over at a nearby couch where Aurora, who had also been asleep, sat up and rubbed her eyes.

“Do we need more coffee?” she asked with a yawn.

“Most definitely.” Beth waved at the others. “You hold things down here. We’re going to go check in with him.”

Aurora nodded, then gave them a small wave as they left. Leilani and Kisa followed Beth past the rubble of Paradise and up the street to their rental apartment. When they opened the door, it was to see Lily and Ratu guarding the portal.

“Is he back?” asked the naga.

“He is,” Kisa replied. “And he’s tired. I’ve never felt him this exhausted.”

“Then let’s go show him a good time.” Lily sauntered toward the closet and opened it. Inside, a small portal flickered. She stopped Ratu from going through by holding out a hand and pushing her back, a look of concern on her face.

“What’s wrong?” asked Ratu.

“Ladies first,” Lily replied, then moved to go through the portal ahead of Ratu. The naga kicked the succubus in the ass, pushing her through.

Cyrus jerked awake when he heard the front door creak open. Sitting immediately upright, he watched in silence as Mike, Yuki, and Dana walked in through the front door. Dana was carrying a backpack which she tossed on the nearest couch. It immediately sprouted a pair of legs and wandered to a different spot.

“How did it go?” asked Cyrus, his voice coming out as little more than a whisper. Having his ribs broken and then inhaling a ton of smoke hadn’t helped him any. Neither Yuki or Dana acknowledged him, both women covered in blood and injuries. The two of them walked straight toward the back of the house and disappeared. Mike yawned, then looked over at Cyrus.

“Oh,” he said as if surprised. “I almost didn’t see you there.”

Cyrus waved a hand dismissively. “Not a worry,” he said. “The last couple of days finally caught up with me is all. The kids are safe. Zel took Callisto back to her

village. Grace is right there.” He pointed toward the living room ceiling where a dark bundle had shrunk into the corner, clutching tightly to her doll. “I think she was waiting for you, but fell asleep.”

“I see.” Mike turned his attention to Cyrus. “Are you...okay?”

Cyrus laughed, which became a rasping cough. “I’d say never better, but we both know I’d be lying.”

“Yeah, right.” Mike sighed and stared at the ceiling, pain visible in his eyes. “How are the kids doing?” he asked.

Cyrus shrugged. “They’re pretty resilient, so it’s hard to say. I’m surprised you didn’t wake her up when you came in.”

Mike smiled. “Grace either sleeps heavy or light. There’s no in-between. I think heavy is good for now. Where’s Bigfoot?”

“Out back. The nymph is pulling bullets out of him.”

“It’s been a couple of hours, though.”

Cyrus laughed. “Apparently it was a lot of bullets. It took me a bit to chase him out of here, actually. He didn’t want to leave Grace alone but he kept bleeding all over everything.”

Mike gave Cyrus an odd look. “He actually listened to you?”

The mage nodded. “Eventually. He was pretty sullen when we got back, and kept muttering to himself. He seemed far more receptive after Grace fell asleep. I had to keep reminding him that the army of centaurs in the front yard meant that he would know well in advance that trouble was coming. He grumbled something about getting a beer and then got a six pack out of the fridge before going out back. I promised him I would look after the girl as if she were my own.”

“Papa Cyrus,” Mike muttered, scratching at his chin.

“That’s something I told the kids when they were captured. It doesn’t mean anything.” Cyrus looked down at his hands.

“I think it does, and that’s fine.” Mike sat in the chair across from Cyrus and stared at the ceiling. “You sacrificed everything for them.”

“And I would do it again.” Cyrus saw the faraway look in Mike’s eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. No. I don’t know.” The Caretaker looked at his hands. “There was a lot that happened in the facility is all. I guess I’m trying to come to terms with some of it, but it’s all very fresh.” As he spoke, a yellow fairy squirmed free of his shirt and hovered in front of his face, her hands moving as she said something to him in sign language. “I’ll explain later,” he said. “Go round up your sisters, please. I know they wandered off when we got home.”

“Did you have to kill someone?” Cyrus asked. It was a hard question, but Cyrus felt it needed to be asked. “New recruits often struggle with that. It’s part of the reason why the Order dehumanizes their targets, which leads to other problems down the road.”

Mike shook his head. “No. It wasn’t that. I learned something recently that was only reinforced tonight. When I choose violence, we all lose. So I’m trying real hard to avoid it. My predecessor ruined her life chasing power for the sake of protection. I know we’ve talked about that.”

“The infamous Emily.”

“Yeah. Good intentions paved the road to Hell for her. My magic is alive, but not in the way we understand life. Sometimes, I get the feeling that it’s watching me, much like an eager child willing to please. It wants to know how to adapt, to learn and grow. But that’s an ability that also comes with a heavy cost. When I make decisions that go against who I am as a person, I’m only creating a liability that I’ll have to deal with later. It’s like a down payment on madness.

“So I’ve been leaning into my role as a protector, as one who nourishes. The others, their strength lies in being able to do the things that I shouldn’t. So when I went to help Yuki and Dana, I stayed back and assisted where I could. There was this spell in the Grimoire, a magical shield of sorts. I kept using it over and over again to keep them safe, but now I feel...empty inside.” He let out a long sigh. “And that was just a spell that wasn’t trying to draw me in or corrupt me. I can only imagine what would have happened if I had used something more...out of line.”

“It’s like discovering a new muscle during a workout.” Cyrus leaned back in his seat. “Your magical talents are a bit unorthodox to begin with, but I would say this spell sounds very similar in nature to what you typically accomplish. I’m guessing you were able to create this shield at no personal cost.”

Mike nodded. "Other than fatigue, yeah. And anger. I have so much anger inside me right now, I'm afraid of what's going to happen next. While I was walking those blood-soaked hallways, all I felt was relief that these men who took my children would never have a chance to hurt anyone ever again. I'm mad that I can't just come home and hold my kids. I'm mad that it seems like there's always somebody out there, lurking in the shadows until they can take what is mine." The Caretaker leaned forward, placing his head in his hands. "And this Great Game business is a lot of bullshit. I have to go fight some centuries-old Frenchman now because he wants dragon eggs."

"Dragon eggs?" Cyrus lifted an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Turns out the dragons left a special clutch behind before they departed our world. An egg from each type of elemental dragon if you can believe it. All I have to do is fertilize the last one and they'll all be born together. I don't even know what that means, but have been told it could restore magic to the entire world."

"Dragons can be very territorial. But clutchmates typically aren't. If these creatures hatch at the same time, they would grow up as playmates rather than potential enemies. The person raising them could accomplish much good. Or darkness, as it were." Cyrus leaned back and sighed. "Think of it. A world with dragon once more."

"Our world still has dragons," Mike countered.

"In a limited sense. Those that exist are hidden away. There's a powerful one that slumbers beneath Yellowstone. Each year, your government plies it with gold to keep it satiated. It's actually one of the cushier gigs a member of the Order can receive." Cyrus coughed, then rubbed at his chest. "Honestly, if I hadn't been disgraced in my final days, I would probably be there now, monitoring a massive dragon and occasionally shoving gold and gems up its nostrils like cocaine."

"Really? Yellowstone?" Mike leaned forward in interest. "I thought it was a supervolcano?"

"Oh, it is. It's also the lair of a really massive dragon that will emerge if it ever erupts. If you've ever wondered if there's gold left in Fort Knox, the answer is no. The US government actually created paper bills because humans care about perceived wealth while dragons want the hard stuff." Cyrus smiled whimsically.

“I’m surprised you told me about the eggs. I figured that was the kind of thing you didn’t want people to know.”

Mike got that odd look again, but it disappeared. “Trust doesn’t always come easy to me,” he explained. “Sometimes, it’s my magic that tells me someone is okay. Other times, I have to rely on my gut. You’ve proven yourself to me a hundred times over and I only regret that I didn’t let you in sooner.”

“I probably wasn’t ready, if I’m being honest.” Cyrus looked up at the slumbering bundle in the corner. “I tried to kill her grandmother when I was younger. I was in charge of the hunt for the last Arachne. Thought I had succeeded, all those years ago. Learning that I hadn’t, well...let’s just say that would have been much harder to accept if I hadn’t seen firsthand just how human she is.”

“I get that. For me, I always had trouble with normal people, humans, specifically.” Mike stood and glanced outside. “I grew up with one who hurt me in so many ways, it damaged me. The women in this house, they aren’t human, yet they accepted me for who I was. So far, the only real monsters I’ve ever met are other humans. So I guess I came from the opposite direction that you did.”

Cyrus sighed. “A lesson I wished I had learned a long time ago.”

“But I’m glad you learned it, anyway. Look, I’d better get going. The girls are probably washing off in Naia’s fountain before we head for Hawaii. I should do the same.” Mike made as if to leave, then paused. “You’ll...still be around when I get back, right?”

The old man laughed. “If you think I’m going to leave this place so soon after being invited in, then you must have gotten some screws knocked loose. At the very least, I expect you to give me a proper tour.”

“I can’t wait to show you the place. By the way, don’t go wandering off, and definitely stay out of the basement. There’s always a small chance that something has escaped and wants to lure you down there.”

Cyrus laughed, then stopped when he saw that Mike wasn’t. The Caretaker walked toward the back of the house and left through the back door.

Feeling a little awkward about the interaction, Cyrus maintained his vigil, now unable to sleep. It was nearly thirty minutes later when a spectral figure passed through the door, her lanky hair dangling over her face. The temperature

of the room dropped substantially as the spirit cocked her head unnaturally to one side and studied him.

“Je...Jenny?” Cyrus was stunned at the sight of the spirit.

“The wicked witch got away,” she whispered as she drifted across the room, her feet dangling just inches above the ground. She floated up toward Grace, then turned to face Cyrus. “You’re like me, now.”

“I beg pardon?”

“You were lost, but now you’re found.” The ghost cackled and started singing *Amazing Grace* as she shrank down and vanished inside of the doll in the Arachne’s arms.

Cyrus shivered. He was never going to get used to that.

When Mike arrived at the secret volcano, it was to find Pele waiting for him. Her arms were crossed and she had an amused look on her face.

“I take it you were successful?”

He nodded, then looked around. The village was empty. “Where is everybody?”

“Evacuating my people and the island’s tourists. Luckily, most of those hotels and resorts have standardized emergency procedures. Your rat queen has shut down communications in and out of the island, allowing us to localize whatever emergency works best. The people on the west side of the island are under the impression that Japan had a massive earthquake and a tsunami is headed their way. They’re headed to reinforced buildings where the rats have installed portals.”

“Where do the portals go?”

Pele shrugged. “I can’t say for certain. Away from here is all I know for sure. I’ve heard rumors that some of them are going to underground bunkers on the mainland, while others are sitting in a warehouse somewhere in Ohio. It really doesn’t matter as long as they’re saved.”

Mike nodded and looked up into the starry sky above. “Do you think we’ll make it in time?”

The goddess smiled and moved closer, then placed her hand on his chest. "Because of the night marchers, yes. All across the island, the spirits are guiding them to safety. Whether or not they can assist us in the battle ahead is unclear, but they have been quite good at removing people from their homes."

The Caretaker winced. "Removing sounds like a strong word."

"Many have forgotten the old ways. There isn't time to explain." Pele's eyes dropped to Mike's chest. "I sense pain in here," she whispered.

Mike nodded. "I saw a lot of things tonight that I'm going to have trouble with in the days ahead." Behind him, a door opened and Yuki walked out with a crown of fairies in her hair. Dana came shortly after, busy eating something that definitely wasn't beef jerky.

"Oh." Pele took a step back and inspected Yuki. "Another demi-god. I sense great power in this one."

"Not powerful enough." Yuki scowled and ran her fingers through her hair, scattering the fairies. "My name is Yuki Radley. It's a pleasure to meet you." She bowed at the waist, her tails flicking behind her.

"Dana." The zombie spoke with her mouth full. "Don' min meh, ah hungee."

Pele frowned. Mike cleared his throat.

"It's a dietary restriction, not a slight."

The goddess chuckled. "Don't take me for one of the fae, Caretaker. I can recognize a deliberate slight." She paused for a second. "Usually. It's a pleasure to meet you both."

Dana swallowed hard, then smacked her lips. "So where's this Francois guy?"

"In a boat off the shore. We aren't sure which one, and won't know until tomorrow." Pele looked at Mike. "Your...goblin friend assured me that there is a plan, but she wasn't real clear what it is beyond preparations."

"That's because we don't know who we can trust. For all we know, someone with the Order or the merfolk are still talking to him." Mike felt Yuki press into him, her arms going around his waist. "Really, the main plan itself is to lure him out. He's hiding behind all of his forces, but will have to show himself sometime. Even though we've evacuated a bunch of people, the plan is to put up

a false defense where the most people would be, convince him that we're scattered. At some point, he'll make his move. Once that asshole shows his face, we'll take him out."

"How?"

Mike shrugged. "Tink probably has five different ways to do it by now. That's probably something we'll figure out in the moment. We also have to figure out how to defeat his guardian."

Pele made a sound of disgust. "I regret that I was unable to destroy that creature. I do not know if it pulls its power from Francois' boat or the ocean itself, but it healed far too quickly for my liking."

"Are you saying we can't kill it?"

Pele shrugged. "I don't know. That will be largely up to Di. Thirty minutes past sunrise, I will be busy triggering an eruption. Ratu will be Di's guide down the mountain to meet the guardian's challenge."

"What's the eruption for?"

The goddess grinned. "Just a little something your lawyer friend came up with. She's a smart one. I like her."

There was a loud thumping sound from one of the nearby huts, followed by Lily pitching face first through the door. She did a quick hand spring, and landed on her feet with her arms in the air like a gymnast.

"Ta-dah!" she declared.

"Everything okay?" Mike asked.

"She's fine." Ratu came out the door next, followed by Leilani and Beth. Kisa was last, the catgirl shutting the door. "Her butt got stuck in the portal is all."

"How dare you!" Lily twisted her rear-end, making it swell up to an unrealistic size. "My butt's not big, it's just the rest of me that's small!"

Mike smiled weakly. "Is everything going okay?"

"Asterion punched a guy out in Lahaina and a bunch of people caught it on their cellphones." Kisa ran to Mike's side and clung to him while Yuki tried to swat her away. "It was a drunk tourist who kept mooing at him."

“What is Asterion doing in Lahaina?”

“It’s too well lit,” Kisa replied. “The night marchers won’t go there and some of the tourists are pushy. Some of the police are family members of Order personnel, so they’re helping out.”

“Well, maybe Eulalie can scrub the video once it hits the internet.”

“I doubt it.” Beth shook her head. “If not for the information blackout right now, the whole world would be watching videos of the marchers.”

Yuki let out an exasperated sigh. “I’ve still got plenty of energy,” she said, walking toward the hut the others had emerged from. “And a few more summoning cards. Let me see what I can do to help.”

“I’ll go, too.” Dana wandered after the kitsune. “I’ll see you all at sunrise.”

“Here, I’ll take you to Tink. She’s running the show.” Kisa hopped up and pecked Mike on the cheek before running ahead of the others. “Don’t do anything fun without me,” she said as she departed.

Mike drooped. “I don’t know that I have a lot of fun left in me,” he said, looking at the others. “I’m...not feeling the best.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Ratu.

“Emotional stress of getting my kids back. Fought some mercenaries and a witch. This.” He gestured around. “I’m just...tired. I feel like a stained-glass window with a big crack running through it, like I might break at any moment. I haven’t felt this awful since my first week as the Caretaker.”

Princess Leilani strode forward and put her hand on Mike’s wrist. “Battle fatigue,” she declared.

“Huh?”

“You’ve been fighting for yourself and others for days now. You’re tired. You need to rest.”

He stared at the mermaid and then shook his head. “And when am I supposed to do that? In just a few hours, I’m going to be in yet another fight. I’m stretched too thin.” Mike looked at the others. “We all are.”

“I think I see the problem.” Ratu pushed herself between Mike and Leilani, her brow furrowed in concern. She studied him for several moments, then looked into his eyes. “You’ve used up too much of your magic.”

Beth let out a little gasp. “You didn’t use the book, did you?”

Mike nodded. “I did, but—” he held up a finger before anyone could speak. “I found a spell in line with my own abilities, a shield made of light to protect the others. It was easy enough to cast, but required most of my magic. That damned book kept whispering to me, so once we were done at the SoS base, I gave it back to Tick Tock.”

“Mental exhaustion. Physical exhaustion. Magical exhaustion.” Ratu took Mike by the hand and led him to a nearby seat. “This is how mages die, you know. Even younger ones. When you try to squeeze blood from a stone, all you get is rubble.”

“I get that, I really do. It’s just...” He closed his eyes and rubbed them. What he wanted more than anything was to just go home, to hold his kids, and sleep until he didn’t hurt anymore.

A warm hand caressed his cheek, and he opened his eyes to see Pele before him. Her ancient features flickered briefly, revealing a much younger form.

“When a flame begins to die, you must feed it the fuel it needs,” she told him. “There are only a few hours left before the sun rises. What will it take to ensure that you burn brightly once again?”

“I don’t know,” he whispered.

Pele smiled. “I think I do.” She took him by the hand and he felt his magic react. It ached deep inside him, but that hollow feeling soon became a hungry one. “You are the Caretaker, the maker of found families, the one who loves strongest, yet hurts the most.” Pele pulled him to his feet and guided him closer to the women, his magic now reaching for them as well. Beth gasped, her own magic swirling around her in the form of a cerulean aura.

“This...doesn’t feel like the time or the place...” he muttered. His magic flickered into being as tiny motes of light that sparkled, drifting gently toward each of the women. A few tried to move in Pele’s direction, but the goddess blew them away from her and back toward the others.

“Desire comes in many forms, Caretaker. Sometimes we crave things because we want them, other times we do so because we need them.” Pele gave him a gentle push toward the cluster of women, closing the distance between them. The motes of light were now coalescing around the women. Ratu’s emerald eyes lit up with each one that landed on her skin. Beth let out cute little gasps and flinched. Lily just smirked as tiny flames rose from her skin to consume them.

As for Leilani, she had closed her eyes and was trembling. He could smell her desire like the distant salt of the ocean. Cerulea, Carmine, Olivia, and Daisy all emerged from their hiding places and started dancing hungrily above the group as his magic touched them all.

Pele’s breath was hot against his skin as she whispered directly in his ear. “You need this, Caretaker. Strengthen yourself and your bonds before the break of day so that we may see your full power. Celebrate life now so that you may remember why it is so precious when you need it the most.”

“I...” He wanted to protest, to say that there were better things they all could be doing to help, but his magic reached hungrily for the women around them. Feeling a little embarrassed about his sudden desires, he turned to argue further with the goddess, but saw that she was gone.

Strong arms grabbed him from behind and it was Lily’s voice in his ear. “The hero usually gets laid after they save the day,” she purred. “I think we should shake things up a bit.”

“And this would be the perfect moment to test a theory of mine,” said Ratu from behind. “I believe what is about to transpire will be far more restorative than a good night’s sleep.”

Someone took him by the hand, his magic immediately mingling with hers. It was Beth, a determined look on her face as she guided him toward the nearest hut. The others followed, Ratu gently pulling Leilani along. It was clear the mermaid was already overstimulated as she walked on shaking legs.

He was lost in a fog, his mind slowly trying to pull up the events and emotions from last night. A gentle hand on his neck yanked him free of the depths, and it was Lily’s lips on his that rescued him. They tumbled onto the bed together, her tail curling possessively around his waist. Someone pulled off his shoes. Another person pulled off his pants. His magic fought to manifest sparks, but failed. Lily released him, a wide grin on her face.

“This is for your own good, Romeo.” She helped him out of his shirt, then paused to swat a fairy that had landed on her breast. “Not yet, you troublesome pest.”

“Lift his waist,” said Beth. “I can’t get his pants down.”

“Maybe I don’t want you to take his pants off.” Lily grinned. “What if I want him all for myself?”

A serpentine coil wrapped around Lily and yanked her off the bed. Ratu took her place, her robes opening to reveal shimmering scales along the inside of her breasts.

“Learn your place, demon.” Ratu winked playfully at Mike as she scooted up onto his chest to allow Beth to fully undress him. “You’ll have to forgive her. Apparently her master doesn’t spank her enough.”

From the floor, Lily spoke. “On this, we actually agree.”

Mike chuckled. It started small, like a bunch of tiny bubbles, then grew as they escaped him. Everybody paused for a moment as he laughed, the humor of the moment shoving the poison of last night's events from his mind. When they realized he wasn’t about to devolve into hysteria, they resumed their ministrations, rubbing his body with their hands and kissing his skin.

As a pile of flesh formed above him, Mike looked over toward the wall and saw Leilani leaning against it, looking uncertain. He held out a hand toward her and his magic rose up, briefly forming golden flames.

“You’re welcome, too,” he said. “We can make room.”

“Um...” Leilani stared at him for several long seconds, then clenched her thighs. “I want to, but...um...I’m kind of nervous.”

“There’s nothing to be nervous about,” he said.

“Maybe a little bit.” Leilani fidgeted with her hands. “I can see better now how...big it is. Things are a bit...tighter in my human form.”

“Have you practiced shoving things up there?” asked Lily from down near Mike’s feet.

“That’s not polite.” Beth leaned into view from behind Ratu. “Is there anything different about your body from a regular human’s in that state?”

“Other than increased density, I don’t think so.”

“Then it’ll be fine. A woman’s vagina was built to stretch. The key is to take your time.”

Lily cackled. “It’s true, she would—”

Beth grabbed Lily by the hair and shoved her face onto Mike’s cock. Hot lips parted and Lily inhaled him, her tongue folding around the base of his shaft.

“Do something useful with that mouth of yours,” Beth muttered, then turned her attention back to Leilani. “Don’t let Lily psych you out. Getting stressed about it will only make it worse. Why don’t you come closer? You might feel better if you’re more...in the moment.”

Leilani scrunched up her face, then nodded. Mike’s view of her vanished as a pair of scaly breasts enclosed his face. Raven-colored hair obscured the light, and Ratu slid her arms beneath him.

“I can feel your magic waking up,” she said, rubbing her body against his. “I’ve often wondered how it can be so powerful. My magic is elemental. I pull it from the heat of the earth, even the sun itself. But yours has always been different, a maelstrom of many different things. It comes from the connections you share with each of us, no matter how deep.”

“Uh huh.” Mike was trying to pay attention, but the combination of Ratu’s breasts pressed against the sides of his face and the warm mouth on his cock had taken away most of his capacity for logic.

“You take your power from us,” Ratu said as she moved her body further up. “Or rather, we give it willingly. I think that’s what makes the difference. It’s what makes you so strong.” Her belly slid along his face, her scales rubbing against the rough stubble on his cheeks.

“Argle megga geh?” asked Lily, Mike’s cock buried in her throat.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Beth muttered.

Ratu’s thighs parted, and she sat on Mike’s face, his tongue parting her folds. The naga hissed in delight, then grabbed his hair with both hands.

“And we receive your power in...return,” she gasped. Mike grabbed the naga by the waist and held her in place, inhaling her scent and tasting her body. She undulated her hips, establishing a slow rhythm. Beth’s hands briefly covered

his own as she scooted forward, her body pressing against Ratu's. She slid her hands up Ratu's body until she cupped the naga's breasts. Mike felt Beth's magic flowing through the sorceress and down toward him.

"Oh!" Ratu went still, her whole body becoming rigid. "That...that!"

"Relax," Beth said as she pushed aside Ratu's hair and kissed the naga's neck. "It's my magic reaching for his. You're just in the way is all."

The mattress shifted, and Mike spotted Leilani as she shyly climbed onto the bed with the rest of them. The wooden frame groaned for about a second before giving way and dropping all of them on the ground. The women cried out in alarm, both Beth and Ratu falling backward onto Lily. The succubus made a high-pitched squeaking sound as their combined weight found the back of her head and pinned Mike's cock as far back as it could possibly go.

"Mmrgh! Nargle fargin erk!" Lily kicked her legs as her tail whipped around. Leilani scrambled off the broken bed and helped Ratu off first. Beth was able to roll free, allowing Lily to pull her hot, sticky mouth off of Mike's cock.

"I'm so sorry," whispered Leilani in horror.

Lily smacked her lips and looked at the mermaid. "You," she said, pointing a finger at the princess. "You're forgiven. As for you two." Her hand swept around to point at Ratu and Beth. Beth's eyes were wide as she fought to hold back a laugh. Ratu covered her mouth with one hand, her eyes filled with mirth. "I can tell you're trying not to laugh."

At those words, Beth broke first, followed by Ratu. Mike sat up on the mattress, holding back a laugh of his own as Lily scowled at the other women with her arms crossed.

"We knew you weren't hurt," Beth countered. "You can't fault us for finding it a little funny."

"Oh?" Lily cocked her head and looked down at Beth. "So as long as it didn't hurt me, it's fine?"

"Please, demon. Your body was built to take a pounding." Ratu rolled her eyes and then looked at Leilani. "She's always dramatic like this."

"Me? Dramatic? Please." Lily knelt down next to Mike and smirked. "What do you say, Romeo? You up for a little tag team action?"

He had no idea what she was implying, but had learned long ago that the answer to a sexy question from Lily was always yes, so he nodded.

Lily cocked her hip, and her tail lashed out, striking both Beth and Ratu one time apiece. Both of them flinched, and Ratu actually jumped to her feet with fire in her hands.

“Oh, calm down,” said the succubus. “It’s not like I hurt you, so it’s okay, right?”

Ratu opened her mouth to say something, then let out a gasp, the flames disappearing from her fingers. Her hips shook as she dropped a hand to her crotch and started rubbing at her moist slit.

“What did you do?” asked Mike.

“Typical succubus cocktail, minus the paralytic.” Lily laughed. “In other words, all of the horny, none of the sleepy.”

“You bitch,” Beth moaned, her hands now exploring her body.

“Oh, please. You’re both accomplished magic users, you could easily dismiss it if you wanted.” Lily chuckled and knelt down in front of Ratu. “What do you say, snake girl? Don’t think I haven’t noticed the weird thrill you’ve gotten out of messing with me in front of Romeo, or how wet you’ve gotten whenever I joked about getting eaten.”

Ratu narrowed her eyes. “I should have known,” she whispered.

“Yes, you should have. But maybe, just maybe...” Lily leered down at the naga. “It was more fun to pretend that you didn’t.”

Lily pounced on Ratu, pushing her down onto the ground. When their mouths met, literal flames escaped from between the naga’s lips, which Lily inhaled. Mike watched in fascination as Ratu’s body shifted, her scales emerging from beneath her skin.

Beth moved next to him, her hands sliding up his thighs. “I need you,” she whispered. “Right now.”

“Are you sure?” He couldn’t help but grin. “If there’s something else you’d rather be doing, I—”

“Shut up,” she groaned, pressing her body against his. When his magic met hers, it made a sound like water meeting hot oil. Lily, who had her legs wrapped around Ratu’s head, looked over at the two of them.

“Damn, Romeo. I can feel that from over here.” She gasped and then let out a giggle. “I always knew her tongue could get long, but she’s so far up my cunt right now that she can taste my—”

Ratu did something between Lily’s legs that made her eyes roll up and she stopped talking. Mike turned his attention back to Beth, who was pushing him onto his back.

“I’ll do all the work,” she whispered as she raised her hips above his. “You don’t even have to move if you don’t want to, I just need...I need...” The head of his cock parted her folds, stretching her labia tight as it pressed into her. From this intimate location, her magic rubbed firmly against his, and his magic roared to life once again. Tiny sparks danced along Beth’s body as she sank onto him, letting out the cutest little cry he had ever heard from the woman. Only a few feet away, Leilani watched in utter fascination, her hands kneading her own thighs.

“How does that even fit?” she asked with awe.

When Beth didn’t answer, Mike did. “She’s got a magical body,” he said. “But don’t let that intimidate you. It just means she can do this without working herself up to it.”

“He’s...ah! Right...mmh!” Beth’s inner thighs were slick with her arousal as she rode him, her fingernails digging into his shoulders. “It just...time, and...oh my god...”

When Beth came, her magic shot through Mike and he nearly came with her. As exhausted and weak as he was, he knew an orgasm now would take him out for the rest of the evening, and he wasn’t about to pass up the opportunity to enjoy all of them at once.

That, and he could feel his magic feeding off of Beth’s lust, making him stronger. Even now, thin strands of her magic intertwined with his, both of them feeding off of each other. The void he had been carrying in his stomach ever since the battle with the SoS was finally being filled.

On the other side of the room, Ratu made a gargling noise as if drowning. Everyone looked over to see that Lily's tail had become a thick shafted cock that was now buried in the naga's mouth.

"What?" The succubus looked confused for a moment. "This is a team event, dicks versus chicks."

Ratu actually laughed, which caused her to cough up about four inches of Lily's demonic phallus. The succubus wiggled her eyebrows at Mike, but then her gaze continued past him to a table where Beth had set down the rod of Osiris. A mischievous grin broke across her face.

Ratu yanked her mouth off of Lily. "Don't get any ideas," she said, her voice suddenly very serious. "If we ever get a chance to return that to Isis, the last thing we want is for her to find out that you fucked someone with her husband's dick."

Lily looked like she was about to argue, then shrugged. "You make a good point," she declared, then grabbed Ratu by the head. "Now shut up and eat me."

Beth shuddered and looked over at Lily and Ratu. "Are those two okay over there?"

Mike wondered the same. Ratu was being oddly subservient, which had Mike baffled. Then again, the two of them had been at each other's throats for so long that maybe it didn't matter anymore now that one of them was literally inside the other's throat. When he looked back at Beth, she leaned forward until her lips were nearly touching his own.

"It seems like we never get chances like this," she said, her hips already moving again. The heat of her last orgasm was already dripping down his own thighs. "Why do you think that is?"

"Separate lives, separate wives," he replied. Beth laughed so hard she snorted, which caused her vaginal canal to squeeze him in a pleasurable fashion.

"So you think of Asterion as one of my wives? I wonder what he would think of that?" She blinked innocently.

"Probably whatever you told him to." Suddenly possessed by a rush of strength, he grabbed Beth by the waist and rolled over so that he was on top. She let out a gasp as he penetrated her from above, then moaned when he rose up on his knees and held her hips in place so that her ass was about a foot above the

mattress. “Now are you gonna talk about your minotaur or do you wanna get laid?”

Beth moaned with pleasure as he held her by the waist and fucked her, his cock sliding almost completely out of her with every thrust. Their magic danced once more, and Beth came within minutes, covering his crotch in another gush of fluids. Grinning, he continued his pace, picking up speed as he forced another orgasm to rip through the curvy brunette beneath him.

“Noooooo!” Lily let out a moan of sweet agony. Mike looked over to see that she was now on the ground, her hips bucking as Ratu deep throated her from above. Copious amounts of cum dripped from the naga’s mouth as she attempted to swallow it all.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“She did something hot with her tongue. So I nutted,” Lily replied, her eyelids fluttering. The fairies descended on her, giggling with glee. “I’m gonna need five minutes and a gatorade before I can come back to the game, coach.”

Chuckling to himself, Mike resumed fucking Beth. She was gasping now, calling for him to keep going as their magic folded together to create dazzling sparks that filled the air. Beth came again, her body going limp beneath his as she tried to catch her breath.

A serpentine tail circled around his foot and pulled, dragging him off of Beth and across the room. He rolled over and was greeted by the sight of Ratu, her lower body now that of a snake.

“You’ve perked up,” she said, pushing the last gob of Lily’s cum into her mouth. “Are you feeling better?”

“Much,” he admitted as her coils pulled him into a standing position against her body. The naga grinned lasciviously at him as she ran a finger down his chest.

“Your magic is quite the puzzle,” she said, the coils adjusting his position so that his cock rested casually against her labia. “I do enjoy a good puzzle.”

Ratu constricted her coils, causing Mike’s cock to slide inside of her. She hissed with pleasure, her tongue briefly emerging to taste the air. Pinned in place, Mike was unable to move his arms, so had his magic do the work instead. Using tiny sparks, he sent little shocks of pleasure into Ratu. This caused her body to tighten up, which only drove him further inside of her.

“Sometimes, I wish I had found you first,” she whispered in his ear. “That I could have kept this pleasure all to myself, to use you at my whim. You would have been the real treasure I kept at the center of my Labyrinth, Mike Radley. Yet I will admit that sharing you has made me a better person. You’ve given me more than just love and companionship. You made me part of your family.”

“You’re worthy of all these things,” he replied. Mike felt bad that he couldn’t do or say more, but he was pinned so tight against her that he had no control over his body. In fact, the way Ratu undulated her coils, she was essentially fucking herself with his body.

He closed his eyes and basked in the sweet heat of the naga as she rode him horizontally. The heat in the room increased and his magic crawled across her skin as if trying to encase her. The dark room became lit by small motes of light that flitted away from him like fireflies. Over against the wall, Leilani was masturbating furiously, her mouth hanging open as she stared at the two of them.

Ratu came, squeezing him so hard with her coils that his back popped. He shivered in delight as he commanded his own orgasm to wait, the room now saturated with magical energy. His body drank it in like a desert flower and then showered the room in sparkling lights. Lily was gasping for air as the fairies crawled across her body, lapping up her sexual fluids.

Beth cleared her throat, then tapped on Ratu’s serpentine coils. The naga sighed with irritation and turned her attention to the brunette. Beth jerked her thumb toward Leilani, who was now actively massaging her breasts with one hand while fingering herself.

“We should probably share him,” she said, then gave Mike a wink. “Before we wear him out, anyway.”

“But I’m not done with him.” Ratu narrowed her eyes at Mike and shifted her coils again, burying his cock deep inside of her. “I could do that all night if I wanted.”

“We don’t have all night.” Beth stroked Ratu’s tail in an effort to placate the naga. “Besides that, we owe her. She was ready to turn her back on her people for us. It would be very unkind not to reciprocate somehow. Besides...” Beth glanced over at Leilani. “I get the idea she won’t last very long anyway.”

Ratu sniffed haughty, then relaxed her coils. "You make a salient point. The least we could do is be good hosts. Princess Leilani, please, come." She beckoned the princess over.

On the floor, Lily giggled. "Are we still doing phrasing?" she asked, lying still while the fairies cleaned her off. Mike wasn't fooled by her harmless act and wondered what she was up to.

Leilani stood on wobbling legs and walked over to Mike, her cheeks now flushed in a beautiful shade of purple. She reached for his cock, which twitched in anticipation as she touched it.

"It's so hot," she whispered in awe.

"You should feel it from the inside," said Beth. "Do you want top or bottom?"

"Um..." Leilani contemplated Mike, her eyes shimmering with anticipation. "Top, I think."

Ratu's elongated body lowered Mike to the ground to set him on his back. He watched with excitement as the mermaid climbed on top of him and tried to figure out how to mount him. Beth and Ratu knelt at her side and gave the mermaid advice, which she wordlessly accepted. By the time Mike slid inside of her, Beth and Ratu were also playing with Leilani's breasts and kissing her neck.

Leilani came almost instantly, arching her back and spraying him with her sexual fluids. Ratu and Beth cheered her on, then helped Leilani sit back on his cock for another round. More motes of light surrounded them, the bedroom now lit fully by Mike's magic. The sight of three women fondling each other as one rode him was more than enough to bring him to the very edge of his own orgasm.

He heard Lily chuckle and turned his head to see that she had crawled up next to him. She winked and then looked at the others.

"They're not even bothering to fight it off," she said, pushing herself up onto her elbows so that her breasts were on full display. "The venom, I mean."

Mike reached over to Lily and grabbed her by the horn. A surprised look crossed her face as he pulled her to him, their lips locking as he kissed her upside down. Her tongue danced with his as Leilani rode him to another tremendous climax. This time, Ratu and Beth put their full weight on the mermaid, pinning her

down so that her hips bucked wildly, her dense body crushing him against the floor.

“I’m gonna come,” he said, interrupting the kiss. “Leilani, if I come inside you, there’s a good chance it may pair us together forever.”

The mermaid paused to look at him. “I’m on birth control,” she whispered.

“Not kids,” he told her. “A piece of my soul for a piece of yours.”

“Is that all?” Leilani started grinding her hips even harder. “Take me, Caretaker. Give me a piece of yourself that I may treasure it until my dying day.”

“Hot,” Lily muttered in his ear, then resumed kissing him.

Somewhere in the distance, Mike felt as if the world held its breath, the magic in the room sizzling as the lights became so bright he could see them through closed eyelids. Lily pinched his nipple and moaned into his mouth, toppling the final barrier between him and ecstasy.

Mike came. When his balls tightened into his groin, the floating lights in the room made a whooshing sound as they shot toward his hips and then emerged from his cock in a torrent of magical energy that encased the mermaid in light. Lily groaned as his magic passed into her body through her mouth. Twitching, she fell over and clutched her stomach as she came, his magic dancing across her skin.

Leilani’s eyes and mouth opened as wide as they could go, but her scream was soundless. The dazzling lights on her skin leapt from her to Beth and Ratu, both of them falling away in surprise. Beth’s magic reacted almost immediately, creating tiny sparks of her own as waves of pleasure rolled through her. Ratu underwent another partial transformation, the remains of her human flesh shifting dramatically into hardened scales as the ground rumbled beneath them.

Mike arched his back, lifting Leilani as magical light swirled around both of them, exchanging a tiny piece of his soul for her own. For a brief moment, Leilani’s eyes glowed from within before she toppled over backward, completely spent. The fairies cheered and landed in the puddle between her legs, dancing around while lapping up their combined fluids. Leilani let out a long, sweet sigh of ecstasy before closing her eyes.

Sitting up, Mike checked on the others. Ratu had slithered off to the side of the room to lie against the wall, her eyes fixed on him as she fought to catch her breath. Lily was lying nearby on the ground making happy sounds. Beth was the

only one left standing, her eyes ablaze with energy as she moved to take her place.

When their lips met, the motes of light returned immediately, pulsing in time with his heartbeat. Some of them even rang like gently tapped crystals, filling the air with music only he could hear.

“It’s just you and me, again,” Beth said as she mounted him, her breasts pressed against his face.

“Do you think you’re up for it?” Mike grinned. Before they had started, he was exhausted. Now it felt like he could run a hundred miles without stopping.

“There’s only one way to find out.” She held still, her vaginal canal somehow pumping him despite her motionless body.

“New trick?” he asked.

Beth laughed. “Always.”

The air crackled with energy as the two of them fucked. Their magic collided as they tried to overwhelm each other with sexual power. What started as a battle for dominance became a playful dance between their magics. Beth’s face and chest became flushed as a slew of micro-orgasms caused her to twitch above him. Her best efforts to push him to orgasm were for naught, and Beth eventually fell forward, her lips finding his as she groaned.

“I thought you didn’t have a refractory period,” she muttered, her body still grinding against his.

“I don’t,” he replied, brushing her hair out of her face.

“Then why can’t I make you come?”

“I’m waiting.”

“For what?”

Mike smiled when he felt a second pair of hands grab Beth’s waist from behind. The lawyer tensed up in surprise, then looked over her shoulder to see Lily wiggling her eyebrows.

“If you’re asking yourself if this was all a long term ploy to try out the best piece of ass the human race has to offer...” Lily flexed her cock, which looked nearly identical to Mike’s. “Then you finally get me.”

“Holy shit,” Beth whispered as she turned stunned eyes back toward Mike. Her eyes rolled up in her head as Lily pressed the head of her cock against Beth’s ass, slowly gaining entry and increasing pressure on Mike’s own cock.

“Yeah, that’s it. I know you can take it.” Lily swatted Beth’s ass, which sent a jolt of pleasure through both her and Mike. Beth held perfectly still until the succubus was completely inside of her, then went limp between them. This allowed Lily to lean over Beth’s shoulder so she could look Mike in the face.

“So do we high-five now or later?” she asked.

Laughing, Mike held tight and let the magic take him. He and Lily pounded Beth mercilessly, both of them feeding off each other’s exuberance as the woman between them cried out and came over and over again. Eventually, she turned into a human puddle between their arms. Mike and Lily kissed each other, both of them frantically pumping themselves into Beth. Sparks crawled across all three of them, eager to begin the chain reaction. A storm was building inside the walls of the building, which created a vortex of energy.

The festivities came to a brief halt when Ratu appeared, her hair a mess and only half of her face human once more. The naga stared down at Beth and shook her head in disgust. She knelt down and picked up Beth’s limp hand to slap it against her own.

“What are you doing?” asked Lily.

“You said this was a tag team.” Ratu grabbed Beth by the wrists and tugged. Beth grunted and muttered random gibberish as she popped free from between them and was dragged over by Leilani. The fairy girls cheered at the sight of her, their bellies bulging from the cum they had already eaten. Satisfied that her partner was comfortable, Ratu returned and placed herself between Mike and Lily. “She just tagged me in.”

“Ooh, I’m finally getting some real tail,” Lily declared, but Ratu shook her head and used the heel of her foot to push Lily onto her back.

“I don’t think so,” she said as she pulled her robes off to completely reveal the network of scales that criss-crossed her body. She looked over her shoulder at Mike and grinned, revealing her fangs. “My ass is for him and him alone. It’s the one thing I have left to give that belongs to nobody else.”

Lily blinked up at Ratu. "That's...actually pretty fucking hot. Do you want him all to yourself?"

"No, I don't." Ratu climbed on top of Lily and sighed as she slid into place. "Some bitch stung me earlier and all I can think about is getting fucked stupid like my partner over there." Looking over her shoulder, Ratu wiggled her ass for Mike. "I know it doesn't compare to Beth's, but..."

"You're wrong." Mike crawled over to the two of them and grabbed Ratu by the hips. "Each one of you is different. That's what I love the most."

"Mike." Ratu arched her back. "Fuck me until I forget."

He didn't even have to ask who she wanted to forget. Placing his cock against the edge of her anus, he went slow, giving her time to adjust. Several agonizing minutes passed, his hips begging him to thrust forward. From below, Lily gave him advice, but he didn't need it. His magic told him exactly what Ratu needed, and it was nice and slow.

Once he was completely inside her, the magic took over again, and soon the naga squealed between them, flames jumping from her fingertips as she was overwhelmed. Even though the three of them moved slowly, the intensity of the moment finally caught up to Mike and he shouted when he came, filling Ratu's guts with hot, magical cum. The magic exploded again, but this time it flowed through Ratu and into Lily, who let out a scream of her own. The earth rumbled beneath them as thunder filled the room.

The three of them came together, over and over again, until they all went limp in a pile. The fairy girls, who were still eating their fill off Beth, ended up crawling across the floor with swollen bellies to eat some more.

Lying in that mess, Mike stroked Ratu's hair, holding her close against his body. She let out a content sigh, then reached back and squeezed his hip.

"I belong to you," she said, her words ending with a slight hiss. "For now and forever."

"That's just the buttsex talking," offered Lily. She yelped when Ratu pinched her nipple.

"I wasn't talking to you, *demon*." Ratu rolled over to face Mike. "I was talking to this man, this wonderful creature who has shown me that life is still

worth living. I used to think I knew what love is. But now? I think I at least understand it better.”

He smiled and touched her face. “I feel the same way,” he replied. “I’m so glad that you’re part of my family. And just so you know...I’d still take you to the sock hop.”

Ratu blushed, then laughed out loud. She snuggled against him, and those final wounds in his heart vanished. In the morning, things would change. He would see terrible deeds, and potentially commit a few of his own. Things were about to change forever, and even he couldn’t predict how. But for now, he was at peace.

Over in the corner, Leilani started snoring, which elicited a series of giggles from Beth. Lying there in the dark, they were startled when the door of the hut slammed open to reveal Quetzalli, her chest heaving from exertion. Sweat ran down her face as she stared in horror at all of them lying together.

“What’s wrong?” Mike asked as he sat up abruptly.

“You...didn’t...fuck...” She clutched at her chest and fell to her knees. “Are...you...”

“Slow down, what happened?” Concerned, Mike started to rise, but Quetzalli held out her hands and gestured for him to sit.

“Felt you...all...from down by the lake.” She was wheezing now. “Fucking. Wow! Came to...see if...I could...join.”

Laughing, Mike held out a hand to the dragon. When he touched her skin, a flash of golden light appeared between them, and the dragon’s labored breathing stopped.

“I think I can make time for one more,” he said as he slid his hands along the dragon’s body. Sighing with relief, Quetzalli let him take her, over and over again in front of the others.

When he finally came inside her, the world erupted in thunder.