

Heart of the Mountain

Beth stepped out of the elevator and was greeted by the sight of Aurora. The woman had dark patches under her eyes that concealer had failed to hide, her disheveled hair piled on top of her head and held in place by a hairpin with a tropical flower on the end.

“Good morning,” she said, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. “The Director has arranged breakfast for you in a special location. If you would follow me.”

The woman turned away before Beth could respond. From behind, she could actually see that Aurora was clutching her clipboard so hard that her fingertips had turned white.

Beth was led past the dining room and the exit to the pool deck, then up a short flight of stairs to an outdoor patio she had never seen before. Pausing to take in the view, she realized that the patio itself should have been visible from her own balcony. With very little effort, she was able to see the edges of the illusionary spell that shimmered just beyond the patio’s boundary.

“Well done.” The words came from an Indian man sitting at an ornate dining table. His skin was the color of topaz, and smooth as if he had been carved directly from the earth. Though his eyes were brown, they had an intensity that pulled her in, set beneath a pair of well trimmed eyebrows. The left one had a tiny scar where the hair didn’t grow. His nose was wide with a waxed handlebar mustache beneath. He rose, revealing that he was wearing a full suit despite the warm weather. “Most people aren’t able to see the illusion from the inside.”

“Is this you?” she asked. “Or just an enchanted array of some sort.”

“Come,” the Director said, gesturing at the seat opposite him. “Sit.”

Beth moved to join him, fully aware that he had ignored her question.

“You stood me up last night,” she said.

The Director nodded. “You have my full apologies,” he said. “Though my physical presence is here, I was caught up in an operation in another time zone. Things did not go as expected, so I had to sit down with some of my people afterward to come up with a different approach.”

Beth wondered if he was referring to the house or the attempt on Mike's life. There wasn't a way to ask without letting on how much she knew, and she got the feeling that this man was as slippery as he looked. So she looked down at the table setting before her and cleared her throat. "I don't have a menu," she said.

"I ordered for both of us." He smiled, and she felt a brief pulse of magic wash over her. It tried to cling to her body, but slipped across her skin and then dissipated in the air. Uncertain what had just happened, she gave the man a smile as if she hadn't noticed.

"What are we having?"

He grinned and sat forward in his chair. "We're going to start with a light fruit salad, followed by a croque madame with some toast. I assume you like mimosas?" Another pulse of magic came off of him. This time, it clung to Beth's skin like spidersilk, and it took some effort to push it away with her magic. The Director studied her intently, as if waiting for a reaction.

"Who doesn't like mimosas?" The moment she spoke, a crystalline glass was set down next to her by a member of the wait staff. She looked up to see a man with tousled brown hair and scars along one cheek. The moment they made eye contact, the man's eyes flashed red and he winked, unseen by the Director.

Lily. If the succubus was there, at least Beth didn't have to worry about something being slipped into her food. Beth watched as Lily served the Director his own mimosa and then walked back to the kitchen.

"Cheers." The Director held his glass up, and Beth joined him. They clinked glasses and then sipped at their drinks. They were cool and refreshing. Beth noticed right away that hers didn't seem to have any alcohol.

"So do you have a name?" Beth asked, setting her drink down. "Or do I just call you Director?"

The Director smirked. "Names are power, so I would prefer that you just use my title."

"Well, okay then." She set her drink down and crossed her arms, leaning forward to reveal more cleavage. "I guess that puts us normal people at a disadvantage. Just a quick internet search and you have all our information at your fingertips."

The man laughed, his demeanor suddenly friendly. “It almost seems intentional, doesn’t it? The amount of information available at one’s fingertips. In my day, you often had to resort to subterfuge to acquire a person’s full name, especially if they were wary of enemy spellcasters.”

“In your day? You look like you couldn’t be a day older than forty.”

The Director ignored her question, his attention shifting to the ocean. She followed his gaze, but couldn’t figure out what he was looking at. He drank some more mimosa, so Beth copied him and pretended she didn’t notice the odd silence. His eyes flicked toward her when she did this, so she went ahead and drank the rest of her glass. The man smiled, his mustache twitching in response.

“These are really good,” she said. The Director snapped his fingers, and Lily reappeared with a decanter. The succubus refilled Beth’s drink, then vanished from sight once again.

“Speaking of information, it’s rather remarkable how little we know about Mike Radley.” The Director leaned back in his chair and steeped his fingers. Another pulse of magic came off of him, but Beth was expecting it. The moment it touched her skin, her own magic churned and shoved it away. Instead of calling him out for his behavior, she smiled and allowed one of her straps to slide down her arm. If she had to guess, he was attempting to charm her or gain her trust, but it was clear he was unaware if the spell worked or not.

She made sure to drink some more of her fake mimosa before answering. This seemed to please the Director, too.

“Well,” she began, taking a moment to examine the rim of her glass. “Part of that is because he was a web developer. I bet he scrubbed his own data from the internet out of habit.”

“I see. If I remember correctly, it was you that found him, yes?” The Director placed his elbows on the table and leaned forward, the fingers of both hands now intertwined to make a single fist.

“It was.” She thought back to that day when she had been at her desk, idly working on something else, and an email had come through from a genealogy service she didn’t remember hiring. She would later check her records and discover that she had, in fact, paid them some months prior to do a search on Emily’s family. They had given her Mike’s phone number and email. She had called him right away, and their conversation had been relatively brief. He had

questioned her intensely, immediately suspicious that the whole thing was a scam. Once she provided her credentials, he had sounded intrigued. She promptly sent a copy of the legal documents to his email address, but she wouldn't forget how the conversation had ended.

"By the way," Mike had asked. "How did you get this phone number? It shouldn't be listed anywhere."

"It's my job," she replied, trying not to smirk. Discovering Mike had been nothing but sheer luck, but she wasn't about to give that away. "And I'm very good at it. I'll see you soon."

"So you knew him before he became the Caretaker?"

Beth shook her head. "Hardly. You have to understand, things happen fast at that house. I had only met him one time before he walked inside that place, and the very next day he was a different person. Is he similar to who he was before? In a lot of ways, I think so. In other ways, not so much. We're getting the best version of him right now, that's for sure." She felt like her answers were vague enough that the Director wouldn't glean anything useful from them.

"Hmm." The Director stared at her for several seconds, then cleared his throat. "I hear he's quite the lover."

She had to hold back a laugh. What kind of comment was that? The Director had spoken so casually that he might have been commenting on the weather or something he had seen on television.

Curious to see where this was going, Beth played the part of the enchanted idiot and started twirling her hair. "I mean, it's not exactly fair to compare him to anyone else. It's like telling somebody that a Ferrari is the fastest bicycle in the world, you know? Doesn't make sense."

"Beg pardon?" The Director's friendly mask slipped for just a moment, but he managed to pull himself together.

"Normal people have sex. When you're with Mike, it's... hard to describe, I don't think a word exists for what he does. You feel him in your body and your soul, like you've been magnetized permanently in his direction. I can't think of a single thing I would deny him in the bedroom, because I know the experience would reshape who I am as a woman and a lover." She played with her necklace, partially to keep from laughing as she laid it on thick. "I try not to have sex with

him too often. It absolutely ruins me for other lovers, and I want them to have a chance.”

The Director’s mustache bristled and he stared at his drink for several seconds. His shoulders tensed up as he met her gaze but kept his voice cordial.

“And does he share this relationship with every woman in your household?” His voice actually squeaked a little toward the end of his sentence. “For instance, the women he brought here, have they all—”

“Oh, certainly.” Beth nodded eagerly, trying to hold back a grin. Something about Mike’s sex life was clearly getting under the man’s skin and she was happy to put it there. “If not for some basic biology and magic, he would have knocked every single one of us up numerous times.”

The man across from her started breathing hard, his cheeks now tinged with an odd purple color. When Beth blinked, the color disappeared, and the Director was now sitting upright in his chair, hands folded in front of him.

When their food arrived, Beth was relieved to see that Lily brought it. The succubus looked at the fruit salad, then back up to Beth and gave a small nod. Relieved that she wasn’t about to be drugged again, Beth ate the fruit and was delighted at how fresh it tasted.

“Are you okay?” she asked, wiping her lips with a napkin to hide a grin.

“Of course,” he said with a dismissive wave while avoiding eye contact. “I had a very long evening and it’s catching up with me.”

“That operation of yours.” Beth set her fork down and crossed her arms. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I’m more interested in what happened on Haleakalā last night.” The Director turned his head towards her and she felt his magic flare up as if it was going to consume her. “We lost contact with our people on the mountain not long after dark. I have it on good authority that Mike Radley might be the reason why.”

“Based on what information?” Beth gestured at the food before them. “Also, that’s quite the accusation for somebody who invited me to breakfast and asked about my sex life. Almost makes me wonder if you took issue with my answers.”

“It is my job to oversee dozens of operations at any given time, and this one was extremely important. Late last night, Sister Ingrid contacted me to let me know that they were being pursued but had established a safe perimeter. As of this morning, we’ve heard nothing from the field team. You’ll have to forgive me if I’m suspicious of the Caretaker’s motives.”

“You accused my client, who is both a good friend and the greatest lover on Earth, of being the reason your team stopped communicating with you. I want to know why you said that.”

The Director stared at her, his lips thinning out as his mask slipped away completely. The magical energy around him became chaotic as his pupils began to change shape.

“Sir?” Aurora came up behind them, her features stricken. “We have news from the survey team. You need to come see this.”

The Director wiped his mouth, rose, and left without looking back. As Beth watched him go, Lily came out of the kitchen with a pair of plates. She set them down on the table, her mouth close to Beth’s ear.

“They just got official word that the away team is gone,” she whispered. “No info on what happened, but the unofficial gossip is that we retaliated for what happened at the house.”

“Yes, I’d like another mimosa,” Beth said in case anyone was listening. “And could you have this sent to my room? I think the Director is done with me.”

“Right away, ma’am.” Lily leaned down to pick up the plate, her eyes drifting to Beth’s cleavage. “By the way, nice tits,” she whispered.

Beth watched the succubus go, then turned her thoughts to the ocean. She was starting to suspect that Francois had acted on his own, but why? It was clear the man had his eyes on Mike’s property, but for what purpose? And why act before they reached Mike’s property line?

There were too many questions and not enough answers. Since she couldn’t leave the resort, the only people she could speak to about Francois were Order goons or the merfolk. Sighing inwardly, she waited for her drink to arrive and then started walking back to her room. After breakfast, she would drop by the beach again and see what she could learn from the merfolk.

This time, she wouldn’t bother trying to fuck one.

On her way back, she spotted Aurora hiding behind a pillar on the other side of the lobby. The woman was silently crying into a white dishcloth, gently dabbing at her eyes. Beth turned away from the scene, her thoughts whirring.

The long shadows of the forest sank into the trees as the sun moved higher into the sky. From the mouth of the lava vent, Ratu gazed down at the forest below with a frown. She could feel the dead men below moving, the steady beat of their bony feet grating at her sense as they searched for her and the others in massive numbers.

Though she had no visual evidence, she would easily attest that there were several hundred skeletons searching for them. Not only that, but the mountain itself gave off an eerie pressure, as if it could feel their blight crawling across its rocky skin. She had told Mike before that the mountain was alive, but that had been a gross understatement. It was like they stood on the back of an immense beast that had come to notice them.

“Anything yet?” asked Ingrid from behind.

“No. The fairies are highly unreliable and struggle with timely tasks.”

“Then why the hell did you use them?”

“What other options do we have? Your technology doesn’t work, and I don’t dare risk sending a magical message that could be intercepted.” Ratu turned to look at the woman, who had her back to the wall and was busy eating one of Zel’s special granola bars made of seeds, nuts, and a condensed syrup composed of Mike’s semen. While they weren’t good for filling bellies, they absolutely provided enough energy to get through the day. “It can be very difficult to catch, much less trap a fairy. So while they may be slow, this is far better than nothing. And while they may be unreliable, they are loyal. For many years, they were among my sole companions underground. I would have kicked them out if I could, but found it was easier to make them obey me using fear instead.”

“How kind of you,” said Ingrid sarcastically.

“I admit, my approach has changed. It is far better to rely on respect than fear as the grand motivator. That is something that the Caretaker reminded me of.” That, and something had shifted dramatically for her ever since Mike had saved her life in the ice cave. He had given her a place within his family, even

encouraged her to be a part of it. The solitude of the Labyrinth had taught her how to be self sufficient, to be the only person that mattered. But Mike had reminded her that life had more to offer. He made her feel safe.

Right now, she wanted to make him feel safe again. She felt like a failure already for allowing him to be harmed in the first place. Now he was essentially alone, unless he had managed to free Opal.

Still, it wasn't enough. Ratu should have done better, planned for more. Even now, Mike's naga-hide armor was folded neatly in her backpack because they hadn't expected to be attacked so soon. She hadn't made him wear it because he wanted to wait until they were closer to the property line, when they expected things to heat up. Without supplies and separated from the rest of the family, he was in more danger than she cared to consider.

"What the hell are in these?" asked Ingrid. "They're good, but there's a nutty aftertaste I can't quite identify."

"It's better that you don't know," Ratu replied.

"Is it bugs?" Ingrid took another bite. "I won't be mad if it is. That's more of a cultural thing. If you're grinding up beetles to make these, it was a good decision."

"It's not bugs." Ratu turned her gaze back to the forest. In the distance, she saw a bird performing aerial acrobatics in an attempt to catch something. She made a circle with her hands and filled the space with light distorting magic. Holding it up to her eye, she bent the makeshift lens until it brought the distant bird into focus. It was actually several birds and they were chasing a ball of light.

"Olivia." Ratu looked over her shoulder and into the cave. "Your sister needs help."

A green ball of light shot out of the cave and in Cerulea's direction. Down below, Cerulea was dodging in and out of the canopy in an attempt to lose her pursuers. The slowest of the fairies, she barely kept ahead of the flock.

Olivia crashed into the closest pursuer, then broke away and led some of the birds in a different direction. Cerulea ascended in a tight spiral, followed by a massive bird that could easily swallow the fairy whole. As the fairy neared the cave, Ratu summoned a ball of fire in the palm of her hand and flicked it out with her fingers. It struck the bird so hard that its feathers incinerated instantly, causing

the torched carcass to sail into the mouth of the cave where it disappeared in the darkness.

Quetzalli let out a shout of alarm. She had been asleep roughly where the bird had landed..

“That’s one way to wake up, I suppose.” Ingrid watched Ratu in fascination as the naga held out her hand for Cerulea to land on. “Well?”

“Patience.” Ratu studied the fairy and noticed she was a little banged up. “Are you okay?”

Cerulea nodded, then paused to straighten an antennae. “I found Mike! And the fish girl and Opal and Daisy!” She pointed off in the distance. “And a whole lot of skeletons!”

“I figured.” Though Ratu’s voice was calm, she was inwardly relieved almost to the point of tears. “Is he okay?”

Cerulea bobbed her head violently. Olivia joined them moments later. Maybe it was the smell of burning feathers or the hissing noise Ratu made in the back of her throat at them when they came near, but the birds chasing Olivia scattered long before the cave’s entrance. Either way, the fairies were safe.

“Mike said to meet him at his property.” Cerulea stood tall and put her hands on her hips. “He’s going to walk the long way to get there.”

“What’s the long way?” asked Ingrid. Cerulea responded by sticking out her tongue.

“Hey.” Ratu jostled the fairie, who crouched down and held on for dear life. “Which way is he going?”

Cerulea shrugged. “I don’t know, but he has a way to make it safe. He wants us to take a different way and avoid the boneheads.”

“Boneheads!” chimed Olivia, and the two fairies high-fived each other.

“They’re like children,” muttered Ingrid.

“In some ways, yes.” Ratu pulled out part of a granola bar she had saved. Cerulea’s eyes bugged out of her skull as she snatched it and fled into the cave, chased inside by her sister. Quetzalli shouted at the fairies, her angry words followed by a loud electrical pop as she had probably zapped someone. “It might

be safer to climb back up and take the original route. It won't be long before Francois stumbles onto Mike's location."

"How do you figure?" asked Ingrid.

"Experience. If the undead walk below us, then Francois is looking there for Mike. Maybe he hopes to resurrect him, or perhaps he wants to make sure he's dead. Based on the rules of the Great Game, the ownership of Mike's land is up for grabs if Francois can take him out."

"The great what now?"

Ratu frowned, staring down into the jungle. *Mike, where are you?* She wished she was down there with him. Francois had fled before them last night and would think twice about confronting Mike in the naga's presence.

"If Francois kills Mike, everything Mike owns is supposed to go to the Captain. That's probably why he made his move last night. If not, he would have had to attack mid-day and in the Order's presence." Ratu walked back into the cave and heard Ingrid scrambling on the rocks behind her. "I can use this tunnel to take us further into the mountain and bypass any stragglers up above. It will take us a bit longer to get where we're going, but we should be able to travel unnoticed."

"Then why not do that before?" asked Ingrid.

"I had no intention of making your people aware of the full scope of my abilities. Also, now that I'm actually inside the mountain, I can feel its veins and know they can take us to our destination. We shall walk where no mortal has traveled before, straight to the heart of the mountain." They were near the back of the cave now and discovered Quetzalli sitting on a rock and eating the bird that Ratu had torched. She had already plucked most of the feathers, and had crumbled a granola bar into seasoning that she had sprinkled on the top. The dragon looked at Ratu and Ingrid, then broke the bird in half down the middle and held out a portion.

"Breakfast?" she asked.

Ratu took the offering and sank her fangs into the still tender meat. She looked over her shoulder at Ingrid, then pulled off the leg and held it out. "Flash fried," she said. "So it should be safe for your consumption."

"No thanks," said Ingrid. "I'll stick with the bug bars."

“Suit yourself,” said Ratu, then stuck the leg into her mouth and swallowed it whole.

Opal was frantically signing at Mike, her fingers and hands moving so fast that she occasionally forgot to hold her form, her digits often melting through each other. She was walking ahead of them, her eyes on the forest while her arms were backward so she could communicate with Mike.

“What is she going on about?” Leilani finally asked from behind Mike. She was bringing up the rear of their entourage, her eyes constantly scanning the trees.

“She’s catching me up on the last season of *True Blood*. I haven’t had a chance to watch it.” Television was largely a thing of the past for him. Even before his children had come along, his time had been limited. Now the only opportunity he ever had to watch shows or movies was if somebody else wanted to see them.

“What’s *True Blood* about?” asked Leilani.

“Vampires. I started watching years ago because I had a huge crush on Anna Paquin.” He moved to duck beneath a leaf, but the tree shifted the branch out of the way. “Thank you,” he said, patting the tree.

“How is it that you’re doing that?” The mermaid had to duck as the branch sprang back and almost took her out.

“Well, once upon a time, a nymph blew me in the bathtub of an old house. Now I talk to trees. It’s a long story.” He looked over his shoulder at Leilani and saw that she was annoyed. “No, really. I would get into it, but I still don’t know you that well.”

“I hardly think that’s fair,” she said.

“You were almost murdered by a man who's been banging your maternal line for generations.”

Leilani scowled, then looked at Daisy. “Is he always like this?”

Daisy, who sat on top of Mike’s head, shrugged.

“I find myself at a disadvantage,” grumbled the princess. “Since you are all speaking in sign language.”

“Well, Daisy doesn’t technically hear like we do, it’s all the vibrations she picks up through her wings. As for Opal, she can’t vocalize. Well, she can, but...”

To help him make her point, Opal’s face melted back through her head and she opened her mouth wide as if to speak. A cavity formed in her chest as she pulled in air, then tried to condense it through a pair of modified vocal chords. The sound rested squarely between a pinched balloon letting out air and a whoopie cushion.

“Oh.” Leilani made a face. “I’m so sorry.”

Don’t worry about it, signed Opal, which Mike repeated.

“So why is she telling you about this show?” asked Leilani.

“We were watching it together for a bit. She’s been in recovery and I made sure to go hang out with her.” His lips quirked into a grin as he thought of all the times she had pulled him into her tub. “But I missed the last season because of my son. He and I were struggling to get along, but we had a breakthrough of sorts. The last thing I wanted was to undo all of our progress by stepping away.”

“Mmm. Relationships among merpeople can be tricky. Many of us don’t know who our fathers are, so it becomes a communal affair to raise the children. Naturally, this means personalities can clash, especially if a father has decided that a specific child is his own. Or worse, numerous men claiming parentage of one child.”

“But you knew yours?”

Leilani nodded, her eyes drifting to her spear. “For the royal line, it’s important to avoid such confusion. When a princess or queen decides to become pregnant, she will limit her lovers in such a way that there can be no question. We do this partially to avoid imbalance—we do not want one man fathering most of the royal line and gaining the ear of the ruling class by parentage alone.”

“The way you mentioned him earlier, is he...gone?”

She nodded. “We are warriors, Caretaker, and assist where we are needed. Many years ago, something attacked an oil platform in your Gulf of Mexico. My people went with the Order to figure out what happened, but none of them returned. There are things in the depths that haunt even us, Mike Radley.”

Mike shivered. “Dare I even ask?”

Leilani was walking by his side now, her face grim. “There’s a tradition among our people where we do not name the things that terrify us. To speak those names aloud would inevitably summon them from their dark slumber.”

“You’re talking sea monsters and not interdimensional beings, right?” He thought about the Outsiders, and how they were constantly pressing against the edges of reality in the hopes of sneaking a bite.

Leilani stared forward for several moments, then shook her head. “I would prefer we do not speak on this topic any longer.”

“I think that’s fair.” He turned his attention forward to see that Opal was signing once more. “No, I haven’t heard any news about *Winds of Winter*, I warned you about starting that series.” Opal was very much into books, which meant putting her e-readers into ziplock bags to keep her from ruining them. Her hunger for them was a direct result of having Beth’s memories up to the moment of her own creation, and Beth was a fan as well.

Opal had spent a long time during recovery trying to come to terms with the idea that she was essentially a Beth clone. Her experience with the horsemen of the Apocalypse had left her in a fragile state, and the inability to go see Beth’s parents as a form of comfort had left the slime bereft. Ratu’s big rule for several months was to never leave Opal alone for any longer length of time. The naga had been worried that the slime girl would simply give up on living and disassociate. These gaps of time were filled by regular visits from almost everyone, even Beth. She and Opal got along well enough, but Mike sometimes wondered if there wasn’t some sort of hidden resentment on Opal’s part.

After making a full recovery, Opal had finally been able to begin pursuing who and what she was. Ratu had assured everyone that there had never been a creature like Opal before, so the path would be long and emotionally treacherous. Mike enjoyed their time together, which was usually just spent talking about the world.

But on the rare occasion Opal got her tendrils on him...

Daisy perked up on top of his head, then beat her fists on his scalp to get his attention. Mike put up a hand for everyone to stop, and even grabbed one of Opal’s hands to keep her from moving any further.

“Daisy hears something.” He gestured to the nearest brush, which split apart to reveal a rocky alcove they could squeeze down into behind the branches.

As a unit, they all moved inside, but Opal was the easiest. The majority of her body squeezed back into her magical decanter, which Mike held in one hand. The bushes closed up just as bony legs filled his view.

It was skeletons, at least three of them. Wordlessly, they wandered through the area, hollow sockets surveying the rainforest as they continued on their way. Mike waited nearly twenty minutes before asking the forest to move aside so they could get out.

“Patrols are getting thicker,” he noted, turning back to help Leilani.

“We are close to your property. The Captain is trying to find you.”

“Honestly? He’d better hope he doesn’t.” He held out his arm and allowed Opal to ooze out of her bottle until she touched the ground, at which time her body formed. “I’ll give him the Mike Radley Special.”

“The Mike Radley Special?” Leilani blinked at him. “What’s that?”

“Great question. But it will be spectacular, unexpected, and really annoy him, I’m sure. I can’t wait to think of it.” He gestured ahead. “Let’s keep moving.”

The sun climbed steadily upward into the sky, visible only through gaps in the canopy. Mike and the others were able to easily hide from the skeletons. They made no effort to conceal their passage, which often required a sharp blade to hack away the brush. The undead seemed to be on autopilot, more like drones than independent thinkers. When he studied them properly, he noticed that they didn’t have souls. It gave him small solace that these walking corpses weren’t harboring tormented spirits, which also meant that they were essentially unthinking drones.

Still, the moment he watched the corpse of a child wander past, its eternal gaze resting upward on the trees, he knew in his heart that he would absolutely take the opportunity to rid the world of Captain Francois.

His shoulder itched, and he tried really hard not to pick at it. Tiny chunks of dried ooze flaked away as the wound healed, leaving behind raw, pink skin. His whole arm burned, as if the nerves were reconnecting. If he didn’t know better, he would simply think he had pulled a muscle in his sleep.

Leilani conversed with him often, mostly about what things were like in the continental United States. She had a pretty good idea what island life was like, but stuff like big cities, skyscrapers, and highways fascinated her. On more than one

occasion, he felt the desire to offer to show her someday, but didn't want to get her hopes up. Until he knew more firmly where she stood, he would keep his guard up.

Still, he had a good feeling in his gut about her.

Cerulea came to check in with them again and let them know that Ratu et al was making slow but steady progress. Apparently they were tunnel hopping. During a quick break to relax, Mike had checked in with Kisa, who was grouchy from being up all night watching the small army in their front yard and was now trying to catch a nap in Lily's room in Paradise. Apparently Jenny had made quite the impression on the SoS, and they were re-evaluating their relationship with her. Zel had forced Callisto to go home to the greenhouse, which had made him quite angry with his mother. Eulalie and Sofia were doing overtime to monitor the external communications of the Order while Tink watched Grace.

As for Death, apparently the reaper was currently standing outside of the Order's tent and staring at them menacingly. The Jabberwock had moved itself closer to the tent, unseen by the Order, in case it needed to intervene. Everyone inside the house was getting restless as they waited to see what happened next, but Mike was hoping the SoS would get bored and leave.

Even now, Eulalie was trying to get in touch with someone higher up in the SoS in order to offer them the money to do so. Sadly, despite their willingness to murder people for cash, they were surprisingly ethical about not turning on their employers. Eulalie was also having difficulty finding another group willing to chase them off. It had been briefly floated that they should call the police, but Mike was fairly certain that would just spell trouble for whoever came out to investigate.

The longer he was out in the rainforest, the more he missed the comforts of home. He was fairly certain a large part of this stemmed from the fact that somebody was in his yard just waiting to murder his entire family, but Hestia had made it clear to everyone who asked that unless he allowed them entry, they would not get in. Time, space, and reality itself would bend in order to hinder whatever they tried.

While he had faith in the goddess, he couldn't help worrying about the situation. His anger for the Order and the SoS sat behind a locked gate in his mind, and he was hesitant to let it out for even a second. His magic did not respond well to murderous intentions, and even thinking about it made his right arm itch. Right now, there was nothing he could do about it anyway. But when he got home?

He scratched his right arm, trying real hard to unclench his fists.

With the heat of the island trying to sap away his strength, Mike was forced to drink water that Opal had stored for him. Whenever they reached a river or lake, Leilani purified the water for his consumption. He would cup his hands and drink greedily, sighing at the taste of crisp, cold water on a hot day.

Opal, being a slime, absolutely reveled in the island's humidity. Her pearlescent luster was particularly shiny right now, and her curves had thickened as a result of the extra liquid in her body. She had used their first stop at a body of water to demonstrate her ability to take on additional water, which she allowed Mike to suck out through her fingertips like she was a living Camelbak.

For whatever reason, Opal stored this water in her breasts. Mike was fairly certain she had done it to screw with him. He was having several impure thoughts about Opal, and would have acted on them already if not for Leilani's presence and the fact that skeletons were hunting for him.

Guided by the pull of his property, he and the others ascended the mountain, trying to avoid open areas where they would be exposed. They finally achieved a height where the ocean became visible through gaps in the canopy, and Leilani paused more than once to stare wistfully outward. He wasn't certain what thoughts were going through her head when she did this, but she cut a rather attractive figure with the wind blowing through her blue and green hair, sunlight scattering through the sea glass beads braided into it.

As the day ran on, they had to stop for more breaks. With nothing to eat, both Leilani and Mike were dragging pretty hard. They had tried to arrange for one of the fairies to bring them a granola bar or something, but the birds on the island had become a huge problem and the fairy sisters were unable to safely fly fast enough while carrying something.

This meant harvesting local fruits. The forest, sensing his need, directed him to small banana trees, lychee, and even some papaya. Leilani taught him how to peel back the skin of the lychee, juice running down her chin as she took a big bite. Opal, who didn't need to eat, stuffed some of the leftover fruit in her body where they floated around like banana slices in jello. This allowed them to carry a small food supply with them as they continued their climb.

Scaling Haleakalā in this manner would have taken days if not for Mike's control over the forest. Control wasn't even the best word for it—he asked politely

and they moved for him. In fact, he wondered if they were just grateful to have someone different to talk to. There was a sense of curiosity from the flora, as if he was a unique creature on exhibit.

This also made him ponder the nature of his land's location. How in the hell was anybody supposed to get there? In Oregon, anyone could walk right up to the property, but would get dissuaded or disoriented at the last moment. According to Dana, outsiders couldn't pierce the visual veil there, which made it slightly different than what happened at home. If he stood naked in his front yard, his neighbors would absolutely see him, but either the geas would clothe him or their attention would simply wander.

Even the property in Ireland had been easy to get to. A short car ride had made the trip almost instantaneous. However, the creatures dwelling within had been extremely hostile, and he had chosen to simply let the matter rest for now.

But out here? There was simply no way to easily get there. The Order had implied that they had been able to get to the edge of the property, but even that had taken a team of survivalists. What sort of secrets lurked on the side of the volcano? Would the guardian recognize Mike's authority, or would he become the target of a different attack?

"Seashell for your thoughts." Leilani's voice snapped him back to reality.

"Really? A seashell?" Mike smirked. "Do your people use them as currency?"

"We rely on the barter system. The ocean is our mother and provides all, so why would we need to hoard wealth? There is little we can't find on our own."

"And you think humans like seashells?"

Leilani scoffed. "We've watched millions of you collect them off the beach. For decades, my people wondered if you weren't using it as currency. For tide's sake, you even named one of our creatures a sand dollar."

"That reminds me. Someone said that you owned the land that Paradise was built on, but you gave it to the Order."

"Leased," Leilani corrected. "We leased it to them."

"So doesn't that mean they're paying you?"

She nodded. "They are. It goes into an account that we can use to purchase additional property or supplies as needed from your kind. How do you think we got that land in the first place? Do you think your government was feeling kind and just gave it to us?"

"Yeah, they aren't in the habit of handing out beach front property. So how did your people buy it?"

"Your ships sink where we swim. It wasn't hard to go out and gather some lost treasure and sell it back. The merfolk in your Gulf of Mexico are filthy rich from some galleons that sank out there some time back. The Order helps them manage their purchases because that's a lot of money to casually move around."

"The Order has really helped your people, haven't they?"

"They have." Leilani paused, sticking her trident in the ground and leaning on it for support. "Without their help, I don't know where we'd be. Did you know they help set shipping lanes? If just one of your oil tankers spilled near a colony, it would kill us. It's absolutely a full time job for them just to make sure our worlds don't cross. If we wanted, we could rise up, attack your people, and cause some mayhem. But there aren't enough of us. It would be like if the people of Hawaii declared war on the rest of the United States. Sure, we could make the coastline a hostile place, but water magic won't stop your missiles, or your other weapons of mass destruction. My grandfather witnessed what your people did at Bikini Atoll."

He scrunched up his face. "What did we do?"

"Nuclear tests," she replied. "Merfolk around the world were discussing your war, and if we should strike out against you, chase you out of the water. We underestimated just how many humans there were across the world, and some of our most powerful warriors trekked across your continents just to get a better sense of the world in general. Captain Francois had given us plenty of warnings, but your advances sounded so impossible."

"Humans feel the same way about magic. Nobody would believe us if we told them mermaids and magic were real. Well, not enough people, anyway. It's all seen as make believe." Mike leaned against a tree and sensed a cane spider crawling down from above to investigate. He looked up at the arachnid and shook his head. "Don't do it."

The spider waved its legs in reply, obviously upset at Mike.

“I’m not claiming your territory,” he told it. “Just resting for a moment.”

“You command the land crabs, too?” Leilani’s eyes were focused on the spider.

“We call them spiders. And only sort of.” He narrowed his energy at the cane spider, who chittered at him and disappeared back into the leaves. “Some are more eager to please than others.”

Cold water dripped on him from above and he turned his attention to the sky. A thin layer of clouds had moved in above them, blotting out the sun.

“It’s raining again.” He crossed his arms and sighed. The others didn’t have any problem with the rain, but after at least three small downpours, his clothes were itchy. Leilani could easily push the water off of him with little more than a thought, but that only worked between storms.

“One of the wettest places on land,” Leilani told him, pointing up the mountain. “The locals call it the Big Bog. My people call it Halealii Aina, or the land palace. It is a popular stop for those who do their pilgrimage.”

“Why do you call it the land palace?”

“Very wet, lots of water. A merperson could absolutely live there if they chose to, and some have. Think of it like spiritual isolation, if you will. A place to step outside the ocean and ponder bigger things.”

“Will we run into any of your people?” he asked.

She shook her head. “If we do, it’s somebody we long thought dead. My kind doesn’t often choose to exile somebody, but when we do, we chase them into the deepest waters.” Sighing, she stood up straight and fiddled with the tip of her trident. “My father stayed there for a year when he was younger. Meditated on what it meant to be a warrior, to hunt for the colony and to protect us from harm.”

“That sounds pretty badass,” Mike replied.

Leilani giggled. “When I was young, he confessed to me that he actually did it to get away from a bad situation involving some of your surfer women. He liked to pretend he was a surf instructor and bed them while they were here on vacation, but got caught by the queen.”

“Oh my.”

She laughed again, staring morosely at the bent trident. Opal, noticing this, moved near Leilani and held out her arms. The mermaid looked at her, then at Mike. "What does she want?"

Mike waited for the inevitable sign language from Opal. "She wants to see it," he answered. "She promises she'll give it right back."

Hesitantly, Leilani handed over the trident. Opal studied it for several seconds, her hands and arms sliding over the metallic surface until the trident's shaft was almost completely in her body. Scrunching up her face, her body distorted and the trident slowly straightened out.

"By the tides!" Leilani gazed in awe as Opal extracted the straightened trident from her form and handed it back over. "To think you were strong enough to do such a thing!"

Opal signed to Mike and he spoke for her. "She said not to underestimate the power of fluid dynamics." He didn't mention that Opal hadn't done so earlier because she was worried Leilani might stab him in the back with it, or the fact that she had done so now because she was tired of it coming up in conversation.

Her spirits buoyed, Leilani led the group, her attunement to water taking them in the correct direction. The miniature streams that formed on the mountain's skin flowed around them as the mermaid manipulated the water. Between Mike and Leilani, they were able to transform an extremely difficult ascent into little more than a strenuous hike. Leilani was huffing and puffing by the time they crested a rocky ridge and she paused to lean against jagged stones that had long ago burst free of the earth.

In awe, Mike stared down into the next valley. The sky above was blotted out by a mass of clouds that drifted between massive peaks covered in thick foliage. From where he stood, he saw more streams and waterfalls in one place than anywhere else he'd been before. The air was so thick with moisture that he could feel the humidity spinning in his lungs.

"Halealii Aina," said Leilani, kneeling and bowing her head. "I never thought I would get the chance to see it."

"It's breathtaking." Mike gazed down into the rainforest below in awe. The trees below practically sang in exultation, their needs constantly met. Closing his eyes, he felt something shift within him. The general sense of where his property

was had solidified to a more precise location, which he pointed at. "Looks like we're going in," he said.

"Will we have to climb out the other side?" asked Leilani. "I thought the map said we needed to go around this place?"

"Trust me when I say that maps can be misleading." He sensed without a doubt that the entrance was somewhere down below. "But now I'm wondering about the thing that killed your people."

"What about it?" asked Leilani.

"We followed its tracks up this way until we lost them, right? Well, I know that where we're headed is correct, but..." he gestured around them. "There's nothing here. Either that thing tiptoed out of here, or it came down a different way."

"Hmm," was Leilani's only reply. The rain suddenly fell in thick sheets, and the other side of the bog disappeared from sight.

"Glad I wore comfy shoes," Mike muttered as he started down the hill. This time, the terrain was steep enough that he had to rely on the trees' assistance, using assorted branches and roots as handholds. The mood of the forest had shifted, and it no longer felt as friendly as it had before. He was an intruder in their midst, and the forest was wary of him.

Daisy had crawled inside his shirt, her body pressed flat against his sternum. He put a hand protectively over the bump in the fabric, wishing for perhaps the hundredth time that he had an umbrella. It was nearly half an hour before they made it down to the valley floor, where the foliage was so thick that he could no longer get the trees to simply part and let him pass.

"I guess this is the hard part," he muttered as they ventured forth into the bog.

Ingrid stood and watched in awe as Ratu's serpentine body tunneled through the hard rock ahead, the cavern lit only by a pair of fiery orbs that hovered just beneath the ceiling. When the naga had first transformed, Ingrid had been forced to hide back a scream at the sheer size of the snake. She had never worked directly with the naga, who had become notoriously reclusive in the last

twenty years, and being subjected to the intensity of Ratu's gaze had triggered some primal instinct.

It was also unnerving to hear the naga speak. Her words had slid through Ingrid with the same ease that the snake passed through stone. She had wondered more than once why the naga were considered demi-gods and finally had her answer.

The yawning tunnel ahead of them trembled, sending loose stones clattering to the ground. Ratu returned to them in her human form, her gaze directed up toward the ceiling.

"It's stable for now," she said with a frown. "But I don't suspect it will last. We should hurry."

"Like, how fast are we talking?" Ingrid gazed up at the ceiling in trepidation.

"That depends on how much it's raining up above." Ratu looked up just as water dripped from the ceiling. "I may be able to command the earth, but water always finds a way."

"It's raining pretty hard." Quetzalli gestured at her nose and moved forward down the tunnel. "I can smell it."

Ratu gave Quetzalli a dubious look that she couldn't see, but said nothing. "Let's press forward."

Ingrid obeyed, not that she had much of a choice. If she wanted to turn around now, there were miles of compressed rock tunnel behind them. She would be forced to navigate it all in the dark in the hope that she didn't take a wrong turn. The transition between lava vents was always smooth, but the vents themselves were usually a mess. There had been a large hole in the middle of a vent that even Ratu's light orbs had been unable to find the bottom of. Even Ratu had sidestepped that one, stating that the fall itself wouldn't kill her but the sudden narrow portion halfway down certainly would. Occasionally, they were forced to surface, and Ratu would send Livia out to check on Mike.

It was usually raining on the surface, but Ingrid had kept dry by sticking close to the trees. Inevitably, Ratu would take them back underground, where the air had a musty dampness to it that clung to Ingrid's skin and carried a nasty chill. Ratu's floating flames kept Ingrid warm, so she made sure to walk close to them whenever she could.

“It’s about a hundred feet this way and then we’re in the next vent,” Ratu explained. “The slope is a little severe up ahead. I had to avoid another chamber.”

“What was wrong with it?” asked Quetzalli.

“Massive.” Ratu smirked. “We would need a rope to get to the bottom, and it’s significantly warmer, if you catch my meaning. If I had gone any closer, I ran the risk of breaking the seal and flooding this tunnel with gas that would kill us all.”

Ingrid frowned. “Do you mean like sulfur dioxide?”

Ratu nodded. “Potentially. But honestly, even flooding this place with carbon dioxide would do it. A benefit of using flames for illumination is that we would see them sputter out should something like that occur. My people have long traveled beneath the world. We know the pitfalls.”

“Huh.” Ingrid tried to contemplate what subterranean life looked like, but couldn’t. “What does naga society look like?”

“What do you mean?” The naga’s eyes were steady on the darkness ahead as the tunnel became sloped.

“I mean how your kind lives. The merfolk have hidden cities built of stone and coral surrounded by fields of seaweed. I’ve actually been there a few times. It’s quite breathtaking.”

“Ah, I see what you mean.” Ratu held out her hands, one curled above the other as if holding a ball, and cast light all along the walls of the tunnel. The shifting shadows within her palms threw images of a massive underground dwelling onto the rock and soil. “There are places beneath the earth that are leftover from its formation, massive domes that are miles long in each direction. In some places, you cannot even see the ceiling. It is here that my kind choose to build their cities.”

“Fascinating.” Ingrid moved to the nearest wall and studied the structures projected onto it. “Do you build homes of clay, stone, or brick?”

“Whatever we choose, honestly. When a naga creates their nest, they may choose to mold it from material they see fit. I actually had an aunt whose entire dwelling was composed of sapphire, collected over the decades and melded together using magic. It’s a slightly more delicate process than what I have been doing to make our tunnels, but easy enough. Incorporating rare materials into

your nest can be seen as a sense of status, or even doing intricate decoration. I had a friend growing up whose home was made of iron ore, but he had filigreed every member of his family going back six generations into the exterior surface.”

“Do you have livestock? What about agriculture?”

Ratu nodded, a thin smile on her lips. “My people did. We simply brought terrestrial animals down and made artificial light for our crops to grow. My people were once far more unified with surface dwellers in a state of coexistence.”

“Do you mean when your people were worshiped?”

“I do.”

“Hmm.” Ingrid pondered that for a minute. She wasn’t a huge fan regarding stories of mythical creatures being worshiped. To her, it was no different than dealing with a celebrity or a shitty politician. She and Wallace had been forced more than once to hunt down a creature who was pissed that nobody was feeding it anymore, or because it had gone rogue after a lack of tributes.

“You’re scowling.”

“What?” Ingrid snapped out of her thoughts and saw Ratu watching her. “Shit, it’s nothing.”

“She lies.” This came from Quetzalli, who was busy munching on a granola bar. Her nipples were so erect beneath her blouse that Ingrid wondered if she was wearing a bra.

“I don’t—” Ingrid sighed, then rubbed at her temples in frustration. Getting called out for lying was bad enough, but the woman was right. Doubling down would only cause more problems for her.

Ratu made a dismissive noise in her throat, then turned away and continued along the path. The trail became slightly treacherous as stones had come loose and slid away when stepped on. Thin rivulets of water had formed in places to create slippery streams.

Feeling like she should say something, Ingrid looked up and cleared her throat. “Look, I don’t know that it matters, but in my experience, a lot of creatures I’ve met weren’t really worthy of being worshiped, is all. I’m jaded, I’ll admit it. But that’s a result of the work I do.”

“And what is this work that you do, hmm?” Ratu looked back over her shoulder. “The Order claims that they are here to maintain the balance, but to what end? Where would the world be right now if magic and science had been allowed to coexist all along?”

Ingrid felt her cheeks become hot. “Who can say? Some people think that humanity would be enslaved.”

“By who?” Ratu arched an eyebrow.

Ingrid shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. Dracula. Pack of werewolves. Maybe even a dragon.” She noticed Quetzalli looked back at her for that last one. “That’s right, dragons still exist. They’re just hidden away is all.”

“Ah. I see.” Ratu snapped her fingers, causing the light show on the walls to come to an end. “And you think that’s not true now? That a vampire isn’t secretly running Wall Street, or that werewolves don’t have a stranglehold on the world’s saffron supply?”

“That’s an oddly specific comment.”

“Maybe.” Ratu sniffed. “But you haven’t answered my question.”

Ingrid opened her mouth, but recognized that she had just walked into a trap. Choosing her words carefully, she continued. “If that were true, then they’re only doing what any human could, without using magic. Sure, a vampire can skip generational wealth and have it all to themselves, and would likely have a better grasp of economics. And good for those werewolves, using their natural talents to do whatever the fuck you do to conquer the saffron supply.”

“What do dragons do?” Quetzalli looked genuinely curious. “If they’re still around, they’re doing something, right?”

Ingrid bit her lip, unsure what she was even allowed to say. “Honestly, they mostly hold us at ransom. All that gold in Fort Knox? Gone. We moved it to a secure location and give a bit of it each year to a massive earth dragon that sleeps under the continental United States.”

“Why?” asked Quetzalli. “Shouldn’t the Order simply kill it?”

“Ha! They would if they could. This thing is perhaps the largest creature on record. There’s a whole team who spends every day increasing the dragon’s hoard just to keep it from waking up.”

“Sounds kind of like worship.” Quetzalli actually stopped to look back. “We give you gold, you don’t blow us all up.”

“I...” Ingrid blinked her eyes, suddenly stunned. “Never thought of it like that.”

“I wouldn’t find yourself at fault.” Ratu let out a huge sigh. “Worship can take many forms, child. When I was young, your people worshiped mine and we repaid them in kind. Gave them blessings, brought rain during drought. It was meant to be a beneficial relationship, though there were many who became parasites. But that’s true of any intelligent creature.”

“But it all changed,” added Quetzalli. “With better technology, people needed us less, or thought they did. The church grew in power and many creatures found themselves having nothing to offer the locals that mass religion couldn’t promise. The balance of power shifted.”

Ratu bobbed her head enthusiastically. “Not only that, but humanity had its magic locked away. That was the beginning of the end for the relationship between man and myth.”

“I disagree,” said Ingrid. “Plenty of people used magic to sow chaos and gain power.”

“And yet, your kind hoards treasure much like a dragon does to the same effect.” Quetzalli snorted. “Power abhors a vacuum.”

Ingrid narrowed her eyes at Quetzalli, more suspicious than ever. For the longest time, she had figured Quetzalli was just a sexy side piece for Mike, a harmless cryptid with access to lightning magic. Now Ingrid wondered if she was something more, maybe even something from the fae realm. The presence of the fairies heavily supported this theory.

The tunnel eventually leveled out and the surface transformed, revealing dark basalt. The air had a foul odor, causing Ingrid to wrinkle her nose.

“Let me know if you get light-headed,” said Ratu, pulling back one of her fireballs. She tugged at its sides and split it into three separate pieces that she sent ahead. “We have plenty of air, but it’s mixed up with some other stuff.”

“Okay, thanks.” Stewing over how badly the previous conversation went, Ingrid fell back on the fundamentals she had been taught during her childhood. Magic had been sealed away, that much she knew. It was why she had to rely on

magical implements for more powerful spells. Sure, she could summon up magical barriers, but needed a conduit for anything more nuanced than that.

Every member of the Order had the ability to tap into their own personal mana well, but not everybody had one. Most people had mana to some degree, but it was like a vestigial organ, useless and not entirely understood. It was the same reason why children were more likely to see spirits, or gain brief moments of precognition. Without any sort of training, that tiny amount faded away to nothing as an adult.

That was just one reason the Order collected children and raised them. It was almost impossible for an adult to regain access to their magic. It was like trying to spontaneously regrow a limb. If she had been a year or so older, she absolutely couldn't have become a mage. Knighthood would have been possible, but she would have started at a massive deficit.

They continued through the tunnel for perhaps another hour, Quetzalli occasionally muttering to herself in a language Ingrid didn't recognize. When Ratu had asked what the problem was, Quetzalli revealed that she hated not being able to see the sky. Ingrid felt the same way, but decided to keep her thoughts to herself.

In truth, she was just trying to keep her shit together. The dull pain in her twisted ankle constantly cried out for her attention, and the mental toll of the last twenty four hours was finally catching up to her. She wanted nothing more than to lay down somewhere and sleep it off. Usually when she got this way, she would either talk through her problems with Wallace or fuck him to improve her mood. When this mission was over, she planned on scheduling time off and utilizing one of the therapists the Order had on file. The last thing she wanted was this mission to become the thing that finally broke her.

"I won't be broken," she whispered, her voice echoing off the walls. It was the same mantra that had gotten her through her experience with the drakes, and every other disaster since then. When it was just her against the world, she refused to succumb to the cracks.

"Is it getting warmer in here?" asked Quetzalli from up ahead.

Ratu frowned and knelt down in the tunnel. She placed a hand on the ground and closed her eyes. "It is," she said. "But there shouldn't be any reason for it to—"

The world rumbled around them, and the vent behind them started to collapse. The three of them broke into a run, sprinting forward as the earth fell apart.

“Can’t you stabilize it?” shouted Ingrid.

Ratu’s face was twisted up, serpentine features manifesting as flames curled around her fingertips. “I can’t,” she hissed, her tongue flickering briefly. The walls in front of them cracked apart, revealing another passageway. “I’m not doing this!”

“Shit.” Ingrid drew her wand, holding it tight in her fist. Quetzalli tripped over a rock and fell, but Ingrid paused long enough to pull the woman back up. She received a nasty shock for her efforts.

“Sorry,” Quetzalli muttered, scowling in frustration.

“Move!” cried Ratu, turning around and flaring her hands. The tunnel walls were still closing in, but debris was now falling all around them. A stone arch deflected the falling rocks long enough for Ingrid and Quetzalli to get away, and the three of them now ran together.

The sound of the earth slamming shut behind them was only slightly more sinister than the crumbling sound of the passageway ahead ripping itself open. Sweat poured down Ingrid’s face, pain now shooting up her leg with every other step. Her ankle had been fine all day, but she had likely twisted it again. She was now driven by enough adrenaline that she would have to pay that particular price later.

The ground cracked open beneath them, revealing smooth rock that they slid across. Ratu transformed into a snake and caught Ingrid and Quetzalli in her coils as they slid.

“We can’t separate!” she declared as they slid down a polished obsidian slope. “I won’t be able to protect you!”

Ingrid was no longer worried about being protected. Whatever was toying with them was far above their weight class. All she could do was hope that they weren’t on the menu as Ratu’s fire was extinguished and they were plunged into darkness.

The steep slide abruptly leveled off, and they slid together as a unit across smooth, obsidian glass. Suddenly, all movement stopped and Ingrid was tossed

free of Ratu's coils. Summoning a magical shield around herself, she collided with a stone wall and came to a halt. The fairies fluttered up into the air, the light from their bodies illuminating a chamber made of stone that terminated in a wall made of cracked and flaking obsidian. The room felt like a sauna, and Ingrid staggered to her feet.

"Quetzalli?" Ingrid looked around for the silver-haired woman and found her in a small alcove beneath the rocks. She ran over and helped pull Quetzalli free, but saw that she was bleeding from a nasty cut on her forehead.

"Here let me look at that." She moved to examine the wound.

"Don't touch me there," said Quetzalli, pushing Ingrid back and opening eyes that revealed an electrical storm within. A massive electrical charge was building around her, and Ingrid took several steps back.

"Are you...okay?" asked Ingrid.

"Hurt and angry," growled Quetzalli as electrical streamers danced all across her body. "Having trouble...controlling myself."

"Ugh." Ratu had transformed into her human form and was lying on her back, clutching her head with both eyes closed. "What did we even hit?"

"A wall." Ingrid gestured toward the rocky surface with her wand, which was still in her hand. "Can't miss it."

"A wall?" Ratu opened her eyes and squinted, as if looking into the sun. "I don't feel a wall there."

Ingrid frowned and tapped the wall with her wand. "It's right here," she said, then fell backward when the stone she had touched slid open to reveal a massive, tourmaline eye.

Her scream was lost in the rumblings of the earth.

Movement through the Big Bog was difficult, even with Leilani helping. They found some shallow streams that the mermaid used her magic to create a path for them to walk on, but the ceaseless rain had chilled Mike to the core. His stomach growled, upset with his all fruit diet, and he wanted nothing more than to have dry feet again.

Daisy shivered against his crotch. The fairy had gotten chilly long ago, so Mike had tucked her down the front of his pants where she had made a quick nest of his pubic hair and potentially gone to sleep. It had stopped raining for almost an hour, but had quickly resumed. With no direct sunlight, there was nothing to warm him back up.

Opal stayed right behind him the entire time, her body constantly pushing out sticks and leaves that she accidentally absorbed. Her legs wobbled, the high moisture making it difficult for her to maintain rigidity. If not for the fact that Ratu had spent an entire year trying to help Opal's body composition, the poor slime would probably be back in her decanter already.

With just over an hour to sundown, he was relieved to discover that they were less than a mile out from their destination. A dark crevasse was visible in the cliffs ahead, and his best guess was that they were headed for a cave. However, the steady beating of drums soon filled the air and he felt his heart drop.

"We should split up," said Leilani, her voice trembling. "As long as they don't see you with me, you should be fine. Just remember to bow down if you see them, show them respect. This is their land, their home." She shivered. "None of my people ever encountered them here. It has to be because of Francois."

Mike studied Leilani. She was already scanning the area, her eyes shifting nervously. The clouds above had descended, filling the area with fog. The skeletons had been gone for quite some time now, but it seemed that one problem had replaced another.

"No." Mike moved to Leilani's side and took her hand in his. "You're with me, now. I won't leave you behind."

"But—" Leilani looked over Mike's shoulder and gasped. He spun around to see torches being carried toward them through the trees.

"C'mon." He pulled Leilani behind him. "If we hurry, we can cross the property line before they catch us. I'm hoping that will keep them out."

The rainforest rustled around them, despite the lack of wind. Mike jogged forward through the moisture and the muck, his senses expanding outward. The spiders had all gone quiet, which was a really bad sign. Branches shifted out of the way to allow them to pass, but now he saw dozens of vines and snakes dangling from them.

“Do you feel that?” asked Leilani. Her gait was uneven and she was gasping for air.

“Feel what?” he asked.

“It’s like somebody is squeezing my chest.”

Mike looked around, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Switching to his soul sight, the land came alive like it was on fire. Spiritual energy permeated the land, sliding over and through it like they were living things. He didn’t know if this was what Leilani was sensing, but the sight of it was overwhelming.

It took some concentration, but he was able to focus only on their pursuers. Spirits appeared through the vegetation, carrying weapons made for battle along with their torches. The drumbeat of the forest chased them right through the trees and into a clearing at the base of a cliff. A large crack in the cliff above transformed into the mouth of a twenty foot tall cave at its base, and Mike’s magic reacted almost immediately to the sight. This cave was the start of his property. If they could just get inside they should be safe.

“Not so fast.” An old woman stepped forward from the darkness of the cave, her earthen eyes tinged with red. Her head was adorned with a crown of kika blossoms and she wore a white dress that only came to her knees. She crossed her arms and stood her ground as Mike, Leilani, and Opal all slid to a stop on the muddy ground.

The mermaid picked up her trident, but Mike grabbed her by the shoulder and pushed her behind him. He didn’t know who the woman was or what she wanted, but powerful magic radiated off her in waves. The night marchers surrounded the clearing, their unfathomable eyes on the trio in the middle. They weren’t attacking yet, which was probably due to the woman’s presence.

Mike took a deep breath and let it out. “Don’t do anything,” he told Leilani. “And definitely don’t react negatively.”

“Who is she?” asked the princess.

“Not sure,” he said. “But it would be a very bad idea to make her angry.”

The woman smiled. Though she appeared to be a native islander, the golden light only he could see radiating out from her body told a very different story. When she spoke next, her voice resonated with power and the mountain trembled beneath them.

“At long last we meet, Caretaker.”