

Making a Splash

It was only seven in the morning when Mike stepped out of his bedroom to the sound of crashing waves and wind. His suite had a large viewing deck off the living room and the sliding door had been left open. The curtains danced in the breeze, and he saw three figures standing by the balcony.

A carafe of coffee was on the counter of the kitchenette, so he poured himself a fresh mug. Ratu, Quetzalli, and Beth were all leaning against the railing, eyes out towards the water. Beth and Quetzalli were wearing lightweight robes that covered bathing suits beneath, while Ratu had on a wrap. Every now and then, the wind would rustle their clothing, lifting the fabric high enough to see their asses pressed against the elastic fabric of bathing suits.

“The gods have blessed me,” he muttered, deciding to wait another minute and just watch the beauties standing before him. The rays of the rising sun obliterated the shadows, giving the scene a surreal aura. They stood in silence, content to enjoy the sunrise and the waves below.

After his meeting with Cyrus, Mike had returned to his bedroom through the rat portal under his bed and gone to dinner with everyone. The food was excellent, but it didn't compare to what he was used to at home. Eulalie had used her weaving skills to generate a duplicate of the bracelet the Order had made, and he kept the real one in his pocket for now. As far as he could tell, that was yet another trick they had all pulled off.

Mike took in the sight for a bit longer, then stepped out onto the deck. “Good morning,” he said. The others turned to greet him, lazy smiles on their faces. “What are we looking at?”

“The Order is up to something.” Beth gestured down below. “Remember when I told you at dinner they wouldn't let me down into the Cove? They've got patrols down there now, and...just come look.”

Curious, Mike walked up to the railing and looked down at the beach. The Cove was a stretch of beach with natural lava rock barriers on both sides that vanished into the water. From where he stood, he could make out a beautiful reef system that started about fifty feet from shore. He had never been snorkeling before, and wondered if he would get a chance to check it out.

But what had Beth's attention was the fact that the barriers were currently being patrolled by the Order. Though they wore clothing suited for the climate, he could make out wands and swords strapped to waists, thighs, and even an ankle holster. Down below in the Cove, the water level was receding relative to the beaches outside of Paradise.

"Are they draining it?" he asked. There was a small dock that ran along one of the barriers, and the pilings beneath had been revealed. Tables and chairs had been placed in the sand where the water ebbed, and elaborate table settings were being placed.

"It looks that way." Beth held out a hand and closed her eyes, as if deep in concentration. "Something is pulling the water away from shore," she told him.

Curious, he opened his mind to study the magic around the beach. The magical barrier around Paradise was a large pink dome that was difficult for him to see in the bright light of day. It extended well past the Cove. In the water below, swirling lines of green and blue were directing the water out to sea.

"It's probably why they closed it," Beth said. "They're getting ready for...something."

"That doesn't sound ominous at all." Ratu chuckled and turned around, her back to the railing. Shimmering scales twisted all along her thighs and upper arms as she studied Mike. "It's water magic. Whoever is manipulating the Cove is being meticulous. That reef system would likely be sensitive to a sudden shift in the current. "

"Interesting." Mike looked at Quetzalli. "What do you think?"

The dragon turned in his direction and winked. "I think I'm hungry for breakfast."

As if on cue, there was a knock at the door. Mike walked inside and opened it to see Ingrid standing there. She wore a sheer white blouse with a bikini top beneath and a loose pair of shorts.

"Good. You're up." She walked inside uninvited and took a look around. "Your presence has been requested."

"By who?" Mike asked.

Ingrid made her frustrated face, then shook it off. "The royal court. The merfolk wish to meet with you immediately after breakfast."

“Merfolk?” Mike raised an eyebrow and looked at the others, who had come inside. “As in mermaids?”

“You catch on quick.” Ingrid surveyed the lot of them. “Where’s the intern?”

“In her room,” Mike replied. “As you probably remember, she made the decision to drink plenty of booze with her dinner, and...well...” He left the rest unsaid. Cyrus had told him that Ingrid carried a truth stone that would recognize a lie when spoken out loud. Yes, Lily had sucked down another bottle of wine last night. Of course she had made a spectacle of herself. He wasn’t sure if she was up to something or just having fun at this point.

“Ugh. You need to learn to control your people.” Ingrid shook her head in disgust. “I’ll alert the kitchen staff, maybe they’ll bring up some food later. If she’s as hungover as I think she is, I do not want her speaking to the royal family.”

Mike nodded his agreement. In truth, Lily’s hangover was a ruse for her to stay in the room and guard the portal under his bed. Ratu had created a simple illusion spell that would mask it, but it wouldn’t hold up if someone checked underneath. He also didn’t want anyone fixing the cameras they had shorted out.

“Yes, well, Lily has always struggled with authority.” Beth moved next to Mike. “Is our current attire appropriate for merfolk royalty, or should we change?”

Ingrid snorted, a small smile appearing. “What you’re wearing is fine. Swimsuits are preferred, actually. We’ll be meeting them out in the Cove, and everybody will get at least a little wet. In terms of the merfolk, you’ll be overdressed, honestly.”

“Lovely. Well...shall we?” Beth offered her arm to Mike, and he hooked his arm around hers. On the way out, Beth slipped the Do Not Disturb sign onto the latch of the door. “We don’t want anyone disturbing Lily,” she explained.

“On that, we all agree.” Ingrid took them to the elevator, and they all rode down together. When the door opened at the bottom, Aurora was there to greet them.

“Good morning,” she declared with a smile. Aurora did a quick scan of the group and then looked at her clipboard. “Will Miss Lily be joining us?”

Ingrid shook her head. “Too much to drink. She’ll be sleeping in today.”

“I see.” Though Aurora smiled, Mike saw the cracks in the facade. This had messed up somebody’s plans. The weirdest part about the whole affair with the

cameras was that he knew they were there, the Order knew that he knew, but nobody was going to come out and yell at him for destroying equipment they had installed to spy on him. Eulalie had tried to explain it using the psychology of espionage, whereas Ratu had done so from a political angle. The whole affair was a little childish, but the consequences of a missed camera or spell were dire.

“Maybe you should send up some breakfast in an hour or so,” Beth offered, placing a casual hand on Aurora’s wrist. “Make sure whoever you send knocks loudly until she answers.”

Aurora chuckled, but Mike could already see that the woman was scheming. His primary plan was to play the fool and reinforce the notion that he was just an ordinary guy with an entourage of beautiful women who he fucked when he felt like it.

“Everything okay?” Aurora studied Mike’s face, and he realized that he had been scowling.

“Yeah,” he replied, rubbing his sternum. “Coffee on an empty stomach, so a bit of heartburn is all.”

“Let me show you to your table. We’re dining in the Cove this morning. Our visitors will be arriving in about forty minutes.” Aurora spun in place and led them down to the beach. They walked past the pool and the beach bar, then along a wooden ramp that descended onto the sand. Everyone paused to leave their shoes behind in a small cubby, and Mike noticed that the women had all painted their toes. Ingrid was the only one who hadn’t. When she saw him looking, he pointed at her feet, then his own.

“Looks like we missed the memo,” he said with a grin. “If you want, we could paint each others toes later, maybe have a—”

Ingrid ignored him and walked onto the sand. He shrugged and followed the mage down to the edge of the water where tables and chairs had been set up. They sat down and were immediately offered a menu of primarily egg dishes. Mike noticed that most of the serving staff seemed to be locals. When they wandered off after taking orders, he looked over at Aurora, who had joined them at the table.

“Is the wait staff part of the Order?” he asked.

Aurora shook her head. “Not really. Occasionally you might have a knight or mage who washes out early and needs a quieter job, but we hire locally. Anyone

working here not only knows how to keep their mouth shut, but they're making at least six figures a year."

Beth, who had been sipping water, choked on it. She sputtered for a moment, and then wiped her face. "Seriously, six figures?" she asked.

"Yes. As well as access to certain amenities." Aurora gestured around them. "For example, many of them live in Order owned properties by the beach, or even on it. When the Order hires someone, they try to make it the career of a lifetime. The men and women who are serving you food today are paid well, and their families are cared for. Breaking our trust wouldn't just cost them a job, but an entire lifestyle."

"So even though they serve us, they do stand above their peers." Ratu tilted her head thoughtfully. "But what if they decide that they wish to move on?"

"There are other opportunities within the Order. If the man cooking your eggs decides he wants to be a chemical engineer, we send him to school, pay his tuition, and the Order gains a chemist in a few years." Aurora set her clipboard down and leaned against the table. "Any other questions?"

"You aren't a local. Does that mean you are...washed out?" Quetzalli frowned and looked at Mike. "Did I use that term correctly?"

"Sort of, but it isn't nice." Mike looked at Aurora. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Actually, she's a little on point." Aurora turned toward Quetzalli. "When I was younger, my family got involved with a paranormal entity that required the Order's intervention. I wanted to join up, but didn't have the killer instinct necessary to become a knight. Great with a blade, average with magic, but the killing part? Blood makes me gag.

"So they found somewhere else for me to work. I get to meet interesting people, see amazing creatures, and all without the expectation of murder!" Aurora clapped her hands together. "Speaking of which, would anybody here be interested in a murder mystery dinner in two nights?"

"There won't be time," Ingrid said. "The itinerary is full. We were going to do a flyover of the property this morning, but that was pushed back by...this." She gestured toward the still draining Cove. "So we'll try to do that later tonight. As long as the weather holds, we should strike out early tomorrow morning."

"Agreed." Mike was about to add something else when his breakfast was set down in front of him. He thanked his server and then tackled the massive omelet

he had ordered. Halfway through his meal, he realized someone was missing. "Where's Wallace?"

"Somewhere else." Ingrid frowned at her plate. "The merfolk aren't very fond of him."

"Tell me more about the merfolk." Ratu sipped at a cup of tea, her sparkling eyes fixed on the mage. "I assume their culture varies wildly based on location."

"They do." Ingrid's forehead scrunched up. "To our knowledge, all merfolk have a monarchical system, meaning a king or queen. Their anatomy will vary depending on their ecosystem. For example, the merfolk in northern Europe look less human than the ones we have here. The colder waters are far more hostile, and they rarely surface because they can freeze. There was a massive kingdom once upon a time along eastern Africa, but they're gone now."

"What happened?" asked Beth.

"Resource issues. They were forced to move to deeper waters due to lack of food, which meant dealing with stronger predators in the deeps. In-fighting caused a bunch of them to flee to different waters after a monarch died, and I won't even get into the wars they fought."

"Wars? With who?"

Ingrid sighed and leaned back in her chair. "With whoever pissed them off. The Order spent a huge amount of time cleaning up messes in that area, but local tribes got into fights with them, the British as well. Ships kept disappearing, that was usually merfolk. Ferdinand the Second commissioned Columbus to find a transatlantic route because of it."

"I thought the whole point of Columbus was to find a shorter path to India?" Beth had leaned forward in her seat, her chin propped up in her hands. At the mention of Columbus, Quetzalli frowned at what was left of her breakfast and stopped eating.

Ingrid nodded. "That, too. The longer voyages were problematic, but fighting with merfolk was making them unprofitable. Just like countries on earth, merfolk colonies differ wildly. Some colonies were wiped out due to being too friendly, while others were destroyed for being too violent. The few that remain today are either completely xenophobic or have found a way to work with local communities, like the Kingdom of Nalu does here."

Aurora spoke up. “The Kingdom of Nalu used to act similarly as the Order for centuries. The Hawaiian people didn’t even know they were here beyond rumors and sightings. The merfolk only involved themselves when the island came under attack from the supernatural. According to the historians of Nalu, their people were given refuge here by the gods themselves.”

“Gods?” Mike perked up. “The gods of Hawaii?”

Ingrid shrugged. “It’s only conjecture. The Order hasn’t interacted with any of the gods in this region, but have no reason to doubt the merfolk. It’s entirely possible they came across magic users of immense power, or even gods from a different pantheon. We don’t pretend to understand them fully, but if I were to give you one piece of advice, it would be this: Deities are notoriously flakey.” The mage smirked. “But back to the basics. Native islanders and merfolk never truly interacted until the late 1700s. They struck an accord with leaders on land and attempted to unite the islands.”

“It went poorly.” Aurora shook her head. “The kingdom of Hawaii had a choice. Cut themselves off from the rest of the world, or try to find their place. When they chose the latter, they opened themselves up to trouble.”

“What happened?” Mike looked back and forth between the women.

“Resources.” Ratu lowered her tea and shook her head. “Once everyone knew what Hawaii had, someone came and took it.”

“That’s right. The monarchy here was overthrown by the US in less than 24 hours.” Aurora stared at her plate. “The merfolk never even had a chance to support their land bound allies. So they hid once more.”

“And they stayed that way until 1941.” Ingrid looked knowingly at Mike. “When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.”

“Were they at Pearl Harbor?” asked Mike.

“No. But that’s when they realized that they could no longer avoid the troubles of the world. They have a saying I rather enjoy; the tide comes and goes regardless of our feelings. If they wanted to stay, they either needed to announce their presence to the world, or find a way to remain in plain sight. And that’s when we got involved.” Ingrid gestured at Paradise. “The Order’s first task was to find a way to unify Hawaii with one of the global powers so that it wouldn’t be flipped over so easily in the future. So we arranged for Hawaii to become the 50th state.”

“Wow.” Mike knew that the Order was powerful, but this sounded almost outlandish. “So Hawaii is the 50th state because of mermaids?”

“It was headed that way already. The Order expedited the process is all.” Ingrid picked up an orange and dug in her thumbnail to start peeling it. “Suffice to say, the merfolk here are among the friendliest on the planet. At the same time, they would not hesitate to drown you should you piss them off. Right now, with so many of their own dead, veiled threats are being made.”

“And they are very interested in you.” Aurora set her napkin on top of her plate. “When we told them that the Caretaker himself was coming, they demanded a meeting right away.”

“That sounds a little ominous.” Mike noticed that Quetzalli had turned away from the conversation. It was clear that she was upset. “So is there anything else I should know before meeting with them?”

“Don’t stare.” Aurora chuckled. “They expect it a little bit, but it does piss them off.”

Everyone except Quetzalli finished their meal. Once the table was cleared, they were free to walk around as long as they stayed within earshot. Mike watched the storm dragon wander off, but Ratu was close behind. Figuring the naga had Quetzalli covered, he walked down to the edge of the water with Beth.

She stood with her feet in the sand, staring down as the water swept across the top of her feet. When it washed back out, the water sucked sand out from beneath, causing her feet to sink and gradually disappear. There was a look of wonderment in her eyes as the water swirled along her toes before vanishing into the tide.

“When I was a little girl, my family took trips to the ocean in the summer. I used to think that if I stood still long enough, I would sink down to my waist in the sand, and that’s when I would get my mermaid tail.” She wiggled her toes back and forth, causing her feet to sink even deeper. “One time, when I was eleven, I tried to bury my lower half in the hopes that it would hasten the process.”

Mike laughed. “I came to the ocean a couple of times with my scout troop, but wasn’t really big on going in the water. The waves always felt too big for me, like they were going to gobble me up.”

“I wanted them to gobble me up, to take me away.” Beth inhaled deeply through her nose. “It was like a calling. I briefly considered going into the Coast Guard.”

“You probably would have been good at it.”

“Maybe. But I didn’t want to be on a boat, staring down from above. I wanted to be part of the water, swimming beneath the waves, exploring its secrets.” Beth sighed. “But the best fit was being some type of marine biologist, and hoping for research in the corners of the earth. Not an easy gig to land.”

“I bet.” In truth, he had no idea.

“I did a couple of intro biology classes in college. Didn’t like it. I like things that are dynamic, constantly changing.” Her eyes shimmered as she gazed out at the waves. “Guess that isn’t a shocking character revelation.”

Mike smiled. “Out of curiosity, what does the magic look like to you? Out in the water, I mean.”

“It’s not something I see. I feel it right in here.” Beth put a hand to her chest. “I don’t even know how to properly describe it. It’s a kind of pressure. I feel how the water wants to move, but I also feel how it’s being changed. There’s a primal power to it, as if the ocean was asked to move and it agreed. How do you see it?”

“Bands of shimmering light.” His answer was far more straightforward than hers. Beth could see some magic, but her attunement to water was incredibly strong. “They’re very pretty.”

Beth stood there for another minute, then turned her attention to Aurora, who was standing by the ramp to the beach. “How much longer until they get here?” she asked, raising her voice to be heard.

Aurora looked at her watch. “A few minutes. They’re running late.”

Beth pointed to the dock. “Am I allowed to go there?”

The hostess thought for a moment, then nodded. “It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Great.” Beth’s fingers curled around Mike’s, and she pulled him toward the dock. They had to climb up a small hill of sand to get to the structure, and she led him onto the dock. About twenty feet past the waterline, he realized that the

water wasn't lying flat, but had taken on a sloped quality. If he didn't know better, it looked like the ocean was receding to form a vertical edge.

They were near the end of the dock when Beth pulled off her cover, revealing a dark blue swimsuit. Hair tumbled down across her back as she handed her cover to Mike, then tossed a smile his way over a shoulder.

"Don't let anyone shoot me," she said with a wink, then took off running. Over his shoulder, Mike heard Aurora, Ingrid, and a few other members of the Order shout, but there was no stopping Beth. When she reached the end of the dock, she leapt high into the air, letting out a whoop of delight as she curled her body into a ball. Her brunette curls trailed behind her like the tail of a shooting star as she fell, the moment searing itself into his brain.

The surface of the water swirled, and it almost looked as if the ocean rose to greet her. Beth broke the surface, disappearing beneath the waves. Behind him, Mike heard footsteps as Aurora and Ingrid ran out onto the dock.

"Of all the—" Ingrid moved past Mike and stared down into the water. "I would expect this from the intern, maybe, not your attorney!"

"Good help is hard to find." Mike shrugged, keeping the grin off his face.

"I swear to God, if she just cannonballed one of the royal family, I will fucking drown her myself!" Aurora's mask had slipped completely, her eyes now pinpricks of anger. "Get her out of the water!"

"Hey. Beth." Mike looked over the side of the dock. Though the water was clear to the bottom, he saw no sign of her. "If anyone has a rock, we can tie a note to it and drop—"

Aurora moved like she was going to strangle him, but Ingrid interceded, pushing the woman away. The two of them had a very rushed conversation about obscene demands, something about peeing in the pool, and the phrase 'diplomatic incident'. Aurora eventually stormed away down the dock, where a few Order members waited. Other than some dirty looks from them, nobody said anything.

Ingrid and Mike stood at the end of the dock for over a minute before the mage spoke. "Is she okay down there?"

"Probably." He shrugged, fighting to keep the smirk off his face. "Maybe she met an interesting starfish or something."

“Look, I know you think this is all fun and games, but this is serious business. When this is all over, you get to fly back to your house and do whatever it is you do there. This is my job, and I have to live with any fallout here, and for all I know, your friend pissed off a mermaid and is being held in a chokehold until she drowns.”

“Do mermaids do that?” Mike raised an eyebrow. “That sounds a little extreme.”

“This is their territory. The Order cares for the property, but the land and the magic that sustains it? That’s all from the Kingdom.” Ingrid pushed a finger in his face. “And if they decide they don’t like you, I want you to know that the Order will not stand in their way.”

Mike looked out at the water, contemplating Ingrid’s words. He had definitely struck a nerve, which was fine. The more off balance he kept them, the better off he would be. However, the merfolk were a factor he hadn’t accounted for. The last thing he needed was to be dragged out into the ocean and fed to a mutant octopus or something.

“Okay,” he said after another minute of silence. “I promise that I’ll be on some of my best behavior when the merfolk arrive.”

Ingrid sighed, the tension going out of her shoulders. “Thank you,” she said.

“But if these merfolk try anything fishy...” he added, grinning dumbly.

“I swear to God I’ll cut you,” Ingrid hissed. “There are sharks out here, they’d never find the body.”

“That’s the thing about sharks. They always get right to the—” Mike was interrupted by a splash as Beth emerged from the water, her mouth open wide as she gasped for air.

“They’re here!” she shouted, then turned to look at him. “Their delegation is almost here, I saw them!”

“Did you wave?” Mike knelt down and held out his hand. “I hear ocean people like waves.”

Beth narrowed her eyes at him while Ingrid stomped off, muttering to herself.

“You just can’t help it, can you?” Beth shook her head and took the offered hand.

“No,” Mike replied as he pulled her up. “No, I cannot.”

Ratu stood behind Quetzalli, watching as the dragon dipped her toes in a tide pool that had formed. A small crab kept popping out of a nearby hole to wave its claws threateningly in their direction, only to vanish if either of them moved. The dragon crouched down and stuck her fingers in the sand, splaying them wide.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Ratu stepped past Quetzalli, which caused the crab to vanish. She knelt down and touched the sand, then closed her eyes and expanded her senses. The crab was huddled in its burrow, nervously pacing back and forth. Beneath them, she could feel the creatures of the sea as they tunneled, slumbered, or generally shifted about beneath the sand.

Quetzalli let out a long sigh. “I don’t even know that it’s worth mentioning. To hear the tale of the merfolk so casually discussed. It isn’t dissimilar to what happened to the humans who worshiped me. I can still see them, in my mind’s eye. My people, cut down by merciless Spaniards, exposed to disease, enslaved. Dragons have long memories.”

“And long lives,” Ratu added. “For you and I, this is our own history. But you have to remember that humans live such short lives. They are so far removed from the travesties of the past.”

“I guess.” Quetzalli kicked a shell across the sand. “This whole time I’ve lived at the house, I’ve forgotten that Mike isn’t your typical human. He’s been an apt pupil, a dear friend, a gracious host—”

“And a generous lover.” Ratu smirked at the memory of making Mike eat her out for almost an hour yesterday evening. Her legs had coiled around his torso, holding her body in place as she came several times. The man hadn’t even complained when she just wanted to lie there in a state of post-orgasmic bliss. He took a quick shower and then crawled under the bed to travel half-way around the world for tea with Death and Cyrus.

Quetzalli blushed and she giggled. “That, too. The human body has many experiences unique to it. I must say that sex is one of them. It’s not really something my kind do for fun.”

“Mine do. Even in our serpentine form.” She moved next to Quetzalli and wrapped their arms together. “We do it like this. Sometimes we could spend days sliding across and over each other, deep beneath the earth. Some naga will create a chain, potentially dozens long.”

“If dragons did that, we would have destroyed whole mountain chains. For us, it was often rough, like a battle. Our powers get released, not unlike my current form. Storm dragons like me would go out to sea and end up summoning hurricanes. Days spent in passion would later become attempts to shepherd the storm away from civilization. Or not, depending on the dragon.” Quetzalli shrugged, which caused her arm to slide free. “I can’t say I entirely blame humanity for hunting us down, but to condemn an entire species out of ignorance is never okay.”

Ratu bit her lip and nodded. To her knowledge, her clan was likely still around. Naga were far more prudent when it came to revealing themselves, especially in the last century. It wouldn’t surprise her to learn that the naga secretly ran entire governments or even corporations. Why worry about mankind when you could rule them from above?

After all, there was a reason that people often referred to politicians as snakes.

“Well, you should know that I’m here for you if you ever wish to talk. We live extremely long lives, and friends who can walk the long journey with us are more valuable than diamonds.” Ratu felt a pulse of power from deep in the bay and turned her attention toward it. “Looks like the merfolk are here.”

Beth and Mike were running down the dock as the drained water in the Cove flowed back, then lifted itself up like a giant, oncoming wave. The wall of water was nearly twenty feet tall, and revealed a sandbar that was covered in stone furniture. Ratu and Quetzalli hurried back to where Mike and Beth stood, the latter making a hand gesture that glowed briefly before stripping the water away from her body. When she saw Ratu looking, she winked.

“This is so cool,” she whispered, then turned her attention toward the wall of water. Shadows had appeared as multiple figures approached. Many were holding spears as they emerged from the murk, revealing merfolk who averaged nine feet long from head to tail. They wore minimal clothing, which was more ornamental than anything else. Other than metallic bracers and shoulder pads, the warriors were naked. The men had their penises tucked into a belt around

their waist, though a couple were dangling freely. Their members shifted and twitched in such a manner that Ratu suspected they could be prehensile.

A trio of individuals hovered in the middle of the group, each one wearing a crown made of coral. Waves of power radiated out through the water, and the central merfolk advanced. As they passed liquid to air, two of the merfolk were held aloft by spheres of water that formed around their lower halves, allowing them to travel toward the nearest stone table. These were both men. One carried a crystalline sphere in his hands and the other a stack of stone tablets.

The central figure was a woman with bare, pendulous breasts and dark skin, but her pupils were silver in color. She flashed them a smile, revealing sharp teeth that reminded Ratu very much of a shark. When she emerged from the water, her lower half split apart with a ripping sound, transforming her tail and fins into a pair of legs covered in a seaweed net.

“I present to you her Royal Highness, Princess Kailani.” Ingrid pulled her arms against her chest and bowed deeply. Other members of the Order repeated the gesture, and so did Mike and Beth.

Quetzalli didn't bow at all. Instead, she gave a simple head dip. Ratu noticed this from the corner of her eye and smacked the dragon's lower back. It occurred to her that the dragon had likely never seen fit to bow to anyone, except for maybe the Faerie Queen Titania.

Kailani's silver eyes shifted in the dragon's direction, the discourtesy noticed. Ratu sent a pulse of magic into the beach beneath her feet, summoning up a small sandstorm that swirled around her group. It danced along the beach, causing Ingrid and Aurora to shift their hands nervously toward their weapons.

“And it is my pleasure,” Ratu announced with a magically enhanced voice, “to introduce Your Royal Highness to Mike Radley, the Caretaker.” The sand swirled around Mike's feet and then burst, creating a star-shaped pattern in the ground with him standing at its center.

Kailani's full attention was now on Mike, who had put on an inviting smile. He hadn't known Ratu would announce him but went along with it. Ratu would be damned if she allowed anyone to believe that he was ordinary.

“It is an honor to meet you,” he said, his voice gentle, yet carrying across the distance.

“And us, you.” Kailaini’s teeth glistened in the sun. “And who is your aquatic friend over there?” She pointed at Beth, who blushed furiously.

Mike looked at Beth, who stepped forward. “My name is Beth,” she said. “And I apologize if I caused any trouble. I arrived on the island yesterday and hadn’t had a chance to swim in the ocean quite yet. I simply couldn’t resist.”

Kailaini’s eyes flashed, and she moved to the seat closest to her. “I see. I sense the water in you. Is this correct?”

In response, Beth held her hand away from her chest, palm down. Water bubbled up from the sand beneath her feet, then formed into a perfect sphere that levitated up to her hand. “It is,” she replied.

In the background, Ratu heard Aurora hissing at someone about a dossier. Ingrid’s expression was calm as she watched, but there was fire in her eyes. Clearly they hadn’t expected Beth to possess any magic, but the secret was out. Ratu didn’t know if Beth was eager to appease the princess, or if the revelation was an attempt to make the Order believe that she was being careless.

Kailaini laughed, clapping her hands together. “I knew it,” she declared, her tone suddenly warm and friendly. “When my people saw you in the water, they wondered if maybe you were from a distant tribe, coming out to greet us. When your legs remained human, we thought perhaps something had gone wrong!”

Beth gasped at the compliment, and there was no hiding the sheer joy on her face. Kailaini turned her attention to Ratu.

“And you are a daughter of earth. I can feel your strength through the sand at my feet.” The princess turned her attention toward Mike. “I had no idea you had such powerful allies among you.”

“We’re full of surprises.” He moved toward the table. “May we join you?”

“Please.” Kailaini clapped her palm against the stone table, and servants emerged from the wall of water. Floating along on large bubbles of water, they carried trays carved from lava rock. The table was set with stone goblets in a matter of moments, and the servants poured a dark red liquid into each cup.

“What is it?” asked Mike. Ingrid had moved to sit between him and Beth, and she tapped the chalice in front of her.

“Fermented blood. It’s the merfolk version of wine.” She ran her fingers along the rim of the cup and flicked away a bead of water. “It is very much an

acquired taste, and I must warn you that humans can barely make it through a full cup without getting terribly drunk. Please pace yourself.”

“But it is tradition. Tradition is important.” Kailaini picked up her goblet and raised it. “To the Caretaker and his family.”

“To the Kingdom of Nalu.” Mike raised his own glass and drank from it. The merfolk drank deeply, but didn’t finish. Ratu tilted her cup back, allowing her serpentine tongue to twist along the inner surface and expose her taste buds. Not only did this let her fully experience the beverage, but it also gave her a good idea what was in it.

She narrowed her eyes at Kailaini, but said nothing. The drink was bitter sweet, the flavor masking the high alcohol content. There was also something else, some form of mild hallucinogen. It wasn’t enough to make a human see stars, but Ratu suspected it would make them more agreeable to any sort of negotiations. She didn’t know how to warn Mike, but suspected he may already have some idea. From where she sat, she could feel his magic ignite, burning through his veins as if to drive out the impurities.

“It makes me think of cranberry juice,” he announced while smacking his lips. “But it’s very good.” He set the chalice down, revealing that it was empty. The princess raised an eyebrow and leaned forward onto the table, her breasts pressing together.

“You seem impulsive for someone with such a big responsibility.” There was danger in Kailaini’s grin, and Ratu made a note to herself that the princess was not to be trifled with. This was somebody used to getting her way, and now Ratu wasn’t sure if this was a meeting of allies or a threat assessment.

“Yeah, I get that alot.” Mike looked over at Beth, who had sipped from her cup. Her cheeks were already bright red. “That’s why I travel with my attorney. She keeps me out of trouble...for the most part.”

“I think the wine is quite good,” Quetzalli declared, setting her chalice down. “Fermented fish blood, you say? May I have some more?”

There was muttering amongst the merfolk, but Kailaini gestured to have Quetzalli’s cup refilled. Ratu really hoped that the dragon’s unique biology would be up for it. This meeting had a sinister feel to it, and she was worried that they would play right into the royal family’s plans. Trying to deal with a drunk storm dragon right next to a body of water sounded like a bad time all around.

As if reading Ratu's mind, the princess leaned back in her chair and fixed a stern gaze on Mike. She licked her lips with anticipation and smiled.

"So, Caretaker. Tell me how you're planning to save my people."

Lily stared at the congregation below, a soft robe wrapped around her shoulders. Unlike one of her manifestations, this one belonged to the Order and was made of cotton blend that felt pleasant against her skin.

"Wow." Eulalie's voice came from the phone in Lily's hand. Lily had started a video call and was showing the Arachne the beach as the mermaids came out of the waves, lining up down below. "That looks amazing."

The succubus grinned, holding the phone close against her chest in case anybody was watching her. Technically, they weren't supposed to be able to make video calls through the barrier. But Eulalie had stuck a router in the magical tea house that connected to the hole under Mike's bed, which meant they were circumventing both technology and magic. Eulalie liked to say that now they were thinking with portals, but Lily didn't understand the reference.

"It does. But Romeo's clenched, I can tell from up here." She smirked as Mike and the others met with the royal delegation. The distance was too great to hear anything, and it looked like they were passing out wine.

"If things go wrong, are you gonna drop down and kick some ass?" Eulalie's side of the call was just a black screen.

"Naturally. But I'm guessing they can handle some troublesome fish." Lily heard a soft click from the room behind her and put Eulalie on hold, tucking the phone between her breasts. Her flesh absorbed the device, moving it to the center of her body. Turning toward the room, she shifted her features so that she looked sickly, her face covered in smeared makeup and blotches.

It was a cleaning crew consisting of two men and a woman, followed by Wallace. They had opened the door, despite the security bolt being in place. The crew paused upon seeing Lily, but Wallace moved in front of them.

"You're up," he said. "I'm surprised. And a little impressed."

Lily waved him off. "You know how it goes. After the fourth time puking, you're pretty much good to go."

“You look like shit.” He stepped to the side, trying to draw her attention. She didn’t fall for it, and went for the cleaning crew’s cart.

“Oh, yeah, we’re out of toilet paper already.” She started pulling stuff from the cart, which caused the crew to immediately return. “You know how it is when you travel. It’s like a mud faucet back there, and—”

With a yank, she pulled a towel out that had been concealing equipment to replace the video cameras and listening devices that Quetzalli had destroyed. Dropping all the toilet paper, she crouched down and picked the device up.

“What the fuck is this?” she demanded, shoving it in the nearest person’s face. “This looks suspicious.”

“They carry stuff like that just in case.” Wallace kept his tone light and playful as he grabbed her by the elbow and gently led her away. “They’re not just cleaners, but electricians and plumbers. It’s like a whole service industry.”

“Really?” Lily held up the wires with the camera on one end. “And that’s what this is?”

“That’s not for this room, obviously. We have security devices everywhere.” Wallace took the camera from her and tucked it in his pocket. “Did you see the merfolk came? That’s pretty interesting, right?”

“I guess.” Lily flopped on the nearest couch, allowing the front of her robe to slide open. Other than a pair of stockings, she was naked underneath. She had even covered her pubes in fake cum to distract Wallace. “Boss left me up here with nobody to play with.”

“Er...um...” Wallace suddenly looked uncomfortable. “So, hey, if you’re hungry, maybe we could go down and get you some breakfast. I know a big meal helps me when I’m hung over.”

“I’ve already had a big meal.” Lily dipped her finger in some of the cum stuck to her pubes and raised it to her mouth. “I’m sorry. I’m being rude. Want some?”

She made eye contact with the knight as she licked her finger clean. Wallace made a face and looked at the cleaning crew, who were all standing horrified behind him.

“Say. You all are pretty good looking people.” She rose and walked toward Wallace. “Three men and two women. Everyone is guaranteed a hole to fuck, if

they're willing. What do you guys say? I'm feeling a bit...hungry for more, if you catch my drift."

There was an awkward moment where the crew and Wallace exchanged wary glances.

"You look like you've got a sturdy back." Lily gazed at the woman like a hungry dog eyed a steak. "I'll let you have first dibs at big man here with my strap-on. Wallace here looks like he could use a proper attitude adjustment and the only way to do it is from the inside."

The crew was already packing up the cart and moving toward the door. Wallace scrunched up his face like he wanted to say something, but decided against it and left. Once the door latched shut, Lily snorted.

"Cowards." She reached into her chest and pulled out her cellphone. She took Eulalie off hold. "It was the Order, come to fix their toys and put in a few more, I'm sure."

"You didn't happen to snag any, did you?" Eulalie's voice was hopeful.

"We did not have that spy movie marathon without picking up a few pointers." Lily held up one of the tiny electronic bugs she had stolen from the cart. "I'll toss it through for you. Any luck on your end?"

Eulalie chuckled. "As a matter of fact, yes. Half of your 'lost luggage' is being purchased from me as we speak."

"And?" Lily sat on the couch and kicked her legs up on the table.

"I'm looking at some bank accounts right now, actually. It's like I've cracked open the first page of a good book and can't wait to see where the plot goes."

"Well, don't spoil it for the rest of us." Lily felt a sense of unease and rose from the couch. She walked outside and stared at the congregation below. She could feel Mike's anxiety as if he stood right next to her. "I think Romeo might be getting the runaround from the fish people."

The Arachne snickered. "Wanna place a bet on how long it is until he fucks one?"

Lily altered the shape of her eye until her vision sharpened, allowing her to get a better look at the merfolk. To anybody watching, that eye was now significantly larger than the other. "Three days at least, but no earlier."

“Really? Why is that?”

The succubus frowned. “They don’t seem too happy with him. And I’m getting a bad vibe from all of this. Usually takes Romeo at least three days to grow on someone.”

“You guys need help, just send the word. We can have anyone you need there within minutes.” There was a loud noise, followed by the sound of someone shrieking. “Shit, Grace just strung up some rats, I’ve got to go.”

The phone went silent and Lily tucked it away, her eyes on the merfolk. She scanned the waters first, and then the beach. The uneasy feeling wasn’t budging, and she couldn’t figure out why. Wondering if something outside the resort was causing it, she moved around the edge of the deck and frowned at a building in the distance.

It could only be seen from the very corner of the deck. The Black Palace lurked in the distance, visible between a nest of hotels. Lily frowned at the sight of the building and the ensuing memories it brought. The property was built on a rocky outcropping that gave the structure a magnificent three-hundred degree view of the ocean. The place was usually rented out to celebrities or for massive parties, and she wished it had burned to the ground. Sadly, somebody had put money into fixing it up, and now she would have to look at the fucking thing.

Throwing one more disgusted look at the merfolk below, she walked back into the room and turned on the tv. Letting out a disgruntled sigh, she found herself wishing that somebody else had stayed behind.

Mike leaned back in his seat, taking a moment to answer. Though the merfolk seemed at ease, he could sense a heaviness in the air that hadn’t been there before. It wasn’t lost on him that the princess reminded him of a shark, and these were unfamiliar waters.

The princess seemed content to watch him squirm, but it wouldn’t last forever. He tapped his hand on the table, looking at his empty cup. Even now, the residual effects of the ceremonial wine lingered, but just enough that he was able to keep his cool. There had been something else in there, too, but thanks to Tink, he was resistant to poisons of any kind.

His magic had been able to burn off the alcohol, but it still had made him tired. Drinking the entire cup had been a power play on his part, and he suspected

it might be why Kailaini was grinning so broadly. Beth was staring blankly at a merman whose penis kept smacking the top of his thigh as if trying to scratch an itch. In truth, it was hard even for Mike to ignore such a sight. The thing looked ridiculous. It wasn't just distracting, it was also a little silly.

"Your Majesty," he said, stretching the words a bit to buy himself a bit more time to think of what to say next. "In regards to your people, I just want to say that I was horrified to learn of their fate. I'm afraid that your presence and this event are relatively new information and we are still in the investigative stage.

"As such, promising you a direct line of action would be, uh, premature." He glanced over at Beth, wondering what she might say in his place. She was currently pointing a finger in the merman's direction and twitching it from side to side, as if moving the merman's dick with her mind. "We must be open to any possibility, and that starts with learning what exactly happened to your people."

"That sounds like a lot of words that simply mean you don't have a plan." Kailaini shook her head and looked at Ingrid. "When I last spoke with your Director, he seemed quite adamant that the Caretaker would bring us the answers we need."

"And he will," said Ratu, her voice cool. "Even the biggest mountain is worn down by the wind. He needs time."

Kailaini made a clicking sound, then looked to the men at her side. "These are my advisors," she said. "Though we are a monarchy, we do depend on a council of elders. Prior to this meeting, we agreed that the Order's lack of progress means that we had to take matters into our own hands. I was hoping to be more...impressed by the answer they promised us. The fact that the Director has eschewed this meeting is further evidence that there is a lack of foresight in this matter."

"I tend to impress people over long periods of time," Mike countered. "I'm not sure what you expected to happen in one day, but I do intend to solve this mystery and help your people."

"And you would use any means necessary?" There was a glint in Kailaini's eye, and Mike recognized that a trap had been sprung. He would have to ask Cyrus about the merfolk next time they met.

“Any means I’m familiar with, yes.” He leaned back in his seat, trying to appear calm. His magic wasn’t warning him of danger, but he knew that something was up.

“We wish to send a representative with you on your investigation. Someone who will see what you see, and report back to us so that we know that your intentions serve our purpose.” Kailaini tilted her head to one side. “Unless you see a problem with that?”

“None that I can think of.” Actually, there were several. The original plan was to ditch the Order once they got close to his property, but now he would have to sneak away from a merman or merwoman. Not impossible, but it would provide an extra degree of difficulty.

“Good. We have a tradition among my people that I hope you would honor. As you can see, the ability to walk on land as a human is not common.” Kailaini gestured to her own body. “The ability to do so lies exclusively in the royal lineage. In fact, a merfolk who can demonstrate this property is immediately adopted into the royal family, as it is a powerful ability.”

Please don’t come with me, please don’t come with me. Mike kept the smile on his face as he pondered the nature of bringing this woman along. His senses screamed that she was dangerous, and that deceiving her would be seen as some sort of direct attack against the merfolk. Naturally, this would piss off the Order, who may decide to take more direct action against him while he was here.

“So I offer up the services of my daughter, Princess Leilani.”

Noooooooooo! Mike really hoped that his face didn’t register his thoughts, because this was somehow even worse. By the predatory grin on Kailaini’s face, it probably didn’t matter.

“We would be honored to escort your daughter,” Ratu said from the side. Mike realized that he had forgotten to respond. “Out of curiosity, her title is the same as yours. Does that mean she holds the same rank that you do?”

Keilaini nodded. “She does. In our kingdom, the royal family has its own hierarchy, but we are like the reef. We all have our part to play, and only the queen is above us. When the queen passes, one princess shall be elevated to her position by the council based on many factors. The same goes for the king and our princes.”

“Then we shall protect her like one of our own.” Ratu spoke with authority, and Mike almost sighed audibly.

“I would certainly hope so.” Keilaini’s grin reappeared. “Because per the tradition of the kingdom, we cannot simply hand over a member of the royal family without something in exchange.”

“Excuse me, what?” Mike almost stood, his hands balled up beneath the table in anger.

Keilaini licked her lips again. “While my daughter is with you, you must leave one of your own with me.”

“I volunteer as tribute!” Beth rose with one hand in the air, slapping the other against the table. Her cheeks were the color of roses, and her pupils had dilated. “Me, me, me!”

“Your majesty,” Mike said, trying not to grind his teeth. “I, uh...” He wasn’t even entirely certain what he wanted to say, but leaving Beth with the merfolk while actively trying to slip his leash had completely derailed his plans. When he looked at Ingrid, he saw the shadow of a grin behind her stony facade.

This had been planned. Either the Order knew he was going to pull a fast one, or they were hedging their bets. Damn.

“I have some concerns.” Ratu shook her head slowly. “As a family and a team, we are very knowledgeable in terms of each other’s strengths and weaknesses. We had intended on tackling this with the help of everyone here—”

“I fail to see how a lawyer with water magic would help you better than a member of the royal family with a lifetime of experience. This is a fair trade.” Keilaini spoke softly, but there was iron in her voice.

“You could always leave your intern,” Ingrid offered.

“No, we probably shouldn’t do that,” Mike said. The room needed to be guarded at all times. “If they don’t like Wallace, they will hate Lily.”

At the mention of Wallace, several merfolk frowned. Mike really wanted to know what the guy had done to piss everybody off so much. At the same time, he had only known him a few days and couldn’t blame the merfolk.

“It doesn’t have to be your attorney. Should you encounter an obstacle requiring her specific assistance, simply leave someone else behind.” Keilaini’s face turned grim. “But this is non-negotiable. If you cannot agree to something so

simple, then I worry that you may have other intentions and will withdraw our assistance.”

“We can work with this, it’s just...” Mike licked his lips, trying to think about how to put the next part delicately. “During my time as Caretaker, I have often found myself in great danger. Others with me have been injured, even killed. My concern is that your daughter will find herself in similar danger.”

“She can handle herself.” The mermaid paused. “But you fear that any harm that befalls her may be passed upon our guest?”

“I do.” Mike gestured toward the island behind them. “While we are up there, we don’t know what might happen. And should your daughter be harmed, or gods forbid...”

“Killed.” Ratu said, staring hard at the princess. “We fear that her death may be attributed to carelessness or duplicity on our part, and we shall be unfairly punished.”

“I see.” Kailaini pondered Ratu’s words, but Mike saw through the act. She had planned for this as well, but how? What trick was up her metaphorical sleeve? “Perhaps it would behoove us to send along a guardian to assist?”

“That sounds agreeable.” Ratu looked over at Mike. “Unless that means we must leave another member of our family?”

“You would not. It would be someone outside the royal family with extensive knowledge of the island who would be able to vouch for your efforts, as well as whoever the Order sends with you.”

“Oh, good.” *One more asshole to keep track of.* Mike looked at Ratu, then to Quetzalli. The dragon was staring mournfully at her cup, and didn’t seem to be paying attention. The merfolk had refused to give her another refill, though she seemed fine. He made a mental note to never accept drinks from the merfolk again. “That sounds more than fair.”

“Excellent. Then allow me to introduce my daughter.” Kailaini’s silver eyes shimmered, and she clapped her hands. Through the veil of water, dark shadows appeared, growing larger by the second. It was a pair of whales with a solitary figure between them. The whales stopped short of the boundary as the mermaid shot ahead, bursting from the aquatic wall at an angle that launched her skyward. Her shimmering tail split in mid-air, forming into a pair of toned legs that allowed

the mermaid to land in a crouch. She held a silver trident in one hand and a conch shell in the other.

“That’s a bit dramatic,” Ratu muttered.

“But points for style.” Mike added. He no longer believed anything the merfolk did was last moment. Every second of this was planned, and he felt there was more to come.

“Princess Leilani of the Kingdom of Nalu. At your service.” The newly arrived princess rose, then bowed her head. Streaks of silver had been woven into her hair, and she wore a green bikini top with a matching sarong around her waist. Her whole body was toned like an athlete, and the way she held the trident revealed that she was comfortable with the weapon.

“A pleasure to meet you.” Mike rose and formally introduced the others. Leilani seemed less intense than her mother, but her keen eyes swept over them in appraisal. In truth, it was clear that the princess was disappointed, but Mike didn’t care. They had been disappointing on purpose.

“My mother informed me that I will be joining your quest to track the beast who killed our people in order to destroy it.” The princess stood tall, clutching the shell and spear firmly. “I look forward to enacting our vengeance.”

This was definitely not the attitude he had been hoping for. Ratu maintained a placid expression while Beth giggled and leaned across the table. Quetzalli set down her cup with a sigh. Ingrid wore the biggest smile he had ever seen. Looking back at the princess, he realized he was going to have to up his game. He couldn’t wait to get back to the room and discuss how to proceed with the others.

“Paradise shall become my new home. Where you go, I shall go. Whenever we leave this property, one of your own shall stay behind in the care of my people.” Leilani gave a cursory glance to the group. “May the tides rise in our favor.”

Everyone repeated the mantra. Princess Kailaini cleared her throat, getting everyone’s attention. “You’re forgetting something.”

“Right.” Leilani held the conch shell to her mouth and blew. Instead of the low sound of a distant foghorn, the shell emitted a soft note that permeated the air and sent a ripple of light out into the sea. The merfolk turned and stared at the water, waiting.

A syrupy mist rose up from the water, about a hundred yards from shore. It rolled itself into a spherical cloud and a tall shape appeared within. The prow of a large wooden ship pierced the fog, and a galleon manifested before them. Large sails flapped in the breeze as the ship drew near. Standing on the prow was a man in a black canvas doublet wearing white breeches. The ship showed no sign of stopping, but came to a standstill about thirty feet out from the wall of water.

The man leapt off the prow, and the waves rose to greet him. He slid down the curved surface of the water and then ran along the top of the waves until he reached the wall. He jumped down in much the same manner that Leilani had appeared, landing in a crouch with one hand on the hilt of a sword to keep the sheath from sticking in the sand.

When he rose, Mike got a good look at sand colored hair and azure eyes that looked right through him. He felt his magic pulse, and the world briefly dimmed as they locked eyes on one another. Though the man was a stranger, Mike was struck by an intimate recognition that nearly left him breathless.

At his side, Ingrid's smile had vanished. This was clearly a surprise to her as well, and it was the only consolation Mike felt in the moment.

"Allow me to introduce my escort." Leilani moved to the man's side. "Sir Francois Lapérouse. Master navigator and friend of the ocean."

Francois did a little bow. Though he didn't look a day over twenty five, his eyes told a different story. This was a man far wiser than his years, and he made Mike's skin crawl.

"My friends call me Frankie," he said with a faint accent, throwing a wink at Beth. But when he turned to face Mike, the smile on his face no longer reached his eyes. The merfolk seemed oblivious to the sudden chill in the air, and it was almost like the sky dimmed as the two men looked at each other.

"Nice to meet you, Frankie." Mike held up his hand in greeting. "I'm Mike. I'm the Caretaker."

Francois smirked and turned to look at his ship. He made a motion with his hands, and the fog returned. It swirled around the vessel and shrunk down, the mist moving toward them and coalescing into a ball. When it reached Francois, he captured it in his hands where it transformed into a glass bottle with a model ship inside. Turning back toward Mike, he smiled. Somehow, his grin was far more threatening than Kailaini's.

“Nice to finally meet, Caretaker.” He tucked the bottle into a small bag around his waist. “You can call me by my official title: Captain.”