

The Tarot Sequence

# Holiday Scenes



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This is a work of fiction. Characters, organizations, products, locales, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, unless it's located in Brand's dialogue, in which case you know you who are and what you did, and you deserve that F-bomb.

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## **Dedication**

This novelette is dedicated to all the amazing readers who have reached out to me through social media. I've always found Twitter a place filled with love & support because of you, and I am deeply grateful for that experience.

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# THE TAROT SEQUENCE

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## 01 - The Playground

I couldn't stop staring at the back wall of the solarium.

It had been painted recently and looked clean and new, but we had little furniture to fill the room, let alone fussy stuff like mirrors or paintings. We were lucky to even have the folding banquet table for now—and this was going to be the room I held Court sessions in.

“Does that wall look bare to you?” I asked Brand. “It looks bare to me.”

“We spent fifteen years in a nine-foot-wide house,” Brand said without raising his head from a magazine article on bacom fighting. “What the fuck do you expect?”

“Maybe I can spruce it up.”

“By all means, use your extensive decorating background. I'll fetch a candle so you can melt it in a wine bottle.”

“Can I light the candle?” Corbie asked in his raspy voice, looking up from a crayon box. He'd camped out on the floor about twenty minutes earlier.

“I can't help but notice you always volunteer to light things on fire,” I said.

“Oh,” Corbie sighed. “Can we go to the playground then?”

“Like a fast-food playground?”

“That's not what he said,” Brand told me. “Don't put ideas in his head.”

Corbie chewed on his lip, saying nothing, as he waited for a word that sounded like yes.

“We can go to the playground,” I sighed.

Corbie jumped up and started to dance from foot to foot. “Can we bring Flynn?”

“How would that exactly work?” I asked him.

He started to chew on his lip again, so I headed it off by saying no, we would not be walking the prehistoric Siberian unicorn to the park.

It took us a small eternity to put together what we needed for the outing, mainly because Brand and I had no idea what a kid needed. Corbie's helpful suggestions came one by one, and only when we were about to walk out the front door. Eventually we had shoes, snacks, jackets, Grandfather Octopus, and empty bladders. We moved from mansion to parking lot and surveyed our choices.

"It's only across the streets from the gate," Brand said. "We could use the motorcycle and sidecar."

"Do you have a kid helmet?" I asked.

"I have an extra helmet and duct tape," he said.

"Don't tape the ducks," Corbie mumbled sadly to his feet.

"Yeah, Brand," I said. "Don't tape the ducks."

"Fine, we'll walk. But I'm not carrying anything else."

Since he was already carrying everything, I quickly agreed, and we set out. Corbie lasted until we'd made it to the estate gates before deciding it was best if he rode on someone's shoulders, which is when I spotted Brand's clever trap.

So we crossed the last quarter mile on foot, with a six-year-old in a dinosaur hoodie kicking my collar bones in excitement. Someone, I thought to myself, better be keeping score.

Sun Estate had been built in a quiet corner of the island, in a neighborhood of quiet, gated estates. Most buildings were hidden behind the trees of a maritime forest: stately black and white oak trees with wintergreen and bracken growing along the ground.

The shared playground occupied a cleared half-acre. It was a warm day—just warm enough that you might wish for a lighter jacket in the sunlight. The denim sky didn't have a cloud in it.

"Now what?" I asked Corbie, setting him on the ground.

He peered eagerly at everything laid out in front of him. "First we sit," he said. He took my hand and pulled me toward a free bench. We each took a seat, and Corbie added, "Now you wait a while and look."

And indeed, that's what he did, craning his neck from left to right in a constant search. Brand stared at Corbie, first in confusion and then in fascination, as if a new breed of martial strategy was unfolding before him.

It was lunchtime on a Sunday, and kids seethed over the equipment. Most of them looked much older, too. But finally Corbie made a satisfied sound, climbed down off the bench, and ran into the fray.

"The see-saw is free," I said.

"I'm not doing the see-saw with him," Brand said.

"No, I mean, you used to love the see-saw. Remember?"

Brand made a face at me which was his version of fake-innocence. "No."

"You liar. I know you remember. You had stronger leg muscles than me, and always tried to slam me into the ground. I could never blame you, either, because it's not like you were actually cheating."

"Huh," he said casually, while smugness lazily flowed down our bond.

"Yeah, huh," I said. I watched as Corbie crossed the playground, giving a wide berth to any mob of kids. "Gods. They're all so much bigger than him. Should we be worried?"

"The difference between a short fighter and a tall fighter is just training," Brand said.

"Well, sure. But it's a little scary that you jumped right to fighting techniques. I just don't want him to get bullied. Are we supposed to do something about that in advance, or just wait and hope for the best? I'm still figuring out all the rules."

“Meh.”

“Not *meh*. I mean...are we good parents? Can we be good parents?”

Brand gave me the side-eye, but did take a moment to think about that. Finally he said, “Remember the goldfish?”

“Brandon Saint John, I will literally commit an act of violence right here, right now, if you don’t stop mentioning the stupid goldfish. It’s been thirty years. I will straight-up turn into a pillar of fucking fire if you mention it again.”

“Okay, okay, easy,” he said. “And look, I’m just considering it a personal victory that you haven’t tried to go on any of the equipment here yet. Do I have to be a good dad too?”

I didn’t say anything and just let that sit for a long minute.

Sure enough, Brand eventually mumbled, “I mean, we’re not *bad* dads, right?”

“I’m worried about Anna,” I said. “I’m worried I’ll screw up.”

“These kids have, like, thirteen people raising them. They’ll be fine. Anna will be fine.”

“But there are things only I can do. How do I make her a well-adjusted kid *and* train her? She’s so damn powerful, only she uses magic in all the wrong ways. I need to break her of bad habits so that she gains a measure of control. She can use the godsdamn Arcana Majeure, Brand. And she needs to keep it secret. And something is going on at Magnus—she’s been too quiet lately.”

“That doesn’t mean we’ve failed her. We’ll pay more attention to her. And look at Layne. Layne is doing great!”

Brand had a soft spot for Layne. He was proud of the way they’d bounced back from their nightmare with the Hanged Man. But Brand’s blind spot with Layne was his same blind spot with me—he never liked realizing how deeply I’d buried my rage over my own trauma.

“Max and Quinn are doing great. And Corbie,” Brand said. “Corbie is happy.”

“Corbie would be happy with a breadstick and a piece of wax paper. And it’s not about him being happy, it’s about him being safe. Was it right to move him and everyone else back on Sun Estate? Are we sure we cleared out all the dangers?”

And *there*. Right *there*. I felt a blip of guilt strobing through our bond.

“What?” I asked him.

He shrugged and pretended to search his pockets for a granola bar.

“Brand, what?” I said again, in a lower but firm voice.

“Maybe not all of the haunts are gone. I spotted some activity by that bunker on the northeast corner of the property. The one used as a back-up wine cellar? It’s circled in wards,” he said quickly as I opened my mouth. “Nothing can get out. But you and I will need to check it out.”

“Let’s do it this weekend, then. Before it eats a kid and makes us bad dads.”

“Done,” he said. “We could—oh, *hell no*.” He got up and started walking across the playground.

I wasn’t sure what the problem was. Corbie was standing by himself, carefully climbing up onto the seat of a large, painted bug. It was attached to the ground by a metal spring as thick as a lamppost pole.

“What’s wrong?” I hiss-whispered as I caught up with his long-legged stride.

“That is the worst ride on the playground. It is literally the backwash of playground equipment. No one uses those stupid things.”

I couldn’t object, because we reached Corbie, and he was thrilled to have us there.

“It’s my favorite!” he said. “Watch.”

He threw all his weight forward. The bug and its thickly painted spring made a slight creaking sound. So he threw all his weight back, then forward, then back, then forward... After an exhausting thirty seconds he relaxed and tilted his ecstatic face toward the sky. The ride wobbled a quarter inch by itself for two pendulum swings, then returned to standing position.

“No,” Brand said. “Nope.”

He went over to the nearby swing set, where the oldest kids swarmed and fought over the seats.

He said, “Why are you still here? I would have thought you’d be after the ice cream.”

“What ice cream?” an older kid said.

“There’s an ice cream truck giving away free samples in the parking lot. Over there.” He aimlessly pointed.

The kids stampeded away.

“Okay, load’r up,” he said to Corbie.

Corbie watched a twisting, recently-abandoned seat with wide eyes. I picked him up under the arm pits and carried him over. “I’m ignoring the moral argument at work here,” I said.

Out of the corner of his eye, Brand saw a small figure dart in, and said, “You’ll want to think about that.”

Then we both saw that it was a small girl—as small as Corbie—with blond hair in pigtails tied with a red ribbon, a pink old-fashioned dress, and fake Yoda-ears.

“I can share,” Corbie mumbled. He gave us a guilty look. “Or do you want to go first?”

“Nah,” Brand said. “You two can play.”

So we left Corbie to make friends and walked back toward the bench. “See,” he said. “We’re not bad dads.”

“You just sent a dozen children running after a strange van handing out treats,” I said.

He blew a raspberry.

“Maybe... I don’t know.” I tried to put my thoughts in order. “Something you said made sense. These kids? They have a lot of people raising them. That’s not the way we were raised—but it’s that way in a lot of courts. There are a ton of wives and husbands, and everyone raises each other’s children. When it’s done well, it really does work. That whole *takes a village* thing.”

“I think you’re a good dad,” Brand mumbled.

I didn’t look at him, because he’d make an excuse to punch me in the arm or do wind-sprints. “I think you’re a good dad too,” I said.

“See-saw’s still free,” he said as we passed it.

“I have a Flight spell in my ankle chain,” I said. “I will launch you into the fucking stratosphere.”

He stared hard at me. The corners of his lips twitched.

“Challenge accepted,” he said.

## 02 - The Sanctum

One would think living on an estate would make privacy easier to find, but apparently there were age considerations for things like that. If we weren't stepping on teenager and kid detritus, we were trying to put the teenagers and kid on the other side of locked doors.

But Addam and I were alone in the estate's new sanctum. The other estate spell-casters would be arriving soon to put the final touches in place; but soon was not now, and Addam looked good in his old, tight jeans as he moved around the tower room.

"You seem most interested in my pants," Addam said as I cast another look at him.

"Stop that," I replied. "I already have one man reading my mind."

"It was not an objection. Just an offer to adjust said pants however you might wish." His Rs became very clear and very sharp.

Then he pressed a kiss on my head, laughed, and settled on the floor next to me.

We'd decided to build the new sanctum in one of the mansion's towers. Despite the many, many stairs. Even Brand was a little surprised at my insistence. But there was something about the skyward space that I was drawn to. It had a beautiful view of the ocean, along with every corner of the property. Also, it was a space I'd rarely used when I was a teenager myself. Building a sanctum here made it feel like mine, not just a rehabilitated piece of my father's rule.

Addam turned his body so that he could lay his long legs in my lap. He was barefoot, and his feet were dusty from the cleaning we'd done. I brushed my thumb along his ankle and said, "Thank you for helping me."

"It is something we should do together," he said. "To make it ours."

"I thought people would complain about the stairs more," I admitted.

Addam's burgundy eyes narrowed into a faint web of laugh lines. "Brand has started a betting pool. He thinks you'll ask for an elevator within two weeks."

“I’m not going to install an elevator,” I said flatly.

“Of course not, Hero.”

I kept staring at him until he added, “I bet that you’ll begin storing Flight or Levitation spells on a daily basis. Max and Quinn pooled their finances. They believe you’ll make a smaller sanctum near your bedroom. Somewhat like a half-bath.”

“I honestly thought being an Arcana would be different,” I said. “I expected a few more bows and Sirs.”

“Shall I remove my feet from your most august lap, Sir?”

I continued to brush my thumb along the bone of his ankle. “Nah. They’re your feet, after all. I’m just grateful you have two of them.”

It took Addam a full second to get the joke, then he gaped at me. I held my breath to see which way it would break—and then laughter came roaring out his mouth.

He said, “My brass foot would be just as sexy!”

“I bet it would,” I said. “See? I bet my money on positive things.”

His smile dimmed. “Do you believe that?”

“That you’ll wind up with a brass foot? That’s really unlikely, Addam.”

Addam slowly flexed the fingers of his brass hand. I’d caught him doing that often—I think he was trying to get the fingers to move in a fluid, staggered wave. But precision was still difficult. The fingers wanted to move in concert.

I felt a little hitch in my heart, and let my body reply for me. I removed his feet from my lap and crawled onto his, so that I could tap my forehead against his own.

“I like the hand,” I whispered.

“Truly?”

“Addam, I’m pretty sure I’ll be okay looking at that hand for the rest of my life, remembering what it means.”

That was when the door banged open and the others entered. I heard Brand immediately say, “Fucking hell, Addam. There are children here, and they have eyeballs.”

“This isn’t nearly as bad as that time we walked in late and—”

“A little of that goes a long way, Quinn,” Brand said. “Pick your battles.”

I groaned and climbed off Addam’s lap. I didn’t fail to notice that Brandon had directed his quip at Addam, and not me, which means he was still sulking because we lost a board game last night.

“Okay, spell-casters in a circle,” I said. “We’re ready for the attunement.”

“Which sigil are you going to loan me?” Anna asked.

“You don’t need a sigil for this,” I said.

“Brand lets me practice with his weapons,” Anna pointed out.

“Sure, but a sigil is more dangerous than a hundred weapons.” I smiled at Brand’s stiffened back. I could almost *feel* the effort it took him not to say something appropriately withering.

“But you’re going to let me use mine, right?” Max said worriedly. He’d rethreaded the ivory cameo sigil I’d given him with a leather cord. It sat, somewhat absurdly, against the logo of a crossbow company that adorned the t-shirt he’d stolen from Brand.

He’d been very good about only practicing with the sigil in my presence—and even then, only smaller spells,

barely hyped-up cantrips. He was ready to try something real.

“I will let you use yours,” I confirmed.

We—the spell-casters of Sun Estate—spaced ourselves into a loose circle on the hardwood floor: me, Addam, Quinn, Max, and Anna. Corbie was too young for training, and Layne had made it clear that they preferred to train their necromancy as opposed to sigil magic.

“You can sit with us if you want,” I told Brand.

He whistled and rubbed at a smudge on the window.

Max looked at me, looked at Brand, and looked back at me. “Is he still mad you lost Pictionary?”

Brand said, “He drew eyelashes on his stick-figure. He took the time to do that. Did eyelashes have anything to do with the answer, Rune?”

“They did not,” I sighed.

“Did you have time to complete the drawing?”

“I did not,” I sighed again. “But let me tell you what a delight it is to find a whole new type of experience that you can be cranky about. We never really played board games before.”

“I’ll sit over here,” he said, and went back to ignoring me.

The next hour passed swiftly.

Addam and I took turns explaining to the kids how to form a bond with the room around us. The deeper and more familiar the connection, the easier it became to store spells.

We talked about the power of a sanctum, and the different ways magic-users tapped into its power. Addam danced while storing spells; I meditated over my sigils; Quinn told Max that he just remembered times when he’d stored the same spell really, really well in one future or another.

Brand was joined by Corinne, who came in late with a bowl of popcorn and two mugs of hot chocolate. They kept quiet except to occasionally snort when we described a spell, and whisper about how a blade would be quicker.

Max decided to try meditating, like me. He’d insisted on storing Fire, which wasn’t a beginner magic, so I kept nudging him into practicing with Shield. Most young scions began their training with defensive magics.

“It keeps slipping out of my hands,” he complained. “And the magic feels cold. Shouldn’t it feel hot?”

“A Shield would—”

“Fire,” Max said stubbornly.

“We could move onto elemental magic next,” I offered. “I know you’ll get the Shield right away.”

“Fire,” he said, and screwed his eyes shut to concentrate.

Across the room, Brand coughed. When I looked at him, he raised his mug to his lips. The words *Get a Fucking Clue* were printed in fancy script along the side of it.

“Max,” Addam said. “Remember when Rune burst into fire in the Iconsgison?”

“Kind of hard to forget that,” Max said.

“Remember it. Remember the heat. It helps to think of strong memories and the actual element.”

“I’ve got some matches on me,” Anna mumbled, and stared pointedly at Max’s sleeve.

So Max tried that, and everyone gave him the time and quiet to do it. It was an odd moment—that small bit of consideration. As hard as we could be on each other, there wasn’t a single person in the room who wanted Max to fail. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, and could feel the sanctum singing with the power of our bond and

community. We couldn't have stumbled on a better way to connect ourselves to it.

And then I felt a surge of heat on my face, and orange shadows bloomed behind my eyelids. I opened my eyes to see a perfectly round ball of orange-red fire in Max's outstretched hand. His eyes were wide and he almost dropped it in Quinn's lap by accident.

"Look at that!" I said, clapping my hands. "Max! That's perfect! I couldn't do better myself!"

He blushed and ducked his face, which became the moment I got a fucking clue, and realized why Max had been so stubborn about making Fire his first spell.

"Looks like fire runs in the family, then," I said quietly, and leaned forward to tap his knee.

"Now do something with it before he burns a hole in the ground," Brand said.

"The hole works for me," Corinne said. "I bet money you'll build a stripper pole to slide back to ground level."

"It's getting a little warm," Max admitted. "Should I throw it?"

"Do not throw it," I said.

"What happens if I squeeze it, maybe?" he guessed. "Or flick my hand?"

"I didn't even want my own sigil, I just wanted to *borrow* one," Anna whispered.

I hurried over to show Max a few techniques to reabsorb the magic. I actually did flick my hand—but a lot of young scions started by touching the now-empty sigil, which helped ground and disperse the spell.

"Now you learn Shield," Brand said from the sidelines. "You'll need it tomorrow. You're coming with Rune and I in the field."

Max gave Brand and I a look that teetered between suspicious and hopeful, because knowing Brand, dodging an actual lawnmower in one of our fields was a true possibility.

"There's a haunt to clear out," Brand said.

I blinked and looked at Brand, who hadn't mentioned Max would be coming with us.

Quinn and Anna both jumped to their feet and opened their mouth. Brand said, "No and no. Taking one of you into the field is enough of a fucking disaster. I'll take Rock Slide this time, and Tsunami and Tornado can wait for the next fucking chance."

"Make sure you dress warmly," Quinn said, jumping to his feet. "*Because it's snowing.*"

The tower had a window at each cardinal point, and sure enough, the skies around us had darkened, and fat, lazy snowflakes were spiraling down. Snow hadn't been in the forecast for the Solstice—not even a little—though I'd heard that Lady World and Lord Magician were working together to undo the lingering weather abnormalities caused by Ashton Saint Gabriel's interference from over a year back.

Corinne's phone began to buzz. Before she could answer it, Brand's pocket vibrated. And before he could answer that, my phone started making short dinosaur-roar sounds.

"I'm not building a snowman with him," Anna said. "He always wants to give it eight arms."

Corinne heaved up to deal with the youngest. On her way out, she put a hand on Max's shoulder and squeezed it. The way his face lit up reminded me of the days that he couldn't even understand a compliment if you explained it to him.

We'd come a long way, hadn't we?

"Let's practice the Shield," I said. "We've got to get you ready for the field."

## 03 - The Ghost

My eyelids opened and closed in lazy, long minutes, as bars of morning sunlight oozed across the bedspread. Eventually they touched the hairs on Addam's leg and set them on fire.

Addam never slept with all his arms and legs under the covers—he was always a massive tangle of flesh and quilt. It's possible I helped matters by stealing the sheets; but to be fair, he was a greedy sleeper too. He frequently manhandled me into a better position, much like a lumpy pillow.

Reluctantly, I began to slide out of bed.

"Mhm," he murmured.

"Sorry," I said. "I have to get up early today."

He grabbed me around the waist and pulled me back under the sheet.

"You could make this easier by waking up in the middle of the night and setting the clock back a few hours," I pointed out.

He laughed into my neck. Something that maybe wasn't an elbow poked at me. I barely had time to debate the implications inside my brain before Addam sighed in regret and shoved me to the edge of the mattress.

"Are you sure you do not require my help with the ghost?" he asked.

"We'll be fine. You've got enough on your plate preparing for our Solstice party."

Addam yawned and stretched his arms behind him, gripping the headboard in a backwards stretch. The wood under his brass hand creaked in protest.

"Why Max, though?" he asked after a moment. "Is Brand really to train him today?"

"I don't know. Maybe? But I think... I think maybe Brand knows more about the ghost than I do. It may be a personal haunt. I could be wrong, but I think he's *including* Max. Like it's a family affair."

Addam's dark reddish eyes warmed into a smile. "That is somewhat sweet. And if it is, indeed, something

personal, then I'm glad you'll all be together when you handle it."

"I may need a nap later," I said.

"As one does," Addam yawned.

I tapped him a few times on the head. "Hey. I said that in my sexy voice. Didn't you hear it? Did my morning breath ruin the sexy voice?"

He cracked an eyelid open again. "Go hunt monsters, Hero. Call me when you're... sleepy."

He put his own sexy voice into the word sleepy, and bet your ass I took notes.

Downstairs, while I pulled on my heavy black boots, I stared in hapless resignation at the poster in front of me. Addam hadn't been kidding: Brand had indeed started a betting pool on how quickly I'd get tired of climbing stairs to the new sanctum.

When Brand came in a side entrance, I stabbed a finger at one of the squares filled with block crayon letters. Brand read it out loud. "*Fonze shyd*. I'm pretty sure he meant fun slides. He bet all his jumping jacks and a doll's arm."

"So if I don't build a slide, he doesn't get the doll arm back? Are these really the lessons we should be teaching him?"

He fastened the straps over his back-up knives and walked out a patio door.

"Where are the kids?" I asked, catching up.

"Max is outside. I haven't seen the others."

"Anna and Quinn are just going to ignore the fact that Max is going on a monster hunt? That sounds exactly like them."

"Eh, we'll clear as we go, and hope they at least try to pretend they're not there," Brand said.

"Do you have any idea what we should expect?"

Brand shrugged and pretended he needed to tighten another strap. He didn't.

"So it may be a haunt from the estate's fall," I concluded.

"Probably. I thought... I don't know. Max is really good about never asking questions, but maybe he has the right to know a little."

"About that night," I said, and kept my voice from breaking.

His eyes shot to me. "No. No, Rune. I was thinking if it's someone we knew, we could lay them to rest, or whatever you do. Maybe it'll be a good thing. If it's someone from when we grew up, there's more to them than just that night."

I nodded and avoided his worried eye. Then I felt shitty about that, because Brand would start to stress. "It's a good idea," I said out loud. "Really."

The patio outside was covered in a rime of frozen snow, barely a quarter inch thick. Our footsteps crunched as we joined Max by the bushes on the other side of the balustrade. Brand vaulted over it without losing his footing, and I carefully tiptoed over the slippery spots until I reached a break in the railing.

Brand led us across the property to a hillside near the orchard, where the ground was hard and cold. My father's seneschal had built a back-up wine cellar there—something about the island's clay gave it good temperature

control. We'd sealed it off during construction to delay the cost of rehabilitating it.

Half of my sigils were filled with spells to protect Max and Brand if we ran into something truly horrible. Outside the pitted wood and steel-plate door, I anchored a Slingshot to an oak tree.

"If I tell you to activate your Shield, do it," I told Max. "If you hear me shout the word *sound*, it means I'm releasing a Silence spell. I'll do that if there's something dangerous about the spirit's voice."

"No winter banshees, please," Max said.

"Not even our luck is that bad," Brand said. "But regular banshees are a possibility. Our goal is to pin the spirit down and let Rune cast a spell that lays the spirit to rest."

"And I only have one shot, so I need a clear path," I added. "The spell takes hours to prepare."

"When we're inside, pay attention to your surroundings. *Everything*," Brand stressed. "Everything you might bump into, trip over, use as a barricade, use as a weapon... You should always be aware of what's around you. Like those two conveniently placed barrels by the door that are clean and have no dirt or leaves on them."

One of the barrels vibrated a bit.

Brand pulled out a massive keyring while opening the door. It was like something out of a gothic horror movie—big and iron and flaked in rust. Brand had always preferred keys to modern locks, though he was coming around to the concept of key cards now that he realized he could sharpen the side of them.

A fresh breeze was sucked into the open doorway, forcing out a waft of stale air and dust spores. It may have been my imagination or nerves, but I felt the stirring of something Other from beyond—like a starved finger plucking a single strand of spider webbing.

"I can't remember the layout at all," I murmured.

"No fucking blueprints either," Brand said. "I was in there once. There are at least two sections—one for the wine, and a desk for the estate sommelier. I think your dad kept vintages here that he didn't want used by mistake in the main house. Let's try not to fucking wreck everything."

"You've really lost all respect for the swear jar, haven't you?" I asked.

"That's not a thing anymore," Brand dismissed.

"What made you think that? I told you I made a spell."

His eyes narrowed. "What spell?"

"It magically tracks swears and keeps charge of what you owe."

Brand didn't say anything for a second or two. "You are stone-cold lying. Are you singing show tunes in your head? Stop fucking with me."

"I'm not lying. Not even a little. I didn't even put your full name on the list. I just nicknamed you Vacation Fund."

Brand clamped his own lips together and continued to glare. Slowly, the color left his cheeks, as he retreated to that spot he did when things required killing.

*Oh he is pissed*, I thought in delight.

I took a step toward the entrance of the wine cellar, and Brand swiftly blocked me so that he could take point. From the threshold, I realized the hidden room was freezing. The chilled wind carried an undertone of vinegar and soiled laundry.

The three of us moved in: Brand and I more or less jockeying for the lead, Max in the rear. Brand waited until Max picked a spot and said, "What's the most secure side?"

“You mean like in your argument?” Max asked.

Brand actually stopped to look back at him.

“Oh,” Max said, flushing a bit. “I was just going to hug the wall.”

“Good. It’s a secure spot and frees up my aim if I need to turn and meet an ambush.

“Nice one, Max,” I said. I whispered a quick cantrip, and a ball of light sped forward.

The walls were hard-packed earth, which was more artifice than actual, since I knew there was a complicated series of atmospheric equipment built behind them. That equipment was long since defunct, though. I tried a light switch and had no luck.

“Hallway branches left and right,” I said.

“Which way do you think?” Brand asked.

“Maybe left?”

“I’m going to try something that normally works,” Brand said, and went right.

“*Hide...*” a raspy voice whispered, the sound all around us.

“Shield, Max,” I said. I didn’t turn to make sure he complied, but I felt a quick spike of magic as a sigil spell was loosed.

“*Find them...*” the voice hissed.

“Rune, go high and right,” Brand said, lowering his voice to clipped single-syllables.

“*Boys...*” the voice said.

We stepped into a modestly large room, filled with heavily-cobwebbed, solid oak bookshelves and a dusty desk. An old PC with a massive, fat hard drive sat on a smaller desk next to it.

Brand prowled along the bookshelf, signaling for me to wait. There was a cubbyhole where the bookshelf ended, or maybe a smaller adjacent room

Just as he neared the corner, the air filled with a spectral shriek, and a rush of energy snapped the rusted brackets holding the bookshelf in place. It began to fall on Brand. Max leapt forward, his fists awash in Shield magic. He punched the bookshelf, delaying its fall long enough for Brand to get clear, and then danced back himself.

“Max, hold at our rear,” I snapped while running a hand along my emerald ring. The Soul Bind spell slid out. I whispered a few quick words and sent three more light cantrips spinning ahead of us, illuminating every corner of the office area.

A white lady cowered in a corner.

“*Must find the boys,*” it hissed. “*Must hide them. Must hide the boys.*”

Recognition was a gut punch. For Brand, too—I heard his soft, inhaled *obb*.

White Ladies were a shared, global mythology. No matter what the culture, no matter how interlinked or withdrawn its people were from the world, the myth of white ladies persisted. They were spirits gripped by deep mourning: the victims of murder, self-harm, or violent death.

This white lady glimmered with the pearl light of spirits, but even in real life she’d worn that color. She was the third shift cook—staffing the kitchen overnight and preparing breakfast in the morning.

“Ohh,” Brand repeated. “Miss Barrie.”

“*Must find the boys,*” she sobbed quietly into her translucent hands.

I blinked away the wetness in my eyes and slowly—very, very slowly—approached the corner. “Harmony Jean

Barrie,” I said.

She stopped sobbing.

“We’re here. The boys are here.”

Brand came over to my side. He said, “We were found, Miss Barrie. We were helped, and now we’re safe.”

*“The boys are here somewhere, I must find them,”* she whispered.

There were tears on her front apron—from either arrow or blade. I’d always assumed she was one of the burned bodies.

“Harmony Jean Barrie, you may stop looking now,” I said. “It’s time to rest.”

I exchanged a look with Brand, who nodded. Then I raised my hand and released the Soul Bind. The stillness was broken by a single, sharp crack—and the white lady faded in a ruffling of wind.

I took a deep breath and inhaled everything—musty air, spoiled wine, regrets, grief. Inhaled all of it deep, deep down.

On the exhale, I turned and went over to Max, who was watching everything with wide eyes. There were droplets of sweat beading on his brow.

“That was a clever trick, moving the Shield to your fist,” I said.

Max nodded.

“I’d like to shake your hand,” I said, and stuck my own out.

Max swallowed. “Not necessary,” he said.

“Because you broke a few fingers?” I asked.

Max closed his eyes and nodded.

I focused on the chain around my ankle. A moment later, the warm rush of healing energy filled my body. I took Max’s fist, made him disperse the Shield spell, and set about healing his broken bones.

“It *was* a good idea,” I said. “But you need more than one sigil. Just because your hand is Shielded doesn’t make it invulnerable. Another spell to buttress the skeletal structure was needed.”

“Does he need a healing spell? I have a Healing stored!” Quinn shouted from the wine cellar entrance.

“Stay there!” I shouted. “Or maybe start running!”

“Miss Barrie?” Max asked softly, looking between our faces.

“The night cook,” Brand said. He cleared his throat and shook his head, coming out of his momentary surprise. “She would have been here that evening. We didn’t have many staff who spent the night, but she was in charge of late meals and prepping breakfast. She was...nice. She was a very nice woman.”

“There was this one time...” I said, and then stopped to smile. It was hard to talk and smile at the same time just then, and I wanted to smile, because I’d just swallowed a lot of sadness.

I said, “We were about six or seven. Brand and I had separate training tracks by then. He was learning about nutrition, and because he was already insufferable at that age, he decided the lesson on nutrition applied to me, not just him. So he marched into the kitchen with his puffy blue Trapper Keeper notebook and asked Miss Barrie about my saturated fat intake.”

Max laughed. “Really? What did she do?”

“She started making cookies. There’s still a photo somewhere of Brand licking the spatula.”

“That is a lie,” Brand insisted.

“It is not,” I said. “I’ve been waiting for the right moment to turn the picture over to the kids so they can make memes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Well, you believed we actually have a jar that is somehow magically sentient, and which understands if a person is swearing, and which then keeps *track of it*. Without any hands or a pen or anything.”

Brand glared at me.

“Honestly, how long have you known me?” I said. “At what point did I become Gandalf?”

“We decided not to run!” Quinn shouted from the entrance. “Can we come in now?”

“Yes,” Brand said on a loud sigh.

Quinn and Anna thundered into the office. They were both still in pajamas. Quinn also had what appeared to be a glue trap attached to his bottom jaw. The sort of thing we used to catch roaches.

Brand pointed at it.

“Oh, it’s clean,” Quinn said quickly. “I just opened the package last night.”

“Did you honestly think that was my first question?” Brand asked.

“You mean how? Anna dragged me out of bed this morning. Kind of literally? And the dragging continued across most of the floor.”

“He wanted to sleep through this,” Anna said with no remorse. “Can I see the photo?”

“Max, take them inside, okay?” I said. “We’ll join you for breakfast in a bit.” I tapped on his knuckles to make sure he wasn’t wincing in pain, then let him go.

The three of them tromped out of there.

“Miss Barrie,” Brand whispered, shaking his head. “There’s a memory.”

“I guess she was looking for us that night,” I said, whispering too.

He studied my face, taking apart every muscle twitch, every twist of the lips. He put so much time into handling me, my Brand.

Finally he said, “You did good, Rune. That spell? I’m glad you have it.”

“I guess I am too.”

“Let’s go find some cookie batter,” he said. He slung an arm around me, gave me a quick, rough shake, and led us out of there.

## 04 - The Principality Ciaran

*Ciaran... Ciaran...*

Ciaran put down the braided hose of the half-story hookah. The voices were annoying, but honestly, what day didn't involve spending a certain amount of time deciding which voices in your head to listen to?

Then the voice shouted, somewhat defiantly, "Goddamnit, Ciaran, stop drifting off and answer my fucking question!"

*Ah, that's right, I was on a phone call.* Ciaran looked down at his hand and saw the readout said: "The Grouchy One With the Nice Eyes." That was how he'd entered Brand's number, back in the days before learning his name became inevitable.

"Yes, dear?" Ciaran said, lifting the phone to his ear.

"Do you even remember what we were talking about?" Brand accused.

"What a strange question. If you suspect the answer is no, why ask me to admit it? It's a rather stark assessment of your conversational abilities."

"Layne," Brand said, possibly through a firm row of teeth. "Have you seen them? They're supposed to let us know when they go out."

"I have not seen them, no. Why would I have?"

"Because they're sitting in the park in your neighborhood."

"If you know that, then why call?" Ciaran asked, genuinely confused.

"Because I don't know *why* they're there. And maybe they don't quite know that I can tell where they are at any given moment."

"You really are rather lucky they put up with you," Ciaran decided. "Showing love through cell phone spyware isn't always a good look. Now. Listen. I'll just trot over and say hello. Is it about Magnus?"

“Magnus Academy? Why would it be about Magnus?”

“Because I dreamt of Magnus last night.”

Brand was quiet for a beat or two. “I... don’t know what to do with that. It’s like you and Quinn mailed away for the same diploma from the same shitty crystal ball infomercial. Just make sure Layne is alright, please?”

“As you say,” Ciaran agreed, and disconnected. Or at least he put the phone down, confident someone else would end the call for him.

He gathered the folds of his silk robe about him and walked to his dressing wing. A speedy sixty minutes later, he performed said trotting across the street.

Outside his compound, he remained both seen and unseen. He’d layered his property with a most particular bit of magic, which kept neighborhood people from understanding where his house actually was, while allowing them to appreciate him and his outfits.

The very patient Layne Dawncreek sat on a park bench by the manmade pond, staring at the floating lilies.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Ciaran said, sweeping into a seat and folding one long leg over a knee.

“Oh. Sorry. I was looking for you, but couldn’t find your place. And I didn’t want to intrude. So I thought maybe I’d see you taking a walk.”

“Really? That sounds rather vigorous of me.”

Layne smiled back. They’d dyed the ends of their beautiful brown hair with some sort of household chemical. The uneven frosted tips bobbed along with their laughter. Ciaran would need to teach them better hair color tricks. His own hair was blue today with cotton-candy streaks.

“Is everything okay, sweets?” Ciaran asked. “Does it have to do with Magnus?”

Layne’s mouth opened in a small O.

And why wasn’t the blue-eyed grouch here to witness this? Ciaran always regretted a wasted flourish. For now, though, Ciaran simply folded his hands on his lap and kept quiet, because he’d found it was the best way to help young people get around to their point.

“I... showed them a spell,” Layne finally admitted. “I wanted to get your advice.”

Ciaran was fairly sure this wasn’t the point, either, but they were closer. “Of course. By all means.”

As a flush crept up their neck, Layne got up and started kicking at the ground. Ciaran wasn’t sure what that was about, but eventually Layne bent over and picked up a thin, flat rock.

“Okay, this is messy, but I’ll wipe up afterwards.” And then the dear child rolled up their sleeve, pulled out a box-cutter razor, and sliced a thin line across a raised lump on their forearm.

Magical spiraled around them—and *oh what a flavor it had!* Ciaran nearly stuck out his tongue to taste the air.

Layne put the flat stone on the ground and spread their fingers above it. As blood pattered into the dirt, necromantic magic consumed the living infection in the lump on their arm. Slowly, grains of sand and dirt began to creep to the stone. The raw material was absorbed, and turned the flat surface into something more round and thick.

Gasping, Layne pulled out a red-and-white handkerchief and tied it around their arm.

“There,” they said, pleased. “Rune’s been obsessed with one of your spells, and this is the reverse of it.”

“My spell?” Ciaran said in surprise.

“He calls it Shale. He said you once turned a solid wall into a brittle layer of rock, back in the Westlands. I thought if you can make a rock smaller, why not make it bigger?” They continued to dart their eyes to and from

Ciaran, nervous. “What do you think?”

“Many things,” Ciaran admitted. “Is exposing the infection to air necessary for the magic?”

“I... don’t know. It works better that way for some spells. But I think it’s about my willpower and the blood, not the infection.”

“Hmm. I’m not a big fan about the injury.”

“Oh, it closes up very quickly—that’s part of the magic. And I don’t always need to cut. For defensive spells, I can reabsorb the infection. But, like I said, for some spells, this just works better.”

“I can appreciate that, dear, but it *stains*. Perhaps some sort of batting for your arm. Oh! Like a leg warmer?”

“That’s a good idea. So you think the spell is interesting?”

“No,” Ciaran said. “I think it’s masterful. It’s ridiculously talented, even for immolation magic. I’ve already made a mental note to talk with your Aunt—you are horrifically undertrained. The people you showed at Magnus must have been drooling at the prospect of training you.”

“Oh. No. They rejected my idea.”

Ciaran stilled. “Excuse me?”

“I was applying for an independent study. I don’t want to attend full time—Magnus is mostly for scions using sigil magic. But I was wondering if they had ways of helping me develop my necromancy.”

“They turned away the kin of an Arcana,” Ciaran said, to make sure he had all the details.

“Well. I mean. Yes? But I didn’t use Rune’s name when I applied. I want to do this on my own.” Layne saw Ciaran’s intense focus, and their flush slowly paled. “It’s not exactly a surprise. I know Magnus can be stuffy and inflexible. You should hear the stories Anna tells me. It really frustrates her.”

“Anna too?” Ciaran murmured.

“I shouldn’t speak for her, but—”

“Field trip!” Ciaran announced, sweeping up from the bench. He began to stride back to his house, and saw that Layne remained standing, open-mouthed, with a sopping cloth tied to their bleeding arm.

Ciaran realized he was failing some basic childcare lesson.

“Mmm. Maybe a bandage and a cocktail first. Then we’ll have some fun.”

One hour and a horse-drawn carriage ride later, Ciaran found himself sitting on a patio at Sun Estate with both Anna and Layne.

The house was unusually empty—apparently most adults were off hunting down supplies for the Solstice party they were hosting over the upcoming weekend.

Layne vanished for a bit to prepare tea, which left Ciaran and Anna alone for a good twenty minutes. They spent most of that time staring at each other. Ciaran was almost impressed at the thirteen-year-old’s intensity. If she ever learned to arch an eyebrow, she’d become quite devastating.

“So,” Ciaran finally said. “Tell me about Magnus.”

Anna’s face emptied of all emotion.

Ciaran sighed. “Yes-yes, you are a frightfully resourceful child, and yes-yes, you are quite capable of looking after yourself. But indulge me. Layne seems to think that some of the stories you’ve told are a touch frustrating.”

“Why do you want to know?” Anna asked.

And *ob* did that speak volumes about this child, Ciaran thought. Most scions her age only focused on the question, not the motivation behind it.

“I suppose,” Ciaran said thoughtfully, “that I’m in the mood to do mischief. And between you and me, my favorite targets of mischief are arseholes.”

“Oh. The etiquette teacher,” Anna said. “What did Layne tell you?”

“They’ve left the subject enticingly blank.”

Anna huffed a bit and fidgeted on the patio chair. “It’s nothing I can’t handle. Lady Fitch is just...annoying. I hate etiquette class.”

“Good for you,” Ciaran said. “But how exactly is she annoying?”

More fidgeting. More huffing. Finally the sore tooth pulled free. “She keeps docking my grade because she says I don’t smile enough. She says a scion needs to smile even when they don’t feel like smiling, and I could do it if I practiced more.”

Ciaran kept quiet and waited.

“It’s just...” Anna waved a hand at her face. “The muscles on this side don’t work well. When I smile it looks like I’m... What’s the word? Sneer. Lady Fitch says it looks like I’m sneering. I’m trying, I really am, but she keeps telling me I need to try harder in front of the entire class. I hate it.”

Anna suddenly straightened in her chair. Her eyes went wide and round.

Ciaran knew his eyes had gone quicksilver. He batted his eyelashes and banked his Aspect before it could grow. It was a little too... *on the nose*, given the secrets he worked so hard to keep.

“Well,” he finally said.

Layne bustled back onto the patio with a laden silver platter. Brand was behind them, his arms full of overpacked paper bags. He put them down on the ground and gave our tea party a curious look.

“I need to borrow these lovely people for a quick trip,” Ciaran told him.

“What for?” he asked.

“I’m going to destroy their enemies.”

Brand paused. “Will you have them back by dinner?”

“With an appetite,” Ciaran promised grandly.

The carriage clattered to a stop just outside Magnus’s main administration building. All of the roads on the campus were paved in cobblestone, which gave their entrance a rather nice, clipped Victorian fanfare.

It had been many, many, many years since Ciaran was taught at Magnus—and even then, it had been under an alias, and back on the original campus in Atlantis. He doubted any of his peers from that time were even alive.

“Sweets,” he said to Layne. “Who evaluated your request?”

“Lord Martin,” Layne said. “He’s the vice chancellor. Are... are we really going to talk to him?”

“Oh yes. And Lady Fitch.”

Layne and Anna exchanged looks—an entire sibling conversation governed by face muscles and eye narrowing.

Ciaran turned in his seat so that he could look at both of them at once. “Have you not noticed that people seem to be calling you Lady or Lord an awful lot?”

“That’s how stupid scions talk,” Anna said.

“Mmm. No. Remind me to have a possibly physical conversation with Rune about this later. He must do better. You see, my little friend: you *are* scions.”

“Our Dad—” Anna started.

Ciaran waved a hand, noticed his platinum ring was a bit smudged, and breathed hot air on it. As he buffed it to a nice glow, he explained. “Your father’s status, and how it changed, is irrelevant. Rune has claimed you as kin. You are cousins, however many degrees separated. And you are his *heir*, Annawan. Do you understand? You are kin to an Arcana, darlings. Anna, you are Lady Dawncreek. Layne, whatever word you prefer is yours as well, though may I suggest Liege? It suits your pronouns.”

“We... what?” Layne said.

“That...” The gears behind Anna’s eyes were moving fast. She seized on the most unbelievable thing of all. “*Lord Corbie*? Are you telling me Corbie—Corbitant Dawncreek, who pees when he laughs too hard, is a Lord?”

“Quite,” Ciaran said.

“But,” Anna said helplessly. “But I don’t want that! What does it even mean? There better not be a dress code!”

“It means,” Ciaran explained, “that you have one more thing that people will try to take away from you. And while, yes, there is an entire line of argument that says you must treat your title with subtlety and responsibility, I’d also argue that it makes a fairly good cudgel against the right asshole. Follow me.”

Ciaran’s mind wandered a bit after that. Eventually he found himself seated in a classroom, admiring the room while he waited.

It was cleverly staged for etiquette, Ciaran had to admit. Fake wall partitions helped create a series of different settings, much like department store displays. There was a formal dining placement; a restaurant table; a scaled version of a court audience chamber. In the right hands, the course could actually be useful.

Then Ciaran spotted a desk in the corner. With a sound of interest, he hopped over there and took a look. The only thing of curiosity was a locked drawer. Ciaran concentrated, channeled a whiff of willpower, and snapped the lock with a good pull. Inside was a series of folders labeled in elaborate cursive.

He found Anna’s, removed it, and returned to his seat for some reading.

“I did tell them we were here, didn’t I?” he wondered out loud after a minute.

“You made the receptionist shake,” Anna said.

Ciaran vaguely remembered that. “But the vice chancellor is on his way, yes?”

“And Lady Fitch,” Layne said. “She was at lunch.”

“Well, that won’t do,” Ciaran said.

Anna narrowed her eyes. “You told the receptionist that you hoped Lady Fitch had a chance to get a few bites in, and that she didn’t trip in her rush to abandon it.”

Ciaran also vaguely remembered that.

“Are we still going to be students here afterwards?” Anna demanded. “Can I get home schooled?”

“Trust me, darling. I really will do my best. And you should be pleased I’m including you. Aren’t adults supposed to lie to children whenever anything meaningful is happening?”

“We’re not children,” Anna said stubbornly.

“Everyone at Sun Estate, with the possible exception of your Aunt, is a child. Talk to me after you’ve removed the training wheels from your first century.”

Anna looked like she wanted to dig into that comment, but the door opened and two people stepped in.

Lady Fitch wore a sweeping seafoam gown. Lord Martin wore brown. Just... brown. And a cardigan.

“Good gracious,” Ciaran said. “There you are. I was nearly about to start knocking down walls.”

The vice chancellor blinked in surprise. “I... my apologies, Lord Ciaran. This is quite a surprise. I believe this is Lady and Lord Dawncreek, then?”

“Liege Dawncreek,” Layne said, with just the right amount of bite.

“Liege Dawncreek, I see,” Lord Martin said. “While it’s... nice to see you all, I should state upfront that it would be inappropriate to discuss their schooling without their Aunt in the room, or perhaps an official from Sun Court.”

“Trust me, Lord Martin,” Ciaran said. “You would not want Rune Sun in this room right now. So let’s set that unfortunate comment aside so that we may first discuss Liege Dawncreek’s independent study.”

The skin around his tight collar turned a mottled shade of purple and pink. “We gave the matter ample consideration. That said, we are not equipped to train scions in such a rare, obscure form of magic.”

“I should say not. You’ll be quite the busy bee finding the right tutor. But at the end of the day, I’m sure your Board of Regents would hate to miss the chance to add such a *rare, obscure form of magic* to their roster. It will be quite the feather in your cap.”

“I—”

“You may thank me in a moment for correcting your misstep,” Ciaran said. “Lady Fitch, I don’t believe I’ve had the occasion. I am the Principality Ciaran.”

“Your reputation precedes you,” she said through thin lips. “Of course, I don’t believe you have any wards enrolled?”

“Quite so,” Ciaran said. “Though I’ve always held out hope that there will be fat, blue-haired godbabies in my future. How long have you taught Anna, Lady Fitch?”

“Since she began her current course,” Lady Fitch said, flicking unhappy looks at Lord Martin, who pretended not to notice.

“You must have realized by now that she’s an unusually talented scion.”

“That may be so, but Etiquette is not about power.”

“What an outrageous statement,” Ciaran said cheerfully.

“Lord Ciaran,” Lord Martin said with a considerable amount of throat clearing. “The faculty are in the middle of an administrative retreat today, so Lady Fitch and I must—”

“Excellent,” Ciaran said, clapping his hands together. “I imagine that includes physical therapists?”

“It does. But as I was saying—”

“Because I was just thinking that a physical therapist would be so wonderfully appropriate for Lady Dawncreek. She has quite a few advantages these days that she once lacked. I’m quite sure the muscles on her face are stronger than she imagines. She has the capacity to improve. Wouldn’t you agree that providing such therapy—to, say, improve her *smile*—is a much better training course than public censure?”

Lord Martin opened up his mouth, and Ciaran stood. It was a sharp and dramatic gesture, and Lord Martin's mouth snapped shut. Ciaran said, "I have had to interrupt you twice now. You will not enjoy how I handle a third such instance. Choose your words wisely."

The puce coloring reached his cheeks.

Ciaran sighed. "Darlings, you have missed nearly every point. They are there, at your feet, swimming about like duckies. So let me make this painfully simple. *Do as I say.*"

Ciaran air-fluffed the back of his cape and sat down. He opened the file he'd been reading and resumed.

"Lord Ciaran," the vice chancellor said with painstaking care. "I am unaware of any issues Lady Dawncreek may have been having, though I will gladly—"

"She is recalcitrant," Lady Fitch said.

Ciaran smiled at the papers and slowly raised his gaze.

"You appear to appreciate bluntness, so let me be blunt. Anna is bossy and recalcitrant. I train her in good habits by breaking bad ones."

Next to Ciaran, he could hear Anna breathing. A deep, angry inhalation.

"Bossy," Ciaran said, rolling the word along his tongue. "I have always hated that word. It's been used like a gag on young women for centuries. It creates pliable young women, and pliable young women do not make great leaders. Annawan Dawncreek has been named Rune Saint John's *beir*. And yet, I can see here that you are quite committed to using words that seek to undermine her potential. They're all but littered through her file."

Lady Fitch actually stamped a foot. "My Lord, that is most inappropriate! Those are private!"

"Mmm," Ciaran said. "Your notes make quite the read. They say as much about you as—"

And now Ciaran interrupted himself. Because he saw something in the file that made his pulse burn. He actually went back and read it again to make sure he wasn't mistaken.

"Anna," Ciaran said. "Layne. Please excuse us."

"But—"

Ciaran turned his gaze on Anna. Layne grabbed their sister's hand and pulled her out of the room at a stumbling jog.

When the door closed behind them, Ciaran stood up, walked over to Lady Fitch, and handed her the file. He then tapped his best nail against one of the passages.

"Is this true," he whispered.

The comment read: *Anna became angry, and everyone heard the sound of wings. Aspect? Slapped ruler against desk—sharp sound settled her.*

"We were in class at the time," Lady Fitch said, and only a quick tremble of her lower lip betrayed her nerves.

"Tell me," Ciaran said. "How many children have you ever known to manifest an Aspect?"

Lord Martin took a step to the side.

"Modern Aspects are rare and, in most instances, exaggerated or fraudulent," Lady Fitch said. "There are quite a few respected academic studies on the matter."

"Anna's Aspect is quite real," Ciaran said. "And you have interfered in its development."

"I wouldn't say that," she insisted as Lord Martin took another sideways step.

"You foolish, foolish woman," Ciaran said. "Do you have any idea what Rune would do to you? What Corinne

would?”

“Anna’s aunt—”

“Anna’s aunt is a Companion of Atlantis and has been rejuvenated to peak health. Keep that in mind.”

Lady Fitch swallowed.

Rivulets of bright silver light began to shine on their faces, a reflection of the rising power in Ciaran’s eyes. “These children are dear to me, and you have *failed them*. That ends now.”

“Lord Ciaran, perhaps, if you’d like to come to my office, we can discuss a way to manage this situation?” Lord Martin said anxiously.

“Discuss?” Ciaran said, and they both stepped back against the flare of magic that poured from him. “You will *listen*. A salary will not be necessary, but I will require a certain budget for couture. I don’t have a single closet dedicated to the schoolmarm look.”

“E-Excuse me?” Lord Martin said.

“I’m Anna’s new etiquette teacher. And I’ll supervise Layne’s independent study. They are simply too valuable to leave to your thick-fingered efforts. Lady Fitch, do have a wonderful time cleaning out your desk and burning your files. Lord Martin, it will be a *pleasure* seeing you so frequently. The mind can barely imagine.”

Ciaran swept out.

Things ended with an ice cream cone, as things were wont to do.

They were sitting on the carriage’s tailgate, legs swinging free. They’d parked by a pier on the north shore, facing the still, black-green Atlantic.

“You’re quiet,” Layne said to Ciaran.

“Am I? I suppose today has come terribly close to a moral lesson. I should really do something about that soon. Possibly with a lime peel.”

“But you’re really going to come to Magnus? And teach me?” Anna said.

“And I’m really going to school?” Layne asked, followed very hastily by, “Just for the one course! I’m not enrolling.”

“Are you sure about that?” Ciaran asked.

Layne took their time to think about their answer. “Yes. I don’t want to be a student. I just want to know more about my magic. And keep volunteering at the hospital. And... everything. There’s so much I want. I want *everything*. Does that make sense?”

“Does it ever,” Ciaran said with relish, and nibbled the waffle cone.

## 05 - The Tree

It should not have been snowing like this. Not this time of year, not these fat, lazy flakes that muffled everything in a half-foot of powder.

The Convocation had been quick to reassure people that it was a good sign. After over a year of climate-related craziness thanks to Ashton Saint Gabriel's weather magic in the Westlands, the Ladies World and Priestess were close to undoing the damage—but the final stretch promised some extremely unusual storms.

So we had an equinox celebration in front of us with lots of snow, and with Corbie cobbling together about six different human winter celebrations—all with a heavy emphasis on gift-giving. We'd be celebrating most of those the next day.

"It's not as if Atlantean holidays are fucking kid-friendly," Brand said as we trekked with the kids through the forest on Sun Estate. "Corbie making a raft for his action figures from the stalks of the Belladonna Lily was a fun fucking use of healing sigils."

Each equinox and solstice had their own sacred yet toxic flower, and each flower generally subsidized an economy of safety paraphernalia to curb hospital visits. After Corbie went after the Belladonna Lily, we'd had to buy a locked display case. He asked for a Christmas tree as a substitute.

"What about that one?" I said, pointing.

"It's the first fir tree you've seen," he said. "Try a little harder. And I'm not carrying anything over six feet."

We were distracted by a low buzzing sound through the branches of the pines. Half a second later it was followed by a whistle, a thunk, and a staticky cough as a drone plummeted into a bush.

"Goddamnit," Brand said. He looked over his shoulder at Anna, whose knife holster was now empty. "Quinn, pack that damn thing up! Anna, drones do not grow on trees!"

She gestured at the neatly disabled drone on the ground as if to say, *And?*

"Congratulations, and thanks for not killing anyone," Brand said.

“You look like you want to tell me not to put anyone’s eye out,” Anna said. “I have thick skin. Do you want to say that to me?”

I thought to myself, *She’s fucking cheating.*

Brand peered at her. “You’re not good enough or bad enough to hit an eye. Don’t flatter yourself.” He turned, stopped, turned back. “*Yet.* You can do anything once you grow up and get your head out of your ass.”

Max sidled up to me and whispered, “She’s cheating. And did he say money doesn’t grow on trees?”

“He said drones, so it doesn’t count,” I whispered back, because I’m almost positive it wouldn’t help me win a row.

I very deliberately did not check the paper in my pocket. Brand hadn’t figured out yet that the kids made bingo cards filled with Brand’s new and awkwardly dad-like responses for handling the influx of children in our life. The winner wouldn’t need to mop marble for two months.

Bushes shook to our left, and Addam and Quinn tromped out. Quinn had a sad look on his face and an unresponsive remote control in his hands.

“We found nothing over there,” Addam said. “I’m almost positive we have some Eastern red cedars in the glade by the back road.”

Then the bushes shook to the left of us, and Corbie, with a sound of great effort, tugged an old-fashioned sled with metal runners into the clearing. He sat down on it with a grunt and gave us all a hopeful look. When no one responded, he casually kicked the rope leash in our direction.

“He didn’t eat his oatmeal this morning,” Max hissed quickly.

“Corbie, remember when you didn’t eat your oatmeal this morning?” I said. “Now you’re going to have to wait until someone messes up and has to pull your sled as a punishment.”

Corbie didn’t seem to think that would take long. He rolled off the sled to make angels—or at least a big circular dent. He was more or less one, big, padded cushion, trapped in a puffy winter coat Corrine had to pull out of storage.

“Max and Quinn and Anna, look over here with me,” Addam said. “We can do this.”

Brand came over to me as they vanished back into the snow-laden undercover. “Why do people keep saying stupid things to me?”

“Mmmm?” I said.

“And Quinn keeps checking a piece of paper in his pocket.”

“That’s strange.”

“Rune, is there a piece of paper in your pocket too?”

“You mean like money?” I said cagily.

Or maybe not that cagily, because Brand said, “I can tell you all the ways that this will go.”

I ended up slapping the bingo card into his hands. His eyes scrolled up and down it, and then he handed it back to me. The fact he said nothing was perhaps even more worrisome than an actual threat.

I heard a crunch of snow, and Corbie tugged on the back hem of my jacket.

“Can I have a birthday party for Flynn tomorrow too?” he asked.

“Flynn’s birthday just happens to be tomorrow?”

Corbie nodded seriously.

“I can’t help but note that you’ve found yet another holiday with presents,” I said.

Corbie did what he always did when I said something that didn’t particularly appeal to him. He waited.

I sighed. “Sure. Absolutely. We’ll have Flynn’s birthday too.”

“With carrots and lettuce?” Corbie said. His eyes drifted left as he saw an opportunity escaping. “And saltwater taffy. And this.”

He managed to extract a crinkled piece of paper from his pocket. It had been torn from a glossy magazine, and showed a picture of not just a bouncy house, but a miniature three-story bouncy house. There was even an inflatable pool behind it.

“What kind of magazines are we ordering?” I asked Brand.

“Don’t look at me. Addam gets about sixty of those *hey-you’re-rich-here’s-some-shit-you-don’t-need-and-no-one-else-can-afford* catalogs. The ones where you can buy islands in the classifieds. Do not mention the swear jar,” Brand added seriously, bending over to stare straight into Corbie’s eyes.

“Corbie, we need to draw a line at the bouncy house,” I said.

“Like with crayons?” he asked.

“Not like with crayons. You get your dinosaur birthday party with carrots and lettuce. No bouncy house.”

“Okay,” he said, and went back to tow his sled further into the clearing.

“Were you able to get Addam to cancel the dinner?” Brand asked.

“Well, I did start asking a question about the dinner, and Addam asked if I was going to try to get him to cancel it. Does that count?”

Addam and Corinne had got the idea in their head that we needed an “adults’ night out.” He refused to tell me what he had planned—only that we’d need to dress nicely, and it would take place at sunset, a few hours before the equinox party tomorrow evening. Traditional equinox parties began close to midnight, but we were fudging it by a few hours for the youngest folk.

“Do you *think* that counts?” Brand asked.

“No. We’re going to have to go to dinner. I need to do laundry today,” I sighed.

“If we’re going to be in the field, I’ll need to wear my tactical gear.”

“Not a fucking chance,” I said. “If I have to wear a button-down shirt, so do you. You can carry your knives in a fanny pack if you have to.”

I expected a little more pushback, but Brand had frozen in place. I watched him tilt his head and smile a little. “We’re being flanked,” he whispered.

Then he turned with unerring accuracy and spotted Max, who was crouched behind a tree and patting a ball of snow into shape. Max, now visibly nervous, shifted his weight and cocked his hand.

“Please,” Brand told him—and a snowball smacked him in the back of the head.

Brand, incredulous, turned to face what he’d assumed would be the least likely threat. Quinn, half-hidden behind his own tree, rapidly grabbed for another handful of snow. His Adam’s apple jumped as he said, “I’m a seer? A really good one? I know which way to duck.”

“And I’m a Companion?” Brand said. “A really good one? And I can engage in a complicated series of random motions leading to an unpredictable attack that will result in all the snow I can grab being shoved down the back of your fucking shirt?”

Quinn didn’t even have time to consider this as Brand launched. There were leaps, pivots, and madman-like rolls

that took him closer and closer to Quinn, who yelped and ran.

As Brand pursued, Addam and Anna and a newly arrived Layne came into the clearing.

“Hero,” Addam said. “Should I be concerned that Brandon has learned techniques to fight seers?”

“Nah,” I said. “He knows how I feel about prophets. He learned these moves ages ago. It’s actually rather sweet. But maybe you should give Quinn some backup?”

“I’m on Brand’s team!” Max shouted, and dove into the brush. Addam said something he usually didn’t under his breath and bolted after them.

“And find a tree!” I shouted.

Anna looked at me, and then she looked at Layne. “Fine, you’re on my team,” she said, grabbed their hand, and dragged them off into the woods.

Corbie and I exchanged a look. Neither of us were really runners, but I suppose we’d be good at laying down in comfortable ambush points. “What do you say?” I said. “I could be your teammate.”

Corbie bit his lower lip and looked around.

“There is literally no one else left,” I said.

“Are you a Companion though?” he asked.

“I am not.”

“My aunt Corinne is a Companion. She makes the snowball for me. And she throws it where I tell her. She never misses.”

“I can fly and light things on fire,” I pointed out, maybe a little defensively.

“But will that melt the snow?” he said.

I picked Corbie up in one arm, grabbed his sled in the other, and trudged in the direction of Quinn’s high-pitched screams. Before I’d made it out of my first glade, I was passed by Corinne and Queenie, who were carrying what appeared to be a ten-foot-long saw.

“Found this in the attic,” Corinne said, not even a little out of breath.

“I don’t know half the things my father got up to,” I said, marveling a bit.

Corinne ran a thoughtful eye over Corbie, maybe to make sure he wasn’t bleeding, and then a more critical eye over me. “Addam said you were asking about dinner.”

“Just casually.”

“We’re not cancelling it. I promise, it will be fun. We have something planned. We invited Aunt Diana too.”

We broke through the treeline. There was another clearing ahead with a ring of trees, including at least two that looked like promising holiday victims. People were weaving between trunks and plastering each other with snowballs. Since I had Corbie in my arm, I dropped the sled and brushed a finger along my emerald ring, releasing a Shield.

“You chickenshit,” Brand called.

Corbie looked up at me and I said, “That counts. Add it to his bill.”

My cousin began to squirm, so I set him down. He ran over to Corinne—or at least he made a series of up and down motions with his puffy snowsuit legs—and began to make hoarse sounds of entreaty.

“Listen up!” Brand shouted. “I want *this* tree cut down in an hour. I don’t care who does it. Make sure there are no animals or undead in the branches. I’m going to get a hot chocolate.”

“Why don’t we get to go have a hot chocolate?” Max said, looking a little abandoned.

Brand raised his voice just a little and said, “Because I said so.”

As he headed away, I felt a lump in my throat. I pulled the piece of paper out of my pocket, spotted *Because I said So*, and said, “Bingo.”

“But he almost always gives it to me,” Quinn said, confused.

“How would he give it to you?” Max demanded.

Layne, who was picking up one end of the giant saw, said, “He caught Quinn with the bingo card yesterday at lunch.” When Max opened his mouth in outrage, they added, “And he caught you at dinner. And Anna at breakfast.”

I said, “So he didn’t just choose me, he chose me *over all of you*.”

I started to follow Brand to the hot chocolate.

“He’s not going to stop talking about this all evening,” I heard Max mutter behind me.

“I’m sure that didn’t occur to Brand at all,” Anna said.

## 06 - The Dinner

I sat at my desk, signing off on a batch of subcontractor claims while trying not to jump up and help Brand with his tie. The shadow of Brand doing it himself looked like puppet murder against the wall.

“Stay where you fucking are,” he growled at me.

“You could have done more to get us out of this,” I said pointedly. We were not fancy dinner type of people. The fact that Corinne and Addam insisted on an adults-night-out genuinely mystified me.

I felt a tug on my shirt sleeve, and a small hoarse voice said, “Can I borrow this?”

“Absolutely,” I told Corbie, while saying to Brand, “You could have even viewed it as a bodyguard activity. A way of protecting me.”

Brand stopped tying his tie and scooped up Corbie beneath the armpits before the boy could run out of the room. He shook Corbie gently in my direction. It took a second for me to realize Corbie had a pair of giant scissors in his hands.

“Um,” I said.

Corbie swiveled his head to look at Brand upside down. “I’m making place settings for Flynn’s birthday. You said I could.”

“Fold the paper, don’t cut it,” Brand said. He put Corbie back on his feet but snatched the scissors away. Corbie scampered, passing Addam along the way, who swooped in with two flutes of champagne.

He put one glass in front of me, and the second on a table near Brand. Then, as if it was the safest, most natural thing in the world, he took the ends of Brand’s tie and began to fasten it for him.

“Diana’s car is pulling up,” he said. “We will leave shortly.”

He wore a black button-down shirt tucked into snowy white slacks. It was an odd look for him—or at least, I thought that, until a casual angling in front of a table lamp proved that the slacks were very thin, and he wore no underwear. What was visible under the hem of the tucked in shirt burned a memory on my brain like a lithograph.

“It’s like living with fucking mimes,” Brand said. “Rune checks out your package, you know he’s checking out your package, he blushes, you smile. You need new material.”

Addam patted the final, tied knot, and stepped back. “Take up your drinks, heroes. We have guests.”

Alcohol seemed like a plus, so we grabbed the flutes and followed him. I don’t know where Max and Quinn were, but I heard faint, explosive-like poundings from outside the corridor windows. Max was practicing sigil magic, mostly likely; which meant Anna was probably there trying to convince him to Will the sigil into joint custody, and Quinn was using his own magic to stamp out flames.

The sun was angling low by then. It would be an early dinner, so we could get back for the equinox festivities before midnight. We’d fudged things a bit “for the sake of Corbie,” but the truth is none of us were anxious to drink until dawn.

“Does it seem weird that the Tower is babysitting for us?” I asked as we covered ground to the main hall. “It feels like a favor.”

“Mmm,” Addam said. “He is Quinn’s godfather. I believe his protection of Quinn in our absence is an expectation.”

“Plus,” Brand said, “if he’s nearby, maybe that means we’ll get an emergency call while we’re out.”

“That’s right,” I said. “I mean, what else can we do if Lord Tower calls us with a mission?”

I said that as we entered the main hall, where Diana was putting her coat on a coatrack that we’d made from plywood. Corinne was pouring more champagne from a bottle she’d nestled in an ice bucket we’d found in the basement.

“If that happens,” Diana said, “I suspect your court administrators will answer the phone and remind Lord Tower that you are now a King.”

It was a comment that made me feel good, even if no one in the room reacted as if they were, in fact, in the presence of a King. Also, the look on Diana’s face clearly aimed to remind me that her nephews were in my care, so Standards.

At that second, car headlights flashed through the glass panes above the front door. Brand peeked out a window and said, “Shit. You didn’t even need to say his name three times in a mirror.”

We set the Tower and Mayan up on our best patio and dropped Corbie onto a nearby chaise lounge. He was on his best hyperactive behavior since we promised that the Tower would walk him down to Flynn’s enclosure to visit our pre-historic rhinoceros.

On my way back inside, Anna waited patiently in the front foyer, holding the door open for us. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I have everything under control. There’s a plan.”

“Okay,” I said. “That won’t obsessively worry me at all for the next three or four hours.”

Corrine added, “If Corbie gets locked behind, in, or out of anything, you will not enjoy the next month at all.”

“So many loopholes in that,” Brand whispered.

Then the five of us, wearing our finest, trailed down to the beach. I had no idea why, or what to expect. But I had to admit: we cut a nice figure. With the sun setting and our fancy attire, as well as the suddenly-warming temperatures, there was something vaguely Gatsby-esque about it. Or maybe it was the champagne.

As we crested the dune that led to our beach, I saw a yacht was parked by our barely-rehabilitated dock along a stone jetty.

“You bought a yacht?” I whispered.

“Rented for the evening,” he said.

“I can’t even tell if that’s better or worse,” I said.

We boarded the yacht. It was small but sumptuous, and came with a small team of professionals to keep us alive and afloat. There was more champagne on the... prow? The word for the front of a boat. As we drifted away from the jetty, powerful motors churned beneath us, and we began to cut through the evening wind.

“Okay,” I said. “Maybe dinner on the ocean isn’t so bad.”

“The yacht is taking us *to* dinner,” Addam said. “We are eating elsewhere.”

Brand and I exchanged a glance, and even Corinne joined in.

Brand said, “We’re not eating on this? You rented this just to take us from point A to point B? Like an Uber?”

“It’s a thing,” Addam said.

We broke up into weird eddies of conversation after that. Addam struck up an animated, amateur conversation with the captain, while Brand went to search the ship for just-in-case weapons. Diana, equally amused and horrified, followed him. She seemed excited too when Brand found a harpoon.

“You’ll have fun,” Corinne said, joining me at the railing. “I promise. Do you honestly think I’d set up a night that wasn’t wholly built around you and Brand?”

“Really? Is that a warning at all?”

She finished off her champagne. “Nope. You two deserve this. I know you’ve been missing field action.”

“There’s going to be field action? Is that why Addam told me to store some stealth spells?”

“Reconnaissance only, and after dinner. It’ll be dessert.”

“I’m going to need to write you a thank you card afterwards, aren’t I?”

It was a joke, and a bad one, but the look on her face became speculative. “No. We’re beyond that, aren’t we? You’ve given my kids a home. You’ve...” She choked off a bit, and shook her head. A gust of damp, salty air blew her dark bangs off her forehead. “You’ve given them a yard. They eat well. They are constantly surrounded by people who look after them. I don’t know how this is my life, but I’m grateful.”

“I feel like I don’t do enough,” I admitted.

“That’s insane,” she said, and decided I needed more alcohol. The prow was dimly lit—perhaps atmospherically—so she had to hunt a bit. When my glass was full, she continued. “Why would you even say that?”

“Because Anna is my heir, and I don’t know what’s going on in her head half the time.”

“She’s been upset her boobs are growing and it’s fucking up her knife swing,” Corinne said. “Do you want to talk to her about that?”

“Not ever,” I said. “That doesn’t sound like a Me thing. And if it is a Me thing, then it’s going to be a Brand thing. Because of the knives.”

Corinne smiled at me, though maybe a little in exasperation. “I think all adults are worried they’re messing up their children. We are Atlantean. We spend small eternities as adults, but only a handful of years as minors. And those years? They influence *everything* that comes after. I’m terrified I’m failing Layne and Anna.”

“You aren’t,” I said, because that was just the truth.

“Really? Because Anna and I... It’s not like what I had with Kevan. I don’t feel like a Companion to Anna. I still feel like a mother. And Layne? I don’t know what Layne wants from Ciaran, and it worries me.”

“Well, *that* I can answer. Layne isn’t looking for a lover, Corinne. They’re looking for a teacher. And you can’t blame them, because they’ve got a gift worth teaching.”

“You can’t teach Layne?”

“Not necromancy. Not a rare type of necromancy like immolation. And... Ciaran is... insanely powerful. More powerful than he lets on. You just need to trust me on that. If Layne is looking for a mentor, they could do a hell of a lot worse than one of the strongest magic-users in the city.”

A motley skyline of lights had appeared on the horizon, close to shore. I knew what it was, and was more surprised than anything when the yacht veered *toward* it.

“Holy shit,” I said.

I heard footsteps behind me and Brand said, “Are we going to the Green Docks?” He pointed. “Are we having fucking dinner there?”

“Dinner at the *Honey Pot*, and unfinished business for dessert,” Corinne said, tipping her glass at the shimmering lights.

The *SS Vaitarna* vanished in the Arabian Sea many, many years ago. If you relaxed your eyes just so, ghostly echoes of its faltering remained—such as a half-second glimpse of a student in a three-piece suit being flung across the deck. I tried not to relax my eyes, though. It could be an overwhelming sensation to see everything the ghost ships of the Green Docks wanted you to see.

New Atlantis’s renowned redlight district had been built from moored ghost ships and tens of miles of branching, folding, and overlapping piers. There were paths more dangerous than the one around the *Vaitarna*—one route in particular led to an American battleship I hadn’t quite figured what to do with. But the *Vaitarna*, and its brothel-restaurant *The Honey Pot*, was close to the lights of mainland, which offered relative—highly relative—safety.

We were shown into a private stateroom. It was far enough away from the main bar that we couldn’t even smell its gently-intoxicating smoke. I assumed Addam had shelled out a small fortune for the privacy, but even he seemed surprised by the dining arrangement.

“I wasn’t even aware you had this room for rent,” he said to the fae waiter who showed us to the cabin.

“We don’t, but you’re with royalty, aren’t you?”

He came over to me, passed me, and tapped Brand on the cheek. He left with a promise of water and drink menus.

Brand hadn’t said a single word since we were shown inside, and looked even more uncomfortable with the attention he’d just received.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered to him. “You’re not worried that I’m upset that you still come here, right? We already had that not-a-fight.”

He gave me a stubborn look, marched past everyone, and studied the table. He picked the seat that put the most defensible wall without a porthole at his back.

Just as he was about to slide into it, Corrine cleared her throat. “Are you the only Companion here?” she asked.

Brand immediately knew this was a conversation with multiple landmines. “No,” he said mulishly.

“Are you the oldest Companion here?” she asked.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he said, and muscled the table out and slightly clockwise, so that both he and Corinne had access to the same defensible stretch of wall.

“Perhaps next time a stiff vodka gimlet instead of champagne,” Diana murmured. “This group isn’t nearly lubricated enough.”

But we did manage to find seats around the table. Getting settled in—with fancy clothing, hidden weapons, and not-so-hidden weapons—took a while. After that there was an uncomfortable pause while we just stared at each other. It seemed much easier to have table conversation when one of the kids was messing around and needed to be yelled at.

Addam cleared his throat. “I hear they have a very nice selection of bread.”

“Wait, what the fuck was that?” Brand said. “Was that small talk? Are we doing small talk?”

“Will you behave yourself if I tell you that you may get to hit someone later?” Corinne asked.

Brand glowered. Then, “Is it someone who deserves to get hit?”

“Be patient and you’ll see,” she said.

The glower went nuclear. “You said the same thing to Corbie before we left.”

We were saved from that declining conversation by a brief spurt of chaos. The door to the stateroom opened, and we heard a waiter rummaging through ice buckets and bottles. In advance of them, a dream sprite flew in the room, zipped in seven circles above our heads, then shot like an arrow to my lap. Its nostrils flared with scent, which would have been extremely embarrassing if it hadn’t said, “*Cord-ee-roy.*”

Satisfied, the sprite zipped back out of the room.

“You brought the button?” Addam said with a little smile.

“I always carry it. It helps with fidgeting,” I admitted. Plus, I was still secretly convinced that the gift I’d received my last time on the *Vaitarna* wasn’t as mundane as it appeared.

The waiter entered the room—only it wasn’t a waiter at all, but someone we’d met on our last visit.

“Salutations,” Kellum Greenwater said, surrounded by a windy billow of kimono and cocoa butter. He had a tray filled with no less than a dozen shot glasses balanced on a freckled hand.

The merman gave the room a practiced flick of his eyes, absorbing details. He appeared as a human man in his early thirties, but there were fathoms in that stare.

He ended up pointing a nail at Diana. “You,” he said. “I know performers who will shamelessly steal that look. I bet you could hold your own in a tough room.”

He put a shot in front of Diana and picked up one of his own. Diana, amused, and trying not to gloat at a table full of people who also thought they could hold their own in a tough room, clinked glass with Kellum and threw it back in one swallow. The smell of silver tequila wafted across the table.

“Oh yes, more of that,” Diana said.

“We are not making sappy toasts,” Brand said. “That is where small talk leads.”

“Use your imagination,” Kellum said, and gave him the second shot glass. “You could toast to violent takedowns. I’ll judge the winner.”

And then *he* gave Brand a friendly pat on the shoulder too, which had me straightening in the chair. I wasn’t jealous. Not entirely. But I sniffed a good story. Brand had obviously been back here since last fall.

“Why did the waiter say Brand was royalty?” I asked Kellum.

“Rune,” Brand said.

“Shush,” Kellum said, while depositing shots in front of the rest of us. “It’s not a secret. Brandon has graciously stepped in as a vigilante bouncer when needed. He’s beat up three customers who got rough with the staff.” He

paused and considered. “There was that fourth, but what you did to him isn’t quite covered by *beat up*.”

“Aww,” I said.

Brand rolled his eyes and threw back his shot. Kellum neatly swapped it for a full one.

“May I make the toast?” Kellum asked Corinne—who he apparently knew as well. “I have the information you need.”

She smiled and shrugged.

“I found you a clever little path through the dead docks,” he said, and held up his shot glass. “Who wants to take a field trip to the *Chained Rock*?”

Brand perked up at the phrase *dead docks*; Addam and Corinne were smug; Diana had no idea what was going on. I breathed, “The ocean roc. Did you find which house owns the bar?”

“Not yet, that’s why it’s just reconnaissance,” Corinne said. “We asked Kellum’s help in finding an . . . unobtrusive path to them, so we won’t be spotted.”

“We are moving against a House tonight?” Diana asked sharply.

That led to a long tangent about our adventures in the Green Docks, starting with meeting Kellum in *The Honey Pot*, and ending on a ghost ship called the *Waratab*. There was a bondage brothel on it called *The Chained Rock*, a vicious wordplay on an imprisoned ocean roc on its deck. The capture of such a rare, legendary beast was a disgusting display of power that appealed to the sort of person I afforded very, very little consideration.

As we told the story, we had shots. Appetizers and food came in. I do remember that much—tasty respites between flinging back good tequila. Kellum had pulled up a chair by then and joined us.

“Earth magic,” Addam suddenly announced. He lifted his shot glass, slopping some onto his chicken wing, which was basted in honey that came from an island off the shore of Greece and cost two hundred bucks a jar. There’d been a very long conversation about that.

He waited for everyone to do the shot with him, then realized he hadn’t made the toast. “My most violent takedown. When Max was kidnapped by Lord Hanged Man’s people, I used earth magic to stop a man in the park. I believe I accidentally removed an arm or a leg from him.”

“Poison,” Diana said. “I once swapped the plates between my mother and a man who was trying to poison her. He never even spotted it. Not for another few minutes, that is.”

I watched Brand give her a look that said he was acutely aware he was sitting next to her with a dinner plate.

“You must have good stories,” Diana said to Corinne. “Your rejuvenation went splendidly, by the way. You look exactly like you did on the fields of Drafayim.”

“Now *there’s* a memory,” Corinne murmured. “I’m honored you remember. You fought side by side with your sister.”

Drafayim was a battle from old Atlantis, back in the days when Houses made open warfare with each other. I mentally adjusted Corinne’s age by at least fifty years, if not a hundred. Even Brand seemed to be surprised at that, because his gaze was fixed in that not-blinking way it got when he respected something *just* enough not to roll his eyes.

“We must discuss this endlessly,” Kellum said.

So that got them talking about battles in a world that Brand, Addam, and I had never seen. It was humbling and interesting, and there was lots more liquor.

“Wait, I was distracted from my point,” Diana eventually said. “Are you sure it’s wise to move against a House without knowing its alliances?”

“It’s not,” I admitted, and realized I was holding my shot glass at an angle. I saved about a thimble’s worth. “But we’ve had enough tequila to act really, really sneaky.”

“Because this is just reconnaissance,” Corinne said.

“No, you said I could hit someone,” Brand argued.

I shook my wrist and funneled some willpower into my sabre, with the idea of transforming it into a hilt with a molten garnet blade so I could demonstrate how expertly I’d cut through the ocean roc’s chain. Or at least that was the plan, but somehow the sabre ended up clattering to the ground and burning a hole in the carpet.

Brand seemed oddly concerned about the rug. I kept trying to tell him I’d replace it until he grabbed my jaw and said, “You’re not going until you remember what’s on the other side of the floor of a boat.”

Kellum’s phone began to buzz. He removed it from a pocket and read something on the screen.

Then he said, “Who is Quinn, and why does he say I should go with you?” His phone buzzed again. “And why is he thanking me for the moisturizer I almost always recommend to him someday?”

When we were finally prepared to head out with our new friend, there was a large argument about whether we should use a cantrip to sober up. Or at least, *I* made a large argument against it, even as Diana went around and cast the cantrip on each of us.

Cantrips were quick and dirty magic, usually with immediate drawbacks to balance out the benefit. The alcohol flushed itself through my system, leaving me with a pounding migraine and a full bladder. So we had to spend time rotating into the stateroom bathroom, then getting our headaches Healed by Addam’s sigil magic.

While sobriety tempered my ideas of descending on the *Chained Rock* like a Highland warrior, it didn’t change the fact that I was ready to hold someone accountable.

Plus, it was my first trip through what Kellum called the “dead docks,” which was a wholly new and eerie slice of New Atlantis.

The dead docks were stretches of piers and ghost ships long since abandoned. The paths were too empty to be generally unsafe; and it afforded us the chance to advance on the *Chained Rock* without the attention that a party such as ours would normally acquire.

The ships on the path Kellum picked were old. Very, very old. Most boats came from countries that no longer existed, or empires that had long fallen. On the deck of one I spotted clay olive jars. Many others were heaped with rotted, handwoven fishing nets.

There were no lights beyond our cantrips, though I did spot a silvery glimmer in the cabin of one old Roman galleon. I’m not sure what drew my attention to it, but there was a power source in the cabin that scratched shivers up my spine. I breathed easier when we passed it. The fact that no one else saw or sensed the potential threat only made me more wary at its skill at hiding itself.

“Are you planning on releasing the Roc tonight?” Addam asked me.

“No,” I said. “I don’t think so. I really wish I could, but I may want to run that by Ciaran or Lady Death. Or even Lord Tower. It would be safer releasing it in the Indian Ocean, away from any island or mainland. If we release it here, and it’s angry, it could create a . . . problem.”

“Such as a tidal wave as large as the island,” Diana said dryly.

Brand said, “Then we’re not doing that. I’m tired of us getting fucking blamed for everything. We still get side-eye because of the weather.”

“The plan,” Corrine reminded us, “is to find out which House owns the ship.”

“Will be encounter resistance?” Diana asked.

“We shouldn’t,” Corrine said, but not confidently. “I’ve kept an eye on this place for a week. No one lives on the ship, and they don’t open their doors until ten o’clock. We should be able to observe without interference, if we’re quick.”

“And you have no ideas at all which House owns the ship?” Diana asked.

“We suspect the Gallows or one of its houses,” Addam said. “It would make sense—the ship is where Kellum’s cousin Sherman was hiding, and he had connections in those houses.”

“He was also hiding from them,” Kellum murmured. “There are other possibilities. I’ve been asking around. The Heart Throne owned quite a few brothels on the Green Docks. When they fell, ownership became... muddled.”

“There’s no shortage of Arcana that could be involved in such a sour affair,” Diana said. “They could be a relic of the Anchorite’s rule.”

Well, that shut everyone up. No one talked about the Anchorite—which said a lot, considering how many distasteful topics were fair dinner conversation in a city like New Atlantis.

Kellum—who’d changed into a slick black jumpsuit made from silk—put a hand on Addam’s forearm. “My apologies, Lord Saint Nicholas. I’m embarrassed not to have mentioned sooner that Sherman is doing well.”

Addam hid his face from me, which meant he was blushing.

“Sherman took you up on your offer to get help?” I asked. My first meeting with Kellum’s cousin hadn’t been my finest moment. I’d used his addiction to get what I wanted. I’d do it again, but still, decisions like that left scuff marks on my decency.

“He did,” Kellum answered for Addam. “He’s been sober nearly three months. He’s considering a move to the human world. I’m not sure if it’ll be good or not—but at least the dangers there don’t have as many grim and immediate endings.”

The fog was getting thicker the further we walked—not unusual for Nantucket, and at least it wasn’t the pea soup that occasionally blinded you. After another few minutes, Corinne held up a hand and simultaneously tensed.

“Ahead,” Corinne breathed. “Addam?”

“I’m going to cloak us all in Camouflage,” Addam announced. “We should blend into this fog nicely.”

He ran a finger across three of his platinum belt sigils, combining the released spells to allow him to expand coverage to the entire party at once. I feel the cool trickle of magic wash down me, briefly turning the world into color negative. When the magic settled, my arm reflected the fog, mirror-like, and my feet were the color of the scuffed green deck paint.

We continued a cautious advance. Slowly, in the near distance, the dead docks reconnected to a more common throughfare lit by fae lanterns. The *SS Waratah* gradually resolved from the fog.

Many decades ago, the five-hundred-foot cargo steamship was lost on its way to Cape Town. My magical vision saw flashes of a broken ship moored on a frozen, craggy landscape—likely Antarctica. Two hundred and ten souls had been lost with it.

The ocean roc was hidden in a nest of dirty straw. I did not see it until we closed in on the ship’s plank, at which point the massive creature raised its head weakly and gazed into the concealing fog.

It was appalling. Its wings—with a span as wide as California Redwood branches—were scored with badly-healed wounds and membrane rips. Last time I was here, they’d threaded holiday lights through the tears. Those were gone now—maybe in a pathetic attempt to kill their attraction less quickly, because its wounds were festering.

Its legs were clamped in cold iron chains inscribed with runes.

There were few ocean rocs left in the wild. They were masters of elemental magic—capable of moving as fast as hurricane winds or lifting rogue waves with a flap of their wings. What had been done to this creature was disgusting. It reminded me of the equally unsavory practices inside the brothel: the red and blue doors which permitted violent tastes against its staff, and offered the same to clients who wanted marks on their own skin. It had not been an entirely consensual arrangement. The bar's management had employed slaver devices to keep its sex workers under control.

I felt a hand grab my wrist. Kellum had stopped walking, and there was a stricken look on his face. "It's failing," he whispered. "It's dying, Lord Sun. I had no idea it was kept in such horrid conditions. I shame my school for my inaction."

"Kellum," I said, not but ungently. "We cannot release it now."

"It won't hurt us," Kellum said.

"That's a very uncertain gamble."

"It's not," he said. "Not necessarily. I am a merman. A merman siren. I am kin to sea elementals. If I can make a connection with the poor beast, I can tell it we are friends."

"Rune, you promised me you'd stop adopting things," Brand hissed.

"Lord Sun, please. It requires no care that you can offer. It needs the open ocean to heal. It does not want to be landlocked."

"Let's get closer," I decided.

And then I stumbled. Brand grabbed my elbow without comment, but gave me a look until I had my feet under me.

I didn't have a way of telling him, even through our bond, that I'd had a flashback to an ifrit. Another powerful, chained being—only I'd had to kill that creature, and it haunted me to this day. I was so tired of having that sort of blood on my hands.

"Let's see what we can do," I said, in a stronger voice.

"I just checked for life signs," Addam added, pulling his hand away from another sigil. "The ship is empty for now."

So Brand and Corinne took point. Crouched low, they moved almost silently down the plank, splitting to starboard and portside. They stopped at every porthole and looked inside.

After a few tense minutes, Brand reappeared at a railing and waved us onto the ship.

"Addam's right, I think it's empty," Brand said when I reached his side. "But we need to clear the two lower decks. Corinne and I are going to take the lowest level. Addam and Diana will clear the main cabin structure. Rune, you and Kellum keep watch and check out the bird."

"We're looking for documentation," Corinne added, mostly to Diana. "Anything that points toward the identity of the owners."

I watched them infiltrate the hatches and vanish inside the ship. I spent a few minutes using a lens cantrip to check the piers stretching to and from the *Waratab*, but saw no sign of impending visitors or workers.

By the time I refocused my attention on Kellum, I saw that he was standing at the foot of the giant raptor. The roc's head was laying on Kellum's shoulder. Its featherless neck was scaly with rash and dermatitis.

My sadness lasted barely a moment before I recalled what Diana had said. She was right. I was no longer a Prince. I was a King.

With a burst of willpower, I melted my sabre from wristguard to hilt form. A crimson blade boiled upwards, shedding lazy, firefly sparks.

“Kellum?” I asked.

“It wants the deep ocean. It’ll take all its energy to fly there. It is no threat to our mainland.”

I went over, swung my sword over my shoulder, and separated the first shackle with a single slice. I went around the creature and cut its remaining bindings. I wasn’t sure I could remove the actual shackle without cutting its skin; but I got as close as I could.

Ending where I started, I made sure to catch the Roc’s eye, and bowed to my waist.

The bus-sized creature shuffled its hind legs, then made a pigeon-like cooing noise when it felt no resistance. It stretched up to the sky and spread its wings. Its first, failed hop shook the vessel—and I took pains to funnel calm, safe thoughts through my Companion bond so that Brand wouldn’t be worried about attack.

Its second hop took it off the ship, but it went crooked quickly and needed to land on a nearby dock. The distance was short enough that I could see its rapidly rising and falling breast.

“Goodbye,” Kellum whispered. His cheeks were wet with tears.

The roc spread its wings, launched into the air, and vanished into the fog. Kellum and I stared long after the fog had seeped back through the hole that had been punched through it.

Brand boiled out of an open hatch, knives drawn.

“Didn’t you get the feeling through our bond?” I said in exasperation. “I tried to tell you we weren’t being attacked.”

“The boat shook,” he said. “I didn’t think we were being attacked, I thought you’d done something.” He went over and kicked the chains on the deck. “I guess you did. It flew off?”

“It flew off,” I said.

He didn’t ask if I’d made the wrong decision, because there were some things Brand never had to ask. As much as he loved a good, snarky line, he trusted my judgment when it came to big decisions; and releasing an ocean roc wasn’t the sort of decision you made every day. Or every lifetime, even.

At that point, a large man walked up the gang plank. He had a small paper cone of roasted peanuts in his hand. He saw us, blinked, and put a hand on the knife at his side.

Brand started to laugh. “Oh, my friend, you’re going to want to walk away. This is just one of those times.”

“I remember you. You’re one of the bouncers,” I said. “What a day to show up early.”

The bouncer looked at my glowing blade; the empty space where the ocean roc had been; and the collection of knives in Brand’s chest holster. He turned and walked away.

“Is it bad that I’m disappointed?” I whispered.

Brand was staring into the fog, his head cocked. Behind him, Corinne emerged from the hatch. Brand glanced at her, and she immediately pulled a clawed gauntlet from her evening purse. Brand pulled out his phone, dialed, and said, “People coming, Addam.” He hung up.

“Kellum, you should take shelter in the bar,” I said. I sent a thought into my sabre and dissolved the blade. It was too bright in the fog—it created a bullseye nimbus.

“I am not without my own protections,” Kellum murmured.

By then I’d started to hear tromping on the planks myself. They didn’t appear to be particularly hurried, which made me think the guard we scared off hadn’t warned them.

And then the footsteps became footpounds as we were rushed.

Brand pulled the pin from a flash grenade and tossed it, shouting at us to cover our eyes. The world lit up in a flesh-colored explosion through my eyelids. We heard excited, urgent shouts from the docks, and then a waft of flowers washed over us.

“What the fuck,” Brand said.

That was when I remember that Max and I had infused Brand’s grenade chemicals with essential rose oil during the pandemic lockdown. We’d been bored. It hadn’t occurred to me that, maybe, it would keep us from being taken seriously in a fight.

“About a half dozen of them,” Brand said.

Corinne snorted.

“No killing,” I said quickly. “Not yet. We need to find out who—”

“They’re calling the Consortia,” Kellum interrupted. To Brand’s sharp look he said, “I hear sounds across water better than you. They sent a runner back for the Consortia.”

“What’s the Consortia?” I said.

“Some of the businesses band together and share the expense of back-up security,” Brand said.

“Evil businesses?”

Brand gave me a grim look.

“Okay, back to what I said: no killing yet,” I told everyone. Then something caught my eye. Or, rather, someone. “Except him, maybe.”

I brushed a thumb over my emerald ring. Angular lines of light sprang up around me and then sunk into my skin. “Get Addam and Diana out here. Shields for everyone.”

Brand evaluated what I meant—that I was taking point—and nodded. He pulled out his phone.

I strode toward the gang plank. At the edge of my vision, nearly obscured in fog, were a group of tough men and woman, along with some people not nearly as tough. Workers, maybe. But at the forefront was a disheveled man with bad teeth.

He no longer had a slaver’s bracelet on him, and I took a small amount of pride in seeing that.

“Remember me?” I said loudly.

“You let it free,” he said hoarsely. There was a tremor to his words. “The owners won’t like that.”

“My only real regret,” I told him, “is that the owners aren’t here right now.”

“Oh, I suspect they’ll be close behind, along with a squad of thirty and two armed skiffs. You have no claim here. The Arcanum’s own law is on my side.”

I closed my eyes and called on my Aspect. Felt the warmth of its magical flame lick at my hair and ruffle my shirt.

“I am Arcana,” I said. “I am Arcanum. I am the Sun of Atlantis.”

Someone cleared their throat. Rather anticlimactically. But it was Diana, and she had a thick ledger in her arms.

“Huskely,” she said. “Minor house associated with the Gallows. Given your role in initiating the Raid against Lord Hanged Man, you likely have legal grounds to contest ownership as a spoil of war.”

“We have a plan,” Brand said from my other side. I glanced in that direction and saw that he, Addam, and Corinne had moved to the side of the ship and were cutting mooring lines. He added, “Mutiny.”

“When people from outside a ship take over a ship, I think it’s called piracy,” I said. Then I listened to myself. “We’re pirates!”

“We can’t allow you to sail off like this,” the man said nervously.

“Can’t you?” I asked.

Kellum strode forward. Magic clung to him like a second-skin, and silvery-indigo scales began to spiral across his face and down his neck. As he passed me, he said, “Cut all lines except the anchor. Trust me.”

At my nod, the others began to follow Kellum’s instruction, while Brand and I stepped up to flank the merman.

“You speak for a miniscule patch of misery and rotting wood,” Kellum said to the people on the other side of the gangplank. “I speak for the oceans of the world. You think you can claim ownership for one of its creatures? Trust me, little man, I can call in favors much, much larger than yours.”

A surge of water rose in the darkness. I thought for a moment that Kellum was raising a wall around us—until a tail fin splashed back into the sea, sending sheets of water everywhere.

The boat shuddered and began to move.

The men and women on the dock began to scream and run.

A head the size of a small whale peeked its snout above a wave and regarded the boat calmly. Then the baby kraken submerged again and began to tow us by the anchor into open sea.

## 07 - The Equinox

The first thing Brand said to me as we sailed away was, “What the fuck are you waiting for? A catchphrase?”

That’s when I realized parts of me were still on fire. I doused my Aspect—and I was getting better at that, wasn’t I?—and made sure I hadn’t singed anything around me.

Addam called his rented yacht to rendezvous with us. That was good, because I really didn’t have any desire to keep this miserable vessel. It didn’t even have a flag with crossbones on it. So, about a mile out to sea, the baby kraken swam off, and we transferred everyone from the *Waratab* onto the yacht as Brand and I discussed plans to scuttle the steamship.

That discussion was prematurely answered by the ocean roc, who gracefully descended from the sky and landed in its old nest. It turned its head to regard us regally, and then flapped its wing.

One of the *Waratab*’s masts snapped and fell.

Another flap and another. A building burst into kindling. Another mast fell. It was the most controlled, systematic episode of destruction I’ve ever seen. Barely a single wave reached us—and the one that came close was smothered by a quick uplift in the ocean roc’s wings.

When it was done, the roc hopped from the sinking brothel onto the yacht, and perched quietly on the pilot’s cabin. Its head vanished under its wing while it made tired cooing sounds.

“It needs to rest for a moment,” Kellum said on an exhale, which was when most of us realized we were holding our breaths. Some of us maybe were even holding in screams. The yacht crew didn’t seem too happy with their commission, at the very least.

Kellum and Diana climbed on top of the cabin to clean some of the worst wounds on the ocean roc’s wing, and when that was done, Addam climbed up too and used a Healing sigil to mend membrane tears.

The rest of us drank. There was still a lot of champagne left.

Not far from Sun Estate, Diana, Kellum and I were gathered on a small lounge on an elevated platform off the stern. Kellum was quiet, which made me quiet, until he eventually smiled at me.

“You feel like you have something to say, Lord Sun,” he said.

“Please call me Rune,” I said.

Kellum bowed his head.

“You...” I started to say, and then had to pause to arrange the words as diplomatically as possible in my head. “That was a very powerful demonstration of your abilities, Kellum.”

Kellum nodded at nothing in particular.

“I think I can speak for all of us,” Diana said, “when I tell you that you have earned our discretion. I understand why you hide these gifts.”

“We do,” I said. “I do.”

“It’s... not exactly powerful,” he admitted. “The ocean’s economy is based on trade. We trade for everything, even an act of ability. There will be consequences for what I’ve done. There will be obligation.”

“What can I do to help?” I asked.

He stared at me. For a long time, actually. Then he said, “You can tell me more Arcana are like you.”

“There are,” I said. “Some.” A couple?

Kellum laughed.

Once the mainland was within sight, the ocean roc stirred, preened its wings, and swiveled its long neck until it caught sight of Kellum. The two stared at each other for a long moment, then the majestic raptor launched into the air and soared towards the horizon. It gathered speed every second until it was simply a blur at the vanishing point.

As we tied ourselves to the short pier, Kellum said he needed to return to the Green Docks. Addam offered the yacht for the trip back, but Kellum laughed and said he could move faster on his own. He slipped out of his black silk outfit and handed it to Diana, who promised to have it dropped off. Then—tall and freckled and nude—the siren dove off the jetty.

I felt a frisson of magic, and when Kellum emerged from the waves, his face was a kaleidoscope of iridescent scales that had replaced most of his freckles. A beautiful fin—vibrant like a peacock’s tail—snapped out to full length

We stared. You might think this sort of sight would be commonplace to an Atlantean, but merfolk sightings were just as rare in Atlantis as the human world. Almost nothing was known about the ocean kingdoms.

“We’ll see each other again, Rune Sun,” Kellum said as he bobbed in wave foam.

“I would like that,” I told him.

Behind me, I heard Diana whisper guest privileges. I said, “You have guest privileges in my court, Kellum Greenwater of the Jade Tide School.”

Kellum rose above the waves, waved, and knifed back down. A torpedolike trail of water appeared in the direction of the Green Docks. I snuck a glance at Diana, expecting to see exasperation that she had to nudge a formal response from me, but instead saw...respect?

My phone buzzed. I pulled it out, saw Anna’s name, and answered.

“We may need some adults,” she said.

“What did you do?” I asked.

She said nothing. I said nothing. She still said nothing. I said, “What did I do?”

“You refuse to see the monster hiding in our midst,” she said. “Just because he’s six.”

“Do you just need adults? Or sober adults? And where is the Tower?”

“He’s ordering three hundred pizzas, because he overreacts even more than Addam does.”

“Why is he ordering food? We have food cooked for the equinox.”

She said nothing, like she always did when she was waiting for me to ask the right questions.

“Okay, two sober adults,” I said, and hung up. I said to everyone else, who’d heard enough to be crowding around me, “We need to draw straws. Don’t let Brand hold them.”

Diana sighed and began to walk back to the mansion while whispering a Sober cantrip. Corinne mimicked her sigh—*mimicked it!*—and walked after Diana, asking for the cantrip too.

Addam, Brand, and I caught up quickly, and I only stumbled twice. At the top of the dunes we reached a fork in the path that led to the mansion or the guest parking lot. There appeared to be some sort of activity happening in the parking lot, and car headlights glowed through the wet tree branches which had finally shed their freak piles of snow.

As we passed through a parting in the undergrowth, we saw a crowd of people gathered before the estate gates. Mayan and Anna were there, and Corinne was whispering with them.

One of the people was a middle-aged man with a large stomach and gray beard. He watched me approach with wide, round eyes. He stood next to a car, and a brightly-wrapped present was resting on the hood.

“Hello,” I said. “My name is Rune.”

“I’m going to kneel, but my knee is bad, no offense, my lord,” he said quickly, and began to brace himself on the driver’s side door of his car.

“No, no, please,” I said quickly. “Please don’t. But you are?”

“Oh, Thato, Sir. Thato De Jager. I was the Dawncreek’s mailman. Well, I was, I mean, at their old place, before it blew up.”

I blinked.

“Young Corbie invited me to his dinosaur’s birthday,” he explained. “I figured it was one of his stuffed animal tea parties? He left a message with me through my supervisor. Clever kid. I just wanted to check in and see how he was doing.”

“Excuse us for a moment,” Brand said, and then squeezed my shoulder. He pulled me back towards the tree line. When we were alone, he whispered, “Did you tell Corbie he could invite people to Flynn’s birthday?”

“Of course not!” I said.

“Rune,” Brand repeated. “Is this one of those times where Corbie maybe asked you, and you responded by saying *absolutely* without even bothering to listen to what he said?”

I decided not to answer. Brand wasn’t happy with that, so he waited until I admitted, uncomfortably, “I don’t know that he precisely asked me anything worded like that. And I only say *absolutely* when I’m distracted and trying to be a little funny.”

“It is going to be your job to literally write fucking laws for our court,” Brand said in a hissing rush. “I can’t believe we’re going to need to have a conversation about how words work.”

I deserved almost every reaction that came to my brain, so I said the only thing I could to distract Brand. “It’s

kind of funny that Corbie got away with all this without you knowing.”

As Brand puffed up half a size, I returned to the parking lot, then went person to person and introduced myself. There was an old Dawncreek neighbor (whose late, much-beloved cat was also named Flynn); the owner of an ice cream store near Corbie’s favorite old park; and the agrarian faery who tended the playground of Corbie’s favorite new park. There was also a woman who helped run the local daycare for Houses in this area of the city—Atlantis’s neighborhood-based answer to American kindergarten, which Corbie was soon to age out of.

I was profoundly conscious of the fact that Sun Estate was only partially rebuilt. It was not a showcase at the moment. But every apologetic comment I made was brushed aside as people asked excitedly about Corbie, and how he was doing. On and on, person by person—a bunch of often-overlooked Atlanteans who were on their own on an Equinox, without friends or family, who seemed to adore Corbie, who wanted to make sure he was alright and happy.

“We can just leave our gifts and go,” the mailman said anxiously. “It’s good to know the lad is doing so well.”

“No, please,” I said. “We’re already ordering food for everyone. If you’re here, it’s because you mean something to Corbitant. It means you’ve been kind and patient with him, and people like that will always be received as guests in my court. I cannot think of a better way to celebrate a holiday eve.”

Brand said, “Though we should warn you in advance that the dinosaur is real. Technically not a dinosaur, but real. Welcome to Sun Estate.”

First, Mayan moved the guests along. At Corinne’s recommendation, we went and put them in the sitting room for now, while we scrambled to set out refreshments.

Discussing those refreshments took up most of our walk to the front door. Layne joined us for that, an anxious look on their face.

“Ciaran found an apron,” they said. “He won’t leave the kitchen. Queenie keeps touching her knives.”

“I heard the Tower ordered food,” I said.

“He ordered a million pizzas. We’re trying to make a salad and other stuff. We could use some help.”

There was a pause while everyone not-stared at each other. Diana cleared her throat and said, “For a moment, I was worried the men were all staring at the women in the crowd.”

Anyway, that was how Addam was sent running to the kitchen with Layne to frost cupcakes.

At the front door, the chaos agent himself, Corbitant Dawncreek, was standing on top of the welcome mat. There was a small pigtailed girl with fake, plastic elf ears standing next to him.

In his hoarse, mumbling voice, Corbie said, “This is Elsie. Her parents brought her. She doesn’t know if she wants to get married yet.”

The girl’s eyes went wide. She shook her head so hard that an elf ear was knocked askew.

So Brand herded the kids into the ballroom, where the older teens were setting up banquet tables and finding mismatched chairs from the mansion. The remaining sobering-if-not-sober adults started moving toward the sitting room, to keep the guests entertained.

The Tower waited on the threshold.

“Matters are under control,” the Tower told me, once the guests were past him and the door had been partially shut.

And I nearly bit my tongue, because Mayan sneaked Lord Tower a dirty look. Or if it wasn’t dirty, it was as

close to a candid, negative emotion as I'd ever seen Mayan show around the Tower.

"Oh *what*," I asked. "What else happened? I have to know. Please. Should I get Brand?"

The Tower flicked a look at Mayan. "I am perfectly capable of making decisions on my own."

"It will be a security nightmare," Mayan murmured.

"The pizza?" I said, confused. "Or the guests?"

"Neither," Lord Tower said. "Mayan is referring to something else."

Mayan said, "Corbie asked the Tower to his daycare to be his Show & Tell."

Lord Tower said nothing.

Mayan added, "He was Corbie's second choice, since apparently Corinne told Corbie that, no, Corbie may not bring a dinosaur to daycare."

"Brand should really be here," I said.

"I'm going to help with the ballroom," the Tower said, and retreated with all the dignity he could muster. There were two perfect, small chocolate handprints on the back of his silk shirt.

"Thank you," I said to the universe in general.

I was about to go into the sitting room with the guests, then heard Brand speaking loudly on the other side of a nearby door, which led to a smaller room off the ballroom, and where we'd put the holiday tree.

"One!" Brand was saying loudly. "You can shake one present, Corbie."

I couldn't make out Corbie's words. He had a tendency to sound like a dolphin with a sore throat when he was excited. Just a string of rough, yipping vowels and consonants.

Brand shouted, "Jesus, I said shake! Shake! Why did you kick it?"

Dolphin sounds.

"I know you asked for a red ball, but how do you know that's a red ball? What if it's a fishbowl? What if you just kicked your new pet fish in his head?"

The dolphin sounds rose in panic and broke into sobs.

Actual fear streamed through our Companion bond. This from the man who had faced down a lich and the Hanged Man. Who had actually slapped the Hanged Man across the cheek.

"What are you doing?" Corinne demanded from the sitting room.

"Thinking this may be time for more booze," I said. "Not to escape, but because I'm really enjoying this?"

But since she'd said what she'd said as if to imply I should actually be doing something else, I went into the sitting room with her. I shut the door on Brand's shushing, redemptive sounds.

We didn't have nearly enough alcohol, at least not until a liquor store dropped off a pony keg. In the middle of an Equinox night. When most liquor orders were placed four months in advance. Sufficient to say, Addam's wallet, which really needed a formal name, made it happen.

I stayed with the guests for a while. When we got word that enough food had been laid out, everyone was ushered into the ballroom, taking pains to dodge the new and unwrapped red ball that was being kicked from room to room.

There was a long period of general pleasantness. Max made Corbie's little friend double over in laughter by manifesting purple sunbursts on his fae skin whenever she poked him. The postal carrier snuck Corbie butterscotch candies—with Corinne's permission, though they both let Corbie think he was sneaking it, because it delighted him. I brought the man another slice of pizza for that.

I even spent time talking to Elsie's parents and introducing myself. Though if I was being honest, I'd been railroaded into that one by Corinne, who told me I was expected to be chummy with the parents of the court kids' friends. That sounded suspiciously like mingling and small talk, which I liked only marginally better than Brand.

"Are we going to move everyone to the paddock?" Brand asked me at midnight.

"To see Flynn? We need lights."

"Corbie asked Ciaran if he could make lights so everyone could go and sing happy birthday to Flynn."

"Why did he ask Ciaran?"

"I'm not going to question the way the kid gets results. Ciaran ran off to prepare the paddock, didn't he?" Brand pointed to a ballroom window. "Do you see the glow in the distance? That's a very dramatic principality trying to out-do flashlights."

So we organized everyone into a loose group to head toward Flynn's enclosure.

I could see an explosion of faery lights in the distance as Ciaran used his abilities to brighten the space. Brand used his own superpower, ordering the teenagers to carry two banquet tables ahead of the crowd so we could bring snacks with us.

Under the flickering pastel lights—like lazy, slow-moving fireworks—the guests oohed and ahed over Flynn, who stood calmly in the middle of his grassy, ward-surrounded lawn eating grass. Eventually Corbie ran up—after having been delayed by several large and recently dropped pinecones. Flynn made a fluting noise and trotted over to the edge of the invisible barrier.

"You did all this because Corbie wanted to visit his pet?" I murmured to Ciaran.

"Well I don't have any children, do I? I don't know better. Most adults seem to say no to young ones on general principle, so I've decided to do the opposite. The idea of being reasonable is monstrously limiting."

In the near distance, Corbie's arms were now empty of pinecones, and Flynn was making dainty crunching sounds. The party showed no interest in moving back to the ballroom, so drinks and food were passed out, and Max hooked up his cell phone to portable speakers and started playing *10,000 Maniacs*.

I ended up sitting on a rock outcropping with Corinne and Ciaran. I didn't even realize what an odd pairing it was until Corinne stared dead straight at Ciaran and said, "I know Layne has a gift."

"They do," Ciaran agreed. "They really do."

"And Rune says no one knows more about rare magics than you."

"Did he," Ciaran murmured. A sly glimmer in his eye was gone just as I properly spotted it.

Corinne sighed and drained her Solo cup. "I know Layne needs to find... advisors outside the Sun Court. I'll probably continue to be an ass about it. I can't help myself—I worry. But I'm trying to understand it too."

"Are you?" Layne said. They weren't exactly eavesdropping, but they'd been near enough to listen.

"Is that enough for now?" Corinne asked.

Layne's eyes got a little glassy, and they nodded. They came over to Corinne and hugged her.

"I remember the first time I saw you," Corinne said, running a hand along Layne's brown hair, which had new blonde highlights in it. "Really, really saw you. When you were a baby."

“I was adorable,” Layne sniffed.

“You were fat and red and squishy and took up all of Stevan’s time. I was jealous. And then you shat on him.”

“I *what?*” Layne laughed.

“He was talking off your diaper, and you shat right in his hands and laughed hysterically. The... oh, the look on his face. I fell in love with you right there and then.” Her gaze sharpened. “Corbitant Dawncreek, get off that ward stone!”

Layne, deeply flushed and more than a little teary, said they’d handle it, and ran off to grab Corbie before he messed with the rocks keeping Flynn enclosed.

Corinne closed her eyes as her smile drained into a weary concern. She glanced at Ciaran. “I think part of it? It feels like Layne is growing up. Right now, and right all at once. Layne’s childhood is just... it’s just gone.”

“That ship has sailed,” Ciaran agreed, and there was a heaviness in his own voice. “Hasn’t it?”

Corinne nodded quietly.

“Sailing can be fun, though, with the right crew,” Ciaran said. “We’ll just keep Layne company a while longer. Won’t we?”

More drinking. More merriment. Addam used Telekinesis to float the keg down to the paddock, only he was drunk and kept banging it into tree trunks. We toasted his accomplishment with foamy beer.

Corbie asked if we could bring Flynn back to the mansion to open his gifts. Even I knew that was a bad idea. Ciaran distracted the six-year-old by asking Corbie what Flynn would want for his birthday.

“I completely forgot to bring a gift,” Ciaran said. “I must make amends.”

Corbie chewed on his lip, conscious that the entire crowd of people were staring at him. “Can you make people dream? Layne says.”

“I dabble,” Ciaran said.

“Can you make Flynn dream about all his old friends? He misses them. There’s no one like him anymore.”

Ciaran stared at the boy for a few seconds, lips parted in surprise. Finally he said, “I suppose I can, little sun. What a lovely idea.”

Corbie decided that merited a hug. When he was done, he grabbed Elsie’s hand and pulled her back to the ring of wardstones to tell Flynn.

“That was soft,” Brand said.

Ciaran smiled at him, his lips nearly neon red in the shifting lights. “I can visit your dreams too, Brandon Saint John.”

Brand decided not to push his luck, and refilled Ciaran’s beer with another three inches of foam.

Eventually there came the time when dawn was a gray smudge on the horizon, and the Equinox had been toasted. Addam was going to order taxis for everyone who had imbibed, but then a bright yellow school bus pulled up out front. The Tower explained he had few options on such short notice, but seemed to take a small amount of pleasure in arranging the cross-city trip. Brand nearly used the remaining space on his phone taking pictures. (At one point, he had Corbie run up with a hand-held stop sign that Brand found on the bus. The Tower stood there, staring at the sign in confusion, while cell phone flashes went off.)

They took the keg with them.

That left the core family in the ballroom, surrounded by torn wrapping paper and new gifts. We'd done a secret gift swap so that each person had another's name—except for Corbie, who had a not-insignificant pile of presents in front of him. The first gift he unwrapped was a stuffed rhinoceros as large as he was. Layne and Anna had found it online. Corbie was so happy he started crying, which made him embarrassed, so he hid his face in the stuffed animal's plush neck. That lasted about ten seconds until he started snoring.

The rest of us sat in a circle and went person by person, telling each other what we were thankful for and opening our gift. Brand went first. I'd bribed Anna with a month of chore work to swap her for his name.

Brand stared at the unwrapped shirt in his arm, and then turned it so the rest of us could see that it said: "*I BROKE THE WARD SEALING THE MONSTER GHOST IN THE JEWELRY STORE.*"

Quinn said, "Oh it's your favorite shirt! You wear it until the seams come loose, or the incident with the jam, but that only happens when we're elves."

Brand unsuccessfully tried to hide a blush or a flush, I'm not sure which. His eyes zeroed on me. "I thought this was going on my birthday cake?"

"Why limit the joke?" I said. "I printed it on *oven mitts*."

"Are you having fun?" he asked.

I decided to take the question seriously. "I am."

His scowl faltered for just a second in a smile. "Good. Just make sure you get some rest, because tomorrow you explain why my grenade smelled like fucking flowers."