

The Hourglass Throne

Preview Pages

The Rejuvenation Center

“—ucking cut you!”

I slapped Brand’s hand away from the radio dial and swerved back into my lane. “Why do you always jump to cutting?” I demanded. “Use your words if you don’t like the radio station I picked.”

Since the pop rock song was off and he’d got his way, Brand settled into the passenger seat with a smirk.

I was driving our beat-up old Saturn toward a corner of the city almost exactly due south of Sun Estate. While summer brought the earliest sunrises of the year to New Atlantis, we were still a half-hour shy of one. The air around us was the gray-tinged black of pre-dawn.

Nothing short of an emergency would have normally got me out of bed before sunrise, let alone two hours before it, which is when Lady Priestess had called with an urgent request. All I knew was that an unknown barrier had appeared around the rejuvenation center, and they couldn’t reach anyone inside by phone or text.

I’d given myself thirty minutes to add a few stealth and infiltration spells to my sigils—at her vague recommendation—while an even-grumpier Brand went from room to room assembling his leathers and chest harness.

“It takes so much longer to get out the door now,” he yawned. “I miss Half House.”

“No, you don’t. You’ve got dozens of people to boss around now.”

“I’ve got dozens of people who need to be bossed around because their heads haven’t grown out their ass yet, which is the state they’d need to be in to do what they should be doing without being told. Why didn’t

Lady Priestess tell us any more about what to expect? Were there any background noises?”

“What sort of noises did you expect me to hear?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Scions-clutching-their-pearls angst? Man-being-eaten-by-crocodile screams? We usually know more before we take a job.”

“Good thing it’s not a job then. Can you hand me my coffee?”

I waited a beat, but no coffee edged into my peripheral. As streetlamps sliced blades of yellow across the windshield, I gave him a quick look. “What?”

“This isn’t a job?” he asked.

“No. It’s a favor. I guess that’s the sort of thing Arcana do for each other.”

“So we’re not getting paid?” he asked, louder now. “Is this the sort of thing we can look forward to now that you’re a part of the Arcanum?”

Okay, maybe he wasn’t grumpier than me, because my temper flared. “How should I know? Did you see me leave the last Arcana meeting with an orientation manual, Brand? There was no orientation.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he said, but handed me my coffee.

I sighed into the plastic lid. “Thank you.”

He waited until I’d taken a long, caffeinated sip. “But she emphasized stealth spells? That’s all you have stored in your sigils—stealth spells?”

“Hell no. Most of my sigils were already topped up. Oh! Addam lent me a sigil with Telekinesis in it. Well, I stepped on his head by accident first, but then he woke up and lent it to me.” I predicted the turn of Brand’s face. “Air conditioning is out in our room, so we slept on the floor. But, hey, Telekinesis. That’ll be fun if I get to use it.”

He flicked a look my way that had us both almost smiling, because let’s be honest: we’d been cooped up on the estate for a while, and the truth was that we really, really hoped we’d get to use more than stealth skills.

We’d relocated to Sun Estate months ago. New Atlantis had been no different from the rest of the world: we struggled with the birth of a novel coronavirus. A heavy investment in magical remedies had allowed us to contain our outbreak so we no longer needed masks or social distancing.

But we'd also had to close our borders and cut off contact with the human world until they found their own vaccine solution.

Personally, I'd spent the quarantine months focusing on little except the rehabilitation of Sun Estate. I'd picked up my father's mantle and was the Arcana of the Sun Throne, and I needed a base of operations. I needed a compound. I needed, eventually and pointedly, a heavily *fortified* compound.

Kicking out all the ghosts and ghouls that had taken up residence in the ruins of Sun Estate was an expensive and tedious process. Every literal square foot of safe ground we gained was measured in hundreds of dollars and hours of spell-work, largely using an incredibly difficult and special magic taught to me by Lady Priestess—which explained why I was on her radar. But we'd finally reached the point where a sizable percentage of the estate was safe behind wards and other protection.

We'd moved the Dawncreeks onto the estate as well—Anna, Corbie, Layne, and a newly rejuvenated Corinne. Anna, Max, and Quinn spent half a week with us, and half a week at Magnus Academy learning how not to stab someone with the wrong fork during a formal dinner. I had just started holding regular court sessions, which meant I had homework of my bloody own. Things, in all, had been very domestic lately.

“So you and Addam are dressing in each other's sigils now?” Brand asked.

“I'm not going to be baited.”

“Just making conversation. Take a left up there.”

“It's easier if we—”

“*Left*,” he barked. “Look at the windows on that building. There are green and amber lights around the corner.”

His instincts were always quicker than mine. I turned left, and sure enough, there was commotion around the bend in the block ahead of us.

“Does that mean you don't like Addam being around so much?” I asked him after a pause.

“Don't you dare fucking use me for cold feet.”

“I don't have cold feet! I was just worried it might feel weird. I'm *checking in* with you. Addam's practically moved into the estate.”

“Yeah, and it was weird the first time he wandered into the kitchen in his boxer briefs. Now it’s called morning.”

“He still hasn’t *officially* joined the Sun Throne. He’s still technically a member of Lady Justice’s court.”

Brand turned in his seat so hard that the seatbelt groaned. “Why do you sound worried?”

“I didn’t say—”

Brand tapped his head, indicating it hadn’t been anything I’d said out loud.

But amber and emerald lights were now dancing across the hood of our car. Ahead of us, just around a corner, was a line of wooden saw-horses blocking off the mouth of an alley.

Immortality was a myth. Sort of.

Through closely guarded rejuvenation magics perfected by Lady Priestess’s court, Atlanteans could make their bodies go on forever. The mind was another matter entirely, though, which is what made immortality a myth in practice. After half a millennium, most people, one way or another, found ways to die.

I always suspected that those who lasted longer, like the Tower or (reputedly) the Empress, were just smarter at knowing how to reinvent themselves. I suspected the trick was building a mental firebreak between shitty life experiences in order to find the desire or motivation to attempt another hundred years on the same rickety roller coaster.

That said, nearly all Atlanteans of even modest means took advantage of Lady Priestess’s magic. She practiced rejuvenation at two centers on the island, and the particular center before us was the premier facility, where heavily funded courts sent their people for complete life-cycle rejuvenation. It was a process that involved several stages and weeks of residence.

Put together, this created a number of uncomfortable scenarios and a dozen times as many questions. The building treated a clientele of powerful people. The idea that someone had created an uncrossable barrier around the facility wasn’t nearly as worrisome as the question of *how* and *why*.

The guarda official who appeared at the driver's window went from bored to formal in a finger snap when I told him my name. I saw him give the Saturn the side-eye, but he ordered one of his people to valet park the car.

“Crowd forming,” Brand murmured when we were on the sidewalk. He nodded in the direction of people in clean uniforms by a nearby sawhorse.

The officer heard that and said, “Morning bakery crew. They were the ones who discovered the barrier and called it in.”

“Still no contact with anyone inside?” Brand asked.

“Nothing. No reply to texts or calls—we’re not even sure the messages are passing through. Lady Priestess herself is on the scene. I can—”

“I am,” Lady Priestess said from behind him. “Here, that is. I’ll speak with Lord Sun now.”

The officer bowed his way out of the conversation as Lady Priestess stepped forward. She was a short woman edging into middle age, with straight brown hair and cat-eye eyeglasses that pulsed with the power of a sigil. Her voice was as wispy as her wandering attention, which begged to be underestimated.

“The barrier is around the corner. Just down there. I’ve tried all the tricky magics I had on me, but nothing seems to work.” She said this while staring intently at Brand, who tensed a bit and shifted his weight to the balls of his feet.

“Has the guarda ascertained how far the barrier goes beneath the ground?” I asked. “Or whether it’s a dome or wall?”

“Details,” she said, waving a hand airily, and still staring at Brand. She said, with something like pride, “I have had over three dozen children. None of them have ever had a Companion.”

And then she turned and walked away.

Brand and I waited a good ten seconds before exchanging glances.

“Did she just brag that she’s never bought or stolen a human baby?” Brand whispered.

“That would mean she just called me a kidnapper,” I said.

“I wish. Kidnappers usually have plans. You can’t even match your

fucking socks. Not to press a button on that whole kidnapping thing, I mean.”

“Not to,” I agreed, but added the weight of the comment to everything else piled on my shoulders.

“Lord Sun, Lord Saint John,” a young woman called. She rolled over in an electric wheelchair from the direction Lady Priestess had vanished. Her hair was short and bleached platinum, and she wore an expensive business suit. She craned her head up at me and said, “My name is Bethan. I’m Lady Priestess’ second oldest. She asked me to answer any questions you might have.”

The Papess Throne was renowned for its fertility. I’d heard somewhere that Lady Priestess staffed her senior roles with direct descendants only, to keep attempted coups within the family.

“What do you know, Bethan? And call me Rune.”

“Brand,” Brand said.

“My lords. I’m afraid we have more questions than answers at this point. When the morning staff tried to enter through the back, they encountered the barrier. My mother and I were on-site within the hour, and we’ve tried what techniques we had on hand to break through. We were unsuccessful. We tried all the elements. We tried to phase through it, and to establish a portal to the other side. Nothing has worked.”

“How far up or down does it go?” Brand asked. “Do you have drone footage?”

“It’s a dome on top. The drones didn’t spot movement in the windows, or anyone in the interior courtyard. We can see that there is electricity inside, though, which is something. As for underground, we sent people into tunnels that extend below the facility and join several buildings in the area. The barrier walls are present there as well, albeit curved. We suspect the totality of the barrier is less a dome than a sphere.”

“Has it injured anyone?” I asked.

“No. Touching it causes no effect. It’s simply ... there.”

“And you want me to try breaking through?”

Bethan smiled. “My mother appears to think you or Lord Tower may be able to help, yes.”

“You called the Tower?” Brand said before he could help himself. Then he gritted his teeth. “He’s behind me. He’s behind me right now, isn’t he?”

I looked over my shoulder. “Nope.”

“Thank fucking God,” he said under his breath. “It’s too early.”

“What do we know of the people who are supposed to be inside the building?” I asked.

“We have eighteen clients on record from multiple courts. An evening staff of twenty-one, and an overnight staff of thirteen. We haven’t been able to pinpoint our last point of contact, but I have people trying to contact the evening staff, who would have departed by eight o’clock last night. If we can account for them, it helps narrow the incident window.”

Eighteen clients across multiple courts. High-value individuals from different houses. This had the making of a diplomatic incident. I understood now why the Tower had been contacted. If something had happened to the clients, it wouldn’t send ripples through the city so much as fracture lines.

“Show me the barrier,” I said.

Bethan dipped her head and escorted us away from the guarda activity. Her chair made almost no sound at all as it moved. She saw Brand’s glance at the crowd and said, “We’re keeping the employees and guarda out of the building’s sight-lines.”

“Then you’ll want the guarda to turn off their patrol lights. The colors are reflecting everywhere.”

“Not that you’re going to keep this quiet much longer,” I added. “Morning commute is starting. In a half hour, we’ll be swamped with foot traffic.”

“Still, I’ll have the lights turned off for now,” she murmured, and began typing a message on her phone. She wore mesh, half-finger gloves that left her thumbs exposed.

As we headed down an alley that connected with the side of the rejuvenation facility, Brand pulled a set of compact binoculars from one of his pockets. Layne had bought them as a gift with their first hospital paycheck, now that they’d been moved from unpaid hospital volunteer to part-time aide. Their necromantic abilities had allowed them complete

immunity to the coronavirus, making them a critical asset in the early days of the hospital's pandemic response.

While the binoculars made sense now, Brand found a lot of other occasions to whip them out and brag—coffee shops, imminent postal carrier deliveries, teenager acne watch. I suppose that's why I didn't mention he was about to bump into the invisible magic barrier.

"Fucking hell!" he said, and recoiled.

"So we can confirm it causes no physical trauma," I said.

"Did you see that there?" he accused.

"Absolutely not," I said. I made a show of squinting hard at what was, to me, a wall of flaxen air, not unlike the dimness of sunlight on a cloudy day. "Ah. There. There it is."

Beyond the barrier was the edge of a tree-lined plot of grass that led to the front entrance. The building was like a block letter O, with an open area in the middle. It was not a translocation, oddly enough. The center was custom built over the last ten years, using bricks baked from the healing mud of Italy's Bormio region.

"Give me a minute, please," I murmured, and stepped right to the edge of the barrier. I closed my eyes and tilted my head, pushing my face into the morning's dampness. The magic in front of me was strong. Wickedly strong—maybe stronger than anything I'd seen outside the Convocation's own protections when the Arcanum was in session.

I'd seen Lord Tower crack barriers before. I was not sure I could. Then again, Lady Priestess and her people hadn't had luck either. I could live with failure in numbers.

I looked back down the alley as two people turned into sight. One strode forward with definitive, advancing footsteps; the other made no noise.

"Rune," Lord Tower said. "Brand."

"Where's Corinne?" Mayan, Lord Tower's Companion, asked.

Brand froze—he knew Mayan was aiming at a target, he just didn't know where the target was placed.

"Corinne is home with the kids," I said slowly.

“The trained Companion who spent over eight weeks in this facility is home,” Mayan summarized. “With the children.”

I gave Brand a look that said, *Fuck?* Brand gave me a look back that said, *Fuck!*

“We picked a small party for the infiltration,” I explained.

Mayan gave Brand a good hard stare. “I’m establishing a command center. One of my people will be on comms. The link will be magic—light-based—which we think will work better than wireless tech. Excuse me while I make arrangements.”

“You bring out such a playful side in my Companion,” Lord Tower said to Brand, as both Mayan and Bethan excused themselves.

“Can you see that barrier right there?” Brand asked, pointing behind him.

“You’ll need to call on deep magic first,” I said quickly.

The Tower flicked a look at me, flicked his eyes upwards in what may or may not have been an eye roll, and said, “Oh. Yes. There it is.”

“Can you tell who made it? Or how it was made?” I asked.

He walked forward until the tip of his shiny black shoe touched the point where the barrier curved into the earth. He reached out and placed a fingertip along the dim glow. “Arcana-level work,” he finally said. “Maybe a principality?”

“Not an Arcana?” I asked.

“No Arcana I know did this. There are very few other options beyond principalities, and of those most are so remote as to be implausible.”

Principalities were simply Arcana without formal courts. The lack of thrones kept them from being true power centers in the city, but also afforded them a certain ability to operate under the radar.

“Do you have a suspicion about who or what created it?” I asked.

The Tower continued to run his eyes along the barrier—high and low. “You’d be surprised how many truly dangerous hypotheticals I monitor on a daily basis. Whether this is related to any of them? That’s why I am here.” He began to calmly remove the links from the cuff of his bespoke shirt.

“Would you mind, sir, if we discuss a practical matter,” Brand said. The *sir* was like a road flare. “In the spirit of Arcana courts working together,

it would be gauche to discuss compensation. But, being that we're a very young court, perhaps you may be able to share some equipment or field tech with us."

Brand didn't often make the Tower smile—or genuinely smile—but he got within shooting distance this time. "I thought you and Rune had already upgraded. Purchased ... drones and earbuds?"

I sighed. "Corbie borrowed the earbuds without asking. He wanted to tell us what the bottom of the pool looked like."

"Then I must make a gift of the light-based technology Mayan is bringing. It's a new spell—I have hopes it'll outpace modern jamming technology. Although, Brandon, you should remember that Lady Priestess is now in your debt. In a way, that is compensation. A favor is a powerful thing."

"Of course, Lord Tower," I said, before Brand could share his views on favors between courts. (*Fucking Monopoly money.*) I had a much better appreciation for favor banks than he did.

As he began to meticulously fold the sleeves of his shirt, the Tower asked, "Are you excited for your gala?"

He was referring to my formal, ridiculously public, and upcoming coronation. "I spend a good portion of every day thinking about it," I said honestly.

"I'm excited," Brand volunteered. Which would have been odd, if you didn't know that he'd been allowed to choose half of our gift registry.

"It's a necessity," the Tower said. "Formal exchanges of power like yours are public gestures, yes, but they're also one of the few times Arcana gather in a show of force. Ah. Mayan."

Mayan handed me two headsets while also extending his hand to Brand, saying, "Phone."

Brand hesitated a second, then passed his phone to Mayan.

"I'm downloading an app owned by the rejuvenation center. Lady Priestess has provided the both of you with full user permissions. The app has blueprints, client information, and also monitors patient vitals. Check those first, if the app works inside the barrier. I'll also have a field agent online with you. Her name is Julia."

“No,” Brand said immediately. “No thank you. I have experience with her. She’s not a team player.”

The Tower said, “She annoys you.”

“Yes,” he said.

The Tower simply smiled and waited for Mayan to proceed. Brand hid his sulk behind his binoculars, staring at the facility.

“Julia can link you with any of us for private talk,” Mayan said. “The public channel is restricted to people authorized by the Arcanum. For now that includes Julia, the two of you, Lord Tower, myself, and Bethan Saint Brigid.”

“We’ll try to establish contact as soon as we’re inside,” I said. “But we need to get through the barrier first. Since we’ve just got the two headsets here, I’m guessing that means you don’t think we’ll be able to bring the entire barrier down.”

“I’m not sure yet, but at the very least, I can get the both of you inside,” Lord Tower said. “You should—”

“Rune,” Brand snapped. “Use Addam’s searchlight trick. Third floor, three windows from my left.”

Addam had invented a mix of cantrips—lens and light—that, when combined, created a piercingly strong beam. I didn’t ask any questions because I felt Brand’s urgency. I whispered the words and aligned the cantrips, and aimed the beam at my feet. When the magic stabilized and I had control of it, I swept it along the bricks of the rejuvenation center until Brand grunted and I hit the window he’d referenced.

Brand stared through his binoculars as Mayan pulled out a set of his own. The two studied whatever they saw quietly.

Brand said, “Looks like blood.”

“Nice spot,” Mayan said after a pause.

Brand held the binoculars to my eyes so I didn’t need to drop my light. It took a second, but eventually my depth vision adjusted, and I saw it. Half a handprint on the lower edge of the glass pane. My light brought out the liquid red sheen.

Brand snapped the binoculars shut. “They have electricity inside. Even if they don’t have outside communication, someone could be flicking the

lights on and off, fucking Morse-coding us. But instead we have blood and barriers.”

“Hostages?” Mayan murmured. His lips settled into a grimace. “Or bodies. Let’s get you in there.”

“I’ll hold the barrier for you and Brand,” Lord Tower said to me. “Find out what you can. I’ll work on bringing the barrier down for larger forces. Brace yourselves.”

The period for small talk was over, and I felt adrenaline washing through me. Lord Tower stalked up to the barrier. He undid the first button of his shirt, revealing a leather strap tied around a bundle of old, bent nails. He touched them, and the release of mass sigil magic nearly blew us off our feet.

Car alarms went off three seconds later, and an alley cat screeched. The magic gloving the Tower’s hands was so hot I could see a mirage haze around his fingers. He lifted both hands, tensed, and then slammed them into the barrier.

For a second—for barely the inhale of a single breath—nothing happened. Then his fingers began to blister and burn. A bubble of blood appeared below one nostril, quickly turning into a thick red stream.

“Gods’ teeth,” he swore, and as he did, I began to smell cooked flesh. A low groan escaped his lips, and his eyes widened in surprise. It barely lasted a second until it firmed into resolve. His wrist muscles bunched as he increased the force of his push against the barrier.

“Can I help?” I said loudly.

“Be ready,” he gasped. “Be ... *NOW!*”

I saw a portion of the barrier thin to the palest of yellow. Since Brand couldn’t see, I grabbed his nondominant hand and shouted, “In my tracks!”

I ran through the split in the barrier, Brand my shadow. As I passed the Tower, I saw his hands up close. The tips of two fingers were already gone.

“Clear!” I yelled the moment we were on the other side.

The Tower dropped the spell. He may have sagged back, but it was hard to tell, because Mayan was already behind him for support.

“Headsets,” Brand said in a clipped voice. We divvied the sets up and adjusted them. He tapped the on button of his own pair and said, “Are you online Julie?”

“Oh, don’t be an asshole,” I whispered, because I knew enough of Julia from the Lovers raid to know she hated the name Julie.

“Julia here,” she said, as unflappable as I remember.

“Julia, this is Lord Sun,” I said. “I need a private link with Lord Tower. Right now.”

“Understood. Hold.”

Brand gave me a curious look, but let me have a moment. He stepped off to the side.

“Rune,” I heard in my head.

There was a level of strain in the Tower’s voice that made my heart skip. I said, “Don’t be a hero. Get medical now.”

He either breathed hard or chuckled. “That took ...effort. I admit to having misgivings, now, about sending you in on your own.”

“I’m never on my own,” I said, and gave Brand’s back a quick smile.

“I was speaking in the plural, and I am still concerned.”

“Do you think this is one of your daily world-ending hypotheticals?”

A pause. Then, “I do not know. I’m calling for backup. Buy me time, Rune, but do not engage. Please.”

My heart skips became drumbeats. I hadn’t ever needed a level of backup *beyond* the Tower. He was the city’s backup.

I switched back to the public channel, confirmed Julia was there, and joined Brand under a chestnut tree, where he was likely scoping our best point of entry.

We decided on the staff entrance. The path to it had less cover than the tree-filled acreage by the front doors, but also the least number of windows to be spotted from.

“So that’s our plan?” Brand asked, tapping the mute button on his headset. “To buy Lord Tower time?”

I tapped my own mute button. “When the barrier comes down, they’ll rush the building. If whoever created that barrier is still on-site, things will get loud fast.”

“So we’ll stay quiet, poke around, and try to figure out what we’re going to end up fighting.”

“Piece of cake,” I overstated.

“Cake doesn’t give the Tower a nosebleed,” Brand said. He saw that I made a face. “What?”

“Did you see the Tower’s hands?”

“What about the Tower’s hands?”

“He lost some of his ... er, fingers. The tips of them. They burned away.”

Brand didn’t even attempt a joke. All it took was a half-inhaled breath for him to understand the magnitude of that statement. He exhaled the word, *Fuck*.

We started moving toward the door. “Maybe we should try to get Corinne on the line, too,” Brand said uncertainly as we crouched behind a hedge and duck walked. “Should we have woken her up?”

“Yes?”

“I’m just not used to having other people to think about when we go in the field,” he said quietly in a rush.

“*Me too*,” I hissed back in total agreement. “I was just getting used to having Addam to call on when the shit really hit the fan, and now we have people we’re supposed to assign on a daily basis. Either management is good or it’s fucking terrifying.”

Brand unmuted his mic. “Jul ... *Julia*, we’re in sight of the door. There’s a keypad.”

“Obtaining code from Lady Saint Brigid. One moment.”

Brand pulled out his phone while we waited and booted up the application that Mayan had downloaded. “They’ve got thumbnail photos of staff and guests. And ... I see the vitals menu. Shit. This better not be working.”

“Brand,” Mayan said through the mic. Just that one word. Not unlike how Brand often just says my name as if it were an entire soliloquy.

“Yes, I know I’m live,” Brand said testily. “And this app better be broken, or else you’ve got seventeen flat lines.”

“This is Bethan Saint Brigid. I helped create the app. Are you looking

at a menu that shows nine squares per screen? And are the squares blank, or truly showing a flat line?”

“Nine squares, and I can swipe up to see more. Eighteen squares total, seventeen flat lines, and one blank. What does that mean?”

“It likely means seventeen deaths.” Her voice sounded like chalk—dry and rasping. “If a square is blank, it means that person has either been removed from the premises, or the armband tracking their vitals has been disabled or removed. I ... must speak with my mother. In the meantime, you can use bypass code 115599 to open almost any door except the center’s vault.”

“Can we track where the bodies are?” I asked, and Brand shot me a quick glance of approval.

“Not normally. There are privacy concerns. Our IT people could configure something, but as data is not passing through the barrier you’ll likely find ... what you’re looking for before then.”

Brand muted his mic and said, “Worst scavenger hunt ever.”