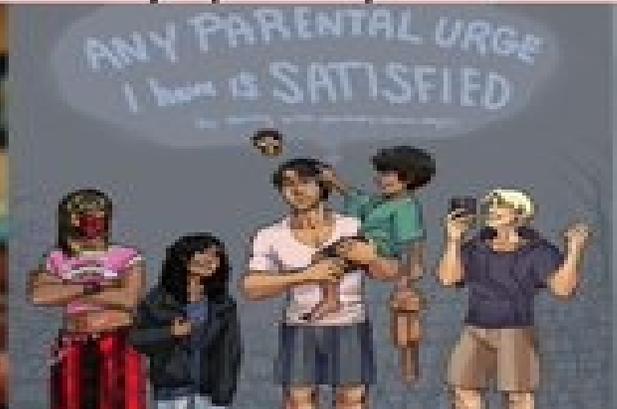


Scenes from Quarantine

A TAROT SEQUENCE Novelette by K.D. Edwards



SCENES FROM QUARANTINE

A TAROT SEQUENCE NOVELETTE

K.D. EDWARDS

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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 Rune's dialog, in which case he's probably trying to be clever, which is easy when he knows that Brand will be there to deal with any law suits.

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DEDICATION

This novelette is for the people who weren't allowed to quarantine when the Pandemic hit. The healthcare practitioners; hospital staff; truck drivers; retail workers; and all the other people who kept us running in the early days of Coronavirus.

This novelette was my own way of surviving isolation, and it gave me so much joy to share it with others. I never felt alone because of y'all following this stream of mini-scenes.

The events that take place herein are now canon, and occur between the second and third book of the series.

A TAROT SEQUENCE NOVELETTE

Scenes from Quarantine

DAY 1

I pulled the car into the narrow little parking space behind Half House, then settled in to hide in the driver's seat for as long as I could get away with it. It would have been a perfect moment to sneak a cigarette, too, but Brand had found my last pack and coated the filters in apple bitter.

After about ten seconds, there was a knock on the back window.

I flicked my eyes in the rearview mirror and saw Brand standing by the trunk, whirling his hand in a *lets-get-this-over-with* gesture.

I rolled down my window. Actually rolled. It was a very old car.

"I did my best," I said pre-emptively.

"Did you panic?" he called.

"....No."

"Because we talked about panic shopping," he said.

I rolled the window back up. I sighed. I got out of the car and joined him at the trunk.

"In my defense," I said, "a lot of people were panicking at the grocery store, so it seemed smart to think outside the box."

"To *think outside the box*?" Brand said. "If I open this trunk and find six bags of muffin mix, we will have words."

I keyed open the trunk and stepped back with a grimace.

Brand stared at the small pond of plastic grocery store bags for a blank second. He leaned forward, pried apart a few bags, and said, "The spare wheel?"

"Left it behind. It was getting kind of bald anyway."

He pulled something out and held it in front of me. "A jumbo box of Band-aids. A jumbo box of *Band-aids*. Why? In case the Coronavirus comes at you with a knife?"

"To be fair, lots of things come at me with a knife, including you."

He continued pawing through the bags, pausing at one that was filled with about nine or ten blocks of cheese. That made him blink a few times before he even had a response.

"There are crackers too," I said helpfully. "And I thought we could try some new types."

"But...I don't... This is what your brain decided? That self-quarantining during a viral outbreak is the *perfect fucking time* to taste-test stinky international cheeses? And..." He grabbed another box. "Bagel chips? Rosemary and salt bagel chips? Rune, you don't even like rosemary."

"But shouldn't I? It sounds really wholesome."

“We don’t need to eat something we hate just because it’s wholesome,” he said, and then stopped, possibly as he remembered all the fucking kale he’d forced onto our dinner table. That really was rather rich of him.

“There may have been some panic,” I decided to agree.

“There was. But there’s no toilet paper? Really? That’s the one thing you could have filled the trunk with. We could have sold it by the roll to the rest of the cul-de-sac in a couple weeks.”

“They have so many reasons not to like us already. Disaster profiteering just feels unnecessary.”

Brand rubbed at the skin between his eyebrows. It was actually a Max gesture. Or at least the two of them seemed to do that a lot around me.

Finally, I said, a bit seriously, “Aren’t you worried?”

“Yes I’m fucking worried. I’m going to be locked in a nine-foot wide house with you and Max for a month. I’ve *already* run out of things to do, and that includes planning on which of you gets buried in the basement, and which goes under the tree in the back yard.”

“I’m worried.”

He grabbed about seven bags at once, looping them around his wrists. “Don’t,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because bigger things than a virus have tried to end the world before. Because Atlanteans have cockroach-brain survivability. Because we’re washing our hands; we hate crowds; and we’ll stab anyone who coughs in our wind current. Because.... Because everything. There are a million reasons we’ll be okay, and just one lousy virus. It doesn’t stand a chance against our idiot planet.”

He headed back into the house, managing to open the back door with one stockinged-foot. Queenie hurried past him as soon as she saw all the bags in his hands, and came over to the trunk. She stared at the many remaining bags.

“You went to the grocery store?” she said. “Was I in the bathroom? Or asleep?”

“On the plus side, I got those fruit roll-ups you like,” I said.

She stared at the trunk one more time—especially the bag with seven boxes of fabric softener—and decided to just kiss me on the cheek and run back to the kitchen.

Altogether, it made me feel a little better.

DAY 7

Things are getting weird. Too much time inside. We’re low on cheese. Brand just threw a footstool at my head because I accidentally covered the remote with my afghan.

DAY 8

Brand fell asleep mid-swear while we were watching *Pride & Prejudice*. He really hates Mr. Darcy.

Max and I were bored, so we went downstairs, broke into Brand's supply of homemade grenade chemicals, and added essential oils. Toss up on whether he'll most appreciate lavender mass destruction or rosewater.

(And as soon as Max falls asleep, I'm planting the essential oils under his mattress.)

DAY 9

Things looked worse on Sunday. I'm not sure why, they just did. Maybe because it was supposed to be the beginning of a new week, and yet, here we are, staring down the full-throated yawn of more quarantine.

And I was worried because I felt helpless, because shouldn't I have been able to protect us better?

My phone beeped at me. I answered it. Quinn said: "So something really sweet happens soon, and it'll make you feel better, but I love it so much more when you don't know what it is ahead of time, but I also love it when you don't know what it is, but you know it's coming, because then you'll be a little less scared until it happens. Bye."

DAY 10

I tossed and turned all night, worrying about the pandemic. I must have fallen asleep eventually, because a thud on my mattress woke me up to bright, streaming sunshine.

Brand was there with a thermos of hot coffee. He tightened the lid and stuck it between the wall and bed.

"I'm up," I groaned.

"Nah," he said. "That'll keep hot. I just wanted to save some for you. There's fuck all else to do, so you might as well get some sleep."

I stared at him a second, because I can't imagine him doing anything nicer for me.

"Are your eyes getting glassy?" he said. "That better be a fucking yawn. Do not get emotional on me, or I will drag your ass to the training room."

I sniffed and nodded, and hugged my pillow. The last thing I heard before he banged his way down the spiral staircase was him saying, "We'll be fine, you moron."

DAY 11: #transdayofvisibility

"Shh shh shh shh," I hissed. "It's on."

We were gathered around the TV in our narrow living room. Two weeks into

quarantine, the room smelled like snack crumbs and old socks, though Queenie was gamely fighting male entropy by dangling unwrapped chai tea-bags from every drawer handle.

On the TV, the local news was running a special on disease-resistant volunteers who'd stepped in to help New Saints Hospital as its own staff began to succumb to COVID.

In the background, as a reporter in mask and scrubs questioned a doctor, we could see the slight profile of a young scion. The scion had thick brown hair and coppery skin; and who, as we watched, delivered a smile and touch to a worried patient on a gurney.

"Layne's really come into their own, haven't they?" I said, using Layne's newly-chosen pronouns.

"Eating viruses for snacks comes in handy," Brand agreed. "Hooray for weird-ass necromancy. I can't wait to figure out how to weaponize it."

DAY 12

My phone rang.

I didn't recognize the number, but it was someone not currently crammed into a tiny house with me, so I answered it with a pleasant, "This is Rune."

"Shhh," someone shushed. Then, speaking in a whisper himself, Corbie asked, "Do you really have a dinosaur?"

"Yes. Though I've been told it may technically not be *that* old - though it's still *really* old. I like calling it a dinosaur, if that helps."

"Is it an elephant?"

"Er, no. Elephants aren't dinosaurs."

"Oh. I've never seen an elephant." The line disconnected.

Max was standing at the landing to my sanctum, raising both eyebrows at me. I said, "The thing that bothers me most is that he always hangs up before I can give him Brand's phone number."

DAY 13

I clattered up the spiral stairway and poked my head into the living room. Max was sitting on the sofa with manga and a peeled orange. "Where is it?" I asked.

"Where is what?" he said.

"The backup pack of toilet paper. You said it was above the laundry machine."

"It is," he said.

"It is not. There's just a roll of paper towels."

"Oh, yeah. They look alike," he said, and went back to the manga.

I waited a good ten seconds, hoping to see something like a light bulb or a lightning bolt generated spontaneously above his head. When it didn't, I pulled out my phone and dialed Brand, who was doing tai chi in the backyard. He answered with a grunt and I said, "Max doesn't seem to care that he lied about us having toilet paper. As in, we do not. Have toilet paper. And he's just sitting here calmly eating an orange. Hey, just curious, did you already take your fiber supplement with lunch?"

By the time I had the word orange out my mouth, the front door was swinging shut just as the back door banged open.

DAY 13

We gathered in the living room.

On the table in front of us was a toilet paper roll with about three torn squares hanging off it, along with a single roll of paper towels that had been sawed into narrow sections.

"Why don't we just knock on a neighbor's door and ask to borrow a roll?" Max suggested. "One of them must like us."

I said, while carefully not looking at Brand, "Neighborhood children dare themselves to run up and touch our fence."

DAY 14

"There's got to be someone who doesn't hate us," Brand said. "What about the Mirandas? They look like the type of people to stockpile toilet paper."

"Whenever an animal dies in our bushes, you put it on a shovel and throw it over the fence into their yard," I said.

"The Shaws?"

"You called their oldest son a mouthy fucking brat when he said your vulcanized coal knife looked fake."

"He is fucking mouthy—if you're old enough to use words, you're old enough not to use them. The Rogers?"

"Sometimes you put a little too much oomph behind the shovel and the dead animal lands in their yard instead."

When he just sat there and glared, I held up a hand and counted down on fingers. "Leaf mulch fire, ran over a cat, phosphorous grenade – I can last the whole rest of the neighborhood, and that's even without going into neighbors we made move."

DAY 14

"So we've established the Raguntons and the Weimers are both in America for

the season,” I said carefully.

“Not that we’re going to do anything with that information,” Brand said, just as carefully. “Though, of course, their houses would be empty.”

“It would be wrong,” I agreed, “though I’d suggest maybe instead using the word *borrow*.”

“Because people borrow from each other all the time,” he pointed out.

“We borrow stuff from each other all the time,” I said. “Nothing wrong with that.”

Max was standing in the archway to the kitchen with a bowl of half-eaten cereal in his hands. He said, “I borrowed one of your knives to core an apple this morning. You found something really wrong with that.”

“That’s entirely fucking different,” Brand said. “It didn’t have to do with toilet paper.”

“I’m calling Addam and asking if he owns another condo,” Max said.

DAY 15

My phone buzzed. I pulled it out of my pocket, saw it was Anna, and answered.

She immediately said, “I think we can burn it.”

“Burn what?” I asked.

“This stupid virus. I think I can use my brain to burn it, then we can all go outside.”

“Well, yes, theoretically that would work. But the virus is inside people. And it never goes well when people burn from the inside out.”

She didn’t say anything.

I waited, and realized parenting usually required more definitive declarations. But Corinne was still locked in the rejuvenation center finishing treatments. Addam and Quinn were in charge of the kids during the unexpected quarantine, since they all shared a building and had been exposed to each other.

“Let me rephrase,” I said. “You will not set the virus on fire.”

“Not even to try?” she said.

“No.”

“Not even on one of Corbie’s stuffed animals? He has dozens.”

“N—” I started to say, and another line tried to beep in. I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “Anna, is that Corbie trying to call me?”

“The stuffed animal no longer has the virus,” she said sullenly. “It died a free octopus.”

DAY 16

Nights were always the hardest. I never could fall asleep right away, which gave

me time to think, and everything I thought about was steeped in worry.

Atlanteans had a nearly genetic aversion to viruses. Viruses had helped decimate our homeland. Viruses had harried us to Nantucket, to rebuild our world on American soil. Would our healers find a way past this new problem? Would the world change around us again?

And that worry—the virus—was like a floor of trapdoors. If I moved left, I fell down a chute and started worrying about the halted renovations on Sun Estate. If I moved right, I stumbled into a pit filled with my enemies, who may take advantage of quarantine to move against me. And if...if...

Eventually I fell asleep, like I always did.

Except usually when that happened, I didn't remember it. I certainly didn't remember opening my eyes to the glare of sun against ocean water. I sat on a beach, and the sand beneath my clenched fingers was as soft as velvet.

"Ciaran, are you dreamwalking me?" I said to the ocean.

A warm body slid down behind me. I smelled sandalwood. Arms rose to circle my stomach; a chin settled on the dip of my shoulder.

"Ciaran owes me a favor, Hero," he whispered against my ear. "I have very much missed you."

DAY 17

We all sat around the box, even Queenie, who made a sound of distress when I started ripping the expensive wrapping paper. I ended up passing the more-carefully torn packaging to her, which she hid in whatever bag of holding she'd invented to keep our nine-foot wide house uncluttered.

Inside was an ornate wooden box, and inside that were ten gray-green stones and two letters: one addressed to Brand, and one addressed to me.

Brand grabbed his letter first. "Brandon," he began, and then he put the letter down. "Nope. That's fucking Mayan's handwriting. He's just going to act all polite and then talk shit at me. Read your letter first."

"Maybe it says what these stones are," I argued.

Max picked up Brand's letter and scanned a few sentences. "It's not bad, Brand... *The Arcanum has developed a spell capable of definitively detecting the presence and passing of the virus. It's expensive and quantities are limited. It'll be weeks before it's mass-produced. Lord Tower wanted to share these prototypes with you.*"

"That's it?" Brand said.

"He also asks whether you've managed to maintain quarantine for all your charges, or whether you've just let Rune do whatever he wanted."

Brand slapped the letter out of Max's hand and glared at me like it was my fault.

I picked up the letter with my name on it, recognizing the Tower's handwriting. I opened it and read what he wrote. Then my eyes began to swim a little, and I put

a hand over my mouth.

“Hey,” Brand said, the scowl vanishing. “What is it? What does he want?”

I laid the letter on the table. It said: “It’s time to go home.”

“Doesn’t he know we’re already home?” Max asked, confused.

“Sun Estate,” Brand said quietly. “He’s saying we should relocate to Sun Estate.”

DAY 17

There was only one place in Half House where I could escape with a low chance of being disturbed. The roof. So in the middle of another night of tossing and turning, I snuck into my sanctum, stored levitation spells in my ankle chain and ankh sigils, and climbed out the window.

The raspy shingles on the flat roof were covered in a layer of pollen, but I found a clean section to float down onto. I got comfortable, laid back, and stared at the sky.

Not even five minutes later, I heard the bang and swearing of my Companion.

Usually he let me have my quiet moment; tonight he climbed the drainpipe. The last bit was particularly impressive, because he had to swing out over a sheer drop and pull himself up with only arm muscles. I watched this without helping, but I did give him a golf clap at the end.

“Oh you fucking bastard,” he gasped as he collapsed onto the shingles. “I love you, and I want to know what’s bothering you, but oh you mean fucking bitch.”

I waited until his panting had subsided a little, then asked: “Do you honestly think we’re ready to go back to Sun Estate?”

He made pollen angels on the roof with his shrug. “The renovations stopped when the virus hit. But we’d already cleared out the threats. A lot of work has been done on the first floor. We have a secure playpen for a fucking prehistoric dire-rhino.”

“There could be other threats. It was so damned haunted...”

“And the areas that haven’t been rehabilitated are behind heavy wards. You took care of that yourself, remember? You wanted the construction workers to be safe.”

“Well, sure, but is it safe for Anna to be there? For Corbie?”

“Are we bringing them?” Brand asked.

He and I exchanged a look at that because, without asking, we’d already jumped into logistics. The question of whether we were going to do it hadn’t even needed to be answered. We required space and security. It made sense. And the gift from Lord Tower meant we could safely mingle two households.

“Are we bringing Addam and Quinn?” Brand added.

“I don’t even know if Addam will want to go.”

“That’s only because you’re an idiot. Of course he wants to go. And he knows

how to protect himself—he'll be an asset. Even Quinn has training on defense magics.”

“Are there enough bedrooms? Are there even enough beds? And how do we—”

Brand rolled, twisted, and ended up in a sitting position. He scooted next to me, and then laid back so that he could see the stars again too. “What is this really about?”

Instead of answering, I said, “Doesn't it worry you too?”

He turned his head to give me a small smile. “No. I'm not the one who will be ruling the estate.”

I turned my head so I could look at him, only I didn't smile. I laughed. I actually barked out a laugh.

“What?” he said suspiciously.

“That's adorable,” I gasped. “Oh my gods, you really think that, don't you? Brandon Saint John—the jobs you and I do right now? The equivalence stays the same; the jobs just get bigger. That means I'm the guy who has to go to meetings at the Arcanum. You're going to run the damn estate.”

“Fuck you say!”

“Oh you have no clue what's ahead of you, don't you?”

And all of the sudden, I felt better about it, because it was going to be so much fun to watch.

DAY 18

I skipped down the stairs with two duffel bags. Max joined me at the second-floor landing. He only had a single suitcase; the same one he'd come to Half House with all those months ago.

We continued downstairs just as Brand finished bringing the last of his luggage up from the basement. That's where the similarities ended. Because Brand? Had a pile of at least two dozen bags, duffel bags, suitcases, and backpacks. He'd actually overturned the coffee table so that he could stack everything in the middle of the room.

“Gods wept,” I said.

“This is real diva stuff,” Max whispered.

“Excuse me?” Brand said with a note of warning.

“Look,” I pointed, nudging Max. “Those two pieces of luggage even match. It's like he's royalty or something.”

“Royalty,” Brand said. “For the sake of a balanced fucking discussion, let's define royalty in practical terms. Lord Sun here probably forgot to pack his goddamn toothbrush, while Queenie and I are the ones who have to remember the toothpaste, bottled water, mouthwash, and hand towels.”

Toothbrush!, I thought to myself. But I was saved a confession by a deep, low

honk from outside.

Brand crossed to a random point of the front window—not the edge, not the middle—and lifted up the closed blind a half-inch.

“Is it Addam?” I asked. “Did he bring a truck?”

“Fucking *scions*,” Brand swore.

DAY 18

Addam found a bus. A city bus. An actual, quarter-block long, dirty-fender, engine-rumbling bus.

Brand and I crowded the front stoop. I didn’t have enough time to translate Brand’s scowl into his real logistical concerns, though, because the bus door hissed open and Addam was a blur off it.

One second, there; the next, here, right here, right against me, the entire line of his body wrapped around mine. He didn’t say anything cute or sexy, he just held me, breathing into my hair.

It was funny, so I laughed—or so I tried to convince myself while my face got wet.

Then I looked over and saw that Brand’s eyes were embarrassed and glassy as Anna and Corbie hugged his waist. And Max was furiously trying to use his fae ability to turn his tears invisible, while Quinn danced around him and slapped him on the back.

I buried my eyes against Addam’s neck, and didn’t stop the moment.

DAY 18

Addam was determined to sell Brand on the bus. As we drove into the eerily-empty downtown streets, he said, “The back has windows. On three sides. It would make a very good defensive perch. Would you like to stand there?”

“I am absolutely going to stand there,” said Brand, who was clipping his chest harness into place. “And I’d like for you to stand where you are, and watch the side of the bus facing the sidewalk.”

“It shall be as you say,” Addam agreed with a little head bob.

After a few city blocks of vigilance, and of everyone under the age of eighteen rooting through bags for food, Addam tensed. “Is there anyone after you at the moment, Rune?”

“Not more than any other Tuesday,” I said.

“I am concerned that we are being chased. Or ambushed. Quinn, grab the crossbow.”

Quinn started. “I grab the crossbow? Are you sure? You don’t always say that, because it’s not always a great idea.”

“What’s up? People running at us?” Brand said casually. “Maybe with a hand outstretched?”

Addam looked outside again, worriedly. “I do not see a weapon in their hand.”

“People usually don’t,” Brand said. “Not when they’re hailing a bus, and not in a city where every fucking bus is out of commission.”

I looked out the window to see an elderly woman hopefully waving a cane at us from a bench, which sped quickly out of view.

“Ah,” Addam said.

“We’re going to talk about this more,” Brand said.

“I suspect we will.”

“At length,” Brand added. “And with visual aids.”

DAY 18

Much had changed in a short time. Things often did when you threw seven figures at it.

The driveway—once flanked with beautiful linden trees, and now just fresh pavement through an overgrown forest—led directly to the low wall in front of the rounded front door. We’d widened the area for the construction crew’s equipment, which now lay in various poses of disuse during the Coronavirus crisis.

The city bus Addam borrowed was self-driving when programmed with the correct GPS coordinates, but Brand had to pilot the last bit himself. He ended up parking where the beds of wildflowers used to be—wild daisies, hydrangeas, milk thistle: flowers that recalled Nantucket’s unsettled days, and could also be used for herbal remedies. They were all weeds now, of course. Landscaping was one of the last bits of reconstruction we planned.

Except for the painting. I’d insisted on a fresh coat of paint on the rotting mansion, even thought we’d have to redo it again when construction was done. It made my occasional visits here more optimistic.

“Fancy-fancy,” Corbie breathed, wedging his head under my arm so he could get a look out my window.

I swallowed a reply down a dry, tight throat. Patting his little back, I squirmed out of my seat and looked down the bus aisle. “Give me a minute guys, alright? I just want to...make sure everything is okay.”

I didn’t say anything as Brand stepped off the bus behind me, because, well, Brand. And it was his homecoming too.

Everyone else also stumbled off the bus, but they made an obvious show of staying put and giving Brand and me a minute to ourselves.

My eyes burned hot as I went toward the door. I didn’t even try to pretend they were anything other than tears.

Then I thought about that and whispered, “Shit, are my eyes glowing? They’re

not on fire, are they?”

“Nah. You’re just weepy.”

“Maybe a litt—” I heard a sound and looked back. The mob—my family—were still standing in a group, pretending to be absorbed with their feet, but the entire bulk of them had shifted five feet towards us.

I turned back to the front door. “Maybe a little,” I said. “So all the floors are technically habitable?”

“Within reason. And there are mattresses in all of the rooms. We’ll be able to order supplies, too. It’s a good plan, holing up here. We can—”

Another noise. We looked over our shoulders. Everyone was five feet closer, still seemingly enthralled with the asphalt, though Quinn had tripped over an untied shoelace and was laid out across Anna’s feet.

As I turned back to Brand, I heard Corbie hiss, “*He’s not looking.*”

“Yeah. It’s a good plan,” I said, and wiped a wrist across my eyes.

DAY 18

While everyone explored downstairs—under strict orders not to follow me or go outside—Brand and I went to the second floor. Reconstruction had barely begun there; only the bedrooms were ready. The majority of the work was being done by magic: infusing raw materials into damaged materials, especially wood. We’d also hired a clan of dwarves to fix cracks and fragile spots in the stone façade.

The nursery had been on the second floor of the West wing—what we called the main body of the house that faced the ocean. The suites still remained even after Brand and I moved out of them, used as a convenience for household staff with young children.

“That’s our crib,” I said in the doorway, smiling at Brand. “I remember that.”

“I remember always having to shove you to your side of it. You were a needy little bastard.”

“You guys slept together?” Anna asked.

I opened my mouth, closed it, turned to see that Anna was standing behind us.

“Are you serious?” Brand asked. “Didn’t we say to stay downstairs?”

“No, Rune did. You didn’t tell me what to do. And I’m not dumb.” She lifted her arm to show that, somewhere, she’d found a crowbar for self-defense.

“There are so many levels to my dissatisfaction,” I told her. “Anna. This is serious. We’ve cleared most of the threats from the estate, but some areas need to be kept off limits. Do you understand? Sun Estate is safer than it’s been in over twenty years, but it’s not *safe*. Wait until we tell you what parts are clear.”

She shrugged and scowled. For the most part, once I got her to this stage, she complied.

“And we were babies,” I said. “We shared a crib until we were old enough to

have our own rooms. We barely even could speak then. I used to call him Band-aid.”

She stared at me, trying to look as adult as she always did, but I saw a questioning smile peek through the curtain of hair. “Why?”

“I had trouble with my Rs,” I said. “And Band-aid sounds a lot like Brand. Plus, sharing a crib with him, the word Band-aid seemed to come up in conversation an awful lot.”

“If you mention that stupid rattle one more time, I will fucking lose it,” Brand promised.

DAY 18

“I don’t think she can hear me. She can’t hear me. This is broken.” I banged on the keyboard as Lady Death made mute, unhelpful pointing gestures from the computer screen.

Brand studied the dashboard over my shoulder. “Nope. She’s just fucking with you.”

The speaker came to life with Lady Death’s throaty laugh. “You’re too easy, little brother.”

I gave her a beady eye, and settled back against the wall. There were no desks in the downstairs study yet, so I was sitting on the ground near the router.

“I’ll leave you two to it,” Brand said. “Anna threatened to bury Corbie’s platypus if he didn’t take a nap, so it’s a war out there.”

Through a dim network of relationships, Corbie had told me that the platypus was the octopus’s stepson, and the entire stuffed animal family was still in mourning over their patriarch’s burns. I gladly let Brand go handle it.

“Someone leads an interesting life,” Lady Death remarked when I had the room to myself.

“Eh, I have help. Thanks for sending those documents. But... Don’t you think we should consider postponing the gala?”

“No, Rune Sun. I think you need to put on your big boy pants and plan to attend a party in your honor. It’s months away.”

“But it’s so...I don’t know. Ostentatious. A *coronation*. Can’t we just make this a small dinner party or something?”

“Is that the sort of Arcana you want to be? A dinner party king? Oh—perhaps instead of a mountain of expensive gifts, people can bring their own streamers. Or maybe an ornament for your next equinox tree.”

I banged my head on the space bar. Then, because I tried to be sensible when possible, I flicked my eyes back to the screen and said, “It’s very, very generous of you to host my coronation party at your compound. I mean that. I’m just...still accustoming myself to the spotlight.”

“Understood,” she said, with a small smile. “So I take it you didn’t review any of the details I sent?”

“You take wrong. I even looked at the drink menu. The caterer is bragging about serving margarita salt from a Malaysian tidal wave, you know.”

The leader of the Bone Hollows had the good grace to roll her eyes.

“That’s the same sort of crap they serve in brothels,” I pointed out.

“You lie.”

“I do not. Call the *Honey Pot*. You’re serving brothel drinks at my coronation.”

She started laughing. “You lie!”

“If this is the kind of older sister you’re going to be, I better warn Brand now.”

DAY 18

Our first day at Sun Estate was over.

After everyone went to their own rooms, I snuck down to the ballroom. Only a few of the chandelier lights worked, so the room was frozen in a sort of twilight. As I walked to the window seat along the wall facing the beach, ghosts laughed and danced by me. Not real ghosts—just the leftover scraps of memories in my brain.

I sat down and looked at the cavernous space. Tried to see it as something filled with warmth and motion again.

Time passed, and then Brand stalked into the room with Anna. He had her pajama collar in his pinched fingers. “She tried to sneak out a window,” he said.

“I was just going to visit the dinosaur! The paths are warded! Do you even know if it ate today? If I’m really Rune’s heir, shouldn’t I be taking care of that stuff?”

“Feeding a four-ton, six-foot prehistoric rhinoceros is not on your list of duties,” I said. “It isn’t even a footnote. It’s not even *implied*. Annawan—”

“Why do you always have to say my full name?” she demanded.

“—Dawncreek, we *will have words*.”

Brand’s other arm was full of bedding. He threw one bundle in a corner and shoved Anna in that direction. He took the other bundle closer to me and started making his own bed. I was about to smile and make fun of his hovering when Addam came into the room.

Addam moved like he was dancing; and my ghosts parted way for him.

“I thought we were going to sneak into each other’s rooms tonight, Hero,” he said. “You are playing most hard to get. And on our first night in a new home, too.”

He stopped just short of me, and in that motion he wordlessly asked for permission. I reached out, tugged at the front of his shirt, and pulled him in for a quick kiss. It barely felt awkward, too.

Addam also had bedding under his arm. He looked for a place equidistant from where I sat and where Brand was nesting, and set up his own camp.

Queenie and Corbie came in next, because Anna woke them up when she'd snuck out of the two-room suite I'd allocated to them. Queenie set up pillows and blankets for Corbie first, then vanished into another room to forage for snacks.

It wasn't long before Max stomped in with his own blanket. He and Quinn had a room to share.

"You do," Max said loudly.

"I do not snore!" Quinn protested. "It's just a sigh. Addam's heard it before. He used to tell me it sounds adorable."

Max spun around and poked Quinn in the chest. "Addam spends his day coming up with reasons to stick gold stars on your stupid forehead. You. Snore."

(I'll admit – I blinked in surprise at that, because I knew that wit. I was very old friends with that wit. My young ward was probably a year shy at putting the word *fuck* in every sentence.)

Eventually everyone ate too much chocolate and popcorn; made sleepy sounds; and settled in for the night. I spoke little and watched, as one by one the ghosts in my head went quiet.

Finally I slipped down to a yoga mat that Addam had scrounged up. He put an arm around me, mumbled something half-asleep, and started drooling on my neck.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had such a safe night.

DAY 19

Quinn and I begged off the afternoon training in order to inventory the decrepit library on the second floor, with a possible eye to finding hidden treasure or well-preserved first volumes. It was a good idea, so Brand took everyone else for a run on the beach while the teen and I settled in.

Two hours later I woke with a start on the musty old sofa. Quinn was snoring from a fainting lounge. I woke him up in hushed whispers, and after a moment of blurry decision-making, we decided to place random piles of books around the room to make it look like we'd accomplished something.

"It was a very nice nap, though," Quinn said as we headed down to the beach.

The sun was level with the ocean by then, burning crimson ribbons into the horizon. The daily exercises had long since ended. Corbie was sleeping on a Sponge Bob beach towel. Anna was off to the side, standing as still as a statue and staring at a flock of gulls. Max was making notes in a little leather journal. He was the first to spot us, and ran up to grab Quinn and pull him into a secret conversation.

I sat down next to Brand, who had pulled two chairs to the foot of the dune grass. "It's nice out here," I said. "Where's Addam and Queenie?"

"Building a disinfectant station for Layne. He—fuck, *they*—they can burn the

virus out of them, but not off them. So we'll have a private room they can spray down their shoes, change clothes, shit like that. Then they can come visit."

"Huh. That's really nice of Addam and Queenie."

"They're nice people," Brand said, and we gave each other a look as if to say, *thank God there are nice people to do that sort of work for us.*

"Find any first editions?" Brand asked.

"Maybe a couple. There was this one—" I paused, looked at Brand's face, realized I was literally lying for nothing. I decided to just give him a thumbs up instead.

"Remember that winter you got really lazy and I had to start writing down your chores with permanent marker?" Brand asked.

"That took forever to fade. I think I still have the word *trash* on my stomach."

"Good. But..." He trailed off. "We're making good progress. On the estate. We deserve a little rest."

I leaned back into the beach chair, satisfied. I kicked off my shoes, ripped off my socks, and dug my feet into the white sand. I watched Anna staring quietly at the gulls. At Max and Quinn reading a passage from Max's journal. Corbie's peaceful sleeping face.

"This is so wholesome," I sighed. "We should be drinking beer."

"Addam is bringing down a cooler."

"Wholesome," I sighed again.

Max grabbed Quinn's sleeve and yanked him to a spot of sand not far from us. I could see, now, that his journal was actually a gridded map of this stretch of beach. He pointed and said to Quinn, "I spend hours and hours and hours digging in this spot. What do I find?"

"This doesn't feel like a very good use of my powers," Quinn said uncertainly.

"I'm gonna run and grab a shovel! Gonna dig for hours! And I find a..."

"Soda tab," Quinn sighed.

Max crossed that block off his map and moved Quinn further down the beach.

Anna stalked over to us and said, "Can I borrow a knife?"

"Why do you want a knife?" I said in surprise.

"No special reason," she said, as Brand said, "One of the gulls stole her sandwich fifteen minutes ago. She's been plotting revenge ever since."

"I know which one it was," she insisted. "I'm only after the guilty party."

I covered my face and said, "How about, instead, you check on your brother and make sure he's not getting a sunburn?"

She made a face, but complied.

"So fucking wholesome," Brand said to me. "We should be a line of greeting cards."

I thought about that. "They'd be kick ass greeting cards, though, wouldn't they?"

“Too fucking right,” Brand agreed, and bumped my fist.

DAY 20

I escaped to a third-floor terrace with a duffel bag, soda, and cell phone. Below me, I heard the sounds of Max and Brand welcoming Quinn into a training session, while Corbie whooped from a tire swing that Addam had jerry-rigged for him.

Setting everything down but my cell phone, I brought up the contact list and poked a number.

The line connected with a, “Rune.”

“Lord Tower,” I said. “Sorry it’s taken me so long to call and thank you.”

“I hope it’s good to be home.”

“It’s...good. And I suppose it’s home. Just different. There’s a lot of work to do.”

“Brand will help shoulder it. It is something he excels at. And the children?”

“All good. I’m a little worried about Layne. They’re young to be on their own—but the hospital has dormitories set up to quarantine volunteer staff, and he seems happy. *They!* They seem happy. Shit.” I plucked a hair from my forearm and winced. It helped reinforce the right pronoun use. Layne was worth it: I was very proud of how they were using their abilities during the Crisis.

“Anyway, it looks like we’re going to start reopening the city in a couple weeks,” I said.

“Slowly,” Lord Tower conditioned. “And I suspect *reopen* is a bad choice of words. We’ll need to seal all travel points and isolate the island, until the human world has their own houses in order.”

I didn’t want to think about that too much. Sealing the island from the wider world came with its own dramatics. I put the thought aside. “You kept a couple stones for yourself, right? That tell if you’re infected?”

“As such,” he agreed.

“Good. You’re invited to a barbecue this weekend. I expect to see you and Mayan here. You’ve been cooped up in that stuffy penthouse too long.”

“What makes you think I haven’t enjoyed the solitude?” he asked, amused. “Enough to leave it, at least?”

“Two things. One, Brand told me he’d clean all the toilets for a week if I got a picture of you eating a cheeseburger from the grill. Second, none of your people ever make mistakes, so what messes do you need to clean up? Think of all the things I’m doing wrong in a new baby court.”

“I’m sure you’re doing fine.”

“I’m going to hire a seneschal, and empower the seneschal to handle all my court appearances and office hours.”

“Rune—” He stopped. “You will not bait me with bad ideas.”

“But the cheeseburger,” I said.

Another pause, and this time I just decided to imagine fondness inside it. Because even the Tower could get lonely, and not many people had the balls to change that paradigm. “We’ll see,” he said, and hung up.

I put the cell phone away and saw that Anna was at the open French door. She came out—ambled, really, like she always did when she wasn’t sure she was welcome—and took a tentative seat on a marble bench. “That was the Tower?” she guessed.

“It was.”

“You seem happy. But you told me to be careful around him.”

“That’s because I don’t trust him to keep his nose out of your training.”

“Why? What’s wrong with my training?”

I didn’t answer right away; I just looked at her. At how guarded she was. At how life had forced her to be guarded—walking the streets with a burn scar she could barely hide. Growing up poor. She’d lost her mother; her father. She’d seen Layne taken, then returned a different person. She’d lost Corinne to the rejuvenation center, and Corinne would also return a different person. Anna had not lived an easy life.

So I leaned towards her and whispered, “Because you are so freaking special.”

“I’m not,” she mumbled, and her cheeks went rosy.

“You are. I won the *lottery* of cousins.”

The smile that edged out of her was as good as I’d imagined.

I dragged the duffel bag to my side, opened it, and pulled out a massive assault-shaped rifle. She looked much, much too happy for not knowing it was only a paint gun. “Easy there,” I said. “It fires paint. The contractors used it to mark parts of the exterior that needed rework”

Anna edged—slyly—toward the parapet, staring at our family below.

“We’ll have about five minutes before Brand reaches us and takes this away,” I said.

“Should we make fun of him for not spotting the sniper?” she asked.

I barked out a laugh. “He knew the minute I came out here. He’s already seen the glint from the scope. If he wanted to stop me, I’d already have a rock between my eyebrows. No, this means he knows I’d only shoot Quinn and Max.”

Anna hungrily took the gun.

I remembered a second later that I was supposed to be a parent in Corinne’s absence. “You can’t shoot Corbie either!” I said hurriedly. Then I added, “Or the stupid octopus’s family!”

She huffed at that, but braced the gun on her shoulder.

“Who are you shooting first?” I asked.

She grinned into the eyepiece and fired a yellow paint pellet dead at Brand’s feet.

DAY 21

Anna and I were no longer allowed to skip training. Honestly, I'm surprised Brand had let me get away with it until now.

The reality of training with others, however, became immediately apparent. This wasn't a contest to see who could vaporize a brick wall. It was calisthenics. Anna sprinted rings around me; Quinn was a meth demon at long-distance running; and Max powered through crunches and pull-ups like a machine.

I'd soaked through the front of my shirt by the time Brand called for a water break. I slapped the water bottle out of his hand and went for the full-sugar Gatorade instead. It took half a bottle to get my voice back.

"Addam," I gasped. "You need to get him in on this fun. He's older than me. He'll be slower."

"Addam joined me on a run this morning," Brand said. "Keep dreaming."

"It's okay, Rune. You'll get abs in no time," Max said, in what I thought was a supportive voice. Then he poked the front of my sweatshirt and said, "Wait, no. Those aren't muscles. It's just a pocket."

"Can I challenge him for the throne whenever I want?" Anna asked.

"Maybe you should practice running," Quinn said to me. "With Brand. You run fast whenever he's behind you. Especially when he's angry."

I didn't say anything, because I didn't want to make the humiliation worse.

"Do you know why I train as hard as I do?" Brand said suddenly.

He turned in a slow circle and stared at the kids. "Why anyone would train as hard as I do? It's because if you do it long enough—for years and years—you may just be good enough to guard the back of someone like Rune. People like him need help saving themselves, because they're usually in the middle of saving the goddamn city. You'd be stupid to underestimate him. Max, Quinn, Anna: wind sprints. *GO!*"

They scrambled, bumped into each other, bolted in different directions.

I opened my mouth and Brand pointed at it. "Shut up," he said.

"But—"

"Not a word. You're going to make this a moment, and then you'll fuck the moment up. Just keep your mouth shut. If you feel so moved, give me a thumbs up."

I sniffed, glassy-eyed, and gave him a thumbs up.

DAY 21

At some point during the morning, Addam noticed that Quinn had slipped away. And as he always did, he examined the dynamics of the moment to see if Quinn was in any trouble or distress, since his little brother so rarely admitted to it

himself.

Addam knew Quinn had spent the morning with Anna and Max. The three of them had formed a bond at Magnus—something genuine and good, which Addam wholly supported. More than that, even. Max and Anna treated Quinn like one of three, not like an addition to two. That was a priceless distinction in Quinn's short life, where eventually he was always edged out by people who feared his gifts.

Another hour passed. Addam hunted his brother down. He might not have a Companion bond with Quinn the way Rune did with Brand, but Addam had raised his brother, which was its own form of telepathy.

He found Quinn in the bedroom Quinn shared with Max. Max was off training with Brand, giving Quinn some privacy, but the expression on the sixteen-year-old's face didn't make Addam feel good at leaving him alone in that privacy.

"I think this is when I say something to you," Quinn said unhappily. He was in front of a mirror, staring at his reflection.

"As you say," Addam agreed, and took a seat on an overturned box. The bare room had little more than two inflatable mattresses, that standing mirror, and a wardrobe.

"Sometimes I've already told you. Sometimes I even think I already did, even though I know I haven't, not now. Not *here*. Sometimes I never tell you, because it's so hard to think about."

"You are worrying me, brother. You can tell me anything."

Quinn pointed at his reflection. "Max is getting handsome. Really handsome. People stare at him, and he notices, and he feels guilty about being vain, but that doesn't stop him from paying extra attention to his hair and clothes."

"And your feelings for Max are...growing?"

"No. I mean, yes. He's Max. I love him. But I'm not... I... People come up to Max. At Magnus. And some of them want to have sex with him. A lot of times, though, it's not for the right reason, because a lot of the students at Magnus Academy are really awful people. But I know Max thinks about that. About sex."

"Would you like to talk about why that makes you uncomfortable?" Addam said, so calmly, because he knew his brother. A blunt question would lead to skittishness which would lead to Quinn's fantastic ability to deflect a conversation in whatever direction he wanted.

"It doesn't make me anything," Quinn said.

He closed his eyes and rested his forehead on the mirror. "I don't think about... it. Sex. At all. I don't... it's not something... I just don't think about it. I don't think about doing it, or wanting to do it, or who I would do it with. I like being close to people. I *like* people. But I don't... Understand the appeal."

"And this bothers you?"

Quinn's eyes snapped open and he turned to face Addam. "It should, shouldn't

it? It's a weird way to feel in New Atlantis. Everything is...it's all about sex. It's all about bodies touching, and showing off your body, and and and—"

Addam stood up and went over to Quinn. He put his hands-on Quinn's shoulders and said, "How many times—in all the probabilities leading from *this* moment as we are now, with me being me, and you being you—do I think it's weird? How many times do I disappoint you?"

Quinn smiled weakly. "That almost never happens."

"And it shall not. Quinn, there are words to describe how you feel. They are not bad words. And they are more common than you think, even in our tiny slice of the world."

"I know. I'm just...I may see what happens many times, but I only actually live through it once. This is starting to happen now, and I can't hold it off much longer. But...not today. I'm not ready today. Is it okay if we don't talk about this anymore?"

"Only if you know it changes nothing in how I feel about you."

Now the weak smile got a little strong, and he threw his arms around Addam, whispering, "You're always a really, really good brother."

DAY 22

We had a big weekend ahead of us. Everyone was busy cleaning or arranging or unpacking or cooking. (Addam was in the kitchen soaking Densuke watermelons overnight in the fridge. He'd funneled a bottle of good vodka into each.)

I thought I could escape more chores by hiding in the library. I had this vague plan of a nap followed by a full night's sleep. But just when I closed my eyes, I heard a hoarse little voice say, "Rune?"

I cracked open one eye and looked at Corbie.

I said, "Corbitant."

Corbie showed me a picture book in his hands. Then he assumed I'd make the natural connection, because he was climbing onto the chaise lounge before I even started to make space for him.

"Why is it your bedtime?" he asked. "Are you in trouble?"

"Nope. But we have a big weekend ahead of us, so I want to rest up. Layne is moving their things in. The Tower and Ciaran are staying."

"Can I do midnight momosirs with Layne and Ciaran?"

"Mimosas, and of course," I said, because they only gave Corbie a champagne flute of orange juice, and nowhere near midnight.

Ciaran and Layne had formed a fast friendship over the last several months. Addam had received no less than five complaints from his condo board (where the Dawncreeks had been staying) about their antics in the community pool. Ciaran was responsible about it—Layne had only just turned sixteen after all—but it was a

hard, hard PG-13 rating.

Corbie held the book out to me.

“You want the cowboy story again?” I asked.

“No. Tell a different story.”

I looked at him, looked at the book, looked back at him. “You want me to read this book but tell a different story?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not sure you understand how books really work.”

“Oh,” Corbie said, and chewed on his lip. “Can I have a soda instead?”

“Not even if it was left to you in someone’s will,” I told him. “But... Well. Did I ever tell you about the Sunken Mall? And the adventures we had in it?”

Corbie’s mouth formed an O and he shook his head back and forth quickly.

“Very well then,” I said, and opened up the cowboy picture book. “Once upon a time there was a long-lost mall, buried deep beneath New Atlantis....”

DAY 23

In the morning, I asked for privacy—even from Brand—and visited the southwestern corner of the compound.

In a shaded glade of tall oak trees, my father had built his personal residence: a five-floor tower, each floor the width of a large room. A spiral staircase inside connected each floor.

(The memory of that random detail surprised me, briefly; and I wondered if the reason I had fallen in love with Half House all those years ago had to do with the familiarity of a spiral stairway and tight quarters.)

I’d spent hours and hours inside the tower as a child, less so as an adolescent. I’d never stepped foot in it as a grown man. When my father died, protective wards he’d laid as a precaution had blazed into existence. It was not an uncommon mechanism among powerful people: there was always an immediate need to protect post-mortem secrets until the probate dust settled.

That said, my father had been an unusually strong spell-caster, and his death had been horrific. That may have affected the strength of the wards. I’d never been able to break through them. Of course, I’d also never had such easy access to try.

I sat under an oak and stared at the front door.

There was a break in the trees over my right shoulder, and I knew if I turned, Brand would be there, on a balcony or patio, watching me from a distance. It felt like sitting in a ray of sun, that sense of safety.

“Are you ready to try?” someone asked me.

I looked to my left, and was surprised to see my second tower of the day.

“You came,” I said, quiet but happy. “To a *barbecue*.”

“It was a generous offer,” Lord Tower said, and lowered himself to the ground.

He crossed his legs as if he routinely made it a practice to sit on dirt and anthills.

I looked back at my father's... Well, my father's *everything*. His private sanctum, study, library, bedroom. I barely knew what waited inside.

"No," I said. "I'm not ready."

"I suspect you'll be the first to make it inside, when you are. Your father would have made certain the wards responded to his bloodline's particular strengths."

"Wonderful. That means Anna's probably already set up a second bedroom for herself in there."

Lord Tower smiled at me. "She has not. The wards are unbroken. She is a remarkable child, but defeating this will take an act of sustained concentration. That is not her forte."

Lord Tower let the moment simmer, but I knew him. I knew him so well I could *feel* the sharpness of his intention, even if I didn't know which of many targets he was taking aim at.

Finally he said, "There will come a point when we must talk of what happened on this estate."

I took a long, thin breath. Claimed my own pause. And then said, "No. There won't. You will never ask, and I will never tell. Not in this life. Not as long as we both live. I swear this on my name. I swear this on my name. *I swear this on my name.*"

The Tower's stunned expression turned into the slightest of wincing as the force of my vow squeezed between us, like deep sea pressure, like the wind off a skyscraper's roof.

"Rune," he said.

"That's how much it means to me, that the past stays buried to everyone but me," I told him. "I am alone in this. *I must* remain alone in this."

"But..." And now the expression on his face shifted between so many things. Still shock. And regret? Or disappointment? And maybe some genuine exasperation. "I don't know where to begin. I would not force the issue. You must know that. But I assumed... I thought there would be a moment where you would *want* to talk with me. You do not need to be alone in this."

"It's how I've lived my life, except for Brand. It's not uncomfortable."

The Tower stared at me a moment longer, then laughed. He leaned so he could look past me. "Is that really a choice any longer?"

Now I looked back to the main house, where I knew I'd see my Companion. What I didn't expect was to see everyone else.

On one patio, Brand and Addam stood. On a balcony: Quinn, Anna, and Max. Queenie stood framed in an undraped window. And by the back door was Corbie in the arms of a lovely young person with shoulder-length hair the color of beach sand—my cousin Layne. They'd finished their monthly volunteer rotation.

They all knew I needed to be alone; and Brand must have told them what this sort of alone meant to me; because they wanted me to know they would be there when I returned from it.

“My oath stands,” I said quietly. “But I guess this is nice too.”

DAY 23

Brand and I walked the perimeter of the Compound, stopping at the dune grass ridge that overlooked the beach. There’d once been a flower garden here, painstakingly tended against the saline sea climate; but all that remained now were weeds and brush, along with newly-scorched areas where we’d evicted some of the nastier haunts.

“You’ve done a really good job with the contractors,” I told him.

Brand flicked his eyes into a suspicious half-eyeroll. I usually didn’t give unsolicited compliments after my second cup of coffee.

“Seriously,” I said. “We couldn’t have hoped for a better move-in period.”

“...Thanks,” he said.

His phone buzzed. He pulled it out, evaluated if the person was worth his time, and answered by saying, “We’re not training anymore unless you finish the protein shake. No. No, I don’t care if it tastes like Quinn’s gym socks, and how the fuck would you even know that?” He paused. Listened. So much eye-rolling. But just before he disconnected, something was said that made him actually smile.

“What?” I asked.

“What what? And why does Anna say Corbie is running around yelling about krakens?”

“I do not know.”

“Really? You didn’t tell him a story about the Sunken Mall last night?”

“It’s possible.”

“Uh-huh. And did you make up a kraken encounter in this story about the Sunken Mall?”

I kept a straight face. “That would be odd.”

“It would be. And did you make up a story about a kraken within the story about the Sunken Mall in which you were the hero of a climactic fight, rather than the person who was nearly sweet-talked by a ghost?”

“Now you’re just being mean. And what were you smiling about on the phone?”

“I didn’t smile.” He scowled. “They’re bringing us some lemonade. But I’m reconsidering yours due to all this kraken stuff. Apparently, Corbie woke Queenie up twice last night because he was screaming and hitting his wardrobe with a pillow.”

I paused and said, “You really have been doing an awesome job with all this rebuilding stuff.”

More eye-rolling, which only stopped when someone left the main house to walk towards us with a tray. To my surprise, it was Layne.

(And of all the things that have happened since we'd adopted the Dawncreeks, this was the one I found the most endearing. In a huge web of weird but new relationships—Corbie and I, Brand and Anna, Anna and Quinn and Max—Brand's friendship with Layne was the most unexpected. Layne's entire life had been upended by the Hanged Man, but they'd come through the other side with this odd, almost surreal sense of peace. Their work at the hospital, their decision to adopt neutral gender pronouns.... It all worked for them. Layne was kind and gentle and used their necromantic abilities to heal others. Something about that really affected Brand, because he treated Layne a bit like a favored younger sibling, and—more important than anything—he *was not gruff about it.*)

"That looks great. Thanks, Layne," Brand said, taking the tray from them.

Layne had bound their brown hair, streaked yellow in spots by the sun, back with a blue ribbon. Their wardrobe tended to waffle between dresses and pants, but today was a cerulean cloak that bloomed with every breeze. They also had both an eyebrow and nose ring, which they'd got after Corinne went in for her rejuvenation treatment. And didn't I look forward to *that* conversation when she got out.

"Did Queenie use honey, or just sugar?" I asked. Her stovetop-cooked honey lemonade had been a source of fierce competition this week. When Brand found out I was hiding glasses of it in my room, he'd taken to hiding the ice cubes, so I'd be forced to partner with him to appreciate it properly.

"You'll like whatever he brought you," Brand said to me. His face collapsed. "Them. Them! Fuck a duck!"

Layne tended to smile a lot, and speak rarely, but now they laughed and patted Brand's shoulder. "You're getting much better at it."

"Are you doing okay?" he asked them. "Do you have enough spending money? Is anyone bothering you? You promised you'd tell me if anyone was giving you shit."

I tried not to smile. I really did. But Brand glowered at the twist of my lips anyway.

Layne said, "Everyone has been wonderful at the hospital, and Ciaran comes by for lunch. No one messes with Ciaran."

"No, no one messes with Ciaran who can repeat the story afterwards," Brand corrected, with no small amount of approval. His phone buzzed again. He looked at it, swore, put his phone away.

"What now?" I said.

"Corbie was caught trying to lift rocks," Brand replied.

"Was he throwing them at anyone?"

"No. But the rocks are also ward stones, and they keep him from going into the

pen with an animal that has a horn the size of a Land Rover.”

“Oh shit,” I said.

“I’m going to nip this one in the bud,” Brand said, and strode off with just a quick tip of the head to Layne.

Layne watched him go. “He’s so good with Corbie and Anna. You both are. They’ve been through so much. I don’t...” They swallowed. “I don’t know what would have happened to us if you hadn’t come along.”

“I guess things happened the way they should,” I said. “Come on. Walk with me.”

Layne and I began walking along the ridge. Layne reached out to break off a piece of dune grass, paused, and didn’t. I’m not sure why I noticed the gesture, but I did, and it said so much about them.

They settled for picking up a flat rock on the ground and skipping it along an imaginary wave.

“Are you really doing okay?” I asked.

They beamed at me and nodded.

“And you’ve got everything you need?”

“More than enough.”

“And the people at the hospital are taking care of you?”

“Didn’t you just tease Brand a little about asking the same questions?”

“It’s not the same. I fit mine organically into dialog.”

“But did you really?” Layne asked, and laughed at my expression. “Yes, Rune. I’m fine. I promise. I like feeling useful, and they need people at the hospital who are immune to the virus. And... Well, Ciaran, I said, checks in on me.”

“I’m very glad about that.”

Layne looked me in the eyes. “Really?”

“Of course really.”

“Why?”

The question seemed to mean a lot to them. I took a beat or two before answering. There was delicate ground ahead. “I heard... I heard you were having nightmares. Bad nightmares.”

Layne looked off into the distance, where the blue ocean turned white and yellow at the horizon.

“And then they stopped?” I said. “Right about the time you and Ciaran became friends? Ciaran dreamwalked into your nightmares, didn’t he?”

Layne waited a full five seconds before giving me a single nod. “He protected me. And he showed me how to protect myself. He’s a very good person, Rune. I promise there’s nothing inappropriate going on.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about that. He knows Brand would kill him if there were. You’re sixteen. You’ve been through a lot, but you’re still just sixteen.”

“I know. And Ciaran treats me like... Like a very young friend.”

I chewed on what I wanted to say next, and took a deep breath. “I know what it’s like to have nightmares too. I used to have them. A lot. So, if you ever want to talk... I mean, I could... You could tell me, and we could talk. About them.”

Layne started laughing. They actually grabbed my arm for balance. Wiping away tears, they finally said, “Oh, Rune, you’re so sweet, but you’ve turned burying your feelings into a new branch of science. I can’t do that to you.”

“Eh, fair point,” I said. I threaded their arm through mine, and we continued our walk down to the beach. Maybe a beautiful day before a fun weekend was enough for the moment.

DAY 23

We were all getting ready for the first barbecue. It was going to be an entire three-day thing. The Tower and Ciaran would be staying with us until Sunday because, apparently, I was a landowner, and that is the sort of thing that landowners did.

“Fuck,” Brand said when I shared the thought. “We’ve got all this open space, and now we have to go and fill it with people? We have enough people.”

“But—”

“*Enough*,” Brand said loudly. He snapped the metal folding chair into position and put it under the banquet table. “Everyone after this will be a well-regarded employee, not someone we need to fight another Arcana or lich over.”

We finished setting up the table just as the kids descended on us. Literally descended—each from their own direction and doing their own thing, but electrically aware that appetizers were about to be laid out. Max and Quinn sat down in the seats we’d just unfolded and continued playing on their Switches. Corbie had an armful of dolls and stuffed animals. Anna had a piece of paper in her fist.

I’m not sure which raised more red flags—the official looking piece of paper or the fist.

“We’re going back to school soon,” she said. “I still can’t believe they’re not going to cancel summer classes.”

Magnus Academy had three long semesters separated by a month of apiece. With the Coronavirus levels tapering off, the school was being reopened with safeguards in place.

“I am absolutely traumatized about it,” I told her. “I already miss you.”

“Sure, whatever, but I can’t go back unless you sign this stupid thing.”

“What did you do?” Brand asked her through narrowing eyes. Behind him, I spotted Addam and Layne bringing bags of hot dog and hamburger buns out the patio doors.

Without looking up from his Switch, Max said, “She programmed her nemesis’s computer to print an eggplant in the place of every hundredth I.”

Brand and I exchanged perfectly neutral looks. He didn’t blink first, so I said, “Okay, I don’t understand. Do you understand? What’s wrong with an eggplant?”

“I know what it means, but I want Anna to explain it,” Brand said cagily.

“It’s an emoji,” Addam volunteered. “Like the smiley face or crying face. It means... It represents... Anatomy.”

“You didn’t know that,” I told Brand.

“I know what an emoji is,” he said back to me.

“Really? When was the last time you used one.”

Brand, now working up to full huff, said, “Why the fuck would I want to press more buttons than necessary to text your sorry ass? Do you *think* you’re the type of person who deserves smiley faces?”

“You’re missing the point,” I said. “We’re supposed to be yelling at Anna.”

“Discussing,” Addam said quickly. “Perhaps it’s better to discuss this, rather than yell.”

“And you got caught?” Brand asked Anna with perhaps the deepest disgust of all.

“And when did you get a *nemesis*?” I asked.

“Mean girls,” Layne said knowingly. “I’ll bet money it’s about a mean girl.”

Mayan appeared at the patio doorway. I think I spotted him first. There was a woman at his side: young with shiny black hair held back by a simple braid. Her face was brown and unlined. She’d told me once that her grandparents came from the Caribbean.

Corbie was the second to notice. His face went from happy to sobbing in about point-two seconds, and then he was running. Corinne met him after he’d barely covered two little-legged yards. She whispered into his ear and knelt down, and held out her other arm. Anna collided and buried herself against the other side of her neck.

Nearby, Layne took a step forward and stopped, unsure. Corinne and Layne locked eyes for a full ten seconds, and worlds of emotion moved across their faces. Then Layne sprinted forward and wrapped their arms around their reunited family.

THE FINAL DAY

I growled into my pillow as Addam godzilla'd his way around the master bedroom.

"I am being very quiet, Hero," he said, as if reading my mind.

I pried open an eyelid and tried to keep my morning breath to myself. "You could be quiet on the other side of the mattress. Like a pillow."

He smiled and said, "If I go back to that mattress, there is every chance we will be anything but quiet."

I hid my blush in the pillow, growled again, and did a push-up to a sitting position. "What time is it? Six? Seven?"

"It is nine-thirty. Brand paces outside the door like a snooze alarm every fifteen minutes. He must be in a good mood if he hasn't resorted to more active measures."

I watched the muscles ripple across his back as he pulled a yellow t-shirt over his head. He knew I liked him in yellow. He tanned ridiculously easily, and the tan looked dramatic against gold. I opened my mouth to ask him something, stopped, swallowed, and tried again. "Maybe just come and lay down next to me for a little while?"

He turned, launched, hit the mattress with a massive bounce. I was laughing by the time he crawled into position next to me. He dug into my stomach and wrapped his arms around me.

"Hey," I whispered.

We stayed quiet and close for enough minutes that I lost track of them. Eventually he squirmed until we were at eye level. "I like our mornings," he said.

"I do too."

"Truly?" he asked.

The waters under that statement were calm but deep. Memory traveled, racing by things still left unsaid, things that eventually would need to be spoken. *I know that I will never be the love of your life.* The moment hadn't passed on that conversation; I was just circling it until I found the courage to continue.

"What is causing these?" Addam sighed, tracing the stress lines around my eyes.

"Socks," I said, mentally scrambling for another topic. "I saw what you did to my socks. You mated them."

"I think you mean to say that I paired the correct socks together and rolled them into a unit."

"It's so *formal*. Did you say vows over them? Did they agree to it? What if a purple sock wanted to shack up with a green sock?"

Addam stared right through that bullshit. After the moment had simmered, he leaned back into the mattress and said, "Corbie told me the story you told him."

"Oh, not the kraken again."

“No. I mean to say, it made me think. I never told you about the conversation that Brand and I had in the Sunken Mall. When he agreed to give us a few stolen moments in the tent.”

“When you purchased intimate time with me. I remember.”

“You never asked what I paid.”

I reached up and touched his own wrinkles. His were on his lips, because he smiled so much. “I’m guessing he took you for everything, right down to your spare change.”

“I told him I would always have your back, no matter what happens between us. That I would always be ready to protect you.”

I slid my hand to his jaw and cupped it. After a few seconds, I lowered my voice and said, “Do you have any idea how much a good bodyguard costs? He literally got you to offer free mercenary services in advance. For life. He *fleeced* you.” I felt his smile under my fingers, and we both laughed.

“My point, Rune, is that if my sock-folding becomes uncomfortable, I will give you space. I—”

“Which of us called which of us back to bed?” I said. “I’m not asking for space.”

He leaned forward and touched his lips to mine. Less a kiss than a quick connection.

He said, “You are my green sock.”

So that led to more moments, until it became impossible to ignore the fact that a household of people was preparing for another day of our barbecue weekend. Plus, Corinne had come home, and I wanted her to feel welcome.

We dressed—or I did, while Addam made encouraging sounds on my choices. I opened the door just as Brand was pacing down the hallway again.

He took a deep breath and said, “I let everyone sleep in.”

“There’s your good deed for the day,” I agreed.

The three of us fell into easy step, and began walking down the hallway. “We’ve got stuff to do,” Brand said.

“Like monster fighting stuff?” I asked hopefully.

“Like cleaning tables and recycling beer bottle stuff,” Brand said.

“Dang. I can’t wait until you hire a staff for us.”

“Yeah, I’m sure once we hire staff I’ll totally let you sleep in every day and not pick up after yourself,” Brand said.

We hit an intersection to another wing. Quinn staggered around a corner in pajamas with purple owls on them. His hair stuck up in every direction. He yawned and said, “I need coffee. I can’t remember if today we have the circus performers coming or just a barbecue.”

“Perhaps I will have coffee, and you’ll eat actual food,” Addam said. “Where is Max?”

“Still sleeping.”

Addam put both hands on Quinn’s shoulders, steered him in a complete circle, and shoved him back towards the suite of rooms he shared with Max. He looked over his shoulder and said, “I will get the boys up and ready to help.”

I waved at him, and Brand and I continued down the corridor. “This feels sort of wholesome,” I said. “It’s weird to live in a house big enough that we need to *walk* places to get people ready for breakfast. Usually you just yell or stick a sword through the ceiling to get my attention.”

“Who’s using a sword?” Anna said, popping out of a room. She had a laptop under her arm.

“Just an expression,” I said. The hallway opened up to the central building stairway. The dark wood didn’t exactly gleam yet, but construction had started reversing the decades of absence.

“Have you seen Max and Quinn?” she asked as we headed down the steps.

“Addam is getting Max up. You need to help us clean,” Brand added.

Anna shoved the laptop in my arms and pulled out her phone. She tapped a message, then took her laptop back. “I told Max there was only enough bacon left for one person. That’ll get him up. They need to get their asses in gear.”

“Language!” I said.

“What? I didn’t say effing asses.” She was about to continue her defense when she stopped walking and focused. A half-second later, Corinne backed out of a second-floor bathroom while saying, “Yes, I’ll keep the door cracked.”

“Aw look, a baby Companion bond,” Brand said.

Behind Corinne, in the bathroom, someone gave a hoarse yelp and cried, “Oh no!” Then an industrial-sized ream of toilet paper that Addam had snagged from his office rolled out of the bathroom, across the hallway, and through the widely-spaced bannister railing. It plummeted to the first floor.

“It’s too big for him,” Corinne said. “Go help your brother. Please?”

Anna made a show of sulking, but it was only a show, because she gave Corinne a quick hug, grumbled the word *morning*, and went to help Corbie.

Corinne watched Anna with a slightly wistful expression. “She’ll stop hugging me soon. She’s about that age.”

“You’re her Companion now,” Brand said. “And they never grow up nearly as quickly as you hope. Anyway, *welcome back!* And, *tag*, you’re it.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a handful of junk, and shoved it at Corinne. I spotted a cornflower blue hair clip; two marbles; a dental retainer; and a scratched nickel Corbie insisted was valuable because it was printed in his birth year.

“You haven’t been making Layne wear their retainer?” she said angrily.

I escaped the need to answer when two hungry teenaged boys in pursuit of bacon screamed a rebel roar and ran through us. Brand shouted at them to slow

down and watch for areas of the floor that hadn't been repaired, and took off after them.

Corinne and I continued down the stairs. She smiled at the handful of junk (though not so much the retainer), and shoved it in her own pocket. "You... watched them," she said haltingly. "I'm thanking you, I mean. For watching them. They seem very happy."

"They missed you, Corinne."

"I'm not... That is, yes, I know they missed me. I'm just having a hard time telling you how... I don't know the words to acknowledge what you've done for my family."

"Our family. They are my kin. So we're kin. We're court."

She took a deep breath while we stepped off the stairs and onto the marble first floor. The giant roll of one-ply toilet paper had made it halfway across the entryway before snagging on a ratty old rug we'd yet to replace.

Corinne faced me. "This will be difficult," she said.

"I know."

"I've spent...years. Alone. Missing Kevan. Raising these beautiful children. And now I have a new bond, and I'm young, and I have all these...these hormonal *emotions*. I forgot what it felt like to be this young again."

"I know," I said again, only more helplessly, because I didn't really know, and I was piss-awful at emotions myself.

Her head lifted and she met my eyes. "I thought I was dying. The only thing that mattered—*the only thing that mattered*—was making sure those children had a home. And you agreed. Not just to make sure they were cared for, but to treat them like family."

"But you didn't die," I said.

"I didn't, no," she said. "But you still took the kids in and cared for them when I couldn't. What I'm saying... What I'm saying is that I pledge myself into your service too. Like Layne. Like Anna. I pledge myself to the Sun Court too."

I blinked my eyes a few times maybe, got a grip, and said, "I accept your service. Harm to you," and I felt the tug of an invisible wind around me, "is now harm to me."

"I'm not hugging you," she said.

"Got it."

"And we'll argue a lot," she said.

"Let me draw you a map to Brand so that you can meet him," I said.

She didn't crack a smile, but she gave me a satisfied nod. "I should check on Layne." She hid an eye-wipe by looking upstairs. "I'll get everyone down for a meal." She started back up the way we came (hefting up the giant roll of toilet paper first), but paused on the bottom step. Without turning her head, she said, "I knew

your father. I can't say what he'd think of all this—you're very different than you were at fifteen."

"He wouldn't know what to make of me," I said.

Now she looked over her shoulder. "No. He wouldn't. I think you genuinely would have surprised him. I think you'd be a wonder to him, because you're doing things he never thought to do. Things, honestly, I'm not sure he had the skill at. Try not to change too quickly."

And we had a party.

I know in the scope of things it wasn't a big party. I had my coronation gala ahead of me, and Lady Death was already tossing around words like "epic" and "generation". *That* would be a big party. But this was a party filled with people I cared about, and it was a far bigger crowd that I would have expected a year ago.

It made a difference. Usually I spent parties thinking about the quickest way to extricate myself. Or maybe trying not to laugh at Brand's own less subtle attempts to extricate himself. But this? I wanted to stay, because it was all so damn relevant and entertaining.

Max and Quinn were allowed half a glass of whiskey apiece. The Tower brought an expensive bottle, from some country that didn't exist anymore. One of them got sick and threw up in the bathroom wastepaper basket. We found the evidence, but not the culprit, because they refused to rat each other out.

Lane used their necromancy to create a golden swirl of octopus-tentacled light above Corbie's head, to his clapping delight. The light rang like piano keys, which was lovely and unexpected, and made me realize I needed to have a serious talk with Layne about the scope of their abilities.

The Tower talked about being forced to hold a global shareholder meeting over the internet, due to the pandemic. He said one of his bar graphs got Zoom-bombed by outsiders and turned into penis pictures.

"I bet you handled that with grace and tact, and turned the other cheek," Brand said.

The Tower looked at his watch. "We tracked the IP address. The strike team lands in Florida in twenty-three minutes."

Addam's fancy watermelons, corrupted by good vodka, led to a talk about pineapples. "They were a sign of wealth in Victorian England," Ciaran explained, drawing on very personal knowledge. "That's why you see pineapple designs in frescoes and gate fleur-de-lis. People actually would *rent* pineapples for parties, just to show them off."

(And across the room, Quinn dropped his plate. It was plastic and didn't cause much of a mess, but I saw the pale and wide-eyed look on his face, and stored it in the back of my mind, in a big treasure chest I called "Quinn's Possibly-Prophetic

Oh Shit Moments.”)

Brand was mercilessly teasing Corinne. Part of the full-age rejuvenation treatment was an acknowledgement that youth brought a surge in fresh hormones. Corinne refused to talk about what sort of *treatment* they used for that, which gave Brand plenty of room to work with. I walked away when he started guessing about active-participation sponge-baths.

That’s how I eventually wound up with Ciaran, sitting at a corner table in the ballroom.

“Why the sleeping bags?” Ciaran asked, looking at a stack of blankets, sleeping bags, and pillows in the corner.

“We all have our own rooms, but one way or the other, we kind of wind up here for slumber parties. It’s a big house. It can get sort of...creaky.”

“You’ve handled all the night haunts, yes?”

“All except the metaphoric ones,” I said simply.

He gave me a red-lipped smile, and kindly didn’t pursue the topic “Layne says you’re all getting along well. They’re worried about Corinne, though. It’s a big change for her. She’s used to running her household.”

“I know. But there are plenty of things that need running around here. I’ve got some ideas.”

“Mmmm,” Ciaran said, and sipped on vodka watermelon juice. “You’re so full of shit.”

I sighed and said, “At some point, I’ll think about it, and then I’ll have ideas. I’m trying.”

“You are. And that’s always been worth more than you give yourself credit for.”

It ended in fireworks. We all trooped to the patio and unfolded a bunch of lawn chairs. The spellcasters competed on who could do the best fireworks monster. Corbie was in charge of shouting out suggestions, like spaghetti boogers, octo-dragons, and a Ms. Siberian Unicorn. After a half-hour of that, Brand swept in with a 99-cent sparkler. Corbie’s eyes lit up like Brand had discovered rocket theory. Dragon fireworks forgotten, Layne had to chase a screaming Corbie around to keep him from setting the tablecloth on fire.

Eventually Brand, Max, and I peeled off from the ground to take a walk around the main house. It was a lazy patrol that ended at a half-rotted wooden swing five minutes later, where we decided to drink beer in silence and listen for approaching bad guys instead.

“We really do need to set up patrols,” I sighed.

“Or hire people,” Brand said. “We need guards. You need a seneschal. We need...shit. We need people. But not people we need to care about and fight over!”

“I’m people,” Max said in a small voice. He was on the ground by one of the

wooden tripod legs. “Can I be someone? Can I help?”

Brand dug a foot in the ground to still the swing, which made my end jerk back and forward. “Of course you’re someone.”

“I’m kin,” Max said. “I’m a Saint John. But... what do I say when people ask? What am I?”

Now I dug my own foot in the ground. I exchanged a look with Brand, and we shrugged at the same time. “Brother,” I said. “You’re our little brother.” I made a lazy gesture in the air with my beer bottle. “Let it be so.”

Max looked between us with bright, shining eyes. “But can I *help*?”

“Of course you can,” I said. “I know you’d rather train with Brand, but I’d also like—if you’re willing!—to have you start working with me. To help administer the court.”

Max jerked upright, lost his balance, slapped back down onto the ground. He was still a little buzzed off the whiskey. He said, excitedly, “I want to do that! Please?”

“You don’t need to say please, I just offered it,” I said. “You picked up good manner from someone. It’s about time you put them to use. I think you’ll kill at diplomacy. Not like Brand-kill. I mean, like, talented-kill.”

After Max ran off to tell Quinn, Brand turned to me and said, “Nice one.”

“You think so? I probably should have asked you first.”

“You only need to ask me first when you’re wrong,” he said. “You’re not wrong here. He may not have his grandmother’s powers, but he got *something* from her. He’ll be an asset. And fuck knows we have a shitload of holes to fill in this court.”

“Everything is about to change. Isn’t it?” I asked quietly.

Brand took a sip of beer, thinking that through. He eventually just shrugged. “The world is changing. Humans are still struggling with the pandemic. We’re about to close our borders now that we’ve got the virus under control. That’s going to create some weird tensions in the city. And you’re a fucking Arcana now. Some of that shit is going to land on your plate.”

“Arcana,” I whispered. “I’ve spent a lifetime wondering if I could ever do it. Do...” I waved at the air around me. “Do this. Have this. And then, all of the sudden, I’m not *wondering* if I could do it, I’m actually doing it.”

“Yeah,” Brand said. “That happened perfectly naturally. We haven’t had our friends, three contractors, and thirteen subcontractors working day and night on it since you decided to catch fire in the fucking Arcanum.”

“I guess that may be true,” I said, while Brand said, “It’s really true.”

I rolled my head along the back of the soft, old wood to stare at him. “Can we do this? Can I do this? Do you trust me to keep us safe?”

“Like I trust my heartbeat,” he said. “Dipshit.”

I grinned. “Looking back over the last few years, now that we have a little bit of

power, now that we have the Arcana name, what do you really want to do? What's on your Wishlist?"

Brand took another long sip. "I'm going to break at least one bone in Geoffrey Saint Talbot's body."

I said, "I'm going to free an ocean roc."

"I'm going to make Mayan call me *Lord Saint John* in public."

"I'm going to find out if this has any magic power." I pulled a corduroy button out of my pocket.

"I want to meet Lady Death's mother," Brand said. "She's called the Matriarch Lady Death. She's supposed to be fucking terrifying."

"I'm going to form an alliance with the Hex Throne," I said, but softly, and very vaguely, because there were some suspicions that only belonged in my head for now.

"With Lord Magician?" Brand said.

"With Lord Magician," I said.

"He's rich, I guess. Maybe he'll shake out his sofa for us. Anything else on our wish list?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm going to make our people safe. You?"

Brand put his arm along the back of the swing, and kicked off. The earth let us go and we flew, just a little.

He said, "That's a good one to end with."

It didn't seem like anything else needed to be said to make tonight really nice, so we decided to spend a while just looking at the stars.

THE END

FOR NOW



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AND A QUICK THANK YOU FOR THE ARTISTS

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