

THE TAROT SEQUENCE WORLD

“The Great Atlantean Battle Royalchemy”

Part Six

The laboratory was sealed off while a hive of technicians in the control room swarmed over their instruments and control panels, trying to understand what happened. A supervisor walked from person to person, barking at them to find the “glitch.”

“It says something about our life that I’d *welcome* a life-threatening glitch,” Brand murmured to me. “I said it before and I’ll say it again: for once, I’d like the universe to accidentally try to kill us without an elaborate fucking plan.”

“Because it’s not a glitch,” I said.

“It is not a glitch,” Brand agreed. “Are we going to play along like it was?”

“Yes,” I said. “For now.”

For all that, matters had changed. We’d need to stay focused and alert. There would be no more casual snowball fights, which was just as well, because Max and Layne had secretly dipped an armful of snowballs in water and snuck them into the hotel’s mini-freezer, as if I wouldn’t check there for ice cream.

The four of us—me, Brand, Ciaran, and Max—were sitting in the control room. Mosi had vanished to compile the recorded footage of the poison attack, and the contestants were being debriefed by center security. We were going to explore the holographic magic for anything we might have missed during the action.

When the door to the busy control room opened, I checked to see if it was Mosi, but instead spotted a middle-aged woman standing calmly on the threshold.

She wore a black dress with lacelike silver around the collar. Her

hair, prematurely graying, was coiled into a single braid. She had the high cheekbones of the fae, along with their pearlescent skin—pale, with just a hint of every color imaginable.

Brand had tensed at my side, which Max caught and mimicked. We stared at her, as she looked directly at me.

“My name is Ewa Harpur,” she said in a soft voice. “I believe you’d asked to see me, though there is some confusion as to whether you are now...otherwise preoccupied.”

I stood. “Of course. The production team has made a room available to us. Please, join me.”

I didn’t bother looking at Brand to see if he’d tag along. I’d be lucky if he let me go anywhere alone without first stuffing rags into vents. Max answered my glance with a shallow nod, but Ciaran waved a hand.

“I’ll find Mosi and see how the footage is coming,” he said. “I’m most curious to learn more about our afternoon, especially if it takes me by hair product.”

He excused himself, and we moved to a small, windowless conference room. A brief feeling of claustrophobia prickled the gooseflesh on my arms, but I ignored it. Only a few facilities in the silo contained the technology necessary for cleansing, and this wasn’t one of them. But I’d still feel a lot better if I’d get time in a sanctum soon, to mix up the spells I’d stored in my sigils.

“I apologize for any confusion,” I said as we all took a seat in the fake-leather chairs around a cheap but serviceable conference table. “We had every intention of introducing ourselves to you, but there was an issue in one of the laboratories.”

“Oh, yes. It’s the talk of the conference center.” She folded her hands in her lap and offered no more, but her body language was telling. She favored Brand and I with polite expressions, but every few seconds, her gaze wandered to Max. The emotion in her eyes was very well contained, but for all that, she was reacting strongly to his presence.

So I leaned into it.

“You appear to recognize my brother, Lord Matthias Saint John,” I said.

She turned that polite look to me. “Of course. Lord Matthias. We’ve never been introduced but...” And here, for just a second, she faltered.

She recovered with an awkward, “But you were known to me. I am glad to see you in such good health and company.”

Max stiffened in the chair. “You work for my grandmother.”

“No. Not directly. I was under contract with the Heart Throne and served at a research facility near the Zone in Poland.”

“But you were a member of the Heart Throne,” Max persisted.

“I was,” she said. “But my connection with them has been severed.”

“After the throne fell,” Brand said. “You left their employ after the raid.”

She looked down. She brought her hands to the table surface and, as she spoke, made random, fidgety patterns. “It would be prudent to make myself understood,” she said. “Many, many people were stunned to learn of the full extent of Lady Lovers’...projects.”

“You mean the production of drugs that enabled the rape and enslavement of young humans,” I said.

She didn’t flinch, and she met my gaze. “I will, in no manner or fashion, defend her. Or anyone involved in that. It is reprehensible. It made a mockery of all the real research that was being conducted. Research meant to create bridges with the human world, not destroy them.”

It got quiet, and I fed the silence with more of my own. After maybe thirty seconds, I lowered my chin into a small nod. This wasn’t the mystery before me. “I appear to have let our conversation go afield. I was simply looking to congratulate you on your reinstatement to the final round, and to wish you luck. I will admit that the issues today were surprising. Have there been any other accidents or setbacks in the programming?”

“None at all,” she said. “There has been no more or less drama than I’d have expected. Plus, these are exceedingly good facilities. I can’t even think of another technical issue we’ve experienced.”

“If I understand correctly,” I said, “all of you hail from the homeland. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn some of you served the Empress and Emperor as battle alchemists.”

I saw the flash of her eyes—and her small smile. “A long time ago. Battle alchemy is out of fashion.”

“It is, and that’s unfortunate. It’s a fiercely powerful field tactic.” She continued to give me the sort of smile a lot of centennials did, as if they didn’t know what a Wiki article was, or I was too young to read it. So I

added, “My father spoke of battle alchemists often. My court has long been affiliated with the inventors and creators of Atlantis, and he told me battle alchemy was something of a type of art.”

“In better days,” she agreed.

“Did any of your co-contestants serve as battle alchemists?” I said.

“That would be their story to tell, but I can’t see the harm of a general answer. It’s not a secret. Lord Erasmus has trained for the field. Not so with Lady Kamilah—she’s a strong alchemist, but took to battle as a lioness.”

I didn’t press further. Ewa Harpur struck me as a very observant scion, which could become uncomfortable if she turned it on me and my presence. I took the buzz of my phone for the escape opportunity it was. “It seems Lord Mosi is ready for us. I’ll need to excuse myself, Lady Ewa.”

“Of course, Lord Sun.”

We all got up to leave. Max was closest to the door. Before he walked out, though, he turned and said to Ewa, “I apologize if my presence upset you.”

I don’t know why he said it, and I’d lose my shit on anyone who expected an apology. But the expression on Ewa’s face was both shocked and shocking.

“Upset me?” she said. “You were my prince. I—” She bit down on her lower lip and blushed. “I forget myself. Truly.”

Max looked at me and waited to see if I would stop this. I didn’t. He looked back at Ewa and said, “Please. You can speak honestly.”

“You were our prince,” she said. Her voice shook. For a moment, I didn’t think she would say anything else, but then determination loosened her tongue. “You were our beautiful baby prince. You were *celebrated*. And then one day...” She shook her head and dropped her gaze.

“One day my grandmother gave up training me,” Max said. “I didn’t have her power.”

“It was wrong,” Ewa whispered. “You were our prince.”

“A long time ago,” Max said. “That part of my life is done.”

I cleared my throat. “Technically?”

Brand added, “But there’s still no crown in our court, and no increase in allowance.”

They caught each other’s eyes and smiled, and I smiled with them.

Our Max was growing up. He'd fought for every inch of confidence he possessed. Every damned inch.

"Matthias," Ewa said before he could turn and leave again. A faint smile had appeared on her own face as she watched our exchange. "I am very happy you have found your people. Just remember one thing. Your grandmother was not a good leader. She only recognized one type of power—hers. That was a character flaw. There are many types of power in this world, if you're persistent and wise enough to take advantage of them."

Max considered that, nodded, and left ahead of us.

Even Brand lost a minute or two gaping at the holographic world around us. We weren't really television people, and had never upgraded our equipment to this newest techno-magic fad. But I had to admit: it was stunning.

The three of us—rejoined by Ciaran—had stepped into a sound-proofed room to privately review the footage from the attack. Or relive it? It was so damn lifelike. It was really as if we were standing in the laboratory again.

The technology, linked to a mesh copper glove and goggles, allowed us to view nearly anything resting within the scope of the dozens of cameras. Mosi had only activated the footage within minutes of the sprinklers being turned on, but we were able to freeze the replay and examine everything frame by frame.

"Rune," Brand finally said in exasperation. "Stop checking out your ass and focus."

"My pants look a little tight in the rear," I muttered.

"Welcome to being a fucking Atlantean," Brand said.

"It's because I've been sitting through so many meetings."

Brand gave me a Look. "Do you really want to talk about this now? Fine. I'll talk about all the excuses you've used to get out of training sessions."

I decided that, no, I didn't want to talk about this now, mainly because I'd forgotten I used meetings to get out of training sessions.

"This is fun," Ciaran said, waving a hand at us. "But *this* is interesting."

Max was already at the spot Ciaran indicated with a tilt of his chin.

Max saw our attention and said, “Didn’t Mosi mention something about putting ingredients away? I think he was referring to this.”

We all gathered at a heavy black lab bench in a corner of the room. There were a few small cylinders of ingredients resting under a special, lint-free cloth used to wipe down benches. I couldn’t see the labels, and we couldn’t actually move items around in the hologram. There was a small dish of crushed green leaves nearby, too.

“The rest of the room is immaculate,” Max said. “I wonder who the slob is?”

“I wonder what the herbs are for,” Brand said. He looked around us in frustration. “The angles are good, but I wish we’d started recording sooner. And Rune, can you do something about Lord Tower? He’s sitting in the corner as if I didn’t fucking notice the moment he appeared.”

I did a double-take because, sure enough, the Tower was virtually resting half an inch above a virtual stool in the corner. He shimmered with the effect of a projection.

“Interesting technology, isn’t it,” he said. “I’m linked through a private room in the Pac Bell. We can speak freely.”

Brand hid his eye roll from everyone but me, because he had clear thoughts on the value of speaking freely around the Tower.

“Am I going to waste time filling you in on anything, or did Mayan already provide a transcript of every word we’ve said?” I asked, though I smiled a bit and dipped my head respectfully. There was a reason Brand hid his eye rolls.

“I have a meeting set up with Lady Moon and Lord Devil in a few moments,” he said. “I thought it worth checking in first. Am I correct in assuming that you find the overlap between Nightglade and Beast interesting?”

“Two overlaps, yes,” I said. “Two...schisms, I guess is the word. Cat versus wolf within the Beast Throne, and the animosity between the administrations of both courts. It would be a strange coincidence, given everything else going on. My gut says we need to look closer. Lord Tower, are Lady Moon and Lord Devil back on the island?”

“No. They have remained outside the quarantine since the Pandemic hit. I’ll be connecting with them virtually.” He didn’t look excited about that. He picked a piece of lint off his dark silk robe and bought himself a

moment or two to think. “This will be tricky, Rune. If any sort of attack is planned, and you can stop it, we’ll need to keep it classified. Lady Moon and Lord Devil have the right to put their houses in order.”

“Understood,” I agreed.

“Good. The volatility in the Devil’s court is especially concerning. That’s a street battle waiting to happen.”

“Do you recognize these herbs?” Brand said, pointing at the dish.

The Tower didn’t raise his virtual ass off the virtual chair. He just swiped his mesh-covered hand, zoomed in, and saw whatever he saw. “No,” he murmured. “Shall I send an independent expert?”

“I have an idea,” I said. “Thanks anyway.”

He looked down at his wrist. “I need to go. Stay in touch with regular reports.”

And then he did something he’d rarely done around me before. His lips twisted, as if chagrined. He added, “Having an Arcana on site is a relief. Truly, Rune, thank you.”

He vanished in a burst of pixelated gray.

“He totally forgot you were an Arcana for a second,” Brand crowed.

“You do realize the Tower would bury me in cement if I ever spoke to him with half your sass,” Ciaran said.

Brand sat on whatever smart-ass reply he had on hand, because his intuition—fed by our bond—was prickling. He watched me dialing a number on my phone. “What?” he said.

“We need an expert, right?” I asked, pointing to the herbs on the table.

“Do we trust anyone here enough to ask?” Brand said.

“No,” I told him. “That’s why I’m going to blackmail someone.”

The call connected. No one greeted me, but I heard the rustle of cloth and a shallow breath.

“Hello, Geoffrey!” I said. “How’s it going?”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “It makes no sense. Who puts a single Pringle back in the container? What sort of mind fuckery is this?”

I slammed the cylinder down on the minibar.

“All of my responses to that are bottlenecked,” Brand said. “It’s like a vaudeville show with eight people running through a door at once. Why are you so fucking hangry lately?”

He was sitting on the hotel suite sofa polishing his knives. I was waiting for Geoffrey's knock at the door. He had not appreciated my immediate summons.

I threw myself down onto the surprisingly plush sectional and stared out a window made opaque by thick, thick fog. "It helps me think. Has it occurred to you yet that it'd be really hard to kill us in a cleansing like that?"

"Maybe someone didn't know we'd be there."

I rolled my head and looked at him, because I knew his devil's advocate tone.

"You could have got us out of there," he said. "I think it was staged, but in a really Atlantean way, like someone didn't mind a body count either. I want to know what those herbs are. The ones left in the open. Calling Geoffrey would have been a perfect idea if it wasn't fucking Geoffrey."

My mind switched tracks. "I still haven't told Addam that Geoffrey was behind Christian's poisoning," I said, and my words were more sigh than sentence. Brand exchanged my guilty look. "I think I need to tell him eventually."

Or not. I didn't know. There was a lot Addam didn't know, and a lot I didn't want to share.

"Elevator just opened outside," Brand said, and picked up the biggest knife on the microfiber cloth. He dabbed some oils on the blade.

I waited until the third knock on the door before getting up. We'd asked for privacy, so Max and Layne were having a late lunch with Ciaran. With unhurried motions, I opened the door and smiled at Geoffrey Saint Talbot.

It had been almost a year since the episode in the Westlands. I hadn't seen Geoffrey since I'd forced him to take a vow requiring him to come to my aid if needed. His only alternative was my telling the Arcanum that his role in Addam's kidnapping and Christian's poisoning was much deeper than Geoffrey had indicated. That might have cost Geoffrey his life or freedom—it still might. In the absence of the full truth, most of the blame had conveniently fallen on Ashton's vaporized shoulders.

The months had not been kind to Geoffrey.

He was thinner, and his messy brown hair was lank. More surprising than anything was his lack of sigils. Except for his square-framed

eyeglasses, he wore no other sigils that I could see, and none that I could sense. It made me wonder—with an effort so minimal that I'd likely not even care about the answer—how his mother had punished him. There was a reason Lady Temperance was often called Lady Tolerance, and it was an ironic reason.

Geoff slouched into the room, refusing to even acknowledge Brand. He stood awkwardly on the carpet, and flinched when I came up behind him and said in his ear, "Make yourself comfortable."

"Don't make yourself comfortable," Brand said. "There are photos on the table. Look at them. Tell us what kind of herbs those are."

Geoffrey's clenched jaw chewed on that. After a few seconds, he said, "Or else what? Isn't that how blackmail works? There's always a nasty, thuggish *or else*."

"Why do people always say that to me? Or else there's not a camera on this building that will see your body fall through that fog outside, that's your *or else*," Brand said, and he meant it.

Geoffrey went over to the small round table by the kitchenette. The security supervisor, after being sworn to secrecy, had helped us download stills from the hologram. Geoff put a bony finger on the top photo and moved it to the side.

"I can't see the vial labels," he complained.

Brand gave him a look like he was an idiot, because why else would we need him?

Geoff said, "But there are two types of herbs in the dish. The one on the left is a standard filler regent. But this other? Slight discoloration and larger flakes toward the left? It's familiar. I'm not an alchemist, though."

"No," I said. "You're a poisoner. If you need some incentive to find some fucking curiosity, consider what will happen if I tell Addam."

He shot me a look. "Addam doesn't know I poisoned Christian?"

"Do you feel dirt over your face?" Brand asked. He stabbed a finger at the table. "Everything you see, everything you say, is confidential. I need to know how those herbs might affect a cleansing."

Interest sparked in Geoffrey's annoyed eyes. "A cleansing?"

"A type of cleansing," I said, referring to the city-wide pollution scouring that happened periodically. It was nearly a holiday on the island, because most people needed to remain indoors for the entire day, assuming

they didn't have the ability to breathe abrasive chemicals. "Designed for sterilizing a laboratory."

Geoffrey touched the first photograph again. He tapped it. "It could be beggar's blanket. Also called mullein—it has a lot of names. It's an antitoxin and helps with skin burns. An alchemist might be able to do something with it. Maybe save the lungs long enough during a cleansing exposure so that you could get Healed."

"Lots of maybes," Brand said.

"We'll get Geoff access to the footage. The lab is still sealed off—when it's safe to go inside, we can confirm."

"Or we give him a paper bag to breathe in and send him now," Brand said.

Geoff was showing progress. He didn't say anything inane to make his situation worse. I pulled out my phone and dialed Mosi.

Within the hour, more became clear.

The lab had been cleaned up. All traces of the wayward herbs were gone. But a closer examination of the footage was enough for Geoffrey to decide his earlier guess might be right.

We sat his ass at a table in the hotel room, and asked him to draw up any scenario in which those drugs could be quickly used to save an Atlantean from the lab's sterilization process.

Meanwhile, we were going to do some snooping, while Mosi kept the contestants and judges busy at a pre-dinner reception meeting. A possible assassination attempt was all I needed to fudge the rules. I no longer had concerns with invading the privacy of anyone involved.

Brand, Max and I took the stairs to the floor where the contestants had been roomed. It was seven stories beneath our own hotel suite, just under the layers of artificially created mist cozily wreathing the upper floors.

"Only two rooms on the floor," Brand murmured, looking down the corridor that bisected the width of the old missile silo. Each side of the floor was now a suite, and the straight corridor ended in a two large, picturesque windows.

As I watched, some lights flickered on outside with dusk. Pastel colors lit the underside of the fog bank.

“Pretty,” I said.

“I hate when fucked up things look nice,” Brand said.

“This building is fucked up?”

Brand looked at me. “The Magician turned a nuclear missile silo into a convention center. I don’t need to be Atlantean to know it’s creepy magic.”

I studied the window again, considering that. “I think Ciaran is bothered by it too,” I murmured. Then I added, quite honestly, “It always worries me most when he’s not around and I know he’s around.”

Brand turned back to the room doors. “Don’t know which is Erasmus or Kamilah. Doors are key carded, and I don’t have e-tech. Are we at the stage yet when we can blast them open?”

“Not as such,” I said, and I pulled out my phone to send a quick text. “But close. I’m totally down for snooping, though.”

“Look over here,” Max said. He was standing by a glass-paned door to a utility room which contained an ice machine and vending supplies. “There’s a vent. I think it faces the room on this side. It’s big enough for me. I could sneak in and open the door.”

I opened my mouth, and Brand said, “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“But—” I said.

“Don’t be selfish,” Brand told me. “It’s time to train a new generation for field action. Here’s a multitool—it’s got a little screwdriver.”

Max, looking like he’d been handed a birthday gift, climbed on top of the ice machine and set about chipping paint from the screws of a ventilation duct. Inside a few minutes he had all the screws out and was yanking the grate free.

I watched him lean into the opening with his cell phone as a light source.

After a few seconds, Brand said, “Need a boost?”

“No,” Max said quickly. “But there are a lot of, um, screws. Exposed screws. With the pointy ends sticking up.”

“Are there?” Brand said.

“It’s not like the movies. There’s some...” He paused, head still in the mouth of the vent. “There’s a lot of rat poop.”

“But the flimsy metal will hold your weight and not collapse at all, right?” Brand asked.

Max sighed, and swear to Gods, I knew that sigh. That was my sigh. I’d had it since the crib. Max muttered, “Rune is right. You just can’t make a point.”

“It was a very nice thought, Max,” I said. “But I texted Mosi and asked him to send an intern with a master key card.”

The elevator outside dinged, which hopefully announced their arrival. The contestants were in a not-so-spontaneous meeting with Mosi along with the judges, to keep them away from us.

Back in the hall, two interns were standing by the elevator, including One of the Many Brians.

“We only need one of you,” Brand said.

The newest Brian put his hands on his hips, grinned broadly, and said, “*I’m braced!*”

Brand stared at him, and Max hurried to mimic the expression.

“Should I do it again?” the intern whispered. He slipped his lips open into another fake smile. “*I’m braced!*”

“This?” Brand asked.

“He thinks we’re being filmed,” the oldest Brian said wearily.

“But,” the intern said. “Aren’t we? Filming? It’s my tag line. I came up with it myself.”

“You think we’re being filmed?” Max asked.

“We’re not?” the intern said. “Are you sure? How do you know?”

“Because I’m not measuring people for body bags,” Brand said.

The intern’s Adam’s apple jerked up and down.

“You go away, you stay,” he said, dismissing the newest Brian and keeping our Brian. When the New Brian didn’t scramble out of there, Brand made eye contact. The newest Brian scrambled out of there. If it were possible to slam the elevator shut, he might have tried.

“Look,” Brand said to the One of the Many Brians. “You seem smart. American college student, right?”

Old Brian nodded quickly.

“Do you know who we are? Who we really are?”

Brian nodded his head just as quickly.

“I’m going to ask you to do things, and you’re going to forget I ever

asked,” Brand said. “And in the off chance something hypothetically bad is happening and you turn out to be the hypothetical mastermind, just know that I will figure it out eventually and kill you. Hypothetically.”

“I don’t want to be hypothetically killed,” Brian agreed.

“Oh, no, I’ll really kill you. I mean you being a hypothetical mastermind. No offense, you seem like a smart kid and all, but I’m going with Murphy’s Law here.”

“Whose room is this?” I asked, pointing.

“Lady Kamilah,” Brian said after squinting through his glasses at the door number.

“No. I want to start with Erasmus,” Brand said. “Can you let us in his room?”

Brand followed Brian to the door. As soon as the key card reader blinked green, Brand said, “And what did you just do?”

Brian blinked. “I’m in my room eating pizza.”

“Good man,” Brand said, and pushed past. “If you see anyone coming, knock on the door.”

Once the three of us were in the room, we took a quick look. It was smaller than our own suite, and very tidy. No clothes or personal items left out; the housekeeping staff had come through and cleaned and made the bed. Outside the window, pale blue and purple lights swept along the mist.

I stared at Brand thoughtfully and said, “Erasmus?”

“Gut instinct,” Brand said, opening a bureau and carefully feeling between the layers of folded clothes. “It’s got to be one of the contestants.”

“Why are you so sure?” Max asked, searching the area around the bed.

“Because of the herbs,” I said, more than a guess.

Brand nodded. “Because someone took pains to make those herbs seem inconspicuous. The labels of the jars were covered. There were two different kinds of herbs in one dish. And the douchebag upstairs will confirm that a skilled alchemist could have used the herbs in a pinch to survive a cleansing. If someone did trigger the cleansing, why leave a convenient solution unless they needed it?”

“That’s why you think it’s a contestant. But not Ewa?”

Brand waffled his hand back and forth after shutting the bureau drawer and moving to the nightstand. “I looked more into her reinstatement as a contestant. She wasn’t a particularly bad choice to be invited back to the

final round. But she also wasn't the only choice. And I can't find anything that links her to the two judges who made the decision."

"So her presence here, at the final round, wasn't a sure thing," Max said slowly.

"That's my thinking." He narrowed his eyes at me. "You're thinking something else."

"I think Erasmus is important," I said. I'd picked the desk to search myself, and came up with nothing more interesting than chew marks on a hotel pencil. "And that's not gut—it's just logic. We've got two possible ideas, right? This relates to either the schism between factions within the Beast Throne, or a breakdown in relations between factions of Devil and Moon. The way that the Mothers were brought into this... It makes me think something public is going to happen."

"Okay," Brand said, and waited to hear more.

"Lord Devil runs his court with absolute authority. A public attack might be public, but he'd be ruthless in keeping the aftermath within his court. But if something blows up between Moon and Devil? I can't help but think Erasmus is either the target—"

"Or the targeter," Brand said.

"I just don't know how to prove it before the filming tomorrow."

"I've already figured that out," Brand said.

Max and I looked at each other. "Figured what out?" I asked.

"What to do tomorrow. But it'd be good to know in advance who's the antagonist here. Let's look for something."

"Like a death threat?" Max asked.

He was holding a crumpled note from the trash.