

THE TAROT SEQUENCE WORLD

“The Great Atlantean Battle Royalchemy”

Part One

I was bored and I wanted something to happen.

That’s what I was thinking when something happened, as if I hadn’t spent my entire life as an Atlantean, as if I wasn’t constantly surrounded by near-sentient magic, as if I hadn’t been drop-kicked by fate more times than I cared to remember.

It started off small, at least. I walked into the ballroom—a manilla folder in my hand filled with loose receipts—and Brand said, “There’s a wasp.”

I took a step back into the hallway. “If you see a wasp, why is there still a wasp? Why not just kill—”

Brand’s eyes flicked up to me, then flicked sharply to the left. I leaned back through the archway and saw Corbie standing on an ottoman, looking worriedly at a black smudge on the floor.

Brand said, tonelessly, “Corbie wonders if it’s missing its wasp mother and father.”

“And maybe it has aunts, too,” Corbie said.

A door in the hallway opened, and I smelled spice. A second later the source of it was standing behind me, lips close to my ear. “I believe it has been inside too long and is fading,” Addam said. “We’ll just nudge it outside. I brought a dust pan.”

There was more commotion. I heard Max say, “Why are you just standing there?”

“We heard there was a bee,” Quinn added.

Anna didn’t say anything, she just ducked and squeezed around me. She took in Corbie, Brand, and what they were looking at. Her eyes didn’t quite roll upwards in a mimicry of Brand, but it was close.

“Just tell Corbie it’s going to live on the farm with our hamster,” she said.

“Can we visit Hermann?” Corbie asked excitedly.

“And tell Corbie there are cookies hidden in the attic,” she added.

“Stop sending him to the attic,” I said. “We’ll take care of this. Give me the dustpan and broom.”

Everyone tromped into the ballroom, staying near the margins and giving the middle of the cavernous space a safe distance. The smudge on the floor revealed itself to be a very sedate wasp.

Addam handed me a dustpan and brush, not a broom. I thought he’d have gotten something with a long handle. I started wondering the best way to pass it to Brand when Brand made an exasperated sound, walked over, and snatched the dustpan out of my hand. I noticed, belatedly, that he also held a small empty vase.

“I’ll trap it,” Brand said. “You slide that folder underneath. Save the dustpan for defense.”

That seemed like an easy plan. Brand held the vase upside down and covered the wasp without any problem. But when I tried to slide the folder under the overturned vase, the wasp simply slid in the direction of the folder. I saw its head twitching, so I knew it was alive.

“It’s not that difficult,” Brand said.

“It doesn’t want to fly up.”

“Well you need to get it to fly up so we can cover the mouth of the vase,” he said.

Behind me, I saw Anna taking off her shoe. If the situation wasn’t solved soon, we’d be buying Corbie a new stuffed animal as a distraction. So I put a little more oomph into my shove, and promptly severed what appeared to be one of the wasp’s legs.

I sucked in a breath as Brand whispered, “You did not.”

“About those cookies in the attic,” I said loudly.

Then the wasp hissed into the air, bounced off the vase, and went back to sitting on the marble, a little pulsing dot of fury.

Brand fell back on his most reliable methods. He leaned toward the vase and shouted, “Get the fuck up!”

The wasp rose, and both of us jerked back—while Addam, his metal hand gloved in swirling Telekinetic energy, brushed aside the folder and

vase and brought the wasp before him. He walked calmly over to a French door, opened it, and released the wounded creature.

“Sometimes it’s much more climactic,” Quinn said.

“Rune didn’t even run around or anything,” Max complained.

That was the exact moment when Brand’s phone vibrated. He pulled it out, read a text, and closed his eyes. He said, quietly, “What did you do.”

Despite the million people that could refer to, and the million things it could be about, everyone looked at me.

As unsurprised as I was to be dragged toward the solarium, Max made a shocked, bleating sound as Brand grabbed his collar and brought him along.

“Are you sure you don’t just want to talk to Rune?” Max said.

“Are you the one who manages Rune’s calendar?” Brand asked while shoving us both into the solarium’s wide, open space. It was flush with sunlight from the many window panels, but we hadn’t yet been able to find a large enough table to go in the middle. This would be where I held court sessions, when I finally got around to accepting that court sessions were the sort of thing I had to do. Max had volunteered to keep track of my meetings and engagements.

“So, you’re saying it’s really just Max you want to talk to,” I clarified.

“Which of you,” Brand said, “took money to be a celebrity judge for some fucking alchemy contest.”

The automatic denial on my lips was punctured by a slow, leaking *ohhhh*. Max cupped one of his hands in the other, probably to hide the direction of where he was pointing.

“In my defense,” I said, “celebrity is a strong word.”

“Don’t I fucking know it,” Brand said. “You really did this? This is something you did, and thought I’d be all casual about?”

“I agreed to it a while ago! Even before what happened with the Hanged Man. They can’t expect me to go anymore, right? I’m an Arcana.” Brand just stared, so I added another, waning, “Right?”

“It doesn’t matter what anyone wants,” Brand said. “Mayan called. Lord Tower wants to make sure you’re still attending. Something’s going on, and he wants a member of the Arcanum onsite. What the fuck is this contest, Rune?”

“They call it *Battle Royalchemy*. The island’s alchemists compete for some trophy. It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s not a big deal that you agreed to go on a televised show,” he said.

“It’s not—” I checked myself. Was I right? I was! “No, they’ve never televised it before.”

“They’ve never had an Arcana judge before. Mayan said they’re very excited about it. He sent me a long text filled with all the fucking ways it complements my duty to keep you safe.”

Max raised his hand, but slowly. “I put it on the calendar like I was supposed to. Am I excused?”

“Did you tell me about it?” Brand said.

“Rune said he wanted to surprise you.”

“Did he? Because I *love* Rune’s surprises. Like that time he took his throne without any warning. And—”

Max’s expression fell. “I was a surprise, wasn’t I? He surprised you with me once.”

Brand stopped mid-swear. He even reddened a little, which only proved that Max’s shameless ruse was working, because Brand didn’t get just how much Max had learned from being around Quinn.

“Why,” Brand said to me, taking a breath, “would the Tower care if someone gets killed during this contest?”

Threads of real-world concern were beginning to worm their way through my abject denials. The Tower wouldn’t call unless there was a consequence he was worried about. I said, “The best alchemists from all the Greater Houses—even Arcana courts—compete for a trophy. Mayan said there’s a target?”

“Mayan said he has intel, details to follow. This is court shit?”

“If an Arcana’s or Greater House’s master alchemist gets murdered? Maybe at the hands of a rival house? Yeah, it’s court shit. Not ours, but it could cause problems.” I added the most vital point of all, saying, “The important thing is that it turned out to be lucky I accepted the invite.”

“And I will find so many ways to thank you,” Brand said. He did a half eye-roll, which meant he was turning his irritation into fuel and ideas. “It’s in two weeks. We’ve got a lot of work to do. They have us booked at the convention center. I’ll look into the onsite security and make inroads. Max, you’re on research—contestants, past contest history. Rune, I want

you to sit down and think very, very hard about any other surprises you're planning."

"Is this a good time to ask questions?" Max asked.

"Absolutely," Brand said. "Drop them off in the suggestion box I put into the room across from my bedroom. It's in the shape of a big porcelain bowl."

He stalked out of the room, as if he wasn't on his way to the supply closet to start a three-ring binder filled with a thousand questions and answers.