

THE TAROT SEQUENCE WORLD

“The Great Atlantean Battle Royalchemy”

Part Two

I strode into the kitchen while tightening a leather arm bracer that held one of my newer sigils. Brand and Max were already waiting for me with duffel bags at their feet. We'd be staying onsite for the duration of the competition's final rounds, which would last all weekend.

“Ready?” I said.

Brand looked a little nonplussed. “No coffee whines?”

“Nope.”

“You don't want coffee,” he said. “You're just springing out of bed and ready to go.”

“I do not, and I am,” I confirmed.

“Because...?”

“Because I woke up to a six-year-old whispering, *It's okay, I just need one eyelash for a wish*. Let's go check into a hotel for a couple days.”

A limousine was idling outside for us—a black stretchy thing that looked like the 1980s. We threw our things in the back and climbed in after them, despite the driver's hovering comments about trunk space.

His chatty nature continued as we did a seven-point turn to drive back down the long driveway. Within thirty seconds we knew what every button did, and how happy he was to be driving us. Then the man said, “Well, this was an easy pick up. Most places around here have armed booths.”

Brand, who was closest to the partition, leaned over it just a shade. “Your name is Vincent. You've worked with Fleet Finlay for seventeen years. You have a nice pension, good life insurance for your husbands and three children. No weapon permits on file. No record, though you did something stupid in Amsterdam when you were fourteen, but the record is sealed under juvenile laws.”

The car slowed for a second, and I caught a corner of his wide eyes in the rearview mirror.

Brand said, “I *am* the armed booth.”

“Would you be wanting the partition up, Lords?” Vincent stammered, and I barely had time to shape my lips to a *Y* before the panel began sliding closed.

“I wonder how many more Solstice cards we’d get if you’d both let me do the talking,” Max said.

“Don’t you have newsfeeds to be reading?” Brand said.

Max—who was charged with scanning reader comments related to last night’s show to identify anything troubling—pulled out his phone, adjusted the backseat temperature, and settled into doing that teenager thing where he fake-ignored us.

Brand leaned back. And *smiled* at me. That was the first warning.

I waited and I waited. A few streets later, he commented, almost casually, “I got a copy of the contract.”

“What contract?”

“For your appearance. For the ten thousand dollars you got for two days’ work. I didn’t recognize the routing number for the transfer, though.”

Oh shit. I slammed shut the bond between us, which was an overreaction, because I saw the tightening between his eyes acknowledging it.

Deciding which sword to fall on, I said, “It’s nothing. A slush fund.”

“*A slush fund,*” he repeated.

“Almost literally. I think I’ve only used it at the gas station.”

“Ten thousand dollars for slushies and gas,” he said.

“Well. I mean. We live such a long time.”

“You guys keep separate bank accounts?” Max asked, and he had a worried, *daddies-are-fighting* look on his face.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Brand said, and dismissed the subject, which wouldn’t have even fooled Vincent by this point.

The contest’s final rounds would be recorded in a building that began its life as a Siberian missile silo.

Decommissioned decades ago, the Hex Throne had purchased and translocated it. The basic structure was ideal for their needs: building

space above, at, and below ground level, which was ideal for a whole slew of magics that might appeal to the diverse needs of a convention center.

The structure we now approached had been retrofitted beyond all recognition. It was a metal and crystal tower-like structure with three main sections: a rotating skyscraper top broken into five levels; a generous surface building; and another series of levels far beneath the ground.

Its magic had a tinny echo to it, not at all like normal building residue. I'd always wondered if it came from the *type* of trauma unique to missile silos. Its imbued emotion came from being an object of radiant fear to all who lived around it—not necessarily dark deeds done on the site itself.

I'd heard they'd used biosphere technology in recent upgrades. I wasn't sure what that meant, but Brand answered the unspoken question by saying, in an aggrieved voice, "It's fucking snowing up top."

Vincent sped off rather quickly, but a phalanx of concierges and valets descended on us. At least three of them tried to take our duffel bags, but Brand answered each request by making eye contact and saying *no*, which was very effective.

Finally, a giant bear of a man with dark skin, platinum hair, and a Bluetooth device in his ear clapped everyone away from us and stood there beaming.

"I am Master Alchemist Mosi, producer of Battle Royalchemy. It is such a sincere, sincere pleasure to have such an august personality as yourself as one of our finalist judges. The three remaining contestants and our regular judges are most eager to meet you." He leaned closer. "I must say, stories of you battling ancient monsters in the Westlands are most exciting."

I opened my mouth to say the stories were exaggerated, at which point Brand gave me a look to say *you will fucking not*, so I shut my mouth. He did not appreciate my modesty in public.

Instead, I said, "Thank you. We look forward to a more private conversation about all the logistics."

"Of course, my Lord Sun. Please, please, come inside."

With that, the crowd of hovering attendants split, and we were funneled through the wide glass doors into a massive, building-wide atrium.

The ground structure of the convention center was designed for

fanfare. Most of the serious conference rooms were above or below-ground, leaving this floor for pomp and circumstance. I could see why. It was rather exceptional, with the glass-and-steel-beamed dome, and the many twisting, moving, scenic stairways that took people slowly up to the skyscraper levels. The area was broken up by several restaurants and ball-rooms. The one closest to us had a bamboo theme, with lots of clusters of real foliage and magical water sculptures.

Mosi said, “Please feel free to eat or rest, as you will. We can discuss whatever logistics you like. The first of two final rounds will begin in the morning. As I’m sure you know, we use Atlantean image recording for the events. It allows a much more authentic expression of emotion and competition. It’s a bit strange if you’re used to camera and microphones, but rather lovely to look at. We can tour the studio later.”

“We’ll rest and unpack,” Brand said. “Make sure everyone onsite knows who I am, and defers to me on security issues. Is that clear?”

Mosi blinked in confusion for a second, but said nothing as the gears in his mind worked. I could feel my eyes start burning, because it was not alright to know who I was but not Brand. Then Mosi exclaimed, with a finger snap, “Ah yes, Lord Saint John. We are honored to have Lord Sun’s Companion on site as well.”

“This is my assistant, Matthias Saint John,” Brand said. “Same goes for him.”

“Excellent, excellent, so many of us becoming friends, it is wonderful,” Mosi boomed. He waved his hands behind us, and a young man with long, flyaway black hair ran up. He blinked at us from behind eyeglasses, and didn’t exude the slightest hint of magic.

“This is,” Mosi said, and paused. “Er...One of the many Brians. Americans, you know. Brian is a university chemistry student, serving as an intern. I’ve assigned him to you.”

Brand pulled out a note pad and made a quick note. He sighed and said, “How many students?”

Brian, not sure if he was being addressed, said, “Three of us, Sir. Lord. Your lord.”

I got a glimpse of the page before Brand put it away. He had a section that said, “Bad Guys” with no names under it; an empty section that said

“Most Likely Bad Guys;” and under the third section labeled, “Collateral Damage,” he’d written *Fucking College Kids*.

Mosi said, “Brian, will you show Lord Sun and his entourage up to their suites?”

“Up?” Brand said.

“Of course. Only the best views for our guests!”

Brand angled a look at the pretty snowstorm buffeting the upper levels of the skyscraper, then angled a look down to me, another moment in a string of moments where he’d remind me this was all my fault.

“Actually...” Max said, and pointed over to the restaurant. “I think we should check in with some friends first.”

That was the first time I spotted the animated, blue-haired head, its owner widely gesticulating to the rhythm of a story, while Layne Dawn creek listed raptly across the table.