

# THE TAROT SEQUENCE WORLD

## “The Great Atlantean Battle Royalchemy”

### Part Three

I did not appreciate how everyone watched my face for a reaction. I honestly didn't. It was as if they expected me to explode, and were counting off the clock ticks.

But...

But Layne was sixteen years old and under my protection. They lived in my court. And here they were, out in the city, and I knew—I *knew*—I was about to find out that they hadn't told anyone where they were. Worse, Ciaran's eyes had narrowed at Layne, giving me the added sense that Ciaran wasn't aware of it either.

I wasn't upset Layne was with Ciaran. Ciaran was helping Layne—with their magic, with their PTSD. I trusted Ciaran. Or at least, I'd decided that if I *couldn't* trust Ciaran, then I couldn't trust anyone, because my instincts were fucked.

That was when the principality—whose hair was sometimes blue, sometimes green, and had been known to change mid-conversation—raised a hand for a waiter and said, “Lord Sun needs a slice of chocolate cake. I know it's early, but quickly.”

“Hello, Layne,” I said, and my voice was too quiet, so I made a show of clearing my throat. “I didn't realize you were off the estate.”

“We're just having tea,” they said hastily.

Brand groaned. “Stop baiting him, Layne. Max, why not take Layne up to our rooms? Rune needs cake.”

“Do I get cake?” Max asked, but was smart enough to pick up on non-verbal cues, because he grabbed Layne, Mosi, and One of the Many Brian Interns and booked it for the nearest moving stairway.

“I have an idea,” Ciaran said before I could speak. “Let’s freely share information. I suspect a convergence of storylines.”

“Did Layne tell Corinne that they left the estate?” I asked bluntly.

“I am suddenly uncertain,” Ciaran admitted. “Have you specifically told Layne to inform Corinne of their whereabouts?”

“Layne is *sixteen years old*. Is that specific enough?”

I’d never—not once that I could remember—seen Ciaran falter. But a dumbstruck look on his face was quickly swallowed by genuine laughter. “Rune Sun, if you think you don’t need to set ground rules with teenagers just because they technically understand the English language, then the next few years are going to be even more amusing than I expected.”

Okay, maybe I deserved that.

I threw myself down into a chair and looked around for the waiter. The table smelled strongly of tea—a jasmine scent somewhat doctored by the dash of brandy in Ciaran’s own ceramic cup.

“So,” I said slowly. “More business with the Hex Throne. You know, I never got the details of the work you’ve been doing for Lord Magician.”

Ciaran’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Go and spin your own straw into gold.” Then, to Brand, with an exasperated sound, “He’s impossible when he teeters around on that tall horse of his. Really, Rune, you should let this pass, and make it an opportunity to set *common expectations*.”

“I’ll handle it,” Brand said.

I opened my mouth, and Brand said, quietly, “Please.”

Which made me a little more irritated, because asking for things nicely was one of our cheapest shots at each other. “Fine. I’m changing the subject. Ciaran, since you’re here, maybe you could help us.”

“I must admit, I expected to bump into you,” Ciaran said. “Your face is on posters all over the lobby. It’s that photo with that haircut,” he added, which made perfect sense to him, and didn’t sound like a compliment.

“Do you know *why* we’re here?” Brand asked.

“No, but it’s bound to be a fun story, since it’s so unlike a decision you’d let Rune make on his own. I had no idea either of you had an interest in alchemy.”

I reached up and touched the ankh around my neck, pulsing willpower through my fingertips.

While there were private sanctums onsite, they wouldn’t be as effective

as my home sanctum, so I'd preplanned a very diverse selection of spells. I'd likely want a balance of stealth and defense over aggression, though I did hedge my bets by storing defense spells that could be used with a lot of convenient hostility if needed.

My ear drums went stuffy and popped, like a quick elevator rise. Then layers and layers of muffled silence fell across the table, an invisible dome drenched in imaginary molasses. Or chocolate.

I looked around one final time for my cake, and said, "Lord Tower has reliable intelligence that the final competition may be used to stage, further, or initiate house warfare. We've got the particulars on file, and are willing to share. I'd like your perspective."

"This sounds suspiciously *pro bono*. I have a special hourly rate for the Tower, you know. I surcharge the hell out of it."

Brand tilted his head at Ciaran, who waved off the statement with a heavily ringed hand. "Very well. No, I've heard nothing. And I would be most interested to see those files. I suppose, given my business arrangement with the Hex Throne, I do have a tiny, tiny responsibility to make sure the building isn't blown up."

"Have you seen anything to raise your suspicions?" Brand asked.

"Yes, your arrival. But... I suppose there is something else. Something you're quite unlikely to know. And I'm not sure you'll be happy about it. Especially with young Matthias here."

"What does that mean?" Brand demanded.

"You must know about the Judge's Reappraisal."

"We do," I said. "They reconsider the performance of all eliminated contestants, and give one alchemist a second chance to compete in the final round. How—"

Ciaran interrupted, quickly and unhappily. The spoon he was stirring his tea with turned from silver to gold-plated, a manifestation of his unpredictable magic. "The contest honors alchemists, not courts. There are no rules against remnants of the Heart Throne applying. And I have reliable word that one of their Master Alchemists is going to be the reconsidered candidate."

Brand left Rune in the restaurant with Ciaran, saying he wanted to talk with Layne alone. Rune and he'd had a quick bond conversation. It was

their shorthand talk, filled with a lot of micro gestures and blah blah blah emotion from Rune that felt like discipline and worry, which Brand batted aside with an eyeroll once he knew he'd gotten his way.

He took the elevator instead of the long, exposed, moving stairway, because fuck that.

As people in the elevator backed away from his scowl, Brand prayed.

People didn't know he prayed, but he did. Every fucking night. He prayed to God, gods, to the River, to fucking Santa Clause. It had once been so simple, too. *Please keep dumb shit away from Rune. Please keep Rune from doing dumb shit.*

Now he had at least several more mental codicils because there were so many more people in their lives, and they all—each and every one of them, except maybe Corinne—had the capacity to do dumb shit.

Such as Layne, and the talk ahead of them.

The thing was, Brand had learned hard lessons about being parental. *Especially* with teenagers. Kids like Corbie were easier. Need to keep him from going in the pool without supervision? Tell him about the shark that lived in the water filter. See. Easy.

Teenagers—teenagers *nowadays*—were a different breed. You couldn't just spar the stupidity out of them. They spent their lives online, constantly bombarded by input. It made them twitchy and volatile. You couldn't just drop a truth bomb on them—you had to wait until they were ready to listen.

That meant Brand spent a lot of time watching. Watching for them to realize they'd fucked up. Watching for them to realize there was a battleground ahead. And then watching for them to finally, finally wander onto it.

In this case, as Max unpacked in the bedroom he'd picked (*and there was another talk ahead of Brand, simmering in the wings*), Brand stood by the window and watched Layne circle the large common room. Soon enough they'd stand still and start fidgeting, which was usually the sign that Brand could pounce.

Brand frittered away the time reviewing all the exits in the room—both real and creative. When you had a partner like Rune, the only difference between a wall and a door was how pissed he was.

When Layne began to worry open a small bag of chips, Brand froze, turned, and stared.

“I didn’t know you were coming this morning. I would have mentioned it, if I knew,” they said nervously.

Brand raised both eyebrows.

“I didn’t want to wake my aunt up!” they said. “Honestly. I left a note on her nightstand.”

Brand held up a hand to ward off further stupidity. He said, “Can we agree there is no swear jar in this room?”

“Oh shit,” Layne whispered.

“Because do you honestly fucking think I care you’re having tea with Ciaran? Really? Do you *really* think I’m pissed about that?”

“...yes?”

“No. Ciaran would fucking obliterate anyone who hurt you. And you’ve already told us that Ciaran is helping with your nightmares. And he probably knows more about necromancy than Rune does. Or he knows who *does* know more. I’m glad you’re talking with him.”

“This feels like a trick.”

“It’s not. I trust you. You’ve given me absolutely no reason not to.”

Now Layne’s worry twisted into a wry grimace. “I have done plenty to have people distrusting me. I’m one of the reasons you had to face—”

“Don’t say his name. He’s dead, and he deserves to be, and he doesn’t deserve the oxygen in our fucking lungs. And you are not the same person you were. Do you honestly think I don’t see that?”

“Then—” Layne broke off and dropped the probably-outrageously-expensive bag of chips back into the money trap on the mini-bar. Brand would have to do something about that, or he’d be hearing furtive plastic bag crinkling all fucking night.

“It bothers me,” Brand said, “that you *think* you’re getting away with something. That you’re *acting* like you’ve been caught.”

“So...I’m giving away too much? Like a tactic?”

“No, Layne. Not everything is a tactic. Well, yes, it fucking is, and yes, you need to work on your poker face, but no, that’s not what I’m saying. You’re acting like you’re making bad decisions, and you’re not. Why would we have a problem with you having breakfast with Ciaran? Do you think

anyone would have said no if you'd asked? We wouldn't. But the way you're acting...it's like you don't trust us. Like you don't trust me."

"I do, of course I do!"

"Apparently fucking not. Let's get one thing out of the way *right* now. We watch you very closely. We watch *all* of you very closely. I don't think it's even possible for you to be doing something wrong right now, because if you were, one of us would have already showed up. I read the note. I knew you were out. I'm not thrilled you're *here*, in this fucking *building*, and your note could have mentioned *that*, because dumb shit is probably going to happen here. But I knew you were out."

"And you didn't tell Rune?" Layne said.

Brand controlled his flinch, because that was going to bite him in the ass. "That brings us to the second part of the conversation. Rune and I don't share a goddamn brain. He'll probably have an entirely different talk with you, if not now then soon. He expects you to tell people where you are. In real time. He fucking worries, and when he worries, he always gets his way. I don't even try to fucking stop him anymore. If you're smart, you'll apologize before he starts imagining all the things that could go wrong. I'm not kidding. They'll multiply and swarm around him. I call it an Angst of Runes, like a fucking murder of crows or a parliament of owls. But even then, it's not because he doesn't trust you. He does too. So maybe give us the benefit of the doubt next time, and a better heads-up."

Layne turned to the window and made some discrete eye-wiping motions. Brand waited. Finally, they squared their shoulders, nodded, turned back.

Then they said, "You know I'm not leaving, right? Because Max is excited, so I think this is going to be fun. And I've got this whole argument ready about how I can do anything Max can do. Because you trust me."

"You really want to throw my own weapons in my face? You really think I won't catch them and return fire?"

Layne smiled, because like Brand, they knew when they'd get their way, too.