

THE TAROT SEQUENCE WORLD

“The Great Atlantean Battle Royalchemy”

Part Four

There was no time to react. I shouted to Layne, “*Beware the traitor!*”, and dove behind a waist-high stone urn.

A snowball exploded against the rock above my head.

“Sorry!” Max called from behind the balcony’s weather-proof furniture. “But Layne is about to switch sides too!”

“I am not!” came Layne’s affronted yet transparently guilty reply from another concealed location.

The suite’s balcony wrapped around a quarter of the missile silo, giving us both tactical advantages and horrific ambush points in the winter microclimate. I shouted, “How about we three keep our damn treaty so we have a shot at taking down the real enemy? We can do it!”

No one replied. At all. Not a single voice of support.

I leaned around the urn slowly, and saw Brand leaning from behind his own urn. He shook his head and said, “You poor dumb bastard. It’s always a hard moment when you get it.” Then he stiffened, slapped his hands against the rock, and stood up. “Rune Saint John, you shut off your eyes right now! No magic!”

I banked my Aspect and grumbled into the snowball I was patting together in my hands.

My pocket vibrated. I shouted a pause and pulled out my phone enough to see that Corinne had texted the word *Ready*.

“Brand, I need you. Layne and Max, give us a second.” I went through one of the fancy balcony doors—tied to expensive and stable translocation magic, which made the door phase into glittery nothingness when you made a certain gesture at it—and then sealed it again when Brand came through after me. I was already dialing Corinne back, and he caught

the read-out on the phone. His expression settled into one much like mine.

Corinne didn't waste any time. "Her name is Ewa Harpur. She was a Lovers alchemist based out of a family compound in Poland—she settled there after the war. The Lovers used the nearby dead zones for alchemical ingredients. I can't find any connection between her and Elena."

"That doesn't mean there's no connection with Max," Brand said.

"Nope," Corinne agreed. "She relocated to the city after the fall of the Heart Throne. There was no direct evidence tying her to the worst of Elena's operations, so she wasn't forced into exile. Should I break into her apartments and search them?"

Brand said *yes* at the same time I said *wait*, which got me a glare. "Wait," I repeated. "Is she affiliated with any other courts yet? Formally or informally?"

"Not that I can tell," Corinne said.

Brand's glare was not yielding. I said to him, "I think I've got to handle things differently now that I'm an Arcana."

"I have another perspective," he said. "This sounds like one of those times where we make new rules *after* something goes wrong. Nothing has gone wrong yet. Business as usual."

"You are going to get me into so much trouble," I said, but I also folded my objections, because he was right. I was much better at asking forgiveness. So we asked Corinne to find out as much as she could about the projects that Harpur worked on, because the answer to that question would tell us a lot about her future.

"We should talk to Max now," I said once the call ended.

"Agreed. But we're on the same page about how to handle it?" he said. I started to nod when he added, "Corinne gets proof, then it's Max's kill."

"Or," I said, "we wait to see if this person is really a bad guy."

Brand didn't seem too caught up in that semantic. He didn't need to be. I wasn't sure I wanted Max as the executioner, but if this woman was involved in any of the magics that had caused the Heart Throne to be raided, a final decision would be made. I hadn't tolerated mind-fuck magic before I was an Arcana; I certainly wasn't about to stand for it now.

Brand went back to signal Max through the door—as a human, he wasn't able to trigger its particular, fussy magic—while I stared at my

phone, because this was usually the point where the Tower butted in with a prescient message like, *Don't kill all the suspects*.

Layne followed Max in, but pivoted towards their bedroom when Brand murmured something in their ear.

“No way,” Max said, staring between us. “I have not done anything wrong yet. I swear I haven’t. That only happens when I take Quinn’s advice.”

“You haven’t done anything,” I said. “This is something else. One of the alchemists in the final round was originally based in the Heart Throne.”

Max’s face closed down.

“Her name is Ewa Harpur. We’re learning whatever we can about her. She was based out of Poland previously, but lives in the city now.”

His neutral expression cracked into puzzlement. He slowly shook his head while squinting at nothing in particular. “I don’t think I know her. But she was one of my—one of Elena’s alchemists? Do you know if she worked on Project Laius?”

Brand and I exchanged a quick look at that—which Max saw, because he watched everything we did. He explained, quickly, “I’ve read the files from the raid. I only know what you know when Lord Tower sent you in. But that was the branch of Elena’s science division that worked on ways to trap humans into service.”

“Corinne is looking into it,” I said. “But I’d have a hard time believing the Arcanum would have let her remain in New Atlantis if she was involved in that.”

“Max,” Brand said. They locked eyes. “What do you want to do?”

Max held his gaze for a second. He forced all of his tension into a slow shrug. “I want to go introduce myself to her,” he said. “You can use me to knock her off balance. Even if she’s not tied to Laius, she could be involved with whatever is happening here, right?”

Brand hid his tension better than others, but I could still spot it. He did the same thing Max did—he slid all of it into a deceptively casual gesture. In this case, Brand smiled, because he approved of Max’s decision.

But it was not a smile Ewa Harpur would enjoy seeing.

“This is wholly fucking unnecessary,” Brand said. He had one hand

on his knives, while the other gripped the moving railing so hard the skin was pinched white.

I looked down at the magically moving steps. They glittered like sunlight and warmed the air above them, largely due to the fusion energy bottled in each warded glass brick. The Hex Throne was really making a point to show off its best and most wasteful magics.

“They have promised me it’s most safe,” Mosi, the show’s master alchemist, said. We’d summoned him to our room with a text, and asked him to lead us to the security center on the main floor. (Max wanted to descend using the glittering stairway along the exterior of the building, Brand insisted on the elevators, so I broke the tie with a huge smile.)

“So the steps won’t explode if someone shatters one?” Brand said.

“Oh yes, my Lord, it would certainly explode,” Mosi said. “But it’s encased in *wards*. Hex Throne’s finest. I hear it was the very team that protects the safe routes in the Westlands.”

“Motherfucker,” Brand whispered under his breath.

“Those roads really are quite safe,” Ciaran said from behind him. “It’s not every day their magic gets subverted by liches.”

“I knew you were standing there,” Max said immediately, barely hiding his flinch.

“Of course, dear. But I’ve been waiting *ages* for you all to call me, you know.”

“I figured I’d just aim a spotlight at the ground and say your name three times,” Brand muttered. Then he gave Ciaran a grudging look. “Thanks for hanging around.”

“Certainly. This sounds like quite the weekend. Why is Rune’s hair wet, though?”

“Look, you can see Lady Death’s peninsula from here,” I said loudly, pointing to the northeast. It really was a lovely view, recently scoured clean of pollutants by a city-wide Cleansing. “I’ve got to say: this building may be a stupid waste of magic, but it’s impressive. Do you think we’ll be rich enough to build something like this one day?”

Brand didn’t look up so much as he rolled his eyes. “We buy you an average of three fucking alarm clocks a month, Rune. That is not the work ethic that builds magic skyscrapers.” He paused and considered that.

“Plus. We’re going to get stuff the honest way. We’ll take it from bad guys.”

“Such a time to be alive,” Ciaran sighed happily. “Where are we going, by the by?”

“To find out why we’re actually here,” I said.

The control room on the ground floor was a respectable array of magic and technology—second to only what I’d spotted once in the Tower’s personal war room. Brand let at least three opportunities for a one-liner slide because he was busy rubbernecking all the features around us.

Mosi stood in front of a wall screen currently broken up into dozens of smaller video feeds. “The Hex Throne’s facilities are ideal for the competition,” he was saying. “The new bioclimate features, in particular, enhance what was already a strong mix of alchemical synergies. The tower’s full extension—above, at, and below ground—create the ideal environment for the widest mix of spell-casting. With the new technology we can even mimic deep sea and subterranean pressures. Quite impressive.”

“If you have a dinosaur tied up anywhere, we’re done,” Brand said.

Mosi seemed baffled at that, so I slid into the conversation. “Knowledge of the facility is vital, so thank you for this overview. But I’m more interested in what set off this chain of events. Lord Tower’s Companion, Mayan Saint Joshua, mentioned an intercepted communication?”

“Not quite,” Mosi said. He gave another look at the people around the room. Most had been excused when he entered, and whomever remained must have been within Mosi’s circle of confidence. “An individual we’ve yet to identify contacted the Sorrowful Mothers forty-eight hours ago for assistance in a potentially complicated extraction.”

“How unpleasant,” Ciaran murmured. A thread of steel ran through his tone. “Are you telling me the Mothers are onsite?”

The Sorrowful Mothers was a semi-religious, semi-mercenary organization that did what other Atlanteans wouldn’t. They took the jobs where silencing opposition was only the beginning of their clean-up. They had ways of preventing the dead from testifying from beyond the River—ways that only barely skirted forbidden magic that destroyed the integrity of what we called the soul. Nasty, nasty stuff.

“They refused the request, and reported the matter to the Arcanum. Even they felt an action at this event, which potentially drew several greater houses into conflict, was ill advised.”

“Don’t the Mothers know who contacted them?” Max asked.

“No. Contact was electronic and very, very cleverly disguised using... Er, human magic. Technology. But Lord Tower’s team was able to unravel most of that. They were able to track the *address*, I believe it’s called, of the workstation used in the contact. It was in an area of the complex generally off-limits to all but on-air talent. With that limited information, and video surveillance to and from the suite of rooms, we were able to cull a potential pool of people it may have been.”

“Back up one second,” I said. “You mentioned an extraction.”

“Yes, my Lord. The individual in question indicated the need for a quick removal from the competition in a way that was untrackable.”

“Mayan looked at every angle,” Brand said. “We know the Mothers are outrageously fucking expensive. Why contract with them for an extraction? No one pays for the Mothers for basic bodyguard services. So what could happen that would require anyone to leave quickly and without being tracked? There could be a good reason, but fucked if I can think of anything but an attack or theft.”

“Could this person be reacting to a potential attack against *them*? Could it be self-defense?” Ciaran asked.

“If that was the case, why not go to the event organizers?” I asked. “You don’t bring the Mothers into matters unless things are...” I reached for a word, and settled on: “Irrevocable.”

“So we hope for the best, and prepare for the worst,” Brand said. “Let’s circle back to the suspects. Is it definitive?”

Mosi spread his arms wide. “It is definitive that we know who had access to the terminal that was used. We have no video observation of the work unit in question, but we can tell who was in that wing.”

“Who?” Brand prompted.

“The two regular judges, our two initial finalists, and a returning contestant. We’ve gathered all five to meet with you, under the guise of introductions. We’ve kept our suspicions in a very small circle of people. I don’t believe we’ve shown our hand. It is most fortunate that Lord Sun even planned to be onsite.”

“It is, and I will continue to thank him for that,” Brand said in his inside voice. “Break the group apart into three rooms. Judges in one, original finalists in the second, and the Heart Throne alchemist in a third.”

“Do I have time to change?” Ciaran asked. “I feel this requires tweed.”