

THE TAROT SEQUENCE WORLD

“The Great Atlantean Battle Royalchemy”

Part Five

I left Brand and Max in an empty office while stepping outside with Mosi. I wanted to coach him about what he'd say to the judges and contestants as he gathered them, so we didn't entirely tip our hand.

I had barely paced the length of a single corridor with the master alchemist before my phone buzzed. It vibrated a second and third time as I pulled it from my pocket.

The first text said, *Rune*. The next text said, *Hey Rune*. Then a third text said, *Did you leave? It's better when you listen*.

I'd need to give Quinn his own special ringtone. Maybe the sound of a bomb whistling through the air. I sighed, excused myself, and walked back into the office just in time to hear Brand say, firmly, “You're getting it all wrong.”

“Then why are you—” Max said, and inconveniently shut up when he saw me.

They both stood there and blinked. “Forget something?” Brand finally asked.

“Quinn texted me. He thought maybe I should be part of this talk?”

“I disagree,” Brand said, but Max betrayed him with a flicker of his eyeballs.

I made a rolling sign with my middle finger, one of Brand's own gestures, which more or less translated to *let's get the fuck on with it*.

“Max thinks I'm being grumpy with you today,” Brand said.

“You're being *so* grumpy with me today,” I agreed. “Like you're getting experience points for it.”

“Max thinks I'm being grumpy with you because you hid money from

me,” Brand clarified, while Max rose on his tiptoes to object to the word choice.

“It’s just that you were looking at his bank account—” Max said in a rush.

“You were looking at the bank account?” I yelled.

“I was proving a point,” Brand said slowly. “I didn’t crack your password. I only got as high as Password1 and Password2 before being interrupted.”

“Let’s not make a thing of this,” Max blurted. “I just hate when you two argue.”

“Wait. You think Brand is mad because I have a slushie fund?” I asked.

“Brand is not mad about that,” Brand said, and then *really* looked pissed, because we’d made him address himself in the third person. “Both of you stop this. I’m not mad Rune fucking hid money.”

“I didn’t—” I shut up and subsided to a glare. Pulling out my phone, I swiped to the last screen, found the bank account app, and pretended to be entering the password. That was a small white lie. The password was already auto-filled, which would have earned me an hour-long lecture. When the account opened, I showed only Max the main screen. I’d named the account so I wouldn’t forget what it was for.

Max went pale, flushed, and used his fae magic to balance it into a mottle.

“You just ruined someone’s gift, didn’t you?” Brand said. And the fucker was right, of course. “Because that’s the only time Rune hides money. I told you, I’m not upset about the money. *I’m upset* that he took the money to begin with. I’m upset we’re *here*, on a case where the Mothers were even mentioned in the same *breath*. He’s an Arcana now. He can’t be running out into the street to chase cars every time one drives the fuck by. And I’m mad because I don’t even blame him. I know Rune hates being upper management, even if he’s a born leader.”

Silence settled. I let it lay undisturbed. It wasn’t really a surprise.

Max ducked his gaze and mumbled, “I’m sorry.”

Brand laughed. He actually laughed. He said, “Oh, don’t. Seriously, don’t apologize. I’ve spent my life dealing with the shitstorm caused by knowing someone like Rune. You’ve got *two* of them. Two insanely

powerful magic-users who follow you everywhere. So don't apologize. You're about to live the dream too."

"I need to go call Quinn back and thank him for this moment," I said.

"No, I'm not done with you," Brand said. "Max is right. I'm being bitchy, and we're in the field. So to make me feel better, you will hire a seneschal before your coronation. I'm serious, Rune. I need another set of eyes on you, and that's a seneschal's job. You've got to start interviewing people for the position."

"Deal," I sighed.

Brand pulled out his phone and glanced at it. "Great. Ciaran got lost and wound up in a hot tub. I'm going to grab him. Text me when the rooms are ready."

As soon as the door shut, Max began to mush words together into a confusing, apologetic jumble.

I held up a hand. "It's okay."

"I didn't mean you did anything wrong, I just know Brand has been in a mood today, and—!"

"Max, it's okay. Just don't tell Brand I'm saving money for his birthday next summer." That's what I'd re-named the savings account. *Brand's Birthday Gift*. "He probably thinks I was saving money for the kids. I don't know what I'm going to get him, either, but he's been really good about arranging all the renovations, and I'm..." I quickly organized my wording. I didn't need to admit I was going to buy Addam an expensive gift, which made me want to save money to do something nice for Brand, too.

"And he's hard to shop for," I finished.

Brand returned with Ciaran just as Mosi texted he was on his way with the judges.

Ciaran's bangs were wet but styled, but he was freshly dressed in a jumpsuit. A tweed jumpsuit. A *tweed jumpsuit*.

"There is no way you had that on hand," I said. "You are absolutely fucking with us."

"It's adorable, isn't it? But no. It was Kelly-green leather an hour ago, but I got excited and accidentally futzed reality. Which role am I playing today? I'll let you be the prosecutor, if I can be the judge."

"No judges, no prosecution, we're going to play this quietly," I said. I

shifted my gaze to Brand. “I don’t want to overplay our hand. As far as the judges and contestants know, I’m only here to introduce myself.”

“Should Max and I search their rooms while you have them busy?” Brand asked.

I grimaced, because yes, I would have liked that. But things had changed. The consequences were larger than an apology when your every word could be interpreted as a war declaration.

“No,” I said. “Not unless we suspect something concrete. Let me lead the talk—I’d value your observations. That’s them, I think...”

There was a discrete knock on the door, and Mosi poked his head in. “Hello hello, Lord Sun. Allow me to introduce Lady Ji-Ho and Lord Sethos, your esteemed co-judges.”

Lady Ji-Ho was a small, plump, young-looking woman with a graphite pencil holding a messy bun together. She gave me a still, small bow with the poise bred from multiple life cycle rejuvenations.

Her partner, Lord Sethos, was a name I knew. I’d made it a point to learn the ranking nobility in courts like the Beast Throne. His bloodline stretched back to Egypt or North Africa—a common point of genetic reference for Lord Devil’s inner circle. He had scars along his face, the backs of one hand, across his jugular, and peeking out from the hem of his French cuffs.

I deliberately made a point of introducing myself and Ciaran to them, but ignoring Max and Brand. Max quickly covered a surprised look, but Brand’s face remained impassive. He sank back against a wall and slouched.

“This is quite exciting for us, you know,” Lady Ji-Ho said. “My heart just about skipped from my chest when I learned we were being *televised*, and you would join us for the final round. You honor us, truly, Lord Sun.”

Lord Sethos gave me a thin-lipped smile.

Lady Ji-Ho poked her fellow judge’s shoulder. “Come now, Seth. It will be *fun*. It lays laurels on all our courts.”

“Just as long as we keep the focus on the contestants’ skills,” Lord Sethos grumbled.

“I agree completely,” I said. “I look forward to meeting them. I believe there’s a representative from the Beast Throne competing?”

Lord Sethos affected a bristle. “She came by the final round honestly. Lady Ji-Ho and I take great pains to remain impartial.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t have meant to imply otherwise,” I said, and caught a motion from Brand at the corner of my eye. Whatever it was, I missed—though Max did stir and raise his voice.

“Golly,” he said. *Golly?* “That must mean you’re a shapeshifter, Lord Sethos. Are you a cat?”

Clever Brand. Two people on the stage from the Beast Throne was not the simple alliance it might have been, had they been two magic-users from any other court. What Lord Sethos shifted into, if indeed he shifted, was of great material interest.

“Wolf,” he said, brusquely and with faint offense, without even looking toward Max. “Not that it’s relevant to alchemy. I say, Mosi, any other surprises for the final round?”

“No, no, Lord Sethos. Other than Lord Sun’s guest judging, you’ll hardly notice the difference.”

“But still, can you imagine? The ratings for the final round? With Lord Sun here, it’ll be a smash!” Ji-Ho said. “*Brace yourself!*”

I have no idea why she said that. Lord Sethos gave her another anemic smile, but Mosi burst into a hearty guffaw.

“It’s my saying, you know,” Ji-Ho added, a little abashed. “People just love it when I say that. It means the contestant is about to get a dreadful score.”

“And they...love that?” I said.

“Well, not the person I’m saying it to. But it’s nice for the other contestants.”

“Ah. Well, as I said, I look forward to meeting both of them. No, wait, all *three* of them. I almost forgot about the contestant you brought back. You chose a former member of the Heart Throne, didn’t you?”

“Ewa. Such a dear,” Ji-Ho said. “I was shocked when she fumbled the pallor potion and got eliminated. Now she has a chance to redeem herself.”

“How many contestants did you start with?” I asked.

“A dozen? No, thirteen. Such a powerful number,” Mosi said.

“You must have had your hands full with so many master alchemists in one room. I bet the atmosphere was rather cutthroat.”

“It was professional,” Lord Sethos stressed.

“Professionally cutthroat,” Ji-Hi snorted. “Give me a glass of wine

during the reception tonight and I'll dish. But, honestly, Seth is right. They're quite well behaved on stage."

"I will be most honored to make introductions," Mosi said. "I thought it would be a treat to show you the private practice lab on this level. Two of the contestants are on their way there now."

"Excellent," I said. "Lead the way."

We said our goodbyes to the judges, and left. On the way to the lab, Mosi explained that the terminal used to contact the Sorrowful Mothers was in the suite. It was a smart idea, bringing the contestants together in that room. It also gave me an opportunity to learn more about why it was so easy to eliminate an entire building from the suspect list.

"As you can see, the lab has been retrofitted into an industry-standard clean room," he said, gesturing at the arcane, technical blend of computer equipment, alchemical tools, and climate-controlled ingredient storage. "It's sterilized daily to prevent all forms of contaminants, including meta-physical—including, even, traces of our own passing through it. It is why Lord Tower's team was unable to use Psychometry to learn more—there are very few magical echoes in this room, so to speak. We were only able to identify the people in the room since the last sterilization, which included all three contestants and both judges."

"Why would the judges be in this room?" Max asked, and it was a good question.

"We record what our producers call *bee-roll* footage here. It's filler between the actual televised moments of the contest."

"So they brought recording equipment into a clean room?" Brand asked dubiously.

"Ah, there lies the wonder of the Hex Throne's facility," Mosi said. "Their blend of magic and technology allow for full holographic recording. You can see the nodes all about the ceiling and walls—the tiny lens apertures. After recording, a full-dimension representation is available."

"It's quite the advancement," Ciaran added. "Every individual viewer is able to choose their own secondary camera angle. One could, say, watch the standard proceedings at the same time as zooming in on a particularly blessed contestant's endowment."

Brand gave me a quick glare, meaning, *I will not be on fucking camera.*

“But the cameras weren’t on that day?” I asked.

“Only for the bee-roll. Not during the moments the terminal was accessed.”

“Brand, what was important about calling Lord Seth a cat?” Max murmured.

“Lord Mosi, perhaps you’ll give us a minute until the contestants arrive?” I asked.

He bowed his way out of the room, and Brand made sure the thick laboratory door clicked shut behind him. He held up a finger for a count of *five, four, three, two*— “Okay,” he said.

“I shouldn’t have said that?” Max asked.

“It’s fine,” I said. “We’ve eliminated Mosi from suspicion, at least for now. Brand had you ask Lord Sethos that question?” At Max’s nod, I went on. “There’s a schism between the wolves and cats in Lord Devil’s court. It’s not a secret, but it’s also not widely known how deep the divide runs. The fact that Lord Sethos and a contestant are from the Beast Throne is as interesting as the third contestant we’re about to meet. Ciaran, did you catch that he’s from Lady Moon’s court?”

“Oh I did,” Ciaran murmured. “And by the way, I know what the Beast Throne contestant shifts into. She’s cat.”

“A cat and a wolf,” Brand said. “As well as members of the Beast Throne and the Nightglade.”

“But...” Max looked between us. “Aren’t Lady Moon and Lord Devil lovers?”

“That’s what makes this so interesting,” I said. “We have two couplings that, on the surface, should be friendly, or at least allies. But the wolves and the cats hate each other. And Lady Moon and Lord Devil’s relationship is tabloid fodder. I’ve heard that as fond as their Arcana are of each other, the administrators of both courts actually detest the situation.”

There was a hollow knock against the door. Brand opened it, and Mosi beamed.

“Hello hello again. Allow me to introduce two of our wonderful, wonderful finalists.” He moved his tall bulk aside, allowing the finalists to enter. “Lady Kamilah and Lord Erasmus.”

Mosi had been naming the nobility by their first names—a common sort of informality growing more popular. But our research had shown

that Kamilah was closely related to Lord Devil's inner circle, and had adopted his Saint moniker. Erasmus descended from a branch of the Nightglade at least two lines removed from Lady Moon, and was associated with his own greater house.

Kamilah, the feline shapeshifter, was a tall, lithe woman with a shaved head and ears that were more earring than cartilage. The ornamentation showcased the ragged tears from old fights. The Beast Throne's medics were notorious for magically healing injuries while letting them permanently scar.

Lord Erasmus was so pale I suspected a form of albinism, though I'd read his house originated in Scandinavia rather than the majority of Lady Moon's people, who descended from Rome and Greece.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I said. "And please, allow me to introduce the principality Ciaran, a friend. I apologize for disturbing you. Mosi was taking us on a tour of the facilities, and thought it would be a good time to introduce one another."

"As long as the facility is cleaned afterwards," Lady Kamilah said shortly. "We have much preparation ahead before the final round tomorrow. This is...an unusual number of people for a clean facility." She gave Max's dirty sneakers a sniff.

"A sterilization is scheduled for this evening," Mosi said. "Which reminds me, I notice we've left out some ingredients on the tables—we should probably store them while we're here."

"Will you be joining us for the event this evening, Lord Sun?" Erasmus asked politely, blinking blue irises that were just a shade darker than the whites of his eyes.

There was a cocktail hour and dinner set up this evening. We all planned on attending. "We're looking forward to it," I said. "Will your fellow contestant join us? A Lady...Ewa, I believe?"

Kamilah snorted. Erasmus was unmoved. I narrowed my focus to the shapeshifter. "It must be strange, this rule of yours. Welcoming an eliminated contestant back to the stage."

"The reasons for her elimination have not changed," Kamilah said, shrugging. "This is the one I lie in wait for." She angled her head toward Lord Erasmus. It was not friendly, and yet not overtly hostile.

“What sort of potions will you be creating tomorrow?” Ciaran asked. “So exciting. I do hope it’s something with a bang.”

“The idea is—” Mosi began, and stopped with a click of the teeth as a loud hissing sound filled the room, preceded by a metallic *thunk*.

“The doors just bolted,” Brand said quickly.

“The vents,” I said, pointing to a shimmer of gas that began to seep through the metal grating.

“The sterilization process,” Mosi said dumbly. “I don’t understand. We—”

“Understand later, do now,” Brand barked. “Is it toxic?”

“Quite,” Erasmus said, visibly swallowing. “Shut it down, Mosi!”

Mosi had pulled out his phone, which must have had no signal, because he ran to the nearest computer terminal. He hit the keyboard several times.

“Rune,” Brand said. “That door has a solid metal core. It’ll take time to bust it open.”

“We’re underground. I can’t use Exodus without knowing if I’m bringing the building down on us.” My eyes were flickering along the ceiling trim, where the vents were installed. Six, seven, eight...*eleven*. Eleven grates with seeping gas.

“I’ll buy us some time,” I said. “Mosi, this is like the city’s cleansing system? It burns away to inert substance?”

“Yes, Lord Sun!”

I ran a thumb along my gold ring, and felt the flush of Fire spread through my body. My Aspect stirred at the same time, responding to the magic—and I’m not even sure if the ease with which it happened, at my Aspect’s hungry responsiveness to my emotions, impressed or scared me. Flames began to lick up my sleeves and flavor the air around me with a burnt umber hue.

The contestants gasped and backed away from me as fire raced along my entire body.

I fashioned a zone of superheated temperature overhead and anchored it to all four walls, creating a gas-filled gap between the ceiling and my magic. The broiling air burned away the gas and made the white paint boil and blister, blackening the tiles beneath my feet.

Brand said. “It’s picking up speed.”

“We could find chemicals to counter the toxin,” Kamilah said.

“Be ready with that,” I said, and my breathing was heavy. My spell didn’t have the duration to hold this up for that long. “Max, you have Fire stored?”

Max swallowed and nodded.

“Join with me,” I said. “You can do it.”

Sweat popped out along his hairline as he wrapped two fingers around his cameo sigil—my old cameo sigil—and released Fire. For a second, the air around his hands caught fire, but Max glared and clenched his hands into fists, and brought the temperature down with an act of willpower. He lifted his arms and fused his magic with mine.

“I’ve accessed the interior room controls, but the subroutine for the sterilization process has been corrupted,” Mosi said in a low, panicked voice.

“Can you get the camera equipment running?” Brand snapped. “Yes? Do it. Record this.” He pulled out his phone and began typing a message.

I angled my eyes down and saw that he’d opened a notepad page and typed, *Mayan check the footage and kill whoever killed us.*

I hissed, “As if. Ciaran, any tricks?”

“Shield,” he said promptly. “It would need to be airtight, which makes oxygen levels an issue.”

“More of an issue than you think—I’m already burning away our oxygen. We need an out.”

“I can try to break through the wall, or force the gas away from us with a gale.”

“Be ready,” I told him as well. The alchemists were already scrambling toward the ingredient storage, a small pantry-like room in the corner. I thought for a fleeting second of barricading ourselves in there, but spotted gas vents in its ceiling as well.

There was a metallic, scissor-like sound, and the sprinklers went off.

The water hit the super-heated air and turned to a vicious rain of foglike steam. Ciaran snapped a Frost spell loose and cooled it, but before he could divert the moisture with Wind, we were drenched.

Ciaran, his hair now flat and unstyled, said, “Oh this is one wet, angry bitch right here.” He broke his Frost spell into two streams and sent one

at the wall beside the heavy metal door. Subzero temperature made the materials splinter and contract.

Ciaran ran a nail across his knucklebone necklace. The air around his hands vibrated like a jackhammer. The magic lashed out and struck the wall.

I'd seen this spell before—he's saved Brand with it, once upon a time. Ciaran called it Shale, and it thinned inorganic substances into fragility. "Break through it, Brand!"

Brand grabbed a tall metal stool from a table and slammed it against the frostbitten wall. Frozen, stretched pieces began to patter against the floor, and inside seconds he had an opening he could put his fist through.

Addam's Telekinesis would have been handy right now. I made do with what I had. Yelling at Brand to step back, I touched the platinum disc nestled in my arm brace and released a Shield. I shoved the Shield through the opening Brand had made—a narrow beam of magic—and then expanded it rapidly.

Chunks of wall cracked and fell, until I had an opening we could all squeeze through.

We began spilling out of the room just as Max's Fire magic bled dry, and my own was about to falter.