

THE TAROT SEQUENCE WORLD

“The Great Atlantean Battle Royalchemy”

Interlude: Matthias Saint John

We found nothing else of interest, even after searching the shapeshifter’s room, Lady Kamilah. Brand and Rune didn’t seem disappointed, but I knew that look on their faces. They were nearing the end of their hunt, getting ready for the moment where all the guesses in the world didn’t matter because it was time to blow things up.

They really, really, really liked to fight.

Back in the hotel room, a raven calmly watched us from the balcony outside as we kicked off our shoes and began to undress. Dry cleaning bags with tuxedos had been hung over the arms of the suite’s table chairs. *Queenie: absent but not forgotten.*

The first thing I did was give Brand a long, flat look and slowly slide his multi-tool in my own pocket instead of returning it. His eyeballs rolled to the ceiling, but he didn’t object.

“Do you know who did it yet?” I asked them. The death threat in Erasmus’s trash had only contained a single line in block print: *I will tear your throat out myself.* “Did the note tell you anything?”

Brand shrugged. “It’s a clue. It could have been sent by someone deeply troubled by their own stupidity. Or else someone wanted to make a statement. Including Erasmus himself.”

He stepped into the bathroom long enough to grab a clean white towel. “We’ve got an hour to kill. I’m going to use the hot tub. You’re welcome to join me, but it’s a Thinking Hot Tub, not a Small Talk Hot Tub.”

“I’ve already done my thinking,” Rune says. “You go catch up.”

That got a quick half-mouth quirk from Brand, but only at an angle Rune couldn’t see. He went outside with his towel, where a hot tub sat at one end of the curved exterior balcony.

“Are you glad you came?” Rune asked while lifting the plastic hem of the garment bag. He let out a breath and muttered, “Thank God. It’s not court style.”

In Rune-speak, that meant the pants weren’t tight. He wasn’t very Atlantean in his views of nudity, and court pants were best described as nudity with a thin piece of fabric stretched over the shapely bits.

“Am I helping?” I asked him nervously.

He blinked at me in surprise. “Of course you are. You always help. Should I be asking you if *you’re* alright with being here? Ewa was... unexpected.”

“It wasn’t bad,” I mumbled. I followed it with a shrug. “She’s not my grandmother.”

Rune looked like he wanted to stick his finger in that injury and root around a bit, but luckily, right at that moment, I got distracted by....

By what?

The release of a spell sent a shiver through my body. It didn’t feel ominous—or even near. My eyes traveled to the windows, where the fog bank was stirring. Well, toward where the fog bank was stirring and also to where a naked Brand was climbing into the hot tub. An impressive pile of weapons sat on a nearby patio table next to his neatly-folded tactical gear.

“What are you seeing?” Rune asked me, genuinely curious.

Now I blinked at him. He didn’t often point out Brand’s...natural gifts. There was some sort of crib psychology at work between them that made that stuff weird for Rune.

Rune’s eyes narrowed. “Not *that*. Though if someone catches him with a telephoto lens, it’s all his fault. I mean, why did you look outside suddenly?”

“Oh. There’s a spell. Can you feel it?”

“I can,” Rune replied, with a flash of something that may be pride. “You’re getting better at sensing magic. Can you tell what kind of a spell it is?”

I tried. I really did. But I had to shake my head *no* in the end.

“It’s weather magic. The legal kind. They’re doing something to the microclimate outside. I was wondering what was up with the fog. But nicely spotted, Max.”

I let that sit for a second, waiting for a punchline. None came. I

cautiously picked the compliment up and put it on a shelf in my brain for later examination.

Yeah.

Yeah, I was glad I came.

Eventually, we were ready.

My tuxedo was the tightest, because my upper chest and back were getting broader with all the recent training. I could feel the fabric stretching between my shoulder blades as Rune clapped a hand against them and nudged me to the door.

Outside, Brand wanted us to take the stairs to the ballroom level at the top of the silo. We did that—or at least, we did that after they got the Brand-Rune thing out of their system. (Rune fake-casually asked why we should take the stairs. Brand said he wanted to mix up our entry and exit points. Rune said we could walk down three stories and then take an elevator back up. Brand said, “I’ve got to believe you’re fucking with me. That’s the only thing that makes sense after spending so much time talking about the size of your ass.”)

The first thing I saw when the stairwell door opened on the ballroom level was a dull red moon the size of Flynn. It appeared to hang right outside the windows, where the fog had previously been.

I looked at Rune first, because he’d been right, of course.

“That’s got to be magic,” Brand said.

“Weather magic,” Rune said. “I think they created a temperature inversion for an optical illusion.”

“Is this that kind of fun weather magic that will have Lady World glaring at us for a decade? Even though it’s not our fault at all because Ashton started it first?”

“Naw. This is legal stuff.”

“More pretty shit,” Brand murmured. “Have you spotted—”

And then he stopped talking. I think I heard his teeth click.

That’s when I noticed Layne too.

They were wearing a cross between a tuxedo jacket with a ball gown flare. It looked lovely on them. The expression on their face, though, was not lovely. Some man was standing in their personal space, touching their arm.

I grabbed Brand's shoulder a half-second before he marched forward, which would have been a half-second before Rune flew forward. "Wait," I hissed. I loved these guys, I really did, but they worked hard to forget that others could fight their own way out of a paper bag. "Just give it a second. Either Layne is a bad-ass necromancer or they aren't. Which is it?"

Brand and Rune looked at each other, doing that weird, freaky ESP thing. They could be thinking about murder or cheese, you never knew. But then Brand barked, "Which of us can do the magic?"

Rune must have known what that meant, because he whispered a quick cantrip, opening a lens made of air before him. All we could see were the pores on Layne's nose, so Rune zoomed out with a flick of his finger. He whispered another cantrip and piped sound into the image—tinny and vibrating thanks to the cheap but easy magic.

I'd save my outrage for later, because I wanted to spy too.

"This conversation is over," Layne said.

"Come now, Layne—"

"Liege Dawncreek," Layne said immediately. "I am Liege Dawncreek now. Kin to Lord Sun, and a sworn member of his court. You'll want to back away from me, or you'll learn what else I am."

"I've heard about your little magic," he said, while puffing out a chest covered in sigils.

Layne smiled, a sharp and dangerous expression through our wavering lens. They held out an arm and placed a long, painted nail alongside an abscess on their forearm. The abscess began to redden and blister.

"It's a small thing," Layne whispered. "Just a single nudge of my nail—just a single slice into the raw, sore flesh. That's all I need to release power. You won't even smell the gangrene before you lose your fingers."

The man backed away, startled. He began to fast-walk out of there.

Layne said, "I know one of you is listening. Just to be clear, I was acting creepy on purpose." They sighed. "Damn. I wish I'd bought a legwarmer."

Rune swept a hand and ended the lens cantrip.

"Did you see?" Brand hissed in delight. "They were about to cut into that boil with the nail of their middle finger. They were giving that guy the finger at the same time. That's our Layne."

“Do you spy on me like this?” I demanded.

Brand and Rune exchanged a quick look. Rune said, “Noooooo,” but since I was behind him, I could see him crossing his fingers behind his back.

“Okay,” Brand said, and his smile dropped as quickly as it appeared. “Now can I go after him?”

“Hell yes,” I said. “Should I grab a shovel?”

Brand and Rune did the ESP thing again, and Rune peeled off to go speak to Layne. Brand marched after the retreating scion. I followed him.

It looked like the man might beat us to the archway on the other side of the floor, but Ciaran slid out of nowhere and blocked the man’s path.

Ciaran was wearing a fuchsia body wrap and enormous yellow sunglasses. Whatever he said to the man didn’t take long, and afterwards, the man left the ballroom at a sprint. I kid you not. A dead sprint.

Brand gave Ciaran his moment, then continued his march forward.

Ciaran beamed as we approached. “Do I need to go after him?” Brand asked.

“I should hope not,” Ciaran said. “He’s leaving the hotel.”

Brand gave Ciaran a very controlled, very long eye blink. “There’s something I don’t know, isn’t there?”

“Do you need to know everything?” Ciaran said coolly, removing the sunglasses. “Or perhaps you can drum up some confidence in my own ability to handle matters.”

Now there was no blinking. It was a straight-on staring contest. Brand let that last all of two seconds before saying, sharply, “*Hey*. I will never fucking underestimate you, so don’t go wasting your scary eyes on me. Who was that man?”

“A former patron of a special room on a certain battleship,” Ciaran said.

My fingers went up to touch the cameo sigil around my neck. I had Fire stored in it. I didn’t release the spell, just felt its presence.

“Apparently he’s found new work with Lord Strength after the Gallows fell,” Ciaran murmured. “It would be an unwise kill. So, in light of that, I explained all the other sparkly tools in my toolkit. He has thirty minutes to leave the island forever before I use them. I was quite generous about it—I gave his immediate family a full forty-eight hours.”

Brand continued to stare. Finally, he nodded, and said, “You’re tracking him?”

“Twenty-seven minutes to go. I have eyes at the portal station.”

While they took satisfaction in the pending exile or death of another, I excused myself to find Layne and see if they were alright.

Layne and Rune were arguing on a balcony. It didn’t take long to realize Layne was making a case for Rune to calm down and not murder anyone.

“You’re too late,” I said, coming up to them. The harvest moon—or its optical illusion—hung right off the balcony. It looked like I could dive into it. I added, “Ciaran exiled him.”

“Exiled him?” Layne repeated.

“That man better hope there’s no traffic between here and the portal station. He’s got about twenty minutes.”

“Huh,” Rune said. “I want to hear that for myself.” He hurried off.

“You really were creepy,” I told Layne with a thumbs up. “That was good stuff.”

“I knew they were spying,” Layne grumbled. “Did they hear me name-drop Rune? That’s embarrassing.”

I didn’t comment on that, because I dropped Rune’s name all the time to cut the coffee line. “You okay?” I said instead.

Layne did the nod-smile-shrug that people did, but it wasn’t enough. And I didn’t know how to build a bridge between that and the comment I wanted to make. Finally, I said, nervously, “I mean... We don’t talk about our pasts much. But...my past... You know I can talk about this stuff with you, right? That we can talk about it?”

Layne stared at the moon. They were younger than me, but in so many ways, they felt like an older sibling. They’d worked so damn hard to regain command of their life. I hadn’t moved nearly that quickly.

“It’s hard to get away from, isn’t it?” Layne sighed. “Depression. Trauma. You can never move so far away from them that they won’t try to visit.”

“You’re doing so well, though,” I said. “So well!”

“Am I? Maybe. Ciaran helps. I have...” A bitter look. “Nightmares. I have nightmares, and Ciaran helps me with them. It makes it easier.” Now

the bitter look emptied from their face, and a smile seeped back in. “If you have nightmares, I could ask Ciaran to dreamwalk into them.”

Which made me say, as carefully and politely as I’ve ever said anything in my life, “No thank you.”

Laughter peeled from them. “I suppose not. There are some people Ciaran just loves to mortify, and you’re one of them.”

We got quiet after that and admired the view. Layne took my hand with a grin, and we swung arms, just enjoying the moment.