

THE TAROT SEQUENCE WORLD

“The Great Atlantean Battle Royalchemy”

Chapter 8: Endgame

The morning of the final contest, I woke early enough to eat breakfast with everyone, which got me a golf clap from Layne, Max, and Brand. I ignored them because there was fake red strawberry syrup on the room service trolley, which was my favorite.

Geoffrey showed up later while I was in a bedroom changing and the kids had gone to the private onsite gym to exercise. I listened half-heartedly to Brand’s occasional threats while buttoning one of Addam’s smaller dress shirts. It hung on me, but it looked good, with bonus points for being expensive and flame retardant. The guest judge invitation was somewhat particular about that point.

And the shirt smelled a little like him, too.

I walked into the suite’s living room to Brand saying, “There’s iron fucking everywhere. That doesn’t work for me.”

“It needs to be treated iron filings,” Geoffrey said with that insufferable overly-patient tone of his. “The iron will be oxidized and have flecks of rust in it. It will need to be kept dry, away from moisture.”

“What are we talking about?” I asked.

“I asked Fuck-hat to look into ways the final potion could be used to hurt a lot of people.”

Mosi had told us that the final test was an ancient warming recipe designed to allow Atlanteans to survive hypothermic conditions. Only the ingredients used in the assembly of it would be permitted. Alchemy was far from my best pool of magical knowledge, though. I hadn’t realized the spell could be misappropriated like that.

“Tell me,” I said.

“This ingredient,” Geoffrey said. He put his hand on a tablet computer

and turned it in my direction. I spotted a picture that looked much like iron filings would.

“Add that to the final potion while it’s still simmering, and the explosion could be large enough to take out the entire room.”

“We can ask Mosi to institute security protocols,” I said, thinking it through. “There are metal detecting spells. We can make sure no one brings ingredients in other than what’s already laid out.” I made a frustrated sound. “I wish Addam was here. He’s good with earth magic.”

“Speaking of that,” Geoffrey said nervously. He got up and began to pace. “When he returns from his trip, I’m going to talk to him. I...need to talk to him. I think he deserves my truth. Don’t you agree?”

I groaned at Geoffrey saying *my* truth. Brand went over to the door and opened it. Then he grabbed the back of Geoffrey’s shirt collar and bodily swung him through the opening. Geoffrey’s heels pedaled the air like a cartoon as he flew backwards.

Brand said, “No,” then slammed the door.

“Awww,” I said, genuinely pleased. “You’re unilaterally making decisions for Addam now too. That’s so cute.”

“I really will put him down,” Brand said. “This isn’t a joke.”

“I can keep Geoffrey in line,” I said. “We’ve got work to do.”

“Max and I will search the stage for anything that shouldn’t be there,” Brand said. “You talk with Mosi. I’ll ask Layne to tell Ciaran about the metal detection. Let’s wrap this up. I’m ready to go home.”

Less than three hours later, I was sitting in a swivel chair while a layer of slime was applied to my cheeks. I felt like I’d been hit in the face with a cream pie. Make-up caked my lips and eyelashes, weighing down my blinks.

“An unfortunate reality of filming,” Mosi placated. “We must exaggerate reality just a *bit* so that it actually looks *real*. It works just as well as a glamor, in truth.”

If I could go back in time, I would have stored a glamor spell in my sigil. I would have stored several. Instead, I’d wasted my time on Shield and Fire and other stuff to keep us alive.

After the stylist finished dabbing foundation around my earlobes,

Mosi thanked her and asked for the room. When the door clicked shut, his jovial smile dimmed.

“We have ushers at every entrance with metal detection magic. I must admit, I would be more at ease if you’d trust me with the reason. Have I done something to make you wary of me, Lord Sun?”

“No. Honestly, no. But you were in the room when the Cleansing was activated. I’m sorry, Mosi—there were some...unexplained elements to that.”

“But surely, if you were to suspect anyone, it would have been people *outside* the threat.”

I hadn’t told Mosi what we’d learned about the reagents left out in the open, and he hadn’t put the pieces together himself. So I just said, as evasively as possible, “We have good reason to assume that attack may have been a red herring of sorts, and the person involved might have been in the room with us.”

“Ah,” he said, and sank down into a swivel chair of his own. It groaned under his weight as he began to swing it from left to right. “Hmm. You suspect Lord Erasmus or Lady Kamilah.”

“I do,” I said.

“And you think they could bring a weapon into the filming?”

“Or an ingredient that could lead to mischief,” I said.

His eyes moved to me, rolled up to the ceiling thoughtfully, and then finally rolled back to me as another baritone *hmmm* left his lips. “Iron filings,” he said.

I dipped my head at him.

“The reason we chose this warming potion is due to its complexity. It’s from Old Atlantis, no longer used—and, indeed, doctoring the preparation with certain substances would have rather explosive results. We were very careful in what ingredients we set out. I do believe it would be wise to run an additional scan of the set. Would that be of assistance? I will partner with your Companion, if you wish, to assure my fidelity.”

“I think that’s an excellent idea, but please coordinate with Lord Ciaran. He’s handling that element of our investigation.”

Brand knocked on the door and poked his head in. When he saw the two of us, he came into the room with Max in tow. “Stage looks good,”

he said. “Do you want to come and check yourself, or are you waiting to pile into a little car with a bunch of other make-up victims?”

“You’re next,” I said.

“I’m not judging,” he said back.

“You’re not going to be on the stage? Because everything on the stage is filmed.”

He put his lips together into a straight line and narrowed his eyes at me.

“I will assign our most gentle, experienced cosmetic technician to your care,” Mosi promised, and tapped a text onto his phone.

Max went over to where he’d dumped his backpack. He’d already been practicing shifting his skin tones using fae magic, and Ciaran had said he had a half-dozen glamours on hand for occasions that required a different color palette.

I heard a sudden rustle of paper. Max had snatched a folded piece of paper from the counter, opened it, and was staring hard.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Son of a bitch,” Max said. “It’s from Quinn. It’s a note for me.”

“Ah yes,” Mosi said. “A young gentleman dropped that off a week or so ago, I believe. I did think it was rather strange at the time.”

Max shook the paper in the air. “He’s showing off. You know he’s showing off, right? But he didn’t know what hotel suite we’d be in—he totally would have showed off even harder and left this under my damn pillow.”

“You are the weirdest friends,” Brand said. “And I’m including present company. Does the note at least contain anything relevant?”

“He just says it’s a very important day for me, and he hopes I do well, and sometimes he’s there when I’m reading this, and wouldn’t that be really fun.”

There was a quick, excited knock on the door.

My heart skipped a beat—and the skipping caught lift and flew when Brand opened the door and I saw Addam outside, standing behind Quinn.

Addam’s eyes went right to me, and the laugh lines around his mouth deepened as he smiled.

“We returned home sooner than planned,” Addam said. “Quinn felt there would be events worth witnessing.”

“Please, please, come in, come in,” Mosi said. “I’ll leave you to speak while I work with Lord Ciaran on the additional scans.”

Once Mosi left and the door had closed, we suffered through a minute of overlapping babble, which ended when Brand said, loudest, “Who is the bad guy?”

Quinn replied, confidently, “There are tigers and lions and wolves fighting with the moon. I am absolutely sure.”

“I’ll make a note of that on a very, very long list of things we’ll discuss later,” Brand said. “Rune, fill Addam in. I’ll be on the stage.”

He opened the door just before a man outside knocked. The young man had a make-up kit in one hand and a hopeful look on his face.

Brand said, “It wouldn’t even be a fair fight.”

“Brand,” I told him.

He grumbled and left with the make-up technician and the boys. Addam came over to me, slowly, enjoying the blush that crept up my neck. He put his lips against the blush and whispered, “And now, Hero, I would like you to tell me exactly how you have managed to put yourself in danger.”

He was using his Russian accent, but it wasn’t the sexy-time Russian accent. So, I sat him down and told him everything as quickly as I could. Well, except for Geoffrey—I didn’t mention a thing about Geoffrey. Brand’s not the only one who felt a need to micromanage Addam, especially when it kept Addam happy. Addam was ours to protect now, and Brand and I had rather intractable methods for protecting people.

“If I understand correctly,” Addam finally said, “Lord Tower wants you to watch and, whatever happens, to handle it. And then sweep the aftermath under the proverbial rug.”

“That about sums it up,” I said.

“It is a very Arcana way to handle things, is it not,” Addam mused. “Those are usually the only options they see.” And he put a little emphasis on the *they*.

I think I was being micromanaged too.

And maybe there was something to what Addam was saying.

“I have an idea,” I said.

After some phone calls were made, as well as some very surprised

reactions that I handled with the convenient shortcut of wielding my new Arcana status like a cudgel, Addam and I walked to the staging room.

The wide, open area had been redesigned with the alchemy competition in mind. Three chemical-resistant tables were set ten feet apart, each with their own sink and alchemy apparatus, along with a tray of reagents.

The judges had a round table of their own, and along one wall was a recessed alcove with audience seats. We'd kept the in-person participant list small on purpose, and I'd further edited that down to what should have been undercover operatives from the facility's security team. I ran my eyes along the people gathered, noted, with exasperation, where the Universe had followed my wishes and where it hadn't, then went over to Brand.

He was sitting on a stool with his back to me. The make-up artist had a spirally-looking black wand in his hand. "I still think a little eye shadow would look good," the young man murmured.

Brand said, "I bet you need a full range of arm motion to do your job, huh?"

"But this looks fine, too," the technician said, and began packing up.

Brand turned around on his stool to face us. He'd refused foundation, but allowed them to put on eyeliner. The kohl lines around his eyes made his blue irises glow like a Vegas billboard.

After a minute of everyone staring, Brand said, "What?"

"Oh Band-aid," I said. "You are so fucking pretty."

He glared at the make-up tech until the man fumbled a mirror out of his kit. Brand grabbed the mirror and stared at it. After a few quiet seconds he said, "Goddamnit."

"So pretty," I said again.

"You're not going to let this go, are you?" he asked.

"I will learn to sew. I will make a *quilt* from this."

"You take everything too far," he grumbled, at such a height of hypocrisy I'm surprised he didn't start gasping for oxygen.

Mosi grew increasingly flustered over the next ten minutes. He ran around the room herding people to their stations. Max would be positioned near Ewa; Ciaran by Kamilah; and Brand at a point between Erasmus and the judge's table. Addam and Layne had already taken seats with the audience—Addam wouldn't hear of remaining outside the studio, and

promised me he had a Shield on hand if needed. Quinn was conspiring with Max in excited tones, though they separated when Mosi barreled between them with waving hands.

I snagged Quinn's sleeve as he was about to head back to his seat. "If you left Max a note," I whispered, "they why did you change your mind and come back?"

He blinked innocent burgundy eyes at me, feigning confusion.

I'd learned a few things about Quinn, though. He always saw events the closer he got to them. He was very careful about interfering, for fear of nudging events beyond his ability to influence them. And he liked being on hand for the good stuff.

"At least tell me if it's a good thing," I sighed.

"I do not know whether it's a *very, very good thing*," he said.

"That'll have to do. Make sure you raise a Shield if anything goes wrong."

"It almost never does, especially if you don't eat or drink anything."

"Sensible advice for a competition that involves tasting," I said. "Off you go."

"Attention, attention!" Mosi boomed. "Please make sure all electronic devices are set to airport mode—"

One of his assistants said something urgently to him.

"Excuse me, I mean *airplaning mode*," he corrected. "The wireless signal will interfere with our broadcast."

Lady Ji-Ho said, "Drats. I was hoping to check my hair."

Sethos, the second judge, muttered, "They already took my damned belt buckle."

I joined myself at their table as undercover security circulated and made sure everyone had complied with the mandate. I'd arranged the requirement myself with Mosi about thirty minutes ago, as Addam's words percolated through my plans.

Mosi began to clap his hands together. "Places, everyone!"

The start of the competition went smoothly.

There were montage biographies of all three contestants projected on a screen. The judges circulated and made bothersome small talk. Max, Brand, Ciaran, and I watched everyone, ready for any signs of violence.

Kamilah insisted her bilberry was stale, which ran the risk of causing internal bleeding. She was intercepted on her way to the supply closet; Mosi hastened to provide her with new ingredients, watched closely by Ciaran. Her eyes shifted to an angry lion yellow, but she complied.

Erasmus made a mistake and threw away his entire pumpkin-sized cauldron in a pique. The judges went into an ecstatic frenzy over that. Lady Ji-Ho said, “What a waste of imbued magic! I would never have started over with a fresh cauldron. Brace yourself, Lord Erasmus.”

When the contestants finished decanting their simmering potions into plain glass goblets, Brand sidled over and whispered, “Now?”

“Let’s go,” I said.

Brand circulated along the back of the room to speak with Max and Ciaran. I looked toward Mosi and, when we made eye contact, nodded.

“How very exciting!” Mosi said in an overly rehearsed voice. “Millions and millions of our viewers are ready to see the contestants share their potions with each other before the judging begins.”

That was tradition. Contestants shared their potions first with other contestants—which caused amusing reactions early in the series due to inevitable mistakes, and sharp professional jealousy in the final stages. Then the judges would partake.

So, following Brand’s plan, I said, “Or at least, that’s what would normally happen. For the final round, we’re doing something different. Each contestant will taste their own potion first.”

There was a clatter of metal. Erasmus had dropped a long stirring spoon. To be fair, Kamilah was also reacting—her eyes were a burnished gold once again.

“You must be sick of tasting each other’s potions,” I said. “I thought we’d just try something new.”

This is the moment we’d waited for. The exact moment. What happened next wasn’t nearly as important as how they reacted to this announcement. Brand and I had spent the last twenty years of our life learning how to read people’s expressions in order to keep each other safe.

“Erasmus,” Brand announced.

I lifted my sabre, which I’d uncoiled from wristguard form into a hilt capable of launching firebolts. I aimed it. “Lord Erasmus, please remain still.”

“This is an outrage,” Lord Erasmus whispered, while Kamilah said, “What is this?”, and the judges talked over each other. Ewa had caught Max’s attention and was saying something to him.

I snapped my finger and channeled some willpower into it. The crack silenced the excited murmurs in the room.

“Do you have anything to say?” I asked Lord Erasmus.

His cheeks were a deep mottled red—striking against lips clamped together so tightly they were bloodless. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and said, “I will gladly die to bring attention to the atrocities committed within the Beast Throne, and its larcenous connection to the noble Nightglade. Over the last several years—”

“To me,” I said, loudly. “To me, Lord Erasmus. Do you have anything to say to me? Or perhaps the room at large? That’s all who is listening. This is not being broadcast. I ordered a two-hour delay in the feed before we started. No one will ever see this. Do you understand? Sometimes ripples don’t turn into waves. Your message will not go anywhere. It’s over.”

Erasmus shot a look at Mosi, who shrugged and said, “It is a decision of the Arcanum. Our viewers will simply have to understand.”

“What is this?” Kamilah demanded again. “He has slandered my court!”

“Lord Erasmus planned on turning the final round into a rather violent demonstration,” I said. “Isn’t that true? My guess is that, somehow, he doctored his potion to poison you, Lady Kamilah. Or he found a way to doctor *your* potion to poison *him*. His original plans to secure safe extraction were ruined, after all. Did you crumple that death threat into your trash? Decide being a martyr suited your purpose just as well?”

Erasmus lowered his eyes and said nothing.

“The cleansing in the laboratory would have been a good decoy,” I said, “but the reagents you left out were rather obvious.”

“And you distracted us, when Mosi called attention to them,” Brand said.

“But,” I added, “perhaps this time we can simply *prevent* the violence from happening in the first place, rather than quietly picking up the smoking pieces. I don’t need bodies at my feet to put you in cuffs. I am the Sun Throne. You have endangered me and mine. You are my legitimate prey. You get no grand moment, no soliloquy, no public appeal. This ends.”

Now came the moment where Brand and I under-calculated.

Erasmus swept his hand along the side of the goblet, which went wide and sprayed potion in my general direction. Our eyes tracked the arc of liquid, which was what he wanted. His other hand was already moving to his sink. He snatched the aerator—the metal ring that should have been screwed around the end of the faucet. It came loose and his arm began to move to the simmering potion in the cauldron.

“ERASMUS!” Ewa shouted, a massive, strident roar learned on battlefields. It was so loud and so unexpected that Erasmus gave her a quick, startled look—allowing Max to slide in from behind and dump a flask of water over his hand.

Erasmus stared at the puddle of water blankly. He turned the aerator upside down, and a clump of sodden metal filings plopped into his palm.

“I was wondering why you refused to clean out your cauldron,” Ewa said. “Had to keep your sink bone-dry, didn’t you? Wet iron filings don’t work nearly as well. Nicely executed, Matthias.”

Max snuck a peek at Brand’s face. Brand met the glance with one of the deepest nods of approval I’d ever seen him give. The look on Max’s face made every minute of this experience worth it.

I’d like to think that I would have found a way to save everyone, too; but, as the person closest to the spray of potion liquid, I was currently bubble-wrapped in multiple, exasperating Shields. “If it makes you feel better, Erasmus, you were severely outgunned. You’re in the crosshairs of three Arcana and a principality. Perhaps some of those Arcana will now *relax*.”

I looked pointedly at a woman in the audience with thick black braids, massive blue sunglasses, and a floppy straw hat. “Little brother,” she said, lowering her Shield.

Lord Tower was wearing the same tall, bland and blond scion glamor he’d lent me for the raid on Lady Lovers. It’s like he wasn’t even trying. He flicked his disguise away with a gesture and lowered the multiple Shields he’d sent to protect everyone in the room he cared enough to protect.

“Companions, too,” Brand said. “I’m pretty sure Mayan and Corinne are in the rafters with crossbows. Corinne didn’t even bother with camo paint. Her nose is shiny.”

“Ingrate,” I heard Corinne say from above us.

“Plus,” I said, “every other member of the audience is professional security and prepared to survive an explosion.” I heard a distinct, clear *Meeeeeep*. I sighed. “Except for One of the Many Brians. Apparently, no one thought to remove the interns from a scene of potential, harrowing violence. Sorry Brian. Good luck with your career in American science!”

Lord Tower stood up, smoothed the lap of his pants, and headed to the floor of the stage. Erasmus tracked his movement with mounting dread.

“Everyone in this room will be sworn to secrecy,” he said. “I will not hear anything in the news except for frustration over a rescheduled final round.”

It was not a request.

Lord Tower stopped in front of Erasmus’s lab bench. Erasmus lost all pretense at being a mastermind of anything, including his own trembling lips.

“What did you hope to accomplish?” Lord Tower asked.

“The Beast Throne is dangerous and must be stopped,” Erasmus stammered.

“If you only knew,” Lord Tower sighed. “These internecine disputes do nothing except hide the real threats. Lady Moon is quite capable of maintaining relations with other Arcana courts without her subordinates’ interference. I do not think you will enjoy the day she returns to the island. But until then, rest assured, I will give you every chance to share information with me. Remove him.”

The last was spoken to thin air, but since he was the Tower, a dozen security personnel jumped to attend to his wishes.

There were loose ends, of course. There always were.

I wasn’t sure what Erasmus’ real issue was, or what trouble was brewing between—or because of—Lady Moon and Lord Devil.

We’d have to spend a lot of money keeping the staff quiet; and the Magician was bound to get pissed when he learned we messed with events at his hotel. The show would need to be reshot with a convenient recasting.

But Lord Tower had people to clean up problems like this. Lord Tower had people who cleaned up *after* the people who cleaned up problems like this. We wouldn’t be reading any of this on the web.

So, half an hour later, we ended our adventures like we always did: with high quality snacks.

Queenie even appeared like a ghost in the backstage green room with a plate of cookies. She brought Anna and Corbie with her. Corbie raced into the room, handed the Tower a stuffed penguin, and ran out. Anna spotted that Layne *and* Quinn were both there, glared at me, and made a beeline to Max to ferret out the whole story.

I did manage to corner the Tower long enough to say, “If I only knew *what?*”

He pretended not to understand the question.

I pointed at his face and said, “That’s the same expression Corbie uses when I say things like, *How did this bag of sugar end up in the living room?* If I only knew *what* about Lord Devil? Or Lady Moon?”

“They are among the oldest of courts, tied to the oldest of institutions,” Lord Tower said. “I do tend to keep a very close eye on them.”

I felt Brand approach us from behind. He stopped by my shoulder and said, “Is this one of those moments when you grimace and remember that Rune is an Arcana now too? With the Arcana secret decoder ring and everything?”

And, unbelievably, the Tower did just that. He grimaced.

“It is a learning curve,” he admitted slowly. “Learning to trust more. But if it matters, some things simply haven’t changed, whether Rune is an Arcana or not. In the city’s most unsteady moments, I cannot imagine not having you both at my side. When you look at it from a certain perspective, and to borrow a phrase from Brand: when the shit hits the fan, I call on you, and you really do often know more than any other Arcana.”

“Okay, that’s enough, don’t build his ego too much,” Brand said. “Half the time he’s the one throwing the shit at the fan, and you have to be on site because we need an Arcana *ex machina*.”

“As it should be,” the Tower said. He nodded at us both, and moved on, a penguin neatly wedged under his arm.

I also managed to corner Quinn, who nearly slipped under my arm in a genuinely impressive move I credited to Brand’s rigorous training sessions.

“Now can I know why you keep staring at Ewa?” I asked. “And stop with that face. You and your godfather, I swear.”

Quinn's expression faded into thoughtfulness. He finally said, "You respect alchemy, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

"Good." He snuck another look at Ewa, traced his eyes across the room to where Anna was talking with Max, and looked satisfied. Then he dove between Lady Death and Mayan, out of my reach.

"Just for the record," Lady Death said. "I did not think you couldn't handle yourself."

"I appreciate that," I said.

"But you have ducked all my calls about the final details for your coronation. You will not duck me today."

"I really, really do need to start interviewing seneschals, don't I," I sighed.

We eventually decided we'd earned the right to some cocktails, and moved the party to the revolving bar at the top of the converted missile silo. Ciaran began entertaining the young folk by turning the Magician's expensive cutlery to various substances, including daffodil stems and straw. Lord Tower was huddled with Lady Death.

I was on a sofa, my head resting against Addam's shoulder. Brand was sprawled on the other end of the couch, his feet draped across both our laps.

"I wonder how other people spend their weekend," Brand said. "They must be so fucking bored."

"I would like you two to be more boring when I am gone," Addam said.

"Don't worry," I promised. "We've got to pick out napkin styles and a music playlist for that stupid gala. I'm sure there's plenty of boring time ahead."

