

THE SUNKEN MALL

A TAROT NOVELLA



K.D. EDWARDS

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A TAROT SEQUENCE NOVELLA

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This is a work of fiction. Characters, organizations, products, locales, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, unless it's located in Brand's dialogue, in which case the person probably deserves it, but either way he really doesn't give a shit.

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DEDICATION

This novella is dedicated to all the exceptionally wonderful and talented readers who have shared their artwork with me, especially artwork inspired by *The Tarot Sequence*. I am constantly—*constantly*—humbled and enraptured by it.

I held a cover contest before posting this novella. All of the submissions were glorious, and I've included a galley of them on the following pages.

Be well, people.

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A TAROT SEQUENCE NOVELLA



THE SUNKEN MALL







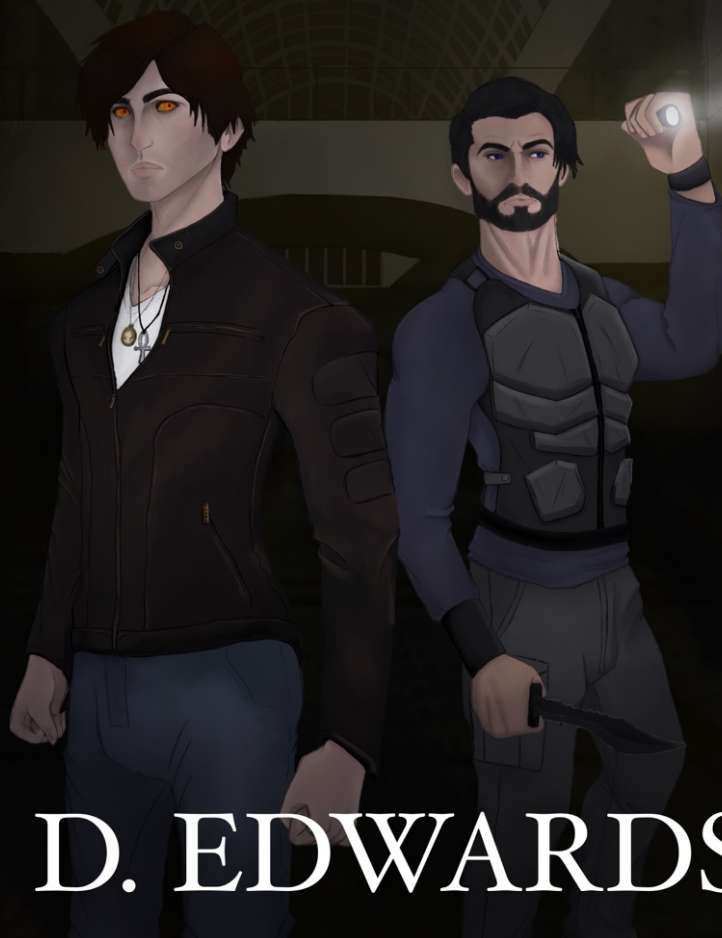
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A Tarot Sequence Novella

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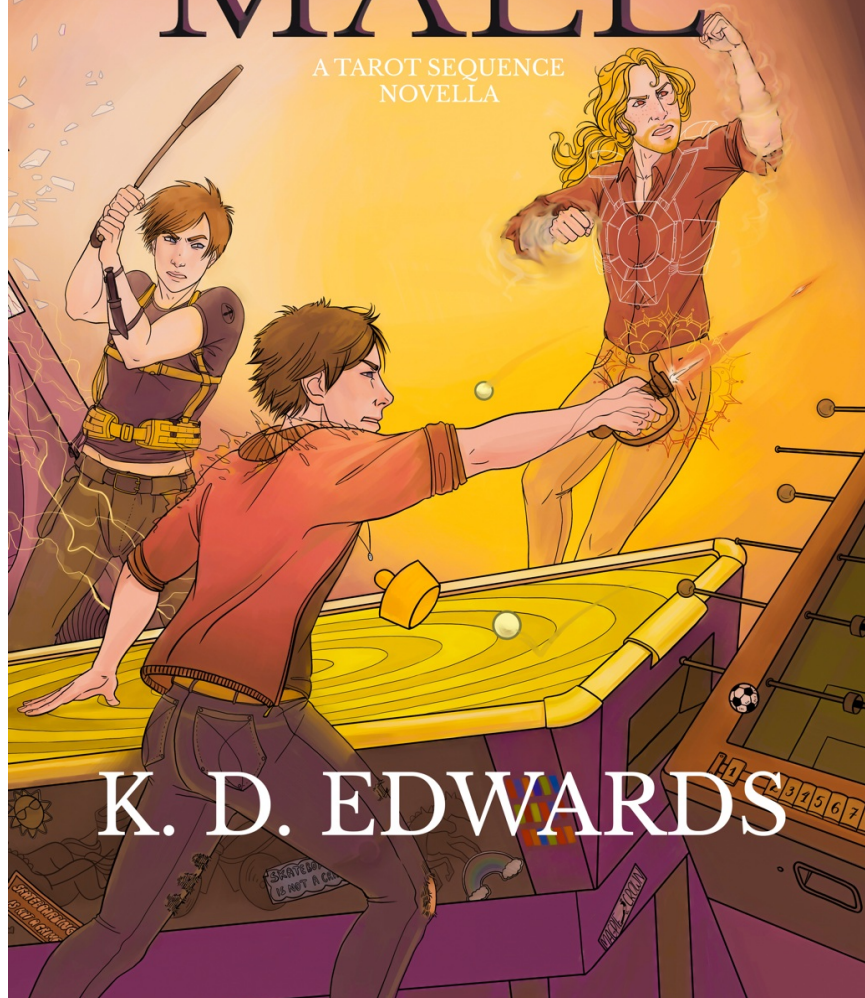






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NOVELLA



K. D. EDWARDS

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“—uck,” I heard behind me.

I ground my back teeth together and turned to the spiral stairway that opened into my fourth floor bedroom. Brand was peering over the lip.

“What was that?” I said.

“Cargo pants?” he repeated. “What the fuck?”

I dropped the cargo pants to the floor, but kept the black slacks pinned to my waist.

“Did you need something?” I said.

“It can wait.”

I heard his boots vibrate back down to the living room.

I’d spent the better part of an hour fighting my closet to find the right outfit for my first official dinner date with Addam. He’d told me to dress comfortably, and also that it was a nice restaurant. That could mean—in his rich-person code—anything from designer track suits to tuxedos.

Gathering up the pile of every pair of pants I owned, I went over and dumped them on the floor of my closet. Then I yanked all of my shirts into a hug and shook them off the rod. Hangers clattered to the ground as I trudged back to the bed.

I pawed through t-shirts and sweatshirts, tugging anything with buttons to the top. Buttons were classy. Or zippers? No, buttons.

And so buttons got all my attention for the next two minutes, because that was what my life had become. I had a boyfriend. I had to care about things like buttons and color and fabric, even if they offered no protection in a fight, even if I couldn’t afford the best cuts, even if it’d been decades since I was used to these stupid *comfortable but nice* restaurants.

“Oh. Um. Rune?” Queenie said from the stairwell after I’d spent another few minutes studying a silk shirt. I hadn’t even heard Queenie come upstairs. She was

sneaky quiet when she wanted to be.

“Yes,” I said as politely as possible.

“Well. Look at that. That’s pretty. And orange? An orange shirt?”

“It’ll compliment my skin if things go bad and I need to catch fire,” I said.

“Okay. If you say so.”

“Did you need something?”

“No?” she said, and scurried away.

I stared at my reflection, finally picking up on the obvious. To test the theory, I dug through the shirts to find a loud, ugly, plaid short-sleeve button-down. I held it against my chest and stood in front of the mirror.

When I heard new footsteps on the stairway twenty seconds later, I shouted, “Go back downstairs, Max!”

I went over to my dresser, picked up my phone, dialed. The other line clicked open into a suspicious silence.

“We talked about cameras,” I said.

“Short-sleeve button-down shirts make you look like the bald, heavysset cop from every 90s cop show ever fucking made!” Brand protested.

“Where is the camera?”

“I made sure no one watched when you came out of the shower. We’re just trying to help.”

“Because it’s as good as melted.”

“Last time you spent four fucking hours dressing for a *coffee date* and came downstairs in *dad jeans*.”

“Maybe everyone wears plaid at this restaurant. Maybe everyone wears dad jeans. What do you even know about it?”

“Plenty,” he shot back. “I had to run background checks on all the staff tonight, didn’t I?”

I hung up, went over to the stairwell, and yelled, “*No you did not!*”

I started tearing my room apart for the camera.

Half an hour before I needed to be at dinner, I clambered down the spiral staircase to the living room.

Brand and Max were sparring. Since they usually did that in the wider, open Sanctum on the third floor, it meant the close quarters were part of the training.

“Try it again,” Brand barked. “The Beholder’s Red Curtain.”

Brand had convinced the teenager he was being imparted secret Companion martial arts moves. In reality, he was being taught street-fighting tactics. The

Beholder's Red Curtain was an eye gouge.

Max circled Brand and tried to feint. Brand knocked Max's arm aside, picked him up, and tossed him onto the sofa headfirst.

The move nearly unsettled a small table in the corner, on which a devil's trumpet sat surrounded by a small collection of wrapped presents. Its pink and pale purple blossoms were traditional for the Fall Equinox, one of the island's four official gift-giving holidays. Devil's trumpet was also one of the most poisonous plants in the world. Atlanteans had a strange sense of humor. No Christmas trees for us—we celebrated with toxins.

(Not unrelatedly, the equinox and solstice fauna funded several cottage industries, including biohazard greenhouses, mass-produced antidotes, and pet funerals.)

"Rune, look," Queenie said, bustling out of the kitchen. She had ragged-edged, glossy pages in her hands. "I found some cologne ads in magazines I bought at a yard sale. They have sample flaps."

"Are you saying I smell?" I asked.

"No?" she said, though properly horrified, even with the question mark she put on the end of most sentences.

"You're saying I smell worse than a neighborhood yard sale," I pointed out.

She stuffed the inserts in my hand and ran back into the kitchen.

"You don't smell. And you look nice," Max said in a neutral tone, rearranging himself into a sitting position.

"That's it?" I said. "No smart-ass comments?"

"No," he said. "I promised Brand I wouldn't say stuff like how much Addam is spending to buy your love."

"Go get the wooden sparring knives and a blindfold," Brand said. "We're going to work on your passive-aggressiveness. Go!"

I watched Max scramble down to Brand's basement room. The teen had cut his hair recently—literally the same haircut Brand favored, whether Max realized it or not. "He's had another growth spurt," I murmured. "He's going to be tall, isn't he? A fighter?"

"He's got potential," Brand said. "Though he sucks at Finding the Flower's Seed."

I cut my eyes at Brand, who shrugged. "Kicking bad guys in the balls," he said.

"You better hope he has a sense of humor when he finds out you're bullshitting him. Anyway, I'm heading out. If you take up a sniper perch across from the restaurant, we are having words."

“I’m staying here.”

“Good. Don’t kill Max with the practice knives. That is literally the lowest bar in the babysitting handbook. It’s practically a curb.”

“I’m a good babysitter,” he said crossly.

“You almost threw him into a plant that causes psychosis and respiratory failure.”

“Go have your fucking date! And don’t forget to look four ways when you cross the street.”

“I know how to cross a street.”

“And be back by eleven.”

“Or not.”

“Fine,” he said. “But if you forget to refrigerate the doggy bag, or try to hide it in a heating duct, I’ll have my own fucking words for you.”

“He’s buying my love, not yours,” I said on my way out the door.

The restaurant was named Portals.

Like all trendy restaurants, it had a gimmick; but since this was New Atlantis, the gimmick was powered by deep and impressive magic.

The building was windowless gray stone. The interior walls—or so we would see, theoretically, when we were seated—were fitted with shielded portals that looked out on different parts of the human world. Dinner was as much event as function. The restaurant seated everyone on the hour, and guests waited together in a separate lounge until their hour arrived.

Addam was waiting at the bar. He wore a shiny button-down shirt and tight tan slacks. A slotted leather belt around his waist contained a dozen sigils—and knowing Addam, he hadn’t wasted the sigils on useless glamor magics. There was a reason I’d agreed to date him.

“So,” I said, and braced for small talk. “You...um...still haven’t shaved.”

He smiled at me, slowly. “Now is when people normally say they like the beard.”

“Huh,” I said.

“Hero,” he said back at me, and kissed my cheek. His sandy beard scratched at my chin, which, I suppose, wasn’t entirely unpleasant.

There were too many people waiting in the lounge, and they were looking at me. I tugged on Addam’s hand, and we snuck our way to a corner high-stool table.

The looks followed.

My reputation stretched back twenty years, forged from the molten, liquidated mess of my court’s fall. I had not been strong enough to protect myself then and

had had to rely on the Tower's patronage for survival. Those were lifelong wounds in my reputation, sending constant ribbons of blood into the water around me.

Though lately...just lately...something had changed. Since the events in the Westlands. I wasn't sure yet if that was good.

We chatted for a bit. Mostly I fudged the truth to make myself look better. What had I done this morning? Exercised. Did I like the highly public and crowded restaurant? Yes, what a treat. Had I finished my Equinox shopping? Ages ago.

"It's as if you think Brandon and I don't talk," Addam finally said, not unamused.

Ten minutes later, the entire room was solemnly escorted into the long, narrow dining hall. The portals were all dark; and the shape of the hall ensured that every table was flush with a wall. We were on the far side of the room.

As soon as the bulk of the crowd had crossed into the eating area, the portals flickered to life. Each table had its own waiter, and the young man attending us said, "A crescent moon over Death Valley, California." The phrase reverberated across the restaurant from every server's mouth.

The portal—slightly filmed by a Shield that kept anything from passing through—opened onto a stunning strip of desert. A thin, curved moon overhead was set against the darkness like the filament of a light bulb. The Milky Way, unshackled by city pollution, blazed overhead in all its gaseous glory.

The waiter said, "My name is Phillip. Our first destination arrives with the amuse-bouche. Tonight we serve Saint Paul rock lobster and kiwi. The sommelier will be by shortly for your drink order."

"I'd like a coke," I said.

The waiter paused.

"And a grilled cheese," I added.

Addam put his hand over mine and said, "We shall negotiate tonight's act of rebellion. Thank you, Phillip."

When he was gone, I said, "Because it can't just be a lobster. It needs at least three other names. Like a rich person, or an assassin. Where did you bring me, Saint Nicholas?"

"I shall enjoy learning your thoughts on that as we proceed through our six courses."

"We have to order six times from a menu? I'm pronouncing everything phonetically," I warned him.

"I suspect the menu will be fixed, saving the main course. Perhaps you'll allow me to order for us both."

The portals flickered and changed as lobster was brought and wine was ordered. Desert became an island—lush with tropical life, seemingly uninhabited. Before he took the food off his tray, Phillippo said, “Tristan da Cunha. One of the most remote archipelagos in the world. There is no landing strip—travel requires a six day boat cruise from Western Africa. Your amuse bouche.”

He didn’t put a plate in front of us. He put a leaf. A huge tropical leaf. On it was a single morsel of lobster on a round slice of kiwi, crisscrossed with some sort of butter-colored sauce. If every course was like this, Brand was not going to be happy with the doggy bag.

As for the portal view, I saw a lot of other people stand up and gasp about mermaids, phoenix hatchlings, and djinn. Addam and I faced a strip of sand occupied only by a fat, slick seal. The seal barked at us and slapped its fins against the sand.

At the table next to me, I heard my name. I turned just in time to see a man in a bowtie look down at his plate innocently, hushing whatever he’d said to his dining companion.

I caught myself in a sigh. “People are looking at me.”

“They are,” Addam agreed. “I’m very fond of doing it myself.”

“Sorry if I’m acting ungrateful,” I said. “I’m not. For this. This is nice. Well—no, this tiny little piece of lobster is ridiculous. But...this. Us. This.”

“It is nice. We’re very fortunate Brand allowed us an evening without an escort.”

“I’m ninety percent sure that’s true. Hopefully he’s keeping his nosiness to pre-event planning. And this. Look at this.” I pulled a brown paper bag out of my pocket and slapped it on the table. “I don’t even know how he snuck that into my jacket.”

Addam glanced at a map Brand had sketched with pencil. It showed all the exits and structural weak points of the building. In the bottom left corner, he had scrawled, *And steal some breadsticks.*

The seal began to make lower, throaty barks, wiggling on top of a rockier portion of sand. “I think that seal wants something I’m not prepared to give,” I said.

“Normally the portals are a bit less...prosaic,” Addam apologized. He tapped a finger over a note Brand had made next to a metal beam that supported the central weight of the restaurant. “What exactly are we to do with this information?”

“Ever since I brought down that cathedral in the Westlands, Brand has been obsessed with blueprints. I’m a little uncomfortable that destroying buildings is now part of his repertoire.”

See, that was easy, I told myself. I can talk about blowing things up. That's sort of small talk.

Only now I didn't know what to say next. I reached out, fidgety, and pressed my fingerprints into the dripping wax on the side of a candle. Phillippo immediately rushed in and replaced it with a fresh one. I sighed again.

At the table next to me, the guy in the bow-tie repeated my name. I flicked my eyes over just as he smirked and turned back to his companions.

My eyes began to itch. Never a good sign.

"Why am I nervous?" I finally admitted to Addam. "I don't care about these people. I care about you. And you're nervous too, aren't you? You're wearing that cologne I like. The one you wear when you want to impress me."

Addam leaned into the table. "I wear this cologne every time I see you. Because you like it. Perhaps you only notice it when you think you need to be impressed."

"You don't need to impress me. You're impressive. And, oh look, it's a boy seal." The seal next to us had rolled on its back, displaying a channel of engorged tissue on its underside. "I think I'm ready for the next portal."

I took a bite of the lobster, which somehow seemed to melt in my mouth. A chain reaction of different flavors went off, one after the other. I kept my face neutral, refusing to give Phillippo the satisfaction.

My pocket buzzed. I pulled out my phone and saw a text from Addam's brother Quinn. It read: *Has the sad thing happened yet? I really feel like I have a lot to contribute when the sad thing is said.*

Quinn was a fifteen-year old seer who saw probabilities, a rare and grave gift. I liked him quite a bit, although I had my own hang-ups about prophets. Paying attention to prophecy was like tossing real diamonds in the air mixed with shards of broken glass. The grab was rarely worth the injury.

"Has Quinn started taking that medicine yet?" I asked. We were trying to find ways to temper the teenager's abilities, and stave off the madness that gifts like his lead to.

"He has," Addam said in surprise. He gave my phone a guarded look, sighed, and lowered his fork. "The medicine mutes his abilities, but he still appears to have...moments. Is that from him?"

"Yup. Are you breaking up with me?" I asked.

Addam blinked at me.

"No?" I said.

"No, Hero. I am not breaking up with you."

He only called me *Hero* when he liked me, so I showed him my screen.

“Quinn sees a sad thing and you assume we are breaking up?” Addam asked.

“Let’s set that aside and keep talking about the prophecy,” I said. “And the prophet. How is the medicine working?”

“It makes him unwell, when he takes it. For a very short time. Then he eats, and seems to be well again.” Addam fussed with the fork. Or one of the forks—there was quite a selection of them. He wasn’t happy with this line of questioning. No parent enjoyed medicating their child, and Addam had more or less raised his little brother.

“But it doesn’t stop his gifts?” I asked.

“It limits the...vastness of his visions. He sees smaller slices of what is, and what could be. I think he *is* better. Max is good for him. Doing normal things is good for him.”

Quinn was adamant that Max was *almost always* his *very best friend*, and acted accordingly. The forced closeness left Max, still stubbornly jealous of people in my life, bewildered.

“Could the lobster be the sad thing?” I wondered. “It personally didn’t have a happy ending, no matter how nice it tasted.”

“It is best not to conjecture.”

We were interrupted by another portal light show. The deserted island became a vast underwater sea scape. A dedicated staff of mages circulated the room, making sure the seals over the portals were functioning as expected to prevent any complications from deep sea pressure.

Addam and I faced a dolphin. A friendly dolphin. It kept trying to shove a plastic bag at us, like a weird game of fetch. On the other side of the room, people were apparently taking pictures of an elder kraken’s cruise ship-sized tail with their cell phones.

I stopped paying attention to them, though, because the skinny man in the bowtie had said my name again. I caught him leaning back into the protection of his table. Whatever he said next made people laugh.

“My other idea was a picnic,” Addam murmured, which caught my attention. I turned to meet his eyes, which were focused on me. “I made a bad choice. A picnic would have been nice.”

“This is impressive,” I said. “It really is. I just...don’t like crowds. I’m sorry.”

“This will not be one of the things we ever apologize about, between us. We will learn from each other.” He reached out and ran his index finger along the back of my hand, ending with a friendly tap. “There’s a game next.”

“What game?”

Addam nodded as Phillippo returned to the table. The soup course featured a selection of artisan breads. The bread plates were fused into a ceramic jigsaw puzzle fashioned from tiny wards. I looked at Addam, who encouraged me with a smile, as he tried to figure out which ward to break to separate the plates.

I pressed down on the plates with my palms. There was a series of popping sounds and the plates fell apart.

Addam's eyebrows winged up. I looked around to see that people were staring. The man in the bowtie raised his voice and said, "My compliments to whomever shared the trick with you. Which order of wards did you break?"

"I didn't," I said. "I broke them all at the same time."

The staring stopped. Rather forcefully. People got back to their table and conversations. I held Bowtie's eyes and crooked a finger at him. We leaned close. I whispered, "How about you nod, as if we're being friendly, then devote the rest of your evening to your own fucking business?"

The man paled, nodded, and retreated. I kept my eyes on the back of his neck for a full five seconds. It was one of the Tower's tricks. When I saw the first hint of a sweat sheen, I withdrew.

"No," I decided, smiling at Addam. "This is better than a picnic."

Addam and I took a long walk after. I didn't get home until well after eleven.

I felt Brand's drowsy awareness of my return from his basement room, as I slipped my key in the door to ease my way into Half House. I thought I'd have the living room to myself, but I was wrong.

Max stood by the devil's trumpet, staring quietly at the three wrapped gifts underneath it.

He hadn't heard the door, so I got an unguarded look at his expression. He was touching the label on one of the gifts, and everything from wistfulness to grief was packed into his stare.

"Hey," I said, a little surprised.

He nearly hit the ceiling.

"S-sorry, I was just—" he stuttered.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. I mean, yes. Are you? How was dinner?"

I walked over to him and looked at the Equinox display. As a people, we exchanged communal gifts four times a year—when the seasons turned. Equinox celebrations weren't as overdone as solstice celebrations, mostly a small token. Queenie had already laid out her gifts. Max had been touching the label with his

name on it.

“I still have time to shop,” I said defensively. “I have ideas. Plans. Big plans!”

“What? No! You don’t need to get me anything!”

“Of course I need to get you something.”

“No, you don’t, I wasn’t—” Max gave the table an upset look, as if I’d caught him red-handed. But what kid didn’t shake gifts?

“Are you sure everything is alright?” I asked.

“Yes. I wasn’t...fishing. For gifts. I’m sorry. Don’t get me anything, please, you do so much already. You let me stay here. That’s more than I deserve.”

“Max,” I said, at a loss. “Of course you deserve—”

He pushed past me and ran upstairs.

My thoughts darted around uselessly. I had no idea what holidays had been like before, for Max. Whether he celebrated them. Whether he’d *had* anyone to celebrate with.

And there were other thoughts beyond that, now that I thought of them. Max still called his bedroom *the guest room*. All his clothes were cast-downs that Brand and I had passed him, or items that Queenie had bought as the weather demanded it. He didn’t have actual outfits. Nothing that really matched.

Had I done enough to make him feel at home?

I heard footsteps on the stairs. Brand poked his head up from the hole in the floor that led to the basement. “The fuck,” he said.

I exchanged looks with him and said, “I think this is the sad thing.”

THE SUNKEN MALL 2

While Max and Queenie clattered around the kitchen preparing lunch, Brand and I planned a covert meeting in my sanctum.

The sanctum encompassed the entirety of the narrow brownstone's third floor—a sanctified space for storing spells into my limited collection of sigils. Brand was late, so I took time to meditate on Healing, bolstering the spell already locked within a sigil shaped as a cameo necklace.

Eventually the metal spiral staircase vibrated as Brand jogged up from his basement room. “Okay, Queenie took him to get groceries for dinner. Have you had any bright ideas?”

“*Idea* sounds complicated. We just need to get him a special gift.”

“Fine. Why don’t we just run to the store and buy something?”

I gave him the long and suspect look he deserved. “It’s a holiday shopping season. I’ve watched you pull fire alarms in coffee shops if there are more than two people in line.”

“There was a tactical reason for that, it only happened once, and fuck off. Are you sure we really need to do this?” And because we shared a bond, he got the answer before I even started saying the word yes, and he knew I felt strongly about it. “Why? What does Max need?”

“It’s not just about buying gifts. It’s about...I don’t know. I don’t know.” I struggled to explain, trying to capture what I’d felt last night. “His clothes are all mismatched. He asks for permission every time he wants a snack. He still calls it the *guest room*. And I get these are all just small things, but they add up to a sense of impermanence.”

“He seems happy.”

“I know he does. But are we doing enough to make him feel like it’ll last?”

Brand settled his eyes on me, sharp and blue and right on point. “The Hanged

Man,” he said.

“The Hanged Man,” I agreed. “We still haven’t learned anything more about that. But, then again, that’s our strategy, isn’t it? Don’t rock the boat until the wave is about to hit? He hasn’t made any moves on Max.”

“Doesn’t matter, I guess, if Max perceives it as a real threat. If you’re right, he thinks this is all going to be taken away from him.”

“Which is why I thought if we make this holiday about him, it’ll show that we’re...*investing* in him. Does that sound stupid?”

Brand sighed, and in that sigh was acceptance. “Looks like we’re going shopping.”

New Atlantis had been built virtually overnight—a powerful feat driven by the desperation of powerful refugees.

By then, our homeland had been uninhabitable, the diseased byproduct of the Atlantean World War. When we’d revealed ourselves to humanity in the 1960s, it hadn’t been received well. A short but destructive conflict produced magically-radioactive wastes in the Pacific Northwest and half of Poland, the near-extinction of dragonkind, and a viral plague that decimated the Atlantean homeland.

Following the signing of global peace accords, the remnants of our people gathered on an island off the Massachusetts coast where we’d been steadily and secretly buying land since the 1940s.

The settling of Nantucket (privately called the Unsettlement) lasted three decades. In displays of magic unprecedented before and since, the Arcana came together to translocate abandoned human ruins from different parts of the human world. We created a patchwork Gotham of brilliant, dense, staggering architecture. Brand and I now spent our adult lives navigating it: the penthouses, the sewers, the rafters and basements.

And yet none of that prepared us for equinox shopping.

“Okay,” Brand said. “I’ll patrol outside and watch the exits. You duck in and—”

“Oh don’t *even*,” I warned him.

He gave me a sour look and scanned the entrance to Firefly, one of the city’s less pricy department stores.

The store had started its life in Pripyat, the town closest to the Chernobyl catastrophe of 1986. Lord Magician—the Arcana behind most of the translocations that built New Atlantis—had let it stew in radiation and geographic infamy for a

few years before mystically scrubbing it clean and dropping it onto a western city block. Some of the original Soviet signage was still framed in the windows, including advertisements for Chanel No. 5 and vegetable juices.

The amount of people rushing into and out of the store was so thick that it had the optical illusion of a stationary blob.

“Did you store any spells that could help us?” Brand asked.

“You mean, did I dump all my healing and aggressive magic to make sure we could dart like raindrops through a waiting line? You’d be okay with that answer?”

“This sucks,” he said. “Let’s just do it.”

I made it three steps up the granite staircase before the crowd pressed in on all sides. I lost sight of Brand immediately, but felt him nearby. I let myself be buffeted forward. Excepting the change in temperature, and the feel of tile instead of stone, I barely could tell when I’d been pushed inside.

The tidal movements of the mob shoved me to the right—ladies’ clothing—and thinned enough by the blouse racks that I was able to duck behind a table display.

Brand materialized next to me.

“Your hands are on your knives,” I said.

He relaxed. Well, he let go of his knives, at least. He said, “Men’s clothing is on the other side of the store. We’ll never make it. Let’s just shop here.”

“In the women’s section?”

“Max likes bright colors. The gender-neutral section is right over there. Or gift cards. Let’s find a bunch of gift cards.”

“Gentlemen!” a voice exclaimed.

We turned to see a tall, thin man bearing down on us. “Welcome to Firefly! How may I assist?”

“Where are the gift cards?” Brand said.

“Come now,” the tall man tutted. “You’ve made it this far. Dig deeper.” He studied Brand and snapped his fingers. “Cashmere scarves!”

Brand said, “I’m done.” He turned around and left.

I waited to see if he was kidding. He was not. I looked back at the tall man, who was waiting for me to either follow or pull out my wallet. I ducked around him and made a run for it.

“That man works retail during the holidays,” Brand said. “I’m not letting him come at me with a scarf, cashmere or otherwise. That’s just one wrist-pull away from a garrote, and I’d fucking deserve it, because last-second shoppers are animals.”

We were across the street splitting a soda from a hot dog vendor. Our planning session had devolved into deciding if we owned anything we could re-gift to Max.

"I just bought a Taser," Brand said. "It's still in the box."

"I can't help but feel that's off-message," I said. "We want to show him he's protected. Weapons make it seem like we're saying he needs to protect himself from us."

"Then what?" Brand demanded.

Ahead of us, I spotted a tow-headed blur weaving through a crowd of people at a walk sign. Quinn ducked under the furry underside of a massive werelion and scrambled toward us.

He was wearing a 3CUPS t-shirt. His jeans were a shade of reddish-blue that made me think mistakes had been made in the laundry room. He stopped in front of us, nearly vibrating with excitement.

"This happens now!" he said. "I feel like it should have happened forever ago. I'm already packed. Do you have any more soda?"

"Don't—" I said, as Brand said, "Packed for what?"

I gave Brand a tired look as the question hung in the air, and then the prophet spoke.

"We're going on an adventure to find buried treasure," Quinn announced. "And Ciaran is going to show us the way."

We were back at Half House. Dusk had approached the horizon, stacking bands of violet on bands of amber.

Queenie was making a large antipasto for dinner, and Addam had promised to bring a bucket of fried chicken. Or, more accurately, Addam had promised to *learn how one buys a bucket of fried chicken*, because he was Addam, and any fried chicken he'd eaten in his life likely had seven other words to describe it, such as *encrusted* or *basted* or *almond-rosemary reduction*.

"Did you get anything else out of Quinn?" I asked as Brand settled on the front stoop with a grunt.

"Nope. He keeps saying that most of the time, Ciaran tells the story better."

"But why does buried treasure help Max?"

"That's not what worries me," Brand said. "I get the sense that Quinn thinks he and Max are going. They aren't field tested."

"Maybe it won't be dangerous?" I said.

"You mean because of all the treasure buried under stuffed bear factories and ice cream parlors?" Brand asked.

Someone cleared their throat. I raised off the stoop and peeked over the railing. One of our neighbors—Mr. Miranda—was standing there.

“I couldn’t help but notice that your...young friend has been putting up decorations on our property line,” he said.

Brand stood up. “Have you tried?”

The man blinked. “Excuse me?”

Brand said, “Not noticing. Maybe a breathing technique? A quick relaxing trip to the other side of your own fucking house?”

Mr. Mirandas offered up a strangled sound and vanished back into the bushes between our homes. Curious, I walked over and saw the half-hearted attempt that *our young friend* had made to put up a string of holiday lights.

We didn’t have holiday decorations, excluding the poisonous plants Queenie insisted on. Max must have dug through basement storage to find even that single blue and green strand. He’d probably meant it as a surprise, and it broke my heart a little more.

I went back to the stoop and sat down. “Two thoughts. Firstly, you remember that time you smelled burgers grilling over the fence in the backyard, and asked me why we never get invited to neighborhood barbecues?”

He narrowed his eyes at me.

“Secondly,” I said, “whatever Max wants, we’ll get. We may not be able to face a shopping mob, but stick a godsdamn dragon in front of its treasure horde and we’re a good bet.”

The front door opened. Quinn snuck out and quietly shut the door behind him. Seeing us, he gave a sigh of relief. “I don’t understand this ‘Closing the Flower Petal.’ Max says he’s aiming for my chakra points, but he keeps on trying to kidney punch me.”

“I’ll go spar with him,” Brand said. “Let me know when Ciaran shows.”

Brand and Quinn switched seats on the stoop, with Quinn gingerly rubbing his lower back. “I like it better when we’ve been best friends for a long time. Max never tries to wrestle me then.”

I gave Quinn a long, long look. By the end of it, he was squirming. He tried to dislodge the tension by saying, “When did you buy Half House?”

“A long time ago.”

“I like Queenie. She tries not to get noticed, but she’s everywhere. When did she start working here?”

“She’s been with us forever,” I said, then shook my head, realizing he was sidetracking me. “Quinn. You’re still seeing things.”

“Well. Yes?”

“But you’re taking the medication Ciaran gave you.”

“Yes?”

“And those two things don’t go together. The medicine is supposed to mute your gift. Give you a chance at being a kid.”

“Why would I want that?” he said, as if the words tasted bad. “And the medicine does work. I don’t see nearly as much as I used to. But some things are too important *not* to see.”

“Buying Max presents is important?”

There were moments when Quinn was not Quinn. Or, maybe, moments when he was exactly the Quinn he’d always been. A sharp, old intelligence would look through his eyes, and his words had their own gravity, like a planetary body.

He said, “Yes. It is very important. There needs to be as much trust and love between you as possible. It will help with what comes next.”

“There’s always a *next*,” I said. “Prophecy doesn’t change that.”

But I swallowed uneasily and braided my fingers together. After a couple beats of trying to convince myself not to, I asked, “The Hanged Man?”

“Mostly. But there’s still a little time. If—” He stood up suddenly and banged a hand on the wooden railing. “I shouldn’t talk about these things. I normally know better. Sometimes it’s worse to say anything at all. This medicine *is* working, and it *sucks*, because I should *know* better.”

“What do you mean?”

“Normally I don’t only see, but I know when to say what I see, because I feel the consequences, like invisible little ripples. But now it’s all fake. Like motion on a TV. You know? Motion on a TV isn’t real motion—it’s not like someone’s moving arm is really fanning the wind in front of you. The medicine is like that—the man’s arm is moving, and I can see it, but I can’t feel the ripples that tell me when to tell other people what I see.”

I wasn’t sure if what he was saying was profound or crazy. And if I were being honest with myself, I wasn’t entirely sure Quinn wasn’t just trying to distract me from what he’d said a moment ago. He and I knew how to keep secrets—and sometimes the lifelong act of keeping secrets became a guarded muscle-memory of its own.

We were interrupted by a roar. A motorcycle and sidecar barreled into the cul-de-sac. The driver was a short man in leather chaps. Ciaran sat in the sidecar, wearing a white summer dress and pinning a straw hat to his blue-haired head with both hands.

The motorcycle stopped in front of us. Ciaran divested himself, smoothed the front of his gauzy dress, and pet the driver on the biceps. The motorcycle roared and fled.

“Sweetness. Sun.” He pecked Quinn on the cheek and nodded at me. “What a delightful invitation. I didn’t know you were interested in the mall.”

“The what now?” I said.

“The sunken mall,” he clarified.

My memory caught and stuttered: glimpses of newspaper articles, urban legends around a campfire. “The sunken mall,” I said slowly. “Are you talking about the mall that was lost during translocation in the Eighties? You know what happened to it?”

“Darling,” he said, “that’s pedestrian. I know much more than that, such as where it is, and how we’ll get there.”

“It was called the Worcester Galleria. Quite the endeavor in Massachusetts, in the early days of such beasts. Alas, it had a short heyday and fell into disrepair in the 80s.”

We were gathered around the picnic table in our thin backyard. The bones of fancy fried chicken filled a plate in front of me, along with slices of salami and turkey from the top of Queenie’s magnificent antipasto.

Ciaran had chosen—or assumed—the plastic chaise lounge, which matched his wide white sunglasses. He stirred the straw in his gin and ginger and continued. “It was quite the adventurous translocation. Before the larger department stores that anchored the mall could declare bankruptcy, the Magician bought everything. Part and parcel—from merchandise to mouseholes. The entire building was frozen in the moments before Christmas. It was supposed to be an *event*, when it arrived. All that tinsel and sparkle and blatant American commercialism.”

“I don’t understand,” Max said. “What happened to it? I’ve never heard about it.”

“It vanished,” I said. “Lost during translocation. The Magician’s people miscalculated, and no one ever figured out where it wound up. On the floor of the ocean, everyone thought.”

Ciaran pulled the straw out of his drink and tapped it in my direction. Lime drops splattered my forearm. He said, “The Magician knows more about translocation than you do the back of Brand’s hand, little Sun. It’s not easy, moving massive city buildings along the latitude and longitude of the planet. Show some respect.”

“And no one else has found it except you?” Brand asked. “You’re the only one who knows where it wound up?”

“Well, not necessarily. Possibly?” Ciaran shrugged. “There’s a lot of buried treasure in this world, Brandon Saint John. The majority of it is more attractive to hunters than a building filled with scarlet shoulder pads and cassingles.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Quinn whispered to Max.

“Are you making words up?” Max demanded.

“No, actually,” I said. “Cassingles were...er...tape cassettes. But they only had one song on each side. It was a weird time. Technology was limited. Most people didn’t even use cell phones, just landlines. There was actually a time when I could have walked to the corner café by myself without Brand having a way to immediately tell me what a dumbass I was. Then pagers came along, which is sort of a way for Brand to let you know that you needed to get to a landline and call him because he wanted to tell you what a dumbass you were.”

“Was it necessary to say all that?” Brand asked. He pointedly turned in his seat to look at Ciaran. “Are you saying it still exists? Where?”

Ciaran smiled and pointed down. “Below us. Deep in the bedrock.”

“And how the fuck is that safe?” he asked. “How is the air any good? How is it in one piece?”

“For the same reason it would have survived translocation to begin with. Awesome and godly magics.”

“Aren’t you excited?” Quinn said, grabbing Max’s sleeve and yanking so hard that Max fell off the bench.

Max stared at us from the ground. “Excited about cassingles?”

“No, the adventure,” Quinn said. “It’s our first adventure together!”

“I’m going? *We’re* going?”

“Wait,” Addam said, at the same time I said, “We haven’t—”

“There are furniture stores, and clothing stores, and department stores,” Quinn enthused. “You’ll be able to decorate your entire room! Isn’t it great that Brand and Rune are letting us do this for you?”

“You’re doing this for me?” Max whispered, staring at Brand and I.

Addam was drilling holes in my head. Brand looked ready to throttle someone. I stared at the earnest look on Max’s face, realizing how neatly Quinn had boxed me in.

THE SUNKEN MALL 3

“You’re calmer about this than I expected,” I said to Addam.

It was morning, and our group was milling about the backyard of Half House. Brand was dragging Max and Quinn among the mounds of gear, making sure they understood the value of each. Ciaran was splayed on the lounge chair with a drink he claimed was made from cucumbers, and gave off enough fumes to make me queasy at a dozen feet.

Addam, sitting opposite me at the picnic table, paused in the act of tightening his backpack strap. “Am I?”

“It really doesn’t bother you that Quinn and Max are coming?”

“Quinn and I have been on many expeditions together. We traversed the Kubera cave when he was twelve. We’ve been to Lord Chariot’s deep sea station near the Mariana Trench. We flew to the top of Olympus just last year.”

I didn’t so much mull this over as decide what to say next. And while I did, Addam didn’t resume tightening his straps. He just gave me a patient smile, crinkling the edges of his burgundy eyes.

“And what sort of, um, interference was there in the Kubera caves?” I finally asked.

“Are you asking me, Rune, whether I’ve found myself in dangerous situations?”

“Possibly.”

“Are you asking me whether I am capable of protecting my brother in dangerous situations? Of *contributing* to our protection?”

“I would never say that out loud,” I told him firmly.

He rolled his eyes at me, a Brand gesture, which if nothing else clearly meant the two of them had been spending too much time together. “Look,” I said. “We don’t know what’s on the other end of this teleportation. We’ll need to react quickly. Quinn and Max are not field tested.”

“They are not,” Addam agreed. “And I was unsettled when I first learned they had...invited themselves. But we have planned for *extraction redundancies*. Isn’t that what Brand calls it? We’ve planned on more than one way to retreat if needed.”

“You’re right,” I admitted.

“And,” he added, “we can always hope there will be no need to utilize them. Perhaps this will be fun. A bit like an archeology adventure.”

“That is one hundred percent how things usually go for Brand and I,” I said.

“Okay,” Brand announced, briskly, coming over to us. “I’m done doing everything Rune could have been helping me with. We good to go? Maybe you want me to top off your drinks first?”

“No,” I said archly. “It’s time for Ciaran and I to drill to the center of the island bedrock. It’s not as important as making sure we have enough room for granola bars, but it’s up there.”

Brand stared at me. He plunked the bag he was holding onto the picnic table, dug through a side pocket, and withdrew a package of red licorice pieces: my favorite Brand-approved snack. He lobbed it over the neighbor’s fence.

In a now-sincere bid to deescalate, I turned to Ciaran. “Any last words about what we should expect?”

Ciaran dabbed his cuff at the corner of his lips. “A bit of a dusty time capsule, is my best estimate. The battery that protects the building during transit is frightfully strong. Think in terms of nuclear energy—capable of lasting centuries. It’s why I’m so sure the mall is whole. Its boundaries are meant to be nearly invulnerable.”

“I still don’t get where the rock and dirt goes. How can it occupy the same place as bedrock?” Max asked.

“Ah,” Ciaran said, as if impressed with the question. “I suppose it went to the same place that all displaced soil goes during the city’s translocations.”

“And where is that?” Max asked, but less certainly, as if he was afraid of appearing foolish.

“Somewhere,” Ciaran said with a small smile.

I started to wonder where *did* all that soil go, when Brand asked, “Will there be hostiles?”

“I don’t see how,” Ciaran said.

“Quinn?” Brand asked. “Do you see any hostiles?”

“Oh yes,” Quinn said, nodding excitedly. “But it depends on what you mean by hostiles.”

“Do they try to eat and-or kill us?” Brand asked.

“Well, lots of things try to kill you, and they aren’t always hostile, are they? It’s

just what they do. We're almost never eaten, though."

"Good enough," Brand said. "Let's get our Eighties on."

Brand, Ciaran, and I stood closest to the circle we'd drawn on my sanctum floorboards using an orange chalk pen. The others stood behind us, loaded with backpacks and a food cache.

Ciaran touched a mass sigil shaped as a necklace made of finger bones—a powerful version of a normal Atlantean sigil, capable of great works of magic. The spell that slammed loose had the force of a gale, buckling all of us and dropping Max and Quinn to their knees. The walls of the room groaned, and the window blinds began flapping about like dying fish.

Standing there in his smart, blood-red coat with exaggerated shoulder pads, Ciaran swept his arms wide and marshaled a vortex of blurring energy from thin air. He turned his arms clockwise, over and over, molding the power into a disc. When he was satisfied with its density, he stabbed his hands at the chalk circle and sent the Portal through it. Flashes of images—real, distant images—played along the sides of the moving energy as it collided with the drawn circle.

Ciaran drew his hands in another circle, slowly moving them upwards. The circle bulged and grew into a sphere, a puppet on teased strings. Flickers of what lay on the other side flashed along the surface: things *there* brightened by the light of *here*. I saw folding red seats, a red cement floor, floating particles of dust.

"Now, Sun," Ciaran urged through clamped lips.

I touched my emerald ring. A heavily-modified version of Shield sprang loose, surrounding my hand in shining fractal light. I stretched out my arm and sent the magic flowing around the sphere, buttressing and reinforcing its wormhole path.

When I'd done my part, I nodded at Brand. He immediately tossed a plain, scuffed metal orb into the portal. The orb hit the sloping cement—and spun completely out of sight, which was not what Brand had planned. We heard it rolling down the grainy floor for long seconds after.

"Fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck—there," Brand said, staring at the PC tablet that Max eagerly handed him. "It's stopped. Connection established. I'm getting readings...and yes, we've got atmosphere. It's temperate. Common allergens. High levels of asbestos, but not unusual for that era. We're good, folks." He gave Ciaran an appreciative look, and angled the tablet at him. "Thanks for the loan. Nice tech."

"I thought it might float your boat. No sign of movement?"

"Yeah," Brand said. "The monsters are forming the receiving line right now. Looks like they totally don't want to jump out and ambush us later."

“You’re so much cuter in short doses,” Ciaran said. “Shall we?”

Brand handed Max the tablet, who carefully stowed it in his backpack. Then Brand slid a knife out of his chest harness and flipped it in his palm.

“I’ll take the rear,” I volunteered.

“No, you will fucking not, because you’re just trying to find an excuse to go after the licorice.”

“I would never!” I said.

“Rune, you’re first in. Go high and right. I’m low and left. Rest of you wait until we give the word.”

He and I exchanged a look, a bare twitch away from actual smiles. We’d never admitted as much, but honestly, we lived for moments like this—when it was too late for regret, when you could relax into the unknown, when it was all about impulse and instinct.

“Ready,” I said, and rushed the sphere. Brand followed close behind—and in the half-second disorientation of passing into another place entirely, I felt him at my side.

The moment we cleared the anomaly, I launched three light cantrips into the air and swung my gaze right and high, while he spun to the left and scanned the ground for threats.

The sloped floor led to a small stage backed by a half-open red curtain. The wall between the opening was a dirty stretch of white canvas. The chairs were fabric and self-folding, and showing the early stages of rot.

“Movie theater,” I breathed. “We’ve landed in the southeast annex.”

We looked back at the sphere, where we saw a distorted image of the sanctum pasted along the rounded edges. Ciaran’s nose looked three-feet long as he peered towards us. “Addam, set the Slingshot. Then come one by one,” Brand called out. “Watch your footing.”

Addam came first after anchoring the spell, one of our back-up *extraction redundancies*, while Ciaran held the rear. Max and Quinn lost their balance despite our advice. I grabbed Max and kept him upright. He spared me only a quick grateful look before wonder washed across his expression. He stared around him.

“I’ve never been off the island before,” he whispered.

“Well. Technically below it, I think.” Still, I couldn’t help but smile. His face glowed—literally glowed, his fae heritage making his skin shine pearlescent.

Addam lowered his backpack to the ground and searched for a stack of clay discs. He split the stack with Quinn, and the two of them began spacing the discs

around the base of the portal. It was yet another of our extraction fail-safes—dormant for now, but ready to be called on as needed.

“Should we set up base here?” I asked Brand.

Brand’s penlight darted about the room. The stirred dust made the white beam look like liquid. “Let’s keep the backpacks with us, but the emergency food and medical cache stays here. That’d be a bitch to carry.” The penlight paused on a huge square piece of luggage. “What the hell is that?”

“My portmanteau,” Ciaran said.

“Did you...” Brand stabbed the penlight at Ciaran’s face. “Did you bring a *change of clothes*?”

“In honor of the eighties,” Ciaran said. “I’m quite put out at the lack of attention my shoulder pads are getting.”

The light flicked along the length of Ciaran’s outfit. Brand made an exasperated sound. “If you need padding like that, couldn’t you at least have used ceramic trauma plates? How is that supposed to stop a blade?”

“Oh child. I barely remember the days when a blade had even a chance at getting close to me.” Ciaran dusted off his hands and headed up the sloped floor. “Come, come. Let’s see what treasures await.”

Brand put away his penlight, trusting me to keep light cantrips ahead of us. In lock step, we overtook Ciaran and assumed the lead of our party.

The theater opened into a wide hallway with atrocious orange and brown carpeting in that sort of paisley-semen pattern popular in the 70s. There were only a handful of theaters in the complex, with manually updated placards outside each room. We’d arrived in *Flash Gordon*. Next door was *Popeye*, and across from us *9 to 5*.

“Okay, heads up,” Brand said. “First stage of this little trip is finding the nearest generator. We came out in a good spot—there’s an access corridor just outside the theater. With any luck, we’ll be able to turn the lights on.”

We headed toward the concession area. I watched Brand’s eyes dance along the carpet, looking for signs of passage or disturbance. There wasn’t as much dust as we expected, but enough to spot a lack of footprints or drag marks.

The concession area was silent, the large popcorn machines empty. The candy displays were still full, though. Behind a dirty pane of glass I spotted a mix of modern and nostalgic: Snickers and Reese’s, alongside Whatchamacallit, Nerds, and Big League Chew.

“Why did they leave candy behind?” Max asked.

“The merchandise was purchased along with the building. I may have mentioned

it was to be an event, when it arrived. There was even a raffle for commoners to get five minutes and a shopping cart, to fill up as much as their greedy little arms could grab. In the event I haven't been clear about this: I call dibs on the pharmacy."

Behind us, Max and Quinn put their heads to whisper out a shopping list. I half-listened, smiling a bit at how they planned on hauling a weightlifting set all the way back to the theater.

The concession area and ticket booth opened directly on a brick and tile hallway leading to the upper levels of the mall. We'd be going that way soon, up a sweeping flight of stairs, after we inspected the generator. For now, we approached a metal door sunk into the wall of the corridor. The blueprints pegged it as an access point to the vast concrete catacombs that crawled through the mall like a hidden circulatory system.

"Fuck," Brand suddenly said.

"What?" I breathed.

"Move the lights back to the stairs. Up. Up more." Brand pointed. "See?"

I saw, a half-second before Addam said, "The glass doors up there are clean." He looked back at the doors to the theater, which were layered in an undisturbed patina of grime. "Why would that glass be cleaner than this?"

Ciaran gave both directions a thoughtful look. "It's not entirely unexplainable. The further we get into the mall, the closer we get to the translocation engine, and the more intact things should be. But we'd be wise to stay on our toes."

"Stay grouped together," Brand added. "If I say, '*On Addam*,' move close to him so he can activate the Slingshot."

Slingshot was a quick and dirty form of teleportation. It operated much like a rubber band: you anchored the spell in one spot and could snap back to it when needed. It was not a comfortable way to travel, but it was useful in emergencies.

I shook my wrist. My sabre, now coiled along my arm as a wristguard, warmed and softened and stretched like taffy. It slid over my fist and hardened once I had it gripped in my palm. It was capable of mimicking any weapon, but my default was a bladeless hilt from which I could shoot bolts of fire.

The metal door didn't open easily under Brand's grasp. He put his shoulder to the frame and pulled, hard enough to break the seal of rust around it. Brand nodded at me, and, in a timed motion, he opened the door completely as I went in. I raised my sabre, circling from left to right, up, then right to left.

"Clear," I said.

The cement corridor was as dusty as the theater, which reassured me. There were no signs that the corridor had been cleaned or disturbed. Brand shifted into

the lead, and we moved toward the electrical room.

We'd gone barely a dozen yards when a sound came from ahead of us. The cement magnified and distorted it—I couldn't even be sure what it originally was beyond the echo of a noise.

"Footsteps? Door opening?" Brand said, frustrated. "Quinn said there'd be hostiles."

"Hostiles that care enough to clean glass?" Max said.

"Maybe we'll make friends," Quinn added. "I remember that Brand makes a lot of jokes, most of the time. That's a good sign, right?"

"Brand makes jokes about knife wounds," I said. "That is not a good stick to measure anything against."

"Whatever it is, are they aware of us?" Brand asked me.

He knew I was good at sensing magic and the appearance of magical beings. Unusually good, even for the child of an Arcana. I drew my willpower into me, closed my eyes, and let out a slow breath. After a moment, I shook my head.

"Let's stay quiet, then," Brand decided. "But get ready to make noise."

The generator room was on our left. The door was in better shape than the one that led to the catacomb; it opened with only a nudge, scraping slightly on the cement.

The room beyond was immense, and filled with all manner of a building's guts: pipes, wiring, bank after bank of machinery.

Ciaran went up to one of the backup generators. He brushed a finger across a sigil shaped as a gold earring. The released spell made the hair on my forearms curl and the lighter hairs in Addam's beard flutter slowly as if underwater. Addam smiled at me, a little sheepishly, and brushed his beard back into shape.

"Now," Ciaran said, caressing the outer casing of the engine. "Time to wake up. You've slept long enough." He closed his eyes.

The effect was gentle but pronounced. Flashes of electricity crackled along Ciaran's manicure. Pulses of magic glowed through the machine's cracks, racing out along wiring conduits. Technology fused with magic—Atlantis's modern Hail Mary play to a world that feared and nearly destroyed us.

"There should be a switch. There. There," Ciaran repeated, tapping a finger towards a control panel. "Throw it."

Addam went over and threw the dusty switch. A back-up generator rumbled to life, its sound like a rusty throat clearing. I felt the vibrations in my feet.

A few seconds later, electric lights bloomed overhead, and a hidden speaker began a muzak version of Mister Mister's *Kyrie*. The song lasted about fifteen

seconds before crackling and slowing to a stop.

“Does this generator power the entire mall?” I asked.

Ciaran tapped a nail against his lower lip. “I’m not sure. But we know the location of several other junction boxes. I can link them, as needed.”

We retraced our steps to the corridor outside the movie theater. The sound we’d heard moments earlier didn’t repeat itself, but the light fixtures in the utility hallway were on.

We arranged ourselves in formation at the bottom of the steps that led to the first floor. I kept my sabre primed, and Addam released one of his Telekinesis spells, which gloved his hands in a continuous wash of energy. Ciaran took the rear with the boys.

“Keep on the lookout for traps or tripwire,” Brand said as we climbed the stairs.

At the closed glass doors, he ran a finger over the surface. Not a professional cleaning, but Max was right: someone had cared enough to wipe away the dust.

On the other side was another long stone corridor. I spotted the first hint of retail: backend stores that couldn’t afford or didn’t need a main thoroughfare to draw business. The walls were covered in unabashedly Christian holiday décor, and the custodial staff had made a game attempt at scrubbing away the worst of the graffiti that one saw in a dying mall.

The generator’s power stretched this far, which was a good sign. I banished my lights and studied the store awnings. An open archway led to a generic dining area simply called RESTAURANT. There was a button, ribbon, and craft store; a pet store; a hair stylist chain; and two big glass doors leading to THE DREAM MACHINE, a video arcade. A life-sized Santa Claus, flanking the arcade entry, was covered in bumper stickers that read, SKATEBOARDING IS NOT A CRIME.

“Humans are so weird,” Brand said. “They *like* that shit.”

“Skateboarding?” I asked.

“Santa Claus. They literally take comfort in the idea that a strange stocky man breaks into their house while their sleeping. Even better? He steals their food, and has a list on which he’s marked the names of the unworthy.”

Something crashed. Brand was already turning toward the arcade, aiming his penlight at a dark panel of glass.

“No lights in there,” he said. “Sense anything?”

I stared, hard. I nodded. Something was in there. It raised the hair on the back of my neck.

“There’s a junction box in there,” Ciaran murmured. “I can power it up. Or

maybe the light switches are just off.” He ran a finger across a ring and lazily wiped at the air in front of us. “Nothing. No life signs—not the way I’d expect. Nothing is alive in...there...” His hands trailed to the left, almost like a slow dance move, before pointing opposite us. “Hmmm.”

He now faced an aquarium store. Rows of water-filled tanks, behind the plate glass, were full of bright stones and fanciful decorations.

And fish. Darting between floating strands of algae, tubing, and Mardi Gras beads were living fish.

“Rivers below,” Addam said. “It’s been decades. How could they be alive?”

“Could the plants have formed an ecosystem?” Max guessed.

I walked closer. The power was off inside the store, but the corridor lights were enough to make out some details. Little plastic treasure chests at the bottoms were filled with real diamond rings and pearl earrings. *Star Wars* action figures were lashed to the deck of sunken plastic boats. Flecks of dried food skimmed the surface.

“No,” I said. “These are cared for.”

“We need to check the arcade,” Brand said in a resigned voice. “I’m not leaving it at our six. Form up around Ciaran. Let’s move to the electrical panel. Rune, Addam, Quinn—light cantrips at a distance. See if we can rustle the bushes.”

“I’m not good at throwing light,” Quinn sighed. “Not for years and years yet. Rune is, because he’s Rune.”

“I’ve learned a thing or two from him,” Addam said, and joined me at the front of the formation.

(In both their defenses, it was tricky manipulating cantrips at a distance; but you learned quick when it was the difference between a blade rushing toward your defended heart or your undefended back.)

“Quinn and Max, stay outside,” Brand said. He slid ahead of me to grab the door handle, which was hinged to pull outwards. He mouthed *one*, *two*, and yanked on *three*.

In a passably coordinated movement, Addam, Ciaran, and I flowed into the arcade.

I sent three light cantrips spinning ahead of us; Addam managed a fourth, which was enough to cover our main corners.

The game machines were laid out in a tight, cramped maze. We took a soft left around Pac Man, turned a corner at Galaxian, and squeezed between two rows of pinball machines to find the junction box. Ciaran moved ahead of us and pried the box’s lid open. He tried the simplest thing first: he flipped all the switches.

The arcade ground to life.

The old, low-tech machines screeched into start-up mode. Electronic colors filled the darkness in hypnotic, staticky patterns. I heard the echoing rings of Skee-Ball near a concession counter to our left.

"SACRILEGE," a sizzling voice shouted.

The fluorescent lights, which had been ticking to life, now brightened to full power. I moved my sabre in a restless aim, but couldn't get a lock on the source of the angry voice.

"In the name of Lord Magician, Arcana of the Hex Throne, lower your weapons!"

"Lord *who*?" Ciaran said in astonishment.

I lowered my sabre—into a crotch-high aim. "We mean you no harm or disrespect," I said loudly. "We request parlay."

"Remain where you are, do not defile our artifacts, and Lord Magician may show mercy!" the voice—or voices—cried, the *Ss* a staticky hiss, like oil drops in a hot frying pan.

I felt Brand at my side a second before he shifted into my peripheral. He whispered, "The fuck?"

I held up a palm against the rim of an imaginary hat—our signal to wait and watch. "Everyone stay where you are. Touch nothing."

Someone stumbled. I heard a loud triple-beep, and Pac Man began its *wubba-wubba-wubba* opening sequence. Quinn hissed, "Max!", while Max hissed, "Stop pushing me!"

I had barely a second to sigh before a skee ball hit me in the head.

"DOWN!" Brand roared. He grabbed the collar of my leather jacket, hit the ground, and pulled me on top of him. The second I was flat he rolled us over so that I was protected and he was exposed. He gave my head a quick glance to make sure brains weren't spilling out.

It was all I could do to watch this in a world filled with spinning black stars.

More skee balls launched from unattended machines. Addam shouted a challenge and blasted them off course with Telekinesis. Brand pulled a tactical baton from his belt, reversed the grip so that the thickest end faced out, and punted whatever balls managed to get by Addam.

When my field of vision simmered into a throbbing ache, I squirmed from under Brand, took aim at a skee ball machine with my sabre, and fired.

That's when I got my first good look at the enemy.

Human-shaped, but decidedly not human. A pure void outlined in jagged tendrils of electricity. It floated off the ground. I'd seen creatures like it before—mostly made of fire or earth. It was an elemental, a type of spirit from Somewhere

Else.

Its hands hovered over a Missile Command game. It drew power from the machine, making the display go haywire, and formed a sphere of lightning in the outline of its palms.

I slapped a hand over the platinum disc threaded into my leather belt. A Shield released, all glowing angles and facets. I stretched it in front of us. The next two skee balls exploded into powder as they struck the barrier. The ball of lightning hit next, and I felt my bones grind in the act of repelling it.

“Max, sound out!” I croaked.

“We’re okay,” he called back.

“Stay down!” I grabbed Brand’s hand and let him help me to my feet.

Movement to my far right. Behind the air hockey tables, another lightning elemental raised its arm, and the tables began to buck. From recessed slots, flat pucks shot out, circled the elemental, and launched at us. They shattered, one after the other, weakening my Shield with each strike.

A third elemental appeared to our left. It shot into the air and flew toward the concession stand, where ticket prizes lay behind a streaked glass panel. The creature sucked electricity out of a cash register and waved a glittering arm above the display case. Prizes rose into the air—waxy finger locks, green Army men, toy parachutes, back scratchers. The elemental sent them streaming into my shield with the impact of buckshot.

“They’re drawing power from the machines,” Brand said in an undertone.

“I saw,” I said.

Addam darted to the electrical junction box just as another elemental phased through the wall in front of him. The two collided. Addam sank into the outline of the creature for a moment, then blasted back towards us while the elemental itself was flung through the wall. In a dissembling display of strength, Ciaran caught Addam one-handed and lowered him to the ground.

I dropped and put my fingers against Addam’s throat. “Pulse,” I announced. “He’s just shocked.”

“If we can’t flip the switch, we can eliminate the hardware,” Ciaran said. “Do you have Wind or Lightning stored?”

“Wind,” I said. I had an air spell stored in a sigil shaped as a... Well, I had a sigil strapped to my thigh.

“Create a spiral current,” Ciaran said.

I concentrated on my sigil, and, seconds later, felt the release of its magic. “Ready,” I said.

“If you please,” Ciaran said while touching a link on his belt. Static snapped from his fingernails. For a second, as the spell balanced, I saw the bones of his hand in X-ray.

I closed my eyes and drew Wind into a slow-moving spiral, tighter and tighter, tense like a coil.

“Release it! Now!” Ciaran instructed.

I released the Wind just as Ciaran infused it with a massive electrical charge. The gale hit each video game like an EMP blast, cracking screens, showering sparks, and lighting small fires as electrical panels exploded. The blast hit the far walls of the room, scorching patterns in the paint.

The air was still and smoky in the aftermath. At my feet, Addam blinked and stirred, rising to a sitting position.

“The throne!” one of the creatures cried. *“The throne has fallen! Retreat, cousins! Retreat!”*

There were flickers of light all around us—the elementals fleeing through walls and shadows, streaming into the corridor outside. “What just happened?” I said. “What the hell does the Magician have to do with this?”

“We aren’t seeing the whole picture,” Ciaran said. “My interest is roused. We must—”

I felt the wave of power a second before it hit. The world cracked and shook. I heard the sheering of stone. What glass hadn’t already shattered at the entrance to the arcade blew inwards in a dangerous shower.

Addam was already running for the boys as I scrambled after him. Quinn had Max in a full-body bear hug, balancing a Shield around them. Max was squirming to freedom.

They were safe, so I dropped them from my attention and hurried into the corridor. Brand was at my side, looking for a target.

“Godsdamn,” I whispered.

The mouth of the corridor—leading back to the movie theater—had been pulled down. Debris blocked our exit: an oozing mound of cement blocks, torn pipes, mud, and brackish water that smelled like salt.

I heard Addam make a sound, half swear, half cry.

“My Slingshot spell has failed,” he said. “I think I lost it when I was shocked.”

“Should we activate the wards?” Quinn asked him.

Addam considered it. “They would protect the portal from attack while we dig through. I could activate them from here.”

Brand stared at Addam a good three beats before he said, clearly and loudly,

“Simon fucking says.”

Addam, who honestly was rattled and maybe deserved a *little* more patience after being shocked unconscious, jumped forward. I felt the strength of his willpower surging outwards toward the dormant wards in the distance. I wasn’t sure whether or not it worked until he opened his eyes again and nodded with relief. He said, “The portal is secure.”

“The utility corridors,” Ciaran said. “There are other ways to access them. We can find another entrance and backtrack to the theater.”

“Sure, but first we’d need to go deeper into the mall,” Brand said. “How about we just have Rune blow everything to hell and tunnel us the fuck out of here?”

“That is a possibility,” I said, and hated what I needed to say next. “But if someone is pretending to be the Hex Throne, I think we may have a responsibility to look into this.”

“We have a responsibility?” Brand asked, making air-quotes around the word *responsibility* with his middle fingers.

He looked down the hallway ahead of us, which ended in a corner.

“Fuck,” he said.

THE SUNKEN MALL 4

The Worcester Galleria was built in the 1970s, named after its host city in Massachusetts. A massive chunk of downtown real estate was demolished to create the million-square foot structure, anchored by two existing skyscrapers and edged with a multi-deck parking lot.

The bulk of it was a two-level rectangular concourse, with a stunning rounded roof that was supposedly inspired by Milan's Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II.

For all its ambition, however, it was doomed from the start. Large malls had already begun a migration to the suburbs, and the first glimmers of big box retail were sketched indelibly on the horizon. Add to that the emotional stains that came from demolishing low income neighborhood and displacing its inhabitants, and the building became a ripe acquisition for Atlantis.

We were, after all, a people that preferred to let our emotional stains soak into the carpet.

"What is it?" Brand said, watching my face as we walked down the corridor.

He asked, so I told him. "One of those movies back there gave me an ear worm. There's this song—"

"Keep your mind on the job," he snapped back at me. Then added, "And keep the song out of our bond." And then added again, since he knew maybe it wasn't the sort of thing I could control, "Please."

I understood. His ear worms were my ear worms. That's what happens when you spend your entire life with someone. Our first experiences all happened as a pair. One of the earliest: big, wide eyes making contact, agreeing with grunts and flailing hands that, why yes, the purple dinosaur on television was annoying—and Brand banging his sippy cup against the crib bars to scare the annoyance away.

"I said stop thinking," Brand repeated, slapping me in the funny bone.

I rubbed my elbow with a grimace and flicked my attention to the light cantrips

above my head, spinning them around us in a short, cautious circle.

We'd turned the corner into the building proper and were, indeed, in an abandoned mall. The distance was lost to darkness, but the shapes that loomed out of it were things you'd expect. No monsters; no cleverly laid ambush points; just a row of stores on either side of a massive two-level rectangle, some with closed grills, some open.

"Could there really be people living here?" Max murmured. "I mean, would they have let *people* stay in the building during translocation? There were fish in the fish tanks. Would the Arcanum really have teleported living things?"

Brand snorted. "The Arcanum were still decorating castles with actual rotting heads a century ago. I'm not surprised they translocated the fish, just that the fish weren't already covered in batter."

I walked over to a car: a pink Cadillac behind red velvet cording on a now-stationary rotating pedestal. A dustless but aged sign read, LEARN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MAKING YOURSELF UP AND MAKING YOURSELF BEAUTIFUL. And, *Become a professional beauty consultant now!*

"Okay," Brand said. "We're clearing this in stages. Max—keep your eye out for a shopping cart. You can drag your own damn loot around."

Quinn grabbed Max's sleeve and nearly swung his arm in excitement. "You're going to get *loot*," he said.

"But..." Max said, then spared a glare at Quinn before tugging his arm free. He looked at me. "There's no dust on the ground. Something is cleaning. So maybe they're friendly? Is there a way that we can let them know we're here, and we're friendly too?"

It was a smart statement, and I felt the wisps of something that might be parental pride. "Good idea, Max. Anyone have any thoughts how we make contact?"

Ciaran said, "Perhaps something...subtle."

"Ciaran subtle or normal people subtle?" Brand asked.

"The difference being?"

"Whether you glue glitter to it."

"Short doses, Brandon," Ciaran murmured. "Quinn, catch me if I fall."

And with that, he wobbled on his feet, eyelids closed but eyeballs zooming back and forth, like he'd free-fallen into REM.

"I think he's dreamwalking," Addam guessed.

It may have been a more dramatic stretch of time, but sixty seconds later, Ciaran chainsawed the air with snores. Quinn and Max each ducked under an arm to keep

Ciaran upright, putting their backs against the metal grate of a closed store.

Since there was nothing else to do but wait, I studied the mall. Even in the limited light, I saw the theme of rampant and robust instant gratification. The American altar: two ice cream shops, a candy store, two shoe stores. And a smoke shop. It had been the 80s; they might even have real Cuban cigars in there. I tried not to look at the store sign.

Brand's eyes narrowed. "What are you thinking about?"

"Wintergreen Lifesavers," I said without missing a beat.

"Lie."

"Prove it."

"Look, Max!" Quinn suddenly said. His face was smooshed up against the metal grate, staring into the locked store. "There are t-shirts in there! And they have.... Oh. A row of mugs shaped like boobs." He looked up at the awning. "This Spencer fellow has a funny idea of what a gift shop should sell."

Addam went a little pale. He grabbed my arm and whispered, "They must not go in there."

"Why not?"

"Because Quinn is fond of brick-a-brack."

"Brick-a-brack?"

"Collectibles. Knick-knacks. *Clutter*. There is now a lava lamp sitting next to the Tiffany lamp I bought through Christie's. Have you been in a Spencer's Gifts before? There are *many* lava lamps in that store. And lightning globes. And boob mugs."

Quinn had moved in with Addam following the events in the Westlands. I'd thought they'd adapted seamlessly to being roommates, so this was important information. As soon as I got home, I was marking Quinn's birthday in my calendar, along with every appropriate gift-giving holiday.

"If you keep admitting stupid stuff like that in front of him, you'll get what you deserve," Brand told Addam. "Look. Ciaran's coming out of it."

Ciaran's eyelids were fluttering. They finally opened, and his pupils dilated, with his sunlight-on-water irises focusing on our party. "Well, well, well."

"Were you dreamwalking? What did you see?" I asked.

"Dreams, of course. There are no humans here, but my oh my oh my are there *dreams*. Open floor space and colorful garlands and rivers and rivers and *ivers* of dreams. I'm not sure what they are, or what we'll encounter, but I projected a sense of calm. I may even have used the words, *we mean you no harm*. It was quite cinematic."

“You better have kept your fingers crossed behind your back,” Brand said. “Because I’m not taking another skee-ball to my head without pelting it right back at them.”

“We shouldn’t take anything,” Ciaran continued. He tapped a nail against his lower lip. “Not yet. I get the sense that this space is...theirs. And it’s special. I think it would be a bad idea to remove anything just yet. At least not until we see whatever it is they don’t want us to see.”

I replayed the words in my head and looked into the distant darkness. It still seemed abandoned and unused—exactly how you’d imagine. And that was a clue. Because it was a bad habit to trust strange places that looked exactly as you imagined.

I had started to pull on my magical sight when Ciaran spotted a convenience store pharmacy combo behind us called CVS. He pointed and said, “You will leave that store alone in particular. I called dibs. Anything with a *cet* after it goes in my luggage. The eighties. Such a lovely decade.”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s start looking around. And let’s get some Shields up. We need to be smart about this.” Or I did, at least. I had limited sigil space; while Ciaran, Quinn, and Addam came from wealthy houses. I couldn’t afford to run through my arsenal in the first twenty minutes. “Addam, Quinn, me. Let’s use a Shield apiece, and watch the others.”

Addam gave his youngest brother a serious look. “It would be a very good time for you to show me you can handle moments like this.”

“Of course I can,” Quinn said. “I’ll cover Max!”

“Are we pairing up?” Ciaran asked. “Is Addam my shield buddy?”

“Yes. Conserve your own spells. You’re firepower, if we need it. Let’s start clearing the open stores, and look for the...owners. You four can look in there—” I squinted. “Is that a tie store? They had a store dedicated to *ties*?”

“Think skinny ties, bolos, and trying too hard in middle school,” Brand said. He widened his attention to include the rest of us. “Let’s see if we can find who lives here. No aggression except in self-defense. Keep an eye out for doors to the back area, which may lead toward the generator. I guess it would be nice to have more options than blowing a hole back to our portal.”

“Agreed,” I said. “Let’s not mess with the infrastructure any more than we already have.”

“Because you never know when a cathedral will drop on your head,” Brand added.

“Brand’s right,” I said. “That’s scary. Thank God he fainted by that point and

doesn't remember anything else." Brand started sputtering. I smiled and said, "I win."

"Rune and I will check out that restaurant over there," Brand continued, ignoring me while he headed in that direction. Well, he rolled his eyes first, which was his usual punctuation on all dialogue that he was about to ignore.

"Feeling peckish?" I asked, catching up to him.

"No, but I want to see if the kitchen has power, and if what lives in the mall is the sort of thing that eats food. You're not going to pull your Shield yet, are you?"

"Nah. Helmets are for kids." I didn't mention I was impressed with the idea of checking for food, but I was. It was just the sort of tactical thought he always had.

The restaurant was a pizza joint called Papa Gino's. The Galleria came from the days before food courts—individual restaurants took up space like any store. The area outside it was clean, and the distance was still shrouded in darkness, but I spotted much of what you'd expect to see from a city mall built in the 70s. Overhead signs with slide-on black letters. Decorative squares of thick foliage, including palm trees, which stretched bright green fronds toward the second level. Tiled slabs of huge, patterned orange stone—the sort of thing that the disco era vomited on all its architecture. The ceiling overhead was mostly lost in dimness, but I caught the impression of its atrium design, a long half-tube of glass and steel.

I paused next to Papa Gino's and peered at its neighbor. A purple and silver sign read *Scharfmann's*, but that was as much as I could see. The doors and display windows appeared to be cloudy glass that dully reflected my spinning light cantrips, but a closer look—one infused with a touch of my willpower—said something else entirely.

"There's a barrier over that store," I murmured.

Brand casually hid a glance in that direction. "Can't see it," he murmured back.

"Powerful. A strong ward. We'll look into it next." I swung my gaze around to see if there was anything in front of us as well. Papa Gino's looked clean of magical traps or wards, but the effort of sensing made my head hurt.

I started to pump more energy into my sight, but Brand tapped my forearm. "Hey," he whispered. "Stop. We can clear the room the old fashioned way. You're hurting yourself."

"I don't know why it's so difficult. This place...there's more to it than we're sensing."

"Rune," Brand said, and the slightest of smiles played across his lips. "The day we walk into a situation and there's *not* more to it than we sense? That's the day we'll probably fuck up the worst, and take out nuns or orphans or kittens with

paranoid crossfire.”

“Honestly, you’re not wrong,” I said. We headed into the restaurant.

The pizza place was deeper than most other stores—or at least was designed to give that appearance—and full of token Italian stereotypes: checkered plastic place settings and fake wine bottles with fake candles pretending to melt. Each red-and-white booth had its own little sound system: a tiny jukebox filled with old 45s.

There were huge containers of bulk staples in the open kitchen—flour, dried pasta, stewed and crushed tomatoes. It didn’t look like anyone had raided the supply since the mall was translocated. I opened a fridge—and the hermetically-sealed stench of forty years of unrefrigerated dairy slammed into my face.

I yelped and slammed the door shut, but even Brand was gagging by then.

“Jesus *Christ*,” he said. “What the fuck were you thinking? Were you looking for food to actually *eat*? I thought you were past the age where you tried to put everything in your mouth.”

I gave him a hard look, but he wasn’t done. He added, “You’re supposed to be fucking housebroken!”

“There’s something I want to run by you,” I said. Then I sang, off-tune, “Tumble outta bed and I stumble to the kitchen, pour myself *a CUUUUUUP* of ambition!”

While *9 to 5* took root in his ears, I continued my search.

The cash register up front had no cord, just levers and buttons. The credit card machine next to it was manual: you had to swipe and imprint the card onto carbon copies. In the back corner of the restaurant were the restrooms. Both doors were locked with an elaborate contraption that reminded me of a parking meter.

I waved a light cantrip closer and saw that entry required an American dime.

“A dime?” I said. “Damn. And now I need the bathroom. I think I have a quarter. Are there any dimes in the cash register?”

“I have one,” Brand said, and pointedly made no effort to reach into his pockets.

“There are worse earworms than Dolly Parton,” I said in exasperation, “and I thought we were supposed to see if anything or anyone had been eating the food. *And* I’m not going to be at my best during an ambush if I need to pee.”

He pulled out a dime (which he really did have on him, only it was thinner and slightly sharpened around the edges, which means it was also another of his endlessly useful contingency plans against abduction or assault or irritating small talk) and slid it into the machine. The handle turned with an uncoiled grind as I pushed the door open.

Brand slid into the men's room a moment ahead of my light cantrip, angled sideways to reduce targetable mass. He cleared the two stalls while I came in behind him. "I can do this part myself," I told him.

"I'll check on the others. Tweak our bond if you're in trouble."

"Roger," I said, and set about doing my business.

It turned out that a single dime didn't just *open* the bathroom door, it also allowed only one person to *leave*. Maybe to prevent multiple people from taking a pee off a single coin? As far as security devices went, this one was wholly paranoid and filled with some rather questionable drawbacks, since Brand had used my dime's exit and locked me in.

I took a calm second to plot my next move, as opposed to blowing the locked door off its hinges. Infrastructure, I reminded myself. Plus, Brand would laugh if—

Something roared. The walls shook. People began shouting. *My people.*

I transmuted my sabre in record time and shot nine firebolts into the hinges, one frenetic flare after another, until molten metal pattered the ground and flash-froze into hard drip lines. The door fell inwards with a groan and sent dust devils into the air.

I ran through the opening, toward the screams.

The moment I was in the main hall, I absorbed as much as I could in a half-second sweep of my head. The ward in front of Scharfmann's was gone. It was a jewelry store—a trampled mess of broken crystal and scattered gemstones. Ciaran had the boys under a Shield. Addam was swinging a pedestal from the car display. Brand had pulled out a collapsible baton, blunt weapons for creatures that became more dangerous with jagged wounds.

I had no idea what was attacking them.

It was seven feet of nonsentient fury, some sort of mindless spirit that took advantage of its surroundings to build a corporeal body from priceless gemstones and cut crystal. Purple boxing ribbon ran through its giant humanoid form like a vein network. It had a mouthful of pearls, and sapphire fingertips.

The construct roared and smashed a hand in the spot where Brand had just rolled away. Concrete wall powdered and split.

"What is it?" Brand shouted.

"No idea," I shouted back, and ran a finger over my white-gold ring. Fire raced along my palm, warming my body from the inside out as the magic stabilized. I held out my arm and shot a jet of flame at the creature's center mass. Parts of it—the crystal, the Wedgwood china—shattered into shrapnel. But much of it was gemstone, and my Fire wasn't nearly hot enough to melt it.

“Get it prone for at least a full second,” I yelled while ducking behind a payphone. The creature’s fist plowed into it, and a small avalanche of nickels and dimes pattered to the floor.

Ciaran must have felt comfortable that Quinn had enough of his own Shield to watch Max, because he swept away from them while touching his knucklebone necklace. Wind whipped, swirling little squalls of air around his fingers. Since he was Ciaran, he afforded extra energy to make sure it ruffled his hair and outfit for the spectacle of it.

He lashed out with Wind, slicing at the construct’s humanoid feet. The creature buckled and went down to its knees. Brand darted in to smack his baton against the back of its head. The creature dropped forward to all fours.

I prepared to touch my emerald ring, which contained a nasty spell called Shatter of which I’d become very fond, and thought may come in handy in an empty, possibly rubble-strewn structure. Before I could move in, though, debris skittered across the floor—shards of ceramic and crystal—and reattached itself to the creature. A third arm formed where none had been. It used the extra leverage to swing off the floor.

I’d never seen regeneration that fast. What the hell type of— “Addam, Ciaran, what is it?” I shouted.

“Los—” Ciaran started to say before a swipe caught the edge of his shoulder. He flew backwards into the foliage surrounding a palm tree. His head hit the trunk, slamming him into a daze.

“I’ll Shield him,” Addam said, swiping a hand along his belt. He shifted ground to cover the square of decorative greenery.

The creature roared—a sound of windchimes and hurricanes—and ran at Brand. Brand danced from foot to foot, landing blows where he could, ducking everything else. One monstrous swipe came close enough to graze his forearm. Serrated fins of jagged, broken gems opened a six-inch cut along his wrist. Half a second later he was leaving a fine spray of blood behind him with every twist.

I didn’t even think. I took my Fire—every second of the spell, every last shred of it—and sent it forward like a cannonball. It opened a hole in the middle of the creature as wide as my embrace.

It tottered backwards, moving its head from side to side. It stumbled a few feet, dropped, made a cattle-like lowing sound. Debris flowed up its body. Instead of replacing the missing mass in its chest, it formed a fourth and fifth fucking arm.

“New tactic,” Brand gasped.

“Quinn and I could lift and drop it,” Addam said.

He was crazy good at Telekinesis, but I'd already proven it wasn't a question of terminal mass loss. "No, no smashing, no breaking," I said. On the ground, the creature shuddered, its rebuilding complete. "What is it, what is it, what is it... What was Ciaran saying?" *Los...* Spanish? A Spanish golem or gargoyle? Something tugged at my memory. Not Spanish. Spanish settlements...

"*Los desmembrados*," someone whispered behind me.

I turned and saw a mannequin—an actual, animated, wide-eyed mannequin.

It was dressed in cheap leather pants and a blue t-shirt, and had a garland of Christmas-tree tinsel tied around its bald gray head.

Gift horses and mouths. I ignored the mannequin, turned back to the monster, touched the emerald ring I'd been given by Elena—the one I'd received in exchange for caring for Max. Max, who was on the floor under a Shield, who was mine to protect.

The monster was not sentient. It would not understand my words, if I explained why I must end it. *Los desmembrados* were the ghosts of accident victims—a haunting parade of body parts that coalesced over time. Its type of spirit began in Puerto Rico's Lajas region and had spread with globalization. Worcester had a sizable Puerto Rican population. I'd checked that in advance; it was always good to know what immigrant spirits flavored the local folklore.

This mall had displaced an entire neighborhood when it was built. All that trauma, razed and reformed, treated like dismembered body parts, becoming Something Else over time.

The difference between *shattering* and *unmaking* is a fine distinction. The creature didn't just need to be broken, it needed to be broken into its components, a reversal of the path it took to its present mobility.

The Shatter spell I'd released was making my fingernails bleed. My hand shook as I stalked forward. I thought, as loudly as possible, *DISTRACT*, and Brand spun from the left and smashed the baton along the creature's backside. When *los desmembrados* turned, I touched its shoulder and sent the Shatter spell into its body.

But not like a sledgehammer. Not like a wrecking ball. Like the roots of a tree that burrow between rock fissures; or the drip of water down the face of a cliff. A millennium of pressure in fast forward.

The creature exploded in the pattern of my choosing.

Crystal fell to one side. Gemstones to the next. Gold went left, and silver went right. A spool of purple ribbon floated to the ground in front of me.

"What the *fuck*," Brand breathed.

"It was a Puerto Rican spirit. Called a—" I looked up, saw that Brand's attention

was behind me, and spun.

Whatever glamour had hidden the real mall was gone.

They hung from the ceiling. From the second floor. They crouched on top of decorative light fixtures. Hundreds of mannequins, all bearing witness, watching us with unnaturally animated faces.

Above us, a sun appeared: a tiny pinhole of light that hurt to see, glowing and growing until a ball of magical gas lit the spectacle before us.

The mannequin in leather and tinsel stepped forward. “I am the Emperor, Arcana of the Regency Throne. The Galleria welcomes you.”

THE SUNKEN MALL 5

The mannequins looked like the love child of David Lynch and Jim Henson, a mix of acid cartoon and puppet mastery. Their near-humanity was so unsettling that it hit a primal nerve I didn't know I had. Was this what tech people called the uncanny valley?

I think Brand was as troubled as I was, but he was Brand and kept his knives out. Behind him, I saw Addam run a finger across a sigil and hoped it was a healing spell. We all had debris cuts, but the heavy slice on Brand's forearm was driving me to absolute distraction.

"Have you been putting traps in our path?" Brand asked the head mannequin in a low voice. "Did you create that thing?"

"You released *los desmembrados*, not I," the mannequin said in a stiff, offended voice. "You have brought aggression here, not I."

"We defended ourselves," I said sharply, going to Brand's side. "And I didn't see you stepping in to help."

"And who would we help?" they asked. "You assaulted members of the Hex Throne. You have devastated their demesne."

"The—" My voice failed, more in confusion than surprise. The Hex Throne. The Regency. What the hell was this? And Brand was *still* bleeding. "Enough! There is only one person here who represents a throne of Atlantis, and I will have answers."

Ciaran swept in front of me, saying, "Yes, yes, Sun. You're well scary. Now let me try."

I almost grabbed Ciaran's arm, but before I could he wheeled on me.

In a voice that didn't carry, he whispered, "You and Brandon will master your bond, or it will ever master you. We must listen and learn, not react."

That stopped me dead, because he was right, and my worry for Brand's injury—

and his own immediate irritation with the people before us—were spreading roots through my common sense. I gave Ciaran a shaky nod and backed down.

Ciaran offered the mannequins a wide, red smile, and skipped into a shallow bow. “We mean you no harm. Quite the opposite. I think we’ve wandered into something rather wondrous. My name is Ciaran, and I am a principality of Atlantis.”

The words generated no small interest. The mannequins spun and danced and airily moved about the now wildly different mall.

There was too much to look at. Too much to take in. I settled on the smallest of details, a more pedestrian form of bizarre: their clothing. These mannequins wore bright, clashing colors. One wore bright pink compression socks on their arms and legs. Another had laced a button-up shirt with Christmas tree tinsel. Yet another had holiday light strands wrapped around their waist—the old kind, with big, thick colored bulbs. The lights, though plugged into no power source, blinked with alternating colors, as if reacting to the creature’s moods.

“Perhaps we start clean, friends,” Ciaran said. “I am most interested to meet you.”

The leader raised a hand—an articulation that should not have been as smooth or possible with a real mannequin. The motion silenced the chattering movement behind them.

“I,” they said, “am the Emperor. I am the Regency of Under Atlantis.”

“Under Atlantis,” Ciaran said. He traced a finger in the air, indicating the stores and space around him. “These...demesnes.”

“As said,” they agreed.

“And there’s a Hex Throne too? Well I for one would just *love* to meet Lord Magician,” Ciaran said cheerfully.

“How are you related to our Emperor?” I interrupted. Politely. “The Emperor of Atlantis. He is—” Quick math. This mall was translocated well, well after the death of the Emperor. The real Emperor. “He is gone,” I settled on.

“He was a soul. Our thrones and courts are more than one soul. Our thrones and courts endure. This Ciaran calls you Sun. You are the Lord Sun of New Atlantis. I saw your fire.”

More excited chattering behind him.

“I am the heir to the Sun Court,” I said. “I do not sit upon the throne yet.”

The creature nodded, again wholly impossible from what I understood of physics and solid plastic joints. I snatched at pieces of what I’d seen, and drew together an image with blurry borders. “You are elementals. You inhabit these

bodies.”

Something about that seemed to bother the mannequin Emperor. There was no facial expression, but I had the strongest sense of unrest. Which was immediately answered when they said:

“Ideally, Lord Sun. Though we find ourselves in need.”

Elementals are summoned spirits from Somewhere Else that can occupy a physical space in our world, not unlike gargoyles, which are torn from murals or statues. But whereas gargoyles possess only a rudimentary sentience and are largely tied to the control of a summoner, elementals possess free will.

They are solitary creatures with powerful natural magics—largely defensive and environmental, only occasionally violent.

And there was no precedent to what I was seeing. A community of elementals, mimicking Atlantean life? It simply hadn’t ever existed, to the best of my knowledge.

Something rather wondrous, Ciaran had said.

The essence of those words, against my more aggressive judgment, had begun to intrigue me.

There were no immediate answers to all the questions I had. The head mannequin insisted we seek an audience with a Lady Amber, and several of their mannequin minions ran off with huge, loping steps to pave the way.

While we waited to be escorted, Addam healed our cuts. Max and Quinn stared at everything with wide, saucer-shaped eyes. Brand eventually dragged me under the leafy overhang of a giant fern, and started whispering plans in my ear.

“Wait,” I said, because one thing was bothering me. “So did they set *los desmembrados* on us or not?”

He clammed up. The word “no” pushed through his lips.

“What does that mean?” I asked. “Why did it attack, then?”

“We broke the ward. That seal. We don’t need to rehash it—stay focused.”

“We broke it? What do you mean, let’s not rehash it? The last time I set off a tripwire, you made t-shirts. Did Max set it off?”

Brand glared at me, and I understood. Gleefully. “Oh,” I whispered. “Oh, you set it off. You broke the ward.”

“The ward was under the fucking water fountain!” he hissed. “Who puts the ward to a fucking monster prison under a fucking water fountain!”

“Beings that don’t need to drink water?” I guessed. “But let me get this straight. You went over to use the water fountain. What’s that about needing to put everything you see in your mouth?”

“Are you going to let this go? Is this going to become a thing?”

“I will write it on your *birthday cake*,” I said with relish.

“Sun?” Ciaran called out, from nearby. He was speaking to a mannequin wearing women’s panty hose over their head. Since the stock came from the 80s, the panty hose was covered in shimmery purple glitter. “A word?”

“I’ll go stand somewhere you’re fucking not,” Brand said, and slipped away.

Ciaran excused himself from his conversation and drew me to a nearby wall. He said, quietly, “We must be very, very careful.”

“Are we in danger?” I asked, just as quietly.

“Perhaps, but not from them. Something has them spooked. But I am speaking about their community. It is something fragile and special.”

“Elementals don’t *join* communities,” I said. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“You are correct, in a modern sense. In our crowded world, where people are quite possessive of their inanimate possessions, it’s rare to see a thriving community of elementals. But elementals predate the modern world. They predate the mortal concept of a world. Once, they gathered in families. There is even a name for it—like a pride of lions, or a murder of crows. Ancient scholars called this a *tension* of spirits.”

“So you don’t think they mean us harm,” I repeated.

“I do not.”

“But something has them spooked?”

Ciaran frowned, and looked back at the destroyed jewelry store. “It appears the mall had hitchhikers when it was translocated. And I’m not sure all of those unwanted guests were so neatly contained. I suspect this Lady Amber will tell us more soon.”

Ciaran looked like he was going to turn away, so I cleared my throat, drawing his attention, and tried to pretend there wasn’t a flush creeping up my neck. “Ciaran. About what you said earlier...that my bond was maybe, a little, influencing my actions.”

Ciaran studied me carefully. “Mmmhmm. You’re doing that thing you do, trying to pull me aside for a quick, heartfelt, draining little moment that leaves us both feeling emotional. Well, no thank you. *Trixarte!*”

The mannequin in hosiery took hesitating, mincing steps back toward Ciaran. They leaned in—head first—and said, “You *glow*. You glow so *prettily*. With such

magic.”

Ciaran winced. “Yes, yes. I’m all that. Perhaps you can show me around, Trixarte? Sun, this is ‘Trixarte.’” Ciaran spun to give the mannequin all his attention. “We’re in the 80s, for gods’ sake. Someone must have dropped a vial of cocaine somewhere. Let’s go exploring, my new friend.”

“You are literally three failed heartbeats away from babysitting two minors!” I said to his retreating back.

“I’ll be the fun uncle,” he replied.

He gave me a little wave and vanished into the crowd.

Eventually the Emperor gathered us together.

“For matters of safety, we seal the Residence during daylight hours. I will now take you on a sacred path into the west entrance. Please follow me, and avoid disturbing our holiest of relics without my leave.”

“Safety against what?” Brand asked immediately.

“It is a precaution in the event our wards fail.” The elemental added, rather archly, “Or are broken.”

“That’s one perspective,” Brand said. “Another is that we took care of the thing you had to seal *inside* the ward.”

The Emperor regarded us with their blank mannequin face, then dipped their head. “We are not without gratitude. Please be patient, and Lady Amber will explain more. I will lead the way.”

Since there wasn’t anything to do but follow.

As I’d noticed before, two burning gas orbs overhead mimicked sunlight, but in a way that challenged my memory of childhood finger-paints. Somehow, the eclipsing blend of red and green light produced yellow, though the occasional shadow of deep garnet and emerald flashed along the edge.

The bones of the mall remained—a massive fountain filled with neon fish tank stones, a punk hair salon, a shoe store—but they’d been heavily repurposed into a wholly alien lifestyle.

On a raised stage, mannequins fiddled with instruments created from the stock of a nearby Radio Shack. The beeping of calculators, the stuttering shriek of a dot matrix printer, and the ringing of a cash register all matched the beat of an old U2 song.

Above all, the most surreal sight were the mannequins themselves. They strode around us with unnatural grace, some hovering in the air, others sliding along overhead wires with an occasional shower of colored sparks. The wires appeared to

create a miniature highway above our heads, powered by the elementals' own innate magic. It was as if—

I froze. Brand bumped into my back. I reached out and grabbed his arm in a grip so painful that I felt a bark of surprise along our bond.

“The fuck?” he whispered.

“Above.”

Brand looked up, squinting against the orbiting suns.

“No. Past those.”

“What are you seeing? I’ve got fucking sunspots.”

“A school of fish.”

Brand stopped looking at the ceiling and stared at me.

“I just saw a school of fish swim past the dome,” I whispered back, hoarse. “They’re bioluminescent. That’s why we didn’t notice earlier—we’re so far down there’d be no light normally.”

Brand’s lips set into a firm line. “We’re not underground.”

“Underwater.”

“Rune,” Addam said, and his eyes flicked around us. The mannequins had stopped moving too, and were listening raptly. It was an exaggerated pose, almost comical—they leaned in with their ears, which couldn’t possibly translate sound the way a human ear would.

“We weren’t aware there was an ocean above us,” I said, louder. “We’d believed that the mall was lost in the island bedrock.”

“We are safe,” the Emperor assured me. “The magic which brought us here is strong. Lasting. It will outlive all of us, Lord Sun.”

I knew that logically. The wards *had* to be strong, to resist the crushing gravitational forces of translocation. I was less bothered by that than by the fact that our escape options had been drastically reduced.

“We can’t blow our way out of here,” Brand said quietly to me, parallel with my own thoughts.

“I know.”

“*You* can’t blow our way out of here,” Brand said.

“Is that another Cathedral joke?”

“Because of all the other jokes I make about buildings falling on us?” he said, which was rather unfair because he’d done just that a half hour ago.

(And maybe, just a little, I wondered *why* he kept making that joke. I was beginning to suspect I’d freaked him out in the Westlands in an entirely new way. But that was a thought for a later bout of confidence.)

We continued on our trek. The Emperor led us out of the Galleria's main thoroughfare and into a store. Unlike much of what we'd already seen, this store—a music store called *Strawberries*—was perfectly preserved.

"Vinyl," Addam, the music lover, whispered. "Still in their original wrappers." His pupils were so wide it indicated either arousal or concussion.

"Holy relics," I reminded him.

He gave the pristine vinyl records a longing look. We were ushered through a door in the back, across a storeroom, and into a cement corridor. It looked like the corridor outside the generator room, which gave me hope for an alternate way back to the movie theater.

We threaded our way into the back of a toy store, also preserved. Because the mall had been translocated at the height of the American holiday season, it was bursting with merchandise. Stacks of Teddy Ruxpin; rows upon rows of Transformer action figures; a display of Atari 2600s. Behind a shelf of Glowworms, someone had hidden a wayward Cabbage Patch doll.

"Shrinky dinks!" Quinn exclaimed, grabbing a box. "Remember these, Addam? Did you ever play with them, Brand?"

"What are—" Brand started, and then said, "I'm not repeating those words." He grabbed the box and tossed it away. A heavysset mannequin snatched it before it hit the ground. Their gray face telegraphed a look of reluctant despair.

"Holy relics," I reminded Brand.

Max moved up a few feet so he was walking next to me. "They're all holy relics," he said glumly. "They aren't going to let us leave with anything, are they?"

"Sorry, kiddo. We'll make it up to you."

"You don't need to," he said quickly.

"Of course we do. Don't worry—you'll get that pony you always wanted."

Brand immediately said, "I know that's a joke, but just in case, I'm not going to be stuck burying it this time."

"I'm not asking you to, and I was five years old, and it was a *goldfish*," I said with genuine exasperation.

"There was a goldfish?" Max asked, confused, the way people always were confused when Brand and I shortcut our conversations.

"He suffocated it," Brand said. "The thing literally breathes water and he found a way to fucking kill it with air. We have rules now. No pets, no plants."

"I was *five years old*, and *you* killed Queenie's cactus," I said in a rush, and then lowered my voice into a growl. "With water. The thing literally comes from a desert and you found a way to fucking kill it with water."

“Is that me? Is that what I sound like?” he asked.

“You have a very unusual court, Lord Sun,” the Emperor remarked, which threw a bit of cold water on our exchange.

There was a doorway ahead of us—something not native to the architecture, with scorch and blast marks along the edges. It created an archway into the neighboring bookstore.

“Just through there,” the Emperor said, and lifted an elegant hand towards the back.

Like the toy and music stores, the bookstore was untouched. The preserved knowledge around me sent prickles along my skin—like an opened time capsule. There was a stack of printed newspapers on a table in the front. One of them—the *Worcester Telegram & Gazette’s* Evening Edition—had a banner headline discussing the fifteenth anniversary of the end of the Atlantean World War.

My father’s picture was above the fold, along with Lords Tower and Judgment.

I must have stopped for more than a moment, because everyone was still around me. I blinked and smiled at them to show it was okay, but behind my corneas, images flashed. His dark orange eyes. Black hair like mine, prematurely salted, always combed.

I felt a presence by my side and knew it was Brand. A line of solid warmth, only the warmth was an emotion, the sort of Companion bond thing that evaded words. His support was tempered with his own reaction; my father had raised him just as much as he’d raised me.

I heard Brand sigh. He rested his forehead against my shoulder.

“Do you have a Sun Throne?” I asked the Emperor, clearing my throat. “Do you have a Lord Sun in this...in Under Atlantis?”

“We do,” the Emperor said gently. “He will be honored to meet you. Come, now. Lady Amber is most anxious to meet you, and celebrate your arrival.”

The Residence was once a store called Jordan Marsh, one of the anchor department stores to the Worcester Galleria. But what it had become... Words didn’t so much escape me as fly together like iron filings to a magnet.

The huge store was now part construction site scaffolding; part tree house; part blanket fort; part Eastern bazaar. The mannequins had built into vertical space with elaborate structures from leftover bits of the department store: gauzy drapes, Egyptian cotton sheets, solid clothing fixtures. Massive shelving units from the backroom had been reconstituted into new, haphazard levels.

It was largely empty—the Emperor had mentioned the Residence was closed

during the day. Those elementals who remained were clearly from a different power structure entirely. Some wore no clothing, and I could see how their innate magic was powering the fluidity of their movement. Where the actual mannequin body had no articulation, they'd created flexibility powered by their own elemental magic: stiff tendons of frost, fiery bands, powdered stone shaped as pulsing muscle, sparking tongues of lighting that ran along the surface of the body like a nerve network.

A smaller one approached us, as we stood in a spot and waited for the Emperor to signal that it was appropriate to advance further. They were childlike, carrot-haired, and bucktoothed, the sort of mannequin you may see on display in a kid's department or toy store.

The buck-toothed ginger regarded us with unblinking eyes and said, "I am Lord Tower."

I literally heard Brand suck in a breath behind me.

"Welcome to the Residence," they said, only their Rs sounded like Ws through the plastic dental arrangement.

Brand whispered, "Dump every photo on your phone. Free up space. Take pictures. These are our Solstice and Equinox greeting cards for the next fucking *century*."

"If you'll excuse me, I will absent myself while Lord Sun's people purify the floor," Lord Tower said, then continued on past us.

When he was gone, I said to the Emperor, "Did Lord...Tower just mention the Sun Throne? 'Purifying the Residence?'"

"Indeed. They handle our daily ablutions. A most sacred assignment. There's a member now, over there." The Emperor pointed down the corridor.

In the near distance, a mannequin pushed a broom along the ground. They wore a gray short-sleeve work shirt with the name *Chet* sewn across the breast.

"Shit," I whispered, at the same time Brand pushed a little in front to make sure he was seeing things correctly.

"Oh my fucking God," he said. "Are you saying there's a court down here, with the same name as *him*, that is organized around the basic principle of knowing how to pick up after yourself?"

Even Addam started laughing. That stung the worst. I said, "Addam Saint Nicholas, you've had people picking up after you your entire bloody life. You just bought your first vacuum cleaner, for gods' sake."

"Hero," he said, wiping the smile off his face. He put a small kiss on my shoulder, by the base of my neck. "It was quite funny, and I have seen your

bedroom.”

“Let’s just focus on the mission,” I said primly. I heard a whir and a click, and said through clenched teeth, “*Brand.*”

“My Lord,” the Emperor said, perking up. “I apologize for interrupting, but I believe Lady Amber and her retinue have assembled.”

I didn’t have to say anything else. Brand’s humor flickered into blankness, and a second later he was standing at my back. I experienced a flicker of pride when Max copied Brand and stood at Brand’s shoulder. Addam and Quinn exchanged a quick look, wondering if there was an appropriately tough pose they should adopt.

Some lavender bedsheets in front of us were swept aside by a mannequin who tied them back with golden drapery tassels. We approached it just as Ciaran strode through, because of course he did.

“Really, is this the pace you keep on all your adventures?” he tutted. “I’m almost on my second cup of tea. Come, come.”

I took the lead, a half-step ahead of a watchful Brand. With a quick glance I mapped people and floor plan—a half dozen mannequins in bright jewel tones, surrounding a corduroy sofa sectional, on which another mannequin perched wearing a severe, brick-red suit with clunky gold jewelry.

“I am Lady Amber, the Empress of Under Atlantis,” she said. “I sit for the demesnes. You are welcome here.”

These are some of the details I learned over the next few minutes, as formal introductions were made:

The elemental demesnes were tied to physical locations in the Worcester Galleria. It was a powerful association for beings with severely limited growth opportunities. They had a hierarchy, based on the Atlantean court structure, under the long-serving rule of the Empress and Emperor.

The bounty of the mall provided marks of their individual hierarchies. The Sun Throne’s gray work shirts, absorbed from a limited supply, provided pre-set names, sewn on their pockets, to signify rank among his people. The Empress’s people distinguished themselves by food scents set in soy candles, rubbed along their necks. Those on the lowest steps of the pedestal around Lady Amber smelled like gingerbread and apple crisp pie; those on the steps nearest to her smelled like lemons and grapefruit.

There was logic behind all of it. It would be a mistake to dismiss any of this as comical. This was a long-standing community, with deep mannerisms and rules, and backed with genuine power.

My respect only grew, the more I learned. So did my sense of responsibility, for whatever secret they were still keeping from me.

And there was a secret. I knew it in my bones. Deep secrets all smell the same, when it come down to it; and those of us who keep them come to recognize the tells.

“Then you really do have an association with the Regency,” I said, surprised.

We were seated around a low coffee table. None of the mannequins drank, of course; but they seemed delighted for a reason to lay out a silver tea set from a department in Jordan Marsh devoted to wedding registries.

Lady Amber inclined her head. “The Emperor was kind to us. We enjoyed our time in his service, back in Old Atlantis. We were most heartbroken following his death. We were also unified in our grief. That unity we’d felt in his service led to a sense of belonging. We had learned what it meant to be a group, and we feared losing it. We searched for many years before finding a home like this.”

“It is a very special place,” I agreed. “I am impressed by what you’ve built.”

“Would that we had the power to build more,” she said, and cast her eyes down at that.

“You have more elementals who wish to join your community?” I asked.

“Not...as such. We are closed off from the Beyond. For our own safety, as well as practical considerations.”

I flicked my eyes at Brand, who knew something important was being said, but hadn’t figured out what the larger picture resembled. I barely did, and I was the expert in magical creatures. “So your community isn’t growing, but you require more space.”

The Empress raised her head and gave me an inscrutable look.

“It is enough, perhaps, to acknowledge that we desire space,” the Emperor said.

“The cinema was deserted,” Addam said. “There appeared to be quite a bit of space there.”

“Unstable, unfortunately,” they said. “As you may have noticed during the unfortunate incidence in Lord Magician’s demesne. It is not sustainable territory.”

“Residence,” Brand said abruptly. “You call this the Residence. Singular. What about the other anchor store?”

Lady Amber moved her expressionless face toward him.

“Crockett & Cohens,” I said, remembering. “That’s right. There were two anchor stores. There should be another three-story department store this size. Is that not used?”

“It is occupied,” Lady Amber said. “It is sealed.”

“There’s another monster,” Max said. When everyone looked at him, a blush started creeping past his collar, but he quickly turned it into a faint, iridescent shimmer—part of his fae shape-shifting gifts. My ward was getting better at controlling his reactions.

“Max is right,” I said. “Isn’t he? There’s another *los desmembrados* here.”

“There is,” Lady Amber allowed. “A strong entity. Formed less from body parts than death itself, yet able to act tangibly in the world. It is unique among its kind, and voracious. While we have tremendous defensive gifts at our disposal, we are not warriors. We can only contain it—we have yet to be able to defeat it.”

“My lady,” the Emperor whispered. “I feel we must trust them.”

She turned her featureless face toward him, but also reached up to touch her gold necklace in a fidgety gesture. “What you speak of is our one vulnerability.”

“Perhaps that is why we must trust them,” the Emperor said.

Lady Amber lowered her eyes to her lap. Her shoulders—padded in excessive 80s weight—drooped. “As said,” she agreed. “Clear the Residence. Set the guards. We will move this discussion to the nursery.”

Ciaran’s teacup clattered onto its saucer at the same time my jaw loosened.

“By the River,” Addam breathed.

At the heart of Jordan Marsh, on the middle of its three floors, the infant department had been turned into a nursery for...

Well. Infants. New spirits. Brand new elemental spirits, pulled together from organic material and animated soil. They were tiny—the size of my spread palm—and leaked rich earth tear tracks from their bright green eyes. Their skin was formed from fern fronds and flower petals. They were the most adorable things I’d ever seen.

Lady Amber picked up one of the seven babies and placed it in my hands. Its skin was as soft as the flesh of a rose. It smelled like rainwater and farm dirt—a clean, basic scent. The infant rolled around my palm, catching on my fingers as I cradled it against me to keep it from falling. Its tiny, chubby green hands found the zipper of my leather coat, and tried to stick it in its mouth.

Ciaran was pale—paler than usual, which meant he was one shade shy of being an anatomical sketch. He came to my side and feathered his fingers above the baby, sensing the powerful magic that had pulled the organic material together into a husk for sentient life.

“How,” he whispered.

“We have grown deep roots in this place,” Lady Amber said. “We cut ourselves off from the Beyond. Over time, we changed. I cannot explain it. I do not have the words or experience. We simply...changed. The universe witnessed us, and saw something new and special, and helped us to continue. To evolve.”

Elementals came from the Beyond. They grew powerful enough to inhabit objects. They never had a stage that one would call infancy.

And yet, a baby spat out my zipper. It made a happy sound as it spotted the button over my breast pocket, which, when wrapped in its plump arms, gave it the leverage to pull to a sitting position.

“How would you like a brand-new Residence to grow up in,” I whispered over its head.

Behind me, Brand growled, but in resignation. Max and Quinn started whispering some scheme or another. Addam put a hand on my shoulder, and Ciaran began asking Lady Amber about his portmanteau.

The baby made a delighted sound when it saw it had my attention, and reached up to bat my lips with its tiny hands.

THE SUNKEN MALL

We stared at the shimmering barrier. It stretched across the entrance to Crockett & Cohens, hiding everything inside from view.

“I wish we had a blueprint,” Brand muttered. “Or maybe an idea of whether there’s a store on the other side of that ward, or a billion gallons of fucking water.”

“It is whole,” the Emperor assured. He alone had accompanied us down the corridor that led to the mall’s second anchor store. The other mannequins stayed at a distance, a twitchy mass of chatter and movement and excitement.

“Can we deactivate the wards from inside after you let us in?” Brand asked. “If we need to get back out in a hurry?”

The Emperor regarded Brand with his blank face. “Unfortunately, I cannot permit—”

“Yes,” I said. “I can.” I stared at the elemental. “Make no mistake, if things go badly, I will do what I must to extract my party.”

Quinn walked to the edge of the barrier and held out a hand. He skimmed his fingers along the swirling edges, and the hairs rose on his arm.

“This is going to be weird,” he said in a small voice. “I don’t like sharing my head with anyone else. People bump into things that are best not bumped into.”

“Rune?” The muscles of Addam’s face pulled with different emotions, worry and frustration among them. “I want to keep my brother near me, but is it safe?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “So much of this place confounds my expectations.”

“Well, until Rune isn’t *confounded* any more, maybe we should take more time to prepare?” Brand said.

“If I may?” the Emperor said. “This spirit is different from the other. It is more...emotion than body. We feel its physical presence only during our evening cycle. It cannot maintain a form beyond that. It is barely our morning cycle now—

there are many hours before actual danger should present itself.”

“Well that’s believably coincident and absolutely likely to happen,” Brand said. “Do the boys stay or go?”

I looked at Brand. Brand looked at Addam. Addam looked at me. None of us were ready to speak first. I trusted walking into that store with them, but protecting Max and Quinn was another issue entirely.

Ciaran cleared his throat, fished some Chapstick out of his pocket, and casually applied it. After smacking his lips, he said, “You have an annoying tendency to forget you’re accompanied by a Principality of New Atlantis. Trust me, dears, whatever is on the other side of the barrier will not be the most dangerous thing in the room. Now. Shall we?”

The barrier slid into place behind us with a staticky hiss.

Addam, Ciaran, Quinn and I launched cantrips into the air, pushing light into different corners. The deep blackness receded, revealing a cramped maze of cosmetics counters.

There had been wards in place to keep dust and debris under control during the original translocation, powered by massive, even-stronger battery wards. The local wards still worked, but were so far beyond their original specifications that everything was a little bit off, striping objects in layers of disuse.

Brand stared at the array of counters and narrow tiled paths with something that may have been disgust or appreciation. “It’s like a cattle chute. You can’t walk in without being in swinging distance of a salesperson. Whoever created this fucking studied Sun Tzu.”

“Oh, wow!” Quinn said from a jewelry counter. “These watches have little calculators built into them. Look at the tiny keypads.”

“Ground rules,” Brand said. “Talk only when it’s important until we clear a base of operations. Understood?”

Quinn replied, in a high-pitched voice, “I betcha they’re lying. I bet the fence isn’t electrified at all. I’m gonna jump it!”

We all stared at him.

Quinn blinked back at us. “What?”

“What do you mean what?” Max said. “What *fence*?”

“Where is there a fence?” Quinn asked.

“You—”

“Stop,” Brand said. “This is weird shit, and we’re not dealing with weird shit right now. We need to see if the lights are working. We need to clear and fortify a

base. Then we deal with Quinn going crazy.”

“I don’t have any spells to help with this,” I said. “Ciaran?”

Ciaran gave Quinn a look threaded with a small amount of concern. “If needed. Let’s let this play out a little while longer. You’re picking up stray thoughts, Quinn—are you in any discomfort?”

“No. I don’t think?”

“Stay close to Ciaran for now,” I said. “And if you hear any of us shout ‘shields up’, grab Max and Shield. Understood?”

He nodded.

“Ciaran, can you still feel where the junction boxes are? Can you help get the lights on?” Brand asked.

“Of course, dear. That way.” He poked a nail in the direction of a clothing department.

We crossed off the tile path and onto carpet stiff with age and smelling of unaired linen. There was a decent amount of space between clothing racks, at least—unlike modern malls. My light cantrip skimmed over a seating area complete with coffee table, couches, and glass ashtrays.

Ciaran and Brand took point, heading to a corner of the department. The junction box was in a recessed cubby, and while Ciaran murmured over it the rest of us faced outwards and peered in the edges of the shadow.

A heavy clank echoed. The fluorescent bulbs overhead flickered and warmed into a twilight glow. As it grew, the department store settled into visibility. We were in the middle of an ocean of women’s clothing: lots of conservative paisley and autumn colors, with separate racks for the more edgy designs of the late 70s and early 80s.

“Put it down, Maria!” Quinn shouted. “It may be loaded!”

He jerked back into Addam. Addam’s arms came up to circle his brother’s chest, keeping him on his feet.

“Death memories,” I mumbled. “Electrified fence. Loaded gun?”

“This thing—*los desmembrados*—how does it use death memories?” Brand asked, frustrated. “I thought it took corporeal form?”

“It does,” I said. “It uses the physical remains of the dead. Not their thoughts or memories.”

“The Empress mentioned something about this creature being more emotional than physical,” Ciaran said.

“The blending of emotion and body—it’s almost like a poltergeist hybrid,” I guessed.

Ciaran actually shuddered. “Nasty things, those.”

“But,” I added, “a poltergeist would have attacked us already. Maybe we’re still okay for the moment.”

Quinn said, in a heavy Massachusetts accent, “I ate oystahs by the side of the road once. I had to try them. When was I ever gonna do that again? Hey, pass me some of that salad. There aren’t peanuts in it, are there?”

“I changed my mind. That will be enough of that,” Ciaran said. He brushed a finger along one of his knuckle-bone sigils, releasing a spell, and transferred his fingertip to Quinn’s forehead. Nothing dramatic happened, though Quinn did shake his head like a dog covered in water.

“That feels like chili powder,” the teen said. “My nostrils are all clear.”

“You and I have practiced our shielding, little seer,” Ciaran said, bending a little so that he was eye to eye with Quinn. “You must do that now, but instead of putting a wall between yourself and future memories, fortify against external thoughts.”

“This is most unnerving,” Addam said. “Should we put the children outside?”

“We’re not children,” Max said immediately. “Stop calling us that.”

“Maybe we should just—” I started to say, then gave Brand a quick wink and roared, “*SHIELDS UP!*”

Max whipped around and smashed into a display of denim mini-skirts. Quinn slapped a hand on one of his sigils, tripped, fell on his ass, and launched a fireball at the ceiling. Everyone else pulled a weapon and formed a perimeter.

“What’s the sixty,” Brand snapped.

“Uh, nothing. It was a test.” I looked up, hoping Quinn hadn’t set more than cobwebs on fire. “That was not a Shield.”

Brand looked like he wanted to slap the bad sense out of me. I held out my arms and said, “I winked! I winked before I did it!”

“You *twitched*,” he said furiously.

“I looked at you with great deliberation and *twitched*?”

“Yes, because you are a fucking twitchy bastard, and that seems more likely than running a test drill in a live field action.” He jammed his knives back into their holsters.

Quinn stared hard at his belt and said, “I almost always remember. I even have a rhyme. Lots of defensive stuff on the left. Really bad stuff on the right.”

“I’m not sharing a Shield with him,” Max said.

“Okay, enough, enough of this,” Brand snapped. “We are going to clear a perimeter. Eyes open, people. Let’s go over there—it’s a corner.”

We crossed into the men's department, which was situated, as Brand said, in a corner of the building. Brand took charge of our campsite, clearing a wide, open space where a grouping of mannequins had been. I noticed that he was uncommonly gentle with them—realizing, like I did, that this department store represented more than just space, it also contained potential new bodies for the elementals outside.

After a while Brand glanced around, saw how useless everyone else was, and said, "Go scout the fuck around. Find something useful. Max and Quinn—stay with Ciaran."

The others whispered amongst themselves and split up. I stayed behind, until Brand gave me one of his epic eyerolls. I realized I was "one of the others," and took off.

Somehow we all managed to return to the campsite more or less at the same time. Brand had set up a perimeter—highly functional, but not so big on amenities. I'd need to look for some sleeping bags or blankets.

Brand stared at what each of us had found in our scavenging and rubbed his eyes wearily.

Max was holding a heavy brass drape rod. Quinn held a candle. ("It smells like gingerbread cookies!") Addam had found a box of petrified exercise bars. Ciaran was wearing yellow-lensed aviator sunglasses.

"Rune," Brand said to me.

"I scouted the first floor," I said in a perfectly rehearsed voice.

"You kind of smell like menthol cigarettes."

"That is highly unlikely," I pointed out. "You would have found and destroyed any cigarettes I tried to sneak on the trip."

"I would have. And yet, here we are, in the 1980s."

"I'm pretty sure menthol cigarettes didn't exist in the 1980s," I said.

"That is a lie," he said, just as calmly. He sighed. "Guys, come on. Max, you weighted one end, which makes it a mace, and you have no training in maces. Quinn, do not light that candle, it'll fuck with our sense of smell. Addam... whatever. Snack away. And Ciaran? Those clash with your suit."

"Bite your fat cow tongue," Ciaran said.

"Sit down, all of you," Brand said. "Get some rest. There's still a fuckload of daylight to burn before this thing is active again. Addam—spend time with your brother, and make it good, because if he pulls another Fireball instead of Shield, I will lose my shit on you."

"Maybe you can pick out some clothes you like while we wait," Quinn said to

Max. "You can finally do some shopping."

"What am I going to wear?" Max said. "Did you see all these pants? Why do they have so much fabric at the ankles?"

"This place didn't make a very comfortable transition from the Seventies," I agreed. "But look at that mannequin over there. Where else are you ever going to find a three-piece corduroy suit?"

"I saw it first, and I will fight him for it," Ciaran said.

"Do that," I said. "Brand, can I borrow you for a second?"

"Are you fucking winking again?" he demanded.

"No. Seriously, come check this out."

While the others settled in, I took Brand to the corner of the store completely opposite the men's department.

There was no telling what it had been. Infants, maybe—there were some baby carriages and shattered cribs scattered in the hallway about twenty feet behind us.

Nothing else remained in the department. Twisted and bent remains of clothing racks littered the area, like a forest leveled by a hurricane.

"What am I looking at," Brand said.

"The non-intangible side of whatever this *los desmembrados* is."

Brand swept a slow gaze across the mess. He started pointing. "There and there. Those aren't all the fixtures. There are parts missing. Maybe this isn't just...I don't know, a shit-fest tantrum. Could it have used these for body parts?"

I was half-angry I hadn't jumped to that conclusion myself, and half-impressed, because Brand was part of me, and we took credit for each other's good ideas. "Possible," I said. "The elementals outside certainly took advantage of local hardware. And the ghost in the jewelry store."

"If it has a body, that's good. We can take it apart. You ready for a fight?"

"I could fight," I said, mulling it over.

He gave me a sideways smile, and I smiled back, because we were deeply troubled people. We didn't so much see a world of red flags as we saw a starting line of checkered flags, inviting us to rush forward.

Brand and I walked off the rest of the first floor, looking for, if nothing else, some hideous metal beast biding its time in a remote corner. There was an entire second floor above us, but we decided to save that for a group expedition.

By the time we got back to our base, the others had brought in sleeping bags and

blankets from another department. Max was beating the dust off three beanbag chairs with a baseball bat. Addam had even set up a little tent in the corner, which he presented to me with a proud flourish.

Brand looked at the tent on one side of our camp, and the sleeping bags on the other. He flipped his glare to me.

“What?” I said.

“So you and Addam cozy up there. And I sleep over there? With the boys?”

“And Ciaran,” I said helpfully.

“This is exactly the sort of thing I hoped for when you started dating. Maybe I can take a break from being your bodyguard and just play soft fucking guitar music outside your tent?”

“You play the guitar?” Quinn said happily. “I didn’t think that happened this time. Most of the times it’s drums or nothing.”

“I’m going to borrow Max for a few minutes, and leave the rest of you to sort this out,” I said. I grabbed Max by the sleeve before anyone could stop my getaway.

I dragged Max further into the men’s department. Farther along, past racks of belts and underwear, was an area filled with suits and nice men’s slacks and jackets. A sign labeled it the *Executive Department*. I’d forgotten how blatantly sexist the eighties were in the human world.

“Do you think it’s safe to separate from us? I mean, um, you and Addam in the tent?” Max said.

“No,” I said, but as if I was saying *no, we are not talking about this*, the same tone I used whenever Max probed for cracks in my relationship with Addam. He’d gotten better about it but still had his moments.

“But—”

“No,” I said, again, and grabbed his shoulders. I backed him up to stand next to a smartly-dressed mannequin. “Hmm. You have the same shoulders and waist. Damn, you’re growing, aren’t you? We should get some bigger sizes too.”

“Are we shopping?” he asked.

I looked around. Just because most of my nice clothes were scavenged or gifted didn’t mean I was stupid. Certain cuts of cloth were timeless, and even a department store from the Eighties had something to offer. “We are shopping,” I finally agreed. “There are some nice leather jackets here. And some good dressy clothes. With your colors, I’m thinking we look for softer tones, like gray and tan.”

“Oh,” he said, a soft exhale.

He watched me with quiet eyes as I ran my hands through a pants display, checking the seams on the hems to gauge the quality. The stitching always gives bad

craftmanship away.

“Talk to me,” I said.

“Oh. About?”

“You wanted to come in here,” I said. “Inside the barrier. Why?”

“Why...” He didn’t understand. “Why would I want to stay outside it?”

“Because it’s safe. You and Quinn could have explored the rest of the mall. You literally could have been the first mortal in the world to teach a baby elemental paddy cakes. So why come with us?” I then asked, deceptively casual, “Did the danger excite you?”

“Oh. No. I just...I mean, Quinn and I. We just want to feel useful.”

“Okay. But you need to understand that this,” I circled my hand around us. “Is unusual. Normally it’s sewers or drug dens or some other perfectly horrid setting. Normally we don’t have beanbag chairs.”

“I know. But it’s...”

He seemed frustrated at the question, and I didn’t know why. Which, I suppose, was the entire point of having a conversation.

I planted myself in front of him and stared at his bowed forehead until he reluctantly raised his face. I said, “I would have been surprised. If you’d told me that the danger excited you. You like puzzles and helping people, Max. I’ve seen that. And I’ve also seen that you are scared. I think you’re scared all the time Max. Of your uncle, of the Hanged Man, of your grandmother...”

Max swallowed but, to his credit, didn’t look away.

I said, “But know this. You’re not always going to feel that way. Someday—someday soon—you’re going to start seeing more Wins in your column than Losses, and you’re going to realize you’re a lot less afraid than you were the day before. One day you’re going to be free Max. One day you’re going to *feel* free.”

He closed his eyes and nodded.

I wasn’t sure he believed me, so I put my arms around him, gave him a rough kiss on the head, and squeezed him in a brief hug.

We were all gathered in a circle on folding beach chairs. Night—or at least the cycle of time that this undercity called *night*—was still over eight hours away.

“We should get some rest,” Brand said. “We’ll set two-hour rotations for watch duty. I’ll start with the boys; Addam and Rune next; then Ciaran and the boys.”

“We go twice?” Max said, as if it was a treat.

“Yes, because you’re not going to do anything except scream if a bad guy jumps out. You’re our sirens. Quinn, not one fireball.”

“That almost never happens again,” Quinn whispered. “Really bad stuff on the right.”

“May I steal you for a nap in our luxury tent?” Addam asked me. “Brand and I have worked out an arrangement. There will be no guitar solo.”

“Eh, I can keep him under control, if it comes to that,” I said. “I have a lot of embarrassing childhood stories I could share.”

“In what fucking world?” Brand demanded.

I gave him a look, decided it was a challenge, and accepted. “Brand feathered his bangs in the 1980s.”

Brand’s mouth dropped open.

“I have pictures,” I added.

“That sounds adorable,” Addam said politely while Max and Quinn howled.

“It was not...I was *never* adorable,” Brand said. “And Rune, I meant in what fucking world would you dare share those stories.”

“You really were adorable,” I argued. “Remember when you were five years old? Running around with that little foam stiletto dagger?” I sighed. “I wish we had pictures of that.”

Brand’s mouth opened and closed a few times. I didn’t often outrage him, but this was close. He really had been rather proud of that fake knife.

Finally his eyes narrowed at me and he said, “Rune used to practice superhero quips. He pretended to be standing over bad guys with his hands on his hips while he made puns. My favorite was, ‘Looks like the *Sun was in your eyes.*’”

Now everyone was laughing at both of us, which wasn’t ideal. I grabbed Addam and shoved him towards the tent.

It was a luxury tent, on top of it. Leave it to Addam to find a two-room model.

He’d laid down chenille throws and some fuzzy pillows. We were both fully dressed, but Addam made a show of pulling off his boots. He wore gray socks. Never white, unless he was exercising. Always a darker shade that matched his pants. It seemed weird that I knew that, but I did. I had a boyfriend.

“And the *pièce de resistance*?” He touched a sigil on his belt. Magic rippled through the air, making my ears pop a little as it settled into a slick curtain around us. Addam tried to hide a proud smile. “A privacy spell. We can hear them, but they cannot hear us.”

“Brand can’t hear me if I shout for help?”

“And what will be happening, to make you shout?” Addam asked quietly.

I laughed and squirmed and plumped one of the pillows. When I was done, I saw that Addam hadn’t moved a muscle. His eyes were still on me, and the

expression on his face was....

I didn't know. I couldn't tell. No one *teaches* you these relationship things, I thought in frustration. But the expression didn't look good.

"I made a very large mistake," Addam finally said. "And I think...I think, Rune, that it must be addressed."

"Oh. Okay. But I was thinking instead maybe we can hit that sweet spot between loud sex and gut-wrenching emotion. A quiet spot. Like a nap?"

"I am not a joke to you," Addam said. But not a question.

"Of course not."

"What is happening between us is...something. It is something good. But I fear that I started it on very, very bad footing."

I swallowed, crossed my legs under me, and rocked forward. "This is about sex."

"Yes. No. Somewhat? You know I will not push you on that. Never. Never, and never, and never." The air churned and rippled; my ability to sense the magic of a vow. I'm not even sure Addam knew how *physical* his sincerity always was.

He continued. "Rune, I do not always need to lead our dance. This is your decision, and I give it freely. But that is not what I regret."

"Then what is this about?"

"In the Westlands...our first time. Together. In the shower."

I hadn't expected that. Memories flicked by, growing more explicit as the blood rushed to my face.

"I pushed you. You reciprocated, and you enjoyed it, but I pushed you. And since then, it is as if... I am worried that you're expecting that to happen again, and it alarms you. I did not realize at the time how...rare it is, for you to spend moments like this with someone."

"That's a pretty nice way of saying that I don't date."

"But that is true?"

I shrugged and burrowed into my nest of blankets. Addam didn't try to move closer to me, and I was grateful for that. This topic turned my nerve endings to sandpaper.

"No," I finally admitted. "Or at least, not in a very long time. I tried, in that first decade after the...after what happened. With my court. When I was working for Lord Tower. But the people who seemed interested in me...I don't know if it was me they were seeing. Some were attracted to the scandal. The infamy. Some were... some liked the darker elements. Like it was a story to them. I don't like talking about this, Addam."

"We can stop."

“It’s not you. It’s just...you need to understand. What happened. Atlanteans shun weakness. My father failed to protect his court. I was...assaulted. There’s always shame. But it’s more insidious than that. It’s not...not like a fever. You can treat a fever, right? It’s not like a flood of emotion. You can weather emotion until it passes. It’s like...an absence of emotion. It’s like *erosion*. A trickle of feeling that wears channels into your normal, healthy emotion, and that secret channel is filled with toxins. It’s always there, waiting for me to stumble.” I swore and rubbed at my eyelids. “Ugh! I hate this. Sometimes I want to beat my brain up for not working the way I want it to.”

Too many words. I let them sit there, and kneaded at my knuckles.

“I will not be like those people you dated before,” Addam said softly.

“You aren’t. You haven’t been. Not from the start.”

“And yet here I sit, worried, because I pushed you too hard. I did, Rune. I didn’t...know you. Not well enough. Not enough to understand you need superior trust in another before you...commit.”

“I trust you,” I said through a dry mouth.

“I mean trust me with your heart. With your safety. With *Brand’s* safety. With *Max’s* safety. You require a superior trust. And I will work toward that. As we nap.”

I cracked a weak smile.

And then, out of nowhere, my brain made a connection. “Wait. What sort of understanding?”

“Excuse me?”

“You said you came to an understanding with Brand before you carted me in here.”

Addam looked contrite, but a little proud and oblivious.

“No, just don’t sit there and shrug mysteriously,” I said. “Listen to the words I’m saying. You somehow *compensated* Brand to spend *intimate time* with me. There’s another word for that sort of arrangement.”

He paled.

I made a show of opening up the blanket next to me, and snuggled into my pillow. “I better not have come fucking cheap,” I said.

Things can change quickly. That’s been true from the very beginning, when the nameless void snapped its fingers and produced the raw stuff of planets, potato chips, and everyone you’ve ever loved. Sometimes you don’t even properly appreciate how quickly immutable change has happened until you feel your heart jackhammering in your chest and realized what caused it.

I woke up alone. I heard Ciaran's confused voice outside, and realized he'd woken up alone as well. A stroke-worthy surge of adrenaline and fear flashed through my body like a fire.

I ripped the tent's entrance off its zipper track and scrambled out.

"Is Addam with you?" Ciaran said in a hushed tone.

"No. The boys?" I swallowed. "Brand?"

"I don't know. We're still hours from the night cycle down here."

"There are no..." I jerked in a ragged circle. "No signs of struggle. I can't—" The air wouldn't fit down my throat. *Why couldn't I why couldn't I why couldn't I*—"I can't feel Brand. I can't feel him."

"Calmly, Sun. What do you notice? Think. You're *good* at this."

"The...the tent was zipped up. Could Addam have been teleported out of it? Or...compelled? We know the creature has some sort of psionic proficiency."

Ciaran and I had strong resistances to mental attacks—me more than most. Mentally compelling me was not easy—but mentally compelling my family? I was a fool to have not put safeguards in place.

Flames danced in my eyes and burnished the air around us. I heard wind in my ears, the physical metaphor of my rising power, and felt my hair began to whip about my head.

I stalked from our makeshift campsite toward the front of the store, sticking to the tiled path that curved back around Women's and toward Cosmetics. When the barrier to the department store was in sight I raised an arm toward it.

"Sun!" Ciaran yelled. Then, more anxiously, "Rune!"

"We entered this store on false intelligence. People under my protection are now endangered. Those creatures are not without their own abilities, and they will come to my aid *now!*"

"Rune, please, I need you to think. What can the elementals do that we cannot? You are a son of the Arcanum; I am one of its principalities. We will handle this."

"*I cannot feel my Companion,*" I said through gritted teeth.

"We will find them. But the community that exists down here is special. It is precious and fragile, and the aggressions of the world would destroy it in a clumsy, thick-fingered instant. It is worth our protection, and our charge today has not changed. Let us find the ghost and end it."

"My sigil load is..." I closed my eyes and felt my Aspect pulse like a migraine. "It's all for stealth and investigation." I hadn't stored too many aggressive spells. I hadn't thought I'd need it. Hindsight is just fucking like that: so clear that you can usually see its teeth in the rear-view mirror.

“Rune, you have your sabre, and your eyelashes are on fire,” Ciaran said tartly. “Now *focus*. I cleared the first floor myself earlier today. If this thing has a nest, it’s not down here. Whatever has happened, I suggest we move upstairs. I may be able to scry for a location as we walk.”

“So you think they were compelled to walk away from us?”

“Yes, but that’s not what worries me. Did you really not notice Addam leaving?”

“No.”

“Because he tends to drape himself about you like a baby elephant. He’s not subtle about it.”

“I didn’t notice him leaving,” I repeated in a rising voice.

“Then we have to entertain the possibility that we were affected by the compulsion too—it kept us quiet or pliable, even if it didn’t compel. And while I’ve made certain...advancements in my own abilities since that disaster at Farstryke, you’re better at psionic resistance than I. So I’d recommend either we hit it *very* hard and *very* fast; or we find a stealthier plan.”

“I’m going to hit it. Now. Escalator is over there,” I said, and headed toward it while shaking my wrist in a decades-old command.

My sabre softened and stretched, and the warm metal flowed into my hand and hardened into a hilt shape. I wanted the comfort of a blade, and, after a second’s focus, liquid sparks ran up from the hilt and hardened into a garnet gladius.

The escalator was past a department filled with purses, grated steps locked in place by grime and petrified grease. I led with the tip of my sabre, and cobwebs flared away like dynamite fuses.

The top floor was not an ideal staging ground for a rescue. The exact opposite, if possible. While the entire first floor was filled with waist-high racks of clothing, the second floor was a warren of walls, partitions, and household room displays.

“Fuck this,” I said, and concentrated on the gold chain around my ankle. The spell slid loose, and my stomach felt like it was full of carbonated soda until the magic stabilized. I lifted a foot off the ground, and another, and then Levitated eight feet into the air above the maze. I peeled off some of the magic and extended it to Ciaran.

“Your old standby,” Ciaran said. “Such an economical magic. Can you spot anything?” He twirled into the air beside me.

The working lights were sparser up here. In the dusty gloom, I saw a twisted web of support beams and metal shelves, and maybe, just maybe, the faintest, faintest whisper of my Companion bond.

Ciaran saw the nest and said, “Flank it. I’ll take left. Look out for each other.”

He hunched down like he was on a surf board and swung away from me.

I decided a better plan was to let Ciaran flank *me* as I shot directly *toward* the thing that had my people.

My anger had me hyper alert, so I wasn't entirely ambushed when something leapt at me from a fake living room display.

I had the briefest glimpse of too many metal legs before crashing into a candy store made of three walls and no ceiling. A long glass bin cracked, and a flood of multicolored taffy wrapped in wax paper rained down on me. I took all of a second to curse fanciful Eighties mall architecture, then the spider-like creature landed on top of a cash register.

It was not nearly as large as *los desmembrados* in the jewelry shop, which led to some quick calculations. Before I could shout a warning to Ciaran, the many-legged creature poised to spring. I took my Levitation—all of it, every second of the spell's potential duration—and expended it in a single thrust. The metal spider bulleted twenty feet into the air and smashed into the ceiling. Bits of metal and fiberglass clattered down, and I felt the shiver of release as the construct's existence expired.

My Aspect was spreading. Occasional licks of fire ran down my arms and hit the ground as sparks. I strode out of the coffee shop, turned right, and moved in the direction of the nest. I'd need to shout a warning to Ciaran—if the creature was a legion-class entity, it meant it had the ability to split itself off into separate constructs.

Ciaran appeared to be keeping busy, though. To my left, entire displays yanked towards the back of the room. Ciaran was using Wind magic to create clear lines of site. Between that and his flanking plan, he was showing off a good knowledge of field tactics, which I suspect he didn't mean to.

Another spider construct came at me from the left.

I saw it in enough time to sever one of its appendages with my sabre, but not soon enough to avoid getting clocked. I staggered into a bedroom display, and hit the mattress with a roll. As clouds of dust mushroomed above me, I came off the other side while melting my sabre back into hilt form, and shot three firebolts into the construct's central mass. It took another four to completely destroy it, and by then I had sweat on my forehead. The sabre was a powerful device, but it was fueled off my lifeforce, and what it took it never gave back.

I ran out of the bedroom display, past fake guest room décor: bamboo furniture, glass and chrome, lace and ruffles. I ducked under a hanging series of drapes and prepared to scramble out the other side, but another metal construct slammed into me head-on.

I fell backward and the thing—which had a garland of green tinsel wrapped around its middle—pinned me. My concentration broke as the creature slashed open one of my cheeks and blood ran into my eye.

“They’re here!” Ciaran’s voice filled my head. *“Home appliances! Not a compulsion—something strong, some sort of geas!”*

That word. Just that word. Geas—a mental compulsion so strong it was nearly a form of puppetry. The complete enslavement of an identity. This thing had put my people under a geas. They had put *Brand* under a *geas*.

One second I was pinned; the next my Aspect went apeshit.

Burning drapes swirled in the air. The construct was an incandescent pile of metal melting into a shimmering puddle. I didn’t stand up: hot air currents pushed me to my feet. I ran toward the corner of the second floor; it felt like every footstep covered twice the distance, and fires flared and died in my passage. I was all Aspect; all rage. I didn’t have a single calm thought to hold onto.

Ciaran had cleared the department. I saw this, but didn’t see it, through the fugue of my anger. Glass and plastic lay shattered on the ground—broken blenders, toasters, coffee percolators. Shelving was overturned, flung to the periphery, and Ciaran was floating in front of a massive creature at least twice as tall as a person. Every time the creature took a many-armed swipe at the Ciaran, he twisted a tendril of Wind around the limb and pulled it off balance.

Behind all of this, lined up against the wall, were Brand, Addam, Max and Quinn. Blank faced. Controlled.

“Mine,” I whispered. Fire splashed around me, as bright as daylight. “Mine mine mine *mine mine mine*.”

Too late, the creature realized the real threat. It whipped a hand snared by Wind to its far left, dragging Ciaran off balance and clearing a path between it and me.

I didn’t speak or move. My power was all around me, spread in phoenix wings. Like the crack of thunder, my voice filled the building. *“MINE!”*

Our Companion bond exploded into motion. I fed power through it, like a needle of adrenaline to the heart. Brand jerked from the geas, took all of two seconds to see there was a monster in front of him; that I was on fire; that Ciaran was picking his way out of a pool of shattered cocktail glasses. Then he was running forward and leaping up the back of the spider construct. He managed to hook a hand under one limb and the creature’s head, and was able to partially yank them back to expose its center mass.

My Aspect receded. My thoughts were my own again. I swiped a hand over my ankh and felt my fingernails ache with the release of the spell. I extended an arm

and sent the second Shatter spell I'd stored for the trip into the heart of the beast.

Brand tumbled from its back and landed on both feet as the creature broke down into its component parts. He ran backwards to me, keeping *los desmembrados* in his line of sight, but he didn't have to worry.

"It's disincorporated," I said. "We're okay."

"I...had the strangest dreams," Brand murmured.

"Don't think about it," I said. "Is there a cut on my face? I feel like there's a cut on my face."

"There is, along with most of your blood," Brand said, and shook off the stupor. He blinked at me, and that wonderful familiar annoyance flooded his expression. "Would you touch your fucking healing sigil already?"

I opened my mouth to respond, and the real monster dropped from the ceiling.

It was the size of a small school bus. Its body—formed from the same metal shelves and fixtures—had as much agility as a real spider, flattening and stretching its body with stunning dexterity.

Brand yelled. I looked down and saw that a sharpened metal pole was sticking out of my abdomen. Before I could wonder how it got there, it jerked me into the air.

Things went hazy for a little bit. I don't think much time passed before I was tossed onto a dirty cement floor.

Blood was pouring from a hole in my stomach; my Aspect was gone; and I'd dropped my sabre.

Los desmembrados landed next to me and bristled. Some clothing hangers caught inside the jumble of metal parts made a rattling sound as it paced around me.

I touched my cameo necklace, felt the ivory outline of a woman's face, let the Healing magic flood into my palms. I touched my stomach and cheek in turn, healing the worst of the damage before the magic sputtered out. I needed Addam—he had a much larger supply of Healing spells.

"I'm not sure if you're brilliant or lucky," I told the prowling ghost. I paused, spoke a few words, and sent honeyed balls of light into the air. They revealed a large, empty, dusty backroom. I took another breath. "I've never heard of any *desmembrados* that's evolved like you have. But I'm not quite sure you understand exactly what you're facing."

A girl's voice shrieked, "I'll climb up to the top of the antennae if I want to! Just go away and leave me alone!"

"If you wanted to be left alone, then why did you fight?" I demanded. "Why did you exert mental compulsion on my people?"

The ghost seemed agitated about that, and turned in anxious circles. Another voice—another death memory that had bound the spirit to earth—said, “Milly, I’m not sure we should go in the pond at night. We can get your dolly from the raft tomorrow. It’s just a toy, you don’t need it.”

“You cast a geas on them. That is not a toy. No good creature uses geas magic; it is anathema. I can’t leave you alone—I have a responsibility.”

Another death memory: a woman’s wispy fear. “I want to live, Sir. I’ll give you all the money in my purse, just let me go.”

“You cannot—”

And again: “I want to live, Sir. I’ll give you all the money in my purse, just let me go.”

I watched the creature pace around me. Waiting for me to react. Or judge? I didn’t know what it expected of me. The elementals needed this space. Were their rights more important than *los desmembrados*? Could they coexist?

And then I thought about the geas. It had taken my friends, had taken *Brand*, so easily. It had even managed a measure of control on Ciaran and me. To put someone under a geas was abhorrent. It was against everything I believed in.

Two swinging doors burst open, and there they were, coming to my rescue.

The ghost said, in a young boy’s voice, “Maybe we shouldn’t poke the nest. Maybe we should let them alone? I don’t have my pen on me, Kyle.”

Brand looked like he wanted to pull a cannon out of his pocket and literally blow a hole in the universe. But Addam’s shaking hand on his shoulder held him back. Even more surprising? He didn’t try to stop Quinn as the teen stepped forward.

“Rune,” Quinn said in a small voice. “We should talk somewhere else. We don’t...we can just go back outside. We should do that.”

“Are you saying it won’t attack if we don’t attack it?” I said.

“Yes,” Quinn said in relief, as if my question was an opportunity. “We—”

“No,” Max said. He was watching Quinn closely. “It’s okay, Quinn. You’re too good a guy to say what you need to say. Me? I’m a pretty good guy too, but in the sort of way that’s comfortable making decisions you can’t. Rune—it’s lying. It wants freedom. It wants more death. It will kill, and grow, and kill, and grow. Quinn saw it. It’s not a spider—it’s a tick. A parasite.”

The creature reared. In a fluid motion, Addam swiped a hand along three of his platinum discs, released the tripled power of Telekinesis, and sent *los desmembrados* crashing into the metal wall behind it.

Ciaran stepped up beside Addam, released a burst of Wind, and added his strength to Addam’s. “Sun, do you remember the spell I used in the Westlands to

break through the wall to the patio?”

“I do,” I said.

“The edge of the translocation ward is behind that wall. Do you understand?”

“I do,” I said.

Ciaran touched one of the fingerbones hiding under his suit’s neckline, and flicked his fingers at me. I felt the ownership of the spell settle into my hands—not unlike Shatter, in that it made the edges of my fingernails brighten with gathered blood.

I strode up to the wall where the ghost was pinned. I murmured, in a sound lost under the creaking of metal and thrashing of magic, “What you could have been.”

As soon as I touched the wall, the cement crackled and thinned. Brittle snapping sounds filled the air, and then the wall—now as slight as slate—cracked to reveal a swirling purple light behind it. As *los desmembrados* pressed against the boundary, indigo sparks shot out, and the metal began to sag and melt.

A hundred trapped death memories filled the air like a panicked crowd, like a stadium stampede. I put my hands over my ears as I backed towards my friends.

It didn’t last very long, and no one said anything until it was over, and something unique and powerful passed from the world.

THE SUNKEN MALL 7

The portal spun in patterns of indigo and butterscotch as our supplies were ferried home, along with a few carefully chosen gifts. Addam had more or less insisted we take only what they offered, out of respect for the elementals' needs.

"Do you know how much the jewelry here would be worth topside?" Brand complained quietly.

"Less than the cost to our sense of nobility," Addam said.

"Would it?" Brand said. "Because I'm pretty sure your disappointed-Dad voice doesn't work on me."

On the other side of the sloped theater seating, a group of mannequins were watching us with rapt thrill. One of them wore a Santa Claus suit; and the other had tried to fit parts of a denture set into its unpainted eye sockets.

Santa Claus said, too loudly, "They fight amongst each other. They really should consider adding some females of their species to their clan."

"Okay, you all stay here, I have something to do," I said. I pointed at Brand before he could open his mouth, so he just shrugged.

I left the theater and walked back to the lobby. A slow trickle of mannequins carried items from the exit, both fascinated and uncomfortable with this unstable part of the translocated mall. I'd suggested to the Emperor they research magical wards that would buttress the ceilings. This could become an entirely usable space, if they put enough work into it.

By the concession stand, the Empress waited. She dipped her head upon seeing me, and gestured to a door behind her. She said, "I was just about to summon you. I believe you were interested in making our Lord Sun's acquaintance? He will be along shortly. You can wait in here. It will afford you a moment of privacy."

My heart started beating faster. I gave her a small smile and walked to the door.

"Thank you," she said as I passed. "I am humbled by your injuries on our

behalf. We shall call you friends: now, and after, and someday now again.”

“I appreciate the clothing you supplied. My ward is touched by the gift. It’s been fun, my Lady.”

“As said.”

She nodded, and backed away to let me open the door.

Inside was a small, cramped office for managers and security officials. It was empty, so I wasted time by studying the VHS tapes lined on a shelf. Security footage from a faded era.

It was a longish wait, but eventually the door opened, and a mannequin entered. He wore the custodial outfit I’d seen among other members of the Sun Court, though the name *Emil* was stitched over his breast. Not my father’s name. Not my father’s black hair, to the mannequin’s fake brown. Or the glass blue eyes to my father’s glowing orange. But, still, I felt something in the moment not unlike kinship.

“They say you have yet to take the throne following your father’s death,” the mannequin told me, taking the seat by the desk. His voice had music in it—wispy fluting notes.

“I have not.” Taking a chair of my own, I turned it around to face him. “Someday. I’ve got a lot to learn.”

“It seems to me you’ve learned quite a bit already in your life,” he remarked, amused. “Your adventures here will become legend.”

“Cross-stitch that on a pillow and mail it to my Companion, if you would,” I said. And then I made an expression of distaste. “Some legend, though. I nearly got tricked by an evil beast, and got a spear shoved through my stomach. Not exactly a tribute to my father’s court.”

Lord Sun—the mannequin Emil—watched me for a quiet moment. Before it became uncomfortable, he said, “May I share some advice with you?”

“Of course.”

“You came here, in a way, to talk with your father. Did you not?”

“I suppose. Maybe? I was just curious to meet you.”

“Perhaps, my child, when you hear the words *Lord Sun*, you should stop looking for his reflection, and instead see your own.”

I blinked.

“And the second piece of advice is this. Before I entered, I sat outside and watched. I watched as each of your people found an excuse to loiter or pass by. To keep watch on you. To make sure you were safe. Every single one of them—back and forth, back and forth. You, Lord Sun, appear to be loved. You should accept

that, because the people you love, the people you draw to you, will always be part of your success. As they were today.”

I looked at my lap. Thought about it. “It’s very nice to meet you, Lord Sun.”

“And you, Lord Sun.”

The portal closed behind us, making a sound like a finger snap.

We left out stuff in the sanctum, and moved to the back yard. It was very late, and moths batted against the porch lantern. The lights in Queenie’s tiny little cottage by the back fence turned on, and she joined the group, quickly evaluating just how much food we needed to settle down.

Ciaran left, and because he was Ciaran, he turned his goodbye into a glorious exit to stage left. Glitter and feather boas were involved—he’d left the mall with his own gifts.

Afterwards, Addam started making sounds about leaving with Quinn, but Quinn jumped from the picnic table and said, “Oh no! No, no, most of the time we pitch a tent back here and have a really, really fun time.”

“Do we?” Addam asked.

“Almost always.”

Addam looked at Quinn very hard and said, “Then most of the time I could have brought camping gear, if I knew in advance, so I wouldn’t have to pay to have someone bring it to us.”

Quinn watched Addam just as hard, and then said, dead serious, “Most of the time the people you pay really could use the extra bump in her paycheck. It makes a lot of people happy.”

“Oh he’s good,” Brand whispered to me.

So Addam and Quinn were staying, giving Queenie and her second-wind a whole new purpose to obsess over.

Brand, Max, and I found ourselves on the front stoop. I’d already given Max something I’d snuck out of the mall: three boxes of colored lights.

“Not sure they’ll work, but I like what you did on the bushes over there.”

Max held the boxes in his lap like the entire concept of a gift confused him. “Thank you,” he said quietly.

“Does this mean you forgive us for not shopping for your Equinox gift sooner?” Brand said. “Because we really, really, really fucking tried to make up for that.”

“You don’t owe me anything. And today was...amazing.”

“It kind of was,” I said.

I got up and walked to the sidewalk, then turned to stare at Half House.

Things were changing. The day was coming when this wonderful little home would be too small for us. But not just yet. For right now, it was still home, and it was filled with many, many people I cared about. Loved. My misfits.

“I wanted to drink beer,” Brand complained. “You’ve got a sappy look on your face. I’m not going to let you *start* drinking beer with a look like that on your face.”

“Just thinking about misfits. We’re an odd bunch.”

“Yeah, and it’s your ass on the misfit’s throne,” Brand said.

The air seemed to start moving quickly around me, the way it did when a powerful vow was made. The way it did when our everyday, stumbling life was touched by prophecy or import, by graves and gravity.

The Misfit Throne.

“Someday,” I said, “It may just be.” And I smiled, thinking back. “It’ll be my reflection, after all.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Malls, like human beings, have a life cycle. They're born to much fanfare; they rise to their prime; and then they decline as newer and shinier malls take their place.

My own childhood matched the hay day of the Worcester Galleria. Some of my best memories came from it, especially during the holiday season.

In the course of writing this story, I learned that the Galleria had been demolished years ago, which made using it as a setting a bittersweet nostalgia. So: Thanks for the memories, Worcester Galleria. I haven't forgotten you.

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