



THE GREAT ATLANTEAN



🌀 BATTLE 🌀  
ROYALCHEMY

A Tarot Novella

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## Chapter One

I was bored and I wanted something to happen.

That's what I was thinking when something happened, as if I hadn't spent my entire life as an Atlantean, as if I wasn't constantly surrounded by near-sentient magic, as if I hadn't been drop-kicked by fate more times than I cared to remember.

It started off small, at least. I walked into the ballroom—a manilla folder in my hand filled with loose receipts—and Brand said, “There’s a wasp.”

I took a step back into the hallway. “If you see a wasp, why is there still a wasp? Why not just kill—”

Brand’s eyes flicked up to me, then flicked sharply to the left. I leaned back through the archway and saw Corbie standing on an ottoman, looking worriedly at a black smudge on the floor.

Brand said, tonelessly, “Corbie wonders if it’s missing its wasp mother and father.”

“And maybe it has aunts, too,” Corbie said.

A door in the hallway opened, and I smelled spice. A second later the source of it was standing behind me, lips close to my ear. “I believe it has been inside too long and is fading,” Addam said. “We’ll just nudge it outside. I brought a dust pan.”

There was more commotion. I heard Max say, “Why are you just standing there?”

“We heard there was a bee,” Quinn added.

Anna didn’t say anything, she just ducked and squeezed around me. She took in Corbie, Brand, and what they were looking at. Her eyes didn’t quite roll upwards in a mimicry of Brand, but it was close.

“Just tell Corbie it’s going to live on the farm with our hamster,” she said.

“Can we visit Hermann?” Corbie asked excitedly.

“And tell Corbie there are cookies hidden in the attic,” she added.

“Stop sending him to the attic,” I said. “We’ll take care of this. Give me the dustpan and broom.”

Everyone tromped into the ballroom, staying near the margins and giving the middle of the cavernous space a safe distance. The smudge on the floor revealed itself to be a very sedate wasp.

Addam handed me a dustpan and brush, not a broom. I thought he’d have gotten something with a long handle. I started wondering the best way to pass it to Brand when Brand made an exasperated sound, walked over, and snatched the dustpan out of my hand. I noticed, belatedly, that he also held a small empty vase.

“I’ll trap it,” Brand said. “You slide that folder underneath. Save the dustpan for defense.”

That seemed like an easy plan. Brand held the vase upside down and covered the wasp without any problem. But when I tried to slide the folder under the overturned vase, the wasp simply slid in the direction of the folder. I saw its head twitching, so I knew it was alive.

“It’s not that difficult,” Brand said.

“It doesn’t want to fly up.”

“Well you need to get it to fly up so we can cover the mouth of the vase,” he said.

Behind me, I saw Anna taking off her shoe. If the situation wasn’t solved soon, we’d be buying Corbie a new stuffed animal as a distraction. So I put a little more oomph into my shove, and promptly severed what appeared to be one of the wasp’s legs.

I sucked in a breath as Brand whispered, “You did not.”

“About those cookies in the attic,” I said loudly.

Then the wasp hissed into the air, bounced off the vase, and went back to sitting on the marble, a little pulsing dot of fury.

Brand fell back on his most reliable methods. He leaned toward the vase and shouted, “Get the fuck up!”

The wasp rose, and both of us jerked back—while Addam, his metal hand gloved in swirling Telekinetic energy, brushed aside the folder and vase and brought the wasp before him. He walked calmly over to a French door, opened it, and released the wounded creature.

“Sometimes it’s much more climactic,” Quinn said.

“Rune didn’t even run around or anything,” Max complained.

That was the exact moment when Brand’s phone vibrated. He pulled it out, read a text, and closed his eyes. He said, quietly, “What did you do.”

Despite the million people that could refer to, and the million things it could be about, everyone looked at me.

As unsurprised as I was to be dragged toward the solarium, Max made a shocked, bleating sound as Brand grabbed his collar and brought him along.

“Are you sure you don’t just want to talk to Rune?” Max said.

“Are you the one who manages Rune’s calendar?” Brand asked while shoving us both into the solarium’s wide, open space. It was flush with sunlight from the many window panels, but we hadn’t yet been able to find a large enough table to go in the middle. This would be where I held court sessions, when I finally got around to accepting that court sessions were the sort of thing I had to do. Max had volunteered to keep track of my meetings and engagements.

“So, you’re saying it’s really just Max you want to talk to,” I clarified.

“Which of you,” Brand said, “took money to be a celebrity judge for some fucking alchemy contest.”

The automatic denial on my lips was punctured by a slow, leaking *ohhhh*. Max cupped one of his hands in the other, probably to hide the direction of where he was pointing.

“In my defense,” I said, “celebrity is a strong word.”

“Don’t I fucking know it,” Brand said. “You really did this? This is something you did, and thought I’d be all casual about?”

“I agreed to it a while ago! Even before what happened with the Hanged Man. They can’t expect me to go anymore, right? I’m an Arcana.” Brand just stared, so I added another, waning, “Right?”

“It doesn’t matter what anyone wants,” Brand said. “Mayan called. Lord Tower wants to make sure you’re still attending. Something’s going on, and he wants a member of the Arcanum onsite. What the fuck is this contest, Rune?”

“They call it *Battle Royalchemy*. The island’s alchemists compete for some trophy. It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s not a big deal that you agreed to go on a televised show,” he said.

“It’s not—” I checked myself. Was I right? I was! “No, they’ve never televised it before.”

“They’ve never had an Arcana judge before. Mayan said they’re very excited about it. He sent me a long text filled with all the fucking ways it complements my duty to keep you safe.”

Max raised his hand, but slowly. “I put it on the calendar like I was supposed to. Am I excused?”

“Did you tell me about it?” Brand said.

“Rune said he wanted to surprise you.”

“Did he? Because I *love* Rune’s surprises. Like that time he took his throne without any warning. And—”

Max’s expression fell. “I was a surprise, wasn’t I? He surprised you with me once.”

Brand stopped mid-swear. He even reddened a little, which only proved that Max’s shameless ruse was working, because Brand didn’t get just how much Max had learned from being around Quinn.

“Why,” Brand said to me, taking a breath, “would the Tower care if someone gets killed during this contest?”

Threads of real-world concern were beginning to worm their way through my abject denials. The Tower wouldn’t call unless there was a consequence he was worried about. I said, “The best alchemists from all the Greater Houses—even Arcana courts—compete for a trophy. Mayan said there’s a target?”

“Mayan said he has intel, details to follow. This is court shit?”

“If an Arcana’s or Greater House’s master alchemist gets murdered? Maybe at the hands of a rival house? Yeah, it’s court shit. Not ours, but it could cause problems.” I added the most vital point of all, saying, “The important thing is that it turned out to be lucky I accepted the invite.”

“And I will find so many ways to thank you,” Brand said. He did a half eye-roll, which meant he was turning his irritation into fuel and ideas. “It’s in two weeks. We’ve got a lot of work to do. They have us booked at the convention center. I’ll look into the onsite security and make inroads. Max, you’re on research—contestants, past contest history. Rune, I want you to sit down and think very, very hard about any other surprises you’re planning.”

“Is this a good time to ask questions?” Max asked.

“Absolutely,” Brand said. “Drop them off in the suggestion box I put into the room across from my bedroom. It’s in the shape of a big porcelain bowl.”

He stalked out of the room, as if he wasn’t on his way to the supply closet to start a three-ring binder filled with a thousand questions and answers.

## Chapter Two

I strode into the kitchen while tightening a leather arm bracer that held one of my newer sigils. Brand and Max were already waiting for me with duffel bags at their feet. We'd be staying onsite for the duration of the competition's final rounds, which would last all weekend.

"Ready?" I said.

Brand looked a little nonplussed. "No coffee whines?"

"Nope."

"You don't want coffee," he said. "You're just springing out of bed and ready to go."

"I do not, and I am," I confirmed.

"Because...?"

"Because I woke up to a six-year-old whispering, *It's okay, I just need one eyelash for a wish*. Let's go check into a hotel for a couple days."

A limousine was idling outside for us—a black stretchy thing that looked like the 1980s. We threw our things in the back and climbed in after them, despite the driver's hovering comments about trunk space.

His chatty nature continued as we did a seven-point turn to drive back down the long driveway. Within thirty seconds we knew what every button did, and how happy he was to be driving us. Then the man said, "Well, this was an easy pick up. Most places around here have armed booths."

Brand, who was closest to the partition, leaned over it just a shade. "Your name is Vincent. You've worked with Fleet Finlay for seventeen years. You have a nice pension, good life insurance for your husbands and three children. No weapon permits on file. No record, though you did something stupid in Amsterdam when you were fourteen, but the record is sealed under juvenile laws."

The car slowed for a second, and I caught a corner of his wide eyes in the rearview mirror.

Brand said, “I *am* the armed booth.”

“Would you be wanting the partition up, Lords?” Vincent stammered, and I barely had time to shape my lips to a *Y* before the panel began sliding closed.

“I wonder how many more Solstice cards we’d get if you’d both let me do the talking,” Max said.

“Don’t you have newsfeeds to be reading?” Brand said.

Max—who was charged with scanning reader comments related to last night’s show to identify anything troubling—pulled out his phone, adjusted the backseat temperature, and settled into doing that teenager thing where he fake-ignored us.

Brand leaned back. And *smiled* at me. That was the first warning.

I waited and I waited. A few streets later, he commented, almost casually, “I got a copy of the contract.”

“What contract?”

“For your appearance. For the ten thousand dollars you got for two days’ work. I didn’t recognize the routing number for the transfer, though.”

*Oh shit.* I slammed shut the bond between us, which was an overreaction, because I saw the tightening between his eyes acknowledging it.

Deciding which sword to fall on, I said, “It’s nothing. A slush fund.”

“*A slush fund,*” he repeated.

“Almost literally. I think I’ve only used it at the gas station.”

“Ten thousand dollars for slushies and gas,” he said.

“Well. I mean. We live such a long time.”

“You guys keep separate bank accounts?” Max asked, and he had a worried, *daddies-are-fighting* look on his face.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Brand said, and dismissed the subject, which wouldn’t have even fooled Vincent by this point.

The contest’s final rounds would be recorded in a building that began its life as a Siberian missile silo.

Decommissioned decades ago, the Hex Throne had purchased and translocated it. The basic structure was ideal for their needs: building space above, at, and below ground level, which was ideal for a whole slew of magics that might appeal to the diverse needs of a convention center.

The structure we now approached had been retrofitted beyond all

recognition. It was a metal and crystal tower-like structure with three main sections: a rotating skyscraper top broken into five levels; a generous surface building; and another series of levels far beneath the ground.

Its magic had a tinny echo to it, not at all like normal building residue. I'd always wondered if it came from the *type* of trauma unique to missile silos. Its imbued emotion came from being an object of radiant fear to all who lived around it—not necessarily dark deeds done on the site itself.

I'd heard they'd used biosphere technology in recent upgrades. I wasn't sure what that meant, but Brand answered the unspoken question by saying, in an aggrieved voice, "It's fucking snowing up top."

Vincent sped off rather quickly, but a phalanx of concierges and valets descended on us. At least three of them tried to take our duffel bags, but Brand answered each request by making eye contact and saying *no*, which was very effective.

Finally, a giant bear of a man with dark skin, platinum hair, and a Bluetooth device in his ear clapped everyone away from us and stood there beaming.

"I am Master Alchemist Mosi, producer of Battle Royalchemy. It is such a sincere, sincere pleasure to have such an august personality as yourself as one of our finalist judges. The three remaining contestants and our regular judges are most eager to meet you." He leaned closer. "I must say, stories of you battling ancient monsters in the Westlands are most exciting."

I opened my mouth to say the stories were exaggerated, at which point Brand gave me a look to say *you will fucking not*, so I shut my mouth. He did not appreciate my modesty in public.

Instead, I said, "Thank you. We look forward to a more private conversation about all the logistics."

"Of course, my Lord Sun. Please, please, come inside."

With that, the crowd of hovering attendants split, and we were funneled through the wide glass doors into a massive, building-wide atrium.

The ground structure of the convention center was designed for fanfare. Most of the serious conference rooms were above or below-ground, leaving this floor for pomp and circumstance. I could see why. It was rather exceptional, with the glass-and-steel-beamed dome, and the

many twisting, moving, scenic stairways that took people slowly up to the skyscraper levels. The area was broken up by several restaurants and ballrooms. The one closest to us had a bamboo theme, with lots of clusters of real foliage and magical water sculptures.

Mosi said, "Please feel free to eat or rest, as you will. We can discuss whatever logistics you like. The first of two final rounds will begin in the morning. As I'm sure you know, we use Atlantean image recording for the events. It allows a much more authentic expression of emotion and competition. It's a bit strange if you're used to camera and microphones, but rather lovely to look at. We can tour the studio later."

"We'll rest and unpack," Brand said. "Make sure everyone onsite knows who I am, and defers to me on security issues. Is that clear?"

Mosi blinked in confusion for a second, but said nothing as the gears in his mind worked. I could feel my eyes start burning, because it was not alright to know who I was but not Brand. Then Mosi exclaimed, with a finger snap, "Ah yes, Lord Saint John. We are honored to have Lord Sun's Companion on site as well."

"This is my assistant, Matthias Saint John," Brand said. "Same goes for him."

"Excellent, excellent, so many of us becoming friends, it is wonderful," Mosi boomed. He waved his hands behind us, and a young man with long, flyaway black hair ran up. He blinked at us from behind eyeglasses, and didn't exude the slightest hint of magic.

"This is," Mosi said, and paused. "Er...One of the many Brians. Americans, you know. Brian is a university chemistry student, serving as an intern. I've assigned him to you."

Brand pulled out a note pad and made a quick note. He sighed and said, "How many students?"

Brian, not sure if he was being addressed, said, "Three of us, Sir. Lord. Your lord."

I got a glimpse of the page before Brand put it away. He had a section that said, "Bad Guys" with no names under it; an empty section that said "Most Likely Bad Guys;" and under the third section labeled, "Collateral Damage," he'd written *Fucking College Kids*.

Mosi said, "Brian, will you show Lord Sun and his entourage up to their suites?"

“Up?” Brand said.

“Of course. Only the best views for our guests!”

Brand angled a look at the pretty snowstorm buffeting the upper levels of the skyscraper, then angled a look down to me, another moment in a string of moments where he’d remind me this was all my fault.

“Actually...” Max said, and pointed over to the restaurant. “I think we should check in with some friends first.”

That was the first time I spotted the animated, blue-haired head, its owner widely gesticulating to the rhythm of a story, while Layne Dawncreek listed raptly across the table.

## Chapter Three

I did not appreciate how everyone watched my face for a reaction. I honestly didn't. It was as if they expected me to explode, and were counting off the clock ticks.

But...

But Layne was sixteen years old and under my protection. They lived in my court. And here they were, out in the city, and I knew—I *knew*—I was about to find out that they hadn't told anyone where they were. Worse, Ciaran's eyes had narrowed at Layne, giving me the added sense that Ciaran wasn't aware of it either.

I wasn't upset Layne was with Ciaran. Ciaran was helping Layne—with their magic, with their PTSD. I trusted Ciaran. Or at least, I'd decided that if I *couldn't* trust Ciaran, then I couldn't trust anyone, because my instincts were fucked.

That was when the principality—whose hair was sometimes blue, sometimes green, and had been known to change mid-conversation—raised a hand for a waiter and said, “Lord Sun needs a slice of chocolate cake. I know it's early, but quickly.”

“Hello, Layne,” I said, and my voice was too quiet, so I made a show of clearing my throat. “I didn't realize you were off the estate.”

“We're just having tea,” they said hastily.

Brand groaned. “Stop baiting him, Layne. Max, why not take Layne up to our rooms? Rune needs cake.”

“Do I get cake?” Max asked, but was smart enough to pick up on non-verbal cues, because he grabbed Layne, Mosi, and One of the Many Brian Interns and booked it for the nearest moving stairway.

“I have an idea,” Ciaran said before I could speak. “Let's freely share information. I suspect a convergence of storylines.”

“Did Layne tell Corinne that they left the estate?” I asked bluntly.

“I am suddenly uncertain,” Ciaran admitted. “Have you specifically told Layne to inform Corinne of their whereabouts?”

“Layne is *sixteen years old*. Is that specific enough?”

I’d never—not once that I could remember—seen Ciaran falter. But a dumbstruck look on his face was quickly swallowed by genuine laughter. “Rune Sun, if you think you don’t need to set ground rules with teenagers just because they technically understand the English language, then the next few years are going to be even more amusing than I expected.”

Okay, maybe I deserved that.

I threw myself down into a chair and looked around for the waiter. The table smelled strongly of tea—a jasmine scent somewhat doctored by the dash of brandy in Ciaran’s own ceramic cup.

“So,” I said slowly. “More business with the Hex Throne. You know, I never got the details of the work you’ve been doing for Lord Magician.”

Ciaran’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Go and spin your own straw into gold.” Then, to Brand, with an exasperated sound, “He’s impossible when he teeters around on that tall horse of his. Really, Rune, you should let this pass, and make it an opportunity to set *common expectations*.”

“I’ll handle it,” Brand said.

I opened my mouth, and Brand said, quietly, “Please.”

Which made me a little more irritated, because asking for things nicely was one of our cheapest shots at each other. “Fine. I’m changing the subject. Ciaran, since you’re here, maybe you could help us.”

“I must admit, I expected to bump into you,” Ciaran said. “Your face is on posters all over the lobby. It’s that photo with that haircut,” he added, which made perfect sense to him, and didn’t sound like a compliment.

“Do you know *why* we’re here?” Brand asked.

“No, but it’s bound to be a fun story, since it’s so unlike a decision you’d let Rune make on his own. I had no idea either of you had an interest in alchemy.”

I reached up and touched the ankh around my neck, pulsing willpower through my fingertips.

While there were private sanctums onsite, they wouldn’t be as effective as my home sanctum, so I’d preplanned a very diverse selection of spells. I’d likely want a balance of stealth and defense over aggression, though I

did hedge my bets by storing defense spells that could be used with a lot of convenient hostility if needed.

My ear drums went stuffy and popped, like a quick elevator rise. Then layers and layers of muffled silence fell across the table, an invisible dome drenched in imaginary molasses. Or chocolate.

I looked around one final time for my cake, and said, “Lord Tower has reliable intelligence that the final competition may be used to stage, further, or initiate house warfare. We’ve got the particulars on file, and are willing to share. I’d like your perspective.”

“This sounds suspiciously *pro bono*. I have a special hourly rate for the Tower, you know. I surcharge the hell out of it.”

Brand tilted his head at Ciaran, who waved off the statement with a heavily ringed hand. “Very well. No, I’ve heard nothing. And I would be most interested to see those files. I suppose, given my business arrangement with the Hex Throne, I do have a tiny, tiny responsibility to make sure the building isn’t blown up.”

“Have you seen anything to raise your suspicions?” Brand asked.

“Yes, your arrival. But... I suppose there is something else. Something you’re quite unlikely to know. And I’m not sure you’ll be happy about it. Especially with young Matthias here.”

“What does that mean?” Brand demanded.

“You must know about the Judge’s Reappraisal.”

“We do,” I said. “They reconsider the performance of all eliminated contestants, and give one alchemist a second chance to compete in the final round. How—”

Ciaran interrupted, quickly and unhappily. The spoon he was stirring his tea with turned from silver to gold-plated, a manifestation of his unpredictable magic. “The contest honors alchemists, not courts. There are no rules against remnants of the Heart Throne applying. And I have reliable word that one of their Master Alchemists is going to be the reconsidered candidate.”

Brand left Rune in the restaurant with Ciaran, saying he wanted to talk with Layne alone. Rune and he’d had a quick bond conversation. It was their shorthand talk, filled with a lot of micro gestures and blah blah blah

emotion from Rune that felt like discipline and worry, which Brand batted aside with an eyeroll once he knew he'd gotten his way.

He took the elevator instead of the long, exposed, moving stairway, because fuck that.

As people in the elevator backed away from his scowl, Brand prayed.

People didn't know he prayed, but he did. Every fucking night. He prayed to God, gods, to the River, to fucking Santa Clause. It had once been so simple, too. *Please keep dumb shit away from Rune. Please keep Rune from doing dumb shit.*

Now he had at least several more mental codicils because there were so many more people in their lives, and they all—each and every one of them, except maybe Corinne—had the capacity to do dumb shit.

Such as Layne, and the talk ahead of them.

The thing was, Brand had learned hard lessons about being parental. *Especially* with teenagers. Kids like Corbie were easier. Need to keep him from going in the pool without supervision? Tell him about the shark that lived in the water filter. See. Easy.

Teenagers—teenagers *nowadays*—were a different breed. You couldn't just spar the stupidity out of them. They spent their lives online, constantly bombarded by input. It made them twitchy and volatile. You couldn't just drop a truth bomb on them—you had to wait until they were ready to listen.

That meant Brand spent a lot of time watching. Watching for them to realize they'd fucked up. Watching for them to realize there was a battleground ahead. And then watching for them to finally, finally wander onto it.

In this case, as Max unpacked in the bedroom he'd picked (*and there was another talk ahead of Brand, simmering in the wings*), Brand stood by the window and watched Layne circle the large common room. Soon enough they'd stand still and start fidgeting, which was usually the sign that Brand could pounce.

Brand frittered away the time reviewing all the exits in the room—both real and creative. When you had a partner like Rune, the only difference between a wall and a door was how pissed he was.

When Layne began to worry open a small bag of chips, Brand froze, turned, and stared.

“I didn’t know you were coming this morning. I would have mentioned it, if I knew,” they said nervously.

Brand raised both eyebrows.

“I didn’t want to wake my aunt up!” they said. “Honestly. I left a note on her nightstand.”

Brand held up a hand to ward off further stupidity. He said, “Can we agree there is no swear jar in this room?”

“Oh shit,” Layne whispered.

“Because do you honestly fucking think I care you’re having tea with Ciaran? Really? Do you *really* think I’m pissed about that?”

“...yes?”

“No. Ciaran would fucking obliterate anyone who hurt you. And you’ve already told us that Ciaran is helping with your nightmares. And he probably knows more about necromancy than Rune does. Or he knows who *does* know more. I’m glad you’re talking with him.”

“This feels like a trick.”

“It’s not. I trust you. You’ve given me absolutely no reason not to.”

Now Layne’s worry twisted into a wry grimace. “I have done plenty to have people distrusting me. I’m one of the reasons you had to face—”

“Don’t say his name. He’s dead, and he deserves to be, and he doesn’t deserve the oxygen in our fucking lungs. And you are not the same person you were. Do you honestly think I don’t see that?”

“Then—” Layne broke off and dropped the probably-outrageously-expensive bag of chips back into the money trap on the mini-bar. Brand would have to do something about that, or he’d be hearing furtive plastic bag crinkling all fucking night.

“It bothers me,” Brand said, “that you *think* you’re getting away with something. That you’re *acting* like you’ve been caught.”

“So...I’m giving away too much? Like a tactic?”

“No, Layne. Not everything is a tactic. Well, yes, it fucking is, and yes, you need to work on your poker face, but no, that’s not what I’m saying. You’re acting like you’re making bad decisions, and you’re not. Why would we have a problem with you having breakfast with Ciaran? Do you think anyone would have said no if you’d asked? We wouldn’t. But the way you’re acting...it’s like you don’t trust us. Like you don’t trust me.”

“I do, of course I do!”

“Apparently fucking not. Let’s get one thing out of the way *right* now. We watch you very closely. We watch *all* of you very closely. I don’t think it’s even possible for you to be doing something wrong right now, because if you were, one of us would have already showed up. I read the note. I knew you were out. I’m not thrilled you’re *here*, in this fucking *building*, and your note could have mentioned *that*, because dumb shit is probably going to happen here. But I knew you were out.”

“And you didn’t tell Rune?” Layne said.

Brand controlled his flinch, because that was going to bite him in the ass. “That brings us to the second part of the conversation. Rune and I don’t share a goddamn brain. He’ll probably have an entirely different talk with you, if not now then soon. He expects you to tell people where you are. In real time. He fucking worries, and when he worries, he always gets his way. I don’t even try to fucking stop him anymore. If you’re smart, you’ll apologize before he starts imagining all the things that could go wrong. I’m not kidding. They’ll multiply and swarm around him. I call it an Angst of Runes, like a fucking murder of crows or a parliament of owls. But even then, it’s not because he doesn’t trust you. He does too. So maybe give us the benefit of the doubt next time, and a better heads-up.”

Layne turned to the window and made some discrete eye-wiping motions. Brand waited. Finally, they squared their shoulders, nodded, turned back.

Then they said, “You know I’m not leaving, right? Because Max is excited, so I think this is going to be fun. And I’ve got this whole argument ready about how I can do anything Max can do. Because you trust me.”

“You really want to throw my own weapons in my face? You really think I won’t catch them and return fire?”

Layne smiled, because like Brand, they knew when they’d get their way, too.

## Chapter Four

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

A snowball exploded against the rock above my head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not that I can tell," Corinne said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brand went back to signal Max through the door—as a human, he wasn't able to trigger its particular, fussy magic—while I stared at my phone, because this was usually the point where the Tower butted in with a prescient message like, *Don't kill all the suspects*.

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

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

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

Max’s face closed down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“This is wholly fucking unnecessary,” Brand said. He had one hand on his knives, while the other gripped the moving railing so hard the skin was pinched white.

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

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

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

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

“Motherfucker,” Brand whispered under his breath.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brand didn’t look up so much as he rolled his eyes. “We buy you an average of three fucking alarm clocks a month, Rune. That is not the work ethic that builds magic skyscrapers.” He paused and considered that. “Plus. We’re going to get stuff the honest way. We’ll take it from bad guys.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They refused the request, and reported the matter to the Arcanum.

Even they felt an action at this event, which potentially drew several greater houses into conflict, was ill advised.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Who?” Brand prompted.

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

“It is, and I will continue to thank him for that,” Brand said in his

inside voice. “Break the group apart into three rooms. Judges in one, original finalists in the second, and the Heart Throne alchemist in a third.”

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

## Chapter Five

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Max thinks I'm being grumpy with you because you hid money from me," Brand clarified, while Max rose on his tiptoes to object to the word choice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Deal," I sighed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No judges, no prosecution, we’re going to play this quietly,” I said. I shifted my gaze to Brand. “I don’t want to overplay our hand. As far as the judges and contestants know, I’m only here to introduce myself.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lord Sethos gave me a thin-lipped smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And they...love that?” I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It was professional,” Lord Sethos stressed.

“Professionally cutthroat,” Ji-Hi snorted. “Give me a glass of wine during the reception tonight and I’ll dish. But, honestly, Seth is right. They’re quite well behaved on stage.”

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

“Excellent,” I said. “Lead the way.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah, there lies the wonder of the Hex Throne’s facility,” Mosi said. “Their blend of magic and technology allow for full holographic recording.

You can see the nodes all about the ceiling and walls—the tiny lens apertures. After recording, a full-dimension representation is available.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s what makes this so interesting,” I said. “We have two couplings that, on the surface, should be friendly, or at least allies. But the wolves and the cats hate each other. And Lady Moon and Lord Devil’s relationship is

tabloid fodder. I've heard that as fond as their Arcana are of each other, the administrators of both courts actually detest the situation."

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

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

Mosi had been naming the nobility by their first names—a common sort of informality growing more popular. But our research had shown that Kamilah was closely related to Lord Devil's inner circle, and had adopted his Saint moniker. Erasmus descended from a branch of the Nightglade at least two lines removed from Lady Moon, and was associated with his own greater house.

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

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

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

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

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

"Will you be joining us for the event this evening, Lord Sun?" Erasmus

asked politely, blinking blue irises that were just a shade darker than the whites of his eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

“The doors just bolted,” Brand said quickly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, Lord Sun!”

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

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

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

Brand said. “It’s picking up speed.”

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

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

Max swallowed and nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ciaran, his hair now flat and unstyled, said, “Oh this is one wet, angry bitch right here.” He broke his Frost spell into two streams and sent one at the wall beside the heavy metal door. Subzero temperature made the materials splinter and contract.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter Six

The laboratory was sealed off while a hive of technicians in the control room swarmed over their instruments and control panels, trying to understand what happened. A supervisor walked from person to person, barking at them to find the “glitch.”

“It says something about our life that I’d *welcome* a life-threatening glitch,” Brand murmured to me. “I said it before and I’ll say it again: for once, I’d like the universe to accidentally try to kill us without an elaborate fucking plan.”

“Because it’s not a glitch,” I said.

“It is not a glitch,” Brand agreed. “Are we going to play along like it was?”

“Yes,” I said. “For now.”

For all that, matters had changed. We’d need to stay focused and alert. There would be no more casual snowball fights, which was just as well, because Max and Layne had secretly dipped an armful of snowballs in water and snuck them into the hotel’s mini-freezer, as if I wouldn’t check there for ice cream.

The four of us—me, Brand, Ciaran, and Max—were sitting in the control room. Mosi had vanished to compile the recorded footage of the poison attack, and the contestants were being debriefed by center security. We were going to explore the holographic magic for anything we might have missed during the action.

When the door to the busy control room opened, I checked to see if it was Mosi, but instead spotted a middle-aged woman standing calmly on the threshold.

She wore a black dress with lacelike silver around the collar. Her hair, prematurely graying, was coiled into a single braid. She had the high

cheekbones of the fae, along with their pearlescent skin—pale, with just a hint of every color imaginable.

Brand had tensed at my side, which Max caught and mimicked. We stared at her, as she looked directly at me.

“My name is Ewa Harpur,” she said in a soft voice. “I believe you’d asked to see me, though there is some confusion as to whether you are now...otherwise preoccupied.”

I stood. “Of course. The production team has made a room available to us. Please, join me.”

I didn’t bother looking at Brand to see if he’d tag along. I’d be lucky if he let me go anywhere alone without first stuffing rags into vents. Max answered my glance with a shallow nod, but Ciaran waved a hand.

“I’ll find Mosi and see how the footage is coming,” he said. “I’m most curious to learn more about our afternoon, especially if it takes me by hair product.”

He excused himself, and we moved to a small, windowless conference room. A brief feeling of claustrophobia prickled the gooseflesh on my arms, but I ignored it. Only a few facilities in the silo contained the technology necessary for cleansing, and this wasn’t one of them. But I’d still feel a lot better if I’d get time in a sanctum soon, to mix up the spells I’d stored in my sigils.

“I apologize for any confusion,” I said as we all took a seat in the fake-leather chairs around a cheap but serviceable conference table. “We had every intention of introducing ourselves to you, but there was an issue in one of the laboratories.”

“Oh, yes. It’s the talk of the conference center.” She folded her hands in her lap and offered no more, but her body language was telling. She favored Brand and I with polite expressions, but every few seconds, her gaze wandered to Max. The emotion in her eyes was very well contained, but for all that, she was reacting strongly to his presence.

So I leaned into it.

“You appear to recognize my brother, Lord Matthias Saint John,” I said.

She turned that polite look to me. “Of course. Lord Matthias. We’ve never been introduced but...” And here, for just a second, she faltered.

She recovered with an awkward, “But you were known to me. I am glad to see you in such good health and company.”

Max stiffened in the chair. “You work for my grandmother.”

“No. Not directly. I was under contract with the Heart Throne and served at a research facility near the Zone in Poland.”

“But you were a member of the Heart Throne,” Max persisted.

“I was,” she said. “But my connection with them has been severed.”

“After the throne fell,” Brand said. “You left their employ after the raid.”

She looked down. She brought her hands to the table surface and, as she spoke, made random, fidgety patterns. “It would be prudent to make myself understood,” she said. “Many, many people were stunned to learn of the full extent of Lady Lovers’...projects.”

“You mean the production of drugs that enabled the rape and enslavement of young humans,” I said.

She didn’t flinch, and she met my gaze. “I will, in no manner or fashion, defend her. Or anyone involved in that. It is reprehensible. It made a mockery of all the real research that was being conducted. Research meant to create bridges with the human world, not destroy them.”

It got quiet, and I fed the silence with more of my own. After maybe thirty seconds, I lowered my chin into a small nod. This wasn’t the mystery before me. “I appear to have let our conversation go afield. I was simply looking to congratulate you on your reinstatement to the final round, and to wish you luck. I will admit that the issues today were surprising. Have there been any other accidents or setbacks in the programming?”

“None at all,” she said. “There has been no more or less drama than I’d have expected. Plus, these are exceedingly good facilities. I can’t even think of another technical issue we’ve experienced.”

“If I understand correctly,” I said, “all of you hail from the homeland. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn some of you served the Empress and Emperor as battle alchemists.”

I saw the flash of her eyes—and her small smile. “A long time ago. Battle alchemy is out of fashion.”

“It is, and that’s unfortunate. It’s a fiercely powerful field tactic.” She continued to give me the sort of smile a lot of centennials did, as if they didn’t know what a Wiki article was, or I was too young to read it. So I

added, “My father spoke of battle alchemists often. My court has long been affiliated with the inventors and creators of Atlantis, and he told me battle alchemy was something of a type of art.”

“In better days,” she agreed.

“Did any of your co-contestants serve as battle alchemists?” I said.

“That would be their story to tell, but I can’t see the harm of a general answer. It’s not a secret. Lord Erasmus has trained for the field. Not so with Lady Kamilah—she’s a strong alchemist, but took to battle as a lioness.”

I didn’t press further. Ewa Harpur struck me as a very observant scion, which could become uncomfortable if she turned it on me and my presence. I took the buzz of my phone for the escape opportunity it was. “It seems Lord Mosi is ready for us. I’ll need to excuse myself, Lady Ewa.”

“Of course, Lord Sun.”

We all got up to leave. Max was closest to the door. Before he walked out, though, he turned and said to Ewa, “I apologize if my presence upset you.”

I don’t know why he said it, and I’d lose my shit on anyone who expected an apology. But the expression on Ewa’s face was both shocked and shocking.

“Upset me?” she said. “You were my prince. I—” She bit down on her lower lip and blushed. “I forget myself. Truly.”

Max looked at me and waited to see if I would stop this. I didn’t. He looked back at Ewa and said, “Please. You can speak honestly.”

“You were our prince,” she said. Her voice shook. For a moment, I didn’t think she would say anything else, but then determination loosened her tongue. “You were our beautiful baby prince. You were *celebrated*. And then one day...” She shook her head and dropped her gaze.

“One day my grandmother gave up training me,” Max said. “I didn’t have her power.”

“It was wrong,” Ewa whispered. “You were our prince.”

“A long time ago,” Max said. “That part of my life is done.”

I cleared my throat. “Technically?”

Brand added, “But there’s still no crown in our court, and no increase in allowance.”

They caught each other’s eyes and smiled, and I smiled with them.

Our Max was growing up. He'd fought for every inch of confidence he possessed. Every damned inch.

"Matthias," Ewa said before he could turn and leave again. A faint smile had appeared on her own face as she watched our exchange. "I am very happy you have found your people. Just remember one thing. Your grandmother was not a good leader. She only recognized one type of power—hers. That was a character flaw. There are many types of power in this world, if you're persistent and wise enough to take advantage of them."

Max considered that, nodded, and left ahead of us.

Even Brand lost a minute or two gaping at the holographic world around us. We weren't really television people, and had never upgraded our equipment to this newest techno-magic fad. But I had to admit: it was stunning.

The three of us—rejoined by Ciaran—had stepped into a sound-proofed room to privately review the footage from the attack. Or relive it? It was so damn lifelike. It was really as if we were standing in the laboratory again.

The technology, linked to a mesh copper glove and goggles, allowed us to view nearly anything resting within the scope of the dozens of cameras. Mosi had only activated the footage within minutes of the sprinklers being turned on, but we were able to freeze the replay and examine everything frame by frame.

"Rune," Brand finally said in exasperation. "Stop checking out your ass and focus."

"My pants look a little tight in the rear," I muttered.

"Welcome to being a fucking Atlantean," Brand said.

"It's because I've been sitting through so many meetings."

Brand gave me a Look. "Do you really want to talk about this now? Fine. I'll talk about all the excuses you've used to get out of training sessions."

I decided that, no, I didn't want to talk about this now, mainly because I'd forgotten I used meetings to get out of training sessions.

"This is fun," Ciaran said, waving a hand at us. "But *this* is interesting."

Max was already at the spot Ciaran indicated with a tilt of his chin.

Max saw our attention and said, “Didn’t Mosi mention something about putting ingredients away? I think he was referring to this.”

We all gathered at a heavy black lab bench in a corner of the room. There were a few small cylinders of ingredients resting under a special, lint-free cloth used to wipe down benches. I couldn’t see the labels, and we couldn’t actually move items around in the hologram. There was a small dish of crushed green leaves nearby, too.

“The rest of the room is immaculate,” Max said. “I wonder who the slob is?”

“I wonder what the herbs are for,” Brand said. He looked around us in frustration. “The angles are good, but I wish we’d started recording sooner. And Rune, can you do something about Lord Tower? He’s sitting in the corner as if I didn’t fucking notice the moment he appeared.”

I did a double-take because, sure enough, the Tower was virtually resting half an inch above a virtual stool in the corner. He shimmered with the effect of a projection.

“Interesting technology, isn’t it,” he said. “I’m linked through a private room in the Pac Bell. We can speak freely.”

Brand hid his eye roll from everyone but me, because he had clear thoughts on the value of speaking freely around the Tower.

“Am I going to waste time filling you in on anything, or did Mayan already provide a transcript of every word we’ve said?” I asked, though I smiled a bit and dipped my head respectfully. There was a reason Brand hid his eye rolls.

“I have a meeting set up with Lady Moon and Lord Devil in a few moments,” he said. “I thought it worth checking in first. Am I correct in assuming that you find the overlap between Nightglade and Beast interesting?”

“Two overlaps, yes,” I said. “Two...schisms, I guess is the word. Cat versus wolf within the Beast Throne, and the animosity between the administrations of both courts. It would be a strange coincidence, given everything else going on. My gut says we need to look closer. Lord Tower, are Lady Moon and Lord Devil back on the island?”

“No. They have remained outside the quarantine since the Pandemic hit. I’ll be connecting with them virtually.” He didn’t look excited about that. He picked a piece of lint off his dark silk robe and bought himself a

moment or two to think. “This will be tricky, Rune. If any sort of attack is planned, and you can stop it, we’ll need to keep it classified. Lady Moon and Lord Devil have the right to put their houses in order.”

“Understood,” I agreed.

“Good. The volatility in the Devil’s court is especially concerning. That’s a street battle waiting to happen.”

“Do you recognize these herbs?” Brand said, pointing at the dish.

The Tower didn’t raise his virtual ass off the virtual chair. He just swiped his mesh-covered hand, zoomed in, and saw whatever he saw. “No,” he murmured. “Shall I send an independent expert?”

“I have an idea,” I said. “Thanks anyway.”

He looked down at his wrist. “I need to go. Stay in touch with regular reports.”

And then he did something he’d rarely done around me before. His lips twisted, as if chagrined. He added, “Having an Arcana on site is a relief. Truly, Rune, thank you.”

He vanished in a burst of pixelated gray.

“He totally forgot you were an Arcana for a second,” Brand crowed.

“You do realize the Tower would bury me in cement if I ever spoke to him with half your sass,” Ciaran said.

Brand sat on whatever smart-ass reply he had on hand, because his intuition—fed by our bond—was prickling. He watched me dialing a number on my phone. “What?” he said.

“We need an expert, right?” I asked, pointing to the herbs on the table.

“Do we trust anyone here enough to ask?” Brand said.

“No,” I told him. “That’s why I’m going to blackmail someone.”

The call connected. No one greeted me, but I heard the rustle of cloth and a shallow breath.

“Hello, Geoffrey!” I said. “How’s it going?”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “It makes no sense. Who puts a single Pringle back in the container? What sort of mind fuckery is this?”

I slammed the cylinder down on the minibar.

“All of my responses to that are bottlenecked,” Brand said. “It’s like a vaudeville show with eight people running through a door at once. Why are you so fucking hangry lately?”

He was sitting on the hotel suite sofa polishing his knives. I was waiting for Geoffrey's knock at the door. He had not appreciated my immediate summons.

I threw myself down onto the surprisingly plush sectional and stared out a window made opaque by thick, thick fog. "It helps me think. Has it occurred to you yet that it'd be really hard to kill us in a cleansing like that?"

"Maybe someone didn't know we'd be there."

I rolled my head and looked at him, because I knew his devil's advocate tone.

"You could have got us out of there," he said. "I think it was staged, but in a really Atlantean way, like someone didn't mind a body count either. I want to know what those herbs are. The ones left in the open. Calling Geoffrey would have been a perfect idea if it wasn't fucking Geoffrey."

My mind switched tracks. "I still haven't told Addam that Geoffrey was behind Christian's poisoning," I said, and my words were more sigh than sentence. Brand exchanged my guilty look. "I think I need to tell him eventually."

Or not. I didn't know. There was a lot Addam didn't know, and a lot I didn't want to share.

"Elevator just opened outside," Brand said, and picked up the biggest knife on the microfiber cloth. He dabbed some oils on the blade.

I waited until the third knock on the door before getting up. We'd asked for privacy, so Max and Layne were having a late lunch with Ciaran. With unhurried motions, I opened the door and smiled at Geoffrey Saint Talbot.

It had been almost a year since the episode in the Westlands. I hadn't seen Geoffrey since I'd forced him to take a vow requiring him to come to my aid if needed. His only alternative was my telling the Arcanum that his role in Addam's kidnapping and Christian's poisoning was much deeper than Geoffrey had indicated. That might have cost Geoffrey his life or freedom—it still might. In the absence of the full truth, most of the blame had conveniently fallen on Ashton's vaporized shoulders.

The months had not been kind to Geoffrey.

He was thinner, and his messy brown hair was lank. More surprising than anything was his lack of sigils. Except for his square-framed

eyeglasses, he wore no other sigils that I could see, and none that I could sense. It made me wonder—with an effort so minimal that I'd likely not even care about the answer—how his mother had punished him. There was a reason Lady Temperance was often called Lady Tolerance, and it was an ironic reason.

Geoff slouched into the room, refusing to even acknowledge Brand. He stood awkwardly on the carpet, and flinched when I came up behind him and said in his ear, "Make yourself comfortable."

"Don't make yourself comfortable," Brand said. "There are photos on the table. Look at them. Tell us what kind of herbs those are."

Geoffrey's clenched jaw chewed on that. After a few seconds, he said, "Or else what? Isn't that how blackmail works? There's always a nasty, thuggish *or else*."

"Why do people always say that to me? Or else there's not a camera on this building that will see your body fall through that fog outside, that's your *or else*," Brand said, and he meant it.

Geoffrey went over to the small round table by the kitchenette. The security supervisor, after being sworn to secrecy, had helped us download stills from the hologram. Geoff put a bony finger on the top photo and moved it to the side.

"I can't see the vial labels," he complained.

Brand gave him a look like he was an idiot, because why else would we need him?

Geoff said, "But there are two types of herbs in the dish. The one on the left is a standard filler regent. But this other? Slight discoloration and larger flakes toward the left? It's familiar. I'm not an alchemist, though."

"No," I said. "You're a poisoner. If you need some incentive to find some fucking curiosity, consider what will happen if I tell Addam."

He shot me a look. "Addam doesn't know I poisoned Christian?"

"Do you feel dirt over your face?" Brand asked. He stabbed a finger at the table. "Everything you see, everything you say, is confidential. I need to know how those herbs might affect a cleansing."

Interest sparked in Geoffrey's annoyed eyes. "A cleansing?"

"A type of cleansing," I said, referring to the city-wide pollution scouring that happened periodically. It was nearly a holiday on the island, because most people needed to remain indoors for the entire day, assuming

they didn't have the ability to breathe abrasive chemicals. "Designed for sterilizing a laboratory."

Geoffrey touched the first photograph again. He tapped it. "It could be beggar's blanket. Also called mullein—it has a lot of names. It's an antitoxin and helps with skin burns. An alchemist might be able to do something with it. Maybe save the lungs long enough during a cleansing exposure so that you could get Healed."

"Lots of maybes," Brand said.

"We'll get Geoff access to the footage. The lab is still sealed off—when it's safe to go inside, we can confirm."

"Or we give him a paper bag to breathe in and send him now," Brand said.

Geoff was showing progress. He didn't say anything inane to make his situation worse. I pulled out my phone and dialed Mosi.

Within the hour, more became clear.

The lab had been cleaned up. All traces of the wayward herbs were gone. But a closer examination of the footage was enough for Geoffrey to decide his earlier guess might be right.

We sat his ass at a table in the hotel room, and asked him to draw up any scenario in which those drugs could be quickly used to save an Atlantean from the lab's sterilization process.

Meanwhile, we were going to do some snooping, while Mosi kept the contestants and judges busy at a pre-dinner reception meeting. A possible assassination attempt was all I needed to fudge the rules. I no longer had concerns with invading the privacy of anyone involved.

Brand, Max and I took the stairs to the floor where the contestants had been roomed. It was seven stories beneath our own hotel suite, just under the layers of artificially created mist cozily wreathing the upper floors.

"Only two rooms on the floor," Brand murmured, looking down the corridor that bisected the width of the old missile silo. Each side of the floor was now a suite, and the straight corridor ended in a two large, picturesque windows.

As I watched, some lights flickered on outside with dusk. Pastel colors lit the underside of the fog bank.

“Pretty,” I said.

“I hate when fucked up things look nice,” Brand said.

“This building is fucked up?”

Brand looked at me. “The Magician turned a nuclear missile silo into a convention center. I don’t need to be Atlantean to know it’s creepy magic.”

I studied the window again, considering that. “I think Ciaran is bothered by it too,” I murmured. Then I added, quite honestly, “It always worries me most when he’s not around and I know he’s around.”

Brand turned back to the room doors. “Don’t know which is Erasmus or Kamilah. Doors are key carded, and I don’t have e-tech. Are we at the stage yet when we can blast them open?”

“Not as such,” I said, and I pulled out my phone to send a quick text. “But close. I’m totally down for snooping, though.”

“Look over here,” Max said. He was standing by a glass-paned door to a utility room which contained an ice machine and vending supplies. “There’s a vent. I think it faces the room on this side. It’s big enough for me. I could sneak in and open the door.”

I opened my mouth, and Brand said, “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“But—” I said.

“Don’t be selfish,” Brand told me. “It’s time to train a new generation for field action. Here’s a multitool—it’s got a little screwdriver.”

Max, looking like he’d been handed a birthday gift, climbed on top of the ice machine and set about chipping paint from the screws of a ventilation duct. Inside a few minutes he had all the screws out and was yanking the grate free.

I watched him lean into the opening with his cell phone as a light source.

After a few seconds, Brand said, “Need a boost?”

“No,” Max said quickly. “But there are a lot of, um, screws. Exposed screws. With the pointy ends sticking up.”

“Are there?” Brand said.

“It’s not like the movies. There’s some...” He paused, head still in the mouth of the vent. “There’s a lot of rat poop.”

“But the flimsy metal will hold your weight and not collapse at all, right?” Brand asked.

Max sighed, and swear to Gods, I knew that sigh. That was my sigh. I’d had it since the crib. Max muttered, “Rune is right. You just can’t make a point.”

“It was a very nice thought, Max,” I said. “But I texted Mosi and asked him to send an intern with a master key card.”

The elevator outside dinged, which hopefully announced their arrival. The contestants were in a not-so-spontaneous meeting with Mosi along with the judges, to keep them away from us.

Back in the hall, two interns were standing by the elevator, including One of the Many Brians.

“We only need one of you,” Brand said.

The newest Brian put his hands on his hips, grinned broadly, and said, “*I’m braced!*”

Brand stared at him, and Max hurried to mimic the expression.

“Should I do it again?” the intern whispered. He slipped his lips open into another fake smile. “*I’m braced!*”

“This?” Brand asked.

“He thinks we’re being filmed,” the oldest Brian said wearily.

“But,” the intern said. “Aren’t we? Filming? It’s my tag line. I came up with it myself.”

“You think we’re being filmed?” Max asked.

“We’re not?” the intern said. “Are you sure? How do you know?”

“Because I’m not measuring people for body bags,” Brand said.

The intern’s Adam’s apple jerked up and down.

“You go away, you stay,” he said, dismissing the newest Brian and keeping our Brian. When the New Brian didn’t scramble out of there, Brand made eye contact. The newest Brian scrambled out of there. If it were possible to slam the elevator shut, he might have tried.

“Look,” Brand said to the One of the Many Brians. “You seem smart. American college student, right?”

Old Brian nodded quickly.

“Do you know who we are? Who we really are?”

Brian nodded his head just as quickly.

“I’m going to ask you to do things, and you’re going to forget I ever

asked,” Brand said. “And in the off chance something hypothetically bad is happening and you turn out to be the hypothetical mastermind, just know that I will figure it out eventually and kill you. Hypothetically.”

“I don’t want to be hypothetically killed,” Brian agreed.

“Oh, no, I’ll really kill you. I mean you being a hypothetical mastermind. No offense, you seem like a smart kid and all, but I’m going with Murphy’s Law here.”

“Whose room is this?” I asked, pointing.

“Lady Kamilah,” Brian said after squinting through his glasses at the door number.

“No. I want to start with Erasmus,” Brand said. “Can you let us in his room?”

Brand followed Brian to the door. As soon as the key card reader blinked green, Brand said, “And what did you just do?”

Brian blinked. “I’m in my room eating pizza.”

“Good man,” Brand said, and pushed past. “If you see anyone coming, knock on the door.”

Once the three of us were in the room, we took a quick look. It was smaller than our own suite, and very tidy. No clothes or personal items left out; the housekeeping staff had come through and cleaned and made the bed. Outside the window, pale blue and purple lights swept along the mist.

I stared at Brand thoughtfully and said, “Erasmus?”

“Gut instinct,” Brand said, opening a bureau and carefully feeling between the layers of folded clothes. “It’s got to be one of the contestants.”

“Why are you so sure?” Max asked, searching the area around the bed.

“Because of the herbs,” I said, more than a guess.

Brand nodded. “Because someone took pains to make those herbs seem inconspicuous. The labels of the jars were covered. There were two different kinds of herbs in one dish. And the douchebag upstairs will confirm that a skilled alchemist could have used the herbs in a pinch to survive a cleansing. If someone did trigger the cleansing, why leave a convenient solution unless they needed it?”

“That’s why you think it’s a contestant. But not Ewa?”

Brand waffled his hand back and forth after shutting the bureau drawer and moving to the nightstand. “I looked more into her reinstatement as a contestant. She wasn’t a particularly bad choice to be invited back to the

final round. But she also wasn't the only choice. And I can't find anything that links her to the two judges who made the decision."

"So her presence here, at the final round, wasn't a sure thing," Max said slowly.

"That's my thinking." He narrowed his eyes at me. "You're thinking something else."

"I think Erasmus is important," I said. I'd picked the desk to search myself, and came up with nothing more interesting than chew marks on a hotel pencil. "And that's not gut—it's just logic. We've got two possible ideas, right? This relates to either the schism between factions within the Beast Throne, or a breakdown in relations between factions of Devil and Moon. The way that the Mothers were brought into this... It makes me think something public is going to happen."

"Okay," Brand said, and waited to hear more.

"Lord Devil runs his court with absolute authority. A public attack might be public, but he'd be ruthless in keeping the aftermath within his court. But if something blows up between Moon and Devil? I can't help but think Erasmus is either the target—"

"Or the targeter," Brand said.

"I just don't know how to prove it before the filming tomorrow."

"I've already figured that out," Brand said.

Max and I looked at each other. "Figured what out?" I asked.

"What to do tomorrow. But it'd be good to know in advance who's the antagonist here. Let's look for something."

"Like a death threat?" Max asked.

He was holding a crumpled note from the trash.

## Chapter Seven

### *Interlude: Matthias Saint John*

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

They really, really, really liked to fight.

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

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

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

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

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

"I've already done my thinking," Rune says. "You go catch up."

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

"Are you glad you came?" Rune asked while lifting the plastic hem of

the garment bag. He let out a breath and muttered, “Thank God. It’s not court style.”

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

“Am I helping?” I asked him nervously.

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

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

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

By what?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yeah.

Yeah, I was glad I came.

Eventually, we were ready.

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

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

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

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

“That’s got to be magic,” Brand said.

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

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

“Naw. This is legal stuff.”

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

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

That’s when I noticed Layne too.

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

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

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

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

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

"This conversation is over," Layne said.

"Come now, Layne—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rune swept a hand and ended the lens cantrip.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Exiled him?” Layne repeated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 8: Endgame

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

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

And the shirt smelled a little like him, too.

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

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

"What are we talking about?" I asked.

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

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

"Tell me," I said.

"This ingredient," Geoffrey said. He put his hand on a tablet computer and turned it in my direction. I spotted a picture that looked much like iron filings would.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After the stylist finished dabbing foundation around my earlobes, Mosi thanked her and asked for the room. When the door clicked shut, his jovial smile dimmed.

“We have ushers at every entrance with metal detection magic. I must

admit, I would be more at ease if you'd trust me with the reason. Have I done something to make you wary of me, Lord Sun?"

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

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

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

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

"I do," I said.

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

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

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

I dipped my head at him.

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

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

Brand knocked on the door and poked his head in. When he saw the two of us, he came into the room with Max in tow. "Stage looks good," he said. "Do you want to come and check yourself, or are you waiting to pile into a little car with a bunch of other make-up victims?"

"You're next," I said.

"I'm not judging," he said back.

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

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

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

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

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

“What is that?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

There was a quick, excited knock on the door.

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

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

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

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

Once Mosi left and the door had closed, we suffered through a minute

of overlapping babble, which ended when Brand said, loudest, “Who is the bad guy?”

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

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

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

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

“Brand,” I told him.

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

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

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

“That about sums it up,” I said.

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

I think I was being micromanaged too.

And maybe there was something to what Addam was saying.

“I have an idea,” I said.

After some phone calls were made, as well as some very surprised reactions that I handled with the convenient shortcut of wielding my new Arcana status like a cudgel, Addam and I walked to the staging room.

The wide, open area had been redesigned with the alchemy competition

in mind. Three chemical-resistant tables were set ten feet apart, each with their own sink and alchemy apparatus, along with a tray of reagents.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So pretty," I said again.

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

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

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

Mosi grew increasingly flustered over the next ten minutes. He ran around the room herding people to their stations. Max would be positioned near Ewa; Ciaran by Kamilah; and Brand at a point between Erasmus and the judge's table. Addam and Layne had already taken seats with the audience—Addam wouldn't hear of remaining outside the studio, and promised me he had a Shield on hand if needed. Quinn was conspiring with Max in excited tones, though they separated when Mosi barreled between them with waving hands.

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

He blinked innocent burgundy eyes at me, feigning confusion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One of his assistants said something urgently to him.

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

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

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

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

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

The start of the competition went smoothly.

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

Kamilah insisted her bilberry was stale, which ran the risk of causing internal bleeding. She was intercepted on her way to the supply closet;

Mosi hastened to provide her with new ingredients, watched closely by Ciaran. Her eyes shifted to an angry lion yellow, but she complied.

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

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

“Let’s go,” I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Erasmus,” Brand announced.

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

“This is an outrage,” Lord Erasmus whispered, while Kamilah said,

“What is this?”, and the judges talked over each other. Ewa had caught Max’s attention and was saying something to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Erasmus lowered his eyes and said nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Plus,” I said, “every other member of the audience is professional

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

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

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

It was not a request.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He pretended not to understand the question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course I do."

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

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

"I appreciate that," I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





