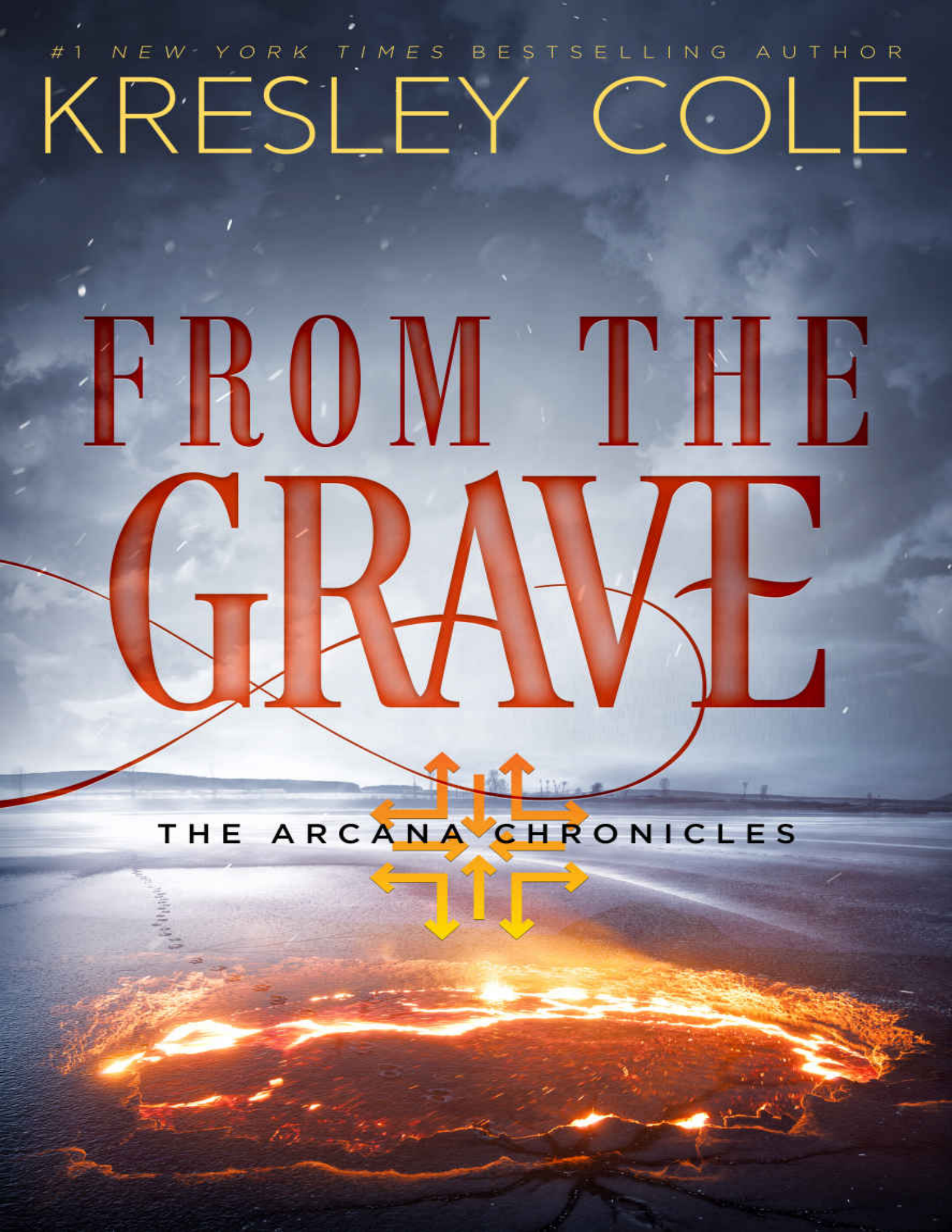


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KRESLEY COLE

FROM THE GRAVE

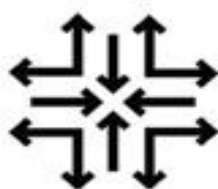
THE ARCANACHRONICLES



KRESLEY COLE

FROM THE GRAVE

THE ARCANA CHRONICLES



VALKYRIE PRESS

NEW YORK BASIN TOWN STERLING PORT EDWIN ACADIANA

Kresley Cole's *New York Times* bestselling Arcana Chronicles series comes to a spectacular and fiery conclusion in this final installment.

When even the gods hold their breath . . .

To defeat the Emperor and Fortune, Evie, the great Empress of Arcana, must repair her bond with Death, despite the earth-shattering developments between them.

And danger lurks in every shadow . . .

Their allies—a sea witch, a band of roving warriors, and more than a couple of rogues—overcome terrifying obstacles to help them. But when Jack makes a shocking discovery, the fallout threatens to tear their alliance apart.

One girl could deliver salvation—or doom.

If the Empress and her friends can remain united, will their powers be enough to defeat a catastrophic curse on the world, or will hellfire reign forever? The end looms for us all until the best hand wins. . . .

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Also in the Arcana Chronicles



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Dedicated to you, for your support and readership over these seven books.

Hail Tar Ro and much love, :)kc

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To Swede. You've been there through thick and thin over thirty-four books. I wouldn't want to take this wild ride with anyone but you. Ready for thirty-four more? ♡

THE FIELD OF BATTLE

The Flash, a cataclysmic flare, scorched the surface of the earth to ash, killing most plant life, animals, and humans, with women hardest hit. The sun has ceased to rise, leaving the world in a freezing, endless night. Plague and starvation spread.

OBSTACLES

Militias unify. Slavers and cannibals hunt for new victims. All are bent on capturing females. The Bagmen (Baggers)—contagious zombies created by the Flash—roam the wastelands (the Ash), wailing for blood.

FOES

The Major Arcana. In every dark age, twenty-two players with supernatural powers fight in a deadly game. The sole winner will live as an immortal until the next game, when the fallen reincarnate. Our stories are depicted on the Major Arcana cards of a Tarot deck.

I'm the Empress; we play again now. Death, my enemy through the ages, is now my ally and the father of my soon-to-be-born child. But the Hanged Man—now defeated—damaged our bond.

To save humankind from the Emperor and Fortune, I'll need to solidify my alliance of killers, each with their own lethal gifts.

ARSENAL

My Empress powers—regenerative healing, the ability to control anything that roots or blooms, thorn tornadoes, and poison—are best fueled by rage, and I have an overflowing pit of it. But if I tap into that toxic well again, will I lose myself for good?

—The Major Arcana—

0. The Fool, Gamekeeper of Old (Matthew)
~~I. The Magician, Master of Illusions (Finneas)~~
II. The Priestess, Ruler of the Deep (Circe)
III. The Empress, Our Lady of Thorns (Evie)
IV. The Emperor, Stone Overlord (Richter)
~~V. The Hierophant, He of the Dark Rites (Guthrie)~~
~~VI. The Lovers, Duke & Duchess Most Perverse (Vincent & Violet)~~
VII. The Centurion, Wicked Champion (Kentarch)
VIII. Strength, Mistress of Fauna (Lark)
~~IX. The Hermit, Master of Alchemy (Arthur)~~
X. Fortune, Lady Luck (Zara)
~~XI. The Fury, She Who Harrows (Spite)~~
~~XII. The Hanged Man, Our Lord Uncanny (Paul)~~
XIII. Death, the Endless Knight (Aric)
~~XIV. Temperance, Collectress of Sins (Calanthe)~~
~~XV. The Devil, Foul Desecrator (Ogen)~~
XVI. The Tower, Lord of Lightning (Joules)
~~XVII. The Star, Arcane Navigator (Stellan)~~
~~XVIII. The Moon, Bringer of Doubt (Selena)~~
XIX. The Sun, Hail the Glorious Illuminator (Sol)
XX. Judgment, the Archangel (Gabriel)
~~XXI. The World, This Unearthly One (Tess)~~

The Empress
Day 587 A.F.
Castle Lethe

I watched the drive long after there was no sign of Jack, the love of my life. I watched until my tears had frozen on my cheeks. I tightened the tourniquet around my heart once more, knowing that one day it would break, and I would bleed out in the snow.

Or worse.

But if he could sacrifice for Tee, the nickname he'd given my unborn son, so could I. Stemming my tears, I turned back toward the castle.

My soul mate, the father of my baby, awaited me there. I had a relationship to repair, alliances to rebuild, and a home to defend.

As certain as I felt that I'd see Jack again, I was even more sure the game was spinning to a bloody end.

I'd be ready.

—*Empresssss*.— A whisper in my ear like a breath of frost. The Fool was contacting me through our mental link.

I drew up short. *I've been waiting for you to answer me.* I plumbed my emotions. How did I feel about my former ally now?

Torn. I'd missed him, and I owed him for saving Jack from those slavers. I owed him for helping free Aric from the Hanged Man. But Matthew had also allowed awful things to happen to our friends.

To Finn . . .

—*Do you know what you really want? I see far, Empress.—*
Then tell me what's to come.

—*The gods vent their wrath. The Minors unite. Hell on earth. Quakes. They'll all be coming for you.*—

Out loud, I said, “Let them come.” My claws sharpened. The scent of roses steeped the frigid air.

—*Empress?*—

“Matthew, I finally understand what you’ve wanted me to learn all along.” I glanced down at my hand, marked with the icons of fallen Arcana, then back at the lonely road Jack now traveled through the never-ending darkness. In that breathy, evil voice—the red witch’s voice—I said, “For better or for worse, anyone who touches me pays a price.” I headed inside.

As I reached the front door, he whispered —*Do you trust me?*— Had his tone held a tinge of menace?

Just when the thought arose, he showed me a vision of the two of us lying together after Jack, Selena, and I had rescued him from his flooded home. Matthew and I had become fast friends, but then we’d been so in past games.

He severed our mental link, the quiet hitting me like the silence after a drum stopped resonating.

Did I trust him? Good question. One I didn’t yet have an answer for.

I paused before I entered the castle. By the light of the flickering lantern, the repaired doors looked like Frankenstein’s monster—ghastly but solid. Months ago, Death had kicked down those doors to get to me, to kill me.

Block it out. Inside, I found him pacing the foyer.

He stopped short, facing me. “Please, come in.”

“I thought you were in your study.” His uneasiness was palpable. “Did you worry I might take off with Jack?”

He swallowed. Nodded.

“I considered it.”

“What made you stay?”

I told him honestly, “The same thing that would have made me go: love.”

His blond brows drew together and he started toward me, but I held up my hand. “I’ll need time to get used to things again.”

He stopped abruptly. “Of course. Is your rose scent for me?”

“No. I got a message from Matthew that pissed me off.” But I preferred anger to my sadness over Jack leaving.

“What did the Fool tell you?”

When my stomach growled loudly, I said, “It’s nothing that won’t keep for now.”

“Come. Let’s get you fed.” As we turned toward the kitchen, he placed his palm on the small of my back, then dropped it, clenching his fist.

To fill the ensuing silence, I said, “I can’t believe I have any appetite considering I strangled a man to death tonight.” We’d vanquished Paul, the Hanged Man, but the monsters would just keep coming. When could I rest at last?

“You eliminated a murderer.” He glanced down at my arm. “How is your injury?”

Paul’s bullet had gone through and through. My sluggish regeneration hurt like hell, but I put on a brave face. “Almost as good as new.”

Arriving in the kitchen, we rummaged for dinner.

“I regret the limited offerings,” Aric said, adding darkly, “the Hanged Man promoted himself out of the service field.”

I unearthed a frozen casserole. “This looks fine to me,” said the girl who’d eaten canned cat food out in the Ash.

“Sit and allow me. You must be exhausted.”

“And you’re not?” He’d ridden for days with no sleep to reach me and Jack on the coast in Jubilee. I popped the dish into the microwave. “How do you know Paul didn’t poison this?” It wouldn’t affect me, but Tee . . . ?

“When Paul convinced me that you had tainted the food, I had Lark scent every item in our stores. After he took control, he wouldn’t have compromised his own supplies.”

I nodded, satisfied. They’d eaten here for months without incident. As Aric and I sat at the table to wait, I said, “I’ll be able to take over in the kitchen. I did in Jubilee.”

“I can help. You seemed . . . uncomfortable cooking before.”

“Just rusty. Speaking of nourishment, did Lark’s wolves finish up Paul’s body?” The three giant creatures had fanged him apart in the study, spraying blood over Aric’s priceless relics.

I was conflicted about that pack. Like Lark, it’d been under Paul’s control, but I didn’t think I’d ever be comfortable sleeping with Cyclops in the bed again.

Yet another thing the Hanged Man had stolen from me. Cyclops, with his heightened intelligence, had been my favorite of all the many animals

here.

“They did,” Aric said. “I believe they also ate the noose.”

“I’m glad. I never wanted to see it again.” The red witch did; my murderous alter ego would’ve worn it as a boa and preened about her kill. But that facet of me—with her red hair and thorn claws—had subsided again. *For how long?* “Do you think Lark will be all right?” Finn’s death was hitting her for the first time, and she’d asked for space. “Did Paul physically hurt her?”

“He didn’t. Yet after he forced her to cremate Finn’s body, she deteriorated quickly.”

I imagined her gut-wrenching pain, would do whatever I could to help her recover from it. . . .

After Aric and I had eaten—I devoured my share, while he pushed food around his plate—we sat at the table drinking decaf tea he’d made.

“What did Matthew tell you tonight?” he asked.

Over the rim of my cup, I said, “After predicting hell on earth, he said that the gods vent their wrath, and the Minors are uniting. He warned that they’ll all be coming for me.”

Though the Minors weren’t supposed to directly interfere with the Majors, each suit favored a particular card to win. The Cups had pulled for Circe—before I’d killed them all.

Had that only been four nights ago? My murder rate was escalating.

And now the other Minors must be looking for payback.

“You said the Pentacles are running the Sick House.” Aric rubbed his chin, rasping his golden stubble. “Did you hear anything about the Swords and the Wands?”

“Nothing.” *Probably more monsters to face.*

“Did the Fool say where he was?”

“No. I should have asked.” I’d just been tired and irritated.

Tee kicked a little, and I rubbed my belly, grateful that he’d made it through all my hardships. “Because of Tee, Paul had no hold on me. Do you think Matthew planned all this?” If I hadn’t been pregnant, if we hadn’t found Jack . . .

“I believe he put events into motion to get us here.”

“To what end? He said he sees far. And before he signed off tonight, he asked me if I trust him.” I had in the first game, and that hadn’t worked out so great for me.

As if reading my thoughts, Aric said, “The Fool never regretted anything as much as he did eliminating you. It altered him forever.”

In the second game, he’d vowed never to win again. So far he’d kept that vow. “Considering how evil I was in the past, how did he and I bond so strongly?”

Pinpoints of light radiated from Aric’s amber eyes, like stars, as he said, “Maybe because the Fool could clearly see you *now*.”

I had to sigh at that. “I feel like I need to trust him, but I don’t know if I can.” I held Aric’s captivating gaze. “*Should I?*”

“I truly don’t know. Over all these millennia, I don’t believe I’ve ever scratched the surface of what he is capable. Did he communicate with you in Jubilee?”

“No, but the night before Paul took over here, I had a vivid nightmare about Zara and Richter. She was lining up innocent people—even kids—to steal their fortune.” She’d formed a luck conduit with each through contact, her eyes glowing purple as that same color branched out over each victim’s skin. Like Aric’s Touch of Death, it only took a graze. “Afterward, she locked them all in a building for Richter to . . . slowly cook.” No wonder Matthew had predicted hell on earth. Didn’t mean we wouldn’t fight. “What’s your plan for those two?”

“I don’t have a good one. If they somehow find this castle, we would have few defenses.”

So we were back to being sitting ducks? Unless . . . Should I tell Aric about the realizations I’d had when I’d faced Richter in the battle by the lake? How I’d comprehended that if I gave myself up to the red witch forever, I could defeat the Emperor, but he and I would destroy the earth. Or else I’d burn out and die, overloaded from my own power.

I was here with Aric now, committed to making this alliance work. Yet I hesitated, digging into my pocket to run my finger over the amber and gold wedding ring he’d once given me.

I wasn’t ready to wear it—or to divulge all. Not yet.

He continued, “I’m hoping we’ll hear from Circe soon and that Lark will recover and begin scouting. Also, if Jack finds Kentarch, the Chariot could evacuate us instantly.” *If* Kentarch could recover from his mental break. “In the meantime, you can revive your thorn forest outside the castle and spread out some of your vines.”

My sentries. “I’ll try.” My abilities remained hit-or-miss. I glanced down at the Hanged Man’s icon on my hand. It’d been close.

Aric noticed. “I can never repay Jack for coming with you to fight tonight.”

“Yes. Yet then he left—even though he’d believed he would be a father soon.” Twist, tighten, constrict went the tourniquet. Now he was out in the Ash again. At least he had Gabe with him.

“I know how painful driving away from you was for him. I regret that. All I am is regret.” How much guilt could Aric shoulder? I thought of Calanthe’s Weight of Sins power, her ability to crush someone with guilt.

At this point in the game, she could have annihilated Aric.

“I don’t think his leaving has sunk in.” I didn’t want it to. I *needed* this numbness. I’d had him back in my life for such a short time.

I frowned as a thought occurred. “What were you talking to him about before I went outside to see him off? At one point, he seemed surprised by whatever you said.”

Aric leaned back in his chair. “You were watching us?”

I leaned forward. “Answer the question.”

“I wanted to make sure he understood the risk of using himself as bait for the Emperor.”

If Jack and Gabe located Kentarch and Joules in DC, the four of them would head toward Louisiana, right through Richter territory. “I can’t believe he would volunteer for that.”

In a gentle tone, Aric said, “Yes, you can.”

I sighed. “Yes, I can.” At least Jack could communicate with us at any time. He’d brought two satellite phones—one for him and one for the Sun Card, in case they ran into a communicative Bagman.

I didn’t plan on talking to Jack though—it would only make the pain of our separation worse. He wouldn’t have a lot of time to chat anyway, would need to focus on staying alive. And me? I needed to concentrate on saving the world.

We’d taken down one Arcana villain tonight. Two to go. The idea of more battles made me queasy.

Reading me so well, Aric said, “Whenever you’re ready to rest, please know that our room is yours. It’s just as you left it.”

“Paul didn’t take it over?”

“No. He preferred his own room, likely because he had a secret passage from there to all parts of the castle.”

So incredibly creepy. “You didn’t trash my art and belongings?” After all, he’d crushed to dust the ring I’d painstakingly crafted for him out of *lignum vitae*, the wood of life.

Honest as ever, he said, “No, because I wanted to enjoy the anticipation of doing just that. I regretted destroying the ring you made for me—but only because I could never do it again.”

I swallowed. “I see.”

He stabbed his fingers through his hair. “I waited two millennia for you to give me a token of our relationship, and you gave me *a wedding ring*.” He glanced at my own bare finger before meeting my gaze once more.

I allowed myself to look at him, really look at him. I’d been brainwashed a couple of times before; I knew what that violation felt like. “You didn’t destroy it. *Paul* did. Does he deserve no blame?”

“Yes, of course. But he acted through me. He damaged your trust *in me*. Is it possible for you to find your way back to what we had?”

“For what it’s worth, I want to.” I peered into his tired eyes. “Maybe it’s PTSD or something, but I have nightmares about escaping this place. It’s weird being back, trying to act like nothing has happened—when so much has.” I pinched my temples. “And how do you feel about me, knowing I was with Jack?”

“I am jealous of him.” The pain in Aric’s gaze screamed *understatement*. “But it does nothing to change my love for you. I will do anything to rebuild what we shared. Unless you and Jack made some kind of promises to each other down the line?”

“No. He expects you and me to get back together. He wants that for Tee.”

Aric swallowed, as if this news were too welcome to bear. “And what do you ultimately want?”

I gave a humorless laugh. “I’ll tell you as soon as I know.”

He nodded in understanding. “Shall we take our time and navigate our way as we go?”

“That sounds good.”

He exhaled a breath, then said, “Tell me about life in Jubilee.”

“What do you want to know?”

His lips curled, a hint of his old self. “As it pertains to *you*? Everything.”

So we talked. And as my arm injury continued its journey to healing, so did Aric and I.

The Hunter

I slammed on the brakes of Kentarch's truck. "I'm goan back."

Even Gabe's endless patience sounded strained as he said, "Once again, no, you are not."

He'd been manning the spotlight, illuminating a snowy road filled with corpses. As we'd descended from Death's mountain, snow had come down in heaps, slowing us to ten miles an hour. At this rate, reaching DC would take weeks.

We'd tangled with a few pileups, using this huge Beast of a truck to winch cars out of the way. And all the while, I hesitated to put more distance between me and Evie. "How could I leave her?"

"Because you love her—and you trust Domīnija." Gabe turned to face me in the seat. Though he'd pinned his black wings against his back, they were still massive in the cab, had grown along with his muscles. "You know what has to be done, and now we must make sacrifices."

"Was I right to trust Death?" My instincts told me to, but this game kept throwing me.

"Yes. Aric Domīnija is not the villain I once thought him. In our dealings, he has been fair and forthright." Like Gabriel himself. "Well, at least he was before the Hanged Man influenced him." Again, like Gabriel. The Archangel tilted his head at me, hawklike. "You somehow managed to keep driving after you found that flower under the visor."

I gripped the steering wheel. "Honeysuckle." Evie had left a branch of it for me, wrapped with the red ribbon—the ribbon that signified she'd chosen

me. Yet I'd tucked my *porte-bonheur* in my pocket and driven forward once more. "I kept goan because we're on a mission."

"And that has not changed, friend. If we can find Patrick and Kentarch, I do believe the game will put us in the Emperor's path."

Which would actually be a good thing. Tonight, when Evie had gone inside to warm herself, Domīnija and I had talked. He'd come up with a plan to defeat Richter, one inspired by my borrowing his armor—one Evie could never know about until after the fact.

As Death had given me the high points, I'd thought, *This is crazy enough to work*.

Richter *could* be killed, without us ever raising a weapon against him. But Domīnija's plan depended on at least a single one-way trip. Maybe two.

Still, we could save the entire earth. So why was I gazing in the rearview mirror for Evie? *Elle me hante*.

If, for some reason, we didn't cross paths with Richter out on the road, we would head to Louisiana to set up a bolt-hole with all the supplies we'd gotten from the castle—everything from military communications equipment to sunlamps to explosives.

Maybe I'd finally start a settlement called Acadiana. But I would never be *home* again without Evie. Only restlessness and misery existed for me away from her. I glanced down at the satellite phone on the console, willing myself not to pick it up.

Some comms and the Beast's high-tech GPS still worked for now, but we figured the satellites would start falling out of the sky in time.

What if Evie *wasn't* a phone call away? Another glance in the rearview.

Gabe patted my shoulder. "I feel as if we're running out of time to find Patrick and your friend Kentarch. They need us—and we certainly need them." I'd told Gabe about the plan; he knew everything hinged on the Chariot.

With that in mind, I exhaled a gust of breath and continued on.

A few miles down the road, I saw Gabe absently trace the World's icon on his hand, earned by default. We hadn't had time to talk about the deaths of Tess, Selena, and Finn yet. Gabe had been friends with Finn and Tess—and in love with the Archer.

"Tess was a nice girl," I said. "I'm sorry we lost her."

He glanced up and swallowed. "Though unprepared to push her powers, she took the risk anyway."

“Selfless, then? Like Selena.”

In the light of the truck’s electronics, I saw raw grief flare in his eyes.
“Like Selena.”

“The Archer gave her life to save mine.” And then Matthew had rescued me—a civvy—from those slavers. *Why, coo-yôn?*

“Because of Selena, you and the Empress were able to defeat the Hanged Man.”

“Not before he got Finn.”

“Not before,” Gabe murmured sadly.

I wanted to say more about our friends, but none of the old platitudes applied.

They had a good life. The three had been teenagers.

Time will heal all wounds. During an apocalypse?

They’re in a better place. That one must be true.

After a laden beat, Gabe changed the subject. “Tell me how Patrick fared in Jubilee and out on the road.”

“Always thinking about freeing you. Joules works best when you’re around.”

“I still cannot believe I would ever try to harm my best friend.”

“You two are solid. He understood this game makes shitty things happen.”

“Indeed. I have stopped blaming Death for killing Calanthe. Though I doubt Patrick ever will.”

“Why did you three attack Domīnija in the first place?” Talk about a suicide mission.

“She said that we were all dead men walking unless we defeated him. Patrick agreed, and I followed him.”

That reminded me . . . “Have you read Calanthe’s chronicles? I sure would like to.” After Evie told me that Joules had them, we’d pressured the Tower to come off them. Stubborn Irishman wouldn’t budge.

“No, I have not, but Calanthe relayed everything written about me. You share Death’s keenness about them. I know where Patrick hid them, but I am sworn not to reveal their location.” And an honorable angel like him would never break his word.

“Did Calanthe tell you how you died in past games?”

“She must have predeceased me. It happens.”

“Yeah. Guess it does,” I said, my thoughts turning dark. I liked Gabe and Kentarch, and even Joules had his moments. I grudgingly liked Domīnija and respected the hell out of him. *They all have to die if Evie is to live.*

Unless we found a way to upend the game. “Did the people in your sect ever talk about finding a way out of the game?”

From what Joules had confided to me in Jubilee, Gabriel Arendgast had been kidnapped as a baby and raised by an off-off-grid cult, secluded from the rest of civilization, which explained why his words and clothes were old-timey. They’d worshipped him as their angelic savior, or something.

“The sectaires did not. They only spoke about my winning. I do not believe my chronicles had anything in them either.” According to Joules, his had been lost in a fire long ago, along with his sword. In past lives, Gabe had been a swordsman to equal even Domīnija.

“Do *you* think there’s a way out? Maybe Tee’s birth will affect the game?”

Seeming to choose his words with care, he said, “Alas, I do not believe his birth will alter anything. You heard me tell Evie that the game is spinning to an end. I know it; Death knows it. After winning so many times, he must *feel* it. Only one can be the victor.”

I should’ve hashed this out before I’d left with Gabe, but . . . “Who’re you liking for that podium?”

A hint of a smile. “I have no desire for immortality, and I am sworn never to harm your Empress, hunter. I favor her to win. She must. Which means you will be reunited with her soon.”

Part of me leapt at the thought of getting Evie and Tee back. But another part of me saw the logical progression of the game. “There’s got to be a way to stop this.”

“You wouldn’t want to reclaim your fair lady?”

“Not if that means you all die. Tee’s father dies.” Losing Domīnija might break Evie beyond repair. Matthew’s death alone could sink her.

“And yet, it will happen.” Gabe resumed his spotlight duty when we closed in on a snarl of busted-up cars. “Domīnija retained his castle and the Empress for now, but his intentions are still for you to raise his son.”

When Domīnija had outlined his plan, he’d said as much. “But it is *possible* for the game to go on for years, right? If so, Death can get to know his kid.”

“’Tis possible. In this world, anything is.” Gabe shrugged his wings, and a gleaming black feather drifted to the floorboard.

“Even overturning the game completely.” As we passed body after body alongside the road, I said, “I got to believe the gods didn’t want the earth to be like this. Maybe they just need a nudge in the right direction to fix things.”

“Nudging deities is not unheard of.” Gabe’s expression grew thoughtful. “The sectaires told stories about divine interventions, and these tales always had two aspects in common. First, the hero had to gain the gods’ attention. Then, to sway their favor, he or she had to make a very dear sacrifice.”

“How do we gain their attention? Be the loudest person on earth?”

“Perhaps it is precisely like that.”

So how could someone megaphone the gods? And what sacrifice would they demand?

The Empress

Okay, okay, kid, I thought when Tee kicked again, as if willing me to go to bed. I told Aric, “Time for me to turn in.”

“Of course.” Ever the gentleman, he escorted me to the room we’d once shared.

At the door, I hesitated. Would he leave me here? Did he plan to sleep in his study?

“Last night, you understandably wanted space from me at the cabin. But this castle isn’t as secure.” His gaze flicked in the direction of Lark’s room and back. “Tonight I will remain with you.”

Having Death in the room might worsen my nightmares. “Are you still worried about Lark? Paul controlled her.”

In flawless French, he said, “I neither knew about nor gave her permission to grow that monstrosity of a bear. And she did it *before* the Hanged Man’s power play. I don’t want you alone with her. Once you’ve seeded the castle with your plants again, we can revisit this issue.”

Was Aric speaking French because she might be spying on us through her animals right now?

I guessed I owed it to Tee to accept this offer of protection, until I talked to Lark and solidified our alliance. “Okay, you can stay.” I opened the door and walked in.

Snow piled up outside the window, blocking the night’s sparse light, but a small lamp cast an intimate glow. As he’d promised, the room looked just as before. Even the white rose he’d grown for me was blooming.

The bed loomed large. A rush of memories—of every wicked thing we’d done to each other there—hit me.

I caught him staring at it too. Recalling the same? He clenched his fists, and his arm muscles bulged. His tell alerted me to his heightened emotions.

Despite everything, I desired Aric. I always had, even when I’d despised him. So what would the future hold in that area?

Voice gone low, he said, “In all the lifetimes that we’ve known each other, we’ve experienced the gamut of emotions between us, have we not?”

“Oh, yeah. Everything from murderous rage to love to weird awkwardness.” I headed to the closet and snagged my most modest nightgown and robe. Before, I would’ve changed in front of him or worn nothing at all. Clothes in hand, I told him, “I’ll go wash up.”

Nod.

So exquisitely awkward.

Once I’d enjoyed a steaming shower—would that ever get old?—I dried off with a fluffy towel, then pulled on my nightgown. It stretched tight across my belly and chest. I donned the robe, covering as much as I could, but the material clung to every curve.

Though Jack had done an amazing job sourcing baby supplies in Jubilee, he hadn’t been able to find a lot of maternity clothes. Another worry for another day.

When I returned to the bedroom, Aric had moved a chair beside the bed. From there he could watch me and the door.

He stood when I entered, his attention dipping to my body. All these changes were new to him. He cleared his throat behind a clenched fist, then seemed to force himself to meet my eyes. “You found everything you need?” His raspy voice called to me.

“Like you said—it’s as if I’d never left.” I bit my bottom lip.

With sadness in his gaze, he said, “More awkwardness?”

I sighed. “A last gift from Paul.” I crawled into bed, trying to ignore the sublime scent of sandalwood and pine on Aric’s pillow. Despite my

emotional numbness over Jack's leaving, my body felt electrified, nerves on high alert from desire—and a touch of lingering fear.

Aric sat beside the bed, elbows on the armrests, fingers steepled.

In time, sleep beckoned. As I drifted off, his amber gaze glowed in the dark, never straying from me.

The Empress
Day 600 A.F.

“Still not hungry?” I asked Lark. For the last couple of weeks, I’d left breakfast outside her door each morning. Today she’d finally allowed me to bring the plate into her room.

I’d been shocked by the dark circles under her bleary eyes. Her pointed ears peeked out from her mane of tangled black hair.

Her animals—monkeys on a climbing perch, her falcon, one of Maneater’s six wolf pups, and dozens more—appeared as listless as she did.

“Not really.”

I set the plate of scrambled eggs, toast, and fresh fruit on her bedside table. “You had better do more than pick at this. I spent an hour sourcing and cooking that meal.” Each morning, with Aric’s constant presence, I would harvest berries from the nursery, eating as many as I put in the basket. In the barn, I collected eggs and filled a pail of milk from one of the cows.

Cyclops had lain beside my stool today, his eye seeming to say, *I’m sorry for almost mauling you*. I’d petted his frizzy scruff until he’d nodded off.

Lark cast an uninterested glance at the food. “How much did you eat when you thought Jack had died?”

Touché. I gazed out of her windows. Lightning constantly flared among snow-laden clouds as the temperature continued to drop. Somewhere out there, he clawed his way through the Ash.

Astute Lark said, “Still can’t believe you let him leave.” When she sat up, sleepy creatures scampered across the animal-print coverlet for another warm spot to snuggle. “You still love him, right?”

“Love both him and Aric.” I faced her with a shrug. “But staying here makes the most sense right now, and Jack’s got a mission he feels strongly about.” To find our friends, and then to be . . . bait.

“Have you talked to him since he left?”

I sat beside her on the bed. “No.” Not once in two weeks. “Aric keeps the phone with him in case of emergency. And he updates me on Jack’s progress.” He’d told me that they were texting back and forth, and that Jack and Gabe were halfway to DC.

Two monkeys squabbled over a spot on the climbing tree. With a wave of her hand, Lark quieted them. “I’m surprised Death let you out of his sight to visit me.”

He’d only allowed me to come up here by myself after I’d managed a show of thorns from a body vine. I’d disguised how difficult that power outlay had been. “He’s in the garage working on sabotaged vehicles.” Paul’s doing.

“Must be weird being back here with the boss.”

“It is, sometimes.” As Aric and I worked side by side, cleaning up the messes left by Paul and reclaiming the castle, we behaved more like colleagues than a married couple. We were overly attentive and polite to each other, saying nothing of importance.

But back in our room . . . we were helplessly drawn to each other. He stole glances at my body and caught me looking plenty too. Sometimes I’d stare at his arms and imagine his comforting embrace. I *missed* him.

Yet I’d tucked the amber wedding ring in my drawer—because I wasn’t ready to let go of Jack.

Lark’s falcon gave a low cry from her perch. The wind today grounded her from scouting, not that Lark looked up for it.

I nodded at the beautiful bird, with its inquisitive eyes and snowy feathers. “You’ve never told me her name.”

“Taka. In Japanese, it means *hawk*, which she isn’t, but I liked the sound of it.” Lark studied my face with a gaze as penetrating as Taka’s. “You look like shit, unclean one. Aren’t you supposed to be all smiles?”

“I think that’s only in the movies.” This pregnancy kept me too nervous to smile much.

“You still having nightmares about us attacking you and all?”

“You know about those?” She raised her brows. Oh yeah, she’d been spying on us. “I’ve had a few.”

“Me too,” Lark murmured. “I dream about . . . about burning Finn. Can’t stop seeing that in my head.”

How horrific. “I’m so sorry.”

She pointed to the Magician’s icon on my hand, the ouroboros, and whispered, “Infinity.”

I nodded. “Infinity.” The symbol marked both of their cards.

“I’m glad you wear his icon. *Not* Paul.” She flashed her growing fangs. “He killed Finn twice. Once with poison and then again when he mind-warped me into cremating Finn’s body.”

“So you couldn’t resurrect him.” I recalled the sparrow she’d revived through faunagenesis. It had been blank-eyed and haunting. Had her grizzly? I hadn’t paid attention to its eyes—was too focused on its yawning maw looming over Kentarch’s truck as we escaped the castle. “Are humans even in your wheelhouse?”

Lark’s irises pulsed red. “We’re all animals at heart.”

After seeing what was left of humanity out on the road, I couldn’t argue with that. “Where are Finn’s ashes?” Surely a tooth or something remained. Not that I wanted Lark to resurrect him. As much as I’d cared about the Magician, I had seen *Pet Sematary*.

“Paul scooped them up, put them in a canister, and made me send one of my wolves out to the coast to break it open at the shore.” Her eyes watered, tears spilling. “The love of my life is *gone*. Obliterated.”

I reached across the bed to hold her hand. “You’ll see Finn again in your next life.”

“Unless you stop the game. When Finn lived, I wanted that more than anything. Not now.” She pulled her hand back. “What if you ruin our reincarnation?”

“You know the odds are against that,” I said, hedging.

A fox kit hopped up on the bed and snuggled into Lark’s lap. She absently stroked its silky fur with her beclawed fingers while it blinked sleepily.

Such an innocent creature compared to the grizzly Lark had sicced on us. “We need to discuss that supernatural bear. If Kentarch hadn’t shown up, I’d be dead.”

“You know Paul forced me to attack you.”

“He wasn’t in control of you when you resurrected it. Are there others?”

“Nah, Eves.”

I raised my brows.

“No! I have to bleed into it, and it takes a lot out of me, okay? And I only did it because Poseida’s moat put me on edge. I know you don’t believe me, but the Priestess did eat my tiger.”

Circe confirmed that. I studied the prints on Lark’s coverlet.

“Just like you guys ate my lion.”

I glanced up with a huff. “We didn’t have a choice, but you did with that grizzly. Why was it so big? Because you resurrected it?” It’d stood as tall as Ogen at his worst.

She shook her head. “No, at first it was normal. But once I fed it some of my blood, it got bigger. A lot bigger. Like my wolves.”

“Jesus, Lark.”

“I just wanted to protect myself, and then Finn.” Her eyes watered more. “Great job I did. I got him killed. If I’d been able to let him go . . .”

“Look, none of us could have predicted the Hanged Man, and Finn wouldn’t have lasted out in the Ash. You gave him happiness at the very end,” I assured her. “The night before he died, we had a talk, and he told me he was happier than he’d ever been.”

The desolation in her eyes lifted somewhat. “Really?”

“Really.”

“When you thought Jack had died, how did you keep from going crazy?”

Didn’t. “I believed Tess would turn back time, and I’d save him.”

“But after you found her body and thought him gone forever, how then?”

I considered evading Lark’s question again or giving her a pat answer. But if I valued our friendship, didn’t I owe her an honest answer? “I imagined I had a tourniquet around my heart that I tightened until I went numb. With every memory of Jack, I would repeat, *Twist, tighten, constrict.*” I’d done it again when he’d driven away two weeks ago. *A bloodless heart can’t hurt.*

“I should try my own tourniquet. Something to keep me from losing it.” Lark swiped at her tears. “Whoever said that it’s better to have loved and lost is full of more shit than a bull.”

I wondered if whoever said that *had* loved and lost. They definitely hadn't more than once.

Could I survive another loss of love?

Lark added, "At least you had Death to live for."

Oh, the irony of that statement. "You've got friends. *And* a mission to save the world." She looked unimpressed. "When we faced the Emperor a couple of months ago, he told me he likes burning bodies, and he'll keep doing it until none are left. Those who don't burn will starve." Hoping to awaken her single-minded pursuit, I said, "If no one's left, how will we reincarnate in a future game? In that scenario, you will *not* see Finn ever again."

Red flooded Lark's eyes, and every animal in the room shot to attention in a chorus of growls—even the baby fox. "Then I need to grow another killer beast to help us fight him."

I frowned. "You were always planning to, weren't you? Lark, what are you thinking?"

She nibbled her lip with a sharp fang. Then she snapped her fingers. Three monkeys hopped off their climbing perch to clamber under the bed.

What they dragged out made the breath leave my lungs.

The Hunter
Day 616 A.F.

“Mère de Dieu,” I muttered when Gabe swept our spotlight over the destruction in an otherwise dark city.

Washington, DC was a corpse of its old self.

The Beast prowled the deserted streets, passing one ruin after another. Graffiti covered the Lincoln Memorial’s walls. Bodies littered the frozen Reflecting Pool. The Washington Memorial obelisk had snapped in half, the tip stabbing the ground.

“I’d always wanted to come here,” I said, but field trips for kids at Basin High had been a laughable dream. Fundraisers sometimes scored us a couple hundred bucks to help with the asbestos removal. We’d been taught to expect little, the only lesson we’d taken away from that school.

“I had no idea cities like this even existed.” Over these weeks on the road, Gabe had confessed that coming across old postcards pained him because he’d never seen anything outside his mountain home before Day Zero. “Had no idea the world had been full of wonders.”

At least I’d gotten to experience the bayou, the moss-draped cypress, and that southern breeze. “I knew about the wonders out there but didn’t figure I’d see any of them.” Thought I’d be stuck in prison, me.

“Do you believe Patrick and the Chariot will be here after all this time?”

“Got to.” If they’d even returned to DC.

With the snow and all the pileups, the trip here had taken us a month. Gabe and I had switched out stints behind the wheel after I’d taught him how to drive.

The Archangel had been excited about his new skill, but then he'd flushed with guilt. "*I experience delight, and yet my best friend might be hurt or worse.*"

I knew how he felt. Whenever I found myself not *completely miserable*, I'd think about Evie at Death's castle. Was she scared about her upcoming labor? Nervous about being back in that place—

Movement out of the corner of my eye. Bagger? Human?

I exhaled a gust of breath. Just a plastic bag floating on the wind. People weren't even producing them anymore; must be spawning on their own.

I glanced at Gabe. "You scent any survivors?" We'd spotted none in DC so far. And no Bagmen.

Whenever we'd found a zombie on the road trapped in a car or under rubble, I would try to communicate with Sol, like I'd seen Evie do. Only hisses and snapping teeth answered me.

Gabe rolled down the window to smell the frigid winds. "There are no nearby humans. The stench of Bagger seems omnipresent, yet I spot none moving about. I would have assumed this city contained legions of them. Perhaps the Azey killed them all."

The Azey. The mention of my former army made sorrow well up in me. I wished I could talk to the soldiers who'd survived, but Circe had said they'd scattered to the winds after picking clean the Lovers' bunker. "Can't be the Azey. They never occupied DC."

Gabe's piercing gaze surveyed the area. "Did Kentarch give you any idea about his hideout's location?"

"*Non.* I only know it was a penthouse, barricaded from the inside." He'd left his wife there while he'd searched for water, yet she'd disappeared. Or so Kentarch had thought. In fact, Issa had gotten trapped in a hidden safe room.

After weeks scouring the area, he'd torn the penthouse apart and found her body. He'd lost his mind, convincing himself she was still alive, just missing—until the Queen of Cups had reminded him that he'd *already* found Issa and gone crazy.

"I can fly aloft and attempt to scent them."

"*Bien.*" I'd just slowed the truck when electricity made my hair stand on end. The sky lit up, lightning bolts fracturing the black.

"The Tower!" Gabe's eyes went wide. "I go anon." He leapt from the still moving truck and bounded into the air, his wings scattering snow.

I followed him in the Beast, careening around wrecks as I sped toward the lightning. So Joules had survived. Had Kentarch?

As I neared, I finally came across Bagmen. Dozens of them loped toward those lights.

My jaw dropped when an apartment building came into view. About fifteen stories up at the top, Joules stood on a balcony, casting down javelins against a cresting wave of Baggers.

What must be a thousand of them scrambled over each other, clawing to reach the penthouse. They covered one side of the building in a roiling mass.

This uncanny scene reminded me of Joules's Tarot card—from a high tower, lightning rained down along with flailing bodies.

Gabe landed next to him, readying his wings against the coming onslaught; why didn't the Archangel just fly our friends to safety?

I wheeled the Beast around, preparing a getaway. Then I flashed every light the truck had and honked to attract the Baggers, but they remained fixated on their target—live bodies in a city of none.

How the hell were uncoordinated zombies *climbing*? I'd seen them ascending stairs but never a ladder, much less each other.

Sol must be attacking. I scanned the area for more bogeys. Would Richter and Zara join him? If the Emperor quaked this place, we'd have no escape.

The Bagger wave was about to crest when Joules stopped firing and sagged against Gabe. Like a shot, the Angel snared Joules and dove down. I leapt out of the truck cab when Gabe landed beside me. "Where's Kentarch?"

Joules swung his elbows, fuming. "Gabe feckin' left him!" He turned on his best friend. "Are you barmy, birdbrain? The Hanged Man still got your bollocks in his hand? I told you Tarch is up there."

Gabe yanked open the truck door and shoved Joules in. "I am going back for him."

"Tarch won't come with you! Won't leave that place or her body. I've tried to convince him to go for weeks, right up until the Baggers caught wind of us and surrounded the building. Been strikin' for me life on and off for days."

"Take me up there, Gabe." I strapped my crossbow to my thigh, then ran around the front of the truck. "I can talk to him." I'd never flown with the

Archangel—well, not while conscious—but I would for Kentarch.

“We must make haste.” Gabe snagged me on his way up into the night.

Christ, was I really flying with an angel? This fucking game . . .

In the fierce wind and swirling snow, we soared over the mass of Bagmen. Without Joules’s bombardment, it scaled higher.

“Time is of the essence, hunter. They will reach the top in moments.”

“Got it.”

Gabe landed us on the balcony and released me. We barreled inside, found the interior in shambles, drywall debris everywhere. The air reeked. Kentarch was in a corner, rocking a shriveled body wrapped in a blanket. Issa, his beloved wife.

I knelt beside him. The man looked gaunt, like he hadn’t eaten since I’d last seen him. “Kentarch, we gotta go! Gabe’s a friendly now. So why doan you and I hitch a ride out of here?”

His lips drew back from his teeth. “*Never*. This is the end for me. You two leave this place.”

If I pushed too hard, he might pull that gun at his side. Silly me had convinced him to practice with his left hand after he’d lost the right. “It’s time, podna. Let’s take her and bury her.”

“This is where she died. She waited for me here. She believed I would come back and save her. This is where I will die—with her. The whisper of my hope lied!”

Gabe paced at the balcony doors. “They are at the railing.” Wings flared, he marched out to meet them, tearing through them with his talons. I heard the gory details—gurgling growls and bodies hitting the floor.

I told Kentarch, “This ain’t the way. You want to die to be with Issa? Then do it clean. Baggers could turn you.” Evie hadn’t turned, but other Arcana might. “Then you’ll live forever as one of them. At best, they’ll mute your power and eat you alive.”

“So? I deserve that and more. Leave us!” Attention back on Issa, he blocked out me and the danger all around us.

Gabe returned, out of breath, wings quaking from his efforts. “Too many have breached. We must go now!”

No time to reach Kentarch. I had one last play, had used it on *coo-yôn*. Desperate times . . .

I aimed my scarred fist and launched a punch at his face. Like hitting a brick wall, but Kentarch went down, unconscious. “Gabe, take him.” I

shook out my right hand. “Come back for me.”

“No time. I will take you both.”

“And her too.” I lifted Issa’s corpse in my arms.

Gabe cast me a disbelieving look.

“We gotta have Kentarch—which means we bring her.”

“Very well. I will clear as much room as I can.” With Kentarch’s limp body in his arms, Gabe sprinted for the balcony doors, wings mowing down Baggers, decapitating them, but their heads still lived. As I ran after Gabe, they snapped their teeth at my boots.

Once he’d cleared a launchpad, he motioned for me with his free hand. “Come.”

With Issa clutched close, I lunged for Gabe. He grabbed us all and vaulted upward.

Clear—

Pressure on my legs??

A trio of Bagmen had leapt over the railing and snagged me! I kicked with all my might, but they were enormous, dressed in tattered football uniforms—full gear and helmets. Washington Commanders. By the size of them, they’d been first goddamned string.

One’s grip blocked my thigh holster. Couldn’t reach my crossbow. Gabe strained his wings against the sudden weight.

“Doan drop us, Archangel!” To the closest Bagger, I yelled, “Sol, we’re Evie’s allies!”

The thing snapped its teeth. Facemask saved me from a bite.

“Sol, *lay off*. Get your man to let me go!” Another blocked bite. The Sun Card might be controlling this swarm, but he wasn’t melding his senses with this particular Bagger—

Gabe flew sideways into a neighboring high-rise, bashing the creatures and my legs; my bad one sang. But it scraped off the zombie between me and my bow.

With my free hand, I snared my weapon and plugged one through its facemask. It flailed before it died, tearing the other one off on its way down.

Shed of the extra weight, Gabe shot higher like a snapped rubber band. I barely kept hold of Issa—or the contents of my stomach.

He banked hard in the winds, then righted us. “Apologies. They were unexpectedly heavy.” His descent was slow and steady, as if to make up for

all the turbulence. He set me on my feet by the truck as gently as a babe in the cradle, and I managed not to vomit.

After laying Kentarch in the back, he took Issa's body from me while I doubled over to catch my breath.

Joules charged toward us, sparking mad. "What happened to Tarch? Was he bit? What'd you let happen to him?"

I held up a finger—*a fucking minute, man*—then said, "*Non*. Not bit. A tap to the jaw."

"You brought the body?"

"He'd never accept it if we didn't, would just teleport back here. We're goan to find somewhere for him to bury her. Get some closure."

Eyes bleary, Joules shook his head. "When he comes to, he'll be right wild on you."

"I'll make him see reason." I sounded so sure. In truth, I didn't like our chances.

And without Kentarch, Domīnija's plan to save the world would be over before it began.

The Hunter

I wished this was the first grave I'd had to dig since the Flash.

Or that it'd be the last.

Gabe had joined me down here in the frozen ground, using his superhuman strength to out-shovel me.

I'd driven to Arlington National Cemetery, the only place I could think of. I didn't figure Kentarch would want to bury Issa in a foreign country's military cemetery, but we could offer him at least one option when he came to.

In the nearby truck, he remained unconscious, and Joules slept on, exhausted from fending off Baggers for the better part of a week.

Before he'd passed out, we'd filled him in on everything that had happened in Jubilee and with the Hanged Man, and Joules had told us about the last month with Kentarch. . . .

"He took me out in the Ash, still barmy, still believin' he just needed to find Issa. So I said we should check the penthouse, see if she'd returned. Bloody mistake, that. Everything came floodin' back, and Tarch just gave up. I couldn't budge his barricade, so I was trapped. Then the Baggers showed."

I'd decided to let Joules in on Domīnija's secret plan to take out Richter. The Tower's take: "For once, I agree with Death. That's the only way. So you had better hope Tarch doesn't zoom out of your grasp, laddie."

Now I paused with my shovel, gauging the depth. "This ought to do it."

Gabe effortlessly leapt out of the deep grave and reached down to haul me up. "Do you believe this will appease the Chariot?"

“*Non*. But it’s the best idea I had.” I glanced at Issa’s covered body beside the grave and felt sorry as hell for what Kentarch was going through. If I’d lost Evie in such a way, I’d have lost my mind too.

With a nod, Gabe collected our shovels and stowed them in the Beast. Then he dug for food.

I swiped sweat from my forehead and glanced around the area. A deathly guy like Domīnija would enjoy so many blackened gravestones. Corpses lay smattered among the markers, probably loved ones who’d checked out here after the Flash.

Would they go to hell? *Was* there a hell? Knowing that the Arcana reincarnated and gods existed had totaled my beliefs.

I scratched my head. Maybe more than the players reincarnated. Could a civvy like me find Evie in some distant future?

The phone pinged. I hurried to the truck, hoping she’d sent a message, though she hadn’t yet. Somehow I knew she wouldn’t.

Domīnija: Evie asks if you’ve tried to communicate with Sol through a Bagman.

Hated to burst their bubble, but . . . Sol attacked Joules and Kentarch. We barely got them out alive.

Domīnija: Emperor and Fortune?

MIA. Don’t know why. BTW, Chariot ain’t sold on the mission. Yet.

Domīnija: Only the fate of humankind is at stake, mortal.

I’ve had a day, Reaper.

Domīnija: Remind him of his alliance. And secure Temperance’s chronicles from the Tower.

Copy. How’s my girl? I reached into my pocket and touched the red ribbon.

The text wheel spun, then: Slowly adjusting. She misses you.

So they hadn’t slept together yet. Only a matter of time. After all, she and I had made no promises between us. Give her my best.

The wheel spun once more. Finally: Do not get killed out there. He signed off.

I’d just set aside the phone when Joules roused in the backseat.

“Where are we?”

“Cemetery. Waiting for Kentarch to come to.”

Joules glanced over at him. “You must’ve clocked the shite out of him.”

I shook my head. “Think his hunger laid him lower than my right hook.”

“We had his old food stores, but I could only get bites down his gullet when he was more addled than usual. If the pair of you hadn’t arrived when you did . . .”

“We’ll patch him up and help him. That’s what we’re here for.”

Joules scrubbed a hand down his haggard face. “Had to be Sol that sicced his Baggers on us, right? Unless zombies have learned to work with each other. And then we’re all fucked.”

Didn’t know which option I hoped for, me. “Any idea why Sol might go after you like that?” According to Evie, the native Spaniard preferred not to fight at all. At one point, he’d even saved the lives of Evie, Domīnija, Gabe, Joules, and Finn.

At least for a time, Magician.

“Could be because Gabe, me, and Finn were gunnin’ for him for months. He was Richter’s eyes and ears, so we wanted Sol gone.”

“But if the Sun attacked, why didn’t Richter join him? Hell, Zara could’ve shelled you to the ground with her copter.”

“Dunno.” He hiked his bony shoulders. “I just work here, Jackie boy.”

“Man, I heard that.”

Joules eyed me hard. “Still canna believe you won Death’s castle then gave it up. You lost your wits since I last saw you?”

“Got a mission. Doan need a castle to complete it.” The plan to flush out Richter was coming online. “But I do need Calanthe’s chronicles, Joules. We’re heading toward Louisiana. Are we goan in the right direction to retrieve them?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You want me to give them to you, so you can hand them over to Death? Should I give over Cally’s weapons too?”

Joining us with a Mayday bar in hand, Gabe said, “Perhaps her things *should* go to the Empress, with the caveat that Evie safeguard those belongings until the next game. How else will Calanthe be reunited with her weapons and chronicles in the future?”

Joules scowled. “You’re so sure the Empress will win?”

“I will work toward that goal, as will Jack, Domīnija, and, I hope, Kentarch. Eventually you will too. I would wager on our alliance even over

the Emperor.” With a gentle smile, he added, “Our time grows short, friend.”

“Death’s still not gettin’ them out of me.” Joules made like he was locking his lips and throwing away the key.

Gabriel looked disappointed. “Honestly, Patrick.”

“Stubborn Irishman.” I’d keep wearing him down.

Kentarch began stirring. *Go time.*

His lids fluttered open. Gaze confused, he looked out the truck window and spotted Issa’s body on the ground beside a new grave. His eyes went wide. “What have you done?” He teleported for Issa, scooping her up in his arms. “You stole her from her final resting place?” He started to waver.

“Wait, Tarch!” Joules scrambled from the truck. “You canna take her back to the penthouse. It’s crawlin’ with Baggers!”

“Hold on, podna!” Panic gripped my throat. “Doan go *anywhere*. Talk to us.”

Kentarch solidified and turned on me. “She and I were meant to remain there! I wanted to join her. I didn’t want to survive this night.”

Gabe quietly said, “The Bagmen had different plans for you.”

“I’ll clear the place of those creatures, then take her body back. I’ll use my pistol for a clean death.”

I shook my head hard. “*Non*, you got to put her in the ground, so you can get to work. You ain’t completed your mission, soldier. Once you do, *then* you can reunite with Issa.”

A hesitation. “What are you talking about?”

With everything to lose, I said, “Death came up with a plan to save the world from Richter, and it can work, but it depends solely on you. You once told me that you owed him for saving your life. You and Issa wouldn’t have made it past the Flash if not for him.”

The stubborn set of Kentarch’s jaw eased. “I won’t be of any benefit to you in my condition. I am broken.”

“We’re goan to help you get on your feet again. We’re here for you. It’s mind over matter—but you’re goan to have to work at it.”

He wiped the scarred end of his right arm over his weary face, then stared down at Issa’s remains. “Hunter, I *ache* to go with her.”

I felt how much he did. Still, my love for Evie would make me ruthless. “You’re in an ancient alliance. Are you goan to honor it? Or will you ditch your men behind enemy lines when the war is raging?”

Kentarch met my gaze with his brows drawn. I had him on the ropes. The great Chariot Card was the world's ultimate warrior, a centurion; he revered honor and allegiance. I'd bet the idea of delivering the earth from evil got his motor revving too.

I pressed my advantage. "Hey, soldier, I can promise you one thing: you *will* die in this fight."

The Empress
Day 631 A.F.

“Oh, hi, honey. You’re home early.”

“Mom?” I whispered as she approached from a nearby field on our farm. I met her halfway, the cane crops sighing as I neared.

The scent of gardenias perfumed the air, and the sun was butter-yellow in a cloudless sky, the light twinkling off her earrings. But pressure built around Haven, as if a hurricane brewed just off the Louisiana coast.

Though my surroundings felt so real, this must be a dream. Wasn’t I dimly aware of Aric in the bedroom with me and of Tee’s fluttery kicks?

Mom smiled down at me, making my chest go tight. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I quelled a crazed laugh. “Something like that.”

“Bad day at school? Is this a three-scoop emergency?”

I used to believe one-on-one time with my mom could fix anything. Now my current worries were far beyond the scope of warm hugs and cold ice cream.

Jack, Gabe, Kentarch, and Joules were on their way to Louisiana together, right through Richter territory, because *bait*.

My Arcana ally Lark might be going rogue. She spent more time in the barn, had all but stopped her animal surveillance, leaving the castle vulnerable. Had her single-minded determination focused on resurrection? If so, then she had ignored my pleas not to go against Aric’s wishes.

He’d been avoiding the stables—hadn’t wanted to choose a stallion to replace Thanatos—but eventually, Aric would discover her actions in the

nearby barn. Then there'd be hell to pay at Castle Lethe. . . .

Mom reached forward and tucked a curl behind my ear, drawing me out of my thoughts. "You want to tell me about it, honey?"

You die way too young, and I miss you so much. If you'd lived, you would be a grandmother soon. Your daughter's hopelessly in love with two men.

Though I missed Jack terribly, I grew closer to Aric. He earned back my trust with every night he patiently watched over me.

My knight and I sidled around each other like magnets—at times opposing, at times attracted beyond denying it. But we somehow did.

"It's nothing I can't figure out." I managed a smile for her. "Whatcha doing out here?"

"Planning an expansion. Our idea to go organic is paying off. The land is happier; customers are happier. We're happier." She surveyed the fields with satisfaction. "No matter how far away you go, Haven will always call you home." It did even now.

I studied her expression. Prior to the Flash, she'd been *Mom*. Now that I'd gotten a bit older and had lived through an apocalypse, I understood that she'd been a full-faceted woman with her own aspirations and concerns. I wished I had asked her more questions about herself. "Did you ever want to live somewhere else?"

Her gaze grew distant as she thought back. "Budapest. The Amazon Basin. Paris! I imagined a thousand different lives." She met my eyes with infinite love. "But when you came into the picture, I wanted roots for you." Once she got an idea into her head, nobody could stop her.

I'd always dreamed of being a force of nature like her. "Any regrets?"

"Your father . . ." Even after all this time, tears welled. "I wish he'd had the chance to see you now. He'd be so proud of our little girl."

Who is knocked up. Occasionally bloodthirsty. Playing a deadly game at the end of the world. Sure.

Before, I might have felt my own regrets about how my life was turning out, but I was done with regret. We had no time for it. I straightened my shoulders. "I would've liked to know him." I made a mental note to look through my photo flash drive tomorrow.

"Remember: he's always with you. Just as I always will be. If you ever feel alone, just call on your memories."

I smiled up at her. "I will."

“Let’s go get some ice cream.” She took my hand.

“Sounds good.” I wanted to stay with her for as long as the dream allowed it, but as we walked toward Haven House, the feel of her hand began to fade while dark clouds rolled in.

The wind gusted and the temperature plummeted. Before our eyes, Haven disintegrated to ash.

I clutched Mom tighter, but the more I squeezed, the more she dissipated. Over the wind, I heard her sigh, “*Love you, sweet girl,*” and then she was gone.

The scene morphed to a lightning-lit night. All around me were black vines. Smeared with blood and dripping poison, they stretched across the entire world. Deep within my Haven, two oaks flanked a throne surrounded by thorns.

My throne. It’d been waiting for me all my life.

I woke.

Aric stood beside the bed with a glass of water at the ready. “Another nightmare?”

“Kind of.” The dream had been so lifelike, I struggled to emerge from it. I sat up and accepted the glass.

“About me?” Concern filled his expression. “About the attack here?”

“No, I dreamed about Haven and my mother. At the end, it turned dark.” Noting Aric’s tired appearance, I asked, “Did you sleep at all?”

“I will catch up soon.” He had books on pregnancy piled up on his chair, titles that Jack had sourced from all the ships he’d plundered.

“You can’t keep going like this. It’s been weeks.” Every night Aric would sit by the bed, reading by candlelight, studying as if for medical school. At times I would catch him raising his gaze from the page to my belly, concern in his eyes. “And you don’t have to stick around me so much during the day. I see you flinch at all the things that need your attention here.” He’d finished working on one of the trucks, had even installed a car seat for Tee. But a property this vast didn’t run itself.

He sat beside me on the bed. “Nothing is more important than your safety, and your own powers are proving recalcitrant again.”

I’d only managed some fitful starts with plants around the castle. “I trust Lark.” I had to.

So help me, if she was resurrecting that creature . . . after I told her not to . . .

“Sometimes the heat of battle comes when you least expect it. We can’t be too cautious.”

“I can handle myself. If you saw what I did to the Cups, you would feel better.”

“I *did* see. When I first boarded their ship, I had to sprint through that carnage.”

“Exactly.” I still hadn’t remembered what the Queen of Cups had whispered to me before she’d died. What was it? Something about Richter? “So stop worrying.”

“The memory of that makes me worry more. Jack said you burned out fast. All the players left continue to grow stronger, yet your abilities pale in comparison to Circe’s. To Richter’s. You should be their equal. *My* equal. For whatever reason, you are not there right now.”

“What do you expect from me?”

“For your thorns to have blanketed that entire coast, that region.” My nightmare had been about that very thing! “You couldn’t have drowned, because your plants would have replaced the ocean.”

Such a feat seemed farfetched, but hadn’t I sensed the catastrophic power inside me? I still hadn’t told Aric about it. Why? I was here; I was committed to this alliance.

I took a breath and said, “When Richter attacked last, something happened. I had this instantaneous awareness of all the seeds in the ground around us—hundreds of thousands of soldiers in waiting.” I swallowed but plowed on. “Aric, the earth quaked. From *me*.”

His eyes widened. “Yes! *That* is what I expect from you. You asked me how I plan to defeat the Emperor. You underestimate your own value.”

“But my abilities come with a price.” Like my call. “To fuel those soldiers, I’d have to tap into pure rage. Against the Cups, I discovered I have a yawning black hole of it inside me—unlimited power was there for the taking.”

He frowned. “Could you have defeated the Emperor?”

“I believe so.” As I stared into Aric’s steady amber gaze, I found myself saying, “But I remember thinking that if I met him power for power, we would destroy the world.” Either that or my body would give out, like poor Tess’s had. “I’ve always feared unleashing the red witch, but I finally understood what would happen if I tapped into that bottomless pit. Aric, I don’t come back from that scenario. It’s the nuclear option.”

I would become the homicidal witch forever, my hair permanently red, claws forever at the ready—my self-control gone.

“You would *have* to return. You’d muster the strength to rise once again.”

“If I’d taken Richter down that night, I would’ve killed Joules and Kentarch as well. If the witch rules me, will I be able to stop myself from killing you?” Her thoughts had begun to infiltrate my own, her lust for icons and immortality surfacing at times in my mind.

“You’ll find a way. And besides, nothing matters more than keeping you and our child safe. My life would be a small price to pay.”

I drew my head back. “How easily you talk about dying. About leaving us.”

“I don’t wish to die, *sievā*. I finally have more than this game to live for, and I am desperate to experience a new life with my family. I’m going to stay with you for as long as I can.”

Somewhat mollified, I said, “Good.”

His phone pinged with a text message. Though my heart still clamored over Aric’s words, I was tempted to grab that phone and call Jack.

Yet hearing his voice might send me into a tailspin. He must think so too; he hadn’t asked to speak with me in all this time.

“What is it? Are the guys okay?” Apparently, Sol had attacked them with an army of Bagmen. But I couldn’t really see the Sun Card as the aggressor like that.

“They are fine.” Aric pocketed the phone. “They managed to make good time today toward Louisiana.” Fresh from my dream, I wished I was going there too. “And the Chariot is doing better.”

According to Jack’s last update, Kentarch had teleported Issa’s body and one bottle of Tusker beer to Africa, laying her to rest at the foot of a mountain significant to his family. He’d returned, focused and committed to soldier on.

Could that level of confusion just disappear? I hoped so. I hoped he’d broken free of the loop he’d been caught in.

“What do you and Jack usually text about?”

“Their progress,” Aric said. “And he relates anything from the others he thinks might help us overturn the game. I’ve told him no detail is too small.”

This was interesting. “Like what?”

“The Archangel said his sect’s elders told stories about nudging the gods into doing something. According to them, a hero first had to garner the gods’ attention, then make a precious sacrifice.”

“Well, it just so happens that I’d like to nudge them about something. So how do we get their attention?”

“My question exactly. Jack thinks you basically have to be the loudest non-god on earth. A megaphone.”

“Any idea what a good sacrifice might be?” Ogen, the Devil Card, had hungered for them. Circe too.

“I know much about the history of sacrifices, but the subject is not one I wish to ponder at present.” His uneasy glance dropped to my belly.

Ah. First-born stuff. Gods were shitty.

Then I recalled the vision Matthew had sent me of the ten of swords. He’d asked, *What would you sacrifice? What would you endure?*

Had Aric and I gotten the gods’ attention that first night we’d made love? When I’d conceived Tee?

Just as uneasy, I said, “I should go start on breakfast.”

“Allow me. Why not relax awhile?”

“I like to keep busy, and sourcing food is enjoyable when it’s right there.”

Collecting the eggs and milk had soothed me. At least it *had* until the last couple of weeks when the awkwardness between me and Aric had morphed into something else entirely.

Down in that plant-filled nursery, he and I experienced a symphony of little tortures. When I’d raised my face to the sunlamps and sighed with pleasure, he’d clenched his fists and turned away. Same when I’d bent over to collect a sprig of rosemary, and his focus had drifted to my chest.

How long could he continue to turn away? How long did I want him to?

Resuming my relationship with Aric had begun to feel inevitable. I desired him just as much as he did me. Each time he emerged from the bathroom, with just a towel around his hips below his damp, tattooed chest, I would melt with longing.

Physically, I was beyond ready. Emotionally, my love for Jack got in the way of my love for Aric.

I rose from the bed, then frowned at the strangled sound he made. “Aric?” I followed his gaze down. “Whoa.” My enlarged breasts strained against my gown. Growth spurt? I’d put on weight overnight.

His brows were drawn as if I'd slugged him. "*Sievā?*"

My attention roved over his tensed muscles. He looked as if he debated striding over to kiss the ever-living hell out of me.

Before he could decide, I said, "I'll, uh, go shower. Be back in a minute."

As though he didn't trust himself to speak, he merely nodded.

In the shower, I replayed the stunned look in his eyes while trying to ignore the spray of warm water on my sensitive skin. Drops hit my icons, my growing belly, my bare ring finger.

I wasn't yet ready to resume our marriage. I gazed over my shoulder in his direction.

But I will be.

Death

I paced our bedroom, a seething mix of frustration, lust, and my ever-present guilt. These past weeks had only increased each.

We should never have had this divide between us.

But hadn't this schism been inevitable as soon as Evie had learned Jack lived? She hadn't preferred me over him. She had settled for me.

Did she love me? Yes. But I would forever know that she hadn't *chosen* me.

Still, I chose to be hers with everything in me. I willed her to take her wedding ring from that drawer and return it to her finger.

As much as my body missed pleasure, my mind missed communing with hers. My soul missed its mate.

Yet even if she wanted to resume what we'd shared, we would only be together for a time. I became more convinced that we couldn't thwart the game, even with our son's birth.

I regretted not telling my wife about my plan to defeat the Emperor. Despite my unfailing honesty, I chose subterfuge now, because our lives were not the only ones on the line.

But hadn't I misled her from the very beginning? I'd never shared with her that the Fool had predicted my future—one part heaven, one part hell. . .

When Evie emerged from the bathroom, she avoided my gaze, allowing me to take in all the changes in her miraculous body. As she grew our child, her breasts and belly had swelled. Her clothes barely contained her curves, her blouse a tight wrap across her chest.

The button just above her cleavage hung on by a mere thread. *I* hung on by a thread.

In agony, I half prayed it would come loose, half prayed it wouldn't.

As she combed the length of her gleaming hair, that button bobbed up and down. *Up. Down.* Gods almighty.

"I'm thinking strawberries today."

Excellent. I'd have to withstand the sounds of her delight as she sampled the fruit. "As you wish," I said, scarcely recognizing my voice.

When we headed out into the castle together, I resisted the impulse to take her hand in mine and relived memories of stealing kisses from her.

In this hall, she'd grinned against my lips.

In that vestibule, she'd nipped my bottom one.

Beside that window, she'd threaded her fingers in my hair to draw me closer. *Harder. More.*

I scrubbed a palm over my face. When we descended into the nursery, I turned my attention from the potting bench, where I'd taken her more than once.

Searching for something to talk about, I cleared my throat and asked, "Have you decided on a name for our son? I assume we won't christen him P'tee Garçon Greene Domīnija."

She said brightly, "I think that has a great ring to it!"

My expression must've betrayed my thoughts.

"Oh, my God, I'm kidding." Even now she could make me grin. "I'm open to suggestions. What was your father's name?"

"Teodors. And yours was David."

She nodded. "It's amazing that I can miss someone I never really knew. But I do, along with everyone else I've lost. Earlier, the dream about my mom was so lifelike."

In the scant time I allowed myself to doze at night, I'd had reveries of my own parents. "Why do you think you dreamed of her?" I suspected the Fool was sending Evie messages. His own powers must be strengthening as well.

I didn't understand their bond and probably never would—because I didn't understand *him*.

She shrugged. "Because she would've been a grandmother? She would've loved that." Evie's smile was bittersweet, emotions dancing in her

eyes. Then she frowned. “My own grandmother would not have been so pleased.”

“No. No, she wouldn’t have.” Her Tarasova grandmother had confirmed to me this game would play out differently—but she’d known not how. Of one thing she’d been certain: only one could win.

“Let’s make this name choosing easy. How about Teodors David Greene Domīnija? His nickname would stay the same.”

“I think that’s a fantastic choice.”

She patted her belly, telling him, “Speak now or forever hold your peace.” She cocked her head. “No? Then it’s settled.”

Warmth stole through me. We’d just named our son—another milestone I’d never thought to enjoy.

She and I shared a grin. I was about to say more, but she turned from me to collect herbs. “What do you think about a quiche for breakfast?”

“Sounds good.” *Sounds ambitious.* Her cooking was . . . interesting. Last week she’d used her Empress talents to mix a delectable herb seasoning for eggs, but then burned the dish black. So we’d begun working as a team, and our efforts were rewarded.

As she snipped sprigs of thyme, her expression grew contemplative. Before Paul, she’d readily shared her thoughts. Now she held back.

Lamentable, yet understandable. “What are you thinking about?”

“Past games. Even after reading my chronicles, I still have gaps. I wish I remembered more.”

Perhaps she hadn’t because she couldn’t handle what would be revealed. I’d stopped pushing for her to. The Hanged Man had taught me one thing: what lay in the past should remain there.

At least with her. With other Arcana, I’d paid for harsh lessons and must heed them. “Like what?”

“How did Circe die in that game when you saved her from me?”

“The Fury struck her with acid.” I hadn’t been there, but I’d seen the gruesome aftereffects. “The Priestess’s doom is that she always comes to land. Her arrival marks the end stage of the game.”

We hadn’t heard from her since Jubilee. It could be months before she grew strong enough to surface.

“I hope that she stays put in her temple in this one.”

“Yes.” *If* we could thwart it. Otherwise, the Priestess, like me and all the others, must perish for Evie and our son to live.

And still I clung to the hope of a way out. But we hadn't discovered the answer in any of the chronicles I'd secured. Perhaps they'd be in those of the Temperance Card.

"Why has Richter never posed such a threat in the past?"

I crossed to her to hold the basket as she worked. "He was killed early, well before his powers matured to this level."

"So what do we do now?"

Whatever I must, I thought, but I answered vaguely, "Richter uses much of his reserves to deflect attacks. If we hit him hard enough, even his unholy fires will cool. Then he will be a mere man." Two games ago, I'd tortured him as such—meting vengeance for my wife.

"And what about Zara? You once told me that if she's fully empowered with all luck flowing to her, then we've already lost." Evie had asked if the odds would always be fixed in Zara's favor. I'd answered honestly, *Not odds. Fixed outcomes. We would have no odds.*

In a dry tone, I said, "Then let us hope Fortune is not fully empowered." Her luck-energy manipulation made her one of the most perilous players. If not *the* most.

"I'm being serious, Aric."

"I've taken her down in a past game, my armor enabling me to withstand the attacks from her environment." My unaltered armor. "Granted, I faced her early on, but I did reap her icon."

Oh, the thoughts going on behind Evie's eyes as she asked, "Are you planning to do it again?"

"I'm planning to protect my family. I *will* stop her."

With a frown, Evie drew back from me and headed to the strawberries. When she leaned down over the plant, that blouse button popped off, revealing breathtaking cleavage.

Look away!

But when I wrested my gaze from that bounty of flesh, I found my wife staring up at me with yearning.

I dropped the basket. "*Sievā.*" My lips were against hers in a heartbeat.

She clutched me closer and moaned into my mouth as our tongues met. She was a goddess; she tasted of all things divine. With her, even an immortal like me could find my way to heaven.

Another moan as she grew lost in our kiss. I lifted her atop that memorable potting bench, and the scent of earth bloomed around her,

joining with all the misty greenery surrounding us.

My goddess.

She beckoned me from the grave to join her in her world. When her legs spread for me, I worked my hips between her thighs. We fit so perfectly.

My shaking hands dropped to her backside. Her lush curves wrenched another groan from my lungs.

Gentle with her. Be gentle!

Even as I cursed my growing strength, I dropped down to kiss her neck and rub my face against her breasts. She gave a cry, throwing her head back. The scent of her hair swept me up, making my mind swim.

Just when I grew certain she'd surrender, she murmured, "Wait," and pulled back. "I-I can't do this."

My voice a harsh rasp, I said, "I know Jack resides in your heart. I don't care."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I'm not ready. Not yet."

I somehow drew away from her warmth. "Not yet? So there is hope for me?"

She blinked in confusion. "Of course. I'm here with you. I chose to be here with you."

"Because of our child."

"No. We started something new between us over the months we were together here. I never wanted it to end."

"Yet that was before you knew Jack had survived. You wouldn't have accepted me otherwise."

She frowned. "Do you not remember our phone calls when I was out on the road?"

"I do. I lived for them, even when I thought I hated you." I regretted not only my cruelty to her but also things I'd divulged—especially when I'd hinted about the story behind the cilice. She'd been delirious with hunger; perhaps she wouldn't remember.

If we didn't have a baby on the way, I would tell her everything. But for now, I would do as Jack had advised and buffer her, holding back information that would only hurt her and couldn't be changed anyway.

"Aric, I told you I would choose you if you came for me. I said that *after* I knew Jack was alive."

This was true. Other facts gave me hope as well. Over these weeks, she'd gazed at me with desire, and she'd just kissed me as if she'd die if we

didn't reach our pleasures together.

And though she could call or text Jack at any time, she hadn't asked to use the phone. On the rare occasions when I slept, I kept it locked to protect my own texts to Deveau. To keep secret the plan.

Once I'd executed it, she would hate me.

Perhaps that was good. Her fury would temper her grief. She was right to fear releasing her most primal self. Of all the cards in the Arcana, she'd been empowered by a goddess who had embodied wrath.

"I will come back to you." Evie's voice was soft. "I just need more time."

"Of course." But we had little! Managing a pained half-smile, I said, "I am very accustomed to waiting."

She hopped down from the bench and put distance between us. "I think I can handle it from here. After all, this is where I'm safest."

Dismissed? "Call out if you need me." I kept my tone even, refusing to betray my internal chaos. "And stay on your guard. Please."

I ascended the steps from the nursery. Stopped in the hall. Turned back to her. Stopped. Turned toward the training yard. No horse.

Where do I go? What do I do?

Habit returned me to my study. This room held its own mix of memories. Making love to the Empress on that couch. Seeing her engrossed in my favorite books. The desk where she'd grown a poppy and told me to smoke it.

But not all the memories were welcome. I recalled Paul arrogantly sitting in my chair, smug in his belief that he owned me and all that I'd held dear. I recalled finding Evie on her first day back here, cleaning his blood spatter.

I'd asked her, "What are you doing? This is not your mess." True on so many levels.

"Maybe I'm nesting? It just feels weird to have any remnant of Paul still around."

"Fair enough." I'd grabbed a rag, and we'd wordlessly cleaned together.

Now . . . *What do I do?*

Before I'd even consciously chosen to, I'd sat and taken out paper and my pen. In the past, I hadn't chronicled my own games, because I'd realized early on in this incarnation that I would never lose.

Now I would write my history not only for my future self but also for the Empress. In time, she would give them to our son.

I wanted Teodors to know exactly what kind of man I was. The good and the bad. . . .

Writing as fast as I ran, I penned dozens of pages. But doubts crept in as I gazed out the windows at the night. Was this the best use of my time?

If I were as cutthroat as I once was, I would eliminate Fauna and leave my wife and child tucked away here at the castle. Out in the Ash, I'd target the Minors before they could ever strike those I loved. After meeting up with the Chariot, I would lure the Emperor to face me—

I heard a shriek from the barn. *Fauna*. I shot to my feet, snatched one of my swords from a nearby stand, and hastened in that direction.

Evie cut me off at the castle's entrance. "Where are you going?"

What kind of question was that? "To investigate the scream *we both heard*."

I edged around her into the snowy dark, but she grabbed my hand. "Wait. Lark might be working on a project."

I raised my brows for an explanation. When none came, I said, "Ah. She's resurrecting another animal."

Evie averted her gaze.

"This is asinine. Her animals can't compete against the Emperor's lava and Fortune's missiles." But Fauna's creations could easily take out my family. "Her greatest utility is to surveil for us." I said these words with conviction. But again, I mused what *my* greatest utility was.

Evie met my eyes. "This particular animal might be an asset."

Disquiet seized me, and I started away once more.

She hurried to keep up with me, blinking against the falling snowflakes. "Let's just talk about this for a second."

When I entered the barn, the scent of blood swept me up. In the back, I found Lark coated in it, hers and the creature's.

Eyes agleam, she dripped crimson from her arm to a huge lump of twitching flesh. With each drop, sinew materialized as if by magic. Scaly skin haphazardly covered immense bones. It looked like a patchwork quilt sewn out of viscera.

Even so, I could tell what Fauna was bringing to life.

I turned to Evie. "You cannot be serious."

The Hunter

“We’re officially in Emperor territory,” Joules muttered from the backseat of the Beast as we eased down the highway.

Whenever he, Gabe, and Finn had made guerrilla incursions against Richter, they’d spotted him in this area more than in any other.

Now the Emperor’s calling card was plain to see; stark ash and fractures marked the sides of the road for miles. Just when we were about to head south toward Louisiana, we’d found a lure.

The hunter in me itched to track it.

Kentarch adjusted the screen on the Beast’s navigation display. “Our turn-off is in a couple of miles.” Even with GPS, we struggled to find our bearings without reliable landmarks and legible signs.

Getting to this point had taken us weeks with all the pileups because Kentarch could only teleport to places he’d previously been or to places he could see. Each snarl had looked like a trap, so I’d been leery of him exiting the truck.

When I hit an unavoidable rut, rattling our trailer, Joules snapped, “Jaysus, Cajun. Watch yourself.” His head was on a swivel as he scanned the wintry wasteland.

“What’s up with you? If Richter shows, we can always teleport.”

Shrug. “Startin’ to feel as barmy as Tarch is.”

Kentarch’s unconcerned expression said, *That’s fair*. But he’d been doing a world better than before, hadn’t had any lapses of sanity. Well, not any major ones, anyway.

Both he and Joules had eaten heartily of our supplies and recuperated, their powers nearly at full force.

“Swear I think we’re being watched,” Joules admitted. “The Empress used to feel this way when we were out on the road.”

I cast a look at Gabe. “We got company?”

He rolled down the window, inhaling. “I too have been feeling something. Yet I scent and hear nothing acute.”

I glanced at Kentarch, who gave a curt nod.

“Richter and Zara wouldn’t hide,” I said. “But Sol could be scouting us through his Baggers.”

Gabe inhaled once more. “As their scent is everywhere, I cannot differentiate it. If one remained still and silent enough, I wouldn’t be able to detect it.”

“What if it’s not Majors?” Joules asked. “Matthew told the Empress that the Minors were watching us.”

The Cups had been. They’d seen us in a chalice of blood. So what were the other suits up to? “We’ll face whatever bogey we come across.” I drove on.

Out on the road with the guys, I could sometimes turn my mind from Evie for a moment here or there, but I missed her so bad it was like a wound that refused to heal.

As ever, I wondered how she was feeling. I’d bet she glowed with her pregnancy.

Though Domīnija updated me about her general health, asking for more details about his pregnant wife would be awkward. So we kept to business.

When I’d last checked in with him, he’d written: You have three Cards under your influence. You are a leader. Lead. Work with them. Their own powers are limited only by their imagination. Even with my plan, we need Richter weakened.

Leading had come easy to me, but after the loss of my army, I didn’t know if I was ready to take on that role again.

Still, Domīnija’s text had reminded me of a sunny afternoon before the Flash when I’d watched my half brother’s football practice at Sterling High. Brandon had been a talented quarterback, but he hadn’t connected with his teammates.

At one point the coach had taken aside his star player for a pep talk: “Son, a QB’s main job is to unify his team. You gotta take a pack of hopped-up teenagers and make them work as a cohesive unit, keeping them focused on the task and pushing them to give you a hundred and ten percent.”

I’d laughed at that advice. But lately I saw similarities between Brandon’s situation and mine. Maybe at the end of the world my job was to keep these Arcana focused on one task: fighting evil.

But if I’d been tapped for QB, Domīnija was the coach, calling the shots. He’d decreed that we were to retrieve him for a one-way trip if we did locate Richter. Didn’t know how I felt about that, me.

At a fork in the road, I eased to a stop. A battered road sign looked like it’d been sandblasted.

Kentarch glanced over at the odometer. “This is it.” He swept the spotlight. To the south was a fairly clean highway. To the west was more ash and fractures.

I put the truck in park and turned to the others. “This is our chance to hunt the Emperor. You guys with me?” At Joules’s strangled sound, I said, “I’m not talking about picking a fight.” *Yet*. “Just locating his lair and coming up with a game plan.”

“Hold on, boyo. Weren’t we supposed to set up a place for the Empress? Your new settlement?”

“That was plan B, *if* we couldn’t flush out Richter. We’ve already touched gloves with Sol, so I’m liking our odds.” In any case, I’d begun to doubt we could build something in Louisiana.

“I used to enjoy tweakin’ Richter’s tail now and then—*before* he turned atomic. But after the battle by the lake, I think our best play is to stay the feck away from that alliance.”

Though Kentarch had lost his hand in that skirmish, he said, “I vote to follow the ash.”

Joules scowled. “Because you want to die.”

The Chariot inclined his head. “True. Homesteading in Louisiana sounds . . . time-consuming.”

From the back, Gabe said, “The game is at work even now. Just when we are about to break free and put distance between us and other players, it pulls us back in. Arcana converge; we can do it by choice or by accident. If

we take the offensive, we would at least have some control over our fate. I vote west.”

“My vote too.” I glanced at Joules. “Well?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Me mam always told me, ‘Paddy, don’t step into the ring unless you wanna box.’ I don’t. But it looks like I got outvoted.”

“*Ouais*. Then it’s decided.”

Kentarch said, “I’ll store the trailer at the supply cave for safe-keeping.” He teleported out of his seat, which never got old. Moments later, he’d stashed the trailer and returned. “Let’s commence.”

“You got it.” I put the Beast in drive and passed our turn-off. For better or worse, we were heading into the mouth of a volcano.

The Empress

“Get cleaned up and come to my study,” Aric ordered Lark after he’d assessed the creature and searched the menagerie for more. My authoritative knight was back, his eons of confidence at the fore. He turned from Lark and started back toward the castle.

I shared a look with her—*it’ll be okay*—then hurried after Aric.

But *would* it be okay?

She’d been resurrecting that creature from the bone she’d shown me in her room weeks ago, the one her wolves had snagged from a museum. I’d told her that a resurrection was a bad freaking idea.

Or, as Lark had proposed to call it, a T-Rexurrection.

I’d wondered if she could grow a dinosaur even bigger than it’d once been, like her war wolves and that bear. And, if so, could she control it?

Logistics like dino food and droppings notwithstanding, there was another issue. Bloodletting brought on the heat of battle—what if Lark succumbed to hers? Her scream that had drawn Aric and me to the barn had been primal.

I clumsily jogged to catch up with Aric’s long-legged stride, snow crunching beneath my boots. I felt sheepish, because I’d suspected Lark was up to something. She’d appeared ever more animalistic, her fangs, claws, and pointed ears growing.

I should have done something, but what? Forbidden her or flexed on her? A rift between us could widen so quickly.

Aric strode through the castle doors.

“Will you please wait for me?” I was huffing by the time I got close to him. “What are you going to do?”

Barely controlling his anger, he said over his shoulder, “We three *allies*, as you seem to think us, are going to have a meeting.”

“Can you just slow down?”

He whirled around on me. “What were you thinking?”

Probably not a great time to inform him that Lark had acted alone.

“You asked me to trust you, but you don’t trust my wisdom garnered over multiple games. I know Fauna better than she knows herself.”

“She’s not going to hurt us. All she wants to do is reunite with Finn.”

“If she longs for the Magician, then she also must crave the end of the game. The sooner it ends, the sooner another can begin, and they’ll be reincarnated. And how does the game end, Empress? Ah, yes, with *our deaths*.”

All except one—the unlucky winner. *Not it*. “She won’t hurt us,” I insisted again. But if the three of us were the only ones left, would she make a move to take out either me or Aric, and then herself?

“She is *Fortitude*. If she sets her mind on the end of the game, we could all be dead.” I parted my lips to argue, but he spoke over me. “She’s been creating an apex predator, the most apex of them all. We can’t ever let down our guard with her.”

“Let’s just hear her out, okay?” When we entered the study, I took one of the chairs fronting the desk and Aric sat behind it. He’d once used this desk as a divide between us. Apparently still did.

He retrieved a whetstone to sharpen his sword. *Way to set the mood for a productive chat*.

As we waited, I nervously traced my icons while he worked on his blade. I asked, “No vodka for you?” I hadn’t seen him drink since we’d returned.

Graaaate went the stone. “When you can have none? Also, I relish my clarity now that I’m not being mind-controlled.” Fair enough. “Did you condone Lark’s actions?”

His question gave me no wiggle room, so I ignored it. “I think we should calmly talk to her about the creature. We’ll just ask her not to do it anymore.”

He narrowed his eyes, reading me so well. “So you didn’t condone her actions, might even have forbidden them. She willfully went against you.

This is what happens—alliances splinter, as I’ve told you before. You might have folded first in past games, but it was inevitable.” He seemed to bite his tongue over his *folded first* comment.

“Inevitable?” I drew my head back. “Will you and I splinter now?”

“Never. Now that the Hanged Man is dead, we are beyond that possibility. But the others aren’t, and each Arcana presents a risk. The only reason Fauna remains here after that bear stunt is because I considered her to deliver Tee. Yet seeing her in such a state has convinced me that’s not possible.”

I pictured the gleam of bloodlust in her eyes. They’d been like that when she’d cut away part of my arm to remove the cilice as we fled Ogen. And just weeks ago, she’d gazed at Paul’s body with a savage hunger. Would an Arcana’s labor send her into a frenzy?

If I revealed my worries to Aric, he’d kick her out tonight.

Graaaate. “In lieu of Fauna, we will need a doctor for you.”

“After Paul, I’m a little leery of medical professionals. Besides, where are we going to find a decent doc out in the Ash . . . ?” I trailed off with realization. “You’re not going to the Sick House.”

He raised his brows.

“Forget it. The Pentacles run it, and all the Minors want me dead, remember?”

He scraped his thumb over the edge of his sword. “I can motivate even the most reluctant.”

“Not me.”

“When you were in Jubilee, who had you planned to deliver the baby?”

“A midwife, but she’s dead now. So you’ll have to do it. How hard can it be? I push and you catch.”

He inhaled, as if for patience. “I take it you haven’t read any of the books on pregnancy I set aside for you.”

Kind of like reading about a plane crash while in midflight. After all, I’d been starved, stabbed, envenomed, and terrified for my life during this pregnancy. Oh, and the Bagger mutation might still course through my veins.

Not to mention what my grandmother had written in my chronicles: *She has no idea what Life and Death become.* . . .

Though I had serious doubts, I said, “Look, we’re going to be fine. We’ve faced worse odds, and we’re due for a break.”

“*Sievā*, pregnancy is out of my wheelhouse. It’s the opposite of me and my powers.”

I patted my growing belly. “And yet . . .”

He laid the stone and sword on his desk blotter. “What if something goes wrong?”

“Then you can cut Tee out of me.” Paul’s surgical tools remained here. “I’ll heal, and I’ve proved I’m pretty tough with pain tolerance. This should be cake.”

“It’s not that simple. I might slice the baby if you move during the surgery. And you *will* move, since I have no anesthesia. The Sick House would, though.”

“Get that idea out of your head, Aric. It’s too dangerous.”

“There’s another reason I shouldn’t deliver our son—I might not be able to touch him.” His face was grim. “The merest contact with my skin could kill him.”

“You’ve worried about this? You’re his father. Of course you can touch him.”

“How can you know for certain? Are you ready to take the chance that you might be wrong?” He gazed toward the window, to the unending snow. “I either set out in the next couple of weeks to find help or we’ll forfeit even that option.”

I pointed at myself and said, “Push,” then pointed at him. “Catch.”

I could tell he was far from sold, but he didn’t argue his point further.

A text notification chimed on his phone. He scanned the message with a furrow in his brow.

Was Jack safe? “What’s happened?”

“Nothing dire. An update on their progress. They made good time today.”

When Aric pocketed the phone, I asked, “How much are you and Jack talking?” I’d thought that the two of them would be friends in different circumstances. Seemed they were even in these.

He shrugged. “We text often and talk on occasion.”

His too-casual tone made my body vines stir under my skin. I got the sense he didn’t want me on his phone—which meant I would be as soon as he let down his guard.

Though he’d never forbidden me to use it, he did code-lock it. I’d assumed the extra security was for Lark, but what if the lock was for *my*

benefit? Aric and Jack might be up to something.

Changing the subject, I said, “I meant to ask you what happened to the poppy plant I grew on your desk.”

Aric’s lips thinned. “The Hanged Man removed it. Which angers me inordinately, considering all the other things he did to us.”

I thought about growing Aric another one, but it wouldn’t be the same—just like any ring I made for him now wouldn’t have the same meaning as the one I’d given him. I knew we were both thinking about that loss.

Lark knocked on the study door and entered, looking fresh from a shower. Her demeanor was antsy. From nerves about this meeting? Or because she wanted to return to her project?

She took the seat beside mine. “I’m here. Let’s meet.” Attitude rolled off her. In the past, she’d almost always been deferential to Aric.

Irritation flashed over his face. “You agreed never to breed creatures without my express permission. You gave me your word.”

Her claws dug into the armrests of her chair. “And *you* promised to keep me safe until it was my turn to bow out. But you let Ogen attack. And Paul. You haven’t kept me safe for shit.”

My jaw dropped open.

He turned to me and raised his brows. *See?* Then he faced Lark, staring her down. “You’re expressing a death wish,” he murmured, “to the one man sure to grant it?”

She jutted her chin.

His lips curved—not a smile. “It seems we have become less useful to each other. We should end our arrangement.”

I quickly cut in, “Aric, she doesn’t mean this. She’s just hyped up. Spilling blood can bring on the heat of battle. I would know.”

Lark snapped at him, “What are you gonna do? Exile me? Got a newsflash for you: the livestock stopped reproducing without my power. Happy apocalypse! Which means, you’ll starve without me. Looks like I hold all the cards—”

His sword was against her throat before I could react. “The splintering begins.”

“Whoa, wait!” I leapt to my feet and hurried around to where he leaned across the desk. “Let’s all be cool about this. Please.” Was *he* feeling the heat of battle? I made sure to touch his bare hand; the contact with my skin had calmed him in the past.

Eyes on Lark, he told me, “She’s right. Ogen and Paul nearly killed you. So why in the gods’ names would I keep yet another lethal Arcana under my roof with my wife and son?”

“Aric, please.”

Yet he didn’t budge. “Seeing her like this, can you tell me she’ll never return to that resurrection? Or harm you?”

I *couldn’t* vouch for her. She wasn’t herself, and she had screwed me over before. “It’s not that simple.”

Aric’s muscles had swelled with aggression, yet his voice remained ice-cold. “We must make it simple. For our son. *Everything* for him.”

Too late, Lark looked nervous. The bloodlust receded, leaving a scared teen in its wake.

Two Arcana had died in this castle in a span of months. How to save a friend? How to keep my alliance on track? “Please put down the sword. I’m asking you, Aric.”

Gazing down into my eyes, he bit out a curse in Latvian, then lowered his weapon.

With the immediate threat past, I turned to Lark. “Look at it from his point of view. That creature could kill us so easily. And what if you die in battle? We’d have no way to control it.”

One of her fangs dug into her bottom lip as she clearly thought through scenarios. “So if I stop resurrecting things, I can stay?”

Before Aric could speak, I said, “Yes. If we can trust you to stop and to get rid of that creature, then of course you can.”

Aric didn’t contradict me, hadn’t moved.

“Why don’t you head to your room, Lark? I’ll come see you in a bit.” And ask about her new revelation.

She nodded with relief and hurried out of the study.

Aric returned his sword to the stand and began to pace. “You suffer guilt over the past games—gods know I’ve heaped the blame on you myself—but you can’t let it cloud your judgment. You’ve softened so much toward other Arcana that you’re placing yourself and our son at risk.”

I needed to make him understand. “When Lark removed the cilice from my arm, she took a leap of faith and trusted me not to hurt her. Then she remained by my side to fight. I’ve got to do the same for her.” Despite my doubts.

He exhaled a long breath.

“What?”

“I cannot fault your loyalty. It’s what makes you so different in this life. I think that’s part of why I fell in love with you for the first time in this game.” He’d told me that he’d desired me before, but had never surrendered his heart. “Yet *sievā*, I fear your trust will be your downfall.”

I weighed his words until a thought occurred. “Will Richter and Zara betray one another?” After all, Sol had turned on them. Could we get so lucky—even when luck was Zara’s domain?

Aric said only, “Humanity is depending upon it.”

The Hunter
Day 645 A.F.

“Take a look-see at that.” I passed around a pair of binoculars to the guys, not that Gabe would need them.

In a valley below stood a lone house that might’ve once fronted a cover of some fancy architectural magazine. Mostly metal and glass, the structure had survived the Flash intact.

Joules peered through the binos. “Looks like some rich bloke’s weekend hideaway.”

“Not anymore.” A swath of ash led straight to the front door. After following Richter’s trail for the past two weeks, we’d found his lair, the one he shared with Zara and Sol.

The many windows and bright lights gave us a clear view of the interior, but so far we hadn’t spied anybody inside. I did see plush couches and wood paneling—all flammable. “If Richter was burning hot, he’d have incinerated that house from the inside.”

Joules went on alert. “If he’s not hot, then I can kill him.” His lips curled into an ominous smile.

Anticipation jangled through me. Maybe defeating Richter *wouldn’t* require a one-way trip. I asked Kentarch, “What say you?”

“In his own lair, the dragon doesn’t burn.” His gaze swept the area. “We have to assume Fortune resides there as well.” We didn’t have a plan to take her on. Not yet.

I surveyed the rest of the valley. “Where’re Sol’s Bagmen? Richter said a horde of them guarded their place.”

Joules's voice scaled higher with his excitement. "Fancy that—Richter lied."

I turned to the Archangel. "Can you do a flyover? Check for Baggers and Zara's copter."

Nod. "With pleasure."

"Just be careful."

He exited the truck and took off into the air.

While we waited, Joules cracked his knuckles. I plucked my crossbow string. Kentarch sat utterly still.

Gabe returned with red cheeks and frost clinging to his hair. "Her copter is in the back. I saw no Baggers. I scent our foes and believe the three are somewhere inside."

Holy shit. If they hadn't recently topped off their power reserves, we might have a shot at doing some damage.

With his usual logic, Gabe said, "We should lie in wait nearby. If we see them leave, we can investigate."

Wait? Instinct told me to *hunt*. "They might not leave for weeks." Wasn't like folks ran to the store these days.

Kentarch said, "I can teleport to the castle to retrieve Death's armor. We can finish this tonight." He clenched his left hand. "My demise feels blessedly near."

I shook my head. "When I texted Domīnija that we followed Richter's trail, he told me he comes with the armor, no exceptions."

"I can retrieve him as well."

Then Domīnija would die tonight.

Would Evie survive that loss? I'd debated Death's plan till my brain hurt and decided that I couldn't risk him, not when upending the game was a possibility.

I'd make sure he met his son—and took care of Evie for as long as he could. *Noble, for the record, hurts like a blade to the heart.* "No. He stays put."

Sounding gut-sick, Kentarch muttered, "So we are not to fight?"

I was about to point out, "Not unless you want to die," but he did, so I said, "What if we can wrap this up without fighting? I'll plant some explosives around the house and on her copter." Domīnija had given us C-4 he'd bought on the black market before the Flash. Sol would be shit out of

luck, but he was fair game after DC. “If I get caught, then you can teleport the others away.”

Domīnija would have an aneurism if he knew what I’d just proposed. But he was the one who wanted me to lead a band of soldiers; I would show some initiative.

Sorry, coach, sometimes QBs go off play.

“Your plan is sound,” Kentarch said, though he stared at the house with longing, like he’d stared at Issa’s corpse.

“You cannot go alone.” Gabe shook out his icy hair. “You did when you ventured into the Hanged Man’s dome of power, and that was a close call.”

A seriously close call. I recalled how dizzy I’d been from hunger—and how Gabe had nearly slit my throat. Still, I said, “I’ll be fine.” His talents wouldn’t help much in the close confines of a house. I climbed out of the truck and headed to the back to stuff gear into my bug-out bag.

Joules hopped out as well. “I’m comin’ with you.”

“I thought your *mère* warned you not to step into the ring?”

“She never warned me *not* to. Just to have a bloody good reason. You need backup.”

I debated his offer. Didn’t want to die tonight, me, but I also didn’t want to jeopardize a friend and a valuable Arcana.

Getting that bullheaded look about him, he told me, “You think I’ll take no for an answer?”

“Fine.” I carefully packed the explosives and detonator, then readied my bow. “Come on, you.”

Ever-loyal Gabe emerged from the truck again. “I go as well.”

“I need you to be Kentarch’s wingman.” Literally. Making my tone light, I added, “And keep him from being a hero, huh?” I said it jokingly, but I meant, *Doan fucking let him do anything heroic.*

After a hesitation, Gabe nodded.

Before Joules and I set off, I caught Kentarch’s gaze. “Remember: we’re expendable. Me more than the Tower. But you’re not. If things go south, you and Gabe head to Death’s.”

“Copy.”

Joules and Gabe shared a look, then Joules rolled his eyes and said, “I’ll be back, birdbrain.”

The Angel sighed. “Very well, Patrick.” Those two—thick as thieves.

Joules and I headed down into the valley, snow compacting beneath our boots and our breaths fogging. I kept expecting Bagmen to leap from the drifts, but none attacked.

As we descended, I replayed our last encounter with Richter's alliance, but memories of melted weapons and life-changing injuries undermined my resolve. So I reviewed what Evie had told me about the Sun Card.

Sol believed he and all the Arcana were gods. The solar rays he emitted from his skin and eyes had varying effects—everything from killing a person to growing a plant. His control over Bagmen was absolute.

He'd been a master's student of history, a rave promoter, and part of a throuple with a guy and a girl who'd been turned into Baggers. When Evie had threatened them as leverage, he'd struck back brutally. . . .

Joules and I quieted our steps as we neared the house. Through one of the windows, I saw dinner plates atop a large table. Papers and maps spread out on the kitchen counter.

We headed to the back and found Zara's attack copter atop a helipad, a fuel depot nearby. She'd chained down the rotors against the winds, but the craft was still intimidating as hell.

A thing of beauty, really. The nose was painted to look like a dragon's mouth, with menacing fangs. While I marveled at the sight, Joules's face sparked with irritation. "Me, Gabe, and Finn blew every barrel of fuel we came across. How is she still finding it?"

"Just lucky, I guess." *But her luck is about to run out*, I thought as I planted enough C-4 to blow her copter to smithereens.

Joules had to stifle a cackle as I worked. "Payback for Tarch's hand!"

I affixed another brick of explosives to the fuel depot, then turned back to the house to secure more in strategic positions. The remote detonator's long range meant we could set off the charges from the safety of the truck.

After casing the exterior with Joules, we wound around to the front again. Still hadn't seen the inhabitants. "I want inside to investigate those maps I saw." Plus, we'd have a better shot at casualties if I got explosives in there. Hopefully *their* casualties.

"You think they locked the place up?"

"*Non*. They'd figure no one would be crazy enough to enter." I eased closer to the front entry, Joules on my heels. Breath in my throat, I tried the door.

Unlocked.

As I opened it, warm air hit my face, the inside like a sauna. Richter definitely lurked in here somewhere. If the three were asleep, why leave all the lights on?

“Stay close.” I hurried to place explosives. In the gas oven. Along a doorway. As I configured the detonator for more strikes, adrenaline hit me. Could taking them out be so easy? Or would Zara’s luck ward off *any* attack on her?

I pocketed the detonator, then riffled through the papers on the counter. I found a map of water tables in the area, another of nearby fault lines, and a third of tectonic plates across the globe.

A fourth map showed all the military forts in the region. Each had been marked out with a red X, all but one. A historic preservation site called Fort Colman had been circled. Underneath it were two handwritten words: *Sick House*.

I ran my finger over it, and a chill washed over me. Had this alliance avoided the fort for a reason? Did they know the Pentacles were running it?

“Jaysus!” Joules exclaimed.

I hissed, “Fuck’s wrong with you?” I glanced around, expecting to see Richter’s beefy face. When no one came running, I turned back to Joules.

Wide-eyed, he pointed to a spot on the counter. A shining pair of weapons sat atop an old-timey-looking book. “That’s my Cally’s *sai* and her chronicles. How the hell did they find them?”

Didn’t know; didn’t care. “Grab ’em, quick.” This night was shaping up!

Joules darted forward to snare the book and weapons.

Past Calanthe’s things, I spied two plates of food, half-eaten, like the meal had been interrupted. I checked the temperature of a coffee cup with red lipstick on the rim. Still warm. “We gotta go. Put the stuff in my bag.”

“So you can give the book to Death?”

“Just put everything in my goddamned bag. You need your hands free.”

Still grumbling, he shoved them in my backpack—

Swwwwwhhhhhhh. Joules and I spun around toward a whispery sound behind us. An entire wall moved, slowly retracting.

I raised my bow and took aim.

Joules materialized a javelin, readying. “That’s a hidden panel like at Tarch’s penthouse.”

Behind it was an elevator. A dial indicated the car had begun to creep up from a lower level. “There must be some kind of safe room or prepper hidey-hole deep down there.”

Joules adjusted his grip on his spear. “What if it’s Richter?”

“He ain’t hot, or he’d melt the elevator car. So hurl that javelin through his fucking heart. . . .”

The Empress

With the hood of my dark coat drawn over my hair, I sneaked toward the stables as Aric rode his new stallion.

I was betting he didn't carry his phone when he trained. I planned to steal it and read everything—if I avoided detection. I had a shot; he'd been even more preoccupied than usual ever since our confrontation with Lark a couple of weeks ago.

With a heavy heart, he'd finally chosen a gigantic mount named Titan, one of Thanatos's offspring. As soon as Aric had made the decision, Titan's soulful brown eyes had turned red, its gray color fading to white. I heard the stallion's breaths even from here.

My own breaths were smoking as snow continued to fall and the temperature kept dropping. Just one more concern to add to the multitude of them.

As I stole down the path that Aric had shoveled, I catalogued all of my worries.

The lingering divide between me and Aric. Jack out in the Ash. My ongoing nightmares. Lark's up-and-down behavior. Circe's disappearance since Jubilee. Matthew's radio silence. My upcoming labor.

Not to mention the threat of Richter and Zara.

This out-of-control feeling left me roiling, and I tensed when the red witch's thoughts sifted into my own, a contamination.

The Empress doesn't need allies; she needs icons.

I got the sense that she wanted to rule as an immortal over the entire earth in her own thorn-filled wasteland. *Home sweet home.* Was that why

I'd continued to have nightmares about poisonous vines covering the world? And about that throne surrounded by thorns?

This morning I'd awakened with a gasp, two questions in my mind: What would the world look like if I won the game? Had Matthew predicted hell on earth—from *me* . . . ?

Across the property, lights burned in the menagerie and animal calls sounded. I glanced around, fearing Lark would spot me.

She'd backed down from her T-Rexurrection, even burning its remains. Too easily? And she'd agreed to keep the wolves and other dangerous creatures out of the castle.

On the rare occasions when Lark came down from her room, she and Aric remained frosty to one another. I was stuck in the middle, keeping the peace.

At least she was doing surveillance again, running a perimeter and foraging out to locate Richter. Every time I tried to talk to her, she told me she was busy, but I sensed she was keeping *something* from me. Or maybe we just hadn't gelled since I'd returned to the castle.

Whatever the case, I missed my friend.

Behind a dead patch of my old briars, I watched Aric charge a target, his sword raised, his bearing ruthless.

Beautiful man. Yearning ripped through me. . . .

When a wolf howled from a distance, I tore my gaze from Aric and hurried into the stables, focusing on my plan. What were he and Jack communicating about? Each message chime had needled my curiosity.

Would reading Aric's messages be an invasion of privacy? Yes. But he'd spent months in my head, hearing all my private thoughts, and Jack had listened to the tape the Alchemist had made of my life's story.

Turnabout's a bitch.

Aric's coat lay on a bench, the phone atop it. I snagged it and slipped out of the stables, made it back to the castle unobserved.

In our bedroom, I stared at the lock screen. Four numbers awaited my input.

I tried my birthday. Nothing. His birth year? Nada. Then I realized what number he would choose, had used it for calculations. I entered the date—

Yahtzee. I tapped the message icon and inhaled a deep breath.

What kind of box was this Pandora about to open?

The Hunter

The elevator doors finally opened; light flooded out, blinding us.

Joules hurled his javelin.

BOOM. The impact lifted us, tossing us across the room to land sprawled on the floor.

My explosives didn't blow? Electricity flared all over the walls and ceiling, but I was safe on the wooden floor.

Had some figure dived out of the elevator right before Joules struck? As my vision cleared, I saw a glowing man sprinting for the front door. Sol!

Over his shoulder, he spied me scrambling to my feet. Did a stutter-step. "Jackson Deveaux?"

"Yeah?" How'd he know me?

"RUN!"

Didn't have to tell me twice. Joules and I were out the door right behind him.

Between breaths, Sol said, "Tower, fire on the house! They're in a lower level."

"Do you one better." I fished out my detonator and flipped off the safety.

Sol's eyes widened. "Do it. Quick!"

I pressed the button.

Nothing.

I toggled the safety and pressed it again. *Nothing.* "Damn it, malfunction."

"Joder! Zara's luck."

"Joules, use your javelins!"

He was already firing. "Malfunction this!" With superhuman speed, he lobbed several spears as we sprinted uphill in the direction of the truck. Explosions of groaning metal and breaking glass sounded behind us.

"*Ouais*, blast that fucker!"

Sol said, "If you're landing a hit, then it's already too late. They've escaped."

Never slowing, Joules snapped, "Those're *your* allies."

I maneuvered between him and Sol. "Focus, Joules. Try for the copter."

With a nod, he hurled another spear. Aimed perfectly, it rocketed over the roof—

Lightning struck, deflecting it. His next several javelins shared the same fate. “Gettin’ real tired o’ that!”

How long would it take for Zara to ready that copter to fly or for Richter to warm up?

Joules aimed for the house again. The structure crumbled, flames growing.

Yet the heat seemed to follow us as we fled. “Snow’s melting up here.” Mud sloshed up around my boots. Sweat poured down my face.

“Richter’s coming!” Sol lost a sandal, tripped, but managed to right himself. “As soon as Zara’s in the air, he will quake us. This valley will be one big lava pit. You have a car?”

“We got wheels past the hill above.” Unless Kentarch had done as I’d asked. He must have seen the flames by now.

The helicopter engine fired in the distance.

¡Mierda!”

I told Sol, “Use your powers against them.”

Stark fear showed in his eyes. “They’re too strong! You don’t know what they are like.”

Joules huffed. “We won’t make it—”

Kentarch appeared before us. We three skidded to a stop.

Calm as ever, he said, “We need to leave.” He grabbed me, and I snagged Joules and Sol. The Chariot teleported us to the Beast and released us.

“Ay, teleportation?” Sol wobbled as he crossed to the back door. “Let’s get out of here.”

Gabriel leapt out of the truck, stretching his wings wide to block him.

Joules flanked his friend, drawing a javelin against Sol. “No way you’re comin’ with us. You attacked us in DC.”

¡Ay, por favor! You pissed on my Bagger’s face—the one I was communing with!”

When Joules flushed red, I snapped, “Goddamn it, Tower.”

Vámonos. We’ll figure this out once we get away.”

We get away, fecker? This alliance is full.”

Making a sound of frustration, Sol said, “You were with Death and the Empress when Zara attacked their truck. If not for my help, you would have been trapped on a collapsed bridge. Five Arcana would all have been dead.”

“You’re playin’ both sides!”

When the copter took off behind the burning ruins of the house and the ground grew hotter, Sol glanced over his shoulder and back. “I’m going to have to insist on a ride.” His skin shimmered.

Before I could shield my eyes, Kentarch had teleported behind him, left arm tight around Sol’s neck. “Should I snap it?”

Sol dug his fingers into the Chariot’s arm, fighting for breath. “My light will . . . madden you before . . . you can kill me.”

In a disturbing voice, Kentarch grated, “I am *already mad*.”

To his credit, Sol didn’t shit himself. His glowing dimmed, and he gasped out, “I know their secrets!”

I told Kentarch, “We’ll take him hostage.”

The Chariot released Sol with a warning: “Never enter my truck without an invitation.”

Sol rubbed his neck. “*Si, genial*. Cool. Invitation. Hostage—”

The ground quaked beneath us. The force rattled my teeth in my head; my legs crisscrossed as I fought to stay standing.

A crevice opened up near the house. Inside it, lava churned like rapids.

Joules relented. “Fine! But I’m not sittin’ next to him.”

Gabe scrambled into the truck. I shoved Sol into the back. He pitched into Gabe’s wing as Joules hopped in on the other side.

When I turned for my door, I tripped, nearly face-planting. My boots were sticking to the steaming ground. “Damn it!” The tires smoked.

I yanked up my feet and leapt inside to take the wheel. As I tried to enter the ignition sequence, more quakes rumbled. The Beast convulsed, shaking us like pebbles in a tin can. My hand flew from the switches. Three more attempts, and I managed the sequence and started the truck. Jammed it into gear, but we didn’t move. Were the tires melted to the ground?

Lights appeared above the wreckage of the house. Zara’s copter. “Kentarch, get us to the cave.”

He already had his hand on the dash. We wavered but didn’t disappear.

Before our eyes, that fault line widened and raced toward us, like a flood of fire.

Kentarch stared at the flames . . . with longing. *Ache to go with her*.

Oh, hell no. “Your time’s coming, but it ain’t tonight.”

Confusion and chaos swirled in his eyes.

“Chariot, snap out of it!”

He blinked to attention. “It feels like the truck is stuck.”

I put the Beast in four-wheel drive, gunning the engine. Budged not an inch. “Forget the cave. Get us anywhere but here.” Sweat dripped down my face as I revved the truck again. “Come on, come on!” The engine sputtered, then died.

A hundred feet away, the crevice snaked closer.

Sol muttered something in Spanish that sounded like a prayer. Gabriel’s wings shook.

Joules slapped Kentarch’s seat with a sweating hand. “Come on, Tarch!”

“Let him focus, you.”

The crevice was thirty feet away. Twenty. Flames reflected in the Chariot’s eyes.

We’re out of time. “Kentarch, get yourself to the castle!”

“No, hunter, I have this.”

Joules turned to his best friend. “Gabe, leave me!”

“Never!”

Too late for any of us. The crevice lurched forward; caught the truck. My stomach dropped. Weightless. We were in free fall above the fiery pit.

Evie, you’ll never know how much—

Impact jarred us. The truck rocked to its side then slammed down onto the firm ground. It took me a few seconds to reorient myself. We’d landed outside our supply cave.

Mère de Dieu. I shuddered with relief. We’d almost burned to death. *Burned alive.*

I’d been branded by the Lovers, and I’d cauterized that scar; thought I’d understood burning. *Non.* When I managed words again, I said, “My thanks, Chariot. Mighty glad to be here.”

Guilt flashed in his gaze.

“Hey, it’ll take some time to get back in the saddle. It’s all good.”

Kentarch wiped his damp brow. “Is everyone okay?”

Joules crossed himself as he peered skyward.

Eyes still wide, Gabe nodded. “Patrick and I are. I do not know about the Sun Card.”

Sol was hyperventilating. Between breaths, he said, “Too close. Too close.”

The heat from earlier dissipated. Sweat had soaked my shirt, now chilling me. I tried the ignition. *Click click click.* Even the battery was fried. Fanfuckingtastic.

Without the Beast's heater, we'd soon be freezing, especially Sol, who wore only a scrap of cloth around his hips and one sandal. "Let's head into the cave. Get a fire goan." We'd left firewood and supplies here.

"Oi, what're we doin' with our prisoner? He could call down a horde of Baggers on us."

Gabriel added, "Just because he is in conflict with Richter and Zara does not mean he is at peace with us. He remains an Arcana, after all."

I turned to Sol. "All right, Sunny, what can you tell us to put our minds at ease?"

Sol's shell-shocked expression faded. Realizing he was still in a pickle? "I only threatened to use my powers because I was frantic to get away from Richter." He leaned around Gabe's wings to tell Joules, "And if I'd wanted you dead in DC, I would have killed you days before Jack and this angel god arrived."

"Bullshite!" Joules blustered. "You've been with Richter almost from Day Zero. You and your filthy Baggers have been his eyes and ears."

"I had my own settlement—the great Olympus! I only allied with him a few times in the beginning. And why wouldn't I? He and Zara told me that the Empress would grow roses in my corpse and that you would electrocute me. Zara described Death as some kind of Terminator—an unfeeling, unbeatable machine who wouldn't stop until he'd reaped me."

Exactly how I used to see him. How wrong I'd been.

Gabe muttered, "Terminator?"

Joules said, "Later, mate."

I asked Sol, "Then why did you save Death when he was under Zara's fire?"

"Mainly for the Empress's sake. But also because I saw a different side to him when he rode out to fight for her. *Muy romántico*. Any man who is willing to risk his life to save his partner deserves my respect, no?"

Tell me about it. Again, Sol's views mirrored my own changing thoughts about Domīnija.

"So, yes, I allied with two strong Arcana, but only because I feared so many others wanted me dead."

Joules scoffed. "And I suppose you just had a change of bloody heart?"

"*Sí*, after I learned how evil Richter and Zara are. My dream is to feed thousands, yet they burn food to starve everyone! And once I met Evie, I realized good Arcana gods existed, people like me who want no part of this

game. I started to help all those brave souls who were working against Richter and Zara. I even helped you”—he waved at Joules and Gabriel —“often.”

To me, Sol said, “After Olympus fell, Richter ordered me to stay with him. I had no car. No food they didn’t guard. No way to outrun a helicopter. I was trapped. But now you have rescued me, and I’m grateful. I’ll tell you everything I know about them, because they must be stopped, and I couldn’t do it alone.”

My gut told me to give him a chance. “We’re goan to hear you out. But try to use your power on us again, and Kentarch’ll do his worst.” Grabbing my backpack, I exited the truck, the air outside like a blast from the Arctic.

Now that the high of surviving wore off, I got pissed my explosives hadn’t detonated. Would we ever get a strike scenario like that again?

I headed to the back to snag some clothes and a pair of boots for Sol. In the cold air, the tires still smoked. The Beast would need new ones and a whole lot of work.

When I tossed the clothes to Sol, Joules asked in disbelief, “We’re not goin’ to tie him up?”

“*Non.*”

With a blistering curse, Joules stomped off toward the cave, Gabe and Kentarch following.

Sol quickly got dressed. “*Gracias.*”

“Any reason you’re wearing a toga in an apocalyptic winter?”

“A Roman toga actually covers the upper . . . never mind. I don’t get cold, plus Richter’s presence heats things up a lot.” He stuffed his feet into the boots. “Zara’s taken to wearing shorts and sleeveless tops. But she still sweats buckets.”

I hoped he had better intel than this or Joules would light his ass up.

Keeping Sol in my field of vision, I strode down the path to the cave. He tromped through the snow behind me.

Inside, I got busy making a fire. Gabe investigated the stockpiled food, tossing Mayday bars to the guys. He hesitated before flinging one to Sol.

Once I’d gotten the fire going, I asked Sol, “What were you saying about Joules pissing in your face?” I shot a glare at the Tower, who was stifling laughter.

Sol sat near the fire. “I was communing with a Bagger, eager to message your alliance. Which Joules *knew*, because the Bagman signaled

him over and over. Instead of responding like a decent person, Joules aimed and took a leak.”

“What can I say, Jackie boy? Everything about the Tower aims true. Even me mickey!”

“Patrick?” Gentlemanly Gabe looked aghast.

“I don’t just rain down lightning, I rain down piss as well!” He burst into laughter.

I’d about had enough of this card. “Why would you do that?”

“Because we can’t trust this fecker. Why don’t we worry less about my stray urine and more about why Sol and his alliance had Calanthe’s chronicles and weapons?”

“We’ll get to that.” To Sol, I said, “I want to know weaknesses.”

“Before we go farther”—he straightened his shoulders—“I would like to formally introduce myself. I am Solomón Heliodoro, the Glorious Illuminator and God of the Sun. Next to me, everything is shadow. You can call me Sol.”

Joules rolled his eyes and paced.

I needed to keep everybody calm and get this guy talking. “Nice to meet you, Sol. You know my name.”

“You go by many. General. Hunter. Cajun. Jack. I have heard a lot about you.” He looked me up and down. “And I must say, the Empress has exquisite taste in men.”

Joules was about to explode.

I frowned at Sol. “Is this some kind of game to you?”

“Isn’t that exactly what it is?”

“Not tonight, not in this cave. You’re supposed to convince us to keep you alive.” Not that I could kill him after learning why he’d attacked Joules—and that he wasn’t in league with Richter and Zara.

Sol raised his chin. “The Empress, my *pequeña*, would never forgive you if you murdered me.”

Evie would, in fact, have my head if we did away with him now. “She’d forgive me if I put my boot in your face.”

His eyes smoldered. “There’s a body part of yours I’d like in my face. But it’s not covered by your boot. And speaking of hot sex”—he turned to Joules—“if you wanted to experiment with me piss-wise, you should have let me know in advance. We could’ve worked out our boundaries and a safe word.”

Joules grew bright red and sputtered, “Y-you fecker!”

The look on his face was so priceless I had to give Sol that one. In Jubilee, Evie had described the Sun Card as “effortlessly charming” and “infuriatingly endearing.” I understood where she was coming from.

Didn’t mean I’d let my guard down. “What were you trying to message Joules about?”

Sol faced me again. “That Richter and Zara believed I knew the location of Death’s lair. I feared they’d soon try to torture me for it, and I was right—you interrupted a session tonight.”

“What happened?”

“Zara and I were eating dinner, Richter working out. A normal night. Then, out of the blue, she asked me why I hadn’t told them Death’s location. The more I swore I didn’t know the more furious she got. She said she had a way to force the truth out of me. Richter emerged from the back with my two Baggers, the ones I never separated from.”

“Evie told me they were your loved ones.”

“Bea and Joe, *sí*.” His breezy flirtatiousness flicked off like a light switch. “Richter tortured them for information I could never tell him.”

An uneasy feeling nagged at me. Sol hadn’t outright denied that knowledge just now. “*Do* you know the location?”

“*Sí*. Of course. But I couldn’t betray Evie. I’ve known since you drove to the castle from Jubilee.”

Merde. “How did you find us?”

“I sensed a tidal wave through my Baggers and monitored the area. One of my scouts spotted you passing, so I had him and others trace your route. When you overnighted in this cave, they placed a Bagger head under your truck. A tracker of sorts.”

“A head? For Christ’s sake, Sol.” I narrowed my gaze. “You knew we were on our way to Richter’s the whole time.”

He shrugged. “I use the powers I have. How do you think I know so much about Richter? I stashed a head in the attic above his room.”

The sheer creepiness . . . But then, Evie got downright eerie when she went full red witch. “Domīnija’s not goan to like you knowing about his stronghold.”

“The important thing is that I haven’t told our enemies.” His smile turned playful. “Not about the castle—and not about *el bebé*.”

The Empress

I sat on the bed reading a months-long text exchange between the two men I loved.

In the earliest messages, Aric had been businesslike as he'd updated Jack about my contact with Matthew, my pregnancy, and Lark's troubling behavior. Jack had been just as formal in his own updates.

But over time, he and Aric had relaxed with each other, sounding less like the rivals they'd been and more like friends.

The night Kentarch had returned from Africa, Jack had written: Wasn't sure he'd come back, so we're feeling downright festive around here.

Domīnija: I assume you're drunk right now.

Jack: Heh. How's my girl?

Domīnija: Settling into life here again. Still believing she can cook.

I had to grin.

Jack: I can read between the lines. So you two are back.

Domīnija: No. But I've hope. *Oh, Aric.* In any case, just spending this time with her is a gift.

Jack: Ouais. It'd be heaven.

Domīnija: You are drunk.

Jack: You have no idea.

Domīnija: If someone told me a year ago that I would be texting with my worst enemy late into the night, I would have decapitated him for lying.

Jack: You and those swords.

The next day Aric had written early: Ah, mortal, I wish I could bang cymbals beside your head.

Jack: Beck moi tchew, Reaper. Bite my ass.

With each word, I fell a little more in love with both of them, and I couldn't help but smile at their back-and-forth about Joules:

Domīnija: Update on Calanthe's chronicles?

Jack: Joules is a tad reluctant. "That big feckin' book is hidden away from the likes of Death. I'd rather set it on fire, then shite on the ashes than to hand it over to the Grim Reaper."

Domīnija: The Tower. Always sugarcoating.

Jack: Wish he'd just say what's on his mind.

The progression of their messages made my eyes water. They'd begun to trust each other, sharing more. Yet then I read a text that made my claws tingle.

Jack: Fork in the road. Louisiana or Richter's trail. We voted to do recon on the Emperor. If we find him, we get this done faster.

Aric hadn't told me they'd uncovered a lead on Richter!

Domīnija: My plan is sound. Follow it.

What? When I'd asked Aric a couple of months ago if he had a plan, he'd answered vaguely, "I don't have a good one."

Jack: We will follow it—just not with you. Kentarch will teleport for your armor when we get a twenty on Richter.

Why would Jack want Aric's armor? He'd told me he hated wearing it. Suspicion stole through me.

Domīnija: I still must take a bow. The game demands it. Unless we learn otherwise, we have to assume only one Arcana can live.

The phone shook in my hand. I'd just gotten Aric back from the Hanged Man; I couldn't lose him again! The words blurred, but I forced myself to read on.

Jack: You don't have an expiration date. This game might stretch out for years. We can buy you enough time to get to know your son.

Domīnija: If you want my armor, I come with it. No discussion. In any case, you do need me. There's Zara to contend with as well. By now, she is possibly the most dangerous player ever to have lived.

Jack: Stubborn ass. You're not the only one who can hitch a ride with Kentarch.

Hitch a ride? I didn't understand exactly what the plan was, just knew Aric sounded bent on some kind of one-way-ticket scenario—even though he'd assured me we would try to survive together.

My glyphs blazed with my fury. So much for us being a team, for finding a way to defeat our enemies and the game on our own terms.

Then I read the last text from Aric to Jack: You must stay alive. I need you to take care of my family.

Take care of my family. Take care . . . take care . . .

I sat trembling, the scent of roses filling the air. I had no idea how much time passed before Aric entered the room, back from training.

He wore chain mail over a thin woolen shirt. Both clung to his chiseled muscles. Leather pants and his gauntlets only added to his scorching sexual appeal. I caught his scent: clean sweat and horse. It drove me wild.

In the past, we'd always had sex after he trained, and he would be deliciously fierce with me. Now his magnetism only angered me more because we should be making love right now instead of about to have a hellacious fight.

His gaze flicked from my face to the phone in my clenched hand. "What are you doing with that?"

"Reading all of your texts."

He tilted his head. "How did you guess my passcode?"

"I put in the date that you and I got together. Pretty important one. You lost your virginity *and* knocked me up that night."

"It was an important night." His voice gone low, he added, "The most important of my long life."

"Oh, but that was before you came up with this big plan to sacrifice yourself. You've got a lot of nerve taking Jack to task about lying when

you've been keeping this from me."

"I do have a lot of nerve." He removed his gauntlets and tossed them on a table. *Clunk*. "I've never told you an untruth. But I have lied by omission."

I set the phone aside. "You told me you wouldn't leave me. You told me that we would survive together, and that Circe would win the game in the far future. Those are lies."

He leaned against the wall with all the elegance of an immortal knight. "I said that before the weather turned and the game's stage tilted ever more. Now that I have—as you put it—knocked you up, we must ensure a future for our child. We will each sacrifice."

"You thought his birth might upend the game." I read his expression. "But you don't anymore."

"I don't know. But I do know that his arrival won't defeat the Emperor and Fortune."

"Then what exactly *is* your plan?"

"I will take Zara out, and then Kentarch will teleport me to Richter."

"You can't fight him. Your sword will melt."

"My armor won't," Aric pointed out. "Only the Devil could produce enough heat to melt it."

"You can't *armor* him to death . . ." Comprehension hit. My mouth went dry. "Kentarch's going to teleport you *inside* Richter."

Calm nod.

Aric could be calm; I was about to lose my mind. "Why can't Kentarch wear it? He's going to die anyway if he gets that close."

"Perhaps not. Remember, he can *ghost*. That's how he and Issa survived the heat of the Flash."

"Jack wrote that Kentarch wants to die. You don't." I could hardly breathe. "Your plan won't work like you think anyway. You haven't seen Richter lately. I have. He moves too fast. Even Kentarch's aim can't land you where you'd need to go. Richter's flames might not burn him, but Kentarch still can't see within them."

"We will have to weaken the Emperor. I've planned for that." Aric sounded rational and sane—the opposite of how I felt. "Love, my battle against him and Fortune will be my last. I've made peace with that."

I stood, my hands clenched. "*How?*" Tears blurred my vision. "How could you possibly make peace with it?"

“I’ve had to ask myself what I need most, and it’s not *a life with you*. It’s you and our son having a life in a world returned to you. That is what I will work for.”

His unyielding tone sent chills rippling over me. Which only fueled my anger. I marched forward and shoved against his chest with a sob. “Dying is *easy*. In an apocalypse, it’s the coward’s way out. Living is for the brave.”

“My mind is made up. I will do whatever it takes to ensure you and our son have a future. I do not apologize for this.” He took my hands, his thumbs making slow circles over my palms. “I only regret that I will miss seeing the two of you in the coming years.”

“I can force this issue.” I’d use my vines to take his armor, hide it away.

“As can I.” He clasped my nape, eyes gone starry with desire.

My desperate gaze dropped to his lips. . . .

And then we were kissing.

God, I’d missed him so much! Each point of contact generated a feast of sensation, and I moaned like I’d been starved.

With reverent hands and worshipful kisses, he peeled my clothes away, trailing his lips over my glowing glyphs and rounded belly as he laid me back on the bed.

When he tasted me, his eyes rolled back in his head. Just as mindless, I couldn’t stop writhing beneath him.

His fingertips squeezed hard enough to bruise my inner thighs, but I loved it.

Head thrashing, I cried, “More . . .”

“*Always*.” He murmured urgent curses in Latvian when he rose above me and entered me. His tattooed chest heaved as his hips sensuously plunged.

I teetered at the brink, whimpering his name—

The phone rang.

“No. *No*,” Aric grated against my neck. “I’ll call him back.”

I tried to shake the haze of lust overwhelming me. “I-it might be an emergency.”

He drew back to stare down into my eyes. “The whole fucking world could burn right now. Nothing will stop this.” He thrust hard as he rasped my name. Finally, my name. “Evie.” Passion. Possession. Deeper. “*Evie* . . .”

And my mind went blank.

The Hunter

“What do you mean, *he didn’t answer?*” Joules demanded, when I told the crew I hadn’t gotten in touch with Death. “What else does the Reaper have to do? Dentist appointment? Feck’s sake.”

I’d called and texted Domīnija at all hours, and he’d always answered or responded right away. I stared into the fire, running through scenarios, each one making my stomach roil worse than the last.

As of tonight, we knew the castle was hidden from Richter, and Domīnija and Evie could handle any other threats. Except from Lark.

I’d just parted my lips to ask Kentarch for a ride when the phone rang. I connected the call. “Why didn’t you pick up?”

“Is there an emergency?” Domīnija hadn’t answered the question. And his voice was even raspier than usual, as if he’d been yelling in a battle or something. “I’ve got Evie on the phone.”

“Hey, *peekôn.*” *I fucking love you. Almost died tonight, and the thought of never seeing you again nearly sank me. I shouldn’t have left you.*

“Hey, Cajun.” First time I’d spoken to her in weeks. Her own voice was throaty. Heat spiked through me. She’d sounded like that after she’d screamed against my palm in our bed in Jubilee.

Realization dawned. Domīnija and Evie had just been together. Pain ripped through me, even though I’d known it would happen.

Phone in hand, I staggered to a storage crate and broke out a bottle of Jack Daniel’s. I hadn’t had a drink since Kentarch had returned from Africa, and the burn in my throat felt hollow.

“*Ça va, Jack?*” she asked me.

“Bien. Toujours bien.” I sounded like anything except *always good*.

“Jack, I . . .” She what? Did she miss me? Love me? Want me to find a way back to her? “I’m glad you’re safe.”

Gutted. *“Ouais.* How have you been?” I asked, grasping for equilibrium.

“Busy. Reading texts.”

Merde. I started putting things together. She’d read our messages and realized Domīnija was determined to sacrifice himself. Whenever something threatened her loved ones, she tended to go overboard clinging to them, treasuring them. I’d been the recipient of that in Jubilee.

Guess Death musta felt pretty treasured earlier.

“Answer me,” Domīnija said. “Has something happened?”

“I’m getting to that.” Ignoring the ache in my chest, and the looks of my crew, I recounted the night. . . .

Sol hitching a ride with us to safety. His knowing about the castle and Tee. The Sick House on the map. Calanthe’s chronicles (with background commentary from Joules).

Domīnija focused on one thing: “You breached the Emperor’s lair without checking with me?”

My eyes narrowed. “Didn’t know I was your lackey, Reaper.”

“Aw, snap!” Joules cackled at my side of the conversation.

“You risked Kentarch, mortal? He is instrumental in the fight against Richter.”

“I wouldn’t risk him.” Well, not exactly. There would’ve been little risk if Kentarch hadn’t frozen.

No, *frozen* wasn’t the right word; the guy was brave as hell. Kentarch had looked at the river of flames like he would a door to wherever Issa was. Which, maybe, it *was*.

Would he always hesitate when his life was on the line?

Domīnija exhaled an exasperated breath. “We need to ask Sol some questions.”

I put the phone on speaker and waved to Sol. “Evie and Death want to talk to you.”

“¡Pequeña!” Sol smiled, and sunlight lit the cave.

Felt amazing. I basked in that light and imagined I was sitting with Evie under a blue sky.

“Sun God! How are you?”

“It’s good to hear your voice.”

Not for me. Another swig. Jealousy clawed me.

“I’m so glad you got away from Richter and Zara,” she said.

“Thanks to my new friends and allies.”

Allies, huh? Given my history with Baggers, could I really work alongside the man most connected to them? The Bagger King?

Peut-être. Maybe. After all, in the past, his light had empowered Evie, healing her. And I would have four Arcana to work with, which came with both benefits and problems.

Even now, Joules sparked with slitted eyes. “Allies, me arse! He’s supposed to be givin’ us intel. You heard anything intelligent out of that one?”

“Ask me questions,” Sol said earnestly. “I’ll answer any you have.”

“You talked about their weaknesses,” I said. “Tell us what you know about Richter and Zara’s vulnerabilities.”

“*Zachter.* Zara and Richter equals *Zachter.*”

Naturally Joules piped up. “No way. *Richtra.*”

So help me. “Let’s doan get bogged down here. Weaknesses, Sol.”

“*Sí, sí.* I spied on them often. I learned that Zara is vulnerable to attack, even when empowered.”

With raised brows, Kentarch held up his right arm, indicating his missing hand.

“Oi, Tarch begs to differ.” Joules took a seat by the fire to polish a javelin with a rag. His spears were flawless, so I figured he was soothing his nerves—or showing off to Sol.

The Sun continued, “True, when Zara’s full of luck, she can be nearly impossible to defeat. *Nearly.* But even a cat with nine lives will die if you kill it ten times. For instance, Zara can only avoid so many bullets heading straight for her face. The problem is the more luck she steals, the more fatal blows it will take. My WAG—wild-ass guess—is a hundred or so. But who can deliver them without dying first?”

“Maybe eight united Arcana,” I said. And one determined human. “But this is nothing new. Death already told us we’ve got to burn out their powers.”

“Has he told you that you can get close to Zara if you don’t have ill intent? It’s only when you *decide* to kill her that her environment will attack you.”

This was interesting. Had Domīnija known that?

Joules paused his polishing. “What about Richter? How do we kill him if all our weapons melt?”

“Burning grain is easy for him, but melting bullets and javelins takes focus. He’s not a big thinker, that one. As with Zara, if we hit him with enough strikes, he will go down. For reference, just think a hundred unanswered hits. Because his *answers* usually mean you’re dead.”

I didn’t mind Sol’s WAGs. I needed a starting point, and one number did as well as any other. “That’d be a lot of firepower,” I said, dreaming about antiaircraft rockets and tanks. But we’d located none on the road.

“Richter doesn’t believe anything like that exists anymore,” Sol said. “Circe is the only one he fears. When she struck him with her flood, she wiped him out. Where is the Priestess now?”

“She has a temple beneath the sea,” Domīnija said smoothly. Not a lie, but we didn’t know if she was in it or what had happened to her after Jubilee. “What is Richter’s plan?”

“He wants to kidnap *pequeña*. At least for a time.”

My fists clenched, but again, this wasn’t new information. “And Zara?”

“To find and kill you all. She’s been searching for Death’s lair, doing flyovers as much as her fuel supplies allow. So far, she hasn’t gotten close, but as her strength grows, she’ll just stumble upon it. That’s how she found Temperance’s chronicles. A weather front pushed Zara’s copter off course, then forced her to land. She took shelter in a house—the very place with those chronicles.”

“Oi, I hid them in a *vent* in the *bathroom*.”

Sol shrugged. “The ceiling collapsed after she left the room. The book and the weapons lay at her feet. This is not unusual with her.”

Joules muttered a curse under his breath. “Weaknesses and wild-arse guesses aside, I don’t think we can fight that.”

Kentarch and Gabe made sounds of agreement.

“You know what beats luck, podnas? Skill. We’ve just got to work harder and be more prepared than they are. In my mind, we’re two hundred hits from victory.” From saving the world.

“Indeed,” Domīnija said. “You forget, Tower, that I’ve killed them both in past games.”

“I don’t forget *anyone* you’ve killed, Grim Reaper.”

Domīnija ignored that barb. “I need more information, Sun. Where will the Emperor and Fortune go now?”

“I have Baggers stationed all around the former house and haven’t sensed any heat trails from Richter. Which means the two traveled by copter, so Fauna can’t track them.”

Not that we could mount an advance against them right now anyway. I had to figure out how steady Kentarch would be under fire.

Evie asked, “Do they have a backup place?”

“That was the backup. But once Zara recharges, she’ll come across whatever she needs. Before she strikes against any Arcana, her copter will be tanked up and reloaded.”

I took another swig. “What will she be packing?”

“Her usual *temeridad*—um, rashness—plus a lot of rockets, missiles, and bullets. *Bang, bang, bang.*”

I turned to Kentarch, whose Arcana ability included weapons expertise. “You got a more exact estimate?”

In a monotone, he said, “The helicopter she piloted is an AH-64 Apache. Fully armored, it will carry sixteen Hellfire missiles, seventy-six rockets, and twelve hundred chain gun rounds, with a rate of fire at six hundred per minute.”

I whistled low, my earlier optimism taking a knock.

“Zara’s family owned a helicopter manufacturing company,” Sol informed us. “She knows them like no one else alive. She’s modified her craft to make it even more destructive.”

Evie said, “If she wasn’t so evil, I’d admire her.”

Joules slammed his javelin across his knees. “Empress wants to be friends with another one!”

Evie didn’t respond to that, but I imagined her claws going sharp.

Domīnija asked Sol, “When did they feed last?”

“Not even a week ago. They’ve rolled every fort in the area, harvesting even more victims and supplies. Well, every one but Fort Colman, aka the Sick House. Richter wanted to go feed on it, but Zara said no.”

Evie said, “Why? Because it’s run by Minor Arcana?”

Sol rubbed his chin. “So demigods are in charge of it?” Demigods? No one bothered to correct him. “I couldn’t sneak a Bagger past the walls to snoop around, and I never heard Zachter talk about it, even with my spy. When I asked Zara what the deal was, she wouldn’t tell me. I think she’d

already begun suspecting me by then, because I'd allowed some human freedom fighters to get too close to Richter's lair."

"Freedom fighters took on Richter?" I swigged my bottle. "God love 'em."

Sol's expression fell. "Zara stumbled onto their heat signature, and Richter roasted all eight of them with one continuous beam of fire."

Christ.

Gabe asked, "What is Zara and Richter's endgame? Their paths are not sustainable."

I said, "Richter thinks the world will come back if he wins, giving him more stuff to burn." His exact words: *I'll fry anything new that grows*. More ash. Smoke. Misery.

"And Zara?" Evie asked. "Eventually even the luckiest Card will run out of humans to steal from."

Sol answered, "She thinks that survivors are just hiding—stingy them—and once things go back to normal, they'll show themselves, and she'll harvest them. Zara's not used to waiting for anything."

The whiskey kicked in, that familiar warmth settling over me. "Look, our alliance won one today. We've stolen the chronicles from them and destroyed their hideout. We should celebrate that." I sounded very noncelebratory.

Joules said, "That doesn't mean the book is goin' to the Reaper."

Kentarch exhaled in irritation, and even Gabe rolled his eyes.

Evie made a sound of frustration. "Come off it, Joules! You're either in our alliance or not."

"Still debatin' it. Looks like you'll let any ole riffraff in."

"*Bueno*. I'll take his place. *Hasta luego*, Tower."

Not helping, Sol. My job at the end of the world might just be to keep these guys from killing each other, going against the will of the gods—and the rules of the game. "I'll work on Joules."

"Work on this." He flipped me off.

Domīnija said, "Sun, I'll have more questions for you in the future." To me, he said in French, "Keep your guard up around your new guest. I'm unsure about him. Just . . . stay safe." He sounded like he genuinely gave a damn.

In English, Domīnija addressed Sol again. "One last thing, Sun Card." His tone turned sinister. "Mark me: I have eons of killing experience. If you

harm anyone in that cave, I will make your murder the longest and most memorable of all.”

Sol swallowed. “Unlike the Tower, I debate nothing about this alliance. I am gladly part of it. You can count on me to be loyal.”

Before Death hung up, he said, “Jack, we’ll talk more tomorrow.” *Click.*

Had he gotten off the phone because I’d sounded so tired and pissed? Or because he was ready for bed with Evie?

The cave wasn’t full of dummies—everybody knew why my mood had plummeted. They looked everywhere but at me. . . .

Eventually the night grew longer, and we broke out pallets around the fire. When Sol went outside to take a leak, the Tower said, “Why do you think the Reaper said *anyone* in this cave? You think he’d avenge me?”

“*Ouais.* One thing I know about Domīnija? If he said it, he meant it.”

Joules lay back on his pallet, appearing in deep thought. Was he coming around to the Reaper? From experience, I knew that process wasn’t fun.

I sat up drinking while the others nodded off. Gabe’s wings twitched in sleep. Joules sometimes sparked from his dreams.

Though the pallets must be heavenly compared to sleeping in the truck, Kentarch tossed and turned as if he couldn’t get comfortable. I figured he would never again be comfortable in this life.

Sol too had found a pallet and bedded down. To distract myself from Evie and Domīnija, I reviewed everything the Sun had told us tonight. I didn’t know if I trusted him or not, couldn’t get past Evie’s account of his initial betrayal—how she’d never seen it coming when he’d clocked her and tried to turn her over to Richter and Zara.

He woke. When he caught me eyeing him hard, he cast me a seductive grin. “*Hola, bello.*” He rose, then sat beside me. “What thoughts go on behind those gray eyes?”

Flirting with me again? I was a one-woman man. Even though Evie shared someone else’s bed right now.

“Just got a lot on my mind.” Needing to be alone, I dragged on my coat. Bottle, bow, and bag in hand, I walked outside to the truck.

Note to self: In the morning, check the Beast’s undercarriage for a Bagger head.

Inside the cab, I cracked open the chronicles. The majority had been written in a foreign language I didn’t recognize, but Calanthe’s section was in English, transcribed by her sister.

I read how the two had plotted to seduce Joules into an alliance, and how the sister feared Calanthe was falling for the scrappy Irishman. Aside from a couple of warnings about killing the Reaper first and never trusting the Empress, I didn't find any game-changing details.

But there was enough of the basics here for two players like Zara and Richter to uncover who they were and what was at stake.

Not long after I'd finished reading, Sol opened the passenger door and climbed into the cab.

I exhaled a weary breath. "Not good company tonight, Sun Card."

"Because Death and the Empress had just had sex before you talked to them?"

My hand inched toward my bow. "You got a Bagger spying on them inside the castle?"

"No, I heard her. You forget that I spent time with her out on the road. She sounded Empress-y on the phone, so I figured she'd either just killed or gotten laid."

"Maybe I came out here to lick my wounds."

"Which I would love to do for you." He gave me a slow once-over. "Every last one of them."

"Barking up the wrong tree, Sol." It struck me that this guy only acted carefree. Underneath all his swagger, he was just making the best out of his circumstances.

With a sigh, he said, "Forever *amigos*, never *amantes*. I understand." Then his eyes clouded, turning filmy white, like a Bagman's—a sight for this Cajun to get used to.

"You communing with one of your scouts now?"

"*Sí*."

Sol could've melded with my mother like that. The idea stuck in my craw. Still, I couldn't help but ask, "Did you order all your Baggers the world over to attack anything that moves?" Was that why *ma mère* had lunged for Clotile's throat? I reached under my collar and ran my fingers over my rosary.

"I only control specific ones, usually those closest to me."

"So why do they attack? What do you feel when you meld with them?"

He blinked, and his eyes cleared. "An all-consuming thirst—for blood." He left me to sit with that, adding, "I made sure no Baggers would surround us here. Sometimes they're attracted to me."

“Seems like Richter would’ve burned them for fuel in a pinch.”

“They do not interest him. I think he also eats through burning, taking nourishment somehow—like a dragon of yore. I never saw him consume a meal or a drink, and I watched him a lot. He must not like the way Bagmen taste.”

The whiskey churned in my stomach. “Why couldn’t you use your powers on him and Zara? Surely you had a chance over these months.” Since we’d fumbled our own chance to strike and the trail had gone cold, maybe we should put those two on hold while we investigated a clue we’d uncovered tonight.

Sol shook his head. “Zara’s luck would have annihilated me before I reached my peak rays. Richter would have burned me on the spot. Remember, though I am a god, I have no super strength, healing, or advanced senses. Physically, I don’t differ much from a regular human. I mean, aside from my divine looks and flawless physique.”

“Heh.” I narrowed my gaze as a thought occurred. “How did you get away from them tonight?”

Grief settled over Sol, making him seem older than his years. “They were so caught up with torturing my Baggers, they didn’t notice me slip toward the elevator. Plus, Zachter never would’ve expected me to abandon my loved ones. My Bea and Joe were killed tonight, I’m sure.” His eyes glinted, and his voice roughened. “*Por Dios*, I loved them.”

“I’m sorry they’re gone. The people they’d been.” I offered him the bottle.

He accepted it, but just stared at it. “I have feared for some time”—his tone dropped to a whisper, as if he was about to blaspheme—“that they weren’t *alive* and that I couldn’t find a way to heal them. I had my followers working on a cure in Olympus.”

Should I tell him what Domīnija had revealed to me about Bagmen? The whiskey said *sure*. “Sol, the Reaper can sense death, and he told me that Bagmen are gone. Forever. They’re just reanimated bodies.”

After a long pause, Sol took a swig, coughing against the burn. “It helps. Thank you for telling me that. I should never have kept them in that state for so long.”

“Can you, I doan know, *deanimate* them?”

He frowned. “*No sé*. I don’t know.”

“Those people wouldn’t want to be like that. They wouldn’t want to kill and turn others. You got to figure out how to let them rest.”

“Rest?” I imagined the mental wrestling inside him. “If they are truly gone, then yes, I will try.”

That finalized it. I’d keep him around. Once his grief ebbed and he’d come to terms with the truth, I’d get him to work on taking out Baggers.

He raised the bottle in my direction. “So tell me what happened to you after Richter’s attack on your army.”

With a shrug, I did.

Nearly a bottle later, Sol and I were pickled, and I’d told him about Selena saving me and *coo-yôn’s* rescue. I’d told Sol about Finn’s murder and the Hanged Man’s powers and defeat. I’d told him how I’d left Evie behind.

But I kept our plan and our alliance secrets close to the vest.

“Leaving *pequeña* with another man must have been hard.” Every day I regretted my decision, yet every day I recommitted to it. “She told me she loved two.”

“*Ouais*. Two.”

“I assume you want Evie to win—and I’m down with that—but what kind of future can she and the Reaper have? I mean, won’t he *have* to die? Won’t we all? The game will demand it, no?”

“What if we upended the game?”

Sol didn’t hesitate to say, “If it’s possible, we must do that. I’m not convinced that everything is going to miraculously come back once the last Arcana is standing. Maybe in the past, but this feels different.”

“Different how?”

“If Death can sense, well, *death*, I can sense the sun. It’s still there, rising each day and setting each night, but its light has been blocked. Corrupted. By what, I do not know. I think we’re in the midst of great magic—a divine curse, even.”

“Domīnija and Gabe said the gods set the stage for this game. A tilted stage.”

“*Sí*, exactly! So how do we appease these other gods? Every Arcana dying but one? There’s got to be a better way.”

Heh. Other gods. “We need more information. Domīnija will translate those chronicles. Could be something in there.” And the Minors might have

intel. We already had a twenty on an entire suit. The Pentacles traded medical care and women at the Sick House.

I couldn't stop thinking about the map at Richter's. Had to know why he and Zara had spared Fort Colman. Were they treating it as a reserve of people to harvest, like the Hierophant had with his cannibal pantry? Or maybe the Pentacles had powers that even two Majors feared. If so, we needed to know what they were.

"I'm eager to hear what Death finds in those chronicles." Sol swiped condensation from the truck window to gaze out at the night. Lightning made the low-hanging clouds look like fireworks were going off inside them. "You know, Evie gave me my first real taste of life out here in the Ash. She once yelled at me because I wouldn't take clothes off a corpse."

I had to grin. "I chewed her out for not plucking sunglasses off a body. Seems some of the grief I dished to her rolled downstream to you."

"So she was trained by the best. I have to admit I'm excited to be out in the world with you guys. I have much to learn."

Back to quarterbacking, me. And now I had one more Arcana on my roster, with new strengths for the playbook.

"What's the plan, General?"

First thing? Get Kentarch to courier the chronicles to Death. I'd deal with the fallout from Joules. Second . . . "We got to fix this truck if we're goan to stay on the move." Domīnija would have the parts we needed at the castle. Kentarch could pick them up when he dropped off the chronicles.

"And after that?"

The answer grew undeniable. "Recon. At the Sick House."

The Empress

“Jack knew,” I told Aric when he returned from showering later that night.

“Pardon?” He wore only loose sweatpants, his muscular chest bare. Memories of our earlier time in this bed simmered.

I gave myself an inner shake to stay focused. “Jack knew we’d been together.” Ever since Aric and I had hastily made that phone call, I’d stewed with anger about his plan and guilt over my actions.

“Yes. He’s a very perceptive mortal.”

“He must have been so hurt.”

“As was I when Jack told me you’d resumed your relationship in Jubilee. He will learn to live with it. And he has much to occupy his mind right now.”

“Like his narrow escape from the Emperor and Fortune.”

“Among other things. He’s probably at this moment planning a trip to the Sick House.”

My eyes widened. “He wouldn’t go pick a fight with Minors.”

“Wouldn’t he? I’m not opposed to him and his crew investigating a potential threat to you. Remember, the Fool warned about at least two suits uniting against you. Plus, there is a slight chance that Jack might find a qualified doctor there.” Aric positioned his sword next to his side of the bed, then climbed in with me.

“What are you doing?” I pointed at his chair. “Off to your spot! I’m still pissed about your suicide plan.”

“I’m going to bed with my wife. We are—how would you put it?—*back together*.”

His take-charge attitude shouldn't be this sexy. "Do I get any say?"

"No. Not after the way you reacted earlier. You needed me as badly as I needed you. Why should we deny ourselves what we both desire?"

As memories washed over me, I couldn't quite formulate an answer.

"Be pissed from your side of the bed then," he told me. "You'll forgive me a little more when I take you later tonight and in the morning."

My breath hitched. "You don't feel guilty about keeping your plans from me? Your one-way trip?"

He shook his head. "Never underestimate the love I hold for you. It will enable me to move mountains."

"Then overthrow this game." *Don't leave us behind.*

"Those chronicles might help. And perhaps Tee's birth can affect the outcome." Aric must have seen I was roiling inside. He reached for me, cupping my face. "Know that I'm going to stay with you for as long as I can."

Emotion threatened to swamp me. "I can't live on after you. And you can just as easily raise your son. He'll need his father."

"He'll need his mother more."

Doubtful. "Why can't *you* win the game? What if I'm not a better alternative than the Emperor? I don't think the red witch will usher in an age of Eden. I dream of a wasteland of thorns and poison, as terrifying as anything Richter could ring in."

"You've been traumatized, repeatedly." *Sometimes by me*—the unspoken words. "So it's understandable that you would have nightmares."

Good point. How curious that I expected regular dreams like a regular girl in a non-apocalyptic world. Still, I didn't want to win.

"You will always come back." He sounded so confident. "You will always leash the witch in time."

"You told me immortality was the utterest hell." Being alone for centuries like that was my worst fear.

"You will have Jack for part of your reign, and you'll have Tee. If I'd had children and grandchildren to look after, things would have been different. All I had was regret and thoughts of revenge. You are life; your reign will reflect that."

Or it'll be a hellscape of thorns. I recalled the red witch whispering that Demeter gave lavishly. But she also *withheld viciously*. "You've proven that

you were the best option to win the game. You didn't use your immortality to rule the world. You could have taken over everything."

"Which would have empowered the God of Death." Aric's eyes looked haunted as he so clearly reflected over his endless years. "Why would I honor the deity who cursed me into this game? It's time for his champion to experience defeat."

At that, Aric released me and lay back. Having said his piece, he drifted off into a light sleep, while I fumed.

He'd aimed his obstinate determination toward a goal I'd never accept. We weren't united in our mission, and working against Aric never went well for me. I felt helpless to save him.

My fists clenched. In the past, what I'd wanted to happen *happened*. Well, except for being able to keep both Aric and Jack. But otherwise, I'd worked hard and believed in myself, and I'd moved the needle.

Then the answer came to me. After tonight, we had another ace in our hand.

Sol.

If he empowered me against Richter, I wouldn't risk burning out or going nuclear. No need to tap into my toxic well. Tomorrow I'd inform the guys that the Sun Card was the new MVP.

Resolved, I finally let sleep come. . . .

Over the night, Aric kept his sensual promises.

When I woke, I found a gift on the pillow beside me—the amber wedding ring around the stem of a clipped white rose. The message from him was clear: *We belong together. I love you.*

Despite being in love with Jack, I couldn't imagine going back to a life without the closeness Aric and I had shared. I picked up the ring, knowing that if I slipped it on, I would consider us married again.

Part of me cautioned for more time. Part of me comprehended we didn't have the luxury of it.

He was right; we were back together. With a shaky breath, I donned the ring, picturing how his eyes would go starry when he saw it returned to my finger.

Thoughts mired and emotions tangled, I headed to the bathroom and glanced at the mirror. A cry left my lips.

A strand of my hair had turned permanently red.

Death

I found Temperance's chronicles on my desk, a note atop them:

Helped myself to engine parts and tires. We journey to the Sick House.
Kentarch Mgaya

I might have wondered why he hadn't stayed to talk—after all, we'd never met in his current incarnation. But in all the games, he'd been nonsense and focused on the mission. A visit didn't coincide with his current mission.

As predicted, Jack and his crew were heading to Fort Colman to find out why Fortune had refused to attack that place. Which meant they were heading toward evil. Again.

With a sigh, I murmured, "The hunter and his puzzles."

The Empress
Day 666 A.F.

“You’ve been at that for hours,” Aric told me from his desk where he worked on the translation of Temperance’s chronicles. Over the last three weeks, he’d gotten halfway through.

I’d been studying my own chronicles, rereading from the very first line: *What followeth is the trew and sworne chronikles of Our Lady of Thorns, the Emperice of all Arcana, chosen to represent Demeter and Aphrodite, embody’g life, all its cycles, and the myst’ries of love.* I’d found nothing promising about overthrowing the game.

I nodded toward the books spread across his desk. “You haven’t exactly been taking breaks.”

Aric looked gorgeous as he concentrated his mental might on the task. Whenever he jotted notes, his hand would flex, and his icons would shift.

Despite the red witch’s lust for them, she wasn’t greedy for Aric’s. No longer did I hear her passing thoughts of killing him. She’d had a change of heart—now viewing him as a worthy, lethal companion. In fact, I’d gotten the crazy sense that she’d accepted him as her . . . *Arcana mate.*

“True,” he said. “It’s a compelling task, with much at stake.”

The majority of what he’d translated so far had been about Calanthe’s abilities, the nature of sins, and the power of guilt.

Although Aric had shared a fascinating snippet: *“In the first game, an alliance existed between the Dawnrider, the Beast Whisperer, the Abysmal, and the Betrayer.”*

“So Sol, Lark, and Circe. The Betrayer must have been the Hanged Man.” I frowned. “In the first game, I was in an alliance with Circe and Lark. Not Paul or Sol.”

“Perhaps they united after you’d died. Despite such a powerful union of four, they couldn’t defeat the Fool when he struck.”

“Then I wasn’t the only one he killed in that game?”

Seeming troubled, Aric murmured, “It appears not. . . .”

I’d scanned the English part of those chronicles, but other than a better understanding of Joules’s character (he was a big softie inside, for all that he acted like a bruiser), I hadn’t gotten much out of it. “Have you found anything else interesting?”

“I’ve just translated a section on the Minors.” The study’s firelight played on his excited expression.

This was huge! “What does it say?”

“We know that the Minors have three purposes—to hide evidence of the Major Arcana, to hasten the end of the game, and then to shepherd humankind into a better age. But these chronicles go into more detail about their specific roles.”

“Like what?”

“In past games, the Pentacles facilitated commerce, and the Cups focused on civilization and repopulation. The muse-historian Wands inspired art and religion—while recording events in the games. The Swords married knowledge and might, tasked with providing rational order.”

“They all sound wonderful and welcome. But in this game, the Cups were evil, and we know the Pentacles are trading women. And don’t forget that my grandmother specifically warned me about the Swords.”

“Perhaps the apocalypse has altered the suits. I recall that in the games following a time of peace, there were fewer malevolent Arcana. Only two or three.”

Like me.

I rose to find a pack of Tarot cards on the bookshelf, then brought it to my spot at the desk. I separated out the Pentacles, the Minors that Jack would soon face—because nothing I’d said would dissuade him from going to their fort. *Stubborn Cajun.*

Each of their cards featured a coin engraved with a five-pointed star. I turned one card upside down and frowned. “A pentacle upside down is a pentagram.” The kind kids used to spray-paint under bridges.

Aric glanced over. “Correct. The pentacle is a positive symbol, representing harmony among the five elements: air, water, fire, earth, and spirit. Inverted with a single point down, it represents a state of worldly goods or bodily desires corrupting the purer spirit. Only the Devil card features an inverted pentagram in his upright position.”

I found the Devil in the deck and grimaced at the depiction: a giant, horned goat-man perched above a man and woman in chains. The pentagram lay cradled between the Devil’s twisted horns. Vivid memories arose of Ogen strangling me—making it last—before Aric had come to the rescue.

A gust of wind hit the castle, and I shivered, could almost feel the temperature plunging. Snowmageddon was here to stay.

Aric had relayed to me that Sol felt the sun rise each day. It still worked, but maybe divine magics kept it hidden. Was that what kept the soil barren and the seas devoid of life? Was that why Lark’s creatures didn’t procreate without her power?

Was Jack’s need to reach the Pentacles all part of the tilted stage? “I’m nervous about Jack out there.” I didn’t downplay my feelings for him in front of Aric anymore. My knightly husband was too in tune with me; it’d be like trying to hide my feelings from myself.

“He was safe as of a few hours ago.” We’d talked to Jack earlier, asking him to rethink his journey.

Hampered by snow, he and his crew made only a mile or so a day. “Not you too,” he’d said, sounding exhausted. Apparently, the others had been giving him pushback.

I asked Aric, “What if the game is luring Jack toward a MacGuffin?”

“Perhaps it is. But if they reach the Sick House, he will investigate threats to you.”

“What powers do you think the Pentacles might have?”

“I can only speculate. I hope these chronicles will provide more answers.”

“Kentarch could come get us when the guys arrive at the fort. We could go in as backup.” Not that I’d be a lot of help. My powers remained haphazard. While I might manage a body vine or two, I hadn’t been able to spread vines for sentries or even revive the thorn forest outside the castle.

Aric’s frown made me feel ridiculous. “You can’t jeopardize Tee.”

Frustration bubbled, because Aric was right, but that didn't make this situation fair. "Fine. Then you can go with them."

"And leave you alone here with Lark? Not a chance." He didn't say this in French, didn't care if she heard or not.

I'd stopped arguing with him about her. With Aric working on the translations and the weather preventing surveillance, I'd spent more time with her, rebuilding our friendship. But the forced downtime gave her too much time to think about Finn, and she'd sunk into a depression again. . . .

A stronger gust of wind buffeted the castle. The snow was so thick on the roof, the structure groaned from strain. I crossed to the window and peered out. The lights from the grounds twinkled feverishly from the extreme cold.

Aric's gaze followed me. "I had multiple engineers certify this castle against all threats. It will hold."

This mothership was immune to electrical storms, sealed against drafts (and Empress spores), and strong enough to withstand a quake—if we avoided a direct hit. Under normal circumstances, we had fifty years' worth of fuel, but not when never-ending night had teamed up with Snowmageddon.

The plan for Circe to win the game, giving me and Aric some time with Tee, was a distant dream. But I still clung to it. "I wish I knew Circe and Matthew were safe out there."

I talked to water in the sink, to no avail, and I always called to Matthew right before I drifted off to sleep: *Does Tee have a greater purpose? What sacrifice were you talking about? Where are you?*

He never answered me. Though I had reason to be angry with him (he'd murdered me after all), when I pictured his big brown eyes, I felt only worry for my friend.

Aric said, "The Fool is the best equipped of all Arcana to survive our new conditions." Matthew couldn't read his own future, but he could travel with others, reading them to protect himself. "And Circe will surface sooner or later. It's inevitable." Aric rose and joined me by the window. "Please don't be unsettled. All will be well in time." He laid his warm hand over my belly, and my anxiety lessened.

At seven months along, I felt as big as a house, but kind of glorious too. Especially with the way Aric continued to worship my changing body. After we made love each night, I would lie with my head on his chest while

he stroked my hair and I traced his rune tattoos. For hours, we would talk about memories from our childhoods, our parents, and our hopes for Tee.

Aric gently massaged my bump and was rewarded with a solid kick, delighting him.

Which reminded me . . . “I have something I want you to see. A surprise.” Despite my fritzing powers, I’d managed to complete a project.

He blinked to attention. “For me?” Aric wasn’t a fan of surprises, since I’d given him more poisonous ones than good ones in the past.

“Well, really it’s for Tee.”

Taking Aric’s hand, I led him to our bedroom. At the door, I made him close his eyes as I guided him to the rocking crib I’d created. “Okay, you can look.”

He opened his eyes, and his lips parted.

Granted, it was *unique*.

I’d fashioned it out of lignum vitae, carving vines all around it that I could call to life in an emergency. Defensive thorns jutted from the rockers.

Engravings decorated the sides—roses and symbols associated with our alliance. Death’s scythe. Jack’s crossbow. Circe’s trident. One of Lark’s wolves. Finn’s ouroboros. Lightning bolts, a chariot, wings, and sunlight. The little dog from Matthew’s card.

At least, I hoped Matthew was still allied with us.

The crib looked like it couldn’t decide if it was Goth or a horror film prop, and I couldn’t stop grinning at it.

When I dragged my gaze away, I noticed Aric’s neutral expression. He ran his finger along one of the vines that dropped down into a thorn mobile. “It demonstrates a . . . consummate mastery over wood.”

“Thanks?”

He returned to my side. “It’s a work of unnerving art,” he said, but pride lit his starry eyes. “I assume the red witch had a hand in this.”

“A little.” Our thoughts had actually been in sync as I’d worked on it.

“How does she feel about the baby?”

“Very protective. She’s even started feeling that way about you. She doesn’t want to kill you anymore.” But other cards were still fair game in her bloodthirsty mind.

“Good to know. Send her my warmest regards.”

“Will do. In past games, did I ever talk about an alter ego?”

“You never spoke of her.” He reached a hand toward me, collecting the red strands of hair between his thumb and forefinger. Another lock had changed last week. “Because you *were* her.”

My grandmother had said my hair would permanently turn red, once I became the vicious Empress *I was meant to be*. “Is that the woman you want to shape the world after an apocalypse?”

“I know that you will return to Evie. Always.” Arm looped around my nonexistent waist, he turned back to the crib. “In all seriousness, I think this is perfect. And it makes things sink in, no? This is a *crib*. For our *child*.”

“Tell me about it.” When I’d been making the mattress out of sweet-smelling grasses and wool from some of Lark’s sheep, I’d been stunned to realize our baby would sleep on it soon.

“The idea seems surreal. I feel him kick against my palm and I sense our connection, but after two millennia, I can scarcely believe he’s coming in a couple of months.”

Yet I read unease in Aric’s eyes. “Still concerned you can’t touch him?” I took one of his beautiful hands and pressed my lips across his knuckles. So much lethality in these hands, yet they brought me only pleasure and comfort.

“The alternative is much worse. What if I *can* touch him—because he’s like me? I wouldn’t wish my fate on an enemy I hated, much less my own son.”

“Then he’ll just have to find someone as wonderful as I am,” I said with a smile, teasing him from his worry. “And he’ll treasure her all the more.”

“Evie . . .”—Aric laid his palms on my shoulders and pinned my gaze with his own—“you are going to make an incredible mother.”

My voice softened to a whisper as I said, “Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Memory-talk me.”

His brows drew together. “I’m sorry, I don’t know that phrase.”

“You’re trying to make this moment into a memory for me to recall after you’re gone. Maybe I’ll be having a bad day, but I’ll look back and remember when you told me that I would make a great mom, and I’ll feel better.”

His smile was gentle. “Is that such an unwelcome scenario?”

“Yes. I want *you* to be with me. Not a memory.” The more I thought about what both Aric and Jack were planning, the madder I got. The two

had no problem risking themselves, uncaring about how I felt. “You want me to *survive* the game, but you don’t want me to *affect* it. After this baby is born, that will change. Sol will empower me, and I will take out Richter—as I vowed I would do,” I said, and the icons on my hand seemed to vibrate with power.

Aric’s gaze flicked from my hand upward, and I realized he was watching another strand of my hair turn red.

The Hunter
Day 701 A.F.

“Punch it!” I yelled over the blustery winds that funneled through this valley pass.

Gabe, Kentarch, Sol, and I were at the bumper of the Beast, pushing as the Tower tried to drive us out of a heap of snow.

How many of these had we dealt with today? *Beaucoup*. Over ten hours, we’d managed a mile—which was about our running average over these last few weeks on the road.

Joules gunned the engine as we shoved.

I gritted my teeth, the cold doing a number on my bad leg. The tires spat dirty slush, but we didn’t budge the truck. I knocked my gloved fist on the back window. “Hold off a minute.”

Joules opened the door and leaned out. “We’re bloody stuck!”

Between breaths, I muttered, “Thanks for the live update, Tower.” Kentarch had been burning too much power today and couldn’t see where next to teleport us in this snowfall, so I turned to Sol. “You’re up. Melt us out of here.” His abilities could clear our way—or set off an avalanche. This place was ripe for one.

“I’m out of juice, Jack.” Sol’s expression was weary. “I think I’ll pass out if I use my rays again.” He gazed around us, as if he could see more than two feet in any direction.

We’d learned the hard way that if he used up all his reserves, he had no control over local Baggers. On the upside, most were beginning to freeze. On the downside, the ones who hadn’t sought him out like a beacon.

During a blizzard last week, a dozen snow-coated zombies had attacked. As the storm disoriented us, Gabe had struggled to use his wings in the howling winds. After one stiff gust, he'd almost disemboweled Joules with a wayward talon.

"C'mon, you keep telling us you're a god," I said to Sol. "Gods doan run out of juice." I sounded like an asshole. I was kind of turning into one.

Didn't have a choice, me. They kept asking why I was so determined to get to the Sick House; why couldn't they see the yawning alternative staring me in the face?

"Just give it one more shot, Sunny. We're getting closer." We'd kept the truck radio and CB on, hoping to get a lay of the land. Yesterday, we'd picked up the Sick House's repeating message, offering medical care in exchange for goods.

"Okay. I'll try." Sol squared his shoulders and stared in the direction of the roadway. His eyes flickered once, twice, then emitted beams of light. They melted the falling snow into rain. As Sol tottered, the thick ice blocking the Beast turned into mini flash floods.

"All right! We're good to go." For another short drive. "Backseat, Joules."

He climbed out of the driver's seat as we tossed in our shovels and tire mats in the back.

Rumbling sounded. Everyone went on high alert.

Joules said from the truck, "Richter?"

Gabe scented the air. "I do not believe so . . ." His gaze darted to the sides of the road, to the snow piled high up the valley walls. He hissed, "Avalanche!"

We all dove back into the truck just as snow plummeted. It covered the doors. The windows. The *roof*.

Finally silence reigned. Too much silence. I couldn't hear the wind anymore. We must be twenty feet under.

I turned off the engine before we overheated it. "Kentarch, can you take us back fifty or so feet?" *Ready to get out of this mess, me.* Claustrophobia gripped my throat.

Joules yanked off his gloves to reveal blistered palms. "The fifty feet that we dug through to get *here*?"

"We're all hurting, Tower. But we are making progress. We heard the message." I turned to Kentarch. "You're up."

“I will try, but I can’t continue to teleport us like this.” We’d learned that heavy weights and long distances were tough for him, but for some reason, teleporting people proved just as difficult. The Beast *plus* people equaled one drained Chariot. “Dozens of times in one day is too much.”

“I hear you. We’ll ease up tomorrow.”

He grabbed the dash and closed his eyes. The shivery feeling I got whenever we teleported set in, but we hadn’t moved.

“You okay, podna?”

“I need a few moments to recharge.”

The five of us would run out of air in minutes. *QB this, Jack. Doan panic your players.* “No worries. Take your time.” Had I sounded convincing? “Sol, can you melt some of this snow away and create an air hole?” I cracked his window.

He looked queasy at the prospect. “Uh, sure thing, Jack.” His eyes glowed, but they didn’t emit light. He slumped back in the seat. “I’m with Kentarch. Even a god like me can’t do this again and again.”

“Enough with the deity bullshite!” Joules, the former Catholic choirboy, wasn’t having it on the best of days. “Just melt the snow or get comfy in our new grave.”

“Everybody stay cool,” I said, even as sweat beaded my forehead. “One of you will recover in time.”

“And if they don’t?” Joules demanded. “Why are we riskin’ our arses over and over? We made two miles yesterday—in twelve hours. And that was a good day, since we didn’t die. Unlike *today*.”

“I somewhat agree with Patrick.” Gabe was used to soaring through the skies; our current situation had to be punishing for him. “Hunter, we must discuss our path. I fear we will not make another mile, much less the dozens left to reach the Sick House.”

Did they think I didn’t know that? They all believed I was hell-bent on reaching that place for Evie—and I was—but it was more than that.

Because my goal of a settlement in Louisiana was done.

Kentarch quietly said, “There’s something you’re not telling us. In the past, all you talked about was starting Acadiana.” Just that word wrecked me. “We understood diverting from the mission in order to hunt Richter, but now that his trail is cold, this insistence makes no sense. If you do not divulge everything, I won’t keep pushing on.”

“The Sick House might have rockets to defeat Richter and Zara and a doc for Evie.” Domīnija was less keen about that prospect as time wore on. Yesterday he’d pointed out that plague victims would’ve journeyed to the fort, and we were running out of time to quarantine any physician.

He’d decided to take on the challenge of delivering Tee, readying for it.

Kentarch said only, “*Might have.*”

“Look, I know in my gut that we have to get to that fort. Can you leave it at that?” And conserve oxygen?

“No.” The word was a cannon shot over the bow. Kentarch didn’t have to help us; he held all the cards.

And now this sacked Cajun quarterback would have to tell his team about the stark reality of the fourth quarter. “Acadiana’s not an option with this weather. Even with all the castle’s supplies and all your talents, we can’t make it happen.” I’d thought sun, seeds, and Domīnija’s fuel would make the difference. I’d been wrong.

“Good a place as any, boyo. And the survivin’ half of your army might’ve tried to reach it. They could be there right now.”

“You guys doan know southern Louisiana like I do. There’re no mountains to break up this wind. No caves for shelter. Materials to build a fort would be hard-earned from the few structures that didn’t burn in the Flash, and nothing we constructed would keep us warm enough. Acadiana was a dream. A good one. But a dead one now. The simple truth is . . . if the snow continues like this, our supply cave will outdo any other place for us.”

Everyone got quiet at that.

“What about the Lovers’ bunker?” Gabe finally said. “We could go there.”

“Picked clean by the Azey before they scattered. And that bunker was as ill-omened a place as you can imagine.”

“Then let’s head to the castle,” Joules said.

The last time I’d talked to Domīnija, he’d urged me to bring Kentarch and do just that. . . .

“It’s time for you to return here, mortal. Your idea to take on Minors is insane. If you can even reach them.”

“At least this way, me and the guys have a purpose. I think I’d go crazy there.” To see Evie and Death together? To live with them without being able to touch her?

Enfer. Hell.

“Are you ready to die out in the Ash? I’ve never seen anything like this weather, and I sense it’s only going to get worse. The risk is too great.”

Biting back my frustration, I asked, “Then how do we stop this? Tell Me.”

“I only know of one way.”

“The end of the game.” Though he’d nearly finished with Calanthe’s chronicles, he’d found nothing to help us. “Eight people I care about have to die?”

“I am one of them. I don’t relish my fate. But this is how it’s been for millennia.”

“We’re not there yet. We might find answers at the Sick House.”

Joules was just getting started: “Yeah, we go to the castle! They’ve got bacon! Maybe I could get me arms around waitin’ with the Reaper till the end.”

Gabe said, “Alas, Death did not invite you to share in his fried salted pork.”

True. Domīnija was still gun-shy about Arcana hanging out together. “What if he did let us live there? Then what? We twiddle our thumbs while the world ends? And what about the game? If we doan figure out a way to dismantle it, all of you die. Get me? *All* of you. Because my girl’s goan to survive, come hellfire or high water. The Pentacles might know something; they might not.” My voice rose to a thunderous pitch, booming in the cab. “But I for one would suffocate out on this road rather than rot in that castle till the last food runs out or you guys start picking each other off. Are you hearing me?” First time I’d lost my patience with this crew, but I didn’t regret it.

Sol cleared his throat. “*Sí*. I hear you. We thwart the game, or we die young, and the world will be destroyed. What we must do is clear.”

“Very well, hunter,” Gabe said. “Assuming we can live to fight another day, I too am with you.”

Joules stubbornly shook his head. “Bacon. Ba. Con.”

I turned to Kentarch. “Well?”

The soldier didn’t say anything. He just teleported us fifty feet back.

The Empress
Day 730 A.F.

“Love, wake up.” Aric sat beside me on the bed.

I drew the pillow over my head. “Nooo.” Why wake me? He knew I’d had a sleepless night, battling nausea. He’d rubbed my back until I’d passed out after noon.

More dreams of a poisonous wasteland had plagued me. They only grew more vivid.

I doubted these were just the nightmares of a traumatized woman during an apocalypse. I hadn’t told Aric, but they felt . . . prophetic.

Was Matthew sending them to me as a warning?

Aric patiently waited beside me.

I yanked my pillow away with a huff. “What is it?”

“You made me swear to inform you when Jack and the others closed in on the Sick House. So I am.”

I bolted upright, ignoring the aches cascading throughout my body. “Is Kentarch coming for you?” Over the last month, I’d broached the idea of Aric’s joining up with them. Since Lark rarely emerged from her room and was sleeping more and more, he’d told me he would consider leaving me for a brief window.

Now he waved at my very pregnant belly. “I can’t go, not when we’re this close.”

Granted, Tee was due at any time. Still, I opened my mouth to argue, but Aric said, “I can’t risk having to quarantine myself this close to your

labor. You asked me not to go out and search for a doctor, to commit to delivering our son. I did.”

He’d accepted the challenge, rereading all his books on pregnancy and assembling a trunk of supplies—with everything from sterilized scissors for the cord to about eighty dozen latex gloves. Paul’s swivel stool sat at the ready in our bedroom next to several portable heaters.

“Please meet me halfway, Evie.”

Frustration spiked inside me, because he was right. “Why can’t they wait until after Tee’s birth then?”

“I beseeched Jack to do just that, but he refuses. The most he’ll commit to is to wear comms. We’ll have eyes and ears on them from the study. They’re approaching the fort.”

Shit, this was happening! “Okay, let’s go.”

“I don’t suppose I can persuade you to stay here and rest?”

“Not a chance.” I leapt out of bed and felt a weird twinge low in my belly. Ignoring it, I waddled to my clothes. My high-waisted pants were strangely loose. Must’ve stretched them out. I tried in vain to put on my boots, couldn’t reach my swollen feet.

Aric rushed to assist me, pulling them on and tying the laces for me.

“I can’t believe they made it at last.”

“The weather over the last few days helped.”

During our alliance conference call a week ago, Gabe had commented on the relenting snow, “I feel like the gods are holding their breath.”

To which Jack had wondered, “What’s the exhale goan to be like?”

I shuddered to think. I asked Aric, “Are the guys going in with Jack?”

“Only Joules.”

Though I wished Jack would have more backup, I understood their reasoning. Gabe couldn’t blend, Sol was my declared MVP, and Kentarch was our only hope of castle evacuation.

Apparently Joules had been practicing with his powers, becoming even more formidable. Plus, if the Pentacles disarmed them, he would always have a weapon on hand.

“Ready?” Aric glanced at my hair.

Another lock must’ve turned red. “Where’s Lark? Maybe she should see this.”

“Sleeping in her room. I suggest letting a hibernating creature lie.”

Good point.

As Aric and I made our way to the study, he brought me up to speed. “Jack and the Tower each have a miniature cam on their hats, which will transmit via satellite to our monitor and to Kentarch’s laptop in the truck. We’ll all be connected.”

Inside the study, Aric pulled up a chair beside his and motioned for me to sit. The computer screen was split into two feeds, one half labeled J. Deveau and the other P. Joules.

He unmuted our mic. “Evie and I are here.”

Jack’s staticky voice sounded from the speakers. “We’re heading out. Give us five to reach the entrance.”

I said, “Be careful in there, Jack.”

“Will do, *peekôn*.”

I wished I was there to protect him. My claws budded at the thought of him wading into yet more danger.

Aric frowned at the scent of roses emanating from me. Another glance at my hair.

As Jack and Joules approached, the feeds lit up and the fort started to take shape. If I’d thought the Lovers’ bunker creepy, this place was just as much so. The Flash had blackened the brick walls and incinerated any trees in the area to jagged stumps. Spotlights highlighted the barrenness that stretched on for miles.

Jack and his crew had toiled for months to reach Fort Colman. What would they find inside? When I bit my lip, Aric muted our mic. “He’ll be okay.” In a dry tone, he added, “Remember, he cheats Death.”

The Hunter

“Let me do the talking, Tower,” I reminded Joules as we made our way to the fort’s entrance.

On the walls, guards manned spotlights, sweeping the flatlands all around, illuminating the falling snow. *Weather’s picking up*. We’d made it just in time.

“Just promise me I’ll get to blow up some shite.”

“Chances are.” My plan was to do recon and see if the Pentacles had amassed any weapons. If this suit turned out to be as evil as the Cups, we’d abduct one for interrogation.

A pair of armed guards swung a spotlight at us as we approached. I made my limp more pronounced.

One shouldered his rifle, cocking it. “Hands up and state your business!”

We raised our gloved hands. “Heard your message. I’m here to get an old bullet taken out of my leg.”

“What have you got to trade?”

“A truck just down the road.” I pointed over my shoulder. “It runs, but we used all our fuel getting here.”

“Where’d you come from? Cars have been blocked by the snow for weeks.”

“From the coast. Caught a break in the weather. Can’t believe we made it.”

They gave me and Joules a once-over, then one said, “All of the specialists are at a *service* today.” The two shared a snicker. “You’ll have to

come back tomorrow.”

“Service? Like a burial?” Never in a million years had I thought they’d turn us away. “Man, I got pain like you can’t imagine, especially after we worked our tails off to get here. Did I mention we have a running truck?”

“Then sleep in it tonight and return tomorrow.”

In my earpiece, Domīnija said, “Walk away, Jack. Something is going on inside that you’re not to see.”

I muttered, “Got it.” A stray impulse made me call out, “You got any food to advance us on the trade?”

A shared look between the guards. “If your truck runs, you can get some meat. Tomorrow.”

Meat. I somehow kept my cool as I said, “All right. We’ll be back.”

On the way to the truck, Joules said, “Bet they’re goin’ to slaughter someone.”

“*Ouais.*”

“Jaysus, this world. Canna stand much more of it.”

Evie’s voice carried into my earpiece. “Jack, leave that place for good.” She sounded tired and off somehow. She should be resting, not fretting about me. “I know you want to rescue any innocent people inside. Just remember that *shackled person* does not mean *good person*.”

I didn’t want to worry her more, but now that we had finally gotten here, nothing would stop me from going in. “Can’t leave, me. I’m goan to see this *service*.”

“Not without me.” Joules pointed back at the wall and said, “I spied an area where the spotlights don’t overlap. Tarch can teleport us to the top of that wall, and we can drop down.”

“You in, Kentarch?” We hadn’t needed him to teleport too much lately.

Over the radio: “In.”

From the background, I heard Sol say, “I still would like to go.” But according to Evie, we couldn’t risk him because he was her key to taking out Richter. I didn’t know if she should be planning a dustup against the Emperor, but we were keeping Sol on the bench, just in case.

Gabe made a sound of agreement. But he’d give us away; his wings had only been growing.

Domīnija said, “You enter at your own risk, mortal. The other Arcana can’t swoop in to save you. We must weigh the salvation of the world against your curiosity.”

“No one will swoop in, Reaper. Everybody knows I’m expendable.”

“I don’t,” Evie said. “Jack, you’re being ridiculous. In the past we only risked ourselves to rescue a friend or loved one—not to solve a mystery.”

The guys and I had fought so hard to get here. Couldn’t give up the brass ring yet. “I can’t explain it, *bébé*. I just know I’m supposed to go in there.”

Joules said, “With a little backup, Cajun. I’m not on the MVP list either.”

“I’ll fire the comms back on inside.” I forced myself to disconnect from her before I lost my nerve.

When we reached the truck, Kentarch, Gabe, and Sol were waiting for us outside.

Gabe said, “I would feel better if I can go and help you.”

“You can’t pass for human, birdbrain.” Joules rolled his eyes. “Stay here and make sure these eejits don’t get any savior ideas.”

While Kentarch raised a brow, Sol said, “*Por Dios*, you make it difficult to *want* to save you, Tower.”

I slanted Gabe a look. He truly did need to make sure no one broke ranks to rescue one civvy and a very stubborn Tower. The Archangel nodded with understanding.

Kentarch offered his arm. “Ready?”

“*Ouais*.” I grabbed Joules’s arm and the Chariot’s. A split second of shivers later, and we were on the wall.

We crouched down, scanning the layout.

This historic fort had five bastions in a star shape, like a pentacle. A coincidence? Or maybe this suit been attracted to its shape.

Though spotlights blazed outside, only lanterns and torches lit the interior. In the center was a large, flat area that probably used to be a grassy green. Surrounding it were two-story walls with rooms inside. Corridors connected the rooms, all leading to one main entrance with a large black door.

Signs for Fort Colman tourists still hung throughout, scorched but intact. STOREHOUSE. BARRACKS. GUARDHOUSE. CHAPEL.

Off to one side of the green, row upon row of empty army tents flapped in the wind.

“Where is everybody?” Joules murmured.

I saw only the two guards from earlier, a couple more manning spotlights, and an additional four huddled around a trash fire on the far side of the fort. All armed with automatic rifles. “I guess they’re at that service.” If the Minors had united, then we could be facing down three suits of fourteen each. Forty-two beings with unknown powers. Were they all inside?

“Thought there’d be crowds here.” Joules shook his head. “Didn’t the Queen of Cups tell you this place was bigger than Jubilee? Maybe they ate everyone?”

Or got struck down with plague. “Let’s go find out.” To Kentarch, I said, “Any sign of trouble coming your way, you get yourselves to the castle.”

“We will be listening and watching you both. Stay on guard.” Kentarch disappeared.

Joules and I readied to jump down the twenty or so feet. My bad leg was going to be singing. For a second, I wondered what it’d be like if these people truly traded medical care for goods. Evie could have a real doctor for her labor. Finn could have had help as well.

Joules and I dropped. As predicted, I had to bite back a groan of pain before I limped on. I drew my crossbow and muttered to Joules, “On my six.”

He nodded, javelin at the ready.

I fired up the comms again. “Read me?”

Kentarch said, “Copy.”

Domīnija: “Copy.”

As Joules and I headed toward the fort wall closest to the main entry, I saw that pentagrams—not pentacles—had been carved into all the lanterns. Demonic-looking shadows wavered over the walls. “You guys receiving this?”

They affirmed.

We passed a makeshift garbage shed filled with bones. Human bones. I investigated a few and found blade marks left from carving the muscles and tendons away.

Domīnija observed, “Definite cannibalism.”

Joules swore under his breath. “So these Minors lured people here by promising help, then they ate them?”

I'd bet on it. "Judging by the number of skulls, the Pentacles did a brisk business back when more humans were around to harvest." Too late, I remembered Evie was watching this. Was she reliving the fight for her life in the Hierophant's cannibal pantry? "How you doing, *peekôn*?"

"Remembering." Her tone seethed.

Joules and I continued on, even though I *needed* to rail against these fiends. Quiet outrage was corrosive. It burned like I'd swallowed acid—

We flattened ourselves against the wall when two robed figures appeared to float down a nearby cross-corridor. One carried a black candle, while the other cradled a goat's skull.

Once they'd passed, I said, "The only thing worse than a cannibal is a devil-worshipping one."

"Do they worship the devil," Evie wondered, "or the Devil *Card*?"

Joules said, "If it's the latter, they're going to hate the Reaper as much as I do."

Smooth as silk, Domīnija replied, "Your feelings are requited, Lord of Lightning."

We trailed behind the figures, until they walked through that black door. "They must be goan to the service. I'm heading in. You with?"

When Joules nodded, I glanced down at his javelin. If he went weapons-hot with that thing in a closed building, he might blow me to bits too. But hell, wasn't like I had a great shot of getting out alive anyway. "If they so much as blink the wrong way, light 'em up."

"Always do, Cajun." His chest puffed out. "Always do."

Dieu aide-moi.

Evie said, "Joules, if you're the only one who makes it out of there alive, you'll wish you hadn't." She sounded halfway to the red witch already.

Kentarch: "Radio silence in five."

Five seconds later, I eased the door open, and Joules and I slipped into a deserted alcove. Black candles and more pentagram lanterns illuminated an old chapel that had been satanified. All the crosses had been turned upside down. Black swaths of cloth dangled from the ceiling. Painted pentagrams covered the doors.

Choirboy Joules looked like he was about to lose his shit.

Chanting sounded. "*Hail Ogen! Hail the Foul Desecrator! The Pentaculum beseech thee.*"

I muttered, “You called it, Evie.” I remembered her telling me that the Devil Card had always been ranting about Sabbats and offerings. He’d had no idea the Pentacles were worshipping him. Did they even know Ogen was dead?

A man’s voice carried over the chanting: *“We offer up this defiled world of darkness for your ascension and kingdom, Lord Ogen. Accept this body as a meal for your unnatural hunger! Enchain our own bodies and flood us with your power. We offer you pain and screams for your demons’ appetites.”*

The followers chanted, *“Pain and screams. Power and demons. Pain and screams.”*

Curiosity compelled me closer. Joules and I eased along the edge of the alcove and peeked around the wall.

Hooded figures occupied the pews. Their chanting grew louder, more frenzied. Against the back wall, a pentagram hung over an altar on a dais. Before it stood a robed man with his back to us. My WAG: the King of Pentacles. Before him on the altar lay a man’s body with jostling legs.

Fils de putain. The king had just set aside a bloody knife to dig his victim’s heart from his chest. Too late to save the man.

As the people swayed, I made out a pentagram tattoo across each one’s throat. They were all adult males, fourteen of them in total, the entire suit. So where were the other Minors?

Joules stiffened beside me. “That’s a priest. We’ve got to do something!”

I saw then what Joules had spotted—the victim’s collar. “Keep it down. He’s already dead.”

“Then they’re mutilatin’ a murdered priest.” Choirboy wasn’t having it. Electricity sparked over his skin until the hair on the back of my neck stood up. If the worshippers hadn’t been in such a moaning craze, they would’ve noticed us.

The king placed the still beating heart in a silver dish on the altar.

“He stole his heart!” Joules hissed. “Right out of his chest.”

Domīnija said, “Control yourself, Tower. There are too many of them.”

I was a former Catholic boy too, but . . . “That guy probably wasn’t even a priest. He could’ve murdered one and stole his clothes. Or these Pentacles dressed him up for sport.”

Joules wasn't registering my words, and I couldn't grab him without getting a jolt.

"Listen to me, we're goan to back out of here." We didn't know what these Minors were packing—other than a taste for human flesh. "We'll snag that leader after he turns in, and we'll question him. We leave *now*."

Joules hadn't taken his gaze off that victim. "Sick o' this world. Sick o' this shite." His accent was thicker than I'd ever heard it. "If I canna save a priest, then what do I have powers for?"

"To help us save the *entire* world."

"Then we start by stampin' out evil. These Minors are all cannibals. They cheered as that freak removed a priest's heart!"

"*Do it, Tower.*" Evie's voice was breathy, stunning. "Blow them to pieces."

"Evie, *tais-toi!*" Shut up! "Domīnija, get her off the comms."

In a strange tone, the Reaper said, "Not possible at present."

"Feckin' hell, she's right." Joules's charge glowed too bright, lighting up the back of the murky chapel. He raised his javelin, electricity crackling along the length.

The king turned toward the worshippers. "Return to us, favorite son of Satan. *Filius Satanae*, enchain us to your unnatural will. . . ." He trailed off as he spotted us. "Arcana!" He slapped his bloodied hand over his throat tattoo. "We've been waiting for you."

Joules fired his javelin with blistering speed.

The king waved his free hand. The javelin stopped in midair, then dropped harmlessly.

Oh, merde—

Another wave of the king's hand launched me and Joules back against the wall. *IMPACT*. Like a giant punch to the lungs. Somehow kept hold of my crossbow.

"Jack!" Evie screamed in my earpiece.

"Ah, the great Tower is visiting." The king's eyes looked feverish in the lantern light. "A Major for us to feast upon."

Joules and I fought to rise. But the king kept one hand on his tattoo, the other directed at us.

"I'll kill you all!" Joules cried, struggling against the man's hold.

Finally making it to my feet, I tried to aim my bow. Couldn't raise it. I grated into the mic, "He's controlling my arms."

Joules managed to stand. “Mine too.” Puppets on a string.

The king’s lips curled, revealing rotted teeth. “No, *I* am not controlling you. A demon has hold of you—and we control the demons!”

Nausea roiled. It *did* feel like invisible hands were gripping me. An actual demon? We couldn’t defend against a force like that.

Joules was losing it. “Some kind o’ demon’s got me arms?!”

“You won’t be able to fight back, but you’ll *feel everything*.” To his followers, the king said, “New meat delivered right to our door. And these look fresh.”

They all shared his smug smile. One Pentacle licked his lips as he stared at Joules.

Cold as ice, Domīnija said, “Listen to me in full. Demons don’t exist; the Pentacles must be telekinetic. But their telekinesis is no match for electricity. When I count to three, both of you will drop to the floor at the same time, then fire. They won’t expect it. Tower, throw two javelins toward the back of the room and triangulate yourself as a third conductor. Jack, get out of the way.”

Could Joules do that? Domīnija had helped him discover new abilities in the past.

I muttered, “Copy,” and Joules gave a tight nod.

Domīnija intoned, “On my count of three. One . . . two—”

Joules hit the floor early, fucker, so I collapsed beside him. We severed the hold on us. Before the king could react, I fired my bow, tagging him in the heart while Joules landed a pair of javelins on either side of the altar.

With a flash of blinding light, electricity combusted between the spears. Heat flared, and the chapel shuddered.

“Come to papa!” Joules cried, his eyes glimmering silver. And the currents *did*, sparking from one javelin to the other, then branching out toward the followers on their way back to Joules.

I shot away just before he caught the streams.

Some of the Pentacles tried to use their own telekinesis, slapping a palm over their tattoo. Too late. They couldn’t escape Joules’s blitz. Their bodies spasmed, their hair standing on end, eyes bulging.

The last two tried to run. Currents seized them like outstretched fingers. *Zaaaap*. They dropped in their tracks, convulsing in pain, right up to the end.

Fourteen Pentacles. An entire suit. Electrocuted.

I blocked out the chatter on the comms, the smell of sizzling flesh making me retch.

Unfazed, Joules clambered to his feet and held a sparking hand out to me.

“Pass.” As I pulled myself up, he grinned and wiped sweat off his paled face.

He reminded me of Evie after she’d fought the Cups—overtaken by the heat of battle. Just like with Evie, I was bewildered by the power he’d just displayed.

Had others in the fort heard us? At least eight guards remained, and I only had five arrows left. I waited, bow pointed at—

The doors flew open. The original two guards stormed inside, guns raised.

I loosed an arrow; Joules lobbed a javelin. The guards’ bodies dropped, wedging the doors open.

The four men from around the trash fire sprinted down the corridor toward us. One of them yelled, “Avenge the king!” Right behind them was the second pair from the wall. Lanterns lit the crazed look in their eyes. These six might not be Pentacles, but they were fanatical followers.

“Down, Tower!” I yelled, just as bullets flew.

Joules and I dove behind a pew. Crouching, I aimed and fired. Hit one. Dodging a bullet, I tagged another. Splinters burst into the air beside my head.

The four remaining guards took cover behind a wall, spraying bullets at us.

“Do your worst, Tower.” Joules had to swipe his damp hands along his pant legs before producing a javelin. He took several shallow breaths, then popped up and threw, drilling the spear into the wall closest to the guards.

Thunk.

No explosion or electricity. Just a spear. Vibrating in a wall.

He ducked back down. “I’m juiced out.”

“Then we do this the old-fashioned way.” I peeked around the pew just as a guard fired wild. I drilled an arrow into his forehead.

Three guards. One arrow left. I motioned for Joules to toss me a javelin. He did, producing one for himself as well.

Then I said, “Shit, I’m out!” Loud enough for the guards to hear. Sometimes the Arcana playbook called for dirty tactics.

Joules caught on. “Damn it, me too.”

Two bogeys broke cover, rifles raised. “Come out with your hands up!”

From behind a cloud of wood dust, Joules and I hurled our javelins. His hit was clean to his target’s heart; mine skewered the guard’s neck in a fountain of arterial spray.

We dove down just as the last bogey opened up for all he was worth, conserving as well as Joules had in his initial attack—in other words, not at all.

Had to run out of ammo soon. Waiting for it . . . waiting . . .

Click, click, click.

Magazine empty. As he fumbled for another clip, I leapt up and stalked over to him.

He stared up at the bow leveled on him and grated, “See you in hell.”

“Save me a spot.” I plugged him in the eye, then wasted no time retrieving the arrow. Hurrying to the corpses I’d dropped, I snared the rest of my ammo and reloaded. I checked the guns from the fallen guards, strapping on one with half a clip left.

As we waited for more guards, my breaths were loud in my ears.

Yet none came. Damn it, where *was* everybody? We’d only found one suit and a handful of guards.

Kentarch: “I repeat, state your sitrep.”

I ran my sleeve over my forehead. Sweat and splinters. “We’re good.”

Voice thick, Evie said, “As in, unharmed?”

“Not a scratch, ma’am.” ’Course the night was still young. I asked Domīnija, “How’d you know demons doan exist?” Some kind of Death deity knowledge?

“I do not for certain.”

I gave a humorless laugh. “Well played.” My laugh faded as I gazed around, wondering if demonic forces were real.

“*Ta* for the assist, Reaper.” The nicest thing Joules had ever said to Death.

Still on guard, the Tower and I edged around the twitching, smoking bodies to the altar.

Joules made the sign of the cross and told the heartless corpse, “Forgive me, Father, for not gettin’ to you sooner.”

Something about the man’s mouth drew my attention. I used my bow and a bloody arrowpoint to draw down his bottom lip.

“A little respect, Cajun . . .” Joules trailed off at what I’d revealed.

The “priest” had filed teeth—a trademark of the Teeth, miner cannibals brainwashed by the Hierophant to kill Evie. I frowned. I’d thought they’d all been killed off.

Joules looked crushed. “Maybe the Pentacles did it to him. He didn’t have a choice.”

“Face it, Joules, they dressed up a cannibal for their sick rites. Just ’cause you wear a collar doan make you a priest.”

Joules turned to me, coming down from his battle high. “Sorry about offing all your potential hostages. And nearly getting us eaten and all.”

“Fuck’s sake, Tower. Remind me to leave you in the truck next time.” The answers I’d yearned for felt more distant than ever. “Come on. Let’s go try to salvage something.”

Weapons at the ready, we headed out of the chapel. We’d just turned down a corridor when I heard a weak voice calling from a lower level. “*Is someone there? We’re jailed down here.*”

With effort, Joules produced another javelin. “Prisoners?”

“Or a trap.”

Still, we followed the sound to a narrow stairwell. Pitch-black darkness greeted us. *Naturellement*. Even with the light from our cams, we wouldn’t be able to see down there.

I fetched one of the Pentacles’ lanterns along the corridor.

Joules blinked at me. “You want to go down into a dark dungeon? With a devil-worshippin’ lantern? Did you never watch horror flicks? I say we chalk this entire night up to experience and get ourselves out of Fort Dodgy here.”

Evie said, “I agree. Jack, you have to leave now.”

“Not until I figure out what’s goan on.”

“*Hello? Anybody there?*” the voice called.

I raised my brows. “That was a woman.”

Joules straightened his scrawny shoulders. “So it’s a good thing the cavalry’s here.”

I gazed skyward, then descended the steps.

The Empress

Watching and listening as Jack risked his life against the Pentacles had proved more intense than being there—because I’d been helpless to save him.

Now the lantern light made his camera feed even harder to see. I hit mute on the comm control and faced Aric. “Tell them not to go down there.”

Aric raised his brows as he watched the monitor. “They won’t listen to me, certainly not like Joules listened *to you* when he took your advice earlier.”

I flushed with guilt. “I don’t know what that was.” I’d just had a jarring cramp in my belly, and my back had been in knots, and the red witch’s aggression had come over me. “I spoke before I thought.” That wasn’t all; when Aric had moved to escort me out, I’d used my vines to inform him I *wasn’t going anywhere*. They still slithered around the study.

“If I believed I could stop Jack, I would. But now he has no intel and no hostage. He will be even more determined to justify their journey there.” Aric lifted his gaze to survey my face. “I can’t force you to leave this room, but I’m asking you to. You need to go rest.”

“Rest?” Stress made my cramps worse, and perspiration trickled down my back. “When they’re heading into a murky dungeon?” God, could it be any darker in there? I heard Jack’s footfalls on wet brick. Eerie echoes competed with the continual *ping* of dripping water. “You have to be joking.”

Sounding disappointed in me, Aric said, “We lost a valuable chance to learn more about the Pentacles—and the game—but Jack might uncover information from a prisoner.”

“Okay, okay, I get it.” I unmuted the mic and told Jack and Joules, “Be careful, please.”

“*Ouais*. We’re just goan to take a look-see. No worrying about ole Jack.”

The Hunter

Half-dressed men huddled for warmth on the filthy ground in the first cell. At least two dozen—all with telltale signs of frostbite and starvation.

Most looked hopeless. Some crazed. They were too weak to speak; chapped lips stuck together. No water or facilities for them.

“Cajun, look at the ones in the back.”

I raised my lantern. A few had weeping red eyes and twisted bodies. *Bonebreak fever*.

The plague was here. No saving these people.

Joules yanked his balaclava over his mouth and nose. “Oi, we’re right fecked now!”

I drew my own bandanna over my face. “We got to go, Tower. *Allons-y*.” We turned toward the exit. I’d always heard the sickness spread through the blood. Maybe the air.

No wonder Zara and Richter hadn’t come here. Plague victims didn’t have a lot of luck to harvest. Bet Richter wouldn’t want to burn them either.

Had this entire journey been a fool’s errand?

Just as we made the stairs, that woman’s voice called from a cell in the back. “Come to me, Cajun.”

A dreamlike sensation descended over me. Had she heard Joules call me Cajun, or had she recognized my voice? Something about her seemed familiar.

Evie: “What’s happening? Do they have bonebreak? Jack, get out of there.”

The woman faintly said, “The numbers are for you. It’s all for you.”

What numbers? Unable to help myself, I turned back toward her cell. The draw was more than just my need to help an imprisoned woman.

Evie muttered urgently, “Do *not* go back there.” She was out of breath. “Jackson Deveaux, have you lost your mind?”

I didn’t want to worry my girl, but I had to see the last cell. “I’ll be fine, *bébé. Prend-lé aisé.*”

“Joules, why does he sound drunk? Is there some kind of mind control?”

The Tower yanked on my arm. “We’re leavin’. Exit’s *that way.*”

“Go. I’ll follow in a minute.” I shoved him away and slipped deeper into the jail.

“Apologies, Empress,” Joules said on the comm. “Me happy arse is headin’ out of the plague prison.” He stomped up the stairs.

Domīnija told me, “Mortal, you are behaving like a madman. Reverse course, *now.*”

“Jack, what is wrong with you?” Evie cried, “Kentarch, teleport him out of there.”

Domīnija: “Chariot, do not go near Jack until he’s quarantined. This is not your mission.”

Kentarch hesitated, then said only, “Copy.”

“Nooo!” Evie yelled. “Go get him!”

I murmured, “Sorry, Evangeline,” then switched off the comm.

The last cell came into view. A middle-aged woman lay slumped against a wall. She wore tattered clothes that swallowed her emaciated frame. Her matted hair was a mass of knots. Her eyes wept blood, and her fingers were bent at unnatural angles. She wouldn’t last the night. The *hour*.

“Who are you?”

“Call me Kos. You’re the one . . . I’ve been looking for. The Cajun.”

Uh-huh. “How long ago did you get sick, Kos?” How long should my quarantine be?

“No idea. Been rotting . . . in this cell for months and months.”

Before she caught the plague? “Why would they put a woman down here?” In our current evil reality, women didn’t get thrown in prisons to rot.

“Because they feared me and my powers.”

“Heh.” Another one round the bend. Not surprising at this point in the apocalypse.

What was I even doing here? This woman couldn't be saved. I needed to leave, to go reassure Evie and start my quarantine.

"The Pentacles gave me my own cell . . . as a professional *courtesy*," she said, sneering the word. "Did you kill fourteen of them? Each one has a tattoo on his throat."

"We did. Anyone else around here we should be worried about?" Another suit?

She shook her head. "Their followers scattered when plague reached the fort."

"Do you know what the Pentacles' powers were?"

Her eyes slid shut, blood tears seeping from the corners. "*We* never deviated like they did. We build. We govern. We protect."

"Okay." I glanced over my shoulder at the door. I'd try one last question. "What else do you know about them?"

She stopped breathing. The end? Yet then she sucked in a wheezing gulp of air. "Too much to tell. And you can't take my hand." She frowned at her dirty, misshapen hand. "All my knowledge . . . would have funneled to you. Powers would spark. Too late, isn't it?"

Yep, round the bend. "Just tell me what you can, Kos—"

Her back arched like a U, her arms contorting. A death spasm. When it finally eased, she lay gasping. "The pain . . . is unimaginable. But you need to know about the game. About what needs to be done."

The *game*? Was this woman a Minor? "I'm all ears."

She got a cagey look about her. "Tell you what I can—two conditions. You follow the numbers." She pointed a crooked finger above her head where she'd drawn numbers in blood on the wall.

"Latitude and longitude." Despite my misgivings, I memorized the coordinates.

A hint of a grin. "Very good."

For all I knew that location was in Alaska, which might as well be the moon. But my curiosity told me to do anything to get her to spill. "Your second condition?"

"Put one of your arrows in my heart . . . before my next spasm."

Kill a woman? Though I could take her out clean, memories of *ma mère*—and Evie's mom—bombarded me, and I hesitated.

"Mercy for a soldier . . . at the end of the world." Soldier? Kos looked anything but. "Swear to my conditions . . . on your beloved mother's soul."

Was that a good guess, or did she know more about me than she was letting on? Pretty much every survivor alive today had a dead mother.

I wasn't convinced that those coordinates were reachable, but I had to know more. "I swear it on *ma pauvre défunte maman* that I'll follow the numbers," then added, "if it's possible."

"I'll take it." She exhaled a long breath. "First thing I'll tell you is what . . . you . . . are. . . ."

Chills skittered down my back. "*What* I am?"

Her muscles began tightening once more.

The Empress

“Kentarch!” I cried into the mic. “Come get me; *I’ll* go to Jack.”

“Negative. I’m sorry, Empress. Signing off.”

Aric shut down his own computer, disconnecting the feed and the comms. “*Sievā*, you need to sit down and relax. If not for yourself, then for the baby.”

My claws sharpened. “Turn that back on.”

“You can’t without my password. Which I’ve changed since your last foray into my phone.”

My rose scent had thickened until even I could barely breathe. “Jack will die if we don’t do something. Why won’t you let Kentarch get him?”

“You know why. We can’t risk the Chariot to plague.”

“Risk him! Get him to retrieve Jack.” I’d just said the words when something gave way inside me. I gasped, clutching my belly. “Oh, God. My water just broke!”

Aric froze. “Pardon?”

Cramps hit me hard and fast. No, these weren’t cramps. *A contraction?!* “It’s happening—” My legs buckled.

Aric lunged across the room to catch me. As we gazed at each other, time felt suspended. Were we both remembering him catching his pregnant mother? Her accidental death at his hands?

Seeming to give himself an inner shake, he said, “We can do this, Evie. Deep breaths.”

“It can’t be happening now! Get Lark to take over with me, then call Kentarch to come get you. Aric, fix this. Please, don’t let Jack die.”

The battle was clear on his face. “I can’t leave you. It’s just not possible.”

Casting him a betrayed look, I yelled, “Lark, come help me!” A much stronger contraction ripped through me. I’d withstood falling from a helicopter and multiple amputations, but this pain was a different level!

Lark lurched into the room moments later. “What’s happening?” Her hair was tangled, her face bearing creases from her sheets. “You in labor, Evie?” Scarface and Maneater accompanied her.

Come on, Lark. The wolves weren’t supposed to be in the castle.

Her eyes pulsed red as her animal gaze took in the scene.

I glanced around, seeing it anew. Aric had no armor, and his sword was across the room. I was in labor. Aside from a few of my vines, we were utterly vulnerable.

Bloodlust shimmered in her gaze, like a predator who’d just sniffed out injured prey. Sensing her aggression, the wolves crouched with fangs bared, and all of Aric’s warnings replayed in my mind.

With me in his arms, he eased us closer to his sword, but even he wouldn’t be able to reach it before the wolves attacked.

Lark’s gaze narrowed on my hand, my icons. I knew that temptation.

Wolves crouching . . . Aric slipping closer to his weapon . . .

I whimpered when the next contraction hit.

Lark shook her head and inhaled a shaky breath. “I-I wish I could help you. Can’t. Gotta go!” She and the wolves whirled around and sprinted away, claws clattering down the hallway.

Aric’s brows drew together. “She did it,” he murmured in surprise, even admiration. Attention back on me, he said, “It’s you and me now.”

“But Jack . . .” Could I manage labor on my own if Aric left on a rescue mission? Women had done it in the past, yet I might be endangering Tee.

Aric was our only hope. Which meant he couldn’t be Jack’s.

“I’m sorry, Evie. But that is not our priority tonight.”

I couldn’t believe we were abandoning Jack to his fate—but I didn’t see a choice.

Aric must have read my surrender. “Can I carry you to our room? I need our supplies.”

I could only nod.

He whisked me out of the study, speeding through the castle to gently lay me on our bed. “I’m going to make it very warm in here for the babe.”

He cranked up the room's thermostat, then flipped on the space heaters.

I was already sweating. "I need some of these layers off." He helped me remove everything, then dressed me in a loose robe.

"Comfortable?"

"Not the word I'd use right now." Another contraction hit, the pain dizzying. The red witch was rising like a leviathan. I gasped out, "The witch is going crazy inside me. She might really hurt you." Arcana mate or not.

Had she fallen for Aric? Yes. But she was also *insane*.

"I understand." His demeanor was calm as he pulled his trunk of supplies to the foot of the bed beside the stool. Retrieving a stack of blankets and towels, he set them on the mattress. A tray of medical instruments joined it. All sitting at the ready.

For the first time, this pregnancy felt very, very real. I caught his gaze. "I'm scared."

"You've felled scores of villains, and your might has toppled empires. This will seem as nothing."

I remained unconvinced, especially when my next contraction hit. Tee seemed to be thrashing in my belly. "My God, it hurts! Amputating my bicep was easier to take than this."

Aric flinched at the reminder of that night and Ogen's attack. "We can do this together." He donned medical gloves. Frowning down at his hands, he pulled on another pair over the first. Then he positioned himself between my legs, readying to catch our son. "Let me see."

Biting my lip, I opened my legs.

"No need to time contractions. He is coming fast."

The words were like a lash to my anxiety. We'd passed the point of no return. Aric would have to deliver Tee. "We should have searched for a doctor, should have found someone." All at once, I was more afraid for Tee than I was even for Jack. My Cajun would pull through this scrape. He always did. But Tee . . . "You need to get Kentarch to teleport a doctor here!" I was being ridiculous, but I couldn't stop the words coming from my lips. "We don't have any experience with childbirth. Like you said, this is out of your wheelhouse."

"I *can* deliver this child." A total change had come over him, his bearing all *nobleman knight*. "I've studied, and I've prepared. I'm ready to do what I need to in order to keep my family safe."

“Why are you so confident now?”

“Because I recalled that I excel at everything I endeavor to do. And I’ve never been more motivated to excellence than I am now.”

I gasped. “My God, could you be any more arrogant?”

“No.”

He was decisive and convincing and everything I needed him to be. “Okay, okay.” I exhaled a breath. “That ends the panic portion of this labor. Guess it’s time to meet our kid.”

His lips curved. “With pleasure.”

But another threat loomed. With each grueling contraction, the witch roused even more. When I yelled from pain, plants and trees erupted from the ground all around the countryside. The castle shook. Snow plummeted from the roof, as if the structure were an animal shaking out its fur. Soon the snow outside the windows was displaced by creepy briar shoots coating the glass.

Aric glanced upward when dust rained from the ceiling. “Easy, love.”

“Easy?? Easy!” I bared my teeth at him, and the rose plant beside the bed shot higher, stalks forking out. They clung to the wall and ceiling, then dropped down to slither throughout the room.

Aric was surrounded. He glanced over his shoulder and back. “Just hold on, Evie. You *can* do this without the witch.”

I balled my fists, grappling to keep her leashed. “I don’t want to hurt you, but she’s so strong.”

His gaze kept flashing to my eyes. They must be green. My reddened hair was strewn with leaves. He told me again, “I will not fight you, so you have to control her.”

Each of those rose stalks had fattened until it was the size of a tree trunk. “I’m trying! But put on your armor just in case.”

“I’m not leaving this spot. We’ll be fine.”

“No, we won’t be! Why aren’t you listening to me?”

In a measured tone, he said, “Wait for the next contraction to push.”

Pain sliced through me, and those stalks lurched. One accidentally caught Aric and knocked him backward with the force of a car crash. He barreled into the crib.

I clambered upright. “Aric! Are you okay?”

I’d built that crib to last; he didn’t leave a mark on it. He picked himself up with a nod, his stoic expression in place. Which meant he could be

totally fine—or concealing a broken limb. On his way back to me, he held my gaze. “My fierce wife, your foes anger you at their peril.”

“Please leave me here. Just get yourself somewhere safe.”

“We’re close now.” Aric stiffly sat at the foot of the bed once more. “We can do this.” On my next contraction, he urged, “Now, *push* . . .”

I did, chin to my chest, gritting my teeth.

“You’re doing great.” He ran his sleeve over his forehead, and blood saturated his skin.

“Why’s there so much blood?” I cried. “Is Tee okay?”

“Everything’s fine. You two are doing amazing.”

Crimson smeared my thighs, wetting my skin and the bed. “No, you’re lying. Why is there so much blood? Something’s wrong!”

Under his breath, he murmured, “It’s mine.”

That stalk must’ve punctured his skin. “I’m so sorry! How bad is it?”

“Just a graze on my forearm.”

A *graze* wouldn’t bleed like that. “You’re not supposed to lie.”

“I’ll be fine.”

I’d hurt him, and Jack might already be infected with plague. My kid was probably going to be a Bagger. Sorrow seeped into me, and the pain amplified it.

Reading me so well, Aric said, “Don’t think about me—or anyone else. Just focus on what you’re doing.”

A stronger contraction hit, tearing a shriek from my lungs. My vision wavered, and suddenly I wondered if Tee and I were going to make it out of this alive. . . .

The Fool
Stix Temporary Lair

As the storm intensified, I glanced around at all the others inside our safe house.

I would separate from them once they became Wise. Over time, all of their descendants would be Wise. But not yet.

They always wanted me to talk to them. *Trying!* Every word changed the future. I witnessed it shifting as I spoke. Landscapes altered. Humankind transformed. Crushed. Rebuilt. Crushed.

With a word.

So, quiet.

So quiet.

When I did speak, Empress wouldn't listen. The sacrifice was not so very far away. Did she suspect what it must be? Carry the memory of a flower. Right now, she was busy.

Was it easier to leave home if you knew you would never return? I couldn't do it all. Fight the magic. Make the sacrifice. Couldn't do it all.

Do enough.

Will we sleep forever and ever at the end?

Death
Castle Lethe

“He’s crowning,” I told Evie as I attempted to keep the staggered wonder out of my tone. “We’re almost there. Bear down and push hard on the next contraction.”

I had put on a show of confidence because that was what she needed, but I felt adrift.

Too much awe, too little experience.

And in the end, I could affect this labor little. Her body knew what to do.

Afterward, I would assist. I’d delay cutting the cord until it had stopped pulsing, then wipe away the blood while leaving the vernix intact. We’d coax Tee to nurse as soon as possible, and the babe needed warmth and skin-to-skin contact.

“I’m so sorry for hurting you.” Evie was all but sobbing.

“It’s nothing.” Not a lie in the grand scheme of things. “Focus on your breathing.”

Her lungs heaved as her body writhed. Agony twisted her features, and her thorn claws shredded the sheets.

Until the next contraction. Then, her every muscle seemed to work in perfect concert to achieve one aim. With a throaty scream, she pushed hard past her anguish.

Our son slipped free into my gloved hands. He was . . .
Perfect.

His face scrunched up, and his cheeks turned red. His strong cry was as welcome as dawn.

“He’s crying,” she said between breaths. “That’s good, right?”

“Good. *Yes.*” I gazed down at this little being. And to my surprise, he gazed directly up at me with eyes that were the color of my own. “Greetings, son,” I said, my heart thunderstruck. “Evie, he’s so beautiful.”

Yet then I perceived a different sensation of heat. Through a new slice in my sleeve, his tiny foot had grazed my lacerated skin.

My lethal skin.

Gods, no! One touch was all it took. Even knowing it was too late, I switched the babe’s position, earning another fierce cry.

Too late. Always too late.

Evie weakly raised her head. “What’s happening, Aric? You’ve gone pale as a ghost.”

“Didn’t know . . . my sleeve.” Words choked in my throat. “Touched . . . I touched him.”

She shot up in bed and reached for the baby. “What?”

I handed him to her. “There’s nothing I can do. Nothing . . .” As I waited for the telltale forks of black to spread over his skin, all of my many victims flashed before my eyes. Their *pain*.

When our baby perished, I would join him.

Evie snatched up a towel to wipe him off, scanning his skin. “I don’t see anything.” She cradled him in her arms. “Aric, it would have happened by now.”

I didn’t dare breathe. One moment passed. Another. Could he be safe?

Her eyes went soft as she beheld the squawking babe. “He doesn’t look like a Bagger. I was so worried. I didn’t want to tell you how worried I was.”

The boy’s cries quieted as he nuzzled one of her breasts.

In all my years of killing, no victim had ever touched my skin then wanted *to eat*. Eyes gone wet, I said, “He’s hungry.”

She gave an exhausted laugh, cradling him to her, instinctively guiding him. “Who wouldn’t be after an adventure like that?” When he latched on, she said, “Wow. That’s it, little guy. Your first breakfast.”

Relief drained my body till I felt boneless. “I can touch our son.”

She gave me a tremulous smile as he began to nurse in earnest. “I knew it.”

Yet then a horrible thought occurred. *Because he's like me.*

The Hunter

In a daze, I stumbled out of the jail, light one arrow and likely plague-stricken. I pulled down my bandanna and inhaled deep of the frosty air.

If half of what Kos had told me was true, my view of the game, the apocalypse, and everything else had just been torpedoed.

I imagined what Domīnija would say if I related what I'd learned. He'd probably point out that Kos had been delirious. At best.

At worst, she'd been leading me into a trap. He would tell me that following the coordinates was folly. Even so, I itched to discover what she'd promised.

Joules marched across the green toward me, Gabe right behind him, gaze alert to any dangers. "What the hell, Cajun? Do you want to die in the worst possible way known to man?"

I shrugged. "I gathered intel before she passed. Understood the risk. You should back away now."

"Oh no, see, Kentarch said we were both exposed. Said we have to quarantine for two bloody weeks in this Devil-worshippin' madhouse!"

I asked Gabe, "What are you doing here?"

"If Patrick quarantines, so do I. Plus, I will help clean the fort and sanitize it."

Two weeks before I could get on with the mission. *If I live.*

"Oi, did you learn anything worth your life?"

This could get tricky. I needed to sit with Kos's bombshell a bit. Turning from them, I said over my shoulder, "Need to find a map."

Joules followed me. “What you need to do is to call the Reaper back. He’s been burning up the truck’s sat phone.”

Evie must be worried sick. I exhaled a guilty breath and reached in my pocket for my *porte-bonheur*. “I’ll smooth that over.”

“Little more than that, boyo. Seems you’re a godfather.”

The Empress

I shot awake in a panic. “Where is Tee?”

Aric turned from the window with a sleeping bundle in his arms. “Warm and safe.”

“I can’t believe I drifted off.” I dimly remembered Aric cutting the cord and cleaning all the blood away, then redressing me. “The Empress is supposed to be the literal poster woman for pregnancy.”

“You haven’t had a full night’s sleep in weeks.”

I took a mental inventory of my body: healed and regenerated. Then I recalled all the events of the night. “You were hurt! And Jack?”

“I’m fine, and Jack called a short while ago. He’s quarantining at the fort and wants to speak to you when you’re ready.”

“Did he give you any reason for that stunt?” The rose stalks in the room slithered with my anger.

“He said he had a good reason, but he wouldn’t enlighten me, not yet. He promised to call you at five.”

I glanced at the bedside clock. An hour from now. I’d deal with him then. In the meantime, Tee seized my attention once more. I held out my hands, and Aric handed over the swaddled baby.

Tee was dozing. He had tufts of blond hair, and his cheeks and lips were rosy. No trace of a Bagger.

I glanced up when winds gusted, rattling the castle’s shutters. “Circe thought his birth might bring about the renewal of the world.” She’d hoped the arrival of the first second-generation Arcana would usher in dawn breaking and a new beginning. Maybe I’d hoped too. Had Aric?

I feared those things would only return with *the end* of all but the last Arcana. Was Tee now damned to be among that number?

Aric canted his head. “I suppose that was never his purpose.”

“Does he have one?” Aside from protecting me from Paul?

“As yet to be revealed.” Aric sat beside me on the bed. “Lark came by while you were asleep. She dubbed him the Unclean One Junior and said he was kind of cute for a blob.”

I had to smile at that.

“When she removed herself from the study earlier, I was very impressed and I let her know that. Which seemed to please her to a great degree.”

“I’m glad you told her. She values your opinion more than anyone’s.” I’d bet she was thrilled.

“I don’t mind if she has Arcana instincts as long as she can control them around you and the babe. I now believe she will.”

“Oh, I see what’s going on. You figured out you couldn’t forgive me for past games and not forgive Lark as well?”

“My card *is* known for change and growth.” We shared a grin. “And yours is known for regeneration and abundance.”

The earth mother. “And wrath,” I said, pointing to the bandage peeking out from his sleeve.

“Of all the scenarios that might have happened tonight, a scratch on the arm is welcome.” Wolves could have eaten us; cannibals could have eaten Jack and Joules. Tee could have died from Aric’s touch. So, yeah, we’d take the win. “I intend to mend fences with Lark and do whatever I can to help her through her current troubles.”

Wow. This was huge.

“But we can’t let her hold the baby. He might have the Touch of Death.”

“You think that’s how he withstood yours?” I gazed down at Tee, and all I felt was optimism. “I don’t believe he does, but I’ll go along with caution if it makes you feel better.”

“Thank you.”

Aric and I sat together, marveling at every nuance of our kid, tracing his little hands and tiny toes. I said, “He couldn’t possibly be cuter.”

“Not possibly.”

“You lost your heart, huh?”

He raised his face to stare into my eyes. Deliberately misunderstanding me, he said, “Done for.” In a wry tone, he added, “And the child’s not so bad either.”

My lips curled. All the worry, all the strife, and now Tee was here in my arms. This little guy had already secured a piece of my divided heart for

himself. Protectiveness like I'd never known overwhelmed me. "Do you think he's healthy?"

"I do, love."

I did too. With a warm, welcome certainty, I murmured, "Aric, we're going to be okay."

"I shall make sure of it," he said with steel in his tone, reminding me that the game played on, and the rules said that only one of Tee's parents would get to live. At best—

The phone rang.

The Hunter

I called Evie early, needing to hear for myself that she and the baby were safe.

Gabe and Joules were holed up with me in some barracks that looked like they hadn't been slept in for a while. After stocking up on food, heating fuel, a pack of cards, and whiskey for me, we'd started our quarantine.

Kentarch and Sol would remain parked close to the fort, keeping watch for any stragglers that might show.

We'd already turned off the Pentacles' message offering medical care. Though I'd expected a large-scale infirmary, we'd found only a pitiful first-aid station for their private use.

Desperate folks had risked their lives to journey here for help that had never been coming.

We'd also found a garage stuffed with personal belongings that made the mountainous pile we'd found in the Hierophant's mine look meager. The Pentacles must have preyed on thousands of people.

Evie and Domīnija answered on the first ring, and she wasted no time: "What the hell, Jack?" She sounded pissed, but strong.

Relief hit me. "I could ask the same of you—having a baby? What's that all about?"

"We're both fine, by the way."

"So they told me, but I wanted to hear it from you." A little squawk sounded in the background, and I found myself smiling. "I can't wait to meet my godson."

“Oh, but you have to wait—because *quarantine*. Most sensible individuals go the other way when faced with bonebreak fever.”

“You didn’t.” I swigged my bottle, figuring the whiskey might disinfect me. Heh.

“That reminds me: I need to mix up a batch of poison for you. You can take it as soon as your eyes turn red.”

“Nothing’s goan to happen to me. So no worrying about ole Jack.”

“We’re dying to know what you were thinking. Not literally dying—not like you might be.”

I chuckled. “I might pray for the end after two weeks in close quarters with the Tower here.”

He grumbled, “Feck off, Cajun. And put it on speaker.”

When Gabe nodded too, I did.

Evie said, “Tell us what happened.”

“Kos, that woman, was the Knight of Swords. K.O.S. She was a soldier and freedom fighter.”

“Seriously?”

“Or she said she was,” Domīnija pointed out. “She was in the grip of delirium.”

If they didn’t even believe Kos was a Minor, they’d never buy the rest. Maybe I shouldn’t either. But it’d *felt* right. “True, but my gut told me she was legit. She said the Swords have a hangar stockpiled with weapons and supplies.” Her actual words: *Everything you’ll need to go out with a bang*. But I decided to soft-pedal this a bit. “We looked up the coordinates she gave me. It’s a couple hundred miles away.” Which might as well be a couple thousand. Already, the weather geared up again, winds howling around the bastions of the fort to rattle those bones outside.

When Joules grunted at my words, I gave him a look that said, *You got something better to do?*

Domīnija asked, “Where’s the rest of the suit then? And what are their powers?”

“She said if two Swords grasped hands, they could temporarily neutralize a Major Arcana’s abilities. Eight of them set out to battle the Emperor, the same freedom fighters that Sol allowed to get close.” He’d confirmed at least that part of Kos’s story. “But Zara caught them by surprise on the road and Richter bombed their camp before the Swords could even muster.”

Domīnija said, “With Kos’s demise, that would make nine Swords down. What happened to the remaining five?”

“The others journeyed to this fort to unite with the Pentacles.” But not against Richter that time. No, another Arcana had moved to the top spot on their target list. “When they realized the Pentacles were deranged, a battle broke out. The Swords had the disadvantage here and were captured. One by one, they succumbed to plague.”

Would Joules, Gabe, and I?

Domīnija asked, “Did she give you any more information about the game?”

“She said Richter had to be taken down.” Among others. “I didn’t get much out of her, only had a few moments with her before she died.” As she’d seized, she’d somehow kept her frenzied gaze on me, her blood-filled eyes asking, *Will you keep your promise?* Though I’d hankered to ask a thousand more questions, I . . . had.

Evie said, “I don’t trust anything that came out of that woman’s mouth. What if she lied about who she was? She could’ve overheard an actual Sword talking. Even if she was the real thing, we can’t trust Minors.”

I winced to hear Evie say that. Kos had told me not to trust the Empress either: *Of all the Major Arcana, the Empress is the most treacherous. Like Richter, she must not win—or the world will be lost.*

Evie continued, “We’ve encountered two confirmed suits, and both were crazed. Why would the Swords be any different? If you recall, Matthew warned me about the Minors.”

The Fool had said they were uniting to come after her. That had been the plan. *Kos: We came to this place because she killed the Cups.*

“Amen, Empress!” Joules cried. “Been telling our boyo this, but he won’t listen. Remember when you kept warning him that something was off with the Queen of Cups, but he was half in love with Lorraine anyway?”

“Me?” I scowled at him. “You were the one singing her praises. In Jubilee, I liked the bounties, *not* the politics—and not the Cups.”

Evie said, “My grandmother told me the Queen of Cups *and* the Knight of Swords were walking nightmares.”

But your grand-mère said a lot of things that weren’t right. “I know the ones we’ve encountered before have been evil—”

“Barmy across the board!”

“—but I believe that Kos was good. I vowed to her that I would journey to their lair. So if I beat this plague, that’s where I’m heading.” For more reasons than one.

Evie wasn’t having it. “It’s way too dangerous out on the road. And even if this Kos person was for real—a big stretch—those coordinates must have gotten muddled. She was so far gone, Jack.”

“I know, I know. But I have to do this. I’ve talked to the guys, and almost everybody is ready to make the journey.” I eyed Joules. “Over the next couple of weeks, I’ll be working on the Tower.”

When he flipped me off, I wondered if that finger ever got tired.

In a curt tone, Evie said, “Will you even stop by to meet Tee?”

“I told you I’d come running if you need me, but you doan. Not right now. So bond with junior and his dad.”

I heard Domīnija murmur something to her but didn’t catch the words. Her voice softened as she said, “This sounds important to you.”

Not just important. Critical. I would never rest until I discovered what those coordinates promised. This was the ultimate quest for a guy who’d dug at puzzles his entire life. “Text me a picture of Tee, and I’ll check back soon.”

“Okay, stay safe, Jack.”

“Hey, Evie?”

“Yeah?”

“Happy birthday, *peekôn*.”

The Empress

Jack had somehow remembered my birthday.

After I hung up, I told Aric, “I totally forgot. Wow, Tee and I share a birthday.” I gazed over at him snoozing in the crib.

“Which will make them easy to remember in the future.”

Will you be here for Tee’s first birthday? Will I?

Aric sat beside me on the bed and drew a felt-covered box from his pocket. “This can’t compete with what you gave us earlier”—Tee made a sweet baby sound in his sleep—“but perhaps it will bring another smile to your face.”

“You remembered too?” I opened it to find a beautiful golden locket with a rose filigree pattern. “A necklace?” He’d given me one in a past game, and it hadn’t gone over well. Why would he now?

Then I looked inside and saw a picture of Tee. While I’d slept, Aric had snapped and printed a photo of our son to place in this locket.

Eyes lively, Aric said, “I’ll put a lock of his hair in there once he has enough to spare.”

“I want a picture of you too.”

“As you wish.”

I pressed the gold against my cheek, warming it. “I will always keep you two close.”

“There’s something else.” He crossed to his closet and returned with a weighty book. “For you and for Tee.”

On the cover was a handwritten title.

DEATH XIII

CHRONICLES OF ARIC DOMĪNIJA, THE ENDLESS KNIGHT

My lips parted.

The Empress
Day 791 A.F.

Kneeling in the pantry with Lark, clipboard at the ready, I rubbed my hand over my nape with a frown. I swore I was picking up on another's presence in the castle.

But no one could have breached my green brigade outside. Over the last two months since Tee's birth, menacing briars continued to guard the castle.

"Something up?" Lark asked. She and I were inventorying supplies while Tee napped.

I often bundled him against me with a body-vine carrier, but today's work was dusty, so I'd put him down in his crib. Outside, Aric trained with Titan in the spotlit arena.

No one could have sneaked past him either. Still . . . "I don't know." Just to be safe, I checked in remotely with Tee's baby monitor: a soft leaf in his onesie. Through the monitor, I could sense if his heartbeat sped up.

Slow and steady. Still snoozing away. I pictured my chubby wittle guy snuggled in his Goth crib and found myself grinning. "It's all good." Was I overprotective? Yes. But nothing compared to Aric. He was hypervigilant of his mini-me.

Earlier I'd watched Death from the window as he ran his mount through its paces in the snow. Something about his demeanor was even more ruthless than usual. My armored knight worked to protect not only me and our home, but our child too.

Against a backdrop of a lightning-slivered sky, he'd been magnificent.

"What about this one?" I handed Lark a package of cornstarch.

She sniffed it, shrugged, and let it pass quality control. I marked it on my clipboard list.

“So Jack and the guys are closing in on Kos’s coordinates?”

I nodded. “He texted earlier today.” Having miraculously avoided the plague, they’d been out in the Ash for weeks, struggling against storms. My worry had been as nonstop as their journey.

What if they encountered Richter out on the road? Or more cannibals? Jack had texted that they saw signs of them everywhere.

In other words, picked-clean remains. “Can you imagine being out there right now? The earth couldn’t be more messed up.”

“At least adventuring out on a mission with friends would be exciting—sniffing out new territory and living by your wits. Being cooped up here is for the birds.”

I had to grin at her animal phrasing.

“Do you think the guys’ll find that hangar?”

“Maybe.” If it existed and if they located it, they might come across more information about the game—such as a clue about how to stop it.

Aric’s completed translation had failed to provide one. He hadn’t come out and told me he didn’t believe the game could be stopped, but we were running out of avenues to investigate.

“Hey, they might run into the Fool out there,” Lark said. “I mean, aren’t we supposed to converge?”

“Yeah. Unless Matthew doesn’t want to.” Possible. “I just wish I knew where he was.” Was he alone and scared? I hadn’t seen him in person in more than a year, not since we’d left Fort Arcana to save Selena from the Lovers. He’d been in such pain, reeling from his godlike abilities.

Aric and I had both tried to communicate with him, but he’d never answered, not even after Tee’s birth. We knew he still lived as of a few months ago, because Sol had confirmed that neither of his former allies wore Matthew’s icon.

I pictured the Fool’s symbol, a zero with a diagonal line through it. I’d have to wear it if I won this game. I shuddered.

Aric had sketched all twenty-two icons in his chronicles—a nonsense history of battles and strategy. Within those precisely handwritten pages, he’d downplayed his own heroics and explained away my betrayals.

One night, as we lay together in bed, he’d summed up his chronicles: “A record of a life too long, with too much bloodshed.”

“Don’t say that,” I’d whispered, knowing he’d completed them because he believed he would fall in this game. It was like a manual for how to win, written by the reigning victor. . . .

Lark snapped her beclawed fingers. “Earth to Evie?”

I blinked to attention. “Sorry. Woolgathering.”

She narrowed her gaze. “You’re not preggers again, are you?”

“What? Good God, no.”

“You and Death have been making up for lost time, though?”

Yes, we have. My face flushed. “No more kids for me and Aric.” Between the rhythm method and my breastfeeding, we figured we were covered for now.

“Smart. I love being an auntie, but it’s time for Mama to go back to work now, you know, killing evil Arcana like Richter.”

Since Tee’s birth, my powers had grown stronger every day. Yet so did the red witch—she seemed to be *readying* inside me to face the Emperor.

Even with Sol’s help, four possible outcomes awaited me from that battle. Richter would defeat me. I’d burn out and die. I’d destroy the world. Or I’d somehow rein in the witch.

Fresh from one of my continual nightmares, I’d finally remembered what the Queen of Cups had whispered to me: “*You’re just as evil as Richter—but at least he isn’t cunning. Your red reign will mark the end of humankind forever.*”

No wonder it’d taken me so long to reclaim that memory.

The red witch *was* cunning and evil; but freeing her—temporarily to protect my loved ones—didn’t mean she would replace me forever.

It *didn’t*.

“Mama’s back at the desk,” I told Lark. “Now we just need to find Richter again. Were you able to do any surveillance this morning?” The snow had briefly cleared, but it was even colder.

“Not a lot. Taka can’t get out ahead of the blizzards. Looks like you’re our eyes and ears for now.”

Despite Snowmageddon, my vines kept growing out from the castle, slithering across the icy surface for miles, a shadow mirror to my nightmares.

But they were handy. I picked up on any intruder—from a rare rat to a Bagger—giving us a PEWS array like never before.

“If you and Death would lay off the *no-resurrection* rules,” Lark said, “I’d revive some cold-hardy arctic wolves.” At my look, she raised her hands. “Kidding. Got no plans to rock the ark here.”

“Definitely not.” Aric had mended fences with her and was doing his best to draw her out of her depression. Tee helped with that as well. Though Lark couldn’t touch him, she had her baby animals put on shows for him. Like living stuffies. She loved spending time with him.

We all did.

Aric wanted to change every diaper, soothe every cry. He acted as if time spent with his son was an empty tank he intended to fill—a lifetime of interactions in a limited window.

Last night, I’d watched a movie with Lark. Returning to our room, I’d found Aric standing over the crib, a tear wetting his face as he beheld Tee sleeping. When he noticed me, Aric hadn’t wiped his face, hadn’t turned away. He’d just offered his hand.

I’d crossed to him and taken it.

“Look at our child, Evie,” he’d murmured. Tee had appeared surreal. Lips parted, lashes on his pinkened cheeks. “All our toils and troubles have meaning. It all led up to him.”

I didn’t know if I believed that. Sometimes I could buy that destiny was playing a part; other times not.

Mainly I just worried about what kind of world we’d brought Tee into. Would he never see the sun shining? Or kids at the playground? Would he never fall in love—

Lark bolted to her feet. “I scent something. Evie, it’s *in* the castle.”

Just as she said the words, I detected movement near Tee’s crib. My claws sharpened as I ran for the bedroom. Over my shoulder, I yelled, “Go get Aric!”

I tried to sense through the crib’s vines and attack . . . but they didn’t perceive a threat?

In the hallway, I spied water on the floor. Then another puddle. And another. All leading to our bedroom.

Wait—these weren’t puddles; wet footprints made a trail.

“Circe, are you here?” She must have hydroported to the castle. What if Tee did possess the Touch of Death? I sprinted for her, slipping in the water. “Don’t pick him up! Don’t touch him.” I lurched around the corner and burst through the doorway.

Circe was barefoot, wearing a baggy overcoat, her dark skin damp. Though she looked like she could hardly stand, she held a sleeping Tee, his cheek pressed against hers.

I hissed, "He might be lethal."

She raised her brows, her expression saying, *Like I'd care?* "There's no Touch of Death here."

"He's not deadly?"

She stroked his forehead. "And here I thought you were rushing to save *him* from *me*."

I gave her the look her comment deserved. "You're his godmother!"

"*Shhhhh*." The sound reminded me of gentle waves at the shore. "Don't wake him." She tilted her head at me. "Genuine distress? Such a change from previous games. Maybe in this one, you won't chain me up in a basement, in order to murder me at a more convenient time."

I rolled my eyes.

She cuddled Tee closer. "I'm so happy to meet this little imp." Though her words were faint, they carried an island accent.

"His birth didn't do as you'd hoped. Nothing changed."

She shrugged. "I was trying to make you feel better about things."

Aric sprinted into the room, spurs ringing, sword raised. He stopped short. "You're *touching* him."

Amusement flickered in her weary eyes. "Yes, he's a snuggly fellow." Tee was, in fact, blissfully snuggled in Circe's arms.

Aric exhaled a breath. "His power might manifest with adolescence, as mine did."

Circe said, "He has Arcana blood, but he's not an Arcana. I know this as well as I know my own reflection."

Then he wasn't any kind of player in the game. Tension melted from me.

Aric's eyes glowed as he stared at Tee. "He's not . . . as I am?"

"I heard you two talking about him not being able to touch anyone, and I refused to have my godson besmirched like that."

I narrowed my gaze. "Then you knew there was a possibility he could kill you."

"There was also the likelihood that he couldn't. We're always so afraid of rare possibilities that we ignore probabilities." When she swayed on her feet, my vines shot forward to collect Tee from her.

He snuffled, put out to leave Circe's arms, but the vines rocked him until he settled. As they laid him back in the crib, I hurried to her side to steady her.

Aric asked her, "What are you doing here, Priestess?"

Leaning against me, she said, "I left my echoing abyss."

The full weight of her presence hit me. Dear God, the Priestess had come to land.

The Hunter
Day 802 A.F.

Two militias, one raving-mad band of doomsday cannibals, and at least three hundred Bagmen later, we closed in on Kos's hideout.

Gabe's wings fluttered with excitement. "I earnestly hope we discover something here."

I clenched the steering wheel. "Me too." This place gave new meaning to the phrase *out in the middle of nowhere*.

Before her death, I'd asked Kos if there'd be any antipersonnel mines or other booby traps. She'd said, "No need. If you find the hangar, you deserve it. Door'll be unlocked."

Even Joules was excited. "Never thought we'd survive to see this place! Took us donkey's years to get here."

Just over two months. But as I'd reminded him whenever he complained: *We got nothing better to do*.

On the road, we'd shared details about our lives. Learning about the crew kept me from going crazy as I remained away from Evie and Tee.

Last week, I'd asked the guys, "What do you miss most about the pre-Flash world?"

"My home country," Sol had answered. "My parents used to take me to the Spanish seaside when I was a boy. I miss the smell of sand and salt water warmed by the sun. There's nothing like it."

Gabriel had said, "I miss blue skies. I never knew people called them bluebird skies. I like that very much."

"Of course you would, birdbrain," Joules said without any heat.

“It sounds heavenly. Do you think we will see another blue sky in our lifetimes?”

Even as I’d nodded and said, “You know it,” I was thinking, *We might not*. . . . I’d glanced over my shoulder at Joules. “What about you, Tower?”

“Me mam’s apple cake. I swear, *mother’s love* or something was in the damned recipe. You could feel it.” He’d seemed embarrassed that he’d shared so much. “Your turn, Tarch.”

Kentarch had answered, “The sound of my wife’s laughter.” Though he never smiled, his solemn expression had eased as he’d clearly recalled a memory. “She always gave herself up to it. I found it impossible not to laugh alongside her.” Difficult to imagine Kentarch laughing out loud.

He’d turned to me. “And you, hunter? What do you miss? Aside from the obvious.”

“I always wanted out of Louisiana. Now I miss everything about it.” But I didn’t just want the home I’d lost—I wanted Evie and Tee. It’d only gotten worse after she’d texted me a pic of her with the baby.

Once I’d recovered from the sight of the two of them—I think my heart lurched in my chest—I’d noticed two things. Tee would be the spitting image of his father. And Evie’s hair was turning red.

Didn’t know what that meant, me. Supposed we’d find out soon enough.

. . .

Now I eased along the slick road, flurries dancing with the wipers. “Kentarch, how’re we looking?”

“We are heading straight for the spot. I believe it’s near those mountains ahead.” He pointed to a pair of peaks in the distance.

We gradually closed in on those mountains, with our usual stop-and-go maneuverings through the snow—only for my hopes to sink when we arrived. The busted pavement ran straight into the side of a foothill at the base of the mountains. A blasted sign read: R O D E N S.

“Road ends?” Joules snorted. “I’ll say!”

“I don’t understand this.” Kentarch rechecked the navigation display. “We should go back to the last crossroads and come from a different angle.”

“Or maybe the Swords lady was barmy after all.”

Sol surveyed the area. “I sense no Bagmen.” In the past, he’d been able to meld with at least one or two wherever we’d driven. As Snowmageddon raged on, more had frozen, but I’d never let my guard down.

“The Swords might have rided their territory of them.” Gabe rolled down his window to smell the swirling wind. “No one is close, but a stray scent lingers nearby.” He inhaled deeply, then tensed. “It’s *gun oil*. I believe we need to go between those mountains.”

I parked the truck, all but shaking with anticipation. The Swords’ lair might be in a valley on the other side. “Let’s follow that scent.”

I was about to reach for my headlamp, but Kentarch said, “The snow is deep. We’ll need Sol.”

I nodded. “You got this, Sunny?”

He preened at his new nickname. “*No hay problema.*”

Joules had to say, “No problem? You told us that before the last avalanche.” We’d lived through a few of them.

“No time for sniping, people. Let’s move.” For better or worse, we’d soon solve this puzzle.

With Sol lighting—and melting—the way, we tromped up our new trail.

“Colossal waste of time,” Joules grumbled. “I’m telling you, we can’t trust a Minor.”

We rounded a corner, and a sheer rise greeted us, blocking our way. I hadn’t expected that. “Gabe, can you fly up and scout?”

His eagle-eyed vision was already scanning the rise. “I don’t need to.” He strode past us, heading for the sheer rock wall. Then he disappeared *into* it. From the other side, he called, “It’s an optical illusion.”

I hurried after him, breaths puffing. Up this close, I saw that the two mountain bases met at overlapping angles, making them look like they were joined. Yet a small crack of a couple of feet existed between them.

Sol, Joules, and Kentarch followed me.

On the other side, the air felt several degrees warmer, the snow only a foot or so thick. I turned to Sol. “Shine on, podna.”

With a glowing smile, he did, illuminating a flat area that stretched out between not two, but four peaks. The expanse was the size of a football field, and in the center stood an enormous structure that looked like . . . a hangar. A light flickered from the door.

“This, my lads, is a trap.” Joules twirled a javelin. “And we’re already in it.”

Over my shoulder, I said, “Then it woan matter if we head in deeper.”

The Empress

“If you kill me in my sleep, it was still worth it,” Circe told me as she settled into the bed Aric had moved into the pool room.

“I don’t have any plans to kill you,” I said, adding in a foreboding tone, “At least not *tonight*.”

“Too soon, Evie Domīnija. Too soon.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

After the Priestess had showered, changed into some of my clothes, and eaten a hearty meal, I’d shown her to a guest room, but she’d said, “I’d prefer to be in the pool room, if possible. I don’t want to be a houseguest who makes demands, but in this case”—her gaze had darted in Lark’s direction—“it will ease my mind.”

I’d assured her, “No one here will hurt you.”

Sad smile. “We’ll all hurt each other before the end. That’s the way it’s always been.”

Though Aric was concerned about the energy expenditure, I’d convinced him to turn on the pool heater again and bring in additional space heaters. The glass that made up one wall was well insulated, but it would be chilly down here without the extra heat.

Nothing could get in the way of Circe’s healing.

Now I sat beside her on her bed. “Do you need anything else?” The clothes I’d lent her were way too big. She must’ve lost thirty pounds since I’d last seen her.

She shook her head. “Did you know this pool is salt water? And, oh, the bed is so soft. Death was chivalrous to move it for me.”

Before the river outside the castle had frozen, she'd communed with it, and I'd enjoyed sitting on the bank to visit her. Now she was right here beside me. "I didn't think you'd come." Surfacing had always spelled her doom.

"I told you emerging from the deep might be my only hope in this game. I had no choice. To reach my temple, I become one with the ocean, but it no longer has life, which means I have no life there."

Communing with an element cut both ways, an Arcana power side effect that she and I both contended with. I felt injuries through any plant life I created, and when Circe controlled a body of water, she experienced everything each droplet experienced.

She continued, "The mysteries have drowned. Currents still whisper, but they speak a language I don't comprehend."

I didn't really understand what she was describing, so I just listened.

"I left my trident and temple." Her voice dropped lower. "I will never see them again in this lifetime, can never return to that form." She glanced up at me, seeming surprised she'd revealed so much.

I was pretty sure Circe had grown tentacles for legs down in her abyss. Now she only had scales on her arms and her elbow fins. I'd bet they would enthrall Tee. "Then why not come to us right after we'd defeated Paul? You've obviously been suffering for some time." I just wanted to cook for her, getting nourishment into her depleted body. Then hug her for days.

"I was too weakened." She stared at the pool, guilt welling in her luminous fawn-colored eyes. "I didn't intend to swamp an entire coastline. I could just as easily have killed you as saved you."

"But you didn't kill us. We're here because of you."

She met my gaze. "Decent people made their home in Jubilee. That settlement had horrible faults, but it was the best one I'd seen in all my watercourse wanderings."

Calanthe's chronicles had said that guilt could only fell the truly good. My heart hurt for Circe.

Making her tone brisk, she changed the subject. "Do you remember any of the times when I first came to land?"

"No. I don't remember much about previous games. I keep waiting for more revelations." Matthew had told me he'd given me my memories from two games, accessible through dreams. My nightmares left little room for mere dreams.

“Maybe you don’t want to remember. Your past might punish you.”

I believed this.

A wolf gave an eerie howl outside. Lark had declined to welcome our new guest in the flesh, saying, “When Poseida occupied the river, she ate my tiger and snarked on Finn’s talents as a Magician. Why would I give her the time of day?”

Circe gazed out at the night. “You court fire with Fauna.”

“We already court fire with the Emperor.”

“Unless your Jack lures him away. Isn’t that their plan?”

He and his crew were closing in on the Swords’ stronghold. Talking to Circe helped distract me. “It’s their *hope*. But I’m beginning to believe the Emperor will come here.” Sol had confirmed Richter’s sick interest in me.

If my powers equaled the Emperor’s, or Circe’s, I could defend our home.

If.

Circe said, “I was surprised you let Jack walk away after the Hanged Man’s demise.”

“It made sense at the time. I’m still in love with him—and with Aric.” I fiddled with my ring.

She sighed. “You never loved in your past lives. It figures that in this one, you’d be a glutton for love.”

I could deny nothing.

“We’ll talk more about this tomorrow.” Circe’s eyes grew heavy-lidded, and she looked like she’d stifled a yawn. “I’ll be up early to visit with my godson, so plan accordingly. Speaking of which, is it not time to feed him?”

I’d started pumping and using bottles alongside breastfeeding, just in case something happened to me. “Why are you so protective of him? He didn’t usher in the sun or a new age.”

“Though I don’t like you, I do like Death, and Tee is his son. Besides, I’m aware that in all these centuries, a child between two Arcana has never been. It makes this game unique.”

“So does the apocalypse.”

“True.”

With a sudden insight, I said, “I believe you resent being cursed by the gods.” Like Aric did. “They might not have wanted this child to be born, and you want to thwart them.”

She inclined her head. “I’ve long been a devout follower of all things Arcana—a Priestess, even. I could forgive the gods for cursing us, but not for cursing the world.”

“With a tilted stage. Sol told Jack that he sensed the sun still rising and setting every day, but *dark magics* corrupt it.”

She nodded. “As with my currents. As with Lark’s unfruitful animals and your lifeless soil. I sense those magics too.”

For some reason, talk of curses and magics made me uncomfortable—which led me to believe we were on to something. “So how do we remove their curse on the world? Mount a rebellion? Out in the Ash, Kentarch told me that we needed to fight the gods instead of each other and take control of the deck.”

Circe gave a weak laugh. “Of course, you believe *we* can defeat *deities*. I’ve often joked about how highly you think of yourself.” Growing serious, she said, “Still, the fact remains that your powers are vast. You are as unfathomable as the Fool is.”

She’d once told me that Mother Earth had powers of birth and rebirth that we couldn’t know. “Unfathomable. That’s exactly how I would describe the red witch in me.”

“We both have our witches, it seems.” Though Circe was a legitimate spellcaster.

I let drop the subject of the game and any curse until she felt better. “I always thought witches got a raw deal. All they wanted was to be left alone to practice their craft.”

She looked pleased with me, her lips curving. “And if it harms none, do as thou wilt.”

I smiled back. “In one game, men tried to burn me at the stake. A *wooden* stake. Needless to say, it didn’t take.”

Her smile widened. “That anecdote was funnier the first time you told me. Back then . . .” Her expression hardened, the moment of bonding over. “Run along and feed my godson. If I die before I wake, I’ll come back to haunt you in the next game.”

I sighed. “It’s a date. . . .”

Returning to our room, I found Aric holding a sleeping Tee. I gave them both a kiss in greeting. “Circe is very thankful to be here.”

“Hmm. Giving to her means taking resources from this one.”

“We either figure out how to end this game—and Snowmageddon—or we’re doomed anyway.”

I expected him to pull another card from his pocket, a new idea for our survival. Instead, he said, “I don’t disagree.”

Now that I’d given birth, Aric had stopped shielding me from bad news. Sometimes I wished we were back in those *buffer Evie* days.

He lowered his voice. “Perhaps we don’t need Circe here or anywhere near this place for any reason. She destroyed an entire settlement.”

“Accidentally! And she only lost control because she was trying to save me and Jack.”

“Lost control of her powers? Or her appetites?”

“You think the heat of battle overwhelmed her? You told me she’d garnered a lot of self-restraint over the games.”

In a measured tone, he said, “She has. But the Priestess’s gifts will always be dark among the Arcana. She is an uneasy mix of sea witch and sea monster.”

The monsters will keep coming—invited into our pool house?

With a challenging lift of his brow, Aric added, “You know this. You’ve seen the inside of her temple.”

When I’d spied depictions of tidal waves engulfing ports and monsters devouring ships, I’d asked Circe if she’d controlled the monsters.

I averted my gaze from Aric as I remembered her answer:

Of course not, Empress. I was the monster. The terror from the abyss.

The Hunter

The door to the hangar opened with ease. I flicked on the indoor lights, revealing a lair to end all lairs.

As we slipped inside, Sol breathed, “*Ay, fíjate*. Whoa.”

Joules glared. “Too good to be true.”

For once, I had to agree. Everywhere I looked, the view was better than the last. A kitchen along one wall had gleaming countertops and modern appliances. Across the cavernous space was an indoor basketball court and gym. In the living area, couches beckoned us to sit in front of a big-screen TV, and a jukebox switched on automatically to play a golden oldie.

We headed into a hallway that led to bunkrooms, a communal bathroom, an office, a massive library, and an oversize stockroom.

Kentarch’s gaze roamed over the food stores. “This would keep us for years.”

“Years,” I echoed in amazement, almost licking my lips at all the boxes and the full freezers.

We secured each room, then returned to the office. Inside were a computer, filing cabinets, and a ham-radio station. A plaque above the station read:

SALUTE TO ALL THOSE WHO BUILD AND FORTIFY.
TO ALL THOSE WHO LEARN AND LEAD.
TO ALL THOSE WHO RIGHT THE WRONGS.
YOU SHALL KNOW YOUR PLACE AMONG THE SWORDS.

A sense of recognition hit me. A sense of pride. . . .

Pictures lined the walls. I closed in on the largest one, a captioned photo of thirteen adults, each holding a different weapon—a sword, nunchuks, an automatic rifle, even a rocket launcher.

The suit of Swords.

One woman, fourth from the right, caught my eye. Dressed in a Navy Seal uniform, she had a thick braid, muscles, a cocky smile, and a resemblance to the plague-ridden woman in the Pentacles' cell.

The caption listed her as the K.O.S., the Knight of Swords.

So she'd been legit, the actual Knight of Swords. And apparently, she'd been a badass.

I beckoned Joules over. "Meet Kos." I gave him a *how you like me now?* look.

Still, I shouldn't celebrate yet. In the Arcana game, a find like this hangar usually spelled trouble.

"We're not in the clear, Cajun. There's more to secure."

Only one door was left at the end of the hall, but he was right. "Let's go."

"I'll stay behind." Joules dug through a filing cabinet. "Sniff around here some."

"All right. Stay sharp."

"Me javelins always are."

Dieu aide-moi. The rest of us headed to the remaining door. It led to a stairwell, so down we went—into an area that slackened my jaw. "Kos didn't overplay her hand."

Crates of weapons and ammunition were stacked with military precision, each group labeled. Racks of shining guns stood ready for action. We found tactical riot gear and comms equipment so high-tech they made Death's look outdated.

Sol turned in a circle, beaming. "Our new lair is apocalypse-proof—and Batman-approved."

Kentarch slid me a look of respect, but I hadn't done this alone. We'd all fought to make it here.

Gabe inhaled deeply. "I don't scent anyone."

"Let's separate and clear the area just in case." As we explored, I realized this hangar must be heated geothermally. The floors were warm,

the air downright toasty. I also found valves for underground fuel tanks. All full.

I called, "Clear."

The guys echoed the word from every corner. Even Joules would have to say no strings were attached.

When we met back at the stairs, Kentarch said, "I found four antiaircraft rocket launchers that are reloadable and self-cooling—so advanced they weren't available to most military. There are crates of munitions. If we have to hit Fortune and the Emperor a hundred times each, those would do it."

Sol punched my shoulder. "Not bad for a little road trip. Looks like the hunter is outfitted to change the course of the world."

"*We* will change it," I corrected. "I say we divert half of those rockets to the castle, prepping both here and there for war." Domīnija had wanted a bolt-hole. We could finally give him that.

Sol said, "If we brought in fertile dirt and seeds, I could grow crops in that windless valley." He'd need to practice with his powers every day anyway. "We could maintain a goat or a cow from the castle."

"Fresh milk?" Gabe's eyes brightened, his appetite as strong as ever.

All my misgivings about the other things Kos had told me faded away. "I'll call the Reaper, let him know—"

"Oi." Joules stomped down the stairs. "Hold off on your victory lap, Cajun. Seems you weren't tellin' us everything."

Merde.

"Like the fact that you're a feckin' Minor!"

Double merde.

"You forgot to tell us the Swords had been searchin' for their missing Page Card!" He marched up to me and waved a piece of paper in my face.

It was titled *Page of Swords Potentials* and had a list of ten names. Right at the top: *Jackson Daniel Deveaux, the Cajun General.*

Someone had written in the margins: *Built Fort Arcana. Seized command of the Azey. Presumed KIA in Emperor strike.*

Before I could skim more than a couple of the other names, Joules yanked away the paper and showed it to the guys. Sol frowned. Kentarch remained cool. Gabe tilted his head, hawklike.

"Where'd you find that?" I asked.

"A lot of records in that office. Grand reading."

Sol looked disappointed in me. “I thought we were all allies now. Why didn’t you tell us you might be a demigod?”

“We’re not . . . *they’re* not . . . Minors aren’t demigods. And I didn’t tell you ’cause you all kept yammering about not trusting them. Not a great time to be revealing that I might be one.”

“Might?” Kentarch said. “You didn’t see Kos’s tableau?”

“Minors doan have them. The only way for a Sword to confirm another was through touch, and I couldn’t take her hand.” I’d been tempted to, but she had refused: *I’d rather you be alive and active in the fight than sure and dead.*

Gabe asked, “Are you related to Kos? The Cups were blood-related, and the Pentacles looked as if they were as well.”

I shook my head. “The Swords weren’t kin. They sought out each other based on certain characteristics.”

Joules crossed his arms over his chest. “This I have to hear.”

Biting back my frustration, I said, “According to Kos, all of the Minors survived the Flash, either because they prepared, or because fate stepped in. So the Swords were looking for someone still kicking. He or she would be a leader of the people, and like the Chariot, they’d be talented with weapons. That’s one of the Swords’ powers.”

Kentarch’s brows drew together. “That leaves a lot of potentials.”

Words dragged out of me, I said, “Swords also like to build strongholds, centers of order.”

“Like a fort!” Joules said in an *ah-ha* tone. “Fort Arcana.”

“Kos thought I was the page, but other Swords had different opinions. There are nine other names on that list.”

“Your feckin’ name is *Jack*, also known as a *knave*, also known as a *page*. Admit it—something was driving you to find her and then this place.”

The Lovers had called me their *knave*. Had they somehow sensed it? “Maybe there was. But I meant what I said in the avalanche. I was also driven because we had nowhere else to go. We never could have built a place like this in Louisiana, not in this weather.”

Gabe said, “All the confirmed Swords are dead. Does this mean you will never know for certain?”

My stomach clenched. “Never.” My own identity was a puzzle that would go unsolved—for the rest of my life.

Yet some things made me believe it. When I'd first met Domīnija in person, he'd told me more than once that something wasn't right about me. And what if my dizziness in Paul's sphere wasn't due to hunger alone? I might've been sensitive to an Arcana's power. "Kos had been on her way to verify me when Richter struck. She figured I'd been killed."

Joules said, "You have to tell the Reaper this. It's clear he's got big plans for you and his family. Bet those plans'll change when he finds out what you are. After all, Minors now hurt Majors and vice versa."

"The Swords wanted to take out Richter, *ouais*, but who doesn't? They feared he'd destroy the earth. Domīnija knows I'm in love with Evie. I'd die before I ever hurt her."

With a carnival sneer, Joules pulled out another piece of paper from his jacket. "It's true the Swords meant to grease the Emperor, but they'd identified a bigger threat. Boyo, your lass was target number one."

Though Kos had said as much, I snatched the page from Joules and found a transcription of a radio call from the King of Pentacles. That *fil de putain* had blamed Evie for the premeditated murder of fourteen Cups and the "wanton destruction" of an entire settlement of innocent people. He'd also stated that the Empress and her allies would be coming for the rest of the Minors to destroy them as well.

I glowered at Joules. "Of course the Swords marched out to act based on intel like this. Their job was to protect humans from Arcana."

Sol asked, "How can we ever know if your suit was decent or not?"

Joules raised his chin. "Canna. Dead men tell no tales."

I narrowed my eyes and gazed up toward the bunkroom. "Doan they . . . ?"



Later that night, we sat down to a dinner sourced from the hangar's stockroom. Though we were glad to be eating something other than MREs, the mood was somber.

I'd called Domīnija and Evie to come clean about everything, but she'd been napping with Tee. The Reaper had been coolly collected as he'd asked me questions I couldn't answer.

Do you feel like you are a Sword? Do you think the game steered you along your path? Will another potential Page of Swords target the Empress?

But in the end, he'd said, "The hangar is a win. Good show, mortal."

We'd arranged for Kentarch to go to the castle tomorrow to swap out supplies. Domīnija had offered us fresh food, seeds, and livestock. We would send rockets and launchers.

After that call, the guys and I had investigated the Swords' lockers to see what kind of people they were. We'd learned about them through everything from personal letters to highlighted passages in philosophy books to video diaries. Our conclusion? The Swords had been good people who'd given their lives to a cause they believed in.

Saving the world.

Even Joules had been convinced.

Here in this hangar, the Swords had trained and studied and strategized together, and then they'd left to go do battle—and to die.

I couldn't help but feel like history would repeat itself for any people who made this place their home.

Yet the more I'd learned about the Swords, the less I felt like one. These had been exceptional people—scholars, doctors, architects, engineers. I'd never even graduated from high school!

While they'd remained altruistic, my thoughts and instincts had gone really dark, really quick after the apocalypse. I'd given Evie grief when she'd waved at strangers out in the Ash, telling her *live people* were the worst kind.

Not so with the Swords. As the earth cratered, they'd just worked harder to help others.

Afterward, none of the guys felt like talking much, the high of the hangar discovery dampened. We sat at the table where the Swords had eaten, each lost in thought.

"The mission," Kentarch suddenly said, his words like a bomb blast in the quiet, "is *everything*."

The Empress
Day 806 A.F.

“I’m going to train,” Aric abruptly announced from his desk. He’d been analyzing ration and fuel reports while I played with Tee in front of the fireplace. With a glance up at the clock on the wall, he rose. “Jack is calling in five minutes.”

“Huh?” It’d been four days since I’d learned he might be a Sword. Jack had told Aric they were slammed going through all the hangar’s records and settling in, so I’d given him space, even though I’d yearned to talk to him about this new development.

“He has a computer set up for a video call.” Aric kissed my forehead, then Tee’s. “You can connect via my laptop.” And with that he left us.

I watched him walking away, knowing how difficult this must be for him. *Hey, Reaper, time for your wife to talk to the other guy she loves.*

The call rang moments later. Nervous about seeing Jack after so long, I scooped up Tee and rushed to answer.

Jack’s heart-stopping smile on the screen made my cheeks flush. Sol must be shining away, because Jack was as tan as he’d been in high school, his gray eyes vivid. When I regained my equilibrium, I said, “Well, well, the Cajunland player. You look amazing.”

He grinned. “I let Sol cut my hair and style me with some of the clothes here. Glad you approve. And look at you.” His gaze darkened hungrily as he said, “Um, um, *um*, Evangeline, never knew I had a thing for redheads.”

My cheeks grew flushed from his tone. Not everyone had been a fan of the red strands that kept appearing. Lark cast my hair wary glances, while

Circe just sighed.

“Lemme see this kid I keep hearing about.”

I held Tee up to stand in my lap. “Can you believe he’s almost three months old?” The castle of lost time was living up to its name.

“*Bonjour, p’tee garçon!*” He smiled at Tee, the skin around his eyes crinkling. “I’m your godfather, little podna.”

Tee stared at him with fascination. Then he bounced up and down on his chubby legs, showing his excitement.

Jack laughed as if he’d done backflips off a high dive.

I gave Tee a teether to play with, and he happily leaned back to chew and listen.

“From the photos you sent, I thought he was a dead ringer for Death, but I see some of you in there too. How’s Domīnija doing with all this?”

“Enjoying fatherhood in what he believes is his limited time left.” I could all but feel another strand of hair turning red at the thought.

Earlier today, the weather had relented, so I’d bundled up Tee to play in the snow while Aric rode. He’d lifted his son into his arms atop the horse, making Tee laugh with delight, while I’d snapped photos like a pre-Flash mom.

Something new I’d learned about Aric: he was self-conscious about having his “likeness taken.” The moment had turned bittersweet for two reasons. One, Aric had stoically allowed pictures of himself because he wanted me to have mementos of him. And two, I’d realized I would need a lifetime to learn everything about my husband.

“How are you, *peekôn?*”

Honestly? “A little less apocalyptic now that I’m talking to you.”

“I heard you got a new houseguest. What’s it like with Circe there?”

“I feel better knowing that she’s here with us and safe. And she’s already recovering some.” As if to illustrate, a loud splash sounded from the pool room. “She’s going to work on a memory spell for the next game.” If Jack was a Minor, would he reincarnate for a future contest? No one knew. “We’ll be treated to actual witchcraft around here. She might even include *me* in the spell.” Progress!

“Never dull, is it?”

I had to smile. “Not for long. So how are the guys doing?” I asked, skirting around the subject of Jack’s new discovery.

“I’m learning a lot about this crew. Sol misses Spanish beaches. Gabe watched his first movie last night—*The Terminator*—and his wings fluttered with tension the whole time. Joules grieves his big family back in Ireland just as much as he grieves Calanthe.”

“And I know what Kentarch grieves. It hasn’t lessened at all, has it?”

“It woan.”

“No,” I softly agreed. “It won’t.”

“But life’s as good as we can expect here. Sol’s already growing grain to feed us and the livestock you guys sent. And yesterday he unfroze a nearby lake and warmed the water so much that we took a quick swim.”

“No way. That must’ve been like a dream.”

“With the Bagger King on our side, we had no worries about one snagging us from the deep. First time I took a voluntary dip since you and I played in that pool.”

I remembered him taking my hand and leading me into Selena’s temporary house. *We are home, Evie Greene!* “That night feels like a lifetime ago.” We both fell quiet as we went awash in memories.

In time, Jack said, “So . . .” He pointed to my hair. “New mom ’do?”

“I’m feeling the red witch more and more. Like she’s readying for a fight.”

“Back in Jubilee, you said you feared what would happen if you faced off against Richter.”

“I did—and I do—but I’m starting to fear more what will happen if she *doesn’t* fight him.” Maybe I had my own one-way-ticket scenario. “Yet Aric’s planning to die in this game and give me and Tee to you, like he’d planned to award you his castle. He keeps acting like it’s olden times.” *Take care of my family.*

“He is an olden kind of guy.”

I sighed. “He is that. Have you two talked about this more?”

Jack shrugged. “We’re at war. Soldiers fall. He’s making contingencies.”

Always with the contingencies. The Chariot had made two supply runs in the last few days, preparing us to ride out a nuclear winter—and defend ourselves—at both sites.

Upon meeting Lark, Circe, and Tee, Kentarch had been polite but restrained, and he’d been eager to return to the hangar.

Aric hadn't invited any other Arcana here, not that Joules wanted to come. Yet Sol did. The history grad student had heard from Gabe about all the treasures Aric had amassed in his immortal life, and the Sun burned to see them.

But Aric had reminded me, "I was wearing my armor when Sol used his power against me, and still I sensed the potential devastation of his rays. At close quarters, he could take any of us down in seconds. . . ."

I told Jack, "I believe Richter's going to come here. I got away from him once, and I escaped Zara before she stole my luck. They won't let me out of their crosshairs again."

"Doan disagree. And they woan need the calls to find you guys. Kentarch told me there are vines all around the castle now. Zara will spot you on a flyby sooner or later, if her luck holds. And I reckon it will."

"I thought about retracting the vines, but with this weather, Lark can't do a whole lot of surveillance. Sometimes those vines are our only PEWS."

Jack's lips curved. "More evidence you listened to me a time or two, huh?"

I returned his grin. "On occasion." Yet then I narrowed my gaze as a thought occurred. "You and Aric are way ahead of me, aren't you? You're already planning for the showdown to happen here."

"I suspect the castle's goan to be our field of battle. I hope it is. If Sol melted the river there, Circe could be an asset. Lark's got nine giant wolves, and you've got all your vines growing. Richter's goan to step in it, if he's not careful."

Sadly, we still had Fortune to deal with too. The subject was exhausting, so I changed it for now. "You've been busy, huh? How does it feel knowing you might be a Minor?"

"I go back and forth on believing it might be true. I'm landing more on *not*. Matthew said that I wasn't an Arcana, and I still feel like ole Jack Deveaux. I got no superpowers or miraculous skills, so to hell with it." He ran his fingers through his hair. My Jack didn't like things unsaid or unknown.

"I heard the Swords weren't fans of mine." Aric had told me I'd been on their hit list, just as Matthew had warned.

"They got led astray when it came to you."

"You remember what I told you about my bottomless well of rage? I *am* a threat to the world. The Swords were right."

“You are good, Evangeline, down to your soul. I will always believe that.” He was so vehement that I almost believed it too.

Almost. “Who had the Swords favored to win?”

Jack hesitated, then admitted, “Death.”

A wise choice. Maybe we should heed them. I didn’t want Aric to be burdened with more immortality, but I also didn’t want to destroy the planet.

Jack asked me, “How do *you* feel knowing I might be a Minor?”

I adjusted Tee in my lap and debated how to describe my fears. “I worried that you might have been drawn to me because of the game. After all, you’ve been thrown in my path repeatedly, ever since we got paired up for that history project.”

“Thrown? Ah, Evie, I’ve been seeking you out any which way I could.”

“Then how did we find each other out in the Ash?”

“We were both heading down the only cleared road, toward the sole rumor of food in the area. When so few of us are left, we’re goan to run into each other.”

I wasn’t convinced. “I guess I worry your feelings were, I don’t know, manufactured or something.”

“I wondered about that for a nanosecond. Then I pulled out my trusty cell phone and scrolled to my favorite picture, one of you watching a sunset at the Gulf. As I looked at that pic, I knew two things. I’m in love with you—game or not, Minor or not—and more, you’re in love with me. I doan think the game likes that, any more than it likes you and Domīnija in love with each other. You and I feel this way *despite* the strength of the game, which makes our bond even more unexpected.”

He had a point, as compelling as ever. I missed him so badly, couldn’t stand this separation. I’d comprehended that I would always feel incomplete without both him and Aric in my life, but I hadn’t yet accepted that fact. “Then why won’t you come visit us on Kentarch’s next run? Not seeing you weighs on me.”

He scrubbed a hand over his mouth. “I would be the interloper there.”

“I wish you wouldn’t look at it that way.”

He parted his lips to say something, then seemed to think better of it.

“Tell me, Jack. Please don’t hold back.”

After a hesitation, he said, “On the way to Jubilee, I asked Kentarch what he would do if he found Issa and she was pregnant by someone else.

I'll never forget what he said: "Our connection is so strong that I would become a father—just by virtue of her becoming a mother." Jack exhaled a breath. "*That.*"

My breaths shallowed from emotion.

"The fact is, I want another man's family for my own. That makes me hate Domīnija a little, and I doan want to do that. Besides, I made myself leave you twice before; doan know if I got it in me again. Woman, I've got to feel you with my every step. I've got to feel you at every second."

We stared at each other as if we were together with only a foot between us—not separated by hundreds of miles of wasteland.

He'd told me his secret thoughts; could I share my own? *I'm scared of what I'm becoming. I need you with me. I need you and Aric.*

I'm beginning to think I might not make it out of this game alive.

Tee fussed, breaking the moment.

Jack cleared his throat and asked, "Does he need a change?"

I checked Tee's diaper. "Yes, as a matter of fact. How would you know that?"

"I have a little experience, me. Back in the day, Clotile had younger half siblings she was expected to take care of, but she was just a kid, so I used to help out."

You were just a kid too. Hell, in this life, *I* was just a kid. "You can rebuild a motorcycle *and* change a diaper? Ladies, take note."

"Doan forget I can cook too. Which makes one of us."

I stuck my tongue out at him, then said, "Be right back." I took Tee to a changing pad, did a quick change, then returned to the computer.

Clean and dry, Tee turned his attention to snuggles. He yawned and curled up against me, holding my sweater with his pudgy little hands. Despite all his best efforts, he started to nod off.

Jack grinned. "*Au dodo, mon biquet.*" To bed, my lamb.

As Tee drifted off, I caught myself smiling down at him with adoration, then glanced up quickly.

Jack rubbed his chest, as if the feeling inside him was too much to bear. "Ah, hell, Evangeline, it ain't ever goan to be easy with you, is it?"

I gave him a sad smile, remembering all the times he'd asked me that. My answer never varied. "Nope."

The Empress

Later that night after Aric and I had quietly made love, he tucked me against his chest as Tee slept on in his crib. Logs crackled in the fireplace, the flames casting a cozy light over the room. Sweet, slow moments still happened after the apocalypse.

Aric's drowsy voice rumbled at my ear: "I can't help but feel I was just rewarded for arranging that call."

I nipped his tattooed chest.

"I can tell you're more relaxed now that Jack is safe." He threaded his fingers through my hair.

"I am. And it meant so much to talk to him like that. Thank you for being so understanding." Not many husbands would facilitate their wife's relationship with another man. Of course, not many husbands believed they would be burned to a cinder in the near future.

I briefly closed my eyes, forever aware of the stakes.

"Each time I've spoken to the hangar crew, I've noticed the Sun begins most sentences with 'Jack says' or 'Jack thinks.' I believe he's infatuated with him."

Sol must've caught a bad case of hero worship during his time on the road with Jack. *Happens to the best of us.*

Under his breath, Aric added, "Is there anyone who doesn't fall for Jack Deveaux?"

What to say to that? "Aww, did Joules go and lose his heart too?"

Aric's lips curled. "How does Jack feel about potentially being a Minor?"

“He’s not sold on the idea. I can’t decide either. Do you believe he is?”

“The characteristics of the Swords apply to him, and historically, the Page of Swords has been considered an emissary between separate camps. That fits his own history in this game as well.”

“Does it change how you view him?”

“I am so conditioned to distrust other Arcana that suspicion is my first impulse.” Having read Aric’s chronicles, I understood why. “And I wonder if Minors have instincts like we do, uncontrollable instincts. Yet I still trust Jack completely. I feel he’s earned that right.”

“Good.”

“In any case, the hangar is a remarkable find. We’ll need a place to keep Tee safe if Richter attacks.”

Richter. My claws tingled. “I’m looking forward to facing him again. Me against him.”

Aric’s muscles tensed. “That can never happen.”

I sat up with a frown. “Have you forgotten that I swore revenge on him? He might not have murdered Jack, but he did murder Selena and all those people.” The Emperor’s laughter had haunted me. “And don’t forget that he tortured me for months two games ago.” Mercifully, I hadn’t recovered *those* memories.

“You told me you feared destroying the world if you battled him. Or dying. I believe you called yourself the nuclear option. Tell me you feel differently, and we can talk.”

Matthew had said that power was my burden. What if I began something that I couldn’t pull back from? Still, if my choices were either to have Aric burned alive inside Richter’s vile body or risk the earth . . . “The Emperor’s kill is mine—not yours. And certainly not yours because of a one-way ticket.”

In a teasing tone, Aric asked, “In the calculus between my life and the fate of humankind, should we not be rational?”

I raised my chin, fists clenched. “What if I *refuse* reason?”

He fell silent. Then he leaned up to cup my face in his warm hands. “You love me.”

I gazed at him, letting him see how much. “Of course I do.”

His brows drew together. “It’s more than love. You feel for me *what I feel for you*.”

I could only nod.

Yet this seemed to sadden him. “I think a part of me believed you were immune to fully loving me because half of your heart is taken. I’d forgotten the most important thing about the Empress. Your wrath is boundless—but so is your love.”

“Then you can understand why I can’t ever lose you. You told me you wanted a life for me and Tee. We want you.”

“But our wants must come second to the needs of our son. Everything we do must be for him. Everything for Tee.”

Even your death? “I need him to know you and love you.”

“*Sievā*, he already does. I have been unsure about many things in my long life, but I feel his love as strong as a battle-tested shield.” Such a knight. He drew me back down against him. “We don’t have to figure this out tonight. I’m open to ideas.”

“If you believed we could thwart the game, you’d be more reluctant to throw yourself away.”

I expected him to say that Jack might find a clue about the game in the Swords’ library, or that we’d keep searching for an answer.

Instead he said, “You’ve read and reread all the chronicles with me. You know what I know about the game. And based on the information we have, I don’t believe it can be ended—and neither do you, my love.”

Hadn’t I begun to suspect that we were spinning to our bloody end? Yes. But to hear him say it out loud, to accept it . . .

Kentarch had spoken about the whisper of one’s hope. I feared mine would lie to me about thwarting the game right up until the end.

“One must win. And one must live as an immortal. *You* must.”

“I can’t.” The red witch purred, *I can*. “I won’t get over you. Don’t force me into that situation.”

“It will be out of my hands. As all war ultimately is.”

“You wrote something similar in your chronicles.” *The only way to control the outcome of war is not to fight it.*

“The end must come for us all. My hope is that I meet it well.”

“What does that mean?”

“Many warriors fight well; they practice to achieve greatness. But there’s no practice that can make one die well. You’re either born with that stern stuff or you’re not.”

Would *I* be? Whenever my life had been in jeopardy in the past—such as when I’d been mind-controlled by the Hierophant or battling the

Alchemist—I'd never had much time to think about *what happens if I lose*.

Now I did, and I wasn't convinced I would survive the upcoming clash against Richter, even with Sol's help. How long did we have? "When do you think Matthew will restore the Arcana calls?" Each player's signature phrase alerted us to their proximity. Richter's—*Quake before me!*—had sounded just before he'd struck Jack's army.

Aric said, "Whenever the Gamekeeper is ready for the end, when all his plots and machinations have fallen into place. Crazy like a fox is apropos, no?" Matthew's own call.

"You make him sound sinister."

"I hope the Fool isn't. But don't ever forget that he won the first game. There's a reason Tarot cards are about his journey—because he was the first immortal."

I pictured his card: under the bright sun, a blithe young man strolled down the road with a bundle of belongings over his shoulder, a white rose—one of my symbols—in his free hand, and a dog at his heels. He had his head tilted back, was about to walk blindly off a cliff.

I remembered wondering, as a girl, if he would fall to his death or tumble into a new adventure. "Do you think he'll keep his vow to me never to win again?" If not, which one of us could defeat him?

"I am betting on it."

Though I did have reason to think otherwise, Matthew still struck me as good. I recalled the way he'd gazed at me with endless trust, and how other kids had ostracized him, having no idea how extraordinary he was. Yet I hadn't definitively answered *his* question: *Do you trust me?*

Matthew's call reminded me . . . "Will you never reveal what your call is?" Aric's chronicles hadn't mentioned it.

A hint of a grin. "I told you I'm beyond one. As the victor of this game, I enjoy certain advantages, such as a stealthy approach when I desire it."

"But you weren't always the victor. In that first game, you had a call."

He inclined his head.

"Aric, tell me!"

In my ear, he rasped, "*From the grave, I rise for you.*"

Chills broke out over my skin. Sometimes I forgot how *deathly* he was. As his opponent, I would have been overcome with terror to hear that.

Yet now it struck me as romantic—because I knew he would come for me across eternity. Even death couldn't keep us apart. . . .

The Empress
Day 851 A.F.

“What are you working on today?” I asked Circe as I entered her pool house laboratory with Tee.

The only thing that could make Castle Lethe weirder was the actual practice of witchcraft. An unholy scent mix of sulfur, charcoal, and herbs filled the halls. Circe’s irises would glow like phosphorescence whenever she perused the plant nursery, plucking random sprigs for her potions.

“I’m perfecting the memory spell.” She’d been working on it several hours each day, would only eat when I brought down meals for her. Over the couple of months she’d been here, she’d gained weight and grown stronger. Her eyes were brighter, her smile quicker.

She wiped her hands over her apron, then removed it to reach for Tee. “Come to Auntie.” All of her various cauldrons and beakers along her makeshift workbench bubbled higher with her excitement.

I untangled him from my vines and handed him over. He gurgled to go into Circe’s arms.

“Or at least I’m *trying* to perfect that spell.” She sat on her laboratory stool with Tee in her lap. With her free hand, she made a show for him, miniature waterspouts dancing on the countertop. “If I get this wrong, I might wipe out all your memories instead.”

“Hey, we have time.” Yet four months had passed since Tee’s birth.

“Do we, Evie Domīnija? Time is a thief.”

I frowned at that saying. People wasted time and spent it. We tried to buy more of it. It could be on our side. But we didn’t often think of it as a

measurement of one's remaining life—a *lifetime*. Now I couldn't think of it any other way.

Circe's next sentence resonated: "And this game is nearing its end."

"I haven't given up on stopping this thing." I sounded like a broken record. "Have you accessed all the memories your own spell preserved?"

"Yes, but I only cast it a few games ago. So I have nothing from the times previous to that. Unlike you. The Fool gave you memories of all your games, no?"

"He said he gave me two games' worth, but I think he meant that in a quantity type way. I've seen scenes from several, but never a whole game." All I knew for certain was that everything he did was for a reason, as yet unknown. "There's got to be something on your temple walls that points to a way out of the game." Those walls were her spell book.

"As I told you, I don't recall anything. And before you ask, I can never return there. I changed to come here. No matter how dearly I might want to, I'll never be strong enough to change back to what I was."

"I understand. We'll keep studying other chronicles, searching for clues." My grandmother had told me to watch for symbols, assigning meaning to waypoints on my journey. Connections existed—I'd seen them—but I hadn't yet made sense of them. "Maybe we overlooked something in the Lovers' book." Was I being stubborn by refusing to give up? Yes. I had to be when the alternative was so grim. Jack always said I had a hard head—*tête dure*. He was right.

What was I missing?

"Empress, the game has been unaltered all this time. If the birth of a child between two players didn't knock the record off the track, I don't know what will."

I sat across from her and Tee. "So you've made peace with the fact that so many people we care about will have to die?"

"I was hoping Temperance's chronicles might be a solution instead of a grail." A MacGuffin. "But we have to face reality."

"Not my strong suit." And more, I couldn't reconcile how *meaningless* this game was. "You told me the lesson of life was to stand up and walk despite the ten swords in my back. But I feel like there's more for us to learn."

I'd accepted I was the Empress only after defeating the Alchemist. When battling Ogen, I'd finally delighted in my powers. Upon defeating the

Lovers, I'd comprehended that love wasn't just the most powerful force in the universe; it *was* the universe.

But after Richter's attack on Jack's army, I'd lost myself, letting rage consume me. My clashes against the Cups and the Hanged Man had topped off my toxic well.

Could I find my way back to love?

I told Circe, "I keep waiting for this game to make sense. To serve some kind of higher purpose."

In a tone filled with bitterness, Circe said, "As soon as you accept that our existence is a game show for the gods' entertainment, your wait will be over."

She sounded like my grandmother. *Why do you think the gods would end their amusement?*

Circe added, "In your situation, I would prepare myself to win."

"The last we talked about it, *you* were going to." In order to give Death and me a chance at a life together and to give Circe immortality to chase the mysteries in the deep.

"The world can't continue like this for much longer."

"If I lose you all, I'll go insane. Is that who should guide humanity out of an apocalypse? Is that who should take care of Tee?"

She shrugged. "You're his mother. It's what we've got."

Lark entered the pool room, Maneater at her side. I was surprised Circe allowed the gigantic wolf so close, yet she looked happy to see them both. "Hail Tar Ro, Fauna."

"Yo." Lark waved. "Tar Ro, yada." Despite the initial chill between the two, they'd eventually hit it off.

As Lark had explained to me, "I didn't understand her at first. Remember, how you described the Sun Card as layered? So is the Priestess. She's a destroyer of coats, a recipient of human sacrifices, *and* a woman with a conscience."

Circe and Lark had a lot in common, each having lost the love of her life. Circe's soul-mate fiancé Edwin, nicknamed Ned, had died on Day Zero, which was supposed to be their wedding day.

The only friction between my roommates was over who got to hold Tee. Though he adored his aunties equally, they squabbled about *Tee time*, as Lark called it. *Tee o'clock* was a thing.

Now Lark clapped her hands for him. With pursed lips, Circe reluctantly handed him over.

Lark nuzzled him, puppylike, and he babbled happily. “Is Kentarch here yet?” she asked me. With a wave of her hand, she summoned some lightning bugs out of her pocket. They flitted above Tee’s head while he watched in a seeming trance.

“Should be arriving this afternoon.” Sometimes we coaxed him to stay and eat. Well, whenever I wasn’t in charge of the meal.

Circe asked, “Jack still won’t come?”

“No. Maybe in the future.” Though I pined for him, I understood. “We’re going to review the latest defense plan with Kentarch. Do you want to hear it here first?”

Lark rolled her eyes. “Duh. We know all about it. We know everything you and Death talk about.”

Expression brimming with humor, Circe said, “You and I are slated to team up on the Emperor, with Sol as support. The Sun will thaw my river and empower you. Everyone else will face Fortune with animals, rocket launchers, and javelins.”

Lark added, “Joules will take care of Zara’s rockets and missiles, and he’s started producing extra spears to stage here for Death’s use. You’ll use your vines to build foxholes as cover from Zara’s bullets. Once we’ve sapped her luck, Gabe will fly above her and drop something on her copter while my wolves fang it.”

“Oh. That about covers it.” Talk about stolen thunder.

Circe rose to stir a cauldron. “I’m curious if Sol can truly melt that river. I miss it. We had lovely times together.”

“Remember, I call the copter.” Lark bared her fangs. Her wolves had already attacked Fortune’s various helicopters twice. “Me and mine are ready to fight with tooth and claw.”

The red witch stirred at the thought of violence. “And my smiling face will be *the last thing Richter ever sees*.”

Both Lark and Circe raised their brows. I guess my tone had sounded much more malicious than Lark’s.

The witch continued readying inside me, and more strands of my hair had turned red. As Spite had molted, Lark had grown more animalistic, and Circe had once evolved into a sea monster, I was undergoing my own Empress metamorphosis.

The witch infused my up-and-down emotions with stability—and menace. My aggression came to the fore more easily, the heat of battle simmering just below the surface.

Like the Emperor's magma.

"It *will* fall to you." Steam wisped around Circe's face. "To take down Richter at this point, I would need to be in my ocean, my trident in hand and my temple surrounding me. But I can assist."

I mentally muzzled the witch and made my tone neutral. "We'll all need to work together, our powers complementing each other's."

Lark rubbed noses with Tee. "So when do you tell Jack he'll be babysitting Unclean One Junior?"

"Jack won't know he's going to," I admitted. "Not until it's too late." Kentarch would drop off Tee at the hangar, then teleport the other Arcana back for the battle.

Lark laughed. "Rough stuff, Eves."

Circe frowned. "What happens if Kentarch perishes? How will you reach Tee once more?"

I had no answer for that. After all, the Chariot wanted to die. "As Jack would say, I have to kick the can—"

"Quiet." Lark cocked her head, pointed ears twitching, and we fell silent. Even Tee's gurgling stopped.

I finally heard what she had, a plinking noise—*ting ting*—that sounded like two icicles striking each other.

Ting . . . ting . . . ting . . . ting . . .

It grew louder and faster. We rose and eased closer to the pool house windows to peer out at the night. By the glow of lightning, we saw a sheet of ice spreading across the landscape like a horrific wind—heading for us.

TING TING TING TING—

"Run!" Lark screamed. With Tee in her arms, she sprinted across the pool house, Circe and me rushing after them.

"Lark, get Tee out of here!" Oh, God, Aric was outside. "*Aric!*" I chanced a glance over my shoulder.

Ice crystals fanned out over the windows, fracturing the glass. They coated the floor, freezing even the salt water of the pool. Circe's beakers cracked, flames extinguished.

Tee cried as we sprinted up the stairs and barreled through the doorway. I threw vines at the door, slamming it behind us. As we backed away, frost

radiated outward from the center. The stalks of green withered and fell to the floor, shattering.

Ignoring the pain, I threw more vines to create a barricade against the cold, until it stopped the onslaught at last. "Aric! Where are you?"

My knees weakened when I saw him speeding down the hall toward us.

"*Sievā.*" He took Tee from Lark, holding him close. "It's okay, son. It's okay." Tee sniffled but calmed somewhat.

I clutched Aric's arm, and he pulled me against him. What if Circe had been asleep by the pool? She would be dead right now. "What *was* that?"

"I don't know. A freak weather front of some sort."

Between breaths, Lark said, "Cyclops was out on patrol. He froze solid. I *felt* it. Nobody could survive that." Her eyes turned red as she communed with another scout. "But now, the freeze is gone. It came as quick as a breeze and left just as fast."

This apocalypse just kept on giving! "He'll recover, right?" Cyclops was one of Lark's familiars, should live as long as she did.

"Yeah. But if that freeze had hit the menagerie dead-on, I would've lost every animal in there."

Had Aric shared a look over my shoulder with Circe?

She murmured, "The gods vent their wrath." Just as Matthew had warned.

Aric exhaled a breath. "I'll call the others and warn them to stay on guard."

Lark sputtered, "Wait, you think that's gonna happen again?"

He nodded.

"Then it's game over, cats. Humanity's days are numbered. . . ."

The Hunter
Day 867 A.F.

Some sound awakened me, and I shot upright in my bunk, fresh from a dream about Evie. I'd been having a lot of them in the two months since we'd talked.

I rubbed a hand over my face and glanced around the room. All the guys were sleeping, present and accounted for.

Today had been busy. Kentarch had used his abilities to teleport more stuff from the castle, including a ton of baby supplies. We now had a playpen set up for Tee and formula stockpiled.

Were Domīnija and I scheming to protect Evie from herself?

De tout coeur. Wholeheartedly. When Richter attacked the castle, we'd make sure she was safe with Tee at this hangar.

Across the room, Kentarch rolled over in his bunk, and again, always uncomfortable. Sometimes he would sleep-teleport, disappearing from his bed without waking. Maybe he traveled to Issa's grave. Or the spot where they'd first met.

He ached for something out of reach, which I understood. I missed Evie so bad, I thought I'd lose my mind—

"Kos? Do you read me? Please reply."

Had I heard a woman's voice on the radio? I tossed on more clothes and hurried to the station in the office. I snatched up the transmitter and pressed the button. "Hey, you there?"

"Who the fuck are you?" the woman said.

What a greeting. "Name's Jack Deveaux."

A laugh. “Kos found you! I’ll be damned. I’m Brunhilda, the Battle-Ax. And yes, that’s meant in all senses of the term. You can call me Brun.”

“I saw you on the list of potential pages.” She was the fierce leader of a California biker gang and a metal-worker who’d forged a garrison out of steel. Stiff competition.

“Okay, put me out of my misery. Did Kos confirm you as the last Sword?”

“*Non*. Not before she . . . passed away.”

“Say again?”

“She died of plague.” I explained how the Pentacles had betrayed the Swords and how I’d found Kos in that cell.

Brun exhaled over the transmission. “The Noodler’s gonna take this bad. He’s one of the last four potentials still alive.”

I’d seen him on the list too. “Why do they call him the Noodler?”

“Because he used to *noodle*. You know, sticking his bare hands into underwater hidey-holes for fish. He founded a colony of folks in Missouri who harvest reptiles and creepy-crawlies. It’s good eating, if you’re hungry enough.”

“You said there’re four potentials still alive. Who’s the other one?”

“Gator Bait in central Florida. She put together a fort in the middle of an alligator farm. Alligators fared okay in the Flash, and they also make great guardgators. It’s not often you can eat your own security system.”

“What does she feed them?” The tour guides in Louisiana once used chickens. Not a lot of chickens left.

“Bagmen. Win-win.”

“At least they’re good for something.” If Sol and I got our way, we planned to deanimate them all across the world. As his abilities grew, he’d figured out how to tap a new level of his rays to render a zombie to dust, but so far only one at a time, and in close contact. His goal was to shine that ray over the entire globe.

“So we’ll never know which one of us is the Page.” Brun sighed. “I take it the Pentacles got what was coming to them?”

“They did. Which leaves the Wands.”

“Heard anything about them?”

The Swords had binders of information about the Majors, but nothing new that Domīnija hadn’t already shared. Yet their notes about the Wands had been interesting. “According to accounts from survivors out in the Ash,

the entire suit is female. Folks say they appear, watch major events unfold, then disappear. They're also known as *the Stix*." When Evie and the others had felt as if someone was watching, had they been right?

"Yeah, Kos mentioned something about that. Was hoping you'd learned more."

"Rumors held they were buying women." Two marauders had considered selling Evie to the Stix.

"They are. Buying them, freeing them, and punishing the sellers."

"Good for them." Maybe the Wands were respectable like the Swords.

"Hey, weren't you riding with a bunch of Majors?"

"Got some here with me right now," I said, not ready to elaborate.

The guys and I were doing okay, all things considered. Mornings we holed up in the library to study everything from military strategy to architecture and engineering. I might not be as accomplished as the Swords, but I could try to earn the name, and the world would need builders once the apocalypse ended.

I'd learned a lot about construction from Fort Arcana, and I had a knack for it, but I set myself to the task of learning even more.

When I'd asked Domīnija for more titles from his own library, he'd also sent me a folder on Haven, with blueprints and a slew of pictures he'd sourced before the Flash. He knew I'd once told Evie that I would rebuild it for her and that we'd begin a life together in Louisiana. But that was before she'd married Domīnija and had a kid with him.

I'd texted the Reaper: You keep behaving like you're a goner. Stop acting like this is a done thing.

Domīnija: Stop acting like it ain't. Gods, you're wearing off on me, mortal.

Heh.

After library time, me and the guys would do target practice. Nights we watched old DVDs. Gabe had fallen in love with movies, getting references that he never had before.

Brun said, "Majors living in the lair of the Swords? Kos must be turning over in her grave. Not that she got a grave from what you described, but you know what I mean. That hangar was never meant to *support* Majors. We need 'em dead, kiddo. That's the only way for the world to come back."

"Ain't that simple."

Brun made a sound of frustration. “Don’t know if anyone’s filled you in about current affairs, but we’re dropping like flies out here. Have you guys had one of those killer freezes yet? That’ll change your perspective real fast.”

Yeah, things had been bearable—until Domīnija had called with an urgent warning about cutting short our time outside. We were going stir-crazy here.

“A speed freeze. *Ouais*, we had one a couple days ago.” It’d laid waste to our field and almost our livestock. Sol had rushed out to salvage our farm with his light, and even he had nearly gotten frostbite.

“Then you know. The good news: no one’s spreading the plague anymore. Bad news? Because they’re all frozen! And things won’t change until all the Majors are gone but one.” She talked so casually about the deaths of my friends.

And what about Matthew? He was still floating around somewhere out in the Ash, the wild card. What was *coo-yôn’s* plan? “Everyone here is committed to stopping the Emperor and Fortune and dying in that fight if necessary. But we can’t fight them if we can’t find them.”

“What if the Empress is the winner?” Brun asked, sounding like this was a worst-case scenario.

“Why did the Swords want to take her out? Just ’cause of what they thought she did to the Cups?” That paper Joules found had listed some other high-level strategy reasons, but I wanted to hear from someone who’d regularly talked to Kos.

“They targeted her because the Empress can’t be trusted. The Hanged Man was a notorious betrayer, but she’s just as bad.”

“I know Evie better than I know anyone. She’s kind, funny, and loyal to the bone.” I’d never met anyone as loyal.

“I heard the rumors, kiddo. You’re in love with her.”

“*Jusqu’au bout*,” I told her proudly. “To the end and with all my heart, lady.”

“You’re in love with the girl she *should* have been. But she’s got a force inside her that makes her crazy. Look, nature is a fickle bitch—and your Evie is *Mother Earth*. Would you be pissed right now if you were Mother Earth? She can’t win, Jack. She is poison and ruin, and she is more powerful than all the Majors put together. Kos made one thing clear to

anybody who'd listen: the Empress doesn't look like a monster—and yet she is.”

“You're wrong about her. One day you'll see.”

Another exhalation. “Read more of the Swords' records. Learn. We'll talk again soon.”

We'd just signed off when Kentarch slipped into the room, his solemn expression telling me he'd heard everything.

“Doan say anything to Joules, all right? Been having enough problems with the Tower.”

He continued to give Sol grief, ruining our fire-station camaraderie. Hell, Joules had even come off his total hatred of Domīnija, calling him *handy* for teaching him another aspect of his power at the Sick House. When the Reaper had sent bacon along with the translation of Calanthe's chronicles, well, that hadn't gone amiss either. But Sol couldn't win for losing with the Tower.

“I won't,” Kentarch said. “We need no fresh strife.”

I'd sat Joules down the other day to ask him why he refused to go along and get along.

In a gruff tone, he'd said, “I told you lot that I had five younger brothers and a mam who thought the world of us. But they were mischief makers of the first order!” His smile had been fond, even as his eyes glinted. I'd been reminded that Joules was the youngest Arcana I'd met, only fifteen when the game started. “And I know without a doubt that when the Flash hit, me mam shepherded all those mites out of our tiny house to watch the lights, so she could catch her breath and smoke for just a bloody couple of minutes of peace.”

“Christ, Joules, I'm sorry. But what does that have to do with Sol?”

“Each game has a disaster based on a card, right? This is his, innit? The sun shone at night, and people turned to ash. My *family* turned to ash. Or worse. He reminds me of that every day.”

I'd had no idea how to respond to that, couldn't tell him to just get over it. When the Flash had turned *ma mère* into a Bagger, it'd done a mind-bender on me.

The only thing that helped with Joules's anger? That Sol worked so hard to take out Baggers. . . .

Kentarch leaned against the desk with his arms crossed over his chest. “Do you believe what that woman said about the Empress?”

“You spent months in close contact with Evie. Does she strike you as evil?”

“The heat of battle is real. I’ve experienced it. Can you imagine any worse punishment for me than living for centuries, unable to die and join Issa? And yet I’ve felt the overwhelming urge to win.”

“But here’s the thing—I can bring Evie back from the brink.”

“You barely did after lesser skirmishes. She believes she is fated to fight the Emperor. Could anything rescue her after the battle to end all battles . . . ?” He trailed off, and his eyes narrowed.

“What is it?”

He shrugged. “I just figured out a puzzle that has nagged at me.”

Puzzle? I perked up. “Wanna share?”

“I’ll think on it more.”

Disappointed, I said, “Look, Evie’s not fighting Richter, remember? You’re still in on the plan, right?” We were letting her think I’d be the one babysitting Tee here. In fact, Kentarch would be teleporting me to the castle—and her and Tee to the hangar.

“I am.” He stood to go. But at the door, he faced me again. “Your new friend was right about something though. This game must end soon. Or there will be no one left—”

“Speed freeze!” Gabe yelled from the bunkroom.

Ting . . . ting . . . ting . . . ting ting ting!

Death
Day 882 A.F.

My greed can no longer be borne.

As I silently paced our room, waiting for Tee's customary 2 a.m. awakening, realization hit me with perfect clarity.

My end had come. I'd found no way out of this box.

I passed by the sleeping form of my wife and crossed to the crib, gazing down at my son as my thoughts raced.

I'd tried to justify my continued existence over the five months since he'd been born. Didn't I deserve the happiness I'd found with my new family? Hadn't I suffered enough to have earned a respite?

Tee had just grown his bottom teeth. He was even crawling! In another few months, he'd walk. I longed to see that.

I wanted him to call me "Father." As every parent should do, I wanted to teach him to be better than I had been.

But above all, I wanted him to live in a world where he could thrive. After the first speed freeze, Evie had absently admitted, "He needs more than sunlamps and loving aunts. He needs other kids, and school, and sunny days with ice cream."

Yes. Though I couldn't give him those things, I could start the world on that path.

I called to Matthew, *Help me, Fool. As you have in the past.* Silence continued to greet me.

The rules of the game were clear. I'd failed to change them; now I must abide by them. All must perish but one.

I gazed back at Evie. She slept on, reaching toward my side of the bed. The two of us only grew closer. The longer I lived, the more she would grieve.

So immersed in my role of husband and father, I'd forgotten my role over eternity: assassin. I would ride out and hunt my enemies as I had so many times before. Now that I was ready to end the game, fate would lead me to them; it always did.

And then . . . I wouldn't stop at my enemies. Like the Reaper I'd been, I would harvest all the Arcana, including myself. For Evie. For our son. For humankind.

The time was now. The weather would continue to worsen. We'd closed all the shutters, living as if in a giant coffin.

The threat of the freezes meant Tee couldn't go outside to play in the snow, or ride with me atop Titan. He loved horses, but we dared not risk the short walk to the stables.

Circe had informed us just today that she'd cast the memory spell for all of those in our alliance. Our every preparation was in place.

The only reason I hadn't ridden out already was because I feared leaving Evie and the baby alone. I'd left her before and had narrowly returned in time to dispatch Ogen. What if Fortune and the Emperor found the castle? Despite the freezes, vines and trees continued to spread around our stronghold, like a green beacon in the desolate landscape.

Their growth puzzled Evie. Not I. Like so many Arcana before her, the Empress was deploying lures for her prey.

The red witch craved her due, acting without Evie even realizing it. . . .

Today I would demand that Kentarch and Jack come to the castle to protect my family, and then I would set out.

Right on schedule, Tee blinked open his amber eyes, grinning to see me in the firelight. I used to pace this castle alone; no longer. Each night I haunted the halls with him, relishing his every sigh and twitch.

I sometimes wondered if he woke on purpose, just to enjoy dozing back off cradled in my arms. When he raised his hands to me, I lifted him from the crib and whispered, "You are supposed to be asleep, my little one."

Tee flashed his new teeth, then laid his head against me. My heart went aloft with the stars. "I will miss you so much, son." Aching, I said, "Shall we make our rounds then?"

By the time I reached the study, his eyes were closed, his chest rising and falling with even breaths. Now he would slumber soundly till what used to be dawn.

So trusting. So loving.

I quietly added a log to the embers in the fireplace and lit a candelabra.

Circe glided into the room moments later. She smiled fondly at Tee, then raised her gaze to me. "Couldn't sleep?"

"No. Nor you?"

She shook her head and took a seat. "My thoughts are much consumed with the future for a woman who doesn't have one."

"Any conclusions?" I sat behind the desk and switched my sleeping son to my other arm.

"I'm glad you have a plan to save the Empress, Jack, and Tee."

Evie believed we would double-cross Jack and leave him at the hangar with Tee. Jack believed we would double-cross Evie. I planned to trick both of them. "I take it you heard my conversation with the Chariot?"

She nodded. "It's important for the Empress to live on. She's a good mother."

"Indeed." She was loving, patient, and protective. Tee was lucky to have her. "It was always in the cards for her." Literally, the earth mother.

"I kept expecting her to betray me, but I think I've accepted that she won't. I *sense* that she won't." Intuition was the Priestess's strong suit. "I believe my sister is returned to me at last."

"I believe it as well."

"That's a problem when we're all supposed to kill each other. There are eleven of us left, Death. Which cannot be."

Though I'd just been thinking of this, I asked, "What do you want me to say?"

"Have you given up all hope of ending the game?"

I hesitated, then admitted, "Yes."

"The Empress hasn't."

"She doesn't want me to die. In fact, I suspect she wants *me* to win the game." She'd started mixing formula in with her breast milk for Tee, preparing him to be motherless. *Never*.

"What if we make a stand against Richter and he gets past us?"

"*Then* she can fight him. But I won't offer her up in the first round."

Circe gave my words some thought, then said, “I confided to the Empress once that other players sometimes came to me and sought the abyss. It was the only place they could see to go.”

Why was Circe telling me this?

“I think they liked choosing how they ended the game.” She held my gaze. “*I* will choose my exit, Reaper. Not you. I plan to go out fighting.”

“What do you suspect me of?”

“To save your family, you’re about to do what you do best. You will *reap*, taking out the worst first. I’m confused why you haven’t left yet.”

My gaze narrowed. “Prescient ally, you see much.”

“But you’ll need backup this time. You won’t be so lucky to steal upon Fortune, not like Jack did. All luck flows to her now. You can’t ride out alone as you have for eons.”

“Instead of you leaving”—Lark strolled into the room, wearing pajamas and bunny slippers—“why don’t we do everything we can to draw Richter and Zara in?”

I raised my brows. “You won’t even pretend you weren’t eavesdropping?”

“No time. A freeze is building not twenty miles away.” She gnawed on a claw. “It got Cyclops—again. Took him days to thaw out and resurrect last time.”

“How do you suggest we draw in Richter and Zara?”

“A radio message worked for the Sick House. Broadcast coordinates here.”

“And have anyone with a radio march on us?”

Circe tapped her nails on the armrest, her scales shimmering in the candlelight. “Zara speaks Portuguese, no? The message could be in that language, cutting out some of the threats. Besides, not too many remain who would risk the freezes to march here.”

“That’s an idea,” I said noncommittally. Evie’s beacon of vines was one thing, a broadcast another.

Lark added, “Oh, that’s not all. We should invite the hangar crew here. Eight Arcana in one spot would get this game brewing. When so many players gathered at the Cajun’s fort, Zara and Richter attacked. They will again. So let’s kick the hornets’ nest, instead of wondering and waiting.”

Though I’d already decided to go on the offensive, I pointed out, “Evie would never agree to it. She’d know what we’re trying to do.”

“Then suggest a dinner or a belated baby shower.” Circe rubbed her hands together with anticipation. “Just because we three will all soon die doesn’t mean we can’t celebrate!”

Lark nodded eagerly. “One of these games, I swear to God, I’m gonna make it out of my teens. But in the meantime, I say we pop open some of the wine in Death’s cellar and get high as a griffon vulture.”

Circe frowned. “Pardon?”

“They could fly halfway to the stratosphere—”

“A moment, please.” I raised my free hand. “I would have to ignore all my experience and welcome dangerous warriors into my home, past my defenses. I would have to trust each of you with my life, my wife’s life, and my son’s.” In truth, I’d changed my mind about the Arcana over these last few weeks, had never felt more confident that an alliance would be unwavering. Nor more certain that it shouldn’t.

There can only be one.

“Yeah.” Lark kicked her bunny-slipped feet up on my desk. “You would. It’s time to put your money where your scythe is.”

The Empress

TING . . . TING . . .

As I prepared dinner in the kitchen, ice covered the countryside in another speed freeze, heading toward the castle. We were helpless to fight it, could do nothing while the front swept through like a stout gust of wind.

Yet for now, we were safe inside our stronghold. We knew to stay away from the walls. We would survive this freeze and the next. Maybe the one after that too—

A baby's scream ripped through the night. *Tee?* Had he crawled outside, wanting to see the horses? "Ah, God, no!" I ran from the castle, following the sound. Where was everyone? "Aric! Circe! Lark!" They didn't answer.

Struggling against the cold, I sprinted toward the barn. "Tee, hold on, I'm coming!" I spied him crawling on the walk as the freeze raced closer. *TING TING TING TING*. Crystals circled us.

No way out. "God, Tee!"

It caught me first, immobilizing my legs in ice. Unable to run, I threw vines to snare Tee. But they shattered before they reached him.

When the freeze descended on him, screams burst from his blue lips. He frantically reached for me, little fingers grasping for his mother. The terror in his eyes turned to betrayal.

Why aren't you saving me? Why leave me here in pain?

"Tee, I can't move, can't get to—" My lungs froze. I couldn't even scream as ice entombed my son forever.

As I closed my eyes and surrendered, a sound boomed over the mountain.

Richter's laughter.

My eyes flashed open. His piping lava welled above us like a wave from hell, cresting over the castle to burn us all—

I shot upright with a gasp, waking from my nightmare.

"Evie, what is it?" Aric was beside the bed.

Between breaths, I cried, "I-I need Tee." Tears poured down my cheeks, my body trembling. "Where is he?"

Aric hastened to the crib. "Right here." He lifted the sleeping baby and handed him over.

Tee was warm and soft in my arms. *Alive.*

I hugged him to me so tightly he woke and started to cry. My heart must be pounding against his ear. The room reeked of roses.

"Easy, love." Aric took him from me and soothed him until he drifted off again. After placing him back in his crib, Aric returned to sit beside me. "It was just a nightmare."

I murmured, "Uh-huh. J-just a nightmare." Or a vision? In the castle of lost time, things were getting mixed up for me again. Whatever it was, I would heed it: we couldn't wait to act. Time had run out. "I'm supposed to fight the Emperor, Aric. I'm the only one who can." I would silence Richter's laughter for good. I didn't think I'd survive it, but I'd take him down with me.

"That's not necessarily—"

"Will you listen to me?" My lips drew back from my teeth. "It has to be me. *Me.*" The anguish from my nightmare wouldn't subside, but I leaned into the pain, would use it.

Tee wasn't safe as long as the world was screwed. We had to jump-start the game.

But how?

Softening his tone, Aric said, "I understand. And we can talk more about this in the coming days. We'll put our heads together and refine our battle plan."

I nodded, thoughts in turmoil.

"For now, I have some news that I think will cheer you up. I was just in the study speaking with Circe and Lark. They suggested that we invite the other Arcana to a formal dinner. I know you miss Jack, and he would probably attend a belated baby shower for Tee."

I read the writing on the wall. Like me, Aric had decided not to wait passively for the end. Circe had just finished her spell, and we'd honed our defense until we were as ready as possible.

But he didn't understand that I was about to kick him off the tilted stage. "What about the risks from gathering Arcana?"

In a casual tone, he said, "A dinner to demonstrate support for our allies seems prudent."

Doesn't it, though? Before I died, I wanted to watch Aric host allies at our table. I wanted to see Jack holding Tee.

Just as my mother had before her death, I would make the *veiller* with my friends, enjoying food, warmth, and conversation. Like her, I would bury my fear. *My last supper.*

Afterward, when Richter inevitably attacked my home, he would *pay a price.*

I caught my lips curving, but I needed to act hesitant. I schooled my features and said, "The heat of battle could overwhelm any one of us."

Nod. "But we must trust our allies. In fact, before the dinner, we can all review the castle's defenses."

"Seeing me will be hard on Jack."

"Yes." Aric ran the backs of his fingers over my cheek. "But perhaps he needs a reminder of what he's surviving for."

"And will seeing Jack around me be hard on you?"

"I'll be jealous of every mere glance of you he steals. But I shall manage."

"Okay," I said. "Let's do it."

"Remember, everything for Tee."

Though I'd resisted this in the past, I managed a smile. "Everything for Tee."

Death

So Evie thought she was going to sacrifice herself? *No, sweet Empress. Now is not your time.*

I kissed her forehead and murmured, "Very well." I pulled the phone out of my pocket and texted: Battle rehearsal followed by

formal dinner and belated baby shower. One week from tonight. Empress decreed attendance is mandatory.

Jack: Good timing. We sure needed a pickup around here, but you might as well text Richter too.

That's the idea.

Jack: Copy. We'll be there.

I'd just read his last text ... when all the Arcana calls were restored.

The Empress
Day 889 A.F.

“You’re acting like you’ll never see this again,” I said as Aric watched me feed Tee with his eyes aglow. “Or see us.” The dinner was in a couple of hours, and all day as the four Arcana here had cooked and cleaned, Aric had been a constant, welcome presence beside me.

We’d each taken turns babysitting Tee and put last-minute touches to the outfits we planned to wear. Earlier in the week, Circe, Lark, and I had “gone shopping” for formalwear among the many clothes in the attic.

Aric would choose one bespoke suit from a closetful of them, of course. Gloves would be his accessories.

He sat beside me on the bed and cast me a sad smile. “Am I?” He hadn’t denied it. “I suppose with the calls sounding, we should be ready for any eventuality.” As king of the airwaves, he’d attempted to communicate with Richter, Zara, and Matthew. But they hadn’t answered.

It was almost more unnerving that a psycho bully like Richter refused to reply, even when Aric had taunted him.

The Emperor and Fortune were up to something. . . .

When Tee drifted off at my breast, Aric murmured, “Good night, my son.”

I gave our baby a kiss, then used my vines to carry him to his crib. I asked Aric, “Are you ready for so many Arcana to descend on us?” For him to cast aside his misgivings and welcome our alliance here was huge.

“I’m looking forward to it. I haven’t hosted a gathering in ages.”

“We have some time before they arrive.” I reached for him. “And I know just how to spend it.”

He leaned down to slant his lips over mine. One heated kiss led to more, and as we quietly made love, his fingers entwined with mine, holding my hands and devastating my heart.

Afterward, I wanted only to remain in his arms and bask in bliss, but we still had a lot to do.

Aric pressed his lips against my hair, inhaling deeply. “Shall we make ready for our guests?”

I had to smile at my old-fashioned knight. “We shall. . . .”

When I emerged from the bathroom dressed for dinner, he awaited me in a crisp black suit. The tailored lines molded to his tall frame and honed muscles.

So sexy he almost got thrown back into the bed. He noted my avid attention, and color rose along his chiseled cheekbones. Then he took in my own appearance.

His lips parted, his amber eyes going starry. “My gods, you’re exquisite.”

I wore an emerald-green sheath dress that brought out the red strands in my hair and my necklace that Aric had given me.

A few weeks ago he’d placed one of Tee’s little curls inside the locket, along with a picture of himself. Aric hadn’t managed a full smile, but his eyes had been lively with humor, because he’d known we’d get a chuckle out of his very first selfie.

Voice a rasp, he said, “The idea that you are my wife is nigh fantastical to me.”

I grinned with pleasure, letting my gaze roam over him. “You polished up nice yourself.”

“Part of me wants to call this off and keep you in bed.” He took me in his arms.

I blinked up at him. “Tonight was your idea.”

“So it was.” He seemed to force himself to release me, but he kept my hand.

As we’d done again and again over these months, he and I gravitated toward the crib to behold our baby sleeping.

Earlier this morning, Tee and Aric had enjoyed a nonsensical babbling conversation, a true back-and-forth with delighted smiles from both of

them. Aric had laughed, but then his brows had drawn together, and he'd simply brought Tee close for a long hug.

As if he'd sensed his father needed it, Tee hadn't fussed. Just snuggled into the embrace.

I did believe we should give everything for Tee. But *my* everything was different from Aric's. My sacrifice would be far from what my husband had in mind.

Forcing a bright smile, I said, "It's time."

"So it is." He offered his arm and escorted me down the hall just as the grandfather clock struck seven. The castle's Arcana had decided to share a drink just among ourselves, before the guys got here in thirty minutes.

Earlier, Aric had ventured down into the cellars, retrieving several bottles. I'd told him, "Thank you for sharing those with everyone. I'll bet they were expensive."

He'd indicated an older-looking bottle. "This is one of only three in the world."

"I didn't know you liked wine so much."

"I don't." Grin. "I merely like fine things."

My nobleman knight.

When my heels clicked along the tile floor, I said, "Lark's animals are quiet." Not a stray howl, chitter, or skitter to be heard.

"A polite gesture from Fauna," he said approvingly.

In the foyer, we watched Circe float down the stairs, resplendent in a sleeveless royal-blue evening gown that highlighted her scales and fins. She'd put her own touches on the dress, raising the slit in the skirt a few inches and plunging the neckline.

I told her, "You look beautiful, Circe."

"I know!" She smoothed her long hair. "Is my godson down for the night?"

"Yes, but I'll bring him out for everyone to meet, after we go over the battle plans." Aric had set out a map of the property for our alliance, but visualizing was just a formality. We all knew our stations and our jobs.

Lark descended the steps then, sporting a fitted burgundy suit, combat boots, and the conductor's hat she'd worn the first time I'd met her. A live mink slept curled around her neck.

I gave her a wide smile, choosing to think she was going fancy with the fur wrap.

I expected her to roll her eyes at me, but she grinned back. “Don’t hate me ’cause I’m hotter than you.”

“Can’t promise anything, Lark.”

She snorted a laugh, and we all headed into the dining room.

As Jack had advised on the night my mother died, I’d broken out the best silver and dishes, pulling out all the stops. Sweet-smelling garland adorned the walls and a fire crackled from the great hearth. The chandelier above sparkled softly.

Atop the table was an elegant centerpiece of white and yellow roses and peacock feathers that Lark had saved. Bunches of shining grapes, pomegranates, and halved figs beckoned.

The table sat a couple of dozen, so we’d put out place cards for our guests. We’d also set places for the Arcana who’d fallen or were missing.

Selena. Tess. Finn. Even for Calanthe. Matthew as well.

The castle had never looked more stunning to me. This was the home I shared with Aric and our friends, the only home Tee had ever known.

We gathered by the wine service, and I insisted on a photo. Careful of Aric’s skin, we got a shot of us in front of the beautiful table. Tonight he actually smiled for the camera!

“Time for wine.” Circe clapped her hands. “I saw some of the labels earlier and could hardly wait.”

“We can begin with this one.” Aric selected the one-of-three bottle. “Though we should let it breathe.”

Circe quipped, “Only people with long lives get to do that.”

We all shared a gallows laugh.

Aric opened that rare vintage, pouring for us. “And there’s much more where this came from.” He seemed to have surrendered to this night; his whole bearing said, *In for a penny . . .*

“A bottle this fine deserves a toast, one from each of us.” Circe inhaled the aroma from her glass, then raised it. “I’ll begin. I propose a toast to alliances that stick. The twentieth time’s the charm!”

I arched my brows at that. “Hear hear.”

Voice thick, Lark said, “A salute to those we’ve lost.”

I added, “And to those we’ve found.”

Aric raised his glass and parted his lips to speak. “To—”

—*QUAKE BEFORE ME!*—

—*WHERE SHE STOPS, NOBODY KNOWS.*—

The Hunter

Had no idea how to knot a tie, me.

I'd borrowed one from among all the clothes stowed here by the Swords. The last time I'd worn a tie had been in court when my lawyer had imparted some "wisdom" to his teenage client.

I can spot a future lifer. When you're old, staring at the bars, you'll remember this talk. . . .

Sometimes I wished I could go back and tell him, "Not getting old, me. And you? You'll be dead in the Flash."

Would I survive the next battle? Seemed like there'd always been another one, my entire life nothing but. And now that the Arcana calls were live, it was only a matter of time before the King of Hell and Lady Luck struck.

When the guys had heard the calls sounding again, Joules had laughed. "Here comes the end. Hold on to your arses, laddies!"

Gabriel had murmured, "Now for the exhale."

Sol had laughed too. "Well, I'd rather we check out early and be missed than overstay our welcome—at parties and in life."

Kentarch's lips had curved, his expression saying, *Coming for you, Issa.*

After that, Joules and Sol had called a ceasefire, putting aside their resentment. Who had time for it?

I gave my tie one last attempt. I was so nervous to see Evie and to meet the baby in person that my hands fumbled. I'd struggled over the months to tamp down what I felt, but my heart kept clamoring.

I headed out to the living area, found the guys all ready and waiting on me.

Joules—styled and sheared by Sol—wore a decent-looking suit and a smart haircut. Gabriel’s suit had slits in the back to fit around the base of his wings. He made a visible effort to keep them pinned down.

While Sol wore a bright scarf and a white blazer, Kentarch had on a camo sweater and pants, forever on mission.

Our wrapped gifts for Tee sat on the table, all stuff sourced from the hangar.

I held up my tie. “Anybody help me with this?”

Gabe raised his brows. “I’ve never tied a modern one before.”

Kentarch indicated his missing hand.

Sol blinked. “A tie? Like what old people used to wear? Let’s rethink your choices, hunter.”

“C’mere.” Joules knotted me up. “Had to wear one to mass every Sunday.”

“Thanks, podna.” I nodded at him, pleased he was giving this night a chance.

He grumbled something about the Empress’s cooking, then said, “If Calanthe could see me now, ‘styled’ by the Sun Card, and gussied up for a date with Death . . .”

Everybody got quiet. Then we all burst out laughing.

Once our laughter faded, the mood shifted, nerves setting in.

Joules said, “Are we really doin’ this? I mean, how are you goin’ to react to the Empress with Death together—and their kid?”

No sugar-coating from Joules. I shared a glance with Kentarch and said, “I’ll manage, me. We doan have time for anything else.” I’d once believed Domīnija would get a chance to stick around with Evie and Tee long enough for his son to know him. I didn’t anymore.

The game would have its due.

Which meant we were *all* on borrowed time, because—like the Swords—everyone in this hangar would fight to the end.

Would I be reincarnated? Didn’t feel like I would. Still not buying I was an Arcana.

Would I go to heaven or hell? Didn’t know; my Catholic beliefs were all askew.

The only things I knew for certain were that I loved Evie and that these guys were my brothers-in-arms. We'd been through so much together, clawing our way across miles and bowing up to danger.

I broke out my flask and passed it around.

Gabe took a swig, and his wings shuddered. "Whiskey has yet to grow on me. I might be immune to the appeal."

"Not me, birdbrain!" After Joules took a hearty drink, Kentarch motioned for the flask. "You want a slug, Tarch?"

He'd never had so much as a taste. Succinct as ever: "Why not?" He took a sip, grimaced. "We've been hauling around bottles of *this* for months?"

I grinned. "I can't say *doan knock it till you've tried it* anymore, huh?"

Sol laughed. "Only about being a demigod!"

I gazed at each of their faces, and words left my lips: "Cheers to you, podnas. The best hand I could have been dealt to ride out an apocalypse."

The Empress

Dear God, it was happening.

No, not now. Not tonight. My sips of wine grew bitter on my tongue.

Lark's eyes flashed red as she communed with a scout to locate our enemies. "Richter and Zara are coming in *hot*."

I gave a humorless laugh. "You've been waiting months to say that."

Her eyes cleared. "Years. Actual years," she admitted. "They're a couple hundred miles out."

As we set aside our glasses, Circe sighed. "They win the timing award. I say we kill them extra just for this."

Aric gazed out the window. "Even with tailwind, Fortune can't fly here in under an hour. And I suspect Richter will flank or follow her." He turned to me. "Are you ready?"

To never see my son again? No. *I want everything to be different. I want peace and sunshine and a chance to build this family!* Instead, I said tonelessly, "Make the call."

Forgoing the phone, he closed his eyes and communicated with Kentarch. After a few moments, he opened his eyes. "The Chariot said they will be here in ten minutes. Without Jack. Kentarch will then transport Tee back. We need to ready ourselves and the baby."

I nodded.

All bravado, Lark said, "Then let's make like a shepherd and get the flock upstairs. Meet you back here."

Circe indulged in one last sip of wine, muttering, "Kill them *extra*." She and Lark headed to their rooms.

I took a precious moment to gaze back at the table. “It would have been a lovely dinner.” I tried to take consolation from the beauty of the *potential*.

Aric held my hand under the glittering chandelier. “Yes, love, it would have. We’ll enjoy it as a victory celebration instead.”

“Good idea,” I said, playing along. As I’d thought when I’d been my mom’s caretaker: *We were both actors in our roles*.

I was convinced I wasn’t coming back from this battle. And Aric believed the same of himself.

The Hunter

“Plan J,” Kentarch suddenly said.

Huh? We’d all been talking, sharing another round of whiskey nips before the big dinner. Then the Chariot’s military posture had grown even stiffer.

“Uh, what does that mean?”

Without warning, the trio of Arcana rushed toward Kentarch—and then they all disappeared.

Three realizations struck me. The battle was tonight, Domīnija had double-crossed me, and everybody had been in on it.

The Empress

Aric, Tee, and I rendezvoused with Circe and Lark in the foyer just as the hangar crew materialized.

When Aric had escorted me back to our room to change into battle gear—jeans, boots, and a coat for me; armor and swords for him—I’d gotten the sense that this would be the last time we would ever walk together. My hand had shaken in his. He’d noticed, bringing my palm to his lips to kiss. “We’ll be okay, Evie.”

I wasn’t ready to leave him and Tee, and yet, I *was*. I was ready to do whatever it took.

After changing, Aric and I had met at the crib as usual. When I’d lifted Tee and begun dressing him in warm clothes, he’d awakened, frowning at us.

As I snapped and buttoned, he’d bounced up and down excitedly, must’ve thought he was about to go outside with his parents to play in the snow. Somehow I’d kept from crying.

Now we were back downstairs with our full alliance, minus one. As I surveyed our group, I thought, *We’re a formidable team*. And yet Zara and Richter would probably wipe us all out. I asked Kentarch, “Jack?”

“Will be angry. But safe.”

Joules gave me a chin jerk in greeting. “Last time I saw you with your hair so red, you were about to stab me in the throat with your claws.” That was true, but I’d reined in the witch with Jack’s help. Joules tilted his head at Tee, who stared at all the newcomers with owl eyes. “Cute kid for an unholy spawn.”

I dryly said, “I’ve missed you so, Joules.” But I kept in mind that without him—and the rest of these allies—Tee and I wouldn’t be here. My life had depended on each of them at some time.

Helmet under his arm, Aric told everyone, “Thank you for answering our call.” He introduced Arcana who had never met in person, at least not in this life, then offered his gauntleted hand to shake.

Tonight at our dinner, he would have been a gracious host. I could see him as the treasured son of a lord, with all the skills of an ambassador.

After shaking Aric’s hand, Sol crossed to me to give me a big hug and baby-talk Tee: “*¡Pero qué mono!*” He smiled warmly at Lark. Eyes alight, he gestured toward Circe’s arm fins and scales. “*¡Fantastico!*”

She winked at him. “Aren’t they amazing?”

The only thing Sol seemed to like more than her was the castle: “Death’s lair. Now, this is what I call *on theme*. Can you imagine hosting a rave here? Or a history tour?”

When Aric offered his hand to Joules, the Tower just stared at it. “You having a go at me? I got standards.”

“Kids, kids,” Circe said with amusement, “must you always fight so? Especially at this juncture in the game? It’s like we were all born to kill each other.”

Aric brushed off the slight, telling the Tower, “I appreciate that you’ve come at all.”

Red-faced, Joules muttered, “Then let’s get the show on the road.”

It was time to relinquish Tee to Kentarch. Aric removed a gauntlet and stroked his son’s cheek with utter adoration. Then he and I leaned down to kiss him. I breathed in Tee’s sweet baby scent and took his excited coos into my heart. *The last time I’ll ever see my little boy*. Refusing to cry, I handed him to Kentarch, who cradled him in the crook of his elbow. “Tell Jack thank you.”

Kentarch gripped my arm. “You can tell him yourself.” Shivers overtook me as he teleported us both—and then I was standing in a strange room. The bunkroom in the hangar? As I gaped in shock, he placed Tee in a waiting playpen, then tensed to teleport back. “My apologies—”

Before he could blink, my vines had whipped out and bound him. “Not so fast.” I grounded him with the force of my vines. “You double-crossed my double cross?”

Jack stormed into the room, bow and bug-out bag ready. “Leaving me behind, Chariot? The fuck?”

Wide-eyed Kentarch struggled to vanish but couldn’t.

Jack pointed at me. “*You* are supposed to stay here with Tee. Your master manipulator husband stung us both.”

I pushed Jack away with my vines and used others to give Kentarch a squeeze. “You’re taking me back, Chariot. Or I’ll poison you where you stand.”

After a beat, he nodded.

Jack strained against my vines. “Doan do this, Evie! I go back—not you. They need me.”

“They need me more.” I adjusted the vines so that I was all but attached to Kentarch, but he could move.

Tee had begun to cry in the playpen, and the need to comfort him overwhelmed me. But the need to protect Aric was greater. “I love you, Tee.” I turned to meet Jack’s desperate gaze. “Take care of my baby.”

As Kentarch and I faded, Jack yelled, “*Evie, noooo!*”

Death

I stared at the blank space that had contained my family. The last time I would see them. I wished I'd been able to tell Evie good-bye, but I supposed I had been for months.

Despite my welling grief, I cleared my throat and said, "It's time to take our positions."

The Arcana filed outside. I checked my swords, and gazed around this castle for a final—

"You dick!"

I whirled around. A furious Empress had forced the Chariot back here.

Recovering from my surprise, I urged her, "Return to our son, love. Remain there with Jack. Evie, I am begging you."

"And leave you with your asinine plan to take out Richter? No way! The Emperor is my kill to make."

"You need to be our backup. If we fail to stop them here, you are the earth's only chance."

"Then let's *not fail*."

Damn it, she wouldn't be dissuaded. I'd have to fight this battle while keeping her safe. I met eyes with the Chariot; we'd discussed this possibility. I sighed. "Release him, Evie. He won't teleport you away again."

After a hesitation, she did, turning her full fury to me. "How dare you trick me!"

"I never told you a lie."

“You’re such a manipulative jerk.” Her eyes flashed green. Good. I wanted her furious.

Was she powerful enough to take out the Emperor? Yes. But could she bridle that power once she’d freed it?

I had to believe that.

“We’ve no time for further discussion.” I turned to the Chariot. “Can you move us into position?” I secured Evie with my gauntleted hand, and Kentarch took my arm to teleport us to the river’s edge. There, with a nod at us, he hurried to his station with its attendant rocket launcher.

“Stay close to me,” I told her as I led her to my own station. Mine had a stand of hundreds of javelins that Joules had grudgingly bestowed.

To my right, Circe had taken up position, Lark beside her, with Maneater as their personal guard. Throughout Evie’s towering oaks and foxholes, the rest of Fauna’s legions awaited their moment to become red of tooth and claw.

To my left, Sol used his rays to melt the snow and the frozen river. Past him, Joules, Gabriel, and Kentarch readied their launchers. Gabriel also had a metal net, similar to the one that had caught me after I’d retrieved Evie from the Hierophant’s mine. We figured a helicopter’s rotors would like it as little as I had.

Everyone’s attention was focused on the horizon, past the river toward a vine-covered plain. Richter and Zara would approach from that direction.

Despite the threat of two baleful Arcana, Kentarch appeared steady. Gabriel as well. Joules’s shallow breaths fogged in the cold night, but then he was the youngest of us, even younger than Lark. Would the Tower deliver all that we expected of him?

Sol’s light grew brighter and brighter until I imagined the dawn. I’d never live to see another one, so I savored it.

But my gaze couldn’t stray long from my wife.

When she felt Sol’s light, Evie’s eyes grew heavy-lidded. Her red hair twined like Medusa’s, her vines vibrating on the ground all around us.

She raised her hands, and those vines shot upright like cobras. Did she realize she was smiling in the face of an imminent attack? Glorious creature!

Yet the distraction was short-lived. She narrowed her eyes at me. “I’m not finished with you. If I hadn’t hitched my ride back, how had you planned to take on Richter?”

I squared my shoulders. “Doing whatever it takes.”

“You’re still bent on a one-way ride.”

“And you weren’t?”

She glanced away with guilt before returning her gaze to mine. “You know you’re the better choice to live.”

I decided to make a small admission, one of the secrets I’d kept from her. “We have little time, but you must know—the Fool told me the only way I’ll win this game is if I claim your icon myself. Which means I will never win.”

“What?” Her vines jolted. “You tell me this now?”

“If you perish tonight, know that eventually I will too. Our child will be orphaned.”

“Joke’s on you, then.” She lowered her voice to say, “I don’t think those dreams I’ve been having about destroying the earth are fear-based or the result of being traumatized. I believe they’re prophetic.”

I exhaled a breath and repeated her words: “You tell me this now?”

Eyes pleading, she said, “Look, just don’t do anything crazy. We’ll get through this and come up with a plan for the future, okay?”

“Which also means I must say: please don’t destroy our son’s world tonight.”

She bit her lip. “I’ll try not to.”

“And I will try not to fall, but if I do, it will have been an honor to fight beside my courageous wife.”

She grabbed my shoulders. “Not tonight, Aric. Just . . . not tonight.”

—*QUAKE BEFORE ME!*—

—*WHERE SHE STOPS, NOBODY KNOWS.*—

Lark yelled, “They’re less than a hundred miles out!”

A reddish glow became visible in the distance. The Emperor. A few miles away from him was a bizarre electrical storm. It must be following Zara’s copter. Lighting crackled all around it like a Tesla ball.

I readied, donning my helmet, part of my armored cage. When Jack had worn it, he’d hated it as much as I. *Try two millennia, mortal.* I’d been trapped in this metal for far too long.

Kentarch ordered, “Fire rockets.”

“Rockets hot!” Gabriel launched our first strike from the castle with a shrill whistle.

Joules and Kentarch fired at the same time, Joules whooping in delight.

The Chariot, like a human calculator, kept count of each rocket. He'd programmed them to seek a helicopter, but Richter's heat signature might distract them. Either way, an Arcana on the other end would feel the pressure.

Soon we were up to a dozen. Then two. Evie used her vines to dispense more rockets as we continued our steady barrage.

Efficient. Meticulous.

I briefly lifted my visor to share a look with her—*we've got this*. She nodded confidently.

In a monotone, Kentarch called, "Thirty-eight."

Zara was close enough that we saw lightning striking the rockets. But her luck would only hold for so long, and then the environment would cease protecting her.

Before us, the river was now a liquid sheen. Circe called out, "Thank you, Sun. I'm ready." She raised her hands and churned the water, her eyes shimmering. Soon a pair of large whirlpools appeared, a modern-day Charybdis, times two. "Spare some light for the Empress."

"Will do, Priestess." Though fatigued from his efforts, Sol gamely lifted the last launcher and fired.

Kentarch's count: "Forty-five."

Lark called, "Richter's hanging back behind the copter. Coward!"

A good deal for us. "He's going to allow us to fight her," I told Evie. "He has to. Even a brute like him has figured out he can't defeat Lady Luck."

Evie grinned with satisfaction. "Splintering."

"And even though the Emperor's idling, he's still burning fuel." Maintaining that much lava in weather like this made for a fearsome sight but would eat through his reserves. "Fauna, deploy your bats."

"On it." Her eyes glowed red as she directed a sky-blotting swarm of bats toward the copter.

Lark would order her wolves to attack once Fortune had sustained a glancing hit. They growled with aggression from the cover of the oaks, hungering for action.

But the bats spiraled down to their deaths. "Gusting winds are shearing them away!" Lark shouted.

"It's still weakening Fortune. Keep them going."

A different pitch of whistle sounded. Kentarch yelled, “*Incoming missile.*”

Zara had fired on us. I turned to the Tower. “You’re up.”

He put down the launcher and readied a javelin.

I intoned, “Wait for it.”

“I got this, Reaper.”

“*Now.*”

He threw . . . and struck it in the distance. An explosion detonated across the river. The metallic scent of lightning and our rocket smoke filled the air.

“Good show, Tower.”

Joules puffed up his chest. “Do this all day long—”

Kentarch cut him off: “*Incoming.*”

Fortune had fired another missile on the tail of the first. Joules hurled a javelin too soon. Then another miss. He began to sweat as he produced a third spear in his palm.

I collected one of my own, throwing with all my might. Even with my aim and strength, I couldn’t hit something moving at Mach speed. “Easy, Tower. Concentrate.”

Joules missed another one. “Feck me, it’s bearin’ down!”

The missile was visible now. Kentarch ordered, “Take cover!”

I’d just tensed to collect Evie, when she said, “I’ve got it!” With a determined look, she waved her hands, and her vines shot to the river’s edge and upward. In midair, they caught the missile in a wall of green, closing around the projectile. The vines spun like an unmanned fire hose, but she gritted her teeth and somehow kept hold of it. “Circe, drag it all down!”

Circe directed one of her whirlpools to spin upward into a spout. It funneled toward the missile and vines, swamping them. Together, she and Evie managed to force the mass beneath the surface. A muffled explosion underwater sent up a gigantic plume.

Circe tottered on her feet. “Ow.” Now one with the river, she’d felt that percussion. As had Evie through her plants.

Between breaths, Evie asked me, “How many more of those does Zara have?”

“Fourteen.” And possibly seventy-six rockets. Not to mention twelve hundred rounds of bullets.

I raced over to Joules, taking the rattled young man by his shoulders. “You are the godsdamned *Lord of Lightning*. You were rightly dreaded over all the games—because you are a foe to be reckoned with. Now *protect this alliance*, Tower.”

“Yeah. Okay!” Joules lifted his chin. “All right, all right, I’m back in it.” Whistles sounded. Kentarch called, “*Three incoming.*”

Instead of appearing panicked by this news, Joules’s mien grew dogged. Evie muttered, “I know that look. He’s about to prickly them to death.”

Joules deflected the first. The second. The third.

Kentarch: “And again. Three incoming.”

With unerring accuracy and focus, Joules continued to shoot them down. Electricity crackled in the air, adrenaline surging in us all. I imagined Zara in her cockpit yelling with frustration as she fired again. Rashness, indeed.

Soon the Tower had burned out all but one of her missiles, yet for some reason, Fortune continued closing in, even as Richter held back, his presence a constant glowing menace. A failure of strategy for her? I would have continued firing from afar. What was her plan?

She’d flown within even my striking distance. Finally, my own target to aim for! I called to the Tower, “If I hit her before you do, I’ll never let you live it down.” I launched my first javelin at her.

“Bring it, Reaper!” The Irishman hurled his own with a speed I’d never seen from him.

Zara’s lightning deflected each of our shots, but was it striking more slowly? A dozen javelins flew, then two dozen.

Kentarch: “Seventy-six.”

Lark called, “Zara’s launching rockets!”

A multitude of bursts glowed from the copter’s launchers. Must be dozens. I told Joules, “We need your net of electricity!”

“Got it!” He took a deep breath and aimed two javelins, throwing them together. In the distance, they landed at the exact same time, sending up a vast barricade of sparking electricity.

I held my breath as the rockets neared . . . then reached his net.

One by one, they exploded in a fiery display. Zara fired again . . . and again . . . draining her arsenal.

When the barricade shut out every rocket, Joules yelled, “Who’s the MVP now, people?!”

Lark, Circe, and Evie cheered him on as Kentarch and Gabriel aimed their launchers above the barricade. Our own rockets would blast upward, then reacquire their target.

Kentarch: "Eighty-four." Still no direct hit, but impulsive Zara had fired at least half of her rockets to weaken Joule's barricade.

When its sparks tapered, he launched a second pair of spears. Sweat clung to his brow, and his body moved more slowly. Without his wall of electricity, we'd be annihilated.

Gabriel must have had the same thought. "As the classic song goes, it's time for me to fly. I will soar well above Fortune's lightning and deploy my net."

I shook my head. "Hold, Archangel. Her defense is too powerful." A fear scratched at my consciousness—one I'd worried about prior to the battle. I couldn't even acknowledge it right now.

Gabriel's hawklike gaze locked on his struggling friend. "He can only do this for so long."

The Tower raised his chin. "I've got this, birdbrain!"

"Yes, but I can help." In a strange voice, Gabriel added, "I'll be back. *Hasta la vista*, baby."

Even amid all this pressure, Joules cackled at his best friend, their camaraderie palpable. "*Terminator*? You're the craic, you know that?"

When I tilted my head at the Angel in confusion, he shrugged his wings. "I have culture now, Reaper."

"We'll try another tactic first." I turned to Fauna. "Release the wolves."

"Got it, boss!" Her eyes pulsed with bloodlust as her pack sped from their cover toward the copter, howling aggressively. Lark had awaited this moment for years, and her wolves were the largest and strongest they'd ever been. She rapped her claws together with eagerness. "Your whirlybird's going down, bitch."

Suddenly her wolves stumbled, plowing into each other, whimpering.

"Ahhhh!" Lark screamed, holding her ears as she collapsed to her knees. "Zara's blasting . . . something ultrasonic." I heard nothing, but Lark and her wolves writhed on the ground.

Gabriel too muffled his hearing.

Damn it, I should have anticipated this!

Wincing with pain, the Archangel grabbed his net and bounded into the sky. He gave the Tower a salute with one wing, then turned to the task at

hand.

“Birdbrain! Get back here!”

I called, “Wait, Gabriel, not yet!”

Evie peered up at the sky. “Aric, it’s too soon for him.”

I bellowed, “Gabriel, return!” Could the Archangel even hear me over that blaster?

When he flew on without looking back, I ordered the others, “Hold fire!”

Sol sagged as he set his launcher down. Kentarch too rested a moment.

I spied Gabriel through the clouds. He’d made it above the lightning storm, was straining his giant wings against the winds to maneuver into position.

We all waited, scarcely daring to breathe; Joules muttered a prayer.

Then Fortune’s approach slowed to a stop, the Emperor holding back as well. Was she *trying* to assist Gabriel’s air raid? “What are they waiting for?”

I’d just voiced the question when I heard something in the background. No.

Ting . . . ting . . . ting . . . ting . . .

The freeze appeared like an outward wave from Fortune, here to defend her—the fear I hadn’t wanted to acknowledge. She and the Emperor were unaffected, but the cold would kill us instantly.

“Get to the Chariot!” I grabbed Evie and sprinted toward him. He could ghost us until the front passed. “Form a chain.”

The freeze was a hundred feet away and closing in fast.

Joules ran to Kentarch, yelling, “Get down here, Gabe! Hie yer arse back here! *Please.*”

Would Gabriel hear the telltale sound of the freeze? Sense it nearing?

Still clutching her ears, Lark directed her wolves to retreat to the barn, but Maneater would never make it. Lark and the wolf loped toward the Chariot.

I helped Evie get to him, then grabbed Lark with my other hand while she kept hold of Maneater’s scruff. Joules snared Kentarch’s other arm, extending his free hand to Circe and Sol.

Fifty feet away.

The Chariot could preserve our lives, but not our weapons. “Sol, you must defeat the freeze. Our launchers will shatter, and we’ll lose the river.”

The Sun nodded. "I'll do what I can."

Ten feet away. "Now, Kentarch. Now, Sol."

They engaged their powers just before the freeze hit. We felt nothing but the shivery sensation of ghosting. As the Chariot protected us, Sol's eyes provided heat for our weapons. Would the focused beams be enough to combat the freeze aloft, where Gabriel flew?

My breaths sounded loud in my ears. I peered down at Evie's face, read the fear in her eyes. If Kentarch or Sol faltered, could she regenerate from this?

"We have to retreat," she murmured. "Sol and Kentarch will be weakened by this, and Zara's still too strong. *Richter's* too strong." Her gaze held mine. "Not tonight, Aric."

If we teleported to the castle, Zara and Richter would firebomb it. We needed a true retreat. Though my blood boiled to continue this battle, our enemies had outgunned us. I told Kentarch, "Teleport us to the hangar."

"No, Tarch!" Joules cried. "We canna leave Gabe."

Sol's light began to dim. Kentarch clenched his jaw, his muscles knotted with strain. Each second depleted their reserves.

Joules scanned the skies for Gabriel. "Where the feck is he?" The Tower turned to me. "Can you see him?"

"I don't." Yet then I heard a roar of sheer agony somewhere in the clouds.

Joules paled. "Did you hear a yell? Is that my boyo?" He swallowed thickly, brows drawn. "In *pain*?"

"I can't see him."

Kentarch's outline wavered even more. Would he have enough power left to teleport us away?

Lark bit out, "We've got to leave. The Chariot can't keep going like this."

Circe steadied Sol as he staggered, yet he still shone. Between breaths, he asked, "How can we tell if the freeze is still fatal?"

With a cry, Lark released Maneater; the wolf froze solid with a whimper. "Fatal!"

Sol's eyes went wide. "Just a little more, Kentarch! We can do this."

Then a black shimmer in the air seized my attention.

Gabriel.

His body was like a tableau, magnificent wings outstretched, net in hand. Expression of anguish frozen on his lifeless face.

I watched in horror as Gabriel Arendgast, the great Archangel, plummeted to the earth.

Joules blinked in disbelief. “Not Gabe. No, no.”

A flash memory arose of the night I’d fled Zara’s copter with four Arcana in my truck. . . .

Joules urged his best friend to safety. “Leave me, Gabe.”

The angel answered, “If I had a dollar for every time you have said those words . . . And I give you my customary reply: Never.”

Now Joules watched Gabriel fall with glinting eyes, begging, “Don’t leave me, Gabe. Don’t leave me—”

The angel’s body crashed into the ground not thirty feet from us. Despite Sol’s diminishing light, Gabe . . . shattered. His head rolled from his neck, wings in fractured blocks. His face remained whole, his whitened eyes seeming to stare at us.

Zara’s luck had struck, sending the freeze to guard her against him. She’d murdered the virtuous angel, our gentleman ally and friend.

Evie shrieked with fury.

Joules yelled right along with her. “*I’LL KILL YOU, ZARA!*”

“Do not release your hands, Tower,” I grated.

He seethed to lash out at Fortune—but if he let go of Kentarch, then he, Circe, and Sol would all freeze instantly.

Instead of meting vengeance, he had to do something much harder: take no action while beholding the remains of his best friend. “*Not Gabe. Not Gabe.*” Tears coursed down his face, cold tracks on his sparking skin.

Circe gave a cry. “No more electricity! I can’t hold on to you like this.”

I ordered, “Chariot, get us out of here.”

“No, Tarch, don’t do it! No retreat! We finish this tonight. We’ll see our loved ones on the other side. Do you understand me?”

Kentarch’s determined nod decided our fate. For better or worse, this battle would rage on.

Sol’s eyes blinkered, his rays eclipsed to nothing. Was Kentarch reaching his own limits?

With a final yell, the Chariot solidified, his powers tapped out. I took Evie into my arms, bracing. She shuddered against me. . . .

We lived yet! The freeze must have ended. But now we had no retreat—

Fortune's bullets rained down in a crazed bombardment, and the ground quaked.

"Get to the foxholes!" I yelled, scooping up Evie as I ran.

The Emperor rattled the earth, shaking us like dice as I careened toward the closest foxhole, the others behind us. I couldn't keep my balance. Bullets chewed the dirt at our feet. Fortune adjusted her gun and fired again. Seven bullets struck my armor's backplate and ricocheted behind me.

Kentarch bit back a yell.

I glanced over my shoulder, couldn't believe my vision. Blood poured from his torso and spurting from the end of his left arm.

The Chariot's remaining hand . . . was gone.

I dropped Evie into the foxhole, then returned to help Kentarch and the others to cover. Lark huddled beside Evie, shaking in pain from that blaster. Her wolves howled with misery from the barn.

Evie slashed her jacket to make a tourniquet for Kentarch, who sat grim-faced and stunned. She injected him with something from her claws, but he didn't seem to register it.

There'd be no teleporting me into Richter. Evie would have to handle the Emperor. For now, I needed to take down Fortune.

I ran back across the quaking landscape for Joules, but he wouldn't come, was firing back at the guns-hot helicopter.

"Feckin' kill you, Zara!" He attacked in a mad rage, hurling javelins with mind-boggling speed. My hair stood on end beneath my helmet.

He was draining her reserves; would it be enough?

Evie yelled from the foxhole, "Aric, get Joules out of there!" She'd climbed up to the edge, keeping me in sight. "Carry him back."

"Can't." If I touched his sparking skin, he'd electrocute me. But I could shield him. "Stay behind me, Tower!"

Out of his head with grief, he didn't seem to register my words.

A dozen bullets meant for him clanged off my armor, the force threatening to send me to my knees. I deflected more with my swords, but the quakes made it impossible to balance, and currents licked at me whenever I got too close to Joules. "Damn it, Tower"—I yelled over the sound of her guns—"you must get behind me!"

With furious tears in his eyes, Joules hurled yet another javelin. "This one's for Gabe—"

The Lord of Lightning's body crumpled to the ground, just as he'd landed a direct hit.

The Hunter

“If they survive, I’m goan to dog-cuss them up and down,” I told Tee. I sounded calm, but my mind felt like it was on fire. “Your *père’s* a slippery one, lemme tell you. He let me think I’d be at that battle, and all along he had me pegged for babysitting duty. Your *mère* too.” I talked to dispel my nervousness. The empty hangar felt weird without the guys.

Wanted a sip of whiskey to settle my nerves, but I needed to stay sharp when handling precious cargo. Tonight Tee would be the only one hitting a bottle. After I’d gotten him to stop crying, I’d mixed him up some formula, which he’d finished. But instead of nodding off, he continued to look alert and concerned.

I’d transferred a clean baby bottle and more formula to my bug-out bag and kept it on, just in case Kentarch returned to move us in a hurry. Now I would work on getting Tee—and me—to relax some. “How you doing, little podna?” For the first time, he had no mama, papa, or aunties around. Just him and ole Jack. “Hey, I got an idea. Let’s open your presents. Serves them right for abandoning me.”

I sat Tee in my lap and unwrapped the first one: a bottle of sunblock from Sol. His card read: *You’ll need this one day, I promise. Love, your fabulous Uncle Sol.* Though I’d had my doubts about Solomón Heliodoro, Evie had been right about him. He was a good guy through and through. Except for when he was ditching me.

I unwrapped a second gift. “This one’s from Gabe. He’s a real live angel.” Gabriel had given Tee a single candle and a handmade card: *Tee, shine brightest in darkness. Warmest regards, Gabriel Arendgast.*

Even that forthright angel had been in on the *Plan J* ruse. He and I would have words later.

I unwrapped Kentarch's gift. A wooden lion. He must've carved it in secret. I might have wondered how he'd done it with one hand, but Kentarch was full of surprises.

Like tonight's.

I raised my brows at Joules's present. Calanthe's sai. His note read:

Kid, I don't trust your mam with these, so you'll have to see that they get passed down and delivered to my Cally.

I rolled my eyes but kept reading.

In all seriousness, your mam's a decent sort and one hell of a fighter. And once she sets her mind to something, watch out. Peace among Arcana? Sure thing, lady. And yet here I am, writing to you like I'm your bloody uncle or something. And your father? As far as Grim Reapers go, I guess I've met worse.

Give them hell, laddie, and know that I'll be a bad influence on you as long as I live.

Patrick Joules.

"Just when I think I'm about to hit my limit of that Irishman, he goes and reminds me that he's stand-up. Cantankerous as the night is long, but stand-up."

I reached for the last present. "And this one's from your godfather." I tore open the wrapping and showed Tee a framed picture of Evie, the one when she'd watched a sunset over the Gulf. He ran a pudgy forefinger over the glass, petting her face. "Yeah, you know who that is. Mama."

She had better fucking come back from that battle. If this was all Tee had of his mother . . . I squeezed my eyes closed.

I opened them to find him peering at me. *Blink blink. Lip bubbles.*

"*Exactement*, little podna, these *are* great gifts. You got some real nice folks in your life. I just wish I'd been in on the action with them." I knew their hearts were in the right place, but still . . .

I got up and crossed to the jukebox and entered the number of an old favorite. Tee was asleep before Otis crooned his second *wastin' tiiiime*.

I gazed down at the baby resting against my chest so trustingly. Made me want to challenge every villain on earth for him. But I was stuck here.

Brun radioed not long after. I was glad for anything to take my mind off my worry. Keeping Tee in my arms, I headed into the office.

After a terse greeting, she got right to it. "Things are bad here, Jack."

I'd held back a lot of information from her—like Tee's existence—but I decided to share tonight's headline. "The battle with Richter is happening right now."

She gave a cry of excitement. "They might all kill each other off! Hell, we could have sunlight by tomorrow."

Matthew was still outstanding; if the sun shone, then Evie had died alongside all the others. *Please doan shine. Please, God, doan let it shine.* "Can't do this tonight, me. Gotta go."

"I know you love the Empress . . ."

I was holding Evie's precious son in my lap and would die for her and this kid.

". . . but these late-game Arcana battles usually rack up the casualties. If the Fool stayed away, he's going to be our winner."

The Empress

A scream burst from my lungs when Joules fell.

The others and I had peeked up from our cover to watch his revenge. Now he lay on the ground, looking so small and young. His lifeless head rolled to the side, revealing a ragged bullet wound to the forehead. His opened eyes saw nothing. Mine watered with loss.

With Joules's death, Richter stopped his quakes. A last aftershock here and there. As predicted, the Emperor was letting us have at Fortune.

Electricity sparked all over the helicopter, but Zara somehow righted it and hovered even closer. Inside the cockpit, I saw her laughing as she yanked off a glove to view her new icons.

She'd killed two of my friends. She'd murdered Joules and Gabe. Fury surged through me, the red witch rising.

Aric collected Joules's body and rushed back to the foxhole, laying him down inside. "We need a plan for Zara."

I stared at Joules, then at Kentarch's bloody wounds, then at Circe's and Sol's defeated expressions. Lark's whimper and the drone of that helicopter were our incessant soundtrack.

Shaking with rage, I created more vines from my body. "The plan is to catch a copter." The vines leapt to attention, shooting toward the sky.

Zara targeted them and shredded them with bullets, but I ignored the pain and grew more.

Aric removed his helmet to wipe sweat from his face. "You can't take her down. You must conserve for Richter."

"I can do this."

“I’ll help,” Sol said, though he was still pale. He blinked his eyes and provided what he could. His small burst of light allowed me to stretch and stretch.

I reached Zara’s skids, latching on. God, that machine was powerful! Her engine revved, but I began to pull her down.

Fortune fired her last missile on us, so I gave her a good shake. More of my vines caught the missile, engulfing it, neutralizing it for the others, but I felt each bite of metal and fire as it exploded.

Zara’s guns spewed a torrent of bullets right at the edge of the foxhole, turning it into a tornado of dirt and chaos. And all the while her copter strained against my hold.

Shrill whistles sounded. Rockets!

Aric covered me, ordering the others, “*Brace.*”

“I’ve got this.” Communing with my vines, I sensed the rockets above, was able to catch them all in a pillow of green. Each detonation was an explosion inside me. *PAIN* . . . Gasping, I said, “How many of those does she have left?”

Instead of a number, Kentarch bit out, “Too many.”

I swallowed and lied, “It’s not a problem.”

Aric said, “If you insist on this course, Evie, then I will capitalize on it.” He pulled me close for a fierce kiss, then donned his helmet again. Before I could stop him, he’d leapt from the shelter with his sword raised to draw Zara’s fire.

“Over here, Fortune!”

“No, Aric!” I scrambled up to the edge of the foxhole, Circe and Sol beside me.

Despite his injuries, Kentarch had clambered up to watch as well, was still in this. We all held our breath as Aric reached my vines, then started to climb them.

“*¡Ay, venga!*” Sol cried. “He’s going to attack her in her own helicopter.”

“No! I can force him back.”

Circe whipped her head around to me. “Don’t you dare. Let Death do what he always has done. Let him reap her.”

“She’s too powerful!” As predicted, she couldn’t be fought.

“You assume he’s not?”

Kentarch grated, "Help Death find his footing. Do this for him, Empress."

Heart in my throat, I relented and grew branches to help Aric climb. Zara banked to wrench free of my hold, but I commanded my vines to steady her.

Beneath the skids, Aric swung himself upward and landed just above the gun deck. He slashed his sword at her rocket launcher, and a shower of sparks cascaded down.

Sol raised a fist. "Take her down!"

Kentarch said, "He dismantled all her remaining rockets." Was his voice getting weaker? Even with my coagulant, he'd lost so much blood.

Circe said, "No mishaps. No *misfortune*. Is she empty?"

Was Zara's luck done? If she experienced a burst of adrenaline, could she tap into another reserve?

I'd just had the thought when two lightning bolts lanced my vines. Clenching my fists against the pain, I held on to her, driving her closer to the ground.

From way too far above us, Aric yelled, "Release it, Evie!"

More lightning struck my vines, but I refused to let him go.

Zara shoved the nose down and shot her guns at the foxhole. I forced her in another direction, and bullets pitted rocks in the distance. All the while, I struggled to reel her in, to get Aric closer to safety.

Clearly not caring about his own welfare, he stabbed his sword into the cockpit to pry open the glass. Zara was just there! Alarms blared from the craft.

Another bolt flashed near them, the light blinding me. I blinked furiously. Oh, God, it'd struck him directly. "Aric!"

He staggered, but still clung to the side of the copter.

His helmet *was gone*.

I screamed "Drop down, now! Leave her!"

He either ignored me or couldn't hear me.

Fear shallowed my breaths until I was hyperventilating, my abilities weakening.

Zara drew a pistol from her jump seat and aimed it; Aric knocked it from her hand!

The copter surged upward. Barely hanging on, Aric raised his sword to deliver the killing blow.

Lightning struck again, hitting his weapon. He somehow kept his grip on his sword. Somehow *didn't die*. How could he withstand that?

The next seconds seemed to move in slow motion.

The copter pitched, the force throwing Aric forward into the cockpit; Zara raised her hands to shove him away.

Her hand must have grazed his face. As they shared a glance, her eyes turned purple, then black branched out over her bared arms.

Circe yelled, "Yes, reap her!"

"Touch of Death!" Sol howled. "Take that, Zara!"

She shrieked in agony, her limbs flailing as she thrashed against her safety harness.

But her luck theft had struck just as Aric's power had—veins of purple forked out across his face.

"Aric!" I cried.

With a last crescendo of spasms and screams, Zara slumped, lifeless. Fortune was no more.

I screamed to Aric, "Get out of there!" Her power would die with her. Right?

Fire broke out in the cockpit, those alarms going crazy. I couldn't think past fear. Couldn't concentrate on my vines as I grappled to land Aric.

The copter banked as if in death throes, taking me and my vines by surprise. He leapt away, but the burning cockpit seemed to scoop him from the air.

He must've hit the controls. With a deafening whine, the helicopter plunged toward the ground.

The Empress

I tried to sense Aric through my vines, past the flames and smoke. Before they could yank him free, he'd jumped.

I attempted to catch him in midair. Missed.

Breathless moments passed until he hit the ground, rolling to his feet.

When he stood, I nearly vomited in relief.

Just like in the movies, Aric swaggered toward us as an explosion boomed behind him. He was returning to me, alive and unharmed. The hero.

But we weren't in the clear. I climbed from the foxhole. "Find your helmet and put it on!" I shouted. His luck had been stolen. Who knew what could happen?

He spotted his helmet and retrieved it. With a look of relief, he donned it. Safe. Armored.

My knees went weak.

He opened his arms to me, and I limped toward him. All I wanted to do was give him a piece of my mind. But with Fortune gone, the Emperor advanced on us. The air grew hotter, the quakes starting up once more. I yelled, "Richter's coming!"

Sol raced from the foxhole to reach his station again. He hefted a launcher, letting a rocket fly, then another. Another. Each hit sent up puffs of smoke as Richter defended himself.

The copter crash must've destroyed that ultrasonic blaster; Lark's wolves returned from the barn, snarling to join the fray.

Circe and a visibly shaken Lark helped Kentarch limp from the foxhole. He was reeling from blood loss and injured worse than I'd realized, but he directed them to set him against a bullet-pitted tree—a front-row seat to the finale?

Circe turned to the river's edge and raised her hands to summon a tidal wave, while Lark sent another swarm of bats to dive-bomb Richter.

We were still in this! We had wolves, rockets, a wave, and the Endless Knight. If we all worked together, we had a shot. I'd almost reached Aric, was parting my lips to tell him not to take risks like that—

Another explosion sounded behind him. The copter again?

He stumbled.

I couldn't comprehend what I was seeing.

A piece of the rotor had cleaved through his impenetrable armor. Through *his side*.

His helmeted head tilted down as he glanced at the gaping wound. He dropped to his knees.

I shrieked, "*Nooo!*" I sprinted for him, catching him as he collapsed to his back. "How? Your armor?" Nothing remained on that side of his torso, just . . . a wash of blood. "No, no, no." I yanked his helmet off, stunned by his expression.

Acceptance.

"Win, Evie." Blood spilled from his lips. "In the next game, find me."

He can't die; he won't die. This couldn't be happening. "Stay with me! You stay with me, Aric."

"Letters for you, Tee, and Jack. In my chronicles. Forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive! You're not going to die. I won't let you!" Even as I said those words, I felt myself changing into the red witch. Claws gone sharp. Glyphs aglow.

"*Sievā*, your tableau is turning. I see it . . . reversing."

Reverse, perverse. Was I about to succumb to the dark calling—when uncontrollable emotion reversed an Arcana?

Over my shoulder, I yelled, "Lark!"

She scrambled over.

"Heal Aric! If you can create flesh, you can heal him."

She gave a shaky nod. "I'll try."

As she sliced her arm with her claws, Aric grated to me, "Fight the Emperor, but then you must find a way to harness your power. Return to

Evie.” His eyes pleaded. “For our son. Everything for Tee.”

“We’re going to save you!” I turned to Lark. “Now!”

She poured crimson into Aric’s wound.

“The Emperor’s coming,” he said, more blood spilling from his lips. “You must be ready. You kill him here. Or you all die.”

“Lark!”

Her eyes glowed red, her fangs lengthening. Her body thrummed with power—but nothing happened.

Sinews and tissue had appeared as if by magic with that last beast she’d created. Here . . . *nothing*. “I-I can’t do humans! I can’t resurrect a person.” Her brows drew together. “I never could.”

Aric’s eyes were unseeing when he told me, “Read my letter. Tell our son . . . how much I adored him. And please, Evie, know that you are my heart. *Es tevi mīlu*. I believe in you.”

Kentarch yelled, “Incoming!” A colossal fireball bore down, heading right for us.

I couldn’t move Aric in time.

“Go, Evie.”

Leave him? “*NEVER!*”

Lark struggled to pull me up and yank me away. “Come on! Move, damn it!” At the last second, she lunged to safety.

Flames engulfed me and Aric. *Shock*. As I stared in horror, his face twisted with pain for a split second before life left his burning body.

Yet for some reason the flames didn’t affect me. I only felt a slight pressure around my neck.

Oh. Kentarch had wrapped a bloody forearm around me, was using his powers.

He’d teleported over to save my life, but he couldn’t seem to evacuate us. So he ghosted us, yelling from the effort to protect me.

He hadn’t been able to help Aric. When the flames abated, Death’s armor was empty. Only fluttering ash inside. His helmet rocked back and forth in the breeze.

He was gone. Murdered. *No. Not possible.*

Kentarch collapsed beside me. I couldn’t tell if he was still breathing.

Was I?

Shock. Real? Unreal?

Richter rode a flow of lava closer to the river, to Circe's wave. "Burned to a crisp, Empress! I just played the Death Card. Man, has anything ever tasted so good?" He threw back his head and laughed.

That laughter. When I thought he'd murdered my Jack, that sound had haunted me.

I'd been wrong about Jack's death, but I couldn't deny what I'd just witnessed. Aric Domīnija, the Endless Knight, was gone.

That *laughter*.

I made it to my feet. The river steamed as Richter drew closer.

Sol fired his last rocket. "I'm out!"

Lark dove to the stockpile of munitions, scrambling to help him reload. "All my animals are just melting. I need to keep the wolves close."

Circe yelled, "My turn!" Sweat dripped from her forehead as she fought to control her wave. Her raised hands shook, her scales reflecting Richter's flames. "No closer, fire starter."

We all knew—even Richter—that the wave wouldn't make a dent in his miles of lava.

With a scream, she directed it to crest above him . . . poised . . .

The surge crashed down over his heat with a blast of steam.

Back and forth went Aric's helmet.

Real or unreal? A tormented sound left my lungs.

Richter emerged, glowing even brighter. "You can't fight fire without fire, sea bitch! It was always going to go down like this." The river was gone, the bed drying up as he rode his piping swath closer.

Sol launched another rocket.

Richter melted it. "You traitor!" He hurled a fireball.

It passed me and Kentarch by as Sol, Lark, and Circe dove for cover in the foxhole, narrowly avoiding the flame.

The Chariot hadn't flinched. Had probably died.

Like Aric. Aric was dead. Murdered. Nothing could bring my husband back.

Richter headed for me now. His lava coated the ground around him, devouring my vines and trees. Cinders and ash floated upward in the sky, like anti-rain. Mighty oaks collapsed under the onslaught. I felt every searing wound, but it was nothing compared to my grief.

From here, I saw the Emperor's fire red eyes and his naked body cloaked in hellfire. Several icons covered his meaty hands.

Aric's icon. Because Aric was dead.
Dead.

At last, fury cleared the haze in my mind. Bile burned in my throat, and my claws dripped poison. Nothing mattered beyond taking that icon. My red hair grew long like a weeping willow, my rose crown twining atop my head. When the ground quaked *from me*—from my soldiers deep in the earth—I murmured, “From the grave, we rise for you.”

Trouble with the possibility of rubble? Yes.

Richter rode that undulating lava closer, sneering, “Tonight’s our night, Empress. Ever since I read about you, I knew you’d be mine.”

Circe yelled, “Lark, do something! Protect Evie.”

She and her wolves mustered in front of me. “Stay behind us, Eves.” Then, to Richter: “You want some of this, Zippo?”

But I shuffled her and her pack away with more vines. “I have it from here.” My grandmother had told me, *Until you fully embrace your viciousness, you have no chance against the Emperor.*

Time for an embrace.

Why not? Aric was dead. If Kentarch was as well, then how could I reach my son again? Was Tee lost to me?

I had always been heading toward this: cataclysm.

As my bottomless pit of rage spilled over, my glyphs lit the night more than the Emperor’s flames. His smoke was as thick as spores, but my plants sucked it from the air.

“One on one?” His face split into a macabre grin. “I like that. This is going to be fun. You don’t look like a crier. But you will be.”

His torture in a previous game still eluded my memory. As if I needed more rage. I hadn’t been able to fight back then—hadn’t yet realized what I was. “You hate me.” With sudden understanding, I said, “You hate women.”

He nodded. “I do. Every last one of you.” He licked his lips. “But it’s you I’ve wanted.”

Because you don’t know what I am. “And it’s me you deserve.” I beckoned him with my thorn-tipped fingers. “Come to me, Richter, *touch.*”

“I don’t expect you to surrender without a fight. Good thing you regenerate.” Like a shot, he launched a beam of fire at me.

I threw my hands up and created a wooden shield. It burned, then regenerated, sloughing ash under new green life as his beam continued without mercy.

Realization: *He's playing with me.*

"Every Emperor is owed an Empress! I've come to collect mine!"

So much smoke and seething heat. So much rage to meet my own. The force of the beam sent me skidding backward, but I leaned into the shield.

Definitely playing with me. That was okay.

Because I was playing with him too.

My powers had unlocked as never before. My vines coursed out, seeking him. His lava torched them, so I sent another wave. And another.

His beam ended. I glanced from behind my shield to see his look of confusion. "You're giving me fuel to burn, you stupid bitch!"

"You've given me rage to burn. And it's never-ending!" How did one put out a fire using flammable wood?

By smothering it.

More of my vines slithered out like serpents. He scorched them all, but they kept coming. My soldiers beneath the earth quaked with readiness, growing beneath his lava. Soon larger trees erupted from the ground, stretching toward the sky, shaking off the flames in bursts of life-giving green. "We rise!"

I'd hoped one day to become a force of nature like my mother. Finally! I was abundance—could do this forever.

I was vine. I was the trees. I was the very earth. *Motherfucking* Earth. And she was about to wipe out Richter.

"You wanna play rough?" He aimed another beam at me. "That's my favorite way to play!"

Flames roared against my shield. This time, I advanced against him. No more losing ground for me. He'd had control of the ground for far too long.

His second beam sputtered to nothing, and he yelled with outrage. All around us, green choked his fires.

I tossed away my shield. "First rule of Arcana, Richter? *Conserve.*" Well, for all the players but me.

I marched forward, striking out into the knee-deep lava, my legs regenerating faster than he incinerated me. I felt no pain—*power!* My clothes burned to ash, so I replaced them with vines. At last, I was who I was meant to be.

The red witch.

When he saw me striding through lava with a smile on my face, his gaze darted. For an escape? I considered letting him think he might get away, but

I craved more icons. “I’ll slice you to ribbons and choke you in vine.” That breathy, evil voice.

His fists clenched at that, and he rode forward to meet me halfway. “You want it up close and personal? I can do that.” His hulking frame lurched forward to seize my neck with flaming hands. “I once took a girl’s head clean off like this.” Heat and pressure charred my skin. “You’re mine. You’ve always been mine!” He laughed as I burned.

I regenerated in his hold.

He increased the pressure.

I regenerated. *You burned Aric. But you can’t burn my rage.*

His expression showed his bafflement as his heat began to wane. The flames surrounding us sizzled out, leaving him naked and sooty. His hands no longer scalded, his lava cooling to charred rock.

“I can still overpower you!” He strangled me. “I am RICHTER.” His massive muscles flexed; I smiled. “Ahhh! I’ll kill you!”

As my throat healed instantly, his lungs heaved, his strength dying out. Though the clench of his hands loosened, he managed to give me a violent shake.

My body swung like a rag doll’s. But this doll had teeth.

Time to end this. I’d had so many plans for his long and excruciating murder, but I was eager to claim his icons—and my throne.

Eyes incensed, he bellowed, “I am destruction. *Destruction.* You’ll never be strong enough to beat a man like me!”

“And you’ll never be smart enough to realize this woman’s already done it.” From one of my glyphs, I pulled my most toxic spores and blew him a kiss.

They traipsed toward his face, like petals on a lazy breeze.

He coughed violently, but I’d already invaded his airways, swelling them shut. His breaths became pitiful wheezes. He dropped me and wrapped his hands around his own throat.

His frantic gaze widened, and I laughed at him. “Ah, finally some realization with this one! Yes, Richter, you *are* done.”

He collapsed to the leaf-covered ground, writhing at my feet. He gasped out, “Stop . . . *stop!*”

I tapped my chin with a thorn claw. “No.”

As he watched in horror, vines grew through his body like veins, slowly flaying him from the inside. Roots burrowed from beneath to feed on his

organs. A cage of thorns tightened over him, holding him steady for the carnage.

His death was a thousand times more painful than Aric's had been and seemed to go on for days. I knelt to inform him, "*You're paying the price.*" His last sight on earth was indeed my smiling face.

When his body went limp—all his fight and pain harvested—my smile dimmed. I stood and dusted off my palms.

Yet then my hand tingled. His ankh icon appeared on my skin. Fortune's wheel too. Nine other icons materialized.

Then came . . . a scythe. Aric was dead.

I lost my mind. Gladly. Because the heat of madness seared away my grief.

My rose crown turned to thorns to match my throne. *Power is my burden.* It weighed as much as a crown of thorns.

I was the May Queen. The Poison Princess. Lady Lotus. Phyta.

The Queen of Thorns.

The big battle had never been against Richter—it would be against myself. *I* was the most terrifying foe Evie had ever faced.

In the opening salvo, poor, sweet Evie retreated. And the earth convulsed.

All over the planet, vines burst into life, rocking continents. I transformed all those plants into black stalks and dispatched them to cover every inch of ground, turning my nightmares into reality. They dripped poison so toxic the soil smoked. Hell on earth?

Exquisite.

Through my vines, I sensed people across the globe weeping, knowing this was the true end. I gazed up at the sky, addressing the gods in a breathy purr: "*Do I have your attention?*" Surely I was the loudest megaphone that had ever lived.

"Empress, stand down," the Priestess said from behind me. "The day is won."

"Won? *Won?*" I whirled around. I was the red witch, and I didn't leave survivors. I would kill Evie's "friends" and desecrate them. Black roses would bloom from their bodies. "It isn't won until I'm the last Arcana left." After I ended these players, I'd begin my search for the Fool. My vines would find him.

The Priestess sucked in a breath. "Your tableau is reversed."

“Or *righted*.”

The Sun flanked her and Fauna. He muttered something in Spanish that sounded like a prayer, then said, “*Pequeña*, let’s talk about this.”

I crept closer, my vines coiling behind me.

“Evie, don’t do this,” Fauna pleaded. “I don’t want to hurt you.” Her wolves positioned themselves in front of her.

I blew spores at the pack. They fell to the ground and yelped in pain, which Lark clearly felt. “I’m not Evie. I’m the Empress.”

With her chin upturned, Fauna raised her claws. I raised mine in turn. My glyphs illuminated the dripping poison.

She whimpered like an animal and dropped her hands.

The Priestess’s eyes showed the depths of her despair over me. Had she come to believe I wouldn’t hurt her? She had! Delicious.

“Courage, friends,” she said to the others. “This is where we die.”

The Empress

“It doesn’t have to hurt,” I told the three Arcana. “You’ll just go to sleep.” My vines shot around them, entangling them as if in a web.

“Evie, you’re still in there.” Fauna struggled against my hold, a fly for a hungry spider. “Think about what you’re doing!”

“There’s no shame in surrender.”

She muttered, “Circe, do something. Hit her with a wave.”

The Priestess’s fists clenched as she strained to control what remained of the river.

I laughed when puddles sloshed the banks.

She told Fauna and the Sun, “Nothing can stop her now.”

“Nothing,” I agreed. “Nothing in existence—”

Movement to my side. The Chariot had roused! His anguished gaze took in the scene.

My prisoners and new look. The Emperor’s body in a cage of thorns.

Before my vines caught the Chariot, he’d teleported.

I shrieked with frustration, tightening my hold on the others. Now I’d have to hunt down both him and the Fool.

No matter. *Though it’s not my way, I can hunt.* Like Demeter, I would scour the earth for them—and for my child. I gazed back at the three Arcana. “Where were we?” Ah, yes, icons up for grabs. Yet a sense of déjà vu struck me, as if I’d been in this very position before.

The Priestess raised her chin. “This wasn’t what Death wanted.”

Fauna added, “He told you to find your way back! You gotta bring Evie back.”

Hardly. If even *I* felt the loss of Death this keenly, Evie would never recover. She couldn't survive this hellscape or protect Tee. I was best suited for the apocalypse.

It had always been awaiting me. Mother Nature had an ax to grind, would withhold viciously—

The Chariot returned; he wasn't alone. He'd teleported to the hangar to fetch Jack and Tee.

"*Evangeline?*" Jack hugged the baby tighter, his gaze flicking from my face to my crown to all the destruction around us. He did a double take at Aric's armor. "What the hell's goan on?"

My vines shot out to the Chariot once more. Before I seized him, he collapsed.

His lids slid closed, his wife's name on his lips. "*Issa . . .*" He had no hands, yet he still reached for her as he died.

"Kentarch!" Hugging Tee close, Jack bent down to take the man's pulse. "He's . . . gone."

I hadn't killed him, but I now wore his murderer's icon, so the Chariot's also belonged to me. Sure enough, a new symbol shivered across my hand: the proud head of a horse.

"Gabe and Joules, too? Domīnija?" The grief in Jack's expression called to Evie's, so I buried her deeper. Instead of grief, I gloried in my collection of icons.

Jack rose and told me, "You've got to rein this in, Evie."

"She's about to kill us." The Priestess struggled against the vines. "Betraying us yet again."

"*Peekôn*, you're not a murderer. You're loyal to your friends, always have been. You're goan to snap out of this."

When Tee started sniffing, I reached out my clawed fingers toward Jack. "Give me my son."

"Okay, *mais yeah*, but just hold on now. Kentarch used the last of his strength to teleport me here, and I'm goan to bring you back."

"Oh, there's no hope of that."

"There's always hope. You said I was your reminder that you want to be good. Your link to humanity."

"That was before—when I *wanted* to go back. I don't anymore. In the choice between good and evil, I'll choose evil."

"You doan mean that. Let me pull you to safety."

“I don’t want safety. Or humanity, for that matter. The monsters will just keep coming. I have to protect my son from them.”

“There’s more left than that! I used to think that way, but I was wrong. Good still exists.”

My vines shot toward Jack and pried my son loose. Tee began crying in earnest, which added to my agitation.

Jack fought me. “Stop this! You stop it right now.” He was no match for my vines. None of them were.

I shoved Jack away and cradled my son to me. “Come here, little love.”

When I blocked Jack from getting closer, he yelled, “You’re not evil! I’ll never believe that, Evie. *Jamais*.”

My son’s cries quieted as he stared up at me in shocked fear. I saw myself reflected in his eyes: leaf-strewn hair, glyphs glowing across my pale skin, gaze burning with malice. Clearly, I *was* evil. “Oh, I am, Jack. And I have been for so long.”

Tee would grow used to me. He’d have to. Because when I was done with the world, it’d be drenched in poison. Only we two could thrive.

Even now black vines were covering everywhere soil had dared to dream. They strangled mountains and licked at the Priestess’s domain.

Poison. Misery. Suffering.

Yet Tee flinched from me. From me? His mother! His face scrunched up, and he burst into tears again.

“Evie, doan you hurt that boy! We can’t ever come back from that.”

I absently said, “I would never hurt him.” But wouldn’t I? Wouldn’t I hurt all humans?

As I stared down at him, he stared back—as if I were a stranger. Which meant he’d lost not only his father this night, but his mother as well.

A wave of dizziness hit me, joined by excruciating pressure on my temples, like my head was cracking open. With my mind all but forced wide, memories flowed as if from a fountainhead.

A scene arose from a far distant time. I gasped as it bloomed in my consciousness, unfurling to catch ever more light. Words left my lips: “I remember . . . the first game. I remember Tar Ro.” The sacred realm and arena created for our *play*.

The Fool must’ve given me these recollections, but I’d never seen them before now.

As if unable to help herself, the Priestess asked, “What was it like?”

“Heaven and hell mixed together. Beauty and danger for us at every turn.”

Jack fell silent. Even Tee, cradled in vines, eventually quieted.

I pressed my fingers against my pounding temples. “We four—along with the Fool—were the last ones left. Were in an alliance.” The Sun must’ve come along later in that game. The players before me looked different, though their eyes had been the same.

Temperance’s chronicles—which had underwhelmed me when I’d scanned them—were now the opening wedge to pry up memories of *us*. “We were the Dawnrider, the Beast Whisperer, the Abysmal, and the Betrayer.”

I had been the Betrayer.

I’d lured them all into a trap, surrounding them with vine, but they hadn’t realized they were about to die, hadn’t recognized any threat from me, an ally they trusted.

Millennia later, these Arcana had made the same mistake again.

The Priestess forced herself to relax against my hold. “What happened to us?” I all but heard her thinking, *Keep the Empress talking*, while she mustered up another wave as the river refilled. But she would never strike me with her godson so close.

“Matthew won it, right?” Fauna said in a high voice, catching on to her friend’s *stall the Empress* plan. Her wolves had resurrected from my spore attack and crouched closer.

Soon I would seize that pack and disembowel them while Fauna watched. She would *feel* every ragged rip of her familiars’ flesh. And once I’d killed her, they would never return.

“Tell us more, *pequeña*.” The Sun too had stopped struggling. “Talk about this history.” Had his eyes lightened a fraction? Ready to strike me mad?

I nearly laughed. I’d just covered the earth in thorns and poison; actions didn’t get much more insane than that. Besides, I knew none of them would risk this baby. “The Fool was the Gamekeeper. Right when I was about to secretly strike against you, he brought a message from the gods, granting us a choice. We could end ourselves and the game, or it would persist forever, spreading out from Tar Ro and annihilating humans. We spat at the offer, choosing to continue our bid for immortality.”

It had all been a test—one we'd failed. No wonder the Fool had reacted so strangely whenever I'd demanded we end the game. The gods had *already given us* that possibility.

The Priestess asked, "Is that why he eliminated you?"

I nodded. "The gods sent their Gamekeeper to kill us all. He'd had no choice."

I glanced over at the Chariot's body. Since that offer, we'd all been caught in a loop, just as he had been in this life. In six or seven hundred years, I'd be right where I was now—having learned nothing, having lost everything.

Again.

We were just puppets to the gods, born for one purpose, and cursed to repeat it for eternity. I whispered, "We're in hell." Death had told me we'd been damned, but I'd never quite grasped that fact until now.

Sadness filled the Priestess's eyes. "Yes. We are."

Unless we all escaped tonight. The Empress didn't get trapped. And she didn't perform for the entertainment of others.

The red witch resisted Evie's efforts to surface. I was being foolish! Wouldn't I rather be evil and immortal than decent and dying?

As the witch strained for control, I gazed down at Tee. I was about to give him a never-ending nightmare! How would he ever find love or friendship? Would his eyes never scan a horizon for the return of a beloved?

Inside, I warred with the witch, quelling her hunger for icons, for bloody battle. *Everything for Tee.*

Over this game, I'd seen symbols everywhere—infinity symbols, a bow, a jagged fracture of rock like a lightning bolt, and more—all waypoints on a journey that had led me here.

To look down into a baby's eyes.

Sudden understanding suffused me. *This* was why he'd been born. He wasn't the salvation. I was. Kentarch and we four Arcana were. Tee had only bought me time to realize it. The fate of the world would turn because I'd seen myself reflected in my son's eyes.

He was indeed a miniature of the man I'd loved and lost. But there was a little bit of me in his appearance. My mother too. Would he be fierce like her?

Would I?

Words left my lips: “I don’t play games where I don’t make the rules.” How many times had I said that in the past? Now was my last chance to put those bold words into brave action. “I’m bowing out.”

Circe clenched her jaw, then grudgingly said, “You can’t. We can’t *all* live. We must die for the world to come back.”

Crying over my mother’s body, I’d sworn to her that I would do anything I could to fix the world. Killing my friends wasn’t what I’d had in mind.

I might have been the Betrayer in the past, but I never would be again. “Says who?”

Tee’s tears eased—because I was changing, becoming his mother once more. The thorns in my crown turned into flowers, and my claws receded.

Withhold viciously. Or give lavishly.

I’d despaired of discovering the point to this game, the lesson we were meant to learn.

Love.

Could I find my way back to it, when the monsters would just keep coming? Yes. As Aric had said, my wrath was boundless. But so was my love.

I would give lavishly.

My vines returned Tee to Jack. Muscles tensed, he drew my son close. He said nothing, just kept his watchful eyes on me.

I inwardly called, *Matthew! Answer me.*

Silence. This was for me to figure out. It always had been. The solution stretched to my consciousness like a stalk of cane to the sky.

If I am strong enough to poison the entire world, I can feed it.

The vines surrounding us shifted from smoking black to green as they spread over this mountain, covering the lava rock, the remains of Richter. They cocooned the bodies of those we’d lost. Kentarch. Joules. Gabe.

They gathered up Aric’s ashes into a vessel made from the wood of life.

Love.

Flowers spilled from my hair as tears flowed down my cheeks. The love—and the grief—made me even more powerful. To have loved and lost made you stronger than anything else in the universe.

The red witch withered and went dormant.

“What’s happening?” Lark asked nervously. Her recovered wolves gazed from me to their mistress.

Circe murmured, “The Empress is changing. Her tableau is righting itself.”

The vines that had tethered my prisoners now curled around my friends, gathering them close. “We’re going to take control of the deck and fight the gods instead of each other.” In honor of those we’d lost.

Sol said, “But we can’t kill gods, unless we really *are* gods.” His eyes widened. “I knew it!”

“We can remove their curse. *We* will bring the world back.”

Circe gave a tense laugh. “You always did think highly of yourself.”

“Eves, are we strong enough to do something like that?”

I nodded at Lark. “We are unfathomable.”

In Tar Ro, I’d been abundance. Now my excess power flowed through us all. I fueled their ability to regenerate, their own abundance, until our powers linked, and they felt what I did. And the reverse.

Our minds united; our heartbeats synced. I didn’t know how. Matthew? Or witchcraft? Maybe a rogue god’s intervention.

Didn’t matter. The earth was stirring, and my friends saw the symbols that kept appearing to me—the shapes, designs, and clues.

Circe’s whirlpool was like a carousel. Like a tourniquet twisting.

I released my own tourniquet. No blood flowed.

Love.

It felt as if our feet weren’t touching the ground, like we ourselves were spinning. Petals flitted all around us.

Sol’s skin began to glow with a warm light. “What is this?” he asked in wonderment.

Circe said, “It feels like our own magic.”

All over the world, my poison subsided, disappeared, replaced by blooms and berries. My toxic thorns morphed to harmless stalks. I cleaned the soil of the curse that had left it barren.

Fruit trees emerged from the ground and stretched their limbs, while grain sprouted to cover fields. At Haven, cane and oaks burst into existence. *We rise.*

Somewhere across the planet, a small girl eyed a vine laden with berries. The four of us felt the sweet tug as her tiny hand plucked one. We felt the nourishment sweep through her. A world away, on a different continent, another shaking hand dared to reach for an apple.

Circe gazed at me. “Abundance.”

As she cleaned all the water on earth, from the oceans to the rivers, I answered, "Sister almighty." I perceived waves through her, could hear the currents and understand the whispers in her echoing queendom.

Sol turned to her. "You smell like the seaside. Like I remember as a boy."

She breathed, "The secrets return."

Lark's long hair spun in the air, making infinity symbols. "Guys, something is happening to me, something that feels really right." She lifted her hands to the sky, and monarch butterflies poured from her palms. As they danced above us in Sol's light, we felt each determined wingbeat. "Holy crow! Did you see that?"

We sensed all the animals killed in the Flash resurrecting. None of them had blank eyes like Lark's first sparrow; these teemed with life. Birds made their songs. Insects chirped. Her wolves peered around in bafflement.

Circe's expression was just as excited as Lark's. "Whale song lifts my heart!"

We all heard it. The gods' magic was strong, but together, ours was *stronger*.

"Ay, I feel dizzy hope," Sol said. "I feel the sea and the creatures. A child is eating berries with glee. My dream to feed people is happening!" His skin grew brighter with an ethereal glow, until an orb of light emerged from his chest. It flew outward into the world faster than a solar wind. He blinked. "That was the light I used to help the Bagmen rest."

Another scene played out in our minds: Hundreds of miles away, a group of teenagers ate from our bounty, but Baggers leapt from the snow to surround them. No way out. Judging by the looks on their faces, the kids knew this was the end.

Yet Sol's orb of light appeared like a comet in the sky. When it flickered above, the zombies collapsed, disappearing to dust.

Disbelief from the kids. Then cheers rang out as empty Bagger clothes blew in the breeze.

"*Madre de Dios*," Sol said. "The light is letting them rest. The Bagmen are at peace now." His orb continued to zoom across the sky, would be a beacon all over the globe before it ended.

I wished Aric could have experienced the awe we shared. But for a time, I buried my grief and just experienced this awakening for what it was.

Miraculous.

The scent of the shore. Vivid wings. The play of new animals. Trees reaching upward, roots digging deep into the now fertile soil. The whale song.

Vertigo hit as we began spinning faster and faster.

To our end?

Without a word spoken, we knew the gods' deal had been repeated. Would we take it?

Matthew had said he'd foreseen a sacrifice. Maybe *we* were the sacrifice.

I shared a look with the others. I would surrender my life, and I knew they would gladly as well. We would decide differently than we had so long ago.

Would we end the apocalypse and the game? I didn't know. But we were ready to risk *everything* for possibly *nothing*.

I glanced at Aric's ashes, then at Tee and Jack. I straightened my shoulders and eked out a reassuring smile. *Tee, your mother's going to die well.*

Jack must have recognized that smile for what it was: good-bye. "Evie, *non*. You stay with me!" My vines pushed him back, keeping him safe as we spun and spun.

The wolves howled our eulogy.

Twirling . . . like I had with Quintessence . . . the carousel . . .

Sol said, "Something's coming. The weather is changing." The air around us grew warmer. How?

Suddenly another light dwarfed his.

Dawn. Tendrils of sunlight from above kissed our skin.

The spinning stopped. Once our feet met the ground, we blinked against the burgeoning sun. Had we ended the apocalypse?

My vines dropped from the others. Released from that mystical bond, we all staggered.

I reached for Tee. Jack, looking stunned, handed him to me, then hovered protectively beside us. Exhaustion overwhelmed me as I mindlessly rocked my baby.

Lark frowned. "We're still here."

Circe pointed at my hand, covered in icons. "The game plays on."

Remember, Aric had once told me, this game will try to make you insane.

I pressed my face against Jack's chest and sobbed under the light of a new dawn.

The Empress
Day 7 N.D.

“We have something we need to discuss with you,” Circe told me. She’d called a meeting this morning in the kitchen.

Jack, with Tee in his arms, Lark, Sol, and Circe all sat at the table with me—a New Dawn boardroom scene. We’d decided to rename the times, to look to the future.

That first sunset after the battle, we’d all seemed to hold our breath until the next daybreak when the sun had returned once more, and the birds had sung dawn’s arrival. The snow had continued to melt. A light rain had fallen, then dissipated, as it would have pre-Flash.

“What is it?” I asked Circe. I’d figured an intervention was in the cards—because I’d nearly killed the Cards.

“You need to read Death’s letter to you.”

Oh. The letter. Lark must’ve overheard him mention it.

Everyone at the table faced me expectantly.

Did they worry that I’d break down from reading it and lose it for good? Not a chance! Though a part of me had died alongside Aric, I had recovered my tourniquet and tightened it once more—for Tee. “Okay,” I told Circe. “I can do that.” Under the table, I traced my fingers over Aric’s icon, one of the sixteen on my hands.

One day, some player would wear twenty-one of them. Though we’d ended the disaster, we hadn’t ended the game. Our sacrifice hadn’t been accepted.

As Circe had once said, “It’s not a sacrifice if you don’t *feel* it.” And all of us had been way too happy to die.

Aside from the four of us, Matthew still lived. Sometimes I thought I’d felt his presence in my mind, as if he was checking on me.

I’d told him, *I know why you killed us. We forced your hand.* But he hadn’t answered.

I didn’t know how I felt about him. Had he gone to bed the night before the battle knowing that my husband would die shortly? As happy as I was about ending the apocalypse, I was aware at every moment that Aric and I could have lived together with our son in this new world.

If even Death had sensed this game would be different, Matthew had to have foreseen it all.

Thanks for the heads-up, Fool.

“Okay?” Lark echoed me now. “You’re cool with reading it?”

“Yeah.” I was proud of how normal I sounded.

“We doan have to rush this,” Jack said. He slept in the guest room closest to me and Tee. I thought. Everyone seemed to worry about me caring for the baby, so they’d all taken turns.

Lark narrowed her gaze on me. “Whoa, you’re doing that tourniquet thing again, aren’t you?”

I am! But even the tourniquet wasn’t enough to stem my grief. The castle was my life support yet again. I ate the lotus and pretended Aric was out on a long supply run. Any minute now his spurs would ring through the halls. I often watched the door, awaiting him to stride inside.

I wasn’t the only one; my baby looked for him around every corner. And weirdly, Tee always woke at two in the morning, his arms eagerly raised. Each time Aric didn’t appear, Tee would cry.

“I’m fine, Lark. I’m ready.”

Circe stood. “Then it’s decided. We’ll walk you to the study.”

Wow. They’d believed me. “Cool.” I eased up from my chair.

In silence, we exited the kitchen and paraded down the hall. Though I’d worried about severe quake damage, Aric had been right—this structure had held steadfast. A stray crack here and there. Crooked paintings easily righted.

If only its inhabitants had fared as well. At the study door, I said, “I’ve got it from here.”

Exchange of worried glances.

In Jack's arms, Tee cooed, then frowned, confused when tense smiles answered him.

"*Pequeña*, we can stay with you for moral support." Sol gave me a gentle smile. "I hold hands like no one you've met before." Then he bit his lip, probably thinking, *Death would've held her hand, imbécil*. They all walked on eggshells around me.

No need! "I'm okay. Really."

"You doan have to do this now," Jack insisted. "Maybe it's too soon."

Lark studied my expression. "Hey, Eves, it's a lot." Said the young woman who'd bravely released most of her animals into the wild to join the repopulation. She'd kept her familiars and some horses and livestock for the castle's maintenance, but all the others would face the excitement—and risk—of a life of freedom.

Titan remained. After Aric's death, the stallion's coloring had reverted from ghostly white with red eyes to his original gray. One day he would be Tee's.

"We'll talk later, guys," I said over my shoulder as I walked inside. "I'll find you when I'm finished." I closed the door.

Alone, I gazed around the study, rubbing my locket. Other parts of the castle held a wealth of memories—my tower with the mural I'd painted, my dance studio where Aric had given me ballet slippers, and the bedroom we'd shared, of course—but this room was most like him.

I surveyed his priceless relics and found myself dreamily smiling. One of the first times Aric had allowed me inside his sanctuary, I'd waved at the crowns and scepters and teased him. . . .

"*Admit it—you wear them when no one's around. Play air tennis with the scepters?*"

"No, Empress. I do not."

"Can I, can I?"

On the verge of grinning, he said, "No, Empress, you may not. . . ."

We'd been on our way to falling in love—as inevitable as the waterfall currents on both of our cards.

My attention wandered over his prized books. While making love, we'd knocked them off the shelves, and he'd laughed. "*Let them fall!*"

I swept my gaze over his vodka service. One glass remained out on his desk beside his chronicles. He must have had a shot that last night. The empty glass would never be refilled.

I crossed to the grand row of Gothic windows. He used to stand beside them for perspective as his tricky mind devised strategy.

From here, I surveyed the sunny landscape around the castle, and I envisioned his return. Any minute I would see his proud figure ride up the long, lonely drive. He would take off his helmet and wave, his eyes gone starry to see me.

My daydreams were so lifelike I couldn't distinguish them from reality.

Things were getting confused for me at Castle Lethe, and I needed them to be. Especially when I returned to Aric's chair and opened his chronicles to read his letter.

The Hunter

"It's too soon," I told the others when we'd reconvened in the kitchen. "She's not ready for this." With her hair blond once more and the red witch on hiatus, Evie hardly ate or slept, just walked around this place looking like she'd just seen a ghost.

Non, that wasn't right. She looked like she was *about* to see a ghost. I wondered if she even understood that Domīnija had died.

Or that the game played on.

Six Arcana had perished. Five remained.

As I'd suspected, my days digging graves hadn't been over. Evie kept Domīnija's urn on her bedside table, but I'd dug resting places for Kentarch, Gabriel, and Joules near the markers for Evie's grandmother and Finn. Evie had all but sleepwalked through the solemn service we'd had for our fallen friends.

Surely Kentarch had been reunited with Issa at last. And Joules with Calanthe and his family. Maybe in heaven Gabriel got all the bluebird skies an angel could ever want. 'Cause he had never seen another one in this lifetime.

Circe sat at the kitchen table. "This needed to happen. We can't put it off."

I adjusted Tee in my arms. "It's only been a week. What's the rush?" I didn't know how to help Evie. I took over with the baby as much as

possible—no hardship there—but I couldn't fix this for her. I wanted to bear all her pain, and I couldn't.

Lark took a pitcher of milk from the fridge and poured a glass. "It's still bad out there. My scouts are coming across sights that make my skin crawl." She scratched behind one of her pointed ears.

"I'm seeing it too," Circe said. "Even with food, sun, fresh water—and no Bagmen—the world remains broken. As the last Arcana, we should be leading and providing order."

Lark nodded. "After that mind trip we took together, I feel responsible for, like, everybody. Evie was the first one who said we should repurpose ourselves and use our abilities for good. I'm ready to *do* it. But we're holed up in here like hibernating animals." She sat with her glass and took a big sip.

Sol leaned back against the counter. "It won't get better until people have hope. They need hope."

"Then you're right," I agreed, "people need Arcana. I've seen what your presence can do. Maybe that's your purpose now."

"Possibly." Circe's expression was troubled. "But the game will continue."

I frowned, not convinced of this. How could they be expected to kill each other? "You guys have to be past that. I saw what you did, saw the connection. I can only imagine what that felt like."

My girl had united with other Arcana and brought back the entire world. I'd thought she'd been like a *divinité* even *before* that night. Now, I only hoped to be worthy of her one day. "I still doan understand this. Gabe said we had to get the gods' attention, then sacrifice something dear. From what you told me, you four each decided to give up your lives together." In some kind of cosmic—mental, physical, spiritual—offering.

"But we didn't die," Circe said. "We didn't give the gods whatever they wanted to stop the game for good."

"You're sure one of you still has to be immortal?"

She exchanged looks with both Lark and Sol. "Yes. We righted a tilted stage, but the play trudges on."

That put me on the defensive, quick-like. *You pose a threat to my girl, you?* I tried to keep my tone even. "How does this work, then?"

"We head out and go our separate ways, letting fate settle the winner. In the meantime, we make things better for others."

That sounded like a good plan, but . . . “The Wands are still out there. Woan the remaining Minors try to make you fight?” Was I a Minor? I had no interest in getting these people to kill each other—just the opposite.

“The Minors’ job is to hasten the end of the game in order to hasten the end of the disaster,” Circe said. “We fixed the apocalypse. They’re also supposed to help humanity—our own agenda. If our interests are aligned, they might leave us alone.”

Might. We had no idea where they were or what their powers could be.

Sol asked, “What about the game itself interfering with us? I heard a lot about how fate will force Arcana into each other’s paths.”

“Fate? Or the Hand of Fate?” Lark pointed out. Meaning Matthew. That was his nickname. “Our plan will work only if the Fool allows it.”

As usual, I wondered, *What’s your plan, coo-yôn?*

Circe shrugged. “One way to find out.”

Sol looked dejected. “Some of us don’t do well alone. I feel like I finally found my after-Flash people. Or, my New Dawn people.”

“I want to leave you all just as little.” As if for comfort, Circe reached for Tee. I handed him over, and she held him close. “Sadly, we don’t have a choice. We have to be vigilant. The heat of battle might return at any moment.”

So that was why Circe had been pushing Evie. There was a time element here. The Priestess didn’t want anybody getting any funny ideas.

With a forced smile, she said, “Let’s not tempt any kind of fate.” Her unspoken words: *Or ourselves.*

The Empress

I took a deep breath and opened Aric's chronicles.

He'd left pages for his final battle. In time, I would add that story. He'd defeated one of the most dangerous Arcana ever to live; his bravery needed to be commemorated forever.

I found envelopes for Tee and Jack. I set them aside, because they were not meant for me.

My letter was inscribed in Aric's very chronicles. Tightening my tourniquet, I began to read.

My dearest Evie,

I wrote this letter to you here for two reasons. First, because all the events in the preceding pages led me to you. And second, because this is not a private missive. Anyone who wants to read my history with this game is welcome to see what shaped me:

You.

Millennia ago, I was born, destined for you.

I hadn't known what I would find with you; our time together humbled my most fervent dreams.

Though I spent my happiest moments here with you and then with Tee, Castle Lethe was not my home. It was my lonely fortress, the stronghold I'd selected to ride out the apocalypse and protect my lifeless possessions.

Now that I am gone, I want you, Jack, and Tee to leave this place. Lethe means to forget, but you won't here. Reminders will beset you with grief. Find the strength to go. Remember: everything for Tee.

Besides, an Empress belongs in Haven. The life we built here is a chapter that has ended. Begin another in a settlement called Acadiana. That wasn't only Jack's dream; it was yours as well.

I was torn. I wanted Tee to grow up with all of Aric's books and art, immersed in his brilliant father's collections. But Aric was right, this wasn't his true home.

Still, realizing I should go and doing it were two different things.

To not sleep in Aric's bed—when I still smelled his scent on his pillow?

To leave our bedroom—when his clothes were exactly as he'd left them, as if he would return at any second?

To not eat the lotus?

I know you well, and I know you will resist. Please, Evie, learn from my card. It signifies change and new beginnings. It advises one to release what no longer serves.

Grief no longer serves you.

And yet, still you hesitate, no? So, I will tell you my final secret. A shameful one. And I hope it sparks your Empress anger.

I nearly closed the book. If my body was an emotional vessel, I was full. No room left for anger. But curiosity compelled me to read on.

When I took you as my prisoner, I reached out to the Fool, demanding some means to curtail your abilities.

As you know, he revealed an additional power of my armor and suggested the cilice. But I kept secret from you another fact: he also told me that the resulting vulnerability in my armor would kill me.

My eyes briefly slid shut. Aric had known?

Mired in resentment, I dared not trust you, but I was desperate to have you for my own. I desired you more than my own life. So I cut free the cilice. Though the Devil and I repaired my armor, the metal was stretched thin and weakened in that spot.

Zara's rotor had struck Aric exactly there, her powers finding that vulnerability.

Then I fell in love with you, and you with me. For a time, I convinced myself I could beat the prediction, that no fate is sealed. I was selfish.

The night Aric and I had first slept together, he'd told me he would accept any risk to himself to be with me: “. . . if I could trade seven hundred years as the victor for seven months as your husband, I would make the bargain in an instant. I would trade those centuries for seven days. Seven hours.”

He'd meant that literally.

If I had been able to trust you sooner, I would have removed the cilice from your arm and had Ogen forge it back before his demise.

A shocked breath escaped me. Matthew had told me that I was Death's sole weakness. I had been.

To save me from Ogen, Aric had killed the only creature able to restore his armor to its original strength. Death's desire for me, *for love*, had been his undoing. As soon as he'd defeated the Devil, Aric's immortal life had become mortal.

I murmured aloud, “You should have told me. I would've been more patient. More understanding. I didn't know our time was that finite.”

But wasn't it always? Time was a thief. Even with Aric's unending existence, an end had finally come.

I found heaven with you, the bargain well struck, but now I have left you in pain, which I cannot bear. I truly didn't believe you could

grieve me as I would grieve you. Had I known, I would have separated myself from you.

But then we wouldn't have Tee. A person could go mad ruminating possibilities. . . .

Still, I hope you are angry with me. I hope it tempers your grief.

It didn't. I felt no anger toward him, would've made the same decisions he had. And more, my feelings toward Matthew changed as well. All he'd done was provide information; Aric had acted on it.

I couldn't blame Matthew for his death.

And though I have harmed you with my selfishness, I am not above asking ever more from you.

Please give these chronicles and my letter to Tee on his sixteenth birthday, the age I first entered this game. And tell him I could not possibly love him more than I do every second of every day.

Evie, your innate strength will see you through any adversity. You, Jack, and Tee will make it. I rest easy, confident in that. I believe in you.

Know that you and I will see each other again. I will search through the ether of eternity until we reunite.

You have my love, my dearest Evie. It's given. Wholly entrusted to you. And you had such care with it.

ARIC (who was not forever alone)

I imagined him at this desk writing these words, and sobs threatened. Tears should be pouring. But the tourniquet and the castle kept my tenuous sanity in place. I merely sat in a bewildered daze as the sun descended across the sky—still an astounding sight.

Sometime in the late afternoon, I managed to stand to join the living downstairs. They awaited me in the kitchen.

"Tee's down for a nap." Jack scanned my face. "How are you doing?"

"I'm hanging in there"—on the precipice—"for now."

"What did he say?"

“He wanted us to go start Acadiana. But I don’t think I can leave. I need all of you too much.”

Jack glanced at Circe and back. “That’s okay, *peekôn*, we have some time.” She opened her mouth as if to argue, but he said firmly, “Waiting a little woan kill anybody.”

The Empress
Day 14 N.D.

“You’re going away, aren’t you?” I asked Circe down by the riverfront. She’d taken a moment to dip her toes in the water and enjoy a sunny spring day. The birds chirped loudly, as if to make up for their forced vacation.

She patted the grass for me to sit beside her, and her arm scales shimmered in the light. “How did you know?”

I took off my shoes and sat beside her on the bank. “You went from letting Jack do all the heavy lifting with the baby to swinging your elbows to spend more time with Tee. And you look at the river with longing.” Not five feet away from us, a large fish breached the surface to snag a bug then dove back in. “Where will you go? You said you can never return to your temple.” I grew dandelions in the grass, then began braiding the stems into two crowns.

“No, I can’t journey all the way to my abyss. But the shore calls to me. I intend to found a port settlement on the coast near Jubilee.”

“Looking for atonement?”

The water grew choppy with her emotions. “Aren’t you? Our work helping humankind isn’t over.” She inhaled a breath, and the surface smoothed once more. “And besides, Haven is waiting for you to return.”

I whispered, “Can I?” Circe knew how crippling grief could be; would she understand my fears? “Sometimes I feel like I’ll never see Aric again, that this castle is my only link to him.”

“What about the next game?”

“By refusing to fight and removing the curse, we had to have pissed off the gods. They might punish us.”

Straight-shooting Circe didn't dismiss my worries. “They might. We're in new territory here, and only time will tell. But if I had to say, I believe you will see him again.”

I wanted to believe it too. “If we do all return in the future, will your spell work?” So many variables . . .

She raised her brows. “Oh, it will work. But even if it doesn't and your reunion with Death is uncertain, you still must leave this place. Don't forget the lesson: you must rise and walk—*despite* the ten swords in your back.”

“I'm stabbed through. I don't know if rising is possible, especially if you leave. I'm not ready to let you go.” I turned to face her more fully. “You said we were sisters.”

“We *are*. But you're more resilient than you know, Evie Greene Domīnija. In any case, it's best if the remaining Arcana separate. Any one of us could succumb to the heat of battle.”

“I will never hurt you.”

“For you to pull back when you did took great strength. But we can't be too careful.”

Fate will figure out a way to make you fight. Aric had told me that. “What about Tee? He needs you.” I donned one of the two dandelion crowns and handed her the other.

A good sport, she placed it on her head. “Though you and I must remain apart physically, I'll visit you at Haven in my liquid form. Tee's godmother will be a water woman. Face it, that won't be the weirdest thing he'll see.”

I was still unconvinced.

“Look, we started something. And we've proved something. But we haven't *finished* it.”

I frowned. “We gave people a paradise.”

“And we need to give them more. Order. Hope. Guidance. Because predators are getting stronger while the weak get weaker. I imagine cannibals are like cancer cells—if left unchecked, their numbers will multiply. We need to act.”

Circe was determined to go; nothing I could say would sway her. “When do you leave?” How long did I have before she slipped beneath the surface and hydroported herself to far-flung places?

“Right after I kiss my godson good-bye.”

I choked back my grief and said, “Your port better be a hell of a settlement.”

She cupped my cheek, her eyes glinting. “Second only to Acadiana.”



I woke to a howl outside early the next morning. Rising from the bed, I stole past Tee’s crib. He slept on.

Another howl sounded, and I hurried to the window.

In the predawn light, I spied Lark in her little conductor’s hat, astride a packed horse, surrounded by all her wolves. Cyclops peered up at me with an unknowable look.

Lark and I met gazes. I had figured she would leave soon too. She’d been acting distant all afternoon after the tearful good-bye with Circe.

Like the animals Lark had released from the menagerie, she was off to experience the excitement—and the risk—of a life of freedom.

I almost waved for her to come back. Being out there alone was too dangerous for her! But she looked excited for the first time since Finn had died.

I slowly nodded to her—*you have all my blessings, friend*—then I blew her a kiss and forced a trembling smile.

She gave me a salute. Then she and Cyclops and her pack took off down the mountain. I watched the drive long after they’d vanished into the morning mist.

And I knew in my bones that I would never see Lark Inukai again.

As my tears flowed, I heard a piercing cry from within the castle. Her falcon! I ran down to the foyer.

Taka bobbed on a perch, dressed in her helmet. Lark had left behind one of her familiars—and a note. I snatched up the paper and read.

Unclean One,

Suck at good-byes, so I’m just gonna jackrabbit out of here and head west. See what I can see and help out wherever I can.

I’ll let you hang on to my gyrfalcon. She could use a rest. If you need me, tell her, and I’ll come running. I considered leaving

Cyclops for you, but he should be with the other war wolves. I know you'll miss him. Almost as much as you'll miss yours truly!

I wish I could stay with you a little longer, but everything at the castle reminds me of Finn, and he was only here for two weeks.

So what the hell is staying here doing to you?

Lady, it's time to go. Death wanted you to. Rip the Band-Aid clean.

I'm going to. And I finally feel like I can breathe again. That's the thing about tourniquets, Eves. They hurt nearly as bad as the wound.

Your friend forever;

Lark!

A breath escaped me. Letter in hand, I hurried up to her room and burst through the door. The space was so empty of life without her and her creatures. Her kangaroo sheets remained. She must've packed her flannel pajamas and bunny slippers.

She'd gone for good.

Wiping away tears, I closed Lark's door for the last time, then descended the stairs.

Jack met me on the landing, bow at the ready. "You okay? I heard howling outside."

"We lost another one." I handed him the note.

He read it, then gave a decisive nod. "Good for her. She needed to go."

Did I? I called up my dreams and memories of Haven, picturing the oaks and the cane that had returned after the battle. With Haven's soil beneath my feet, could I ever feel excited again?

What an impossible idea.

Sol joined us. "Lark left, no?"

"She did." I frowned at his tired face. "You don't look like you've slept."

"I haven't. I've been wandering this place, knowing my time is coming to an end. I don't ever want to be an awkward third wheel, so unless you guys want to throuple . . ."

"Tempting, Sunny." Jack put his arm around me. "But I'm in love with this one."

“I’m teasing you.” Sol sighed. “Truthfully, I don’t have anywhere to go. Not that I can get to anyway.”

I cleared my throat. “We are . . . leaving soon.” The words said aloud steeled my resolve. “Heading to Louisiana. But you can stay here for as long as you like.”

“¿*En serio?*” His troubled look lifted. “I could write about all the incredible things Domīnija acquired over his lifetimes!” A history scholar like Sol had just scored the jackpot. “I can also preserve the paintings and books for when the power eventually goes out.”

Aric would’ve liked that. “Yes, please safeguard everything as best as you can. When Tee is old enough, you can teach him some of the history.” Aside from a few personal belongings, I would leave everything else behind, couldn’t bear to see most of it. Yet then a thought arose. “But I ask one thing. Leave Aric’s room as it is. I’ll lock the door, and I don’t want it disturbed.” *I might not make it off life support.*

“Of course, *pequeña*,” he said softly. “Can I do anything for you?”

I patted his shoulder. “Get started.”

Excitement made his skin glow. I relished the hit of sun. “This is such a relief. So much to do. Thank you again!” He hurried off, his bearing completely changed.

Jack eyed me. “You sure?”

Not at all. “Yes,” I said, though I gave myself a fifty-fifty chance of making it.

The Empress
Day 33 N.D.

The day we were supposed to leave had dawned bright and clear.

Jack slid behind the wheel of our truck, I had shotgun, and Tee looked excited in the child seat Aric had once installed for his son. Taka dozed in her cage beside him. Titan and a mare followed in a hitched trailer.

Jack and I had taken a couple of weeks to sort out everything we would need. After all, we were cutting ourselves off life support, in more ways than one.

Some things were critical gear: Fuel, formula, preserved meat, solar panels for Haven. A ham radio to communicate with Jack's Potentials allies. All the chronicles.

Some things *felt* like they were: Printed pictures from our phones and keepsakes for Tee. The ballet slippers Aric had given me. His armor, swords, and scythe.

I had his ashes in my bug-out bag.

"Ready?" Jack's gaze was searching.

I took a fortifying breath. "Now or never."

He turned to Tee. "Ready, little podna?"

Gurgle. Bounce.

"*Exactement!*" Jack put the truck in gear.

We were actually leaving, easing past the property's huge gate. I was determined not to look back at the castle of lost time. It'd had me under a spell for so long.

But Tee craned his head to keep it in sight, seeming confused. He looked as if he expected his father to ride out after us. To come *get us*.

I no longer did, and it was killing me. When we reached the base of the mountain, I murmured, “*Wait . . .*”

Jack paused on the winding drive.

Locket in hand, I looked back. Mistake.

Without the castle’s spell, memory associations became sharp knives. My panicked gaze darted from one sight to the next.

The arena where Aric had taken Tee into the saddle as I’d snapped photos.

The side of the castle where I’d once washed Cyclops to capture Death’s attention.

The training yard where he’d rewarded my Empress efforts with kisses.

Those Gothic windows in the study. How many times had I walked the property and seen him through those windows, staring down at me with longing?

Yet Aric wasn’t standing beside them now.

He was dead. I might see him again in another lifetime. I might not. But never again in this one.

The tears I’d held back for so long burst from me. I had to battle the urge to run back up to the home I’d made with him and take in his scent.

Jack jammed the truck in park, leapt out, and hurried to my side. He opened the door and laid his warm palms on my shoulders. “We doan have to go,” he said softly. “We can stay for as long as you like.”

Leaving meant living on without Aric. It meant enduring and accepting loss. There was no time travel to right this wrong. No *deus ex machina*. No easy fixes.

Just . . . enduring.

“A-Aric was right—if I stay, I’ll never move on.” I sobbed. “H-he wanted me to move o-on.”

Jack took me in his arms. “You will see him again.” He for one was certain I’d reunite with Aric in the future.

Against Jack’s chest, I cried, “T-tell me it’ll be better at Haven. Tell me I’ll do better.”

He drew back to face me. “It’ll be different. It’ll be a new start. But we can always come back here if you want to.”

“Right.” Just as I’d known I would never see Lark again, I knew I would never return to this place as long as I lived. “Jack”—my voice dropped to a whisper—“I don’t think I can heal from this. I don’t think that I can be what you and Tee need.” I gazed up at Jack, feeling broken.

Maybe they should leave me at the castle to waste away into oblivion. To go to the grave with Aric.

Jack shook his head. “You can. You *will*. I read Domīnija’s letter to you. He believed the three of us would make it, and I do too.” Jack cupped my face in both his hands, brushing his thumbs over my damp cheeks. “Remember, *bébé*, together we can do *anything*.”

How many times had he told me that? In a way, he’d always been right. Could I rise with ten swords in my back? The first step was to make it to my knees. “I-I think I’m ready.”

“*Ouais*. Okay.” He hurried back to the wheel, then put the truck in drive, easing us toward the next chapter of our lives.

Good-bye, Aric. I love you so much.

I turned to keep the castle in sight until it disappeared like a fever dream. . . .

The Hunter
Day 152 N.D.

Evie and I stood arm in arm, Tee on her hip as we took in our new home.

We'd put the finishing touches on the main wing today, would live in it while we completed the rest.

"It's incredible, Jack. I can't believe Haven is back." She took it all in—the proud manor, the twelve moss-covered oaks, the sea of cane in every direction.

Despite my studying and experience, even I was mighty surprised by how well the place had turned out. "Not bad if I do say so myself." I'd even managed to source cream paint for the siding and green for the shutters. But we couldn't have done it without the plans Domīnija had sent me.

"And we didn't cut down a single tree," she said proudly.

We didn't need to since she could make a flawless board or a thick column with a wave of her hand. Hell, she could've constructed the entire thing, but I'd wanted to help.

So the two of us had done it together, using her vines to keep Tee's crawling corralled and to hoist joists. We'd salvaged a lot from ruins in the area, but some things would never be the same. And that was okay. We'd stayed busy from dawn till dusk, which was good for both of us.

As we surveyed our work, I said, "Feel that southern breeze." It brushed the cane, rippled the nearby river, and made the moss dance. That warm breeze smelled of the sea, of far-off places. It used to call to me. Not anymore. I never wanted to leave here again.

“I missed it.” Her gaze went distant, and she rubbed her locket. “Missed this place.”

The journey here had been uneventful, considering what we’d usually found out on the road. She and I took turns driving, and her powers were on point, so we kept the *p’tée garçon* protected.

Seriously, though, there was never a cooler kid than this one. He was currently tugging on a strand of Evie’s hair, amber eyes mischievous as he grinned at me. I grinned back.

Once the three of us had gotten closer to Louisiana and the danger dwindled, Evie’s grief had rebounded. Things were touch and go, worrying the living hell out of me.

Back here at Haven, she’d dug her hands into the rich soil. For a second, I’d wondered if she would answer that old call to surrender and plant her fingers like roots, going dormant.

For a second, Evie had looked like she’d wondered too.

In fact, she’d seemed surprised when she made the decision to release the earth and rise. She’d taken strength from the land that day, and a part of her had healed. She’d told me, *It’s good to be home, Jack*.

At the original site of Haven House, we’d found ashes from that fateful day when we’d burned down her home, her *mère* inside. We’d collected some and sited a cemetery on a rise overlooking the river. We buried her mom’s ashes and then Domīnija’s, each with an oak to mark their graves.

Was it enough closure? Didn’t know, me.

Maybe some hurts were so deep that closure just sank in like quicksand, a bandage eaten by the wound.

Jury’s still out.

Tee helped with the grief. And I hoped I did too, giving her as much time as she needed, even if that was forever.

It might come to that. Whenever she was thinking about Domīnija, she’d rub that locket. Eventually she’d wear the design down to nothing.

Sometimes I still picked up the phone to text him. I missed getting his take on things. Missed his sharp wit.

One day when this storm had blown over, I might show her the letter Death had left for me, the one I’d read and reread.

Maybe.

“Jack?”

I blinked to attention. “*Ouais, bébé?*”

She offered me her free hand and a hint of a smile. “Let’s head inside.”

The Empress

Day 157 N.D.

“Evie, *viens ici!* C’mere, quick!”

I hurried around the corner of the house, braced for trouble—a militia breaching my PEWS or a speed freeze approaching.

Then I heard Jack laugh and slowed my run. No emergency. *Relief.*

But this latest scare reminded me that life was short, and I regretted not taking more time to check in with him and reconnect. We’d both been working ourselves to exhaustion every day, never talking about the future.

He’d made no secret that he wanted whatever I was willing to give, was a hundred percent committed to me and Tee.

Jack and I slept in the same bed. We walked the property hand in hand. He was giving it his all. He’d even quit drinking, didn’t want to “dull a single second” he had with us.

Grief held me back.

Yet lately, I’d started to believe I would see Aric again. As Death had promised, he would search for me through the ether and return to my side.

But I didn’t think Jack and I would be so lucky to get another reincarnated life together. We rarely talked about his potentially being a Sword. He seemed to have written it off as either unimportant—or impossible. And even if he was a Minor, we didn’t know that they reincarnated.

So I should savor this time with Jack and my little boy. They would be my present. Aric would be my future in another lifetime.

When we’d buried his ashes and armor on the hill, I’d let the tournament go. And I’d decided to give life another try.

As I rounded the corner, I gasped to see Tee toddling toward Jack. *Walking!* Tee laughed with each wobbling step, and even when he dropped to his bottom into the thick green grass.

As I clapped, bittersweetness coursed through me. I loved seeing this; I wished Aric had lived long enough to experience it with me. I took my locket in hand and rubbed my thumb across the rose.

But I was happy to share the moment with Jack—the man who was ready to raise Tee as his own, but who didn't want to replace Aric. Jack just needed to be there for us.

Grinning, he said, “Did you see that, *peekôn*? He'll be running before we can blink!” As remarkable as Tee's new accomplishment was the fatherly pride in Jack's blazing gray eyes.

He is a father. And wasn't it time to make that official? Somehow I would find the strength to remove Aric's ring and ask Jack if he was ready to give me his own.

As Aric wanted for us. . . .

Later that night after Jack and I had put our newly minted toddler to bed, we sat on the front porch steps and listened to the night: fish jumping in the river, cicadas, and sighing cane. In the front parlor, Taka cleaned her wings.

I'd never thought I would hear Haven House creak and groan again. I'd never expected to hear the cane whisper me to sleep. Yet here I was.

A lifetime ago, when Jack and I had walked together through these fields on the night before the Flash, I'd soaked up the sultry air, savoring the insect chatter, and the sweet smell of dew.

Now he and I were back. All our wanderings had returned us here.

How strange it was just to *be*. I'd thought I would either die young or become immortal until the next game; this option—just living—had been a distant dream.

Would my regeneration keep me young-looking, while Jack and Tee aged? Would the Stix and the game lay off long enough for the three of us to build a life here?

I glanced over at Jack and saw none of the restlessness that used to trail him—just contentment. It fed my own, and I stifled my worries. “You told me we'd have these things again, but I was too scared to believe you.”

He looped his arm around my shoulders. “It's only goan to get better, *peekôn*.”

“Yeah. I think it will. It already has.”

He slid me his heart-stopping grin. “Smell that honeysuckle, would you?”

I leaned into his warmth. “How is it possible to love you this much?”

He knew what currents swam within that question and answered, “Because your heart is that big. Big enough for two. I loved you first in this

life, and Domīnija will love you last in the next.” From his pocket Jack pulled out the red ribbon, the one that signified which man I’d chosen. “I’ll keep this for a bit. And you can give it to him in the future.”

I nodded, emotion making my throat tight. When I could speak again, I said, “You once mentioned you wanted to marry me. Still interested?”

He leaned in to press his lips to mine, giving me a *bec doux*. “Whenever you’re ready, *peekôn*.”

**The Empress
Year 5 N.D.**

I came downstairs to the sound of a windup gramophone playing an old record—and chaos.

Jack was feeding the kids breakfast.

Tee tended to all of our chickens and ate their eggs each morning. Little Clo, named after her aunt Clotile, refused, wanting only the most exotic fruit Mama could conjure. And baby Kent, named after the Chariot, loved nothing more than avocados.

They now covered Kent's high-chair tray as Jack fed the grinning infant. Avocado smeared one of Jack's cheeks, which only made my heart pang.

From his seat beside a singing Clo, Tee asked me, "Can I go fishing with Dad today?" All he wanted to do was tromp around the farm after Jack. As expected, they were best friends.

"I don't know. Have you been behaving?"

Tee mirrored Jack's grin and gave me the most Cajun of retorts—a shrug with one palm up.

"I see. We'll talk when I get back." I told Jack, "Reinforcements are on the way. I'll be right back." I slipped from the kitchen to go feed Taka.

I missed Lark even more than usual this morning, had been dreaming about her all night.

Over the years, I'd told her—through the falcon—about our new kids and the growing settlements of both Acadiana and Circe's Port Edwin. How

members of Jack's old army had found their way here, and he'd put them to work keeping order.

I'd told her all about Sol's adventures. After the Sun had written five weighty tomes about the castle's treasures, he'd buttoned up the place and journeyed to Circe's bustling port. With help from her currents, he'd sailed across the ocean.

In sunny Spain, he'd started his own colony on the beach, Cielo, for hedonists who'd had enough of apocalyptic suffering. His motto: *Wine, women, men, and song!*

I'd told Lark about the rumors surrounding Matthew. Some said he'd been traveling with a wandering group of women known as the Wise Mothers, also known as the Stix—or the Wands. The last suit of Minor Arcana protected women and girls, their numbers expanding.

For whatever reason, they'd left the Major Arcana alone, allowing us to live our lives. With Matthew's guidance? I didn't yet know.

I talked to that falcon so much that people thought I was nuts. But unlike my regular visits with Circe's water form, I couldn't hear Lark's responses. The falcon's piercing cry might be a communication, yet I never got the sense that Lark was tuned in. Probably too busy.

Travelers who passed through Haven brought accounts of her whereabouts. Some claimed they'd seen a wild-eyed young woman with a pack of giant wolves in the Canadian Rockies. Others swore Yosemite.

I thought it was both. The Mistress of Fauna couldn't be contained to one area. She needed to be free.

Jack caught up to me before I'd made the porch. "Hey, we need to talk."
"About what?"

His brows drew together. "*Bébé*, Taka . . . passed late last night."

"That's impossible." She was one of Lark's familiars, which meant the falcon couldn't die until she did. "Taka's just up in that oak again."

He shook his head. "I'm so sorry, Evie. I talked to Circe earlier. She doesn't have the icon. Matthew must've been closest to Lark. I was goan to tell you once I got the kids settled down."

Jack was . . . serious? Lark had died somewhere out in the wilderness? Had she been scared at the end? *Alone?*

She longed to live past her teens. She'd barely made it.

I had a flash memory of another game—when the Magician had kissed her on a warm summer night while her lions' tails looped over each other to

make an infinity symbol. Was Lark with Finn again?

Tears welled and streamed down my face. "Give me a little time, okay?"

"*Ouais*, of course."

I hurried upstairs so the kids couldn't see. But Tee must have.

I heard him tell Jack, "Mama really loved that falcon."

"She did, son," Jack said, his voice thick. "She really did."

**The Empress
Year 16 N.D.**

“More showed up last night,” Clo said, her eyes excited. “A village’s worth of pilgrims. *Boy* pilgrims too.”

She and I had just sat down for lunch with Jack, Tee, and Kent.

“More hearts to break, *cher*? Go easy on ’em, huh?” Jack ruffled her hair affectionately, and she laughed.

Tee grinned over at me. “It’s not our birthday without pilgrims.”

Our yearly tradition was a barbecue by the river so Circe could attend in her water form. Yet groups of Arcana-worshipping pilgrims kept making the journey to Acadiana, to see the birthplace of the Empress and perhaps steal a glimpse of her, on what they considered a holy day.

Word of the players had spread from one ragtag settlement to another, our tales as popular as TV had once been.

Kent’s expression lit up. “They might have books to trade! Tired of reading the same ones over and over.”

“Let’s hope,” Jack said with a proud smile. “Else our bookworm will mutiny.”

While Tee resembled Aric so closely, Kent and Clo both had Jack’s gray eyes, black hair, and tanned skin. Our two youngest, H         and Karena, named after their grandmothers, took after me in looks, but temperament-wise, they were hellions. As usual, when I’d called them in for lunch, they’d hidden, giggling out in the cane.

I often worried about that pair, but as Jack would remind me, “*Peek        *, those wildlings’ll wander in once they get hungry enough.”

As we ate, I admitted to the table, “I always feel obligated to give the pilgrims a show after they ride all the way here.”

I supposed we should be happy that so many people revered the players. It made it easy to say things like *Arcana have forever outlawed cannibalism!*

If only our decrees worked on everyone. The tales trickling out of the Eastern Seaboard north of Port Edwin were harrowing. Unfortunately, in this New Dawn era, gangs, militias, and cannibals still reared their ugly heads.

Though we enjoyed unlimited natural resources, I believed our society felt the lack of women. Jack had once said we were a civilizing influence. I couldn't argue with that.

Here, he was the de facto sheriff and mayor, keeping order and even setting up a postal service with Circe. He and his Potentials allies were putting plans into action to govern and unite large swaths of territories.

Jack slanted me a look. “No more dog and pony shows for the tourists, *bébé*. It's not worth it.”

Tell me about it. Over the last few years whenever I used my plant abilities, I'd begun to feel the pain of old injuries.

My bicep amputation. The Alchemist's acid splashed across my skin. Bagmen bites. Zara's three bullets to my heart. Richter's scalding palms around my neck.

We didn't know why. So I'd trained myself not to use my powers. Well, all but the involuntary one. I'd worried my regeneration would keep me eternally young-looking, but it seemed to be aging me. I finally appeared to be in my late twenties. On my last pregnancy, I'd retained my duly earned stretch marks.

Like me, Circe and Sol aged and even sickened when using their gifts. Her take: “We are human, imbued with inhuman power, and we were never meant to be on this earth for so long.”

Unlike me, she and Sol hadn't stopped using them. He continued putting on the world's greatest light show for his followers, and she orchestrated the tides of her great port.

I told Jack, “Agreed. No more shows from me.”

He nodded, relieved. “I say we build a museum for them. You've been wanting to set the record straight on some things. That would help.”

Some people said I'd been hunted by the Hierophant's cannibals because I'd *been* one. Others speculated I'd killed Lark. We still didn't know how my cherished friend had passed, but I didn't want people to believe I'd had anything to do with it. "Sounds like a plan."

Tee rubbed his hands together with anticipation. "Let's do it!" He turned to Clo and Kent. "You two in?"

"When am I ever *not*?" Clo snorted, flipping her jet-black hair off one shoulder. At fourteen, she was all glorious attitude. "A good thing too. One day you boys might be able to swing a hammer like me."

"I can do the drafts!" Kent's voice broke, my sweet twelve-year-old in that awkward preteen stage. "Maybe the pilgrims have paper to trade?" He'd inherited my ability to draw and loved to do architectural renderings, but paper was in short supply. His sketchbook was often a clay tablet.

Jack smiled with satisfaction. "*Ouais*. After dinner, we'll start planning the build."

I could see the scene now: Jack with his tool belt (*mrowr!*), our three oldest with their hammers, and our youngest pair wading in and out of the cane to set up various pranks. . . .

Bliss.

After we'd eaten, Clo stood and announced, "I'm going to go greet the newcomers."

I arched a brow. "And flirt?" She was worse than my best friend Mel had ever been.

Jack said, "Bring a friend and the bow, *ma cher*."

Clo stuck out her tongue at us and sashayed from the kitchen. But she did take her crossbow. Like her namesake, she was a crack shot.

All five of our kids were. Jack trained them constantly.

Kent hurried from his chair. "I'm going too. Be back before dinner." All long legs, he scrambled after his big sister.

When Tee, Jack, and I remained, I caught Jack's eye. "So about that thing . . . on Tee's birthday." It was time for him to read Aric's chronicles and last letter, a loving missive filled with fatherly advice.

In another few years, I might give Tee my own chronicles—though I would probably snatch back the book before he'd made it through the first line: "*What followeth is the trew and sworne chronikles of Our Lady of Thorns . . .*"

Jack looked at Tee solemnly. “Your father wanted you to read his chronicles when you turned sixteen. Your mother and I think you’re ready.”

Tee leaned back in his chair, eyes lively. “I already read them. Like two years ago.”

My lips parted with surprise. “Okay. Um, do you want to . . . should we discuss them?”

He shrugged. Such a teenager. “It wasn’t as big a shock as I thought it would be. You guys talk about him a lot, so I feel like I know him.”

Jack gave a low laugh. “I suppose we have talked about him a bit, huh?”

“The battle details were intense though! I can’t believe you guys did all that stuff.”

“*Ouais.*” Jack took my hand under the table. “*Intense* is the exact right word.”

I asked Tee, “What about how you view me?” Though Aric had justified or downplayed all my actions, they were still there.

Another shrug. “In the past, you were raised to play the game. Then in this life, you turned your back on it. You undid any harm you’d ever done. Mom, you and the other Arcana saved the world.”

Jack said proudly, “Man’s got a point.”

I was relieved until a thought occurred. “Have you read *mine*?” We didn’t lock them away. Maybe I should have. There were some private moments. . . .

Tee shook his head. “That’s different. I wouldn’t until you say I can.”

“Thank you. I’ll think about it.” I’d ask him to skip a few passages.

“I do want to see Castle Lethe one day though. I dream about it a lot. If half of what Uncle Sol wrote is true . . .”

“We’ll see what we can do,” I said. “Did you read Aric’s letter to you too?”

“I did.” Tee grew more subdued. “I loved him, didn’t I? Even as a baby?”

“You did,” I answered, voice gone hoarse. Under the table, Jack squeezed my hand reassuringly. “And he knew it. He told me once that he felt your love as strong as a battle-tested shield.”

Tee swallowed thickly. “Good.” He looked like he’d say more, but after glancing at my emotional face, my teenager stood. “I think I’ll head into town too and make sure Clo and her friends stay out of trouble.”

Jack and I shared a glance. We suspected Tee had a crush on Clo's best friend, a sweet girl who would probably be delighted to have caught his eye.

"Good idea," I said. "Please make sure everybody's back for dinner. Circe will be here at six."

"And remember," Jack said, doing his customary send-off, a tribute to Aric, "if you can't speak your deeds . . ."

"Don't do them," Tee finished for him. "Got it, Dad." But at the doorway, he paused. Bathed in sunlight, he looked so much like Aric that I almost gasped. "Maybe I'll write my own chronicles, and you can give them to my father in the next game."

I could only wordlessly nod.

The Empress

“How are you holding up?” Circe asked me through her water form at the river.

It was just the two of us, after the sun had set and all the hubbub had died down. Jack, Tee, Clo, and Kent were on the porch talking about the new museum, while my hellions had gone to bed—in theory.

“I’m hanging in there.” Birthdays were tough. Every year the multiple Arcana lived, we each risked winning the game, which would mean entering the next one older and weaker; every second I remained in this life was one less I could spend with Aric.

He would be young and strong, and I wouldn’t be the girl he had fallen for. I’d be a mature woman—who couldn’t use her powers. All vanity aside, what kind of ally would I be for him against our foes?

Circe’s water form canted her head. “Still no word from the Fool?”

“None.” She always asked me this on my birthday, part of our ritual. As I did every year, I grew dandelions and braided the stems into two crowns. “He’s the wild card.” *Crazy like a fox.*

“Just as he is in Tarot.”

“Witnesses last spotted him and the Wise Mothers in western Canada. The Minors have passed us by.”

“Hmm. Perhaps they were afraid to challenge Majors.”

“Those women aren’t shy about mixing it up,” I pointed out. “They’ve challenged some of the worst gangs up there.”

“Do you think the Fool is looking out for us?”

“I think it’s because of him that we’ve had this time. No MacGuffins, no game, no Minors.” How to explain my evolving thoughts about Matthew?

He’d told me that I listened poorly, so I’d replayed everything he’d ever said to me. Above any other sentiment, he’d invariably expressed one: *You are my friend.*

After too long wondering, I had decided I *would* trust him; I’d taken the leap. *The Fool guides your way.* . . . “Circe, what if all that happened was part of his plan? What if he was the one who positioned us to stop the apocalypse? Maybe he did the legwork, and we just put the bow on top. *He trusted us.*”

Sounding contemplative, Circe said, “If that’s true, then what is his *current* plan?”

Good question. “I have no idea.” But I suspected my friend continued to play for no less than the survival of humanity.

“I hope you’re right about his intentions,” Circe said with a cough.

I’d noticed she seemed off with the kids at the barbecue earlier, her energy flagging. “Are you okay?”

Hesitation. “I do have some . . . bad news. I won’t be able to visit here again.”

I stilled. “Why?”

“I can’t sustain this water form, not like I used to.” She gave a wobbly arm wave. “Even such a small outlay is too taxing for me. And, as you know, the more I use my powers, the faster I age.” Circe’s tone grew distant, and I pictured her surveying the star-lit ocean from her home on the shore. “As my abilities ebb, my Arcana life becomes like a dream. Surely I wasn’t once a creature who lived in an abyss. Surely I didn’t relish sacrifices. But I was and I did. Perhaps I did enough good to offset my crimes.”

“Enough good? Everyone who lives in Port Edwin thanks the gods—and you—for its existence.” I frowned. “But you’re right; you shouldn’t be making this water form.”

I was already planning a trip for the family to go see her when she said, “I need to talk to you about something else as well.” Her voice sounded apologetic as she revealed, “I have . . . cancer.”

Her news stunned me to silence. When I regained speech, I said, “You’re barely forty.”

“I believe I poisoned myself when I first communed with the ocean. Turns out the waters were polluted even before the Flash. Using my powers has just made the cancer worse.”

“How bad is it?” I’d explored plant-based treatments. If caught early enough, I could slow the spread.

Circe sighed. “I’m eaten up with it. I can sense it in all the watery cells of my being.”

No, *no*. “Come stay with me here.” I had the urge to wrap her water form in my arms. “Or I can come to you. You belong with me. I’ll take care of you.”

“As in *murder*?” She gasped theatrically. “I thought we’d gotten past that!”

“You won’t make me laugh. How long do you think you have?”

She clucked her tongue. “Half a year. And Sol’s not doing so well either. The last time I checked in with him, he told me that his heart hurts every time he shines. But he’ll never stop.”

“Never.” Solomón Heliodoro was the ultimate showman, and the sun was his shtick.

Circe’s confession devastated me, sadness like a lead weight on my chest. She’d once told me she wanted to be cremated upon her death and returned to the sea. Would she make that final journey within half a year?

“Now, now, none of that,” she said. “I’m sorry to tell you these things on your birthday. But I wanted to deliver the news in waterperson.”

“I’m glad you did. Never hold back anything you need to tell me.”

“In that case, I want you to start planning for the future. You can’t be the last Arcana. We’re already too old, our powers too compromised. Sister almighty, you must consider strategy. You have to think about ending this life.”

To go through what we had without our youthful strength and abilities would have been grueling. Still . . . “I can’t leave Jack. I’ll never leave him.”

“But he will leave you. He *will* die. Evie, you’re so caught up in this life that you’ve forgotten you’re meant to fight in another one.”

“I can’t. It’s not just Jack. It’s the kids too.”

She sighed again. “I worry about you. I will die worrying about you.” Voice conveying her sorrow, she said, “You have to face reality.”

As I’d told her years ago, I said, “Not my strong suit.”

“What about Death? You promised him you’d be there for him in the next game.”

“He didn’t foresee this many of us living on. But he would understand that I can’t abandon my family, that I can’t leave behind our sixteen-year-old son. And more, I can’t do that to Matthew.” If the Fool had a plan for the world, I’d do my part.

I would never be the Betrayer again.

Words echoing a long-ago conversation, Circe said, “It figures in this game you’d be a glutton for loyalty.”

When her water form wobbled again, I said, “We’ll talk about this another time. Rest up, please. I’ll leave for Port Edwin at dawn. I can be by your side in a couple of weeks.”

“We’re not there yet, sister. I will call for you. . . .”



I’d just said good-bye to Circe when Jack joined me at the riverbank. “I’m sorry, *bébé*.”

“You heard?”

He nodded.

“I’m going to travel to the port as soon as she gives me the okay.”

“*Mais* yeah. We’ll all go. If you think it’s safe for two Arcana to be near each other.”

“Circe will never hurt me.”

“I know, I know.” Jack kicked a stone by the bank. “She raises good points about what living on could mean for you in the next game. Domīnija said immortality would be the utterest hell. I finally understand how awful it would be. And every year you live, the more likely you are to ‘win.’” Jack ran his fingers through his hair. “With Circe and Sol sick, it’ll be you and Matthew left. Is *coo-yôn* also feeling the effects of his powers? He might not have quit ’em like you did.”

I hadn’t been able to quit all of mine. Which made me wonder: “*Could* he quit? How do you turn off foresight?” Matthew was probably sick and in pain. I ached for him.

Jack closed the distance between us and placed his hands on my shoulders. “Maybe we should figure out a situation for our youngest, and

then”—his fingers gripped me—“then you and I both go out clean.”

My jaw slackened. “I kind of understand your point about me, but why you?”

With a laugh, he said, “You think I’m goan to keep truckin’ after you’re gone?”

I raised my brows. “Like I did after Aric?”

“That’s different. We were raising a baby in uncertain times and then our family,” he said. “Woman, you got my heart. If you die, it goes with you. What good am I without it?”

“Oh, Jack.” I rubbed my cheek against his hand. “But the kids need us. And they will for years.”

From an upstairs window in the house, I heard Karena and Hélène giggling way past their bedtime. On the porch, Kent and Tee laughed at something Clo said. No way we could leave this.

Besides, even if I’d had no kids or a life with Jack . . . “You heard what I told Circe about Matthew.”

Nod.

“I’ve got to believe he has a plan. The last thing he asked me all those years ago was if I trusted him. Jack, I *do*.” When he still looked unconvinced, I said, “Do you remember when I first came clean to you about him, about hearing his voice in my head and how I didn’t think I’d survive without him?”

“*Ouais*.”

“You took it on blind faith and drove a van through a house to save him, a boy you’d never met. In turn, he saved us again and again. He’s earned our loyalty, mine especially.” I recalled galloping my horse through Fort Arcana’s minefield as Matthew directed me. I felt that same sense of vulnerability now, but that same determination to trust.

“I doan understand the connection you two have. Probably never will. But I also can’t forget when I saw him as a *sosie*. An evil double.”

Yes, but Jack had been out of his head with fever, down in the slavers’ mine. “I’ll never betray him.”

Jack pinned my gaze with his. “Then you’ll leave him to do it to you. Only one can win.”

The Empress
Three weeks later . . .

Circe lied.

Jack and I, along with our somber kids, stood at the shore of the Priestess's majestic Port Edwin. I clutched an urn of her ashes and a dandelion crown in my shaking hands.

I'd felt the tingle of her trident icon just days after my birthday. Not half a year later, as she'd told me. Not a couple of months. *Days.*

When we arrived here after riding hard, her followers had admitted that she'd known during our last visit how little time she'd had left.

Using her powers that night had likely pushed her over the edge. That knowledge stabbed at me.

Just before the Priestess passed, with all her admirers around her, she'd murmured, "Sister almighty, we will meet again."

We will, my sister. Aching, I spread Circe Rémire's ashes over her mysterious queendom and tossed the dandelion crown into the depths. The sea took my tears in toll.

I swore the cresting waves waited an extra breath before crashing along the shore. . . .

**The Empress
Year 36 N.D.**

“How do I look?” Jack asked me as he straightened his tie. He’d finally learned to knot one out of necessity.

Tonight he was to receive another civic award at the town’s amphitheater. We’d had to do a lot of these ceremonies. People liked awards—made them remember bygone times—and they loved Jack.

“Like a million pre-Flash dollars,” I told him honestly. His rugged good looks just improved with each year.

“Heh. Didn’t take you for a flatterer.” Jack grinned that heart-stopping grin; it still made my cheeks flush.

Though we both had some age on us, I was wildly attracted to him. Judging by what had happened in our bed all afternoon, he felt the same.

“It’s not flattery if it’s the truth.”

“And you”—he looked me up and down—“*jolie* as a damned picture.”

I wore jeans, boots, and a dressy blouse and scarf, which was semiformal in this N.D. time. “I just wish the kids could be here tonight to see you up onstage.” Jack and I were empty nesters. I had invited them to this ceremony, but the post hadn’t reached them in time. They’d start filing in tomorrow.

“Me too. Miss ’em.”

Tee and his wife lived at Castle Lethe with their growing family. Clo had married as well and made her home at the old site of Aric’s satellite dish. We met their families halfway as much as possible, and they traveled to Haven a couple of times a year.

Kent, Hélène, and Karena and her fiancé were all traveling together, learning about life on the road. That fearless pack had already journeyed to the ruins of Fort Arcana and Sol's Olympus, also pilgrimage sites, and for their next trip, they planned to find the Swords' lair. We'd kept its location secret, our family's bolt-hole.

The four wanted to see in person Kentarch's Beast, the great Chariot's ride, and they promised to return with Tee's baby shower presents for the Arcana museum.

Tourists couldn't get enough of the exhibits we'd displayed. I'd relinquished Lark's letter, Aric's scythe, and my ballet slippers, among other precious belongings. I would bequeath more mementos upon my death.

I swallowed—if I didn't win the game . . .

Jack asked me, "Wrong that I kind of like my position?"

"Who wouldn't like being governor of the Southeast?" He would be in all the history books, the leader of the world's largest community—a place of hope, run on a tight leash. "What an accomplishment, Jack."

We'd kept all the regions agrarian. Those who'd lived through an ash-laden hell couldn't get enough of green fields.

Were there some pockets of resistance out there? Yes. A couple of years ago, those cannibals on the Eastern Seaboard had organized into a new gang—the Teeth. Their leader was, you guessed it, dubbed the Hierophant. Zero points for originality. They even occupied some of the same mines that Guthrie, the real Hierophant, had.

Jack gave his tie a last adjustment. "You know I couldn't have done it without you."

I placed my hands on his cheeks and met his gaze. "Yes. You could have." I wasn't giving him lip service. He had the patience I'd never mastered, and the people skills I'd left by the wayside. "I wish everyone from before could see you now." All the folks who'd doubted him.

His shoulders straightened. "You'd keep me as a history podna?"

I grinned at him. "Happily."

"My biggest accomplishment is holding on to you." He clasped my hands and pressed a tender kiss on each palm. "Doan know how I got so lucky, me."

Arm in arm, we turned toward the door. As we descended the stairs, my gaze took in the framed pictures on the wall. We had them of our children,

my parents, and grandmother. Mel. Jack's mom, Clotile, and his old buddies.

I'd finally been strong enough to hang the picture of Aric, Circe, Lark, and me from the night of the battle. . . .

When Jack and I exited the front door, horses nickered from the stables. Thanatos's line had carried onward through Titan, to an entire stable for us and our kids.

In addition to the white roses that flourished at Haven, in honor of both Aric and Matthew, I'd planted yellow roses beside the front porch steps ten years ago in memory of Sol. I glanced down at his icon on my hand.

I'd received it with no way of knowing how he'd died, until a couriered letter had arrived from across the sea, informing me that Sol had suffered a heart attack in bed. Rumor held that the Sun God had been with several *amantes*, shining in delight all the way to the end.

I missed him, but grief didn't feel appropriate. He'd lived his life exactly as he'd chosen. *Wine, women, men, and song*. I'd put markers for him, Circe, and Lark in the cemetery.

Only Matthew and I remained.

As long as I didn't use my powers, I felt fine. I'd *be* fine. I trusted Matthew, even though I had never heard from him again.

As Jack and I often did, we stood side by side on the porch, his muscular arm looped around my shoulders as we surveyed Haven. He inhaled deeply, rubbing his chest with emotion. "We are home, Evie Deveau."

A distant memory whispered from the past: *We are home, Evie Greene*.

We hadn't been then; we'd had such a long way left to go. To get *here*.

Yet it didn't feel long. Before I could blink, decades had passed like a flash of Joules's lightning.

Time *was* a thief—who kept on stealing.

Jack said, "Remember when you told me how badly you wanted to see a field of cane beneath a blue sky? That the rasp of their leaves made your heart swell."

"It does even now." I leaned against his strong frame, ivy embracing an oak. "You assured me I'd see it again. That we could do anything together."

"We did. We built this place and raised a passel of kids." He sighed in contentment as the southern breeze rustled the leaves. "Smell that

honeysuckle, would you? Even now I could die a happy man.” He turned to face me. “Only got one worry, me.”

Oh, not now, Jack. Once or twice a year, he would bring up the subject of exiting the game.

And I would always remind him of upcoming events we couldn’t miss. Tee and his wife were going to have another baby this winter, and Karena was getting married in the spring. We had a harvest coming soon and the museum to expand. A temple in town was in the works for all the pilgrims who kept arriving.

But even if I could bear to part from my family, I worried about Matthew. And shouldn’t I be ever loyal to him? I believed he’d set into motion this magnificent life for me, then left me to go live it.

Guided me, coaxed me, then let me spin like a carousel.

A ballerina’s pirouette. A vortex in a stream.

What had he promised me? *My wildest imaginings.* When my family had last been all together, I’d looked over their faces, and I’d sent out a call.

Thank you, my treasured friend. If not for Matthew, none of those faces would exist. My love was boundless; so was my loyalty.

Now I gazed up at Jack. “We can talk again after the harvest.”

He eyed me. “*Tête dure.* You got stubborn mastered, doan you?”

“It’s why we work so well together.” I stood on my toes and pressed a kiss to his lips. “Come on, we can’t be late.”

The Hunter

Evie and I mounted my stallion, a horse so big you knew Thanatos was his great-grandsire.

She and I often rode together—to the amusement of the townsfolk—but we didn't care. The beat of our drummer had always been different.

Whenever she gave me hell over something, I still teased her, “Evangeline, it ain't ever goan to be easy with you, is it?” But it *had* been easy over our thirty-six years together.

So damned easy.

Like the people of my mother's blood, I'd fallen in love forever. It'd always been Evie, always would be.

In the saddle, she wrapped her arms around my waist like she had all those years ago when we'd ridden that Ducati. God, I could still taste the thrills, the heat, of being young together. But this age had its own thrills.

When I rubbed her denim-clad thigh like I'd craved to do that long-ago day, she leaned into the touch, even as she said, “You better behave. Well, at least until we get back.”

I smiled up at the late afternoon sun. *Lucky me*. Life was sweet. “You want to take a shortcut, *séductrice*?”

She grinned against my back. “I'm waiting on you, Cajun.”

I got the stallion galloping at a good clip down the drive, then veered off toward the fields. “Hold on tighter, you!”

She locked her arms around me, and I pushed the horse to stretch its legs. Soon we were racing across the farm, whipping through cane and jumping small canals.

She gave a whoop of excitement, then threw back her head and laughed. “Faster!”

Our mount vaulted over a downed tree, and we leaned in together, so in sync. The aroma of cane clung to our clothes, the rich earth scent making me higher than whiskey ever had.

When we passed the Arcana museum, I gave it a proud salute. It was a monument not only to the heroes of the game and all their sacrifices, but to our family too. We’d put everything into building it.

Once we neared town, I slowed the horse so we could catch our breath and act halfway respectable. At a hitching post, I helped Evie down, and she flashed me an excited smile, eyes shimmering. She’d been gorgeous as a girl; as a woman she turned me inside out.

I had an *envie* for her that would never fade.

As we walked hand in hand, she gazed up at me with those big blue eyes—and all of a sudden I was back to walking with her outside that cave after we’d first made love. With her, I’d finally found my home, as if I’d known even then what these decades with her would bring.

She’d been so fucking beautiful that night I’d nearly tripped. Her scent had been honeysuckle, which had meant she’d been all but purring.

As before, so too now. I repeated my words from so long ago: “*À moi, Evangeline.*” Mine. Would she remember?

She tilted her head, and her lips curved. Of course she remembered. She answered as she had then: “Always.”

But she wouldn’t be always. I had to wear her down about the threat of immortality. I’d let her put me off, because I’d been greedy for this life with her that I’d never expected to have—and because I would never get another shot with her.

Not Arcana. That’s what Matthew had repeatedly said about me. There’d be no reincarnation for this civvy. Even so, now that all our kids were grown, I’d start working on Evie again.

She didn’t know this, but I’d sent out scouts to find Matthew and discover his endgame. There could only be one winner; but by God, it wouldn’t be my girl. . . .

On our way to the stage, a couple of my deputies informed me that more than four hundred people had shown up, quite a turnout for New Dawn times.

As Evie and I climbed the steps, the crowd chanted, “*Hunter! Hunter! Hunter!*”

I waved and smiled, and Evie looked proud, which meant my chest had gone and bowed out. But as much as I got a kick out of these awards, I was keen to get back home. The kids would start descending on us tomorrow, and I wanted more time just me and her.

I held her hand as we listened to a long-winded elder deliver a speech. He was the dogcatcher Evie’s mom had planned to set her up with after the Flash. Nice guy, but verbose.

I’d just taken the podium when I spotted someone pushing through the audience. A protester? My deputies went on the alert. Then four more men at different spots in the crowd tossed off their cloaks, raising automatic rifles. *Pointed at Evie*—

“Hail the Hierophant!” they yelled.

I dove for her, covering her just as bullets ripped through the night.

Bystanders screamed, running in terror. Guards encircled us, but Evie had already lashed out at the gunmen with her body vines, leaving behind carnage on the ground.

“Ugh, Jackson Deveaux!” she snapped, pale and shaken from using her powers. “How many times do I have to tell you never to shield me? Regenerate here, remember?”

“Didn’t want you to have to.” I knew how much pain it’d bring her.

Speaking of pain . . . I rolled off her, and we both glanced down.

Damn it.

The Empress

“*Jack??*” Five bullet holes riddled his torso, blood gushing.

I tamped down my panic long enough to muster an anticoagulant into my claws.

He didn’t seem to feel it when I injected him, but I had to bite back a scream.

“Why . . . why would you cover *me*?” I wadded up my scarf to stem the flow from the worst wound. Over my shoulder, I yelled, “Get a doctor!” His deputies were already running to find one.

“Can’t help it. Got to protect you to my dying breath.”

It *would* be his dying breath. Crimson covered the stage around us. The blood from one wound was darker. We couldn’t fix a fatal liver injury. When we met gazes, I knew that he knew.

His expression was sheepish. “Stepped in it now, me.”

Didn’t mean I wouldn’t try to save him. “We’re going to fight this! You have *never* backed down from a fight—don’t start now.”

“Heh.” A ghost of a smile. “Been on borrowed time since I was a kid. I lived every day with you like it was my last, but those last days kept rolling over. Got more than three decades of last days with you.”

Blood poured. Pushing past my agony, I injected him again. And again. “We can do anything together! You told me that. You proved that. So *fight*.”

He dug into his pocket, pulling free the red ribbon. He tried to hand it to me. “For Domīnija.”

“Do not give me that!” Tears welled. “You’re not leaving me! You *wouldn’t*.”

“I should’ve let you go. So selfish.”

“No, I wanted every second with you! I love you so much, Jack.” My tears spilled uncontrollably, and that seemed to cause him more pain than his wounds.

“No crying over ole Jack, *bébé*. We got to talk about you. You can’t win. Promise me.” Even as he was dying, his thoughts were on me. “Swear you’ll follow me. It’s the only way to be sure.”

“J-just don’t leave me.”

“I mean it! Doan think about the kids or *coo-yôn*. Think of yourself. You’ve got to end it.” He gripped my nape to draw me closer. “*Promets-moi*.” His voice grew weaker, his skin cooling. His life was leaving him.

My breaths turned to sobs. “I-I promise.”

As my hair made a veil around our faces, he rasped, “My God, woman, I’m goan to miss you.” Jackson Daniel Deveaux’s last words: “Ah, *peekôn* . . . it was always *you*.”

The Empress
One week later . . .

We'd buried Jack beside Aric, an oak growing above each grave.

Today I lay in the filtered sun beneath those trees. I wore the red ribbon around my wrist. The material was faded and worn—but strong enough for a tourniquet.

Still, I was sinking toward Circe's abyss, the only place I could see to go. And hadn't I promised Jack?

Tee opened the cemetery gate with a worried look. He should be worried.

Mama isn't well, kid. Losing Jack was like losing a part of my body that would never regenerate.

Tee approached me with the gentle steps of one nearing a wild animal. "We need to talk." He glanced at Jack's marker, then Aric's, then back at me.

"Of course." He'd decided to move his family to Haven. I think Kent was planning to return for good too. Clo as well? I couldn't remember exactly. The last week had been a haze.

"You wrote in your chronicles that I once turned you away from a dark path. I want to again."

He didn't understand. Without Jack, every moment was torment.

Tee read my apprehension. "Dad was the bedrock of this family, and we've lost him too early. Mom, we need you now." He held out his hand to help me stand.

I didn't take it. "You'll all be fine. Jack and I taught you everything you need to know."

His brows drew together. "What about justice?"

"I believe the gunmen paid with their lives." I still felt that outlay of my powers. "I sentenced them to being smears."

Upstanding Tee frowned at my words. "We caught another accomplice outside of town. There are more of them."

"So round them up." *You're the new sheriff in town.*

"A lot more. They were Teeth—under the command of the new Hierophant." *The monsters will just keep coming.* "They targeted you as the unclean one, and they've vowed not to stop until you and all your children and their children are dead. No one you love is safe. So I need you to help me protect our family. Help us." Tee was a proud man, as proud as his own father had been. For him to ask must be difficult.

But powers meant pain. How much could I be expected to withstand?

"There are masses of them, banding together." The breeze ruffled Tee's blond hair and swayed the oak limbs. "They're threatening to take over Port Edwin."

The idea of cannibals overrunning Circe's shining port only stoked my fury. Yet the fact remained . . . "What can I do?"

"We're going to unite with Brun and the rest of the Potentials to mobilize against them. You fought the real Hierophant, and you know those mines. I want you to ride with me."

I glanced back at the graves. Not to join Aric and Jack? To rise with a hundred swords in my back? Though I hadn't wanted to abandon Matthew, could he blame me now?

Hell, he might have *planned* for me to take my own life. I frowned.

Or to fight this new threat.

Tee continued, "When you first fell in love with Dad, you wished you had cut him loose so this game would never affect him. But you didn't, and it did. Those men came here to end *you* and your children. Dad just jumped in the way."

Deep inside me, the red witch blinked open her eyes and stretched. *You rang?*

Maybe I should ride out to meet one last foe. If I survived or if I died, my fate would be a kind of answer.

Tee pulled a piece of paper from his jacket. “I want you to read this. It’s my father’s letter to Dad.”

“Now?” *Are you trying to send me over the edge?* Still, I’d been curious about it. Jack had offered it to me not long after we’d completed Haven. I hadn’t felt strong enough to view it then.

“Could you possibly hurt worse?” Tee asked.

I accepted the worn parchment. It shook in my hands as all the world seemed to grow quiet for me.

Jack,

If you are reading this, then I’m gone—a fate you’ve probably wished on me a time or two, no, mortal? But then, if you’re reading this, I’m a mortal too.

We both knew I wasn’t coming home from that battle. The Spartans used to tell departing soldiers, “Come back with your shield—or on it.” (That’s how I heard it back then, an anecdote I think you will like.) I will be on mine or burned to ash.

At long last, I will have balanced the scales and paid all my dues. Because I will have given up heaven, my existence ended.

And your life’s journey will only be starting. How I envy you!

Yet now Jack’s had ended as well. Like a flash of Joules’s lightning. *Time, you thief.*

With my passing, I will be torn away from those dearest to me in all the world, so I am asking you to be a husband to my wife and a father to my son.

You alone must safeguard their lives and be there when they need you most. When my demise hurts Evie more than she can bear, you will bring her back—from me, from Death, from the dead.

Jack had. He’d given us everything! He’d deserved better than to be gunned down in cold blood.

He hadn’t died in grace—because some monster a thousand miles away had resurrected another monster’s insanity. My body vines stirred beneath my skin, and the pain was instant.

For once, I see the future as clearly as the Fool. You will be a devoted husband, a patient and loving father, and a great leader, helping the Empress usher in a new age. My son will grow to be your best friend, as I believe you and I must now be. Already a proud and adoring mother, Evie will spread word of the Arcana, bringing hope to those in need.

Hope? That wasn't what the world needed from me. The world needed me to annihilate a cult—one that had been given paradise and chosen hell.

I've lived longer than anyone, and for all my everlasting years, I have observed people. Jackson Deveau, you are the only man I've met who is worthy of this undertaking. Do you understand me? If old doubts creep in, know that of all the humanity I've witnessed, you are the best of us.

You are worthy.

Anyone who told you differently is but a memory.

Protect my family. Love them. Guide my son. One day, tell him about me.

My job, at the end of such a long existence, is to die well. Your job is to bring Evie back to life.

A.D.

I whispered, "You are worthy."

The script of that one line had been worn down, the paper roughened—and I knew Jack had run his finger over that sentence again and again through the years.

You are worthy.

Whenever he'd doubted himself, he'd read this letter, and Aric had reminded him.

You are worthy.

Maybe I'd been too busy with the kids to understand how much Jack had needed to know . . .

You are worthy.

Aric had been cheering him on from the grave.

Oh, Jack. You were so worthy.

With a trembling hand, I gave the letter back to Tee. “Why did you want me to read this now?”

“Because you’re not finished. The world still needs hope. We’re not in a new age. Not yet.”

A new age? *Be careful what you ask for, son.* My hair began to redden.

How much pain could I be expected to withstand? I flared my claws, and it was excruciating. But I could bear it until I murmured in the imposter Hierophant’s ear, *Come, touch . . .*

Tee said, “Join us in this campaign, Mom.”

“No.” I stood on my own. “You stay here and keep order. I’ve got this.”

With him and his siblings securing the region, I would ride out. But I’d do more than defeat this Hierophant. I would stamp out the Teeth in their own den.

It might not be my way, but I can hunt. Like Kentarch, I wouldn’t stop until I’d completed the mission.

The red witch hadn’t died. She’d simply been dormant, waiting for spring so she could bloom once more. . . .

**The Empress
Year 46 N.D.**

Today I turned sixty-four, and Tee forty-six. He himself was a doting grandfather of two now.

My families with Aric and with Jack had grown, branches expanding like a mighty oak, our roots deepening and strengthening.

Unlike me. I was a shadow of myself, the red witch quieted forever.

My years-long campaign against the Hierophant imposter and his ilk had been successful, but those battles had ravaged me. I'd limped home to my Haven, supernaturally aged and racked with anguish. I looked and felt ancient.

The years that had once zoomed past now dragged by as my health continued to worsen. I might've expected the passage of time to mute my grief from having lost both Aric and Jack, but it didn't. People thought I'd found peace; in truth, I lacked the energy to manifest what I was feeling.

A few weeks ago, when my granddaughter asked me to grow her a flower, I'd been helpless to deny her, had used my powers for the first time since the mines. Such a small outlay had debilitated me; the doctor said I'd had a stroke and would likely have more.

I was bedbound, would be for the rest of my life. An eternal life?

I didn't know. Apparently, Matthew was sick and aged too, but now he was all alone. We'd heard from several accounts that he'd separated from the Wise Mothers, informing them, "I've told you all you need to know." His words were a close echo of what my grandmother had once said to me.

He could have ended his life at any time. Did he plan to outlast me? Even though he must remember the desolation of immortality?

I ached to think about him wandering the earth for centuries—alone—with one foot in the grave. How could I leave him to that fate? He didn't have a family to help him. I did.

With each passing year, I grew more convinced that he was playing for more than just this game. The imposter Hierophant had taught me that the world wasn't where it needed to be yet. Order remained elusive.

I would do my part. Matthew clearly wanted me alive; I would remain so. If he wanted me to win, I could do that too.

After all, I had stubborn mastered.

Though Aric and I wouldn't have the reincarnated life together we'd dreamed of, we could reunite in the game after. I grieved that life desperately, but he would understand why I needed to trust Matthew—and why I needed to help.

Love.

With difficulty, I continued to write in my chronicles. If I somehow predeceased Matthew—against all my efforts—I wanted to remember all that happened in case Circe's spell faltered.

I wondered how I could ever forget.

I still cried over the icons of my friends on my aged skin. I traced Aric's with awe. I ran my fingers over the beads of Jack's rosary. The red ribbon bookmarked this chronicle entry.

Each sunset, I closed my eyes with relief. Another day had passed. One less day to wait.

Time was meaningless; time meant everything.

I was so tired, but I would hold on. I had my family and my memories to keep me company. Only I could survive what the winner of this game would have to brave.

Matthew had once asked me what I would sacrifice, what I could endure. I believed he needed me now, and it was the least I could do.

Though my abilities have wilted, I still had a wellspring of power.

I can endure this.

The Fool
Year 59 N.D.

Evie's room. Candlelight.

She lay in her big bed, eyes closed. Not yet asleep, she was lost in memories of being young.

Her chronicles sat on a nearby table. Her descendants had been reading them to her each night. She wanted them to read only about this game. But she couldn't tell them so.

She couldn't talk any longer. I barely could. Almost hadn't made it up the stairs. Never been old before. *Effort! Hurts!*

From my jacket, I slipped pages into her chronicles. I'd written them from Jack's point of view. Tredici's. Mine. Even the Hanged Man's.

Then I crossed to her. I had just moments left before I was to die. I hadn't meant to arrive so late, hadn't meant for the Empress to be like this for so long. The thread of time had slipped from my grasp, the loom unattended. I had the thread back—the straight line into eternity.

She must have sensed me or heard my faint call; her lids fluttered open, and her gaze landed on me. Recognition.

In her, I recognized the girl I'd first met millennia ago. She tried to say something. Failed. Her tiny form tensed with frustration.

She pursed her lips, then mentally called —*Can you hear me?*—

I nodded.

A hint of a smile. —*We haven't spoken like this in so long. I've missed you.*—

“I missed Evie.” Talking was difficult. My heart hurt all the time. It wanted to rest.

—*Oh, Matthew, I still see in you the boy you used to be.*—

“You are the Empress.” Her face changed from game to game and year to year, but her eyes stayed the same.

She started to cough. I offered her the glass of water from her bedstand, but she shook her head.

—*I haven’t seen you in person since I left Fort Arcana all those years ago. You had a single tear streaking down your cheek, and I was so worried about you! But Aric told me, “He’ll find you when you least expect it.” How right he was. What have you been doing?*—

“Spreading the good word.” For decades I’d traveled with the Wands, but I’d parted ways with them once they knew everything they needed to know. They were Wise. Their descendants would be Wise. They would rule as they should.

And me? The straight line . . .

—*Please, come closer.*— When I stepped into the low light, she sucked in a breath, and her eyes watered. —*You’re in even more pain than I am.*—

In a way, I was. I was, in a way.

—*Come closer. Come.*—

With great effort, I lay beside her on the bed and waited for her to strike. I’d arrived here determined, but my stomach churned. What finality this course would bring.

—*That’s it.*— Her voice was soothing, even as she frantically tried to muster poison in her claws, just one last time. —*We used to lie like this when out on the road with Jack and Selena. Do you remember that, sweetheart?*—

I nodded with difficulty. “I do. Knowledge is my burden. I have only ever tried. I won’t fail you.”

Perspiration dotted her brow as she struggled to make her claws work. She inwardly cursed her weakness. She was also angry because she’d thought no one could compel her to play the game again—yet right at the end, the gods had forced her back into it. Just as Tredici had warned her.

But she would do anything to spare me the lonely road of immortality. She would suffer, so I did not.

Her loyalty . . . *incandescent.*

Lifetimes ago I had foreseen this brilliant beacon—this very moment—and I had loved her ever since.

My friend.

I heard her hectic thoughts: —*One last strike, one last kill, let me end this!*— She would, in a way. In a way, she would.

She didn't realize that in calling upon her power, she would . . . expire.

I understood. I understood everything. I would teeter on the very brink of dying for centuries.

—*Sweetheart, you don't know what you're doing!*— She coughed again. When her icons started to transfer from her hands, she cried —*No, no, you're all alone.*— Her worst fear. —*This is my burden to bear. Not yours!*

Tingling. New markings on my baggy skin. “I wear them once more. The markings must be earned. By me.” I stroked her cheek with my shaking hand. “I vowed never to win again; you'll forgive me.”

—*I never meant for this to happen!*— Her coughing worsened. —*Oh, God, I've damned you.*— The lights in the room grew dimmer for her.

As Evie passed from this life, she heard me whisper, “Matthew knows best.”

Ivy Lierre, Potential Empress
Year 800 N.D.

Breathe, I told myself as I hurried out of Haven House. *Just breathe.*

The urge to run to the cane nearly overpowered me, but I kept my pace even. I sensed their gazes on me from the old manor house, and not just Mom's at the kitchen window. The Wise Mothers watched, were always watching. They'd just finished questioning me yet again to determine whether I was the next Empress.

For centuries, the descendants of the Wands had been awaiting the return of the Major Arcana. Of all the branches of Evie Greene Domīnija Deveaux's many lines, only one had generations of daughters only. The Wise Mothers had noted that and installed me and Mom at Haven years ago.

Lately they'd sensed that the game was about to start, so they'd sent a delegation here. That group of eight Wands was studying my speech and analyzing my mannerisms for similarities to the last Empress. And so many questions . . .

Have you had any strange dreams? Weren't all dreams strange?

Do you long for Death or Jack Deveaux? I mean, from what I'd read—and I knew the Empress's chronicles up and down—they sounded nice enough.

Have you had any show of powers? No. Not one.

On my way to the cane, I meandered through the laundry fluttering in the wind. I'd read about machines in the past that washed and dried clothes, but the idea seemed too fantastical.

Though some people wanted to bring back technology, the Wise Mothers and the regional governors had forbidden it, decreeing, “If a child abuses a privilege, you take it away.”

When I reached the rows of green stalks, I sighed with relief, skimming my fingers over the leaves. Mom wanted me to be on my best behavior with the Wands, but I struggled to conform. Always had. Sometimes I felt as if I were truly the Empress, a grown woman, a mother to several children.

In which case, to hell with all the constraints my own mother had placed on me! I glanced around guiltily, as if someone might hear my thoughts.

Other times, I felt like I was just a girl named Ivy.

Though I was eighteen, older than the Empress had been at the start of the last game, I had things in common with her. Both our fathers had died when we were young. Both of our mothers were strict.

All winter, Mom and I had been fighting. After she’d caught me sneaking out and breaking into the Arcana museum after hours, she’d put me on indefinite restriction. But the other night I’d climbed out of my window to meet friends in town, even though things were getting a little crazy in Acadi.

Tonight marked the eight hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Lethe, when the Empress had forgone victory in order to save the world. When the great Chariot had made it all possible with his last fateful trip. When their Arcana alliance had ended an apocalypse.

We knew from Death’s chronicles that no interim between the games had stretched this long. Did that mean we were safe from another Flash?

Or overdue for one?

After so many centuries of peace and prosperity, folks were getting scared.

Speaking of scared . . . I frowned, still spooked by my weird encounter the other night, when an ancient, gray-haired man in old-fashioned clothes had stopped short and stared at me as if he’d seen a ghost. Then he’d shuffled after me and my friends, muttering, “The End is beginning. . . .”

Clearly a Fool wannabe messing with me, probably drawn here like so many by the celebrations. Though he’d looked like he might keel over at any second, I’d kept my hand near my ever-present knife in my sheath. And I hadn’t gone back to town since. . . .

Dusk approached before the delegation filed out of the house toward a carriage that would take them to the temple for tonight’s anniversary

ceremony.

Finally! I gave it a couple more minutes once they were gone, then made my way back to the house. I slipped inside—no sign of Mom—then up the stairs to my room to get dressed.

I closed the door behind me and released a pent-up breath—

Someone was in my bed! My eyes went wide. The creepy old man!

I drew my knife, but he murmured, “Tired, Empress.”

“I-I’m not the Empress. Why are you in my bed?” He lay under the covers, had made himself at home.

Though his voice was weak, exasperation laced his tone when he repeated, “*Tired.*” As if I was asking him silly questions. “You still listen poorly.”

“Okay, why not rest in *your* bed?” Maybe I should have been scared, but it wasn’t like he could geriatric me to death. Pity welled in me, and I sheathed my blade. “I need to get you a doctor.”

He shook his head. “No doctor.”

“You look like you’re at death’s door.”

He nodded somberly. “At Death’s door.” Some dying old man was in my bed. My mom was going to have a fit. I’d done my fair share to keep myself in trouble lately, but this predicament wasn’t my fault!

He shivered. “Cold.”

A sense of protectiveness flooded me, and I muttered, “Fine . . .” I brought over an extra quilt to toss over him. “I’ll get you some water, but then I’m going for help.”

I poured a cup from the pitcher on my dresser. As I gazed at the mirror, a dreamy feeling descended upon me. I had the sense that I’d cared for someone at Haven. But it’d only been my mom and me since I was a baby, and she’d never been sick a day in her life.

A thought whispered through my mind: *We were both actors in our roles.*

Weird.

I brought the cup to him in the bed. He clasped it between two hands to drink like a little kid, and I found my lips curving. He was cute for an old guy. Like a puppy—

Wait. Were those tattoos on his wrinkled hands?

No. Not tattoos.

Icons.

“Oh, my gods, you’re the actual Fool!” The winner of the last game. No one had seen him in forever. Some even doubted his existence—as if the whole game had been made-up.

“And you’re the Empress.”

No longer could I wave away his words. “I’m in her line, but I don’t have powers. Surely you’ve got the wrong girl.”

With difficulty, he set the cup on my bedstand. “Empress has a sense of humor.”

Sudden pressure swelled inside my head, my temples beginning to throb. I closed my stinging eyes against waves of dizziness. My body shook as memories filled my mind.

Claw thorns. Deadly powers. A heart split in two by Jack and Aric.

My breaths shallowed when I recalled my children—babies teething, first steps, their heartbreaks and joys.

I rocked on my feet as recognition took hold. Oh, dear God, I *was* Evangeline, the Empress of Arcana. Reincarnated for the next game.

My life as Ivy subsided to memory, my girlish worries vanishing. “I-I remember, Matthew!” My friend was here before me. “I *am* Evie—I remember everything. Circe’s spell is working.”

Pained nod.

Which meant Aric’s reincarnation would also be remembering me soon, if he hadn’t already.

My excitement disappeared as I gazed at Matthew’s face. While I had been reborn into youth, he was dying. In my past life, I must have beaten him by moments. Then he’d been trapped like this.

Did that mean he would restart his mortality for this game with only scant time left?

Tears flowed as the full impact of what he’d done hit me. “You freed me from misery. You returned to my deathbed, just to take on immortality. These peaceful centuries were because of you. You affected everything.”

“Everything.”

I gave a choked laugh through tears. “I’ve missed you so much.” I sat beside him and took his hand.

“I kept you in mind.” He gazed at me with his solemn brown eyes. “Helped people hope. *Evangeline* means to spread good tidings.” He reached up and stroked my cheek as he had when I’d died.

As the memory of my death flared brighter, I grieved my family, my children, the men I'd loved. And now I was about to lose Matthew too. He couldn't disguise his pain.

He'd suffered it for the better part of a millennium. "What can I do to help you?"

"Not much time."

"In town, you said that the End was beginning." Anxiety gripped me, and I dried my tears. "A new game is about to start, isn't it? Some catastrophe's coming, and we need to be ready." Again.

I did a mental inventory of my powers. Nothing yet. I had no body vines or glyphs. No thorn claws, just pink nails. "How will I find Death and our Arcana allies?"

"Tredici returns. I shepherded allies to you, now and forever. Look for them on the morning tide at the big port."

Aric was about to be returned to me! But greedy Evie wanted even more. "Allies like Jack?" Would he be reincarnated as a Minor?

"Not Arcana. Just extraordinary." Matthew's brows furrowed. "I should have said good-bye to him."

As Jack and I had suspected, we'd had just one shot together. Despair washed over me, but I tried to bury it for now. I needed to prepare for the next disaster—and for my enemies. "What about Richter and Zara?" Not to mention the other foes we'd defeated.

"No Arcana arsenals anymore."

Huh? "The cards don't have powers?" Then Aric wouldn't kill through his touch! "Wait, how will we fight with no abilities?"

"Endgame. I end the game."

I swallowed. "Then I'm . . . a normal girl? It's *over*?"

"Forever." Looking exhausted, he said, "I carry the memory of you."

He'd told me this before. On his card, he carried a white rose, one of my symbols. I had the impulse to grow him one, but couldn't. "Why would the gods do this? They'd demanded a sacrifice, but they didn't accept ours. And what will happen to you now?"

He stared into my eyes with endless trust. "Last stop."

I couldn't catch my breath as the mystery unraveled. He was the only Arcana who hadn't been reborn into this age to live in peace. "We had to get the gods' attention, then offer up something that would be dearly

missed,” I said, my voice breaking. “You got it through centuries of suffering, and now *your death* is the sacrifice.”

“Final death. Atone.”

My tears started anew. “Oh, Matthew. You knew this would happen. You predicted this.”

He’d foreseen a straight line through to the future. And *he* was the endpoint.

“I stepped off the carousel. The last Matthew.”

He was talking about reincarnation. He would never be reborn again. “You planned everything.” He’d saved the world from another game, from another disaster that might have wiped us out.

“Matthew knew best.” Past tense.

He’d given us a gift from his heart, one that could never be equaled.

Love *was* the universe.

Tears coursed down my cheeks. “I-I understand now.”

“I will sleep forever and ever at the end.” His lids grew heavier, lungs laboring. Anguish marred the deep grooves in his face. “Empress was my friend.” Was. Again, past tense.

A sob left my lips. “There’s got to be another way. I don’t want to lose you.”

“We will never meet again.”

I wanted to fix this, to save the day. For a second, I thought I smelled roses, but I had no powers. Had Matthew retained all of his? If so, he’d probably foreseen anything I might have said, any plea I might come up with—

“Yes.” He managed a slight smile. “It’s okay. Tired of dying.”

I tenderly stroked the flop of gray hair from his forehead. “Oh, sweetheart, I guess you would be.” He’d lived through all the games, preserving memories of those lives and of each of his deaths. “I still don’t want to let you go. I’ve missed you so much.” Yet then I recalled Aric urging me so long ago: *Empress, let him rest.*

“Things will happen beyond your wildest imaginings.”

I remembered this conversation. “Good things?”

His voice grew hoarse as he said, “Good, good, good, good, good-bye. You are my friend.”

I swiped at my tears. “Always, Matthew. Always.”

He weakly drew me beside him on the bed. We lay, tucked together, as we used to do on the road. He kept my hand in his and murmured, “*Sleep.*”

I grew warm, unable to keep my eyes open, just like when he’d first shown me a vision of the game. Holding Matthew’s hand, I dreamed as he did—of symbols.

Vortexes and wolves and arrows and lightning. I dreamed of a scythe that made peace with cane. I dreamed of battles and daring, of magics and unity.

I dreamed of the end of an eternal life.

The Fool’s.

He would never live again, but that didn’t mean he was dead. In this vision, I watched him with a bundle over his shoulder, a white rose in his hand, and a little dog at his heels. As the sun shone down, serenity filled his expression.

When he tumbled off the cliff, he would embark on a *different kind of journey*.

Matthew Mat Zero Matto was finally free.

I woke with another sob. Beside me, he was gone. His unseeing eyes were open, a single tear streaking down his weathered cheek. But his face was at rest.

Like this, traces of the young man he’d been were visible to me. Yet that young man was now gone forever—the one player who would never return.

Unlike every Arcana who’d ever existed, he’d retained his icons in death. They remained; he didn’t.

I whispered, “Fair travels, my beloved friend.” I leaned down and kissed his cooling cheek, then closed his lids for the last time.

No one would ever know how one Arcana—who’d been written off by so many—had ended a lethal game and saved the entire world.

No, they *would* know.

Because I would tell them. *Evangeline means to spread good tidings.*



My mom’s footsteps sounded on the stairs. “Ivy, what is taking you so long? We’re going to be late.” She entered my room and stopped, blinked

furiously. “Why is there a . . . oh, goddesses, why is there a dead man in your bed?”

“He’s the Fool.”

She narrowed her eyes with irritation and huffed in a breath, about to scold—until her gaze landed on his hands, on those icons. “It’s him!”

I stood, wiping my face. “Yes.” I grabbed some clothes and dressed for a long ride. “We need to have a funeral for him in the Arcana cemetery. Schedule it for Saturday.”

She nodded, for once bereft of words. Then she frowned that I was giving her orders.

Was she my mom reincarnated? I might never know, but I loved her regardless. Would my children return to me? Only time would tell.

All I knew was that Aric would arrive soon. To make the port by daybreak, I’d have to put my sorrow on hold.

I gave Matthew one last kiss good-bye, then I faced my mom. “I’ll be back soon. I love you very much.” Leaving her flabbergasted, I headed down the stairs and out of the house toward the stables.

After saddling a mare, I hurried to the Arcana museum. Had my mom followed me?

I strode inside and made my way to the Empress exhibit. Preserved behind glass were my private pictures and keepsakes. I passed the letter Lark had left me and the chronicles Tee had written for his father.

Tee. My kids. I had to believe they would also be reborn.

I caught my reflection in the glass. Though my face was different, my eyes and hair were the same. Would Aric recognize me? Would I know him in a crowd?

Museum visitors gasped as I traipsed past the velvet ropes to reclaim my things. I punched one exhibit’s glass and retrieved my gold locket and amber wedding ring.

Jack’s rosary too! I gave a cry to see the bloodstained red ribbon. I snared it as well and pocketed it.

My mom rushed in, her eyes wide. “Ivy, have you lost your mind? Those items are holy. Put them back this instant!”

I turned to take her hands in my bloody ones. My skin wasn’t regenerating. That would take some getting used to. “When I get back, we’re going to have a long talk. But for right now, I have a boat to catch.”

The Empress

I set out at a brisk gallop.

As I ride, my emotions careen from grief to nervousness to excitement and back. After so long, Aric and I are about to be reunited. Fitting that he would return to me by ship. He has one on his card.

As my mare and I cover miles, everything feels surreal, my body *mine* but not. My experiences *mine* but not.

How many adventures have I saddled up for in previous lives? But in this one, I have no supernatural powers and will live as a normal girl. I keep my knife within easy reach and spur my mount.

Riding through the night, I arrive just after dawn. At the port, I ask around until I find a dock with a ship due. Only one is expected.

In a crowd of strangers, I anxiously wait, my focus fixed on the horizon as seagulls swoop and play. I nearly cry out when sails appear, tiny at first but growing. Eagerness ripples through me, my nerves jangling. I want to wrap the vessel in vine and draw it closer.

No vines. No powers.

No Arcana war. I'll take the trade-off.

After an eternity, the ship maneuvers to the dock, sailors calling greetings as they moor. I scan the busy decks, but I don't see Aric. *Patience, Ivy. I mean, Evie. He'll be here.*

Others might be as well. Matthew mentioned shepherding allies to the area. Which ones? Circe, Lark, or Selena? I could soon see Kentarch, Sol, Finn, or Tess! Joules and Gabriel are probably already best friends.

But never Matthew again. I swipe a hand over my damp cheek. Nor Jack—

A figure out of the corner of my eye draws my notice.

On the dock not twenty feet away stands a tall, black-haired young man with tanned skin. He's broad-shouldered, like my Jack used to be. He seems restless, as if he craves to be anywhere but here. A full backpack sits at his feet, a bug-out bag. Is he sailing out on the same ship Aric arrived on?

Why can't I look away? Aric is so close.

The man stills, turning in my direction. His vivid gray eyes narrow on me.

Electricity and heat sizzle inside me. Longing explodes. *Oh, dear God.* I whisper to myself, "It's *Jack*." Or a reincarnation of him.

He looks similar, but not exactly the same. Except for those eyes.

His gaze roams over me the way it did when he saw me for the first time—centuries ago. His restlessness turns into a determined look.

I should've remembered: *Never underestimate Jackson Deveaux.* Hadn't he always been *unexpected*?

Though not the Page of Swords, Jack has still reincarnated, which means *everyone* will return. We're on the carousel together! I give a laugh of wonder, and that feeling of surreality overtakes me again.

Maybe I'm in a type of heaven, like Matthew is. Or maybe I'm dreaming. If so . . . not waking up!

Yet my laughter dies in my throat when a man on the ship wrenches my attention back. At last, I see Aric. I recognize him just as easily as I did Jack. He is tall with a rangy build and longish blond hair. He wears no gloves because he has no deadly touch. One look at his amber eyes, and I forget to breathe.

They're back. *Both* returned to me!

When Aric reaches the dock, he does a stutter step and presses his hands to his temples, as if he's being bombarded. Circe's spell must be hitting. Then recognition flickers over his spellbinding face. He starts toward me with an intent stride, brows drawn with yearning.

Jack too is crossing the distance to me. When he rubs his chest as if his heart can't be contained, I wonder if Circe's spell has affected him too. Or is he simply experiencing our connection once more?

Connection. Yearning. My giddiness fades, replaced by sadness. My heart will be torn in two again. Is that my fate—always to be incomplete?

I remember once lying on a cot in Fort Arcana, deciding which man I would choose. Jack, the love of my life, had told me, “It’ll always be Evie and Jack.” Aric, my soul mate, had told me, “We are forever.”

My eyes narrow. Matthew had repeatedly asked me if I knew what I really wanted. He’d said, “I do. I see it. I feel it. *Think*, Empress. See *far*.”

I’d wanted to love both Aric and Jack in a world that was healed. I unsheathe my knife and tug free the red ribbon.

I cut it in half.

As the two approach, I gaze at their faces, but I’m not looking only at them. I’m looking at all of the Arcana, at the world. I’m looking at *you*—the readers of my chronicles—and I dare you to judge me for the happiness I’m about to take.

Imagine me straightening my shoulders and staring you down as I write my final say on this subject:

I’ll
have
both.

**The Empress
Year 878 N.D.**

And so I did.

Surrounded by friends and family, the three of us were never separated in this life, nor will we be in the next, our bond transcending mere mortality, now and forever.

Sometimes, readers, you just have to see far. . . .



Here endeth the trew and sworne chronikles of Our Lady of Thorns, the Emperice of all Arcana, chosen to represent Demeter and Aphrodite, **embody’g life, all its cycles, and the myst’ries of love.**



Kresley Cole is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Immortals After Dark paranormal series and the young adult Arcana Chronicles. Her books have been translated into many languages and consistently appear on the bestseller lists in the United States and abroad. Visit her at KresleyCole.com and TheArcanaChronicles.com. [Sign up for Kresley's email newsletter](#) to receive the latest book release updates.

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