



The Untamed Moon (Wilde Justice Book 7)

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Category: Urban

Description: "Swear not by the Moon, the inconstant Moon..."

Night is falling on the world of the Arcana Council, and the darkest corners of the psychic community are stirring, eager for war no matter the cost. In a last-ditch effort to maintain the balance of magic, Justice Sara Wilde launches an all-out search for the Moon, one of the Council's most powerful missing members. With a team that includes the darkly formidable Magician, the tech-savant Fool and the incomparable Nikki Dawes...Sara likes her odds for finding her quarry in time. Unfortunately, she's not alone in the hunt. A cry for help from the depths of South America triggers Sara's oldest enemies, the cutthroat artifact hunters of the arcane black market. In a race to find the deeply secretive, elusive Moon, the winner is promised power beyond their wildest imagination. Are these claims pure lies and moonlit fantasy? Or a sign that when the Moon is in play, nothing is ever as it seems? The truth is deadlier than anyone expects. Even your shadow will betray you when you hunt The Untamed Moon.

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Page 1

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The devil was in the details—again. I still didn't want him on my pizza.

“They cut their pepperoni into horned devil faces?” I studied the steaming pie. “That seems...wrong.”

Across from me, Sariah Pelter leaned back and propped her booted feet on the vinyl bench seat next to my legs. She moved aside the stack of napkins emblazoned with a devil and pitchforks, along with “Best Pizza in Pennsauken” inscribed in curly script. She pushed the pizza pan my way in tribute. “Justice first.”

I reluctantly picked up a slice, glancing from it to her. Sariah wore what I was coming to acknowledge was her new uniform: a beat-up leather jacket with lots of pockets to hide weapons I didn't much want to think about, a tank top, and low-slung jeans, usually accompanied by scuffed boots. It wasn't all that different from my typical attire, but it seemed rougher, edgier. Sort of like Sariah herself.

“I'm telling you, this place would be freaking amazing if it wasn't run by devil worshippers,” she said, talking around a mouthful of pizza. “Or if they actually were talking about kissing up to the Council's version. Kreios is a pain in the ass, but at least he's easy on the eyes. The guy these people are following? He rocks it much older school, all the way down to his cloven hooves. And he's bad, bad news.”

Coming from Sariah, this observation hit a little harder than usual. As my not-so-better half, she'd spent an unreasonable portion of her life in Hell. Maybe not the Hell that Bible thumpers described so eloquently, filled with fire, brimstone, and pointy-tailed demons inflicting torture on any unfortunates who dared to violate their religious strictures. But a place of imprisonment, confusion, and lies nevertheless. A

place you couldn't leave when you wanted to. A place without coffee.

It had been bad.

Sariah had been a part of me at one point, our two spirits living as one when we were kids. At age seventeen, an inferno of epic proportions had split us off from each other. I'd run away from that fire, she'd run toward it. And that had marked the difference in our personalities ever since.

I'd found Sariah in Hell while hunting down someone else for my number one client at the time. The Arcana Council were a group of Tarot sorcerers so strong, some of them were actual demigods, and they'd taken it upon themselves to keep the magic of the world in balance. I hadn't so much cared about the group's mission statement when I'd first started working with them. My goal had been to use the cash they paid me to help keep the most vulnerable members of the psychic community safe from the higher-level magical asshats who exploited them for personal gain. But one job had led to the next, and then the next. Eventually, I'd joined on as a bona fide Arcana Council member—Justice, no less. Brand-new title, same job description: to right the wrongs perpetrated against Connecteds by other Connecteds.

Spoiler alert: there were a lot of wrongs to right.

Sariah had taken on a new job recently too, one with an even sketchier job description than mine. As the Night Witch, she'd officially become my right-hand woman—as in the left-hand-not-knowing-what-the-right-hand-was-doing kind of woman. She'd been duly appointed to take out all the bad guys who needed taking out, no after-action review required. She was also supposed to work on her own.

I pointed my pizza slice at her. “So explain why you asked me to come here. You have all the authority you need to make crooked things straight. I'm technically not supposed to be a part of that.”

“You’re right.” She took a long swig of her beer, then settled the bottle back on the table. Even she knew enough not to order from the tap at a place called Demonico’s Pizza, where they served their pies hot and dangerous. “Trouble is, I’ve never done any of this before. I kind of thought it might be good for me to have some, you know, onboarding.”

I blinked at her, instantly on alert. “Why? What did you do?”

Sariah lifted one shoulder, dropped it. “Let’s just say you may be getting another call for Justice across the transom in oh, say, a couple of days. I’m not sure how long it’s going to take them to dig out.”

“Take who?”

“It wasn’t my fault,” she countered, setting her boots back on the floor so she could hunch over her beer toward me. “It was a dig in Madagascar, a diamond mine that had been part of this indigenous people’s religion forever. They’re good, simple people. They sell one of their sacred diamonds a year, and that diamond finds its way back to Hell in due course. Once I started noticing the pattern, I got into the habit of returning the rock to their mine so the cycle could start again. No big deal. But I haven’t been down to Hell in a while, so when I saw a complaint from the tribe, I poked around to see what was going on. Come to find out, a bunch of assholes from the arcane black market had discovered the tribe’s mine. They killed half the miners, and were going to town digging the shit out of this hole in the ground themselves without a single damned clue of what they were doing. Those bigger sacred diamonds are bad news, intended only to keep that tribe rolling along. Too many of them hit the market at once, a whole lot of people die.”

I studied her skeptically. “I don’t suppose you explained that to the assholes in careful, measured tones?”

“See? There you go. A tactic I never would have considered.” Sariah grinned. “My way was a lot faster.”

“I bet.” I set down my pizza slice and settled back, sliding only a little on the shiny vinyl. “Is the tribe going to be okay? The ones who are left, anyway?”

“Yeah.” She rolled the beer bottle in her hand. It was already half-empty. “They’re the innocents in all this. They should never have been forced to defend themselves from a bunch of Connected assholes trying to horn in on their territory. Not their battle to fight, not their day to die. Anyway, now they’ve gotta track down some rogue diamonds, but that shouldn’t be too much trouble. Those rocks tend to make themselves known. It was easier when they just fell down at my feet, usually clutched in the hand of someone who really wished they’d never found it. But God love greed, it does keep things interesting.”

I grimaced, but she wasn’t wrong. “Well, I don’t have a problem with what you did, for what it’s worth.” I tipped my bottle toward her. “Consider yourself onboarded.”

Sariah snorted. “Excellent.”

I watched a thick-lashed waitress walk by and serve the family on the other side of us, her gaze darting quickly to us, then around the room as she passed. Her lacquered nails were so long, I couldn’t see how she held the glasses of dark soda, but she handled her delivery like a pro. Her customers were a couple of grandparent types with their grandkids, all of them enjoying an enormous pepperoni pie. Despite Sariah’s comment about wanting some training, she’d brought me here for a different reason.

I refocused on her. “So other than the name and the unfortunate advertising strategy, what’s the story on this place? I gotta assume you’ve been here before, yeah?”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “So, Demonico’s is a gateway to Hell, right? I mean, obviously. Back in the day, I got bored and decided to make a project out of checking portals. This happened to be one of the places I hit. I couldn’t come through, but I could see who they were sending down to their infernal reward, and who was doing the sending. At the time, I didn’t think that much of it. Bunch of low-level necromancers, usually marshaling the worst of the demon horde to do their bidding, the spawn, that sort of thing. No big deal. But when I saw the plea from Demonico’s at Justice Hall, something didn’t sound right. It was sent from one of the waitstaff here, some chick who’s psychic enough to keep herself safe while she rakes in great tips. To paraphrase the complaint, she’s worried that her boss, a guy named Barry, is about to catch a whole lot of heat from the arcane black market syndicate types, and then there’d be a whole lot of dead bodies to explain.”

“Dead bodies?” I asked, eyeballing what was left of the pizza. “Please do not tell me...”

Sariah chuckled. “You’re good. So far as I can tell, cannibalism is not part of Demonico’s secret sauce. But here’s the thing.” She leaned forward, her lips twisting into a smirk. “Our man Barry, he’s making a lot of dough.”

I narrowed my eyes. “If you’re just going to hit me with stupid jokes—”

“No, I’m serious. He’s making dough into actual people. Like golems. He fashions them in the back of his bakery, where the big ovens are, and he’s swapping them out for people, with the help of demons.”

“Oh.” I blinked. “Why?”

“That’s where things get interesting. It started out as a low-level secondary workforce. The models for the golems are homeless people mostly, folks he paid to lie low until their doppelg?ngers did the dirty work he needed done. Demonico’s has

a program where they feed anyone who wants leftover pizza out the back of the house, no questions asked. Been doing it for a couple of decades, apparently, with no problem. But something shifted after the old man died and his son Barry took over a few years ago. The jobs he needed done became more complex.”

“Transition of authority,” I said. “Escalation of business.”

“Yep. Apparently, Barry got the idea that he can have a whole army of golems spread out across New Jersey to act as some sort of enforcer mob, and he’s been doing a pretty good job at building a Gumby army. Very under the table. And it worked. Crime’s ticked up, but there’s a fair amount of crime here to begin with, so nobody much noticed, especially since Barry funnels a lot of the proceeds back into the community. Also, nobody noticed a few more homeless people apparently going dead, though the dead were mostly the golems, from what I gathered. Either way, it’s not ideal. Worse, Barry’s branching out, and apparently, a friend of a cousin of a neighbor got hit by a doughboy with a decided whiff of Italian seasoning. She came here looking for information, and she’s known for flapping her gums. Barry’s nervous as hell the whole thing’s about to fall apart. Even if our psychic waitress is sweet on the guy, she’s no idiot. She’s worried he’s in over his head, and she thinks some serious shit is about to go down.”

I lifted a brow. Barry sounded like a weasel at best, and a killer at worst. I didn’t know why Sariah wanted to save the guy, but she obviously did. Which was...interesting. “Go down, you mean like something specific? Urgent?”

“Well, I didn’t just bring you here because of the fabulous pizza.” Sariah shrugged. “There’s some sort of deal that’s going to be happening tonight. Figured we should be a part of it.”

“Sariah...”

“What? I’m trying to be responsible. I even brought along my big sister to make sure I did everything by the book this time.” Her eyes brightened as she took another drink of her beer, focusing on something over my shoulder. “Here we go,” she murmured. “It may be a good idea for you to pull out your cards.”

I squinted at her. “You want me to give you a card reading?”

“Not me,” she said, tilting the amber bottle toward the back of the dining room. “Maria Romano. Our complainant.”

I half turned to see the waitress who’d served the table next to ours pull off her apron and drape it over a barstool.

“I’m going on break,” she called through the kitchen door, and a throaty shout from the back acknowledged her announcement. Apparently, the rules for waitstaff were pretty lax at Demonico’s. The waitress marched right over to our table, her gaze flicking between Sariah and me. Maria Romano knew who we were and why we were here, no question.

“I didn’t think you’d come,” she said as Sariah scooted over in the booth, letting the woman sit down. With the high-backed wooden barriers separating us from the next table, the space was admittedly cozy, private. I could imagine all sorts of deals being made here, on the up-and-up or otherwise.

“Yeah, well, you won the lottery,” Sariah said. She’d put down her beer and was now fiddling with a strip of gleaming metal. She’d pulled it out of one of her pockets and started twirling it in her fingers despite the fact that it was razor-sharp. I recognized one of the cuffs of Justice that Sariah had whittled into her own tailor-made knife, but Maria didn’t seem alarmed as Sariah used the blade to gesture toward me. “I’ve given Justice Wilde the basics, but has anything happened since you and I last spoke?”

“Not really,” Maria said, hunching toward me over the table, her thick, dark hair falling forward over her brow before she curled it behind her ear again. “Barry, he’s the boss now. His dad, Joe, passed away five years ago. Joe was a good man, mostly—and Barry tries real hard to do the right thing.”

I grimaced. Not a ringing endorsement of Joe or Barry, but Maria continued. “Barry doesn’t have the discipline of his father, you know? First I thought he was just pushing harder on the homeless people we helped out, getting them to run his side deals. You’d hear about someone doing stupid things, dangerous things, though nobody ever seemed to get in trouble with the police. I didn’t notice so much back then. You don’t see what you’re not looking for, you know? I mean, sure, the place was flush with cash, maybe more cash than made sense for our customer flow, but it wasn’t crazy out of line. But then, things got worse. More money started coming in, and I started to see the people who came around back for free pie in places they totally shouldn’t be. Half the time, it was like, they weren’t even themselves. They’d become sort of...I mean...”

Sariah leaned in. “Gingerbread men,” she supplied, and the waitress winced. She looked to me.

“Some important people have figured out the truth about Barry’s army, and they want to know more. There’s a meeting tonight in the family event room, right after closing. I’m supposed to work it, but I’m scared.”

“Will Barry be there?”

She nodded quickly, her amber-colored eyes wide with concern. “He’s nervous too, I think. He’s been drinking himself stupid. He knows better, but it gives him courage. Swagger. He needs it with these guys, you know? I think they’re pretty high up on the food chain, maybe even from New York. Barry wants to look good in front of them, and I think that’s a bad thing.”

“I suspect you’re right.” I reached into my hoodie pocket and pulled out my Hello Kitty deck of Tarot cards. Maria sucked in a quick breath as I slid a card out from the middle of the deck and dropped it on the table, but I wasn’t surprised to see it. The Moon was all about that which was hidden coming to light, darkness clearing, and people finding their way. The card had other meanings too, of course, but I was pretty sure I understood what it represented here.

“What is it you really want, Maria?” I asked. “What is it you’re not telling us?”

She bit her lip and glanced away, then swung her gaze back toward me, her eyes intent. “I think Barry did all this to show off a little. I think he’s decided to throw in with Frank Maddix and some of his buddies over in New York City. They’re close, you know? And the syndicate’s been putting out their feelers for months, trying to figure out what Barry is doing. These dough creatures—they look good, and they’re obedient. They’ll do anything they’re told. They’re completely controlled. But when they get face-to-face with the real human they’re modeled after, it’s no good for the human. People have breakdowns. Some of these poor souls aren’t all that stable to begin with, and this...doesn’t help. Especially given the kind of energy being used to order the creatures around.”

I studied her as her gaze shifted away again. Maria definitely was Connected, and she knew black magic when she sensed it. So did I. Now that I looked around more carefully, the place was oozing with it. “Okay. Good to know.”

Beneath the Moon, I laid out three more cards in rapid succession. The Devil, not surprisingly, and once again not looking anything like Aleksander Kreios, the current leader of the Arcana Council back in Vegas, but a cute kitten trying to decide between a cupcake, jewels, and candy. Then came the Five of Wands, always a crowd pleaser, indicating a fight.

The next card surprised me, though. It wasn’t one I encountered very often, and I

especially didn't like it for this reading. Hello Kitty's Judgment was earnestly blowing her horn, but the card traditionally depicted that horn raising the dead from their graves. That didn't make me happy at all.

"Um, are we expecting some kind of zombie apocalypse?" Sariah drawled. I shot her a hard look as Maria paled.

"Is there a cemetery around here?" I asked.

Maria nodded. "Three blocks over, Holy Angels. Why?" Her eyes widened further and she gave a choked gasp. "You don't think he's going to raise the dead at Holy Angels? Instead of creating dough people? That's worse. That's so much worse. My aunt is buried at Holy Angels. Oh, Barry, what are you doing?"

I patted her arm with as much reassurance as I could. "I think your aunt is going to be just fine. But I don't want you in that back room tonight."

She made a face. "I have to. Barry doesn't trust anyone else."

"How can we get in there?" I asked, but she shook her head.

"You don't. He knows all the servers. We've been here since his dad opened the place. He knows the books, he knows the energy, he knows everyone. He drinks, but he's not stupid. He would've been dead a long time ago if he was. And—I mean, I want to make sure he's okay. He's a good guy, he really is. He's just in too deep with all this."

I nodded, hearing the genuine love in her voice for the guy, despite everything she knew about him. I struggled with my own reactions. Here was a guy using the homeless to create dough golems...and who appeared right on the cusp of necromancy. Ordinarily, not a guy worth saving, but once again, when I glanced to

Sariah, she stared back at me stubbornly. If she wanted to help a guy of questionable morals and his sweetheart sail off into the sunset—or at least survive the night—I guess I could roll with it.

“You were right to call for help,” I told Maria. “Barry will be okay. I promise you that.” She rewarded me with a tremulous smile, and I pushed on. “Does he know all the players who are meeting him? Does he ever meet with strangers?”

Maria sighed. “He knows them all. They’re dark people, very bad. Their energy is wrong. Not like yours.” She slid a glance toward Sariah. “More like yours.”

Sariah touched a Night Witch blade to her brow in a wry salute. “Always happy to be among my people.”

“That’s not going to help us though,” I said. “If we can’t get in there, it’s no good.”

The door chimed, and Maria’s gaze went automatically to the front of the restaurant. “You’re too late,” she said tightly. “The first of them’s here already.”

We turned and stared as the newcomer entered the room.

“Holy shit,” Sariah muttered.

The Devil had come to Jersey.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

The Devil of the Arcana Council was usually tall and broad shouldered, his bronzed skin kissed by the sun and his tawny hair flowing over his shoulders, but tonight, he stepped into the restaurant with a glamour that reeked of Mafia enforcer. His body was thick, heavy, and stuffed into a suit that emphasized every bulging muscle, and his face was hard and iron-jawed. A thatch of dark hair swept back from his temples, graying slightly above the ears, but I doubted anyone would suggest he was past his prime. At least not to his face.

“Maria,” somebody bellowed from the kitchen. She stood, bumping the table, the wood surface so thick that the cards didn’t shift.

“Something’s going to happen tonight,” she hissed. “Something bad.” Then she hurried off, grabbing her apron from the stool and lashing it on again with the ease of long practice.

After a quick survey of the room, Aleksander Kreios strolled over to us with an easy smile, though his gaze remained on Maria. “How do I look?” he asked as he slid into the booth beside me.

“Like the cat who just incinerated the canary,” Sariah answered, her gaze going from him to Maria. “What are you doing here?”

“Why wouldn’t I come?” Kreios asked mildly. “When I paid a visit to Mrs. French at Justice Hall, she told me where you were. I did a little research myself, and I must say, I’m hurt. Barry’s a devil worshipper. Forget my newly minted role as head of the Arcana Council, how could you not have asked me to come along?”

“Maybe because it’s none of your business?” Sariah put in, with just enough edge to her voice that I lifted a brow.

Sariah and the Devil were rarely together, but for the first time it occurred to me that they might not be natural allies. For all that Kreios was known as the Lord of Hell, he’d never spent much time in those subterranean passages. I didn’t think he and Sariah had ever encountered each other before she’d exited Hell to come to Vegas...which had arguably been a lateral move. And they generally didn’t spend too much time in each other’s company, though I’d never noticed that before now.

Nevertheless, Kreios turned to her and eyed her with barely a flicker of curiosity—something else that was unusual. One of the Devil’s most profound traits was his insatiable need to know everything in another person’s mind, yet he didn’t push Sariah to spill...anything.

“On the contrary,” he drawled. “It’s exactly my business, or at least my business for tonight, and this glamour will get me prime seating for the show. More to the point, what I can do for myself, I can also do for you.”

I blinked, and Sariah let out a low, appreciative chuckle as she tapped her newly long, lacquered fingernails on the scarred wooden table.

“How do I look?” she asked me, and I turned to see Maria sitting there again, speaking with Sariah’s laconic voice. A second later, the image cleared, and Sariah settled back once more in the booth, looking satisfied. “Okay, you can stay,” she told Kreios. “But you’re here just for the party tricks, while I need to figure out...”

She blinked, then looked away as she cut herself off, her face reddening slightly. I narrowed my eyes again at Kreios. Sariah wasn’t one to show her cards, while the Devil was a big fan of helping everyone flash their hand early and often. Had he used his skills of persuasion on her after all? And if so, how had she managed to stop

herself from sharing her thoughts midsentence?

“Why are you really here?” I asked Kreios.

He shrugged. “It’s safe to say that the Magician is growing warier of the events coming to pass. His need to locate the outstanding members of the Arcana Council, the Moon and the Star, weighs heavily upon him. Every new request for your services, every shift in magic is connected, he believes, to a greater picture that we cannot yet discern. He can’t fully discern it either, which is more the problem.”

Sariah scoffed. “I mean, seriously. The guy has one job.”

The Devil looked at her with wry amusement. “Whereas you have many jobs, don’t you?” he asked quietly, the question so laden with hidden meaning, I blinked. What was with these two?

Sariah narrowed her eyes at him. “Look, Grandpa, if you’ve got a problem with me, you can come right out and say it. Whether you split into sixty-seven different versions of yourself or man up and present as one, I’m more than happy to take you on.”

“Whoa,” I said, lifting my hands slightly. “Did I miss someone pulling somebody else’s hair or something?”

The door opened at the front of the restaurant, and a cool breeze flowed in along with a new set of diners. The Devil lifted his head to peer over the edge of the booth.

“Super smooth,” Sariah observed.

“You forget that anyone looking at me sees only what I want them to. Just as they will see you the way I’ll be presenting you shortly,” he murmured. Before Sariah

could respond to that, Kreios turned back to us, his eyes gleaming with a faint red glow. “For all the professed devil worshipping that goes on in this world, there are few who truly take the time to get it right. The gentlemen who just entered are among those few.”

I glanced over and saw six men, all of them dark suited, walk through the restaurant while no one so much as glanced their way. The newcomers disappeared into the back room, while Kreios regarded Sariah more steadily.

“Did you ever encounter husks in Hell?” he asked her.

She shrugged. “Hell took all types, but yeah, we had husks. They were dormant until they were called, then they returned once their work was done. That’s what we’re dealing with here? He’s not making his golems with dough anymore, but with husks?”

“I can’t speak to what he did in the past, but now...it would seem things have changed.” Kreios turned to me. “Husks are created out of human blood, ground animal bones, poisonous plants, and various other ingredients known to a rarified few. They are summoned much like demons, and their use is to effect a very specific kind of possession.”

I lifted my brows. “I’ve dealt with the Possessed before, but I’ve never encountered a husk—or a golem, for that matter. What’s the difference?”

“A golem looks like a human, and can act like a human for a time, with the human’s tacit permission given via their blood. A husk pulls a human to them and wears it like a skin. There’s no conflict, no compulsion, because the human is already dead.”

I slid my gaze to Sariah, and she shrugged again.

“Ah... Dead, dead?” I asked. “Not just seriously in need of therapy?”

“Correct,” Kreios said. “It’s a nasty piece of business. And an interesting new staffing choice for Demonico’s proprietor.”

Sariah leaned forward. “That’s a good point. You use golems mixed in with the population of the homeless and the disenfranchised, nobody notices, right? They just think somebody else is off their meds, or drunk, or just having a really bad day. Then the golem leaves, no harm, no foul. The host might trade a few pints of blood for a couple of pizzas, but nobody else would pay that much attention. But making dead people into husks? Bodies are gonna add up, and be found in places they shouldn’t be. Why would you do that?”

“Because you can.” Kreios’s expression had turned a touch darker. “Husk magic is a particularly dirty form of necromancy. Someone wants to send a message that he can play with the big boys, and the big boys have decided to come around.”

“Last call,” Maria said, walking up to our table. Her eyes were wide and glassy, but her smile was as genuine as ever. She was working hard at keeping it together. “Can I get you anything?”

The Devil regarded her steadily. “Maria Romano, what magic do you deal in?”

She blinked at him, opened her mouth—then closed it again.

Kreios smiled like a shark. “What is it you want to tell me?”

“My family are healers,” Maria blurted, her words rushed, almost panicked. “We deal in white magic only. It’s how I’ve been able to work here so long. Barry and Joe before him—they’re good people. They’ve always been good people. But this is different. Barry’s going down some dark paths, and word’s getting out. I’ve tried to

keep the place safe, but what he's doing, it's gotten bigger than I can contain."

Kreios nodded. "That's probably why it's taken him so long to draw the attention of the others. You can't heal this, Maria. You need to go home."

She shook her head. "I can't. He'll never let anyone else..." Her words faltered as she glanced around the table, stopping when she got to Sariah. To me, Sariah looked the same as she ever did, but to Maria...

"Oh..." she whispered.

"Go home, Maria. Sariah will follow you out and then reenter as you." Kreios fixed her with a stern gaze. "The magic you summon, use for your family this night. Hide them. Hide yourself. If husks walk the street this evening, they will come for you."

"No," Maria said, shaking her head quickly. "No, they won't. Barry wouldn't do that. He—he wouldn't. But I'll go." She stepped back, and Sariah slid out of the booth, raising a brow to Kreios as Maria turned on her heel and hurried away, the poor woman visibly restraining herself from running through the restaurant.

"You really do have such a way with people." Sariah smirked, then she headed out after Maria.

"You want to tell me what's going on between you two?" I asked as Kreios turned back to me, picking up one of the bottles of beer and sniffing it, then curling his lip. I took it from him and took a long swig before settling back in my booth.

Kreios regarded me with an intrigued gleam in his cool green eyes. "Sariah is more complicated than the Council has given her credit for. Her elevation to the Night Witch position has set off a series of events in the underworld that we did not anticipate, and that the Magician in particular did not anticipate."

I frowned. Not too much got past the Magician of the Arcana Council. “What are you talking about? Is she in trouble?”

The Devil huffed a soft laugh. “Not exactly. All I know is that trouble is now poised to find Sariah, wherever she roams.” He gestured around the room. “Trouble, it would appear, already has.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

“That’s what the Night Witch is supposed to do, though,” I protested. “Handle the trouble Justice doesn’t get to or can’t address.” Even as I gave this brief outline of Sariah’s job, I recognized the pitfalls. How well did I know my other half? How well would I ever know her?

The front door slammed again, and Sariah-as-Maria reentered the restaurant, her chin tilted up a little higher, her shoulders a bit more squared as she went about her waitressing duties. I shot a glance at Kreios, and he nodded.

“Call her by her alias. It will help keep her focused,” he said. “The other patrons are leaving, you notice?”

I took another drink of beer and watched the gradual exodus of diners from the pizzeria. Within a few minutes, only a few knots of people remained, and they looked like they weren’t going anywhere.

Sariah sauntered up to us. “Are you here for the party?” she asked brightly, and I glanced to Kreios. He nodded, and she beamed. “They’re ready for you. Straight through to the back. Can I refresh your drinks?”

I held up my beer, and she gave me a winning smile, then turned away.

“Who am I in this pageant anyway?” I asked as Kreios and I stood. He continued his glamour of a rough-looking New York businessman, which was how I assumed most people here saw him. He wasn’t completely out of place in the pizzeria, as his expensive suit covered the body of a thug and his still-attractive face had a hard, bitten-off look to it, with a heavy brow and a thrusting jaw.

“My bodyguard,” he said. He moved ahead then, allowing me to hide a grin. I couldn’t see the glamour he had adorned me with, didn’t know if I was male or female, but it didn’t matter. Given the hastily averted stares when I swung my gaze around the room, I looked the part well enough.

The party room of Demonico’s pizza was exactly what you’d expect from a strip mall pizza joint, with wood-paneled walls, a long center table, and plastic upholstered seats arranged all around, enough for twenty people. There were only six guests in the room, however. A thick-necked man in a poorly fitting suit sat at the head of the table—undoubtedly Barry the pizzeria owner—while a few seats down, three men sat and three others stood behind them. The syndicate members and their bodyguards.

One of the men looked up and seemed to recognize Kreios, his green eyes gleaming with interest in his bluff, red-cheeked face. “George,” he said. “Didn’t know if you would make it.”

”You should never doubt me,” Kreios drawled, with such enthusiasm that I wondered what he’d done with the original George.

“I appreciate you all giving me the interview,” Barry put in, striking what I thought was an appropriate balance between respectful and belligerent.

The man nearest to him on his right—stocky, well oiled, and lugubrious, his gray-tinged cheeks hanging in sorrowful folds from the corners of his deep-sunk eyes to his heavy jowls—leaned back, straining his suit and the goodwill of the chair he occupied.

“We’ve been watching what you’re doing, Bartholomew. You’ve got a good operation. You know we can take you further, but what can you do for us?”

Barry leaned forward. “More than you think, Ralph,” he said, pounding his stubby

finger on the table.

At that moment, the door swung open and Sariah-as-Maria walked in, carrying a tray of beers. I watched her warily. I had attempted a job at Frisch's Big Boy restaurant when I'd been sixteen years old, and was quickly forced to acknowledge that I couldn't carry a tray to save my life. Not surprisingly, Sariah wasn't doing a very good job of it either. We weren't that much different from our teenage selves after all. She held the tray not with the casual assurance that Maria typically would, but white knuckled with focus as she approached the table.

Fortunately, the Devil came to her rescue, as the Devil was wont to do.

"It looks like you've struck the fear of God into your best worker," Kreios commented, standing up smoothly to take the tray from Sariah. She glared at him as Barry laughed uproariously.

"She's the only one I trust in this room, I'll tell you that plain. Maria, be a doll and get me some of that special booze I told you about. The green bottle. Maybe get yourself a drink of something else while you're at it, yeah?"

The men smiled as Sariah exited, and I got the impression that this wasn't their first visit to Barry's party room. What made this different? Why had Maria been so concerned?

Shielding my movement from the other bodyguards so they wouldn't think I was going for a weapon, I shoved my right hand into my leather jacket pocket, and felt the hard ridge of the cards beneath my fingers. So far, nothing Demonico's had thrown at me tonight had surprised me. A fight and Judgment seemed par for the course in a meeting of thugs, so what was I missing? I edged another card out of the deck and snuck a peek at it from behind Kreios's broad back.

Ugh. The Five of Swords—I hated that card. It was all about having to push forward to win a fight that wasn't going to be handed to you on a silver platter, or alternatively winning a battle you didn't necessarily want to win. But its meaning was rarely clear in the moment, only upon later reflection. Super not helpful.

Barry scraped his chair against the floor, drawing my attention as he leaned forward for emphasis. “Like I said,” he grinned, stubbing his finger against the table top. “You’re gonna like what I learned. Something’s shifted in the underworld these past few weeks. Shit waking up is the best way I can describe it, magic that’s been asleep since the dawn of time. The husks I’m pulling up? Stronger than anything I’ve ever seen. Definitely stronger than anything my pop or I ever baked. We’ve expanded operations, moved into some of the neighboring boroughs closer to the docks. I’m going to be opening my own shipping enterprise if all goes well, and that could mean an interesting opportunity for you all to do business.”

“It sounds like you’ve been working hard,” the man sitting to Barry’s left said, his thin face looking permanently flushed beneath his tightly cropped gray hair. Gold flashed at his neck and wrists, and his suit looked more expensive than anyone’s but Kreios’s. I suspected he did not run a pizzeria back in the city. “Why haven’t you told us of this before?”

“‘Cause I’m telling you now, Don,” Barry said. “I had to get some things in order. I had to make sure that my position was protected.”

The context of that statement wasn’t lost on the group, but Barry didn’t seem to care. Either he was that sure he had protected his position, or he was already well on his way to getting drunk. I looked around the room at the impassive faces of the men he’d assembled. This wasn’t a group who were going to betray their opinions, but that didn’t mean they didn’t have them. Barry needed to watch himself.

The door opened again, and Sariah-as-Maria reentered, looking a lot more confident

since she was only carrying an ancient-looking bottle and a rocks glass. I peered with interest at the bottle, but I didn't recognize it, which was surprising. I was a fan of most any kind of booze. I didn't think that Barry's taste was going to be all that impressive, but I figured it'd at least be recognizable.

The bottle, however, drew attention from more than just me.

"Barry, you're making some interesting choices," observed the third man, the snub-nosed ginger who'd first addressed Kreios—and who looked like he'd been in his share of street fights.

Barry only grinned, though the tension in the room was lost on me for a moment.

"You like that?" He nodded, settling back smugly. "I thought you might. And let me tell you, it's way sweeter than you could imagine."

"You used a husk to break into Frank's stash?" the mournful man asked Barry, then turned to eye the ginger—Frank, apparently—who was looking a little salty over his apparently pilfered bottle of booze. "That takes some sack."

"And I could even have overlooked that, except you opened the fucking bottle," Frank said, his voice deepening past menace and well into pissed. "Just who the hell do you think you are?"

Barry, however, was on a roll. "Yeah, well, good help is hard to find, you know? And one of your boys proved that he wasn't worthy of your trust. I didn't do nothing but offer the man some cash, and he slid the liquor my way. Easy as that."

Kreios was happy to play interpreter. "You found a weak link in Frank's operation."

"I did," Barry agreed. "Figured since I was doing you guys a favor by telling you

about my newest venture first, least you could do was let me sample some of your wares. And, hoo boy, I gotta tell you, this is some great booze.”

Barry was decidedly wobbly, but showed no sign of backing down.

“Yeah?” Frank said, his eyes narrowing with temper. “Seems like the smart thing to do would be to tell me if there was a rat in my operation. Not go stealing my shit out from under me. That bottle is over five hundred years old. It ain’t supposed to be drunk.”

“I’m aware of that,” Barry shot back. “And you know what would’ve happened if I’d told you about your rat? Nothing. I would have been in exactly the same place that I was before. Maybe you would have done something about your boy, maybe not, but I wouldn’t have made my point. This way, you lose a bottle of booze, sure, a nice bottle of booze, even...but I got your attention. And you, Ralph, and Don here will be paying closer attention now, yeah?”

Barry had their attention all right, but I wasn’t sure that was in his favor. He gestured to Sariah, then pointed to the sideboard, where more glasses were stacked up. “Since the bottle’s been opened, and oxygen has gotten in, I figure there’s no point in corking this sucker. Might as well enjoy it like it was meant to be enjoyed...like all powerful things are meant to be enjoyed.”

Once again, there was no mistaking Barry’s brash mannerisms. For the first time, the other men in the room looked moderately interested. Stupidity, they were probably used to, but Barry’s swagger spoke of something more.

Frank accepted the glass that Barry poured first and squinted at him. “You got something else you wanna tell us? Or you gonna make us wait all day?”

Barry merely smiled. He poured out generous amounts and passed it around to the

other men, who took the liquor obligingly. I half expected them not to drink it. I wouldn't drink it. There was clearly something screwy going on here. But as the men pulled their glasses toward them, something shifted in their demeanors. They eyed the amber spirits with more grudging interest than they maybe wanted to, and the mournful one, Ralph, lifted the glass to take a sniff. He shivered, then studied Barry more speculatively.

"You've sampled this?" Don asked first, his pale, thin face screwed up in concentration. "How long ago?"

"Only a little earlier tonight," Barry said. "I didn't want to get too far ahead of you."

Beside him, Sariah/Maria sent Barry an interested glance and shifted up on her toes, ready for anything. She didn't go for one of her knives yet, but I could practically see her fingers twitching.

Ralph rolled the glass in his fleshy hand. "And how did you find your first taste of Byzantium pitch?" he asked. "Was it to your taste?"

"It was everything I could have wanted. Everything I didn't know I wanted," Barry said.

Don's grin was quick and hard. "You play a dangerous game, Barry, I'll give you that. But I like that about you."

He took the glass and tipped it back.

As if given permission by the schoolroom bully, the other men lifted their glasses and took a swig as well—including Kreios, or at least he appeared to. Only Barry stayed his hand. He was sweating now, his eyes wide. And when he spoke next, his words were garbled and fast. He uttered some sort of spell or incantation that I didn't know,

in a language I'd never run across and which I couldn't immediately decipher, which made it hella old. All three men froze, the liquid barely down their throats.

The door behind Sariah opened again, and three new men in combat gear rushed in, spraying silenced bullets. Not aiming for the other mafiosi at first, but for the men's bodyguards, who were also caught in some sort of thrall. Once they fell, Don, Frank, and Ralph were dispatched with equally swift efficiency. Kreios lifted a hand, casually deflecting any gunfire that came our way, and Sariah squealed with impressive alarm and dropped behind the table. It was all over in less than ten seconds, but Barry wasn't done yet.

Four shuffling creatures moved into the room next, their skin the color of old clay, their faces slack, their shoulders hunched. The gunmen cursed and pressed themselves against the wall, eyes going wide. The four creatures were wearing brown workmen's clothes and dusty boots, their hair lank and flat against their heads. As soon they cleared the doorway, the gunmen slipped out behind them—hard-bitten killers who apparently had no stomach for the supernatural. I had plenty of stomach for it, and I still stared wide-eyed in horror.

So these were husks. Automatons of Hell with a singular job—to take over the bodies of the dead and animate them at the behest of their master and his dark necromancy. I watched, queasy, as they moved toward the dead men. A moment later...they had become the dead men. The slender, fastidious, well-dressed Don, the pug-nosed ginger Frank, the sad-sack gray-faced Ralph. They all lived anew, only now they sat stiff and unnaturally still, waiting for further instructions.

And only three of them had completed their transition. The fourth creature approached Kreios, then froze as the Devil lifted a lazy hand and gestured it away.

The husk's featureless face turned toward Barry.

Uh-oh.

Barry gusted out a long breath as Sariah scrambled upright and flattened herself against the wall. I tensed as the creature shifted toward Barry, though the pizzeria owner paid no attention to it. He was too focused on the husks who'd taken over the mafiosi's bodies, the three men who were now lifting their hands to their heads and straightening their suits like they were coming out of a deep sleep.

"Um, Kreios?" I whispered.

"Wait for it," Kreios murmured.

Barry leaned forward in his chair, his eyes bright. It was as if he didn't notice the fourth husk that was edging toward him with a heavy, plodding shuffle. "Fuck," Barry said. "I didn't think that was going to work."

"Barry, honey, what did you do?" Sariah managed in Maria's throaty voice.

Kreios dropped his hand and set his drink on the table with a loud thunk. Barry was so startled, he shoved back in his chair, half standing before Kreios lazily waved him to stillness.

"You didn't drink the pitch," Kreios challenged him.

"Fuck no, I didn't," Barry said, wide-eyed. "But you did. So how..."

Kreios sighed, but I was only half paying attention to him. I kept watching the husk. It was diminishing in size as it approached Barry, not even trying to lunge for him. Maybe...maybe the magic was weakening? Maybe Barry wasn't slated for death after all? Maria had seemed truly sweet on him, but the asshat had just gunned down a bunch of humans in cold blood. How did any of that square? I watched as the fourth

husk finally sort of oozed through the floor, and belatedly wondered what exactly lay beneath this particular party room.

“Barry, there’s a reason why that bottle of Byzantium pitch was never supposed to be opened, and it wasn’t because it gives its owner the power to kill his enemies,” the Devil finally said. “There are far simpler ways to accomplish that, and Hell doesn’t choose sides.”

“No! No, you don’t understand.” Barry blinked back to full attention, suddenly on the defensive. “I had to strike these guys first. They were already closing in, sniffing around. If I didn’t hit them, I’d have been a dead man within a week. They’re bad news, and their bodyguards were worse, I’m telling you. Now we’re safe.”

Kreios smiled indulgently. “Not exactly. You talked about magic waking up? You’ve helped it along. In fact, you just flipped on all the lights and banged a loud drum in its ear.”

“Whattya mean?” Barry asked. He squinted around. “Hey. Why are you even still upright? Where’s the fourth husk?”

“Ah, him.” Kreios tilted his head, considering. “He’s left to tell his master that you lied, I suspect.”

“He what?” Barry practically choked.

Kreios merely nodded. “It would seem all that’s left now is the screaming.”

With that, the liquid that still remained in Barry’s glass hissed, and smoke curled around him. A yawning pit opened beneath the pizzeria owner’s chair, and without any further fanfare, he dropped straight down, leaving nothing but an empty hole.

For a long moment, there was no sound at all. Then Sariah stepped up to the edge of the pit.

“Well...looks like I’m up,” she said. She glanced at me and winked. “Not like you’re going to head down there, right?”

“Neither are you,” I snapped, as Kreios saluted the empty space that Barry had abruptly vacated, then drained his glass of Byzantium pitch. Apparently, he was immune to any side effects from the archaic brew.

“I’d say George owes me,” the Devil announced with satisfaction, to no one in particular.

“Dude, we can’t just leave Barry down there,” Sariah protested. “That was kind of the whole point of this process. He needs to live.”

Kreios shrugged. “He’s dropped into Hell. I can’t go after him—and neither can Sara. Those are the rules.”

“Then like I said, I’ll go myself,” Sariah blustered.

“No,” I said again, holding my hand out to stop her. As she stared at me, I thought about Maria’s face, the way she’d looked when talking about Barry. From everything I could tell, he was an asshole, but he was Maria’s asshole, and I’d told her he would be okay. Plus, Sariah seemed completely invested in the guy for some ridiculous reason I had yet to figure out. I edged toward the pit, peering into it. It looked reassuringly pitlike, not like Hell at all. Maybe it was merely Hell-adjacent? And I’d promised Maria, dammit.

“But what if I sort of duck in real quick-like to Hell, and then come right back out again?” I asked Kreios. “Just long enough to fetch the guy. I can do that, right?”

“No, you can’t—” Kreios began, and Sariah threw up her hands.

“Okay, you guys go ahead and keep arguing. I’m out,” she announced. She stepped into the pit, vanishing from sight.

“Sariah,” I yelped. Without thinking, I jumped into the pit as well—and plummeted down.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

My descent into Hell was brief and bumpy. I slammed against solid rock walls way too rough to be man-made, like some long-ago underground aqueduct that had somehow avoided becoming part of Pennsauken's infrastructure. Then again, I suspected very few of Hell's entryways showed up on city planning maps, not even in New Jersey.

"Incoming!" I shouted down to Sariah. She yelped, sounding less alarmed than irritated as she scrambled out of the way in time before I crashed down beside her. I rolled up to my feet again, my head spinning.

"Where are we?" I demanded. "Is this Hell? Can you tell?"

"Oh, yeah. It's Hell all right." She groaned, drawing her knees up as she leaned against a rock wall. "I fucking hate this place."

"Where did Barry go?" I'd spread-eagled my arms in defense against my own lack of impulse control, my stance wide. There was light, oddly enough, an ambient glow that emanated from the walls with a nice cheery red.

"Not far, believe me." Sariah stood as well, leaning down to dust off her jeans. "And don't ask me how you made it in here, because Kreios is right, you shouldn't be able to enter Hell. Armaeus made you immortal. Either that, or his magic sucks balls. As for Barry, give it a second. You'll hear him."

Her voice was so soft as to be barely audible, and it had changed in pitch as well. It was lower, harder. I thought back to when I had first met Sariah in Hell, this almost perfect mirror image of myself who was yet so different. She hadn't been particularly

sisterly from the get-go, but we'd crossed a lot of fires since then.

She turned and peered intently down one of the corridors, grimacing a little. "This way," she muttered, almost more to herself than to me. I followed her halfway up a corridor until it split off. She leaned close to me, putting her mouth next to my ear.

"The old saying that the walls have ears came from down here, you know. There are pockets of Hell that are basically wired for sound. This is one of them."

I glanced around. "Wired for who?"

"The black beast, the prince of darkness—the devil, in the flesh. And not that pretty boy we just left either."

That sharp edge was back in her voice. "What is with you two?" I asked, but she waved me off, the glint of one of her blades catching the dim light. She moved forward with long, quick strides, her steps sure and certain in the half gloom.

"We can get to that later. Right now, you should focus. The dude I'm talking about is an ancient creature, pretty much spit out of the bowels of Earth during creation. He's not all horns and devil eyes and cloven hooves, but he's no cover model either. His glamour is designed strictly to freak you out, and given that Barry is the food he's playing with, you can expect a pretty textbook devil incarnation." She shook her head. "I've never even heard of Byzantium pitch, and I've been down here a really long time."

In another twenty paces, we finally heard a sound that was detectable to my ears. Something that made Sariah stop. Sobbing. Specifically, a woman sobbing.

"That ain't Barry—or Maria, in case you're wondering," Sariah said coldly, and she headed on, but I held up a hand.

“Yeah, but...” I began.

Sariah snapped a sharp gaze back at me, hard and unforgiving. “Sara, Barry’s no prince, but the way he looked at Maria when he thought no one could see him, which I happen to know firsthand now...that was real. So him, we save. But otherwise, if somebody’s down here, chances are they should be. It’s not your job to save everyone. It’s definitely not mine. Let’s go.”

She turned back and tugged me on, leaving me to mull over that little chestnut. Technically, as Justice of the Arcana Council, it wasn’t my job to save anyone. But it was my job to get justice for those who’d been wronged. Had this woman been wronged? Stuck in Hell through choices not her own? Where did my duty stop anyway?

I didn’t have any more time to think about it as more commotion caught our attention. Muffled shouts, like someone speaking through heavy blankets. Sariah grinned, her entire body seeming to go electric.

“Okay, then.” She looked back at me. “We’ve got druids to start—not real ones, but they dress the part. You’ll like these guys. The chubby bastard they’re performing for certainly does. They’re his number one enforcers.”

She picked up the pace and in about fifty more steps, we reached another doorway, this one opening onto a room with more light. Barry stood in the center, wrapped up like a tamale in what looked to be burlap with a suspiciously oily sheen. Only his head stuck out the top.

Three figures stood around him. Tall, thin, and—Sariah was right—druidic looking in heavy cowed robes, they could have been any DD clerics in any basement anywhere. One of them lifted a hand, and a whoosh of air went up. The guy now brandished a flaming torch. My eyes snapped wide.

Barry started screaming like a madman as the cleric waved the flame toward him. Perfectly reasonable response, as far as I was concerned.

Apparently unimpressed by the uproar, Sariah leaned close and hissed in my ear. “It’s illusion magic, the best of the best. There’s a reason for the fire-and-brimstone legends, the eternal flame that never dies and all that bullshit. It’s because it works. Fire is a big trigger for a lot of people.”

An unreasonable chill swept through me. It should have been a trigger for Sariah as well, but then she had run into the fire, while I had raced away.

“I did everything you asked, everything. I killed them all,” Barry pleaded, as the druid guy leaned forward and set the fringe of the burlap sack ablaze. Barry’s voice climbed several octaves. “I killed them all!”

“You killed three.” A voice flowed out from the shadows at the back of the room, dark and ragged. It leached into my bones and circled like a fist around my spine, making me stiffen.

“Sariah,” I muttered.

Barry’s screams grew more frantic. “I killed them, all of them. Even George finally drank, I’m sure of it—”

“George remains among the living,” the slithering voice countered, and I blinked, thinking of the man that Kreios had impersonated in the pizzeria. “I would have received his shriveled body on a pallet if he didn’t. His soul is mortgaged over to me a dozen times, yet he’s not here. So I’ll take you instead.”

“No,” Barry screeched, and whether it was illusion or not, his pain appeared very real as he flopped around inside his cocoon, trying to roll the fire out. The druid guys

stepped off to the side, their faces unseeable beneath their heavy cowls. Beside me, Sariah squared her shoulders. Metal flashed in her right hand.

“Not yet, not yet,” she muttered. “Might as well make this worth it.”

“My children are hungry,” the voice taunted, thick with satisfaction. “They haven’t had fresh meat for some time. You broke your bargain with me and wasted my pitch.”

“I didn’t,” Barry wailed, but the fire had moved farther up the bundled blankets, and I could smell something other than oil and fabric. Roasting flesh.

I nearly burst forward then, but Sariah’s left hand lashed out and gripped my forearm. “The field has to be set,” she said tightly.

A second later, a rush of movement burst into the room from all sides, making my eyes peel wide. Demon spawn of every description crowded close. Traditional horned mini devils, clacking lizards, hissing snakes, deformed monkeys, even rodents scuttled forward as the fire surrounding Barry flamed higher, then abruptly guttered out.

“I’d say he’s just about done.” Sariah grinned at me, whipping out a second metal bracelet of Justice that she had fashioned into a long, jagged knife, the weapon of choice for the Night Witch. “Let’s go.”

She leapt into the fray, scattering the creatures as Barry’s scream choked off. I followed right behind. My hands electrified with a fireball of my own, but one born of magic, not true flame. I wasted no time choosing targets. I picked the easiest ones, the tall, thin, robed druids who turned and raised their torches of flame against me. Two-thirds of the horde were focused on Sariah and her whirling blades, while the final third were shredding the blankets around Barry.

The mix of fire blazing from the brands and my own brilliant fireballs threw everything into full light. For the first time, I caught a glimpse of the creature hovering at the back of the room.

Sariah had been right. The beast was...beastly. The enormous creature sported the head of a goat, horns sticking out on either side, surmounting a body that was fat and hairy. Its belly spilled out over squat legs with cloven feet. It had small, man-sized arms all out of proportion to its enormous body, and it held a bottle in one long-fingered fist, a glass of dark liquid in the other. Its eyes went wide with surprise as my fireballs sent the druids exploding in all directions, taking out a good portion of the creatures ripping into Barry's charred blankets.

"You bitch!" the devil roared, but not at me, as the bright lights also served to illuminate Sariah gutting its spawn army with a speed that went well beyond human. The Night Witch's knives screamed their fury.

I leapt forward, grateful that the beast was distracted. I swept the remaining demons off Barry, ripping through his wrappings until I exposed what was left of him. He was still alive, but he'd lost a good quarter of his girth, his body shrunken and bright pink, and definitely singed on the edges.

"Can you run?" I asked. He only stared at me, nodding mutely, his eyes glassy with shock. I reached out a hand and winced as he grabbed it, his own hand burning hot. I didn't have time to try to heal him. We had to go.

"Sariah!" I shouted, and she laughed with hard, feral glee.

"Right behind you. Just cleaning up the trash."

I pulled Barry clear as Sariah turned toward the creature in the back of the room. She went after it and, with one arcing slash, gutted it from neck to belly, then she reached

in and pulled out its heart and threw it across the room, sending another knife soaring out immediately after it. The knife was faster and skewered the heart before it reached the far wall.

The devil creature crumpled to the ground, and Sariah used her free hand to grab the bottle it was holding before anything more spilled out of it.

“That was for Barnabas,” she spat. Leaning down, she picked up a strip of cloth and stuffed it in the mouth of the bottle. Then she turned toward me.

“The others will come to feast on this shitshow. We’ve gotta get out of here.”

“You think?” I muttered.

She strode across the room and recovered her knives, wiping them on her jeans before slapping them back against her wrists, where they returned to their original bracelet forms. I let her take some of Barry’s weight as she came up on his other side.

Together, we led the stumbling, muttering, pizza-slinging necromancer out of the room, back into the gloom-shrouded corridors of Hell.

“Which way do we go from here?” I asked.

Sariah glanced around, evidently used to the dim lighting. “What I know about the Arcana Council, they like things easy,” she said. “It doesn’t so much matter where we poke up, it’ll be where they want us to be.”

“You sound strangely confident about that.”

She grinned at me, then dropped her voice when she spoke again, reminding me of the need for discretion. “I’m kind of curious to see what’s going to happen to you

now that you broke the seal of Hell and all, not gonna lie. You seriously shouldn't have done that. Do you feel any different or anything?"

"Nope." I shook my head. But that didn't mean I felt good. I was pretty sure Armaeus and Kreios had the right of it. Immortals couldn't enter Hell, no matter how powerful they were. And I was immortal by virtue of the fact that I was an Arcana Council member. So how had I managed it?

The only answer wasn't a good one.

"I think Armaeus doesn't know as much about me as he thought he did," I muttered as Barry moaned between us.

Sariah sighed. "Pretty much."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

Barry started crying quietly, so we kept our conversation to a minimum, gradually working our way through the corridors. Eventually, we crouched our way through a low opening in the rock. The rumble of engines and heavy equipment reached us from far overhead, and I lifted my brows at Sariah over Barry's head. "Are we out?"

"In Between, I'm thinking. Which means we can talk, at least." Sariah grunted, shifting her hold on Barry and glaring at him hard. "I'm not sure what Maria sees in you beyond your moony-eyed stares, buddy, but you are one lucky bastard."

He stiffened and managed to pull himself together a bit more. "What do you mean?"

"I mean she's the only reason we went in after you. She believes in you, even though you're a sack of shit."

"Maria?" he asked, still sounding dazed. "She knows nothing—she's safe. I've kept her safe."

"Yeah, yeah, you can tell her all about it—here we go," Sariah said.

She was right. As we came around the corner, a doorway stood open, cut into the solid rock. We drew even with it and stopped, peering into the shadows beyond.

"What's this?" Barry asked, his voice tremulous. Not even a trace of his former swagger remained, and he shivered uncontrollably as the thick shadows flowed away from the door, eventually revealing a woman lit by a pool of light. She knelt in front of a small table covered with a heavy dark purple fabric.

Maria clasped her hands in prayer, and the candlelight flickered higher, making the religious icons lined up next to the crystals and candles stand out in sharp relief. “He’s a good man, a powerful man. He just needs a second chance,” she pleaded.

Beside me, Barry sucked in a quick breath.

I glanced to Sariah. She rolled her eyes, then gave Barry a push toward the door. “You fuck this up, we’re not saving you again,” she informed him tersely.

He stumbled into the mists, and a second later, we heard Maria’s cry of exultation.

We slowly closed the door behind them.

“There,” I grinned at Sariah. “You feel better now?”

“I...do,” she said, surprising me. She kept her gaze on the door a long minute. “That—yeah. It wasn’t exactly all the truth, what I just told him, but it was true enough, I guess. There’s a whole lot of people who are assholes and don’t deserve to be saved. But some of them have people who love them anyway. I guess it kind of makes you want to see how things turn out, with the right kind of second chance.”

I bit my lip, but kept my face carefully neutral as she turned back to me. Once again, how well did I really know Sariah, this reflection of me who’d taken a decidedly crooked path to get to where she was today? Not well enough, clearly.

“So where to?” I finally managed.

She squinted up the corridor. “If Kreios is topside, you can bet he’ll have transpo home. You probably don’t need it, but considering you caught him off guard by disappearing down the rabbit hole, it might be interesting to find out if he’s learned anything. If the magic house of Tarot cards is about to take a tumble, we should

probably know that sooner rather than later. Plus, I'm thinking he's going to be in a chatty mood."

"Oh?" I narrowed my eyes at her as we started walking again. "Any particular reason why you might think that?"

She shrugged. "He was close enough to touch at Demonico's, at least for a little while. I don't need that long to soak up a Connected's skills. My ability to use said skills doesn't last very long, but it's fun while I can access them—especially when they're at his level."

"You've gotten stronger."

"Oh, yeah," she said. "The Night Witch gig has some fringe benefits that weren't included in the job description, namely that my ability to sponge the magic off others has amped up like whoa. I can't draw blood from a stone, so the person I'm tapping needs to be pretty strong for the skill to be super beneficial, but everyone has something to offer. Maria was a low-level hedge witch. I couldn't do too much with that, because when I draw someone down, I deplete them, and that's no good for most humans. But Kreios? I don't think he even noticed. And I got a full-on view into his head—and into Maria's, for that matter...and into Barry's while I was up. It was...useful."

I considered that. Sariah was probably wrong. I quite seriously doubted that Kreios was unaware that his skills were being siphoned off. Far more likely he'd wanted it to happen just because he found the idea curious. He was a curious kind of guy.

"So that's why you guys aren't getting along?" I asked. "Because you hijacked his ability of discernment and didn't like what you saw?" Even as I asked the question, I shook my head. "That can't be right, though. You were pissed at him long before he reached our table."

“Yeah, well. I was kind of messed up after this last gig, and let’s just say I got some visitors while I was laid up. With each new one that showed up, I tried soaking up some of their abilities.”

“Uh oh,” I said. “Visitors like who? The Magician?”

“One more tick down the Tarot food chain,” Sariah grinned. “Eshe.”

I blinked. “Eshe came to see you? Seriously?” The High Priestess of the Arcana Council wasn’t exactly chummy with anyone, and I’d never thought she’d considered Sariah as anything more than a nuisance.

Apparently, Sariah’s siphoned mind-reading skills had faded somewhat. She gave no reaction to my internal musings. “Yup. And once she was done, she left behind a parting gift I know for a fact she hadn’t intended. I had some wicked dreams. In addition to tipping me off to check out your incoming caseload at Justice Hall, and cluing me in to the value of a doughboy army, those dreams basically made our buddy Kreios out to be, well, kind of an asshole. Sort of like his predecessor, if I’m getting my history right.”

I squinted at her. “Kind of an asshole, how?”

“For starters, I think he’s looking to try to kill the Magician.”

“What? There’s no way. They’re friends. They’ve always been friends.”

“Uh-huh.” She glared right back. “Am I the only one who’s noticed that he’s taken over the Magician’s jobs, and here we are in the middle of a basic, boring opportunity to get some Justice done, and he shows up out of nowhere, sticking his nose in things?”

“But that can’t be right,” I protested, though in reality, Sariah could absolutely be right. I’d always liked Kreios, we’d gotten along, but how well did I really know the demigod?

The answer, of course, was not very well—especially since I didn’t have the Devil’s mad skills of being able to see into others’ most intimate thoughts.

I scowled at Sariah, though we kept moving briskly along the corridor. “How did you keep him from knowing your suspicions?”

She laughed. “That part’s easy. I didn’t. He knows I’m not currently a fan, and he knows why. He may not know the specific details of it because I hang around with you enough to be able to keep my mental barriers shipshape, but he knows that I’ve gotten some bad feels about him—and I think he’s surprised. I think it makes him curious about me, which could be good, could be bad.”

“It could be very bad,” I agreed. “I’ve never seen Kreios actually interested enough to go after someone for any reason. He usually just...”

“Gets them,” Sariah said with a nod. “As in, they fall into his lap. Yeah, I noticed that too. But I don’t think he’s gonna show up on my doorstep carrying flowers, if that’s your concern. He’s got the hots for Nikki.”

I snorted. “Everyone’s got the hots for Nikki if they’re smart, while she’s got the hots for at least a half dozen people right this second. The Devil knows that better than anyone, and supports it. But since we’re on the subject of relationships...”

Before I could finish the question, Sariah raised her hand. “Don’t even start with me and Brody,” she said, her words conjuring up images of the rumped, square-jawed Las Vegas detective who was one of our few friends left over from childhood. “I’m never going to see him as anything other than the knight in shining armor that he still

is, and he's never going to see me as anything but the little sister of his ex. We may keep knocking the idea around a few times because he is hella hot, despite his Boy Scout act, but that's not going anywhere. And I don't need any more friends."

Something in her voice caught me up short. Between my work and, well, my work, I didn't have a lot of friends either, but I did have some—who I valued more than I did my own skin. What had Sariah's life been like in Hell? Had she always been this alone?

The name came to me immediately.

"Who is Barnabas?"

She chuckled a little ruefully. "I figured you maybe heard that. He was a ghoul, I guess you'd call him, but a good guy, as ghouls went. A low-ranking lieutenant of the fat-bodied fucker we just took out. After that asshole and his buddies used him as fodder for one of their black dark-magic parties, they killed him. I mean, sure, I guess he was already dead. But after the spawn got done with him, he was dead, dead. First time I realized that could happen down in Hell. I didn't take it well."

I nodded, my heart twisting a little. If your best friend was a ghoul, what did that say about your social group? "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well, you win or you learn. One of the joys of walking through Hell, you figure out how not to get too attached." She squinted ahead, slowing her stride at last. "This looks promising."

We approached a rough metal door bolted into the wall of sheer rock. Its sides were melted and warped, but the door itself appeared legitimate enough. Sariah tugged on its handle. The door opened inward toward us, revealing a smoothly efficient metal and concrete hallway beyond.

“That’s one heck of an emergency exit,” Sariah quipped as we moved into the much more official-looking corridors of what I assumed was the Newark airport. We walked quickly, not wanting to explain our presence so far underground, but we needn’t have worried. The first staircase that presented itself led up to an access doorway that dumped into a more central hallway, and soon we were on the ground floor of the airport, near the private tarmac. The gleaming black jet that waited out on the far edge of the tarmac didn’t look familiar to me, but Sariah moved toward it confidently.

“That’s Kreios’s,” she said. “He’s now the head of the Arcana Council, so of course he’s going to have a fancy jet. He’s even got the welcome wagon waiting for us.”

Sure enough, a black limo with two guards and an aviation official stood at the ready as we emerged from the gate area. We were swept into the limo and driven the short distance to the private plane. Probably not typical TSA protocol, but it appeared to work for Kreios.

He wasn’t alone on the airplane when we boarded, either. I sensed the shift of power as soon as we stepped off the steep stairway to enter the plane—which was far bigger than it appeared to be on the outside, bigger than any private jet reasonably should be. But I could only process one shock at a time.

“Armaeus is here?” I asked.

Sariah nodded, peering around with newfound irritation. “I’m telling you, something hinky is going on. I thought I brought you to Jersey on my own, but now, I’m beginning to wonder if even I wasn’t manipulated in some way. If so, that shit’s gotta stop.”

I frowned, but I didn’t have the same sense of manipulation she did. More likely it was just the Devil and the Magician taking advantage of circumstances that presented

themselves to them. It was what they had done best in all the years they had worked together. The tally of those years was going on a hundred. Kreios had joined the Council in the early 1930s if I recalled correctly, whereas the Magician had been a fixture since the late 1200s. The reality of that date tugged at me. Armaeus had spent a long time as head of the Council, and he'd given up that role on a whim?

For the first time, it struck me how odd that was. Yes, Armaeus had had good reason to step down while his memories had been compromised, but why had he stayed out of the top position in the weeks and months that had followed? Was Sariah right and more was going on here than I suspected?

We reached the main compartment of the jet, and I knew one thing was certain—this was not the Magician's private plane. While Armaeus's conveyance was elegant, pristine, and efficient, Kreios's approach to the interior design of his jet was entirely different. Leather seats, sofas, and reclining chairs adorned the space, each one more vibrantly colored than the last. Carpet lined the floor, the padding so thick that it was noticeable even through my boots. The windows were tinted a faint rose, so the light that filtered through the space took on a pink haze. An enormous bar took up one side of the cabin, and not surprisingly, that was where the Devil stood, regarding us with a self-satisfied smirk as we emerged from the doorway.

"Congratulations." He lifted a glass. "Barry will have a full recovery and will go on to run the Eastern Seaboard operation of the Black Diamond syndicate. George Demopolous, meanwhile, will continue his leadership in the Sapphire syndicate. Both men are very aware of their most excellent good fortune, and understand they will be very handsomely rewarded for their interactions with the Arcana Council going forward. Meanwhile, we have secured a solid position in two prominent organizations. A job well done."

I could feel Sariah's irritation ratchet up with his little speech, steam trickling off her as she studied him. "So you were behind this the whole time?" she asked. "You

tricked me?”

“Not at all,” Kreios said with credible sincerity. “I didn’t know where you were heading until you got there, but after I looked in on the situation, it quickly became clear how the Council could benefit. And given the givens, it’s important for us to maximize any opportunity for benefit. Time is running short.”

I considered his words carefully. The Devil wasn’t one for false alarmism. If anything, he took, well, a devil-may-care attitude toward the business of running the Arcana Council, or the business of life, for that matter. He rolled with every punch and came up not just swinging, but with a cocktail in his hand and a smile on his face. What had changed?

I had felt the tension winding tighter all around me these past several days, in the tenor of requests that I was getting at Justice Hall, the energy that jittered and skittered up and down the Las Vegas Strip where the Council made their home. But I was used to worrying. There was always someone else to find, protect, heal. None of those things were the Devil’s province.

Sariah knew it too. “Since when do you give a shit about anything but having a good time?” she asked, with perhaps a little bit less decorum than I would’ve been able to manage. “You expect me to believe that you’re taking your role as head of the Arcana Council to heart? ’Cause I’m not really feeling that.”

For a long moment, Kreios studied Sariah, his face impassive, his green eyes emotionless. Then his mouth kicked up at the corner into a smile.

“You’re quite right,” he murmured, his tone dangerously soft. “But there is one thing I do care about.”

A presence hovered in the doorway of the main cabin, and I turned as the full force of

that presence struck me—crackling with energy, power, and possibility, but encased in stultifying darkness, a panic-filled chaos of fear...and even the whisper of death.

“Sara,” the Magician gasped.

Then he collapsed.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

“Armaeus!” I gasped, and bolted forward.

As quickly as I moved, Kreios was faster. He caught Armaeus before he hit the floor, then eased him into my arms.

I knelt, cradling the Magician close to me, my heart in my throat. What was wrong with him? How could I help him? I was afraid to do anything without his direct request, for fear of what snarl of magic I might encounter.

The Magician of the Arcana Council had been a larger-than-life figure to me since I’d first met him, working remotely in Rio de Janeiro for the Council without even realizing it. Every time I’d seen him since then, he’d struck me all over again with the force of his charisma, power, and unreasonable beauty. Tall and sleekly muscled, with bronze skin and sharply cut features that spoke of his heritage of a French father and an Egyptian mother, he radiated sensuality and grace.

Now he looked like he’d been through a war. His sleek black hair hung lank and tight to his face, his golden-bronzed skin was sallow, his gold-and-black eyes sunken and hollow. Even his body felt deflated, as if in the few short days since I’d seen him last, he’d lost thirty pounds.

“What happened to you?” I whispered. I lifted my gaze to Kreios. “You knew?”

“Only what he allowed me to know, until about fifteen minutes ago,” Kreios said, an edge of irritation gilding his words. “With recent events involving our enemies in high places, there was a need for him to do research on the true whereabouts of the Star and the Moon, he said. A need to go deep, to seek out corners of the arcane

community who would know more than anyone what was going on.”

“And you just let him go? Aren’t you supposed to be in charge here?” An edge of hysteria made my words sharper than I wanted. I’d never seen Armaeus so helpless looking, so frail.

Kreios held my gaze steadily. “This is not the first time that the Magician has disappeared into his work, or pushed himself too hard. I have only known him for a handful of generations. He lived several hundred years on his own before that. He has undoubtedly nearly died and come back dozens of times.”

“But it’s different this time, isn’t it?” I asked tersely, because of course it was. The Devil wouldn’t be telling me all this if it wasn’t.

He grimaced. “It’s different. He’s no longer the head of the Arcana Council, I am. And as with every fucking thing Armaeus touches, things are not as simple as they should be on the face of it. When I accepted his suggestion to lead the Council, I didn’t ask what that would mean for him. What that would mean for you, either.”

I blinked at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Armaeus is dinking with his magic, isn’t he?” Sariah asked. “Making a power grab for him—maybe for all of you. That’s why you could get into Hell, yeah? He did something to trump the immortality clause.”

From my arms, Armaeus groaned in protest. “...stronger,” he managed.

Sariah waved him off, practically bouncing on her toes. “Yeah, yeah. I’m sure that’s what it is. He juiced you without you knowing it.”

I scowled, working out the ramifications of Armaeus’s actions as Sariah peered at

Kreios.

“You didn’t know, though,” she said thoughtfully. “You didn’t know, or you would have gone into Hell with us. Or, maybe he didn’t give you a magical power boost.”

“I don’t need a magical power boost,” Kreios informed her coolly. “But when I watched Sara successfully enter, I knew that something had shifted. I put out the summons immediately for Armaeus, only to find out that he’d been hiding his, shall we say, magical injuries from me. There are some benefits to being the head of the Council however.”

Sariah chuckled. “Good man. You pulled rank, and went and saved his ass while we were dicking around with Barry. You totally pulled him out of whatever hole he’d dropped himself into.”

“I did, but even I didn’t know he was in this sort of shape.” As Kreios spoke, he glanced toward the Magician, who I still cradled in my arms. Armaeus’s breath was shallow, his eyelids fluttered closed, and he slumped bonelessly into my arms, as if he’d used all his energy to get from the hallway into the main cabin.

“What’s wrong with him?” I reached out with my mind, but the Magician was closed off to me. I’d always prided myself on keeping him out, and now he kept me out as well, despite his current weakness. How strong was Armaeus to be able to do so much even when he was so frail?

“I would tell you, except all the people that I would ordinarily ask, I can’t,” Kreios said.

I peered up at him. “What are you talking about? Surely the Fool would know? Eshe? Maybe Death?”

“All likely possibilities.” Kreios nodded. “Except as I was bringing the Magician here, he specifically asked me not to let anyone know of his condition or how he arrived at it.”

“This hardly seems the time for him to develop a chip on his shoulder,” Sariah observed, and I had to agree with her.

Kreios’s jaw tightened. “I’m afraid the situation is far worse than that. The Magician can’t afford to let anyone know of his condition because he can no longer judge who to trust. A shift or, perhaps better stated, a schism is taking place in the Arcana Council, and that schism could have long-term repercussions. It is my suspicion that’s why the Magician has been chasing down both possibilities and probabilities regarding the identity of the Moon and the Star. To learn what he’s desperate to know, he’s had to seek information out from some of the darkest corners of the arcane community. And do it in such a way that nobody knows.”

“But why?” I protested. “I mean, sure, some of the members of the Council can be dickheads, but do you seriously think they would do anything to harm the Council itself? That makes no sense.”

Even as I put up the objection, though, I could see where Kreios was going.

“The Shadow Court,” I said, referencing the organization most likely to deserve a boot straight into Hell—if only we could pin them down long enough to aim correctly. “You think some of the Council are going to break ranks and join them? But why? We’ve beaten the Court at every turn.”

“We have beaten them at every turn, but at every turn, they’ve gotten a little stronger now, haven’t they? Strong enough that someone already chafing at the bit to break from the Arcana Council might decide to make their move? Strong enough that such a Council member could be lured into outright betrayal? We have located the missing

Sun, but there's still the Moon and the Star who remain hidden to us. What if those two former Council members are looking to recruit their own Council? Or at least take down the existing one by joining ranks with the Shadow Court?"

"You're asking these questions because you don't know the answers," Sariah challenged. "This could all be bullshit. Has Armaeus told you anything for certain?"

The Devil shook his head. "He hasn't. These are all possibilities, different threads that he has tugged from the weave of the world. They could all lead to nothing."

"Useful, as always," Sariah said.

He ignored her, glancing my way. "I'm going to arrange for our flight back to Las Vegas, taking a rather circuitous path. I don't know how long it will take Armaeus to recover, but I'd rather not be where anyone can see us when that happens."

Sariah threw up her hands. "Wait, you're going to go all Snowpiercer on us? We're just going to go around and around and around?"

The Devil regarded her with an arched brow. "You have someplace else you'd rather be?"

The question was so laden with meaning that I blinked and slanted a quick glance to Sariah, surprised to see her redden and turn away. The tension in the room was thick enough to cut, but I was distracted almost immediately by Armaeus shifting in my arms.

"Sara," he murmured again. I leaned down toward him, settling him more heavily against me. As glad as I was to hear his voice, I hated him calling me by my name. It meant he was hurt far worse than I wanted to think about.

“I’m here, Armaeus,” I whispered. “I’m right here.”

“Good,” he said. “Heal me.”

I blinked, jerking my gaze up to Sariah. She stared back at me with equal surprise.

“Has he done that before?”

I shook my head. That wasn’t to say that I hadn’t helped Armaeus heal, but this was the first time he’d ever made the explicit request of me, I was pretty sure. Was that important? Knowing the Magician, was it some sort of test? And if so, was it a test I wanted to pass?

I leaned down to his ear, holding him tight, hoping he didn’t take my question the wrong way. “Why?”

Armaeus smiled, a sad, knowing smile, aware even in the depths of his injury of all the various nuances between us.

“Not a test for you,” he assured me, though it looked like the effort to talk cost him. “For me.”

I bit my lip and looked again to Sariah, who’d strode halfway across the room toward me. Now she stood battle ready, her hands down and loose at her side, a gunslinger ready to draw at the slightest provocation.

“He’s not screwing with you, is he?” she asked. “Some sort of postjuicing gotcha?”

“I don’t care,” I admitted, and I didn’t. I returned my focus to the Magician, opening my mind to him as well as my heart as he seemed to collapse further into himself, his eyes drifting shut and his mouth going slack. I pulled every vestige of energy that I

could from the core of my being and sent it pulsing out through my fingers as I gripped his arms steadily. I could feel the jolt of electricity as it moved along my nerves, gaining strength as all my energy, my power, all my everything poured into Armaeus.

And pour it did, since there was nothing there to stop it, no slightly burning synapses, no faintly glowing embers. The Magician had been wiped clean of his very essence, it seemed. He was an empty well that accepted my energy without reaction, so drained that he couldn't even assist with his own healing. I stared in horror at the wreckage of Armaeus's circuitry—the shattered nerve endings, the burnt-out filaments. I knew him as well as I knew myself, but how...how could I put him back together from virtually nothing?

Shoving my fears away, I redoubled my efforts, leaning down closer, murmuring under my breath, telling him of all the moments we'd shared together, all the idle memories... Nonsense words, meaningless words, merely a vessel to pour out whatever power I had, the heat of my healing energy building with every breath.

I heard Sariah speak at one point, but I couldn't respond. My hair felt like it had become electrified, my skin was hot, my blood practically bubbling in my veins. Energy built around us in a spiral, hemming us both in, but Armaeus didn't move. I talked and coaxed and cried until I was hoarse—and nothing.

At some point, I slept.

I had to have, because when I came awake seemingly moments later, the two of us remained on the floor of the jet, blankets and pillows piled over us, as if they'd been tossed from a distance. I blinked and saw Sariah lying boneless on a far couch, while Kreios sat close to her head, his elbows on his knees, his eyes focused on Armaeus and me.

“Do you know what he did?” Kreios asked, the words so silent, I imagined he spoke in my mind. He slanted a glance toward the sleeping Sariah, and I realized he didn’t want to wake her. I shook my head the barest fraction. I couldn’t speak—my throat was parched, every ounce of moisture in me wrung out.

“He surrendered to you,” Kreios said. “He allowed himself to be weak and for you to make him strong. He pushed himself that far, dismantled himself completely, then forced you to put him back together again, all by sheer instinct.”

He spoke with a heavy weight to his words, and I squinted at him, trying to understand. “So?” I croaked.

“So, two things. One, your powers are amplifying, Sara Wilde. You are blending the yin with the yang, the new with the old. As Armaeus would say, this is a skill that bears much study. Second, you and Armaeus are tied together now completely, indelibly. In short, he cannot live without you. And should he die, when he dies, if you’re still among the living, every last shred of his power will accrue to you.”

I sagged back against the wall, the ringing in my head building to a crescendo, while Armaeus slumbered, oblivious, in my lap. My heart seemed to crack open a little, to see him resting easily, no longer racked in pain. Nothing could matter other than he was healthy and whole again, I decided. Nothing could ever compare to that.

“Oh,” I muttered, my eyelids drifting shut. “Is that all?”

When I woke again, it was with the disconcerting realization that I’d been moved.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

Ordinarily, this should never have happened. You didn't get to be Justice of the Arcana Council without being aware of where your body was at, dammit, at least if you weren't under the influence of some pretty impressive drugs.

Then again, I was on a plane with arguably two of the strongest sorcerers in the world, the Magician and the Devil. So I supposed I could be cut some slack. Nevertheless, it was a challenge to get my bearings, partly because I was in a darkened room in an actual bed on an airplane, a combination I would never get used to, and partly because of the disco lights reflecting beneath my doorway.

I pushed the covers back and got to my feet, finding my boots easily. I hadn't been stripped of any clothing, except for my boots. With my advanced abilities of Justice, a full-on disrobing would have woken me up, no matter how much magic had been in play. Or at least, so I wanted to believe.

I crossed the room to the door and gently eased it open. The undulating flickers and shimmery pops of light were visible under another doorway, and in its reflected gloom, I saw Sariah leaning up against the wall in the corridor. She nodded at me.

"I figured you wouldn't be able to sleep through all this forever," she said, and I peered at her, taking in her drawn face.

"Did you sleep at all?"

"I don't need much sleep anymore," she admitted, surprising me. "I may want it, but I don't need it. And it's kind of hard to catch some z's with all the Disney Plus action going on out here." She gestured to the doorway.

“How long has he been at it?”

She shrugged. “An hour or so, not much more. Kreios got him to the room while I hauled you to yours, and bedded him down. We argued a little bit more about how injured you were, and then about the inappropriateness of Kreios using his mad Devil skills to keep you knocked out. I lost the argument, and the light show started about thirty minutes later.”

I regarded her with curiosity. “How is it Kreios didn’t knock you out? He’s stronger than you.”

“He is stronger than me,” she agreed, her smile hard. “But another cool thing I’ve learned: if you point your mad skills directly at me, I can access them more thoroughly than if I siphoned them off you by just walking by. So Kreios had to weigh the value of putting me to sleep to avoid dealing with me for a short period of time, versus knowing that I might be able to knock his ass into next Tuesday if he gave me access to his mojo. Not much beyond Tuesday, but I could do it. And he knew without a doubt that I’d give it a try.”

I nodded, still uneasy with the level of anger that Sariah held for Kreios. “What aren’t you telling me about him?” I asked quietly.

To my surprise, Sariah merely sighed and stood straighter, shrugging herself off the wall.

“That’s the problem,” she admitted. “I’m telling you everything I know—and I don’t know enough. I have a bad feeling about what’s going on between Kreios and Armaeus, and I don’t know if it’s a bad feeling I’m picking up from them, or Eshe’s stupid dreams, or my own native-born instinct that something’s about to go seriously pear-shaped. This is the problem with my shiny new skill set. It’s not quite cut and dried as to what’s me or what’s not me.”

I heard the soft truth of that complaint in her voice, even if she didn't. Before I could talk myself out of it, I lifted my hand and gripped her shoulder.

"What's inside you is the real deal, Sariah," I assured her. "It always has been."

She rolled her eyes at me. "Don't you be putting more of your airy-fairy healing powers on me. I'm good. Seriously—you can't even help yourself, can you? Justice heals the injured. Justice rights wrongs. But I am wrong, Sara. Broken too. I have been since the start of all this. I'm okay with that, so that means you've gotta be too." She nodded toward the door. "Go in there and figure out what Dr. Manhattan is doing, and try to keep him from taking our plane down in an electrical storm before we get back to Vegas. I've got a serious need for a buffet."

She turned back toward her room, and only then did I notice the thin line of blood snaking along her collarbone.

"Sariah?" I asked sharply, reaching toward her neck even as she ducked away and waved me off.

"I always forget that you're a fucking empath on top of everything else," she muttered. "This is nothing. Apparently, Armaeus got a particularly bad owie on his left shoulder that you decided to take on for yourself. Going forward, you can keep that little ability to yourself. I've got enough injuries to deal with. Though thanks for the instant-healing thing—I've been around you enough that I'm my own walking tube of Neosporin. It helps." She turned into a shadowy doorway and clicked it shut behind her.

I stared after her for a long minute, but I suspected that Sariah had been close enough to me to pick up my mind-blocking skills. I didn't think she was seriously hurt, and she'd expressly asked me to butt out—so I would. For now.

Instead, I turned and tried the door to Armaeus's room. It wasn't locked, and the latch turned easily, the door opening to a room only slightly bigger than my own sleeping quarters, dominated by a large bed, but with an appreciable amount of open carpet and an ornate desk pushed against one wall.

Armaeus stood between these two visual anchors, and I winced to see that Sariah's characterization of him wasn't completely off. He glowed as much as any nuclear superhero, his ordinary golden-bronze skin now a steel blue, with white and blue arcs of electricity rippling along his body and extending a good two feet into the room surrounding him.

Orbiting his powerful form were symbols of every language, letters, hieroglyphics, mathematical squiggles and squares, arcane imagery, the works. They danced in circles, merged together, and split apart, making a hundred thousand different combinations, it seemed, in the space of a few breaths. I thought back to the Devil's assertion that I was stronger than the Magician now. I deeply, deeply hoped that wasn't true. It looked like way too much math.

Armaeus didn't show any indication he knew I was there, but I had no doubt he tracked my progress across the room, all the way to the bed, which was unusually high. I climbed up on it to watch him. With my legs bent and my feet dangling a good foot off the floor, I decided I could watch this movie forever. Because in the middle of all that swirling magic was Armaeus Bertrand—the man, demigod, whatever he was, the being I had come to love more than life itself. The one person on this earth I would do anything for.

Something of my thoughts must have reached Armaeus, or perhaps it was just the quickening of my heart, but he turned to me, his eyes glowing gold and rimmed with black, his perfectly formed mouth curving into a smile. He no longer looked haggard, at least. Despite the blue skin, he looked reborn—like he'd gone to a Vegas spa for some serious TLC.

Had that been my doing? I peered down at my left shoulder, palpating it with one hand, but of course there was no wound there. I hadn't noticed it in any event. Dangerous, not to be aware of your own injuries. But it was what it was.

"Sara," Armaeus said, and I refocused on him, noting that the corona of magic was lessening, as if he was coming out of his fugue. I didn't respond, but Armaeus's hands slowly lowered after another few moments, and one by one, the spinning symbols disappeared. In a mere matter of seconds, he stood alone in the center of the room, illuminated only by the glow of candles that I now noticed had been set up at either side of his bed. Pretty sure candles weren't supposed to be lit on airplanes, but then again, chances were good that nuclear fission magic was also not supposed to be tucked into your carry-on bag.

Armaeus stretched, which gave me the chance to admire his naked body a few seconds longer, an opportunity I gladly took. As the Magician of the Arcana Council, Armaeus could adopt any form that pleased him, but, unlike Kreios, I'd never seen him stray from the same basic form that stood before me now.

Tall, well over six feet, but so perfectly proportioned that you didn't notice his height until he came up against a more ordinary-sized human. His dark hair flowed over his shoulders, curling to his collarbone, and his bronze skin stretched wrinkle-free over a face that spoke of far-off lands and magical heritage. His eyes gleamed with a mix of black and gold, and his high cheekbones, winged brows, and sensual mouth turned his face into a work of art. His broad shoulders and chest tapered down to a narrow waist, and long sleekly muscled legs completed the picture, each separate piece of him perfectly sculpted, ideally suited to his role of keeping the magic of the world in perfect balance.

As usual, he was completely unselfconscious beneath my gaze, and moved over to me with a final exhale, a yogi finishing his practice. Instead of sitting down beside me, however, he knelt, drawing my hands together and resting them on my lap as he

searched my face.

“Did I harm you in any way?” he asked, and his voice resonated oddly against my bones, making me sit up sharply.

“Not until right this second, no,” I said. “What are you doing with your voice?”

He blinked a few times, pulling back, and when he spoke again, he used his regular outside voice. “The magic I was consulting was deep and old,” he said, his emphasis on the last word almost one of surprise. “Old as in no longer in common use when I came up through the ranks. I only knew of its existence in second- and third-hand accounts until quite recently.”

“Right.” I didn’t have time to follow the Magician down his arcane paths of esoteric knowledge, as fascinating as they always were. I needed answers. “What have you done, Armaeus?” I murmured. “And when did you do it?”

He squeezed my hands gently, and his gaze returned to meet mine. “Time blends together. I can’t answer that part of your question. But the transition of the leadership of the Arcana Council to Kreios created the distance I needed to dive deep into my mystical practice. I have learned...a great deal. Though not nearly enough. And those whose power I could augment without their express knowledge, I did.”

I ran through the laundry list of Council members, my stomach turning. “Armaeus, some of these people are assholes. I don’t think they need to have their power augmented.”

“It had to be done,” Armaeus countered. “We have to find the Moon and the Star and understand what efforts they are making to shatter the Council, or how far they’re willing to go to incite Connecteds worldwide to what may well be catastrophic action.”

“You’re sure the Moon and the Star are the bad guys here? And that they’re behind the Shadow Court?” The organization of one-percenter Connecteds had made no secret of wanting to dominate the entire rest of the planet’s psychic community—or destroy it. Though we’d unmasked most of the lieutenants and colonels in their unofficial army, we still needed to get the generals and whatever passed as their commander in chief. The Shadow Court definitely needed to be shut down. But was this really the right path to doing that?

Armaeus lifted a brow. “Though there are always variables that may impact the outcome, it does seem the most likely solution. I can go through the calculations of that if you prefer.”

“Spare me,” I muttered, running a hand through my hair. I didn’t want to see him go all Lord of the Math Dance again.

He nodded. “Though Simon was able to ascertain that the Moon and Star exist, we’ve lost the trail to them. To find it, I needed complete access to my abilities, and you needed a stronger connection to yours.”

I made a face. “From what Kreios tells me, I’ve now got access to yours too,” I pointed out, and the smile he gave me was deeply satisfied.

“You healed me. I allowed myself to waste down to my emptiest form, and you poured yourself into me unceasingly, without thinking twice, putting me back together again the way you could best remember.”

I shifted a little uneasily on the bed. “Is this the part where you tell me that’s a bad thing?”

The Magician sighed. He sat beside me, took my hand, and lifted it to his lips. The bolt of energy that seared through me at his kiss would have fused me flat against the

bed except for his grip on my fingers.

“Not at all,” he murmured, his enigmatic gaze holding mine. “Now more than ever, I could not live a moment without you, on this plane or any other.”

An irrational spurt of fear spread through me. “What do you mean, this plane? You mean like specifically the airplane that we’re on right now? Is that all you’re talking about here? Because—”

“Shut up, Miss Wilde,” Armaeus said, leaning forward to kiss me in earnest.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

We landed in Las Vegas on a bright and sunny morning, a full day and change after the excitement at Demonica's Pizza. In fact, including the additional time that we'd spent in Hell, a full three days had passed since the attack in the pizzeria.

Barry had wasted no time taking advantage of his new position of power among the arcane drug lords of New Jersey, though he had committed to returning to the relatively benign practice of utilizing a dough army vs. the husks of Hell. He also refused to let Maria leave his side, convinced that she was his good luck charm. Maria, for her part, had begun feeding Kreios all the intel he needed to know to stay on top of the district. Hey, whatever worked.

Once we were cleared to leave the plane, we emerged into the sunshine, and I blinked rapidly, though not only because of the mirror-bright sun.

"Dollface," Nikki Dawes shouted through a megaphone as she stood beside one of the Arcana Council's sleek gray limousines. It wasn't the first time Nikki had ever met me at the airport, but I had to admit, the megaphone was an unexpected touch. So was the line of four additional limos, each with their own driver, their outfits as on point as Nikki's if somewhat less fabulous. While Nikki's snap-brimmed chauffeur's hat completed the ensemble of a black minidress tuxedo perfectly cut for her voluptuous curves and mile-long legs, ending in platform patent leather pumps with what looked to be bona fide spike heels, her compatriots were dressed in more subdued dark gray suits—two male chauffeurs and three females.

The Devil broke into a wide grin as we moved down the stairway. "Miss Dawes, you never disappoint," he observed. Bringing up the rear as I was, I peered between Kreios and Sariah, trying to pick up any further weird energy between them.

With a slight jerk, Sariah turned to me, meeting my gaze pointedly before rolling her eyes to remind me that she still maintained some of Kreios's mind-reading skills. She refocused on Nikki. "Please tell me one of those limos is for me."

Nikki tucked the megaphone beneath her arm and grinned, her bright red lipstick a perfect counterpoint to her short blonde bob. She tipped her cap to Sariah, and a few strands of her wig fluttered in the breeze, defying the edict of her hair spray. "Your wish is my command, oh Night Witch. As it turns out, as you are one of the newest and most fabulous of our Las Vegas celebrities, and you've got an appointment with one of the old guard. The limo's going to take you to see Dixie Quinn."

My brows lifted as Sariah and I exchanged a glance. Dixie Quinn, astrologer extraordinaire and owner of the Chapel of Everlasting Love in the Stars, was the unofficial den mother of the Connected in Las Vegas. If it was psychic and happening in the city, she knew all about it. She and Nikki had been besties for years prior to me coming to town too. "She asked to see Sariah?"

Nikki turned to me. "She did. Apparently, there's been some trouble among the Connected community here. It's dark and bloody, and she thought—"

"I'm in," Sariah cut her off, turning to scan the line of cars.

"Car number two's for you," Nikki informed her, and I smirked. There were two drivers for that car, both of them looking fresh off a Chippendales revue. Had they been chosen for Dixie or Sariah, I wondered? Either way, Sariah didn't give any of us another glance as she headed off across the tarmac.

Nikki's mouth curled into a satisfied smile. She shot a glance to me, and I shook my head warningly, making her grin even more. Then she glanced up, pouting with feigned annoyance. "Just once I would like to give Mr. Magic a ride."

The Magician had not exited the Council's jet with us. He had other means of transport to his private casino at the end of the Strip. Considering his current glow-in-the-dark status, it was probably just as well.

Nikki turned and winked at Kreios. "Please tell me you're not gonna let me down?"

"It would be my greatest regret," Kreios agreed as he stopped before Nikki and reached out a hand, lifting her gloved fingers to his lips. As he kissed her knuckles, four other Devils emerged from the airplane to saunter down the staircase, each wearing different clothes. One was dressed as a Mediterranean model, with long hair, worn khakis, and a white linen shirt. Two other Devil incarnations were dressed as uptight businessmen, the severity of their suits in direct contrast to their jocular grins, one with ice-white hair and deep blue eyes, the other with rich black hair cropped close, and eyes the color of caramel. The collective gasps of the chauffeurs behind Nikki were all that was needed to send her smile into the stratosphere.

"I knew I could count on all of you," she said happily.

"Always," Kreios agreed. They kissed with the fervor of two lovers who hadn't seen each other in months, not mere days. Did I sense a sharpened attention from the Chippendales limo? I couldn't tell as Nikki broke away from Kreios, wiping away a nonexistent lipstick smear as she cackled. She drew the megaphone back up to her mouth.

"Let's go, people," she ordered. And pointing to Kreios, she flicked her finger toward one of the other limos. "I got a particular challenge for you over there. New in town and kind of a fan. It's sweet, really. Her name's Wendy, and she's truly looking to fly."

It was everything I could do not to turn my head on a swivel, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw a stunning redhead in thigh-high boots beneath her mini-skirted suit.

Once I had attuned to her, I could feel her nerves.

“Ah, yes. Wendy Gray,” Kreios said, not looking Wendy’s way either. “I do believe she works for me. You can be safely assured that her wish is my fondest command.”

He bowed again to Nikki, and she sighed with a little giggle, then shooed him on his way. When she turned to me however, her eyes had a steeliness I didn’t miss.

“In the car, dollface. We’ve got to talk.”

There had been a time when Nikki had been my driver when I’d come to deliver arcane artifacts to the Arcana Council. Now she was my best friend. There was absolutely no need for her to drive my car anymore; she just liked to do it.

We got in the limo, and I slid into the back seat as Nikki adjusted the rearview mirror so she could easily meet my gaze. She put the car in gear, then glanced up at me.

“Self-driving car, courtesy of Simon, but I still don’t trust this shit.”

“I’m not sure I would either,” I agreed, though I sat back in the leather seat with a heartfelt sigh. That particular flight from Jersey had been a little extra. “What’s going on?”

“What isn’t?” Nikki countered. “We’ve got calls for Justice coming in from all over the world, some referencing current issues, of course, but more referencing past complaints than I care for. It’s as if someone leaked that you had a cold case archive and they wanted to make sure their issue had its day in the sun.”

I groaned and leaned back farther into the seat. The role of Justice of the Arcana Council had gone unfilled since my predecessor vacated the position in the mid-1800s. There had been a shot at a replacement in the 1920s, but that hadn’t taken, and

ergo entire generations of requests for Justice had fallen on not necessarily deaf ears, but definitely idle hands. Mrs. French, the caretaker of the library of Justice Hall, had diligently filed each and every case, in a library room with stacks that wound around for acres, it seemed. I would never get through all those cases. People had to know that. Even the cold cases that had surfaced as a result of current investigations had taken time to sort out. There were just too many wrongs in the world, and there always would be.

“How’s Mrs. French doing?” I asked.

“She’s holding her own, but she would be the first to tell you that there’s something hinky with this latest flow of demands. I’ll let her explain that part of it, but things are weird in other ways too.”

“I figured,” I said. “The Council?”

To my surprise, Nikki shook her head. “Actually, no. They’ve been pretty quiet since we got back from our last big adventure. The Sun is outfitting his residence and trying to get the lay of the land. The rest of the crew is doing their best to accommodate him. There hasn’t been a Sun on the Arcana Council in a hella long time, and everyone’s going at him in their own way. It’s like they just introduced chicken nuggets to the school lunch line.”

I smiled. The Arcana Council had recently added a djinn to its ranks, and of course, I already suspected the Magician had been tinkering with all our magical limits. But if it wasn’t the Council that was bothering Nikki...

She didn’t make me wait any longer.

“We’ve started getting some personal correspondence over the transom for you, some of it more personal than others.” She reached out to something on the seat beside her

and lifted a small burlap pouch, handing it over the back of the seat.

“This came for you about three days ago, best we can tell, but it was part of a flood of new canisters, so it took us a minute to sort everything. But it’s not addressed to the Arcana Council...it’s not addressed to Justice...it’s addressed to Sara Wilde, and it’s apparently from somebody you know. Or knew, anyway, from your artifact-hunting days. I asked Nigel about the name, and he got all squirrely and announced he was heading straight for us, so I figured it was probably somebody legit.”

I frowned. British-born artifact hunter Nigel Friedman and I had met while we’d been doing similar work, hunting down magical treasures for the highest bidder. Occasionally, we’d also steal those artifacts out from underneath each other after a successful hunt, in the time-honored practice of thieves for hire everywhere. But while Nigel and I had remained on relatively good terms throughout our years in the business, he was definitely in the minority. I hadn’t made too many attachments when I was hunting. I assumed, and rightly so, that anyone who was out in the field with me was a competitor. Given the money that each of our artifacts earned us, competition was fierce.

I slid the papers from the burlap sack. The message was rolled in a tight sheath. As soon as I flattened the top one, though, my brows went up. “Roland Franklin?” I asked. “I didn’t know he was still hunting.”

I leaned in closer, holding the pages up to the sun streaming into the window. The handwriting was spidery, thin, cramped together. The top sheet looked as if it had been torn from a notebook, while the pages beneath were older, crumbling. Giving up on trying to read the older man’s handwriting, I flipped through the other pages. “Where is this? Peru? What’s he doing down there?”

“I took the liberty of deciphering his scrawl and putting together a more complete dossier. That’s waiting for you back at Justice Hall on a screen. I wanted you to

handle the delivery yourself, though, see if you picked up anything from the package.”

I glanced up at her, half expecting her to be pulling my leg, but when our gazes connected in the rearview mirror, I saw she was deadly serious. “I can’t always feel magic that strongly. It’s not how I work. You know that.”

“Wait for it,” she said, then barked out a curse as she snapped her gaze back to the street and barely avoided a car running a red light through an intersection. As we swerved, I could hear something knocking around in the base of the pouch. I poured the rest of its contents into my hand. A ring fell out. A large central opal framed by three small moonstones and a burst of diamonds to either side had been set into a silver band thick enough to make any high school graduate from the 1980s proud. Or maybe someone who’d just won the Super Bowl.

I scowled down at it. “Roland sent this to Justice Hall? Why?”

“An excellent question, but there was no residual magic on the ring I could find,” Nikki returned. “I tried it on. It only fit on my pinky, natch, but it made me feel all fluttery inside, not gonna lie. Kinda made me wonder what it would do for you.”

I studied the ring more closely. “I’m not in the habit of triggering magic artifacts without any provocation.”

“Oh right, and I’m not in the habit of wearing glitter to church. You gotta admit, it’s a pretty hunk of tin.”

“It is that,” I agreed. I held up the ring to the sun, admiring it for another long moment, then I slid it on my finger. The response was harsh, immediate—and about blew right through my eardrums.

“Miss Wilde,” the Magician bellowed in my mind. “No!”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

The Magician's rebuke was so intense that I yanked the ring off and, for good measure, threw it across the limo. It banged against the far door, and before it could land on the leather seat, a hand appeared to snatch it out of thin air—followed by a cuff-linked white shirt, a charcoal-gray suit sleeve, and then the full length of the elegant Magician materializing in the back seat next to me. He held the ring between his thumb and forefinger like it was fine liquor in a cordial glass, and he sat absolutely still.

“See, I knew there was a way I could get the Great and Powerful Oz into my cab,” Nikki cracked. Though her words were light, her tone was steady, laced with an edge I didn't normally feel from her. Not anger, but fear. “So, what's going on with the Cracker Jack prize?”

Armaeus breathed out, his manner focused, but fear didn't mark his features, only curiosity. I thought immediately of what Nikki had said about the other members of the Council, welcoming the Sun with open arms merely because they were bored. Here was the smartest man in the world, entranced by a tiny bauble whose provenance he could not immediately ascertain. There was something dangerous in this, I knew. But Armaeus's next words scattered my thoughts.

“Swear not by the moon,” he murmured, peering intently at the ring. “The inconstant moon...”

I exchanged a nervous glance with Nikki, but Armaeus said nothing further.

“You're quoting Shakespeare to me now?” I prompted, as much to break the spell on the Magician as to calm my own tightening nerves. Either way, it seemed to do the

trick.

Armaeus blinked, then dropped his hand to rest atop his right thigh, still holding the ring gingerly. When he lifted his gaze to mine, I went still. I was used to the Magician having lava-lamp eyes. It was part of his charm. They could turn from gold to black in a heartbeat, sometimes shot through with a little red to make things interesting, but most of the time, they were gold rimmed in black. When he was feeling his magic deeply, however, they would go all black, with only the barest hint of gold at the edges. Life was all about optics, after all.

But now the Magician's eyes had taken on a ghostly white pallor, as milky and full of glittering lights as the opal ring in his hand.

"Worship of the moon is a time-honored practice, as old and venerated as worship of the sun," he murmured. This Wiki-lite assessment was not for my benefit, I decided, as much as it was helping to draw Armaeus back from the churning pit of his thoughts. His eyes cleared slightly as he continued. "Typically presenting as a female in goddess form, the moon ruled the tides, the exposure of hidden secrets, the arts, feminine wiles, and all things in the shadows."

"And werewolves," Nikki put in brightly. "You can't forget that one."

Her attempt at distraction proved more effective than mine.

Armaeus blinked. He glanced around the back seat of the limo as if surprised to find himself there. Then his gaze dropped again to the ring, and his winged brows shot up. "The goddess Hecate blessed these stones," he murmured with some surprise before holding the ring up to me. "Where did you get this?"

I didn't need Nikki's sharp glance to me to play it safe, and I prayed that she'd warded herself against the Magician's mental touch as well. I suspected she had.

She'd lasted too long in the shadows of such powerful sorcerers not to have wards in place on her person—probably even from me. But I could feel Armaeus pressing against my mind, unconsciously seeking the information he wanted to know. I wasn't going to give it to him, not completely. Not until I understood it more myself.

"It came into Justice Hall," I said. "I don't know the details yet. All we have is the ring."

"It didn't accompany a request for help?"

I shrugged. "Unclear at present. Could be the ring is its own cry for help. Maybe someone doesn't want us to know where it came from, or they're trying to lure us to wherever it did come from."

"Hmmm..." The Magician considered that. "Though the stones have Hecate's touch, I have never seen this exact jewelry design, which is saying something. It would be around the turn of the Common Era, perhaps far earlier. But the silversmith skills are exceptional and speak to influences in South America, despite the use of opals in the setting. And of course, moon worship was much less common than sun worship among the indigenous peoples of that continent, though it did exist." He roused himself to look at me. "You say you don't know where this came from?"

"Not yet," Nikki answered for me. "We're tracking that down now."

"I will as well." With that, he opened his other palm to reveal a second ring, as beautiful as the first, identical in every way down to the shimmer of magic that floated off it.

I lifted my brows. "That's a pretty neat trick. Are you keeping the original or the fake?"

He chuckled. “What is original and what is fake?” he challenged drolly. “But I think I will use the created version, while you will pursue this request for your services to its ultimate end. You should have the original artifact, in case someone is looking closely.”

“I haven’t decided to do anything with it,” I pointed out.

Armaeus only smiled slightly and shook his head. “Even if I counseled you against it, which I don’t in this case, you would be hard-pressed not to respond. Given that we are searching for missing Council members as we attempt to stave off a war against the power behind the Shadow Court—or at least be prepared for it—an opal arriving at Justice Hall signifies the Moon. Worse, we suspect the Moon is aligning against the Arcana Council, along with the Star—possibly in league with whoever is secretly running the Shadow Court. With this, it would appear our suspicions are correct.”

I rolled my eyes. “Can’t you people ever just pick up the phone and talk to each other? Do you have to make everything some elaborate game?”

He offered the ring in his right hand to me; presumably, the original ring. “You are definitely being toyed with, Miss Wilde, but it may be a game worth playing.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. Or maybe it’s just some low-level Connected who needs help.”

Even as I suggested that alternative explanation, I had a hard time believing it. Roland Franklin, the artifact hunter who’d supposedly sent the message, had been no great friend when I’d been in the business. He’d been at the end of his career while I had just been beginning mine. We weren’t enemies, but we ran in different circles. The idea of him working for some shadowy organization, playing on an old relationship that maybe he embellished a little to curry favor with his new employers, wasn’t all that surprising.

The Magician continued watching me, and I held out my hand for the ring, wincing only a little as he dropped the heavy bauble into my hand. “I’ll look into it,” I said. “You’ll know what I discover the moment I do.”

“For now,” the Magician agreed. “For now.”

He disappeared in a swirling mist, but not before a slight pressure drifted across my lips, as intimate as it was invisible.

To Nikki’s credit, she kept her eyes on the road and waited another two beats before she blew out a shaky breath. “I truly do love that man. But that freaked me out, I’m not gonna lie.”

“Sort of defeats the purpose of having a ring if you can’t wear it.” I sat back in my seat, eyeing the heavy band. I had no desire to put the giant rock back on my finger. Even in the brief moment it’d touched my skin, it had felt like the weight of the universe had pressed in on me.

“Kind of interesting that it created such a hair-trigger response in our Magic Man too,” Nikki agreed. “Whatever juju he’s into these days, it’s made him a little sensitive, wouldn’t you say?”

I sighed. She didn’t even know the whole story. “I’m nervous about what he’s getting into, you want to know the truth,” I said. “I think he’s getting reckless. I think he’s found something new, bright, and shiny and just like every other member of the Council, he doesn’t know what to do with it.”

“You know, that’s an interesting observation,” Nikki said. “What is with these guys? I wouldn’t put that kind of onus on Death, would you? And can you imagine the Hierophant getting excited about anything?”

I shook my head, bringing the image of Michael the Archangel into focus. I couldn't see anything piercing his unflappable calm, Nikki was right. But was there a reason for that?

We turned onto the Strip, and I settled back, taking in the view. Despite the bright sunshine, it was easy to see the soaring magical structures that made up the homes of the Arcana Council. From the Magician's mighty fortress of Prime Luxe that dominated the Luxor Casino, all the way to the Hanged Man's rooftop aerie above the Stratosphere, the Arcana Council crowded the Strip with their shadow casinos. The Devil's lava-lamp-animated tower above the Flamingo, the Hermit's tiny cottage on its platform above Excalibur, the Fool's glass jester's hat above the Bellagio, the Emperor's black tower above Paris, and the Hierophant's gleaming white tower above Treasure Island. If only someone had locked the Council into an HOA when they'd first gotten to Vegas, the Strip would never go broke again.

As we approached my own humble abode, Justice Hall, perched atop the Palazzo casino, my gaze went inexorably toward the newest Council residence on the strip, the Sun's palace. Floating above the casino once again known as the Sahara, which perhaps was the most obvious location for an Arcana Council member who was a djinn. Still, it was a breathtaking study in gold. Its soaring ramparts captured the sun's rays this bright day, making the residence look like a tented city. I hadn't visited the Sun in his shadow casino, but I suspected there would be lots of pools to reflect the glittering magnificence.

Nikki parked beneath the Palazzo, and we took the elevators to the main part of the casino, then switched over to the residential section. Unlike in most of the Council's residences, ordinary mortals could reach the office of Justice Hall by going to the top floor of the hotel, though few ever did. Most of them were content to toss their requests for my assistance from afar, perhaps unsure of how they would land.

Nikki and I rode up the residential elevator in silence, the weight of the giant opal

ring heavy in my pocket. And when the doors swished open, I blinked.

I didn't know what I had been expecting to greet me on the plush expanse of carpeting that ran the length of the hallway to my office, but it definitely wasn't Nigel Friedman bleeding out against the wall.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

“Nigel!” I shouted, while Nikki rushed ahead of me, barely breaking stride as she leaned over to scoop up the muscular Brit.

“I swear to God, I just contacted him this morning,” she protested. “He was coming down from Canada. What the hell kind of trouble can you get into in Canada, I ask you? None. The answer to that is there is none. There is no trouble that you can get into in Canada that leaves you with most of your blood on the outside of your body. None.”

As she dashed down the hallway, the door opened at the far end. The bright, inquisitive face of Mrs. French poked through the entryway to Justice Hall, clearly surprised at all the commotion.

“Well, I rather hoped—what on earth?”

Mrs. French broke off as Nikki shouldered past her, then whirled around in her long gray bustled dress, with its high collar and double row of shiny black buttons, a fringe of white lace at her neck and cuffs. After a cursory glance to assess the situation, she burst into a flurry of activity, nodding me a quick greeting before directing Nikki—who needed no such direction—to put Nigel on the couch, to make him comfortable, to ring up Dr. Sells, and that she would fetch some tea right away.

By the time I reached Nigel, Nikki had pulled open his shirt collar and spread it wide over his fair-skinned chest and stomach. Despite the gravity of the situation, she whistled. “Well, God save the Queen,” she drawled. “I need to get back to London, stat.”

But it wasn't Nigel's ripped abs that preoccupied me. A mass of symbols had been etched into his skin with bloody brutality, ancient and arcane. Quechuan, maybe? Something about the symbols reminded me of the ancient language of Peru that had been in play long before the advent of the Incas and Spaniards. The symbols seemed to be inscribed in a repeating pattern, but I couldn't find the starting sequence.

"Nigel," I tried to rouse him, as Mrs. French hustled back with a tea service. She held the steaming cup under his nose like smelling salts, and like any good Britisher, he stirred.

And by stirred, I meant he shot to his feet, sending the cup crashing against the wall with a sweep of his hand. I winced despite myself, but the cup merely bounced off the wall and dropped to the floor.

Mrs. French tossed her well-coiffed head at my surprise. "If you thought I used my best china in Justice Hall after all these years, you're quite mistaken. I've learned well enough not to do that."

Nikki held a trembling Nigel in place, his mouth working furiously as he struggled to speak.

"You bastard..." he seethed, though he seemed to be talking to himself more than anyone. His eyes slowly refocused, and he blinked and stared first at me, then Nikki, then Mrs. French, then down at his own chest, where the marks were still glowing.

"Camera," he managed, letting me help pull off his shirt and then use it to sop up the worst of the blood. "These—may not last."

"Roger that." Nikki let him go long enough to whip a phone out of the lining of her chauffeur jacket, then she photographed Nigel from his cranium to his waistband. "You got these on your legs as well?"

“I bloody well better not.” Nigel stepped away from us, then wrestled his pants down past the line of his boxer briefs. No further marks showed, and he yanked the material of his underwear out, then grunted with satisfaction before resetting his pants. He threaded his slightly shaking hands through his hair. “I would have killed him, flat out. Good to know that the bugger maintained some measure of decorum.”

“Who?” I asked as Nigel turned back to me, though I suspected I knew the answer. I reached out to grip his forearm, wincing as I felt the measure of his discomfort. “What happened?”

“Ahhhhhh,” Nigel half groaned, screwing his eyes shut in renewed pain. “Keep doing that. I think I feel them lifting.”

Tightening my hold on his arm, I tentatively extended my mind toward him, feeling my way along the energy currents of Nigel’s body. My skills as a healer were much more on the nontraditional side of the process, as that generally was what was required when it came to working with the magically afflicted. In this particular instance, both blood and magic were in play.

I could see the symbols and lines of language written on Nigel’s skin had burned themselves all the way down to his bones, and I swept across them one after the other, erasing them layer by layer, bringing the energy up out of his body until it no longer scorched his flesh or rent his skin. Nigel convulsed as I worked, his gaze locked on mine, his mouth set in a determined grimace. The man didn’t have much magic in him, though he’d picked up some over the past few years just by his proximity to us. What he lacked in supernatural ability, he more than made up for with British grit. As always, he didn’t breathe a sigh of protest.

When it was done, he grunted with satisfaction. “I preferred it when you were hunting artifacts, but that is a neat trick.”

“You’re welcome.” I gave him a grim smile.

“You want to tell me what tattoo parlor you fell into so I can avoid it?” Nikki asked.

Nigel turned to her, then once again noticed Mrs. French there, waiting patiently with a fresh cup of tea. This time, he accepted it gratefully. “Roland Franklin sent me an encrypted email a few days ago, telling me he was in trouble.”

“Roland Franklin?” I interjected sharply. “You two are still in touch?”

“Not even remotely. I assumed it was a scam—he’s that kind of a fellow—then it came again. By the third time, I decided that maybe there was something to it. I’d planned to reach out to you when Nikki called, telling me you’d gotten a similar missive, along with an artifact. I hopped the first flight down from Quebec and didn’t think much more of it, landing just a few hours ago. I booked a room to stay up at the ARIA—none of you have a residence above there, right? A man prefers his privacy.”

“No,” I snapped, giving him the move-it-along gesture. I couldn’t unsee the image of Nigel bleeding in the hallway, and my tension was winding tighter by the second.

“Right, so, the minute I passed this place, the trouble started. It was as if I’d violated some ward. The runes or whatever the hell they were sliced into me, ripping me to shreds. Suspecting there was a connection, I turned right around to head here, but the damage was done. I managed to get through to the elevators before the message started burning through my shirt, but it bloody well hurt.”

“Since when did Roland become a sorcerer?” I protested. “He was an artifact hunter. Not a very good artifact hunter at that. And he was old when we were young.”

Nigel snorted. “Not as old as you might suspect. With artifact hunters, it’s not the age, it’s the mileage. But it wasn’t that long ago, even if it feels like it. Still, this isn’t

Roland, not directly. He's no sorcerer. Not back then, not now. It's either whoever has him, or more likely a magician he bartered with to get help. My money's on the latter, depending on what the message says. Needless to say, I didn't take the time to try to read it."

Nikki scowled down at the screen. She handed the phone to me. "You fluent in stick lines and squiggles?"

I did have a facility with languages, but this was unlike anything I'd ever seen. I couldn't decipher it, even if my first suspicion was right as to its origin. I suspected if I'd heard it aloud, I would understand it, but the arcane scribbles could have been moving in any direction—up, down, or in circles, and until I knew the pattern...

Stymied, I handed the phone over to Mrs. French. "You recognize any of this from anything we have here in the library?"

"Well, I'm sure..." Mrs. French said, frowning. "I'll have it transcribed over into the catalog system and see if we have any hits. There must be something. Hmmm...."

Still murmuring, she turned away to reenter my private office, leaving Nigel, me, and Nikki alone. By now, the marks on his skin had faded to white and pink smudges, and he stretched out his hands, looking first at the palms, then the backs.

"I never thought it was going to be Roland who'd give us trouble," he said. "I mean you recall him, right? He was about as remarkable as toast."

I sighed. "Honestly, I can't really remember much of the man."

Nigel rolled his eyes. "Yes, well, it's amazing what tequila will do to you. You don't remember Valencia, eight years ago? The caves at the southern tip of Spain?"

I widened my eyes ever so slightly. “That was Roland?”

“In the flesh.” He glanced to Nikki. “He pinched the Star of Arabia out from beneath both of us, when we were practically sitting on top of it. And then fumbled the damned thing prior to getting it across the border. Sara here got the bright idea that we could win it back in a card game because it was being held by a bunch of Russian hunters who’d never been to Spain before. She figured they wouldn’t be familiar with the local alcohol.”

“Wait a minute,” Nikki protested. “You said tequila. Tequila isn’t Spanish.”

I rolled my eyes. “Everybody’s a critic.”

“As it happened, those gits weren’t terribly familiar with tequila, so that was to our advantage,” Nigel continued, with a ghost of a smile. “What I didn’t know was, in addition to a somewhat questionable understanding of international liquor, Sara didn’t understand her own cards.”

“Oh, bullshit,” I countered. “I knew exactly what I was doing. The cards had already told me where things were headed.”

“A fight,” said Nigel. “Five of wands, a fight. But there are lots of ways you can get into a fight. They didn’t have to involve drinking yourself under the table first.”

“It worked,” I reasoned.

“It worked because I was the only one in the room with the sense to nick the stone back and haul ass out of there before we all got killed.”

“So what are you saying?” Nikki asked. “There was no fight?”

“Oh, there was a fight,” Nigel said. “It was just in the streets outside the bar, when Roland showed up with a half dozen mercs he’d hired to get back the blasted rock he’d just lost. One thing about Roland, he wasn’t a quitter.”

“Did he get it back from you, then?” Nikki asked.

Nigel looked at me with one elegant brow raised. I shrugged.

“He didn’t get it back,” I muttered. “That rock was worth way too much to the right people, and I had kids to save.”

“Then how—”

“She swallowed it.” Nigel grinned. “And then we ran like hell. It took maybe twelve hours and a fair amount more alcohol to recover that particular bauble, but at least we made it through customs without any issues.”

“And what happened to Roland after that?” Nikki asked, doing an admirable job of trying not to laugh.

Nigel tilted his head. “I lost track of him after that for a few years,” he admitted. “The rock wasn’t his original job, so it’s not like he lost a client in losing the bauble, but he was a bit of an ass about the whole thing. Word got out that we’d bested him, and that didn’t sit well. I came across him again a few years later. Had me ambushed, and that time, he was successful in making off with the goods. Too bad for him I knew he was coming, and I didn’t want to fuss with the man.”

“You set him up,” I said. “You had him steal the wrong piece?”

“A very well-made fake,” Nigel agreed. “So well made that Roland was able to pass it off to a buyer. I hadn’t expected him to do that quite so quickly. When the amulet

finally got to its new owner, who was a wizard of some repute, Roland was sunk. He's had it in for me ever since, but time passes. Life goes on."

"Well, if he has it in for you, why in the world would he choose you to be the recipient of his message, whatever the hell the message is?" Nikki asked reasonably enough. "You guys are enemies."

"Even enemies know who can help them. Most likely, I was Roland's best chance. And not only me." Nigel glanced my way meaningfully. "Those marks hit me about twenty minutes ago. What were you up to about then?"

Nikki blew out a long whistle. "Nigel's little message is tied to the ring, I bet. This Roland guy wanted you to receive the messages together."

With my gaze firmly fixed on Nigel, I held the ring closer to my finger. As it neared the tip, Nigel looked up, jolting as his skin glowed, the arcane runes flaring to life—this time across his forehead, which hadn't been marked before. "Bloody hell," he muttered, a bead of sweat appearing at his hairline. I jerked the ring away from my hand before the runes caught fire.

"The two go together," I said. "But why? Why would he want us to get the message at the same time?"

"Justice Wilde," Mrs. French interrupted from the doorway to the inner office. "I think you'll want to see this."

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

We gathered in the interior office, where Mrs. French perched in front of a standing desk, commandeering a laptop that was attached to a large screen on the wall opposite our complaint-intake system. I blinked at all the electronics.

“When did we get those?” I asked, but Mrs. French waved me off.

“We’ve always had access to all the fancy technology we need, and setting it up is no great matter,” she said as I peered at the glittering combination, sparing only the barest glance for the Victorian-era pneumatic tube system that served as the main communications hub for Justice Hall. Then the screen in front of me changed, and my attention sharply refocused on it. A series of lines, glyphs, and letters, all from different languages, gleamed from its surface, jumbled together like alphabet soup.

“When you start at the very top row, then read all the way through to the bottom, you end up with a tangle of glyphs,” Mrs. French said before highlighting one of the symbols with a red laser pointer. “However, this sign here appeared at such regular intervals that I decided it was some sort of break in the pattern. When you use that as a focal point, then you get the exact same set of letters between the two symbols every time, just in different order. So the message itself is quite brief, I suspect, for all that I cannot specifically decipher it. But the symbol bracketing the message is, I think, quite appropriate, given all the fuss of late.”

I nodded. It was a simple crescent, heavily outlined. The ancient symbol for the moon.

“Can you make heads or tails of it?” Nikki asked.

“Um—actually, I can,” I said, squinting at the glyphs with some surprise. “It’s Quechuan, sort of, plus some other influences, but the message is coming through clear enough. All variations of ‘Come save me, you cunt.’”

Nigel choked on a laugh, and I glanced at him. “You know Roland better than I do. Does that sound like him?”

“It sounds very much like him,” Nigel said. “The question is, where is he?”

“He’s Australian, right?” I hefted the ring. “Opals are mostly mined in Australia. It would make sense to start there, except for the Quechuan inscriptions on the band. I have no idea how you end up with opals in South America, but I think it’s far more likely that’s where the ring came from. I bet that’s where Roland found it, anyway.”

“Quechuan?” Nigel asked. “Who speaks that language?”

“Originally? Tribes indigenous to the area who were the precursors to the Incas by several thousand years, which doesn’t narrow it down much,” I said. “The language is still in use today, to some extent. So maybe this ring was part of that civilization? It’s heavy, but it’s meant for a woman’s hand. Not for everyday use, I can’t imagine.”

Nigel reached for it, and I handed it over with only slight trepidation. Fortunately, he had no reaction to it. Either the inscribed symbols had already done their job, or he wasn’t a trigger for the ring. He weighed the ring and grimaced.

“Definitely not an everyday ring. It weighs about two pounds, I would guess. Not something you’d want to have hanging out on your hand all day.”

He held it up to me, and didn’t stiffen when I passed my ring finger over the opening of it.

“You feel anything?” I prompted.

He shrugged. “Perhaps I’m all better.”

“Or the message has been received,” Nikki put in, echoing my own thoughts. “All right, so let’s take this from the top. We’ve got a beaten-down bad actor of an artifact hunter lost and potentially in distress, probably, though not definitely, in South America, who had enough gumption, mojo, or connections to get a message to Sara and, by extension, you, Nigel. What else do we need to be thinking about here?”

Nigel sat back in his chair, considering. “He didn’t offer anything to sweeten the deal. A hint of treasure to be found, a reason for us to have skin in the game. That’s unusual.”

“You guys usually have to provide incentives to get you to go help a friend?” Nikki asked drily.

Nigel cocked a finger at her. “Remember, we are not friends. Roland and I, in particular, have been on opposite sides of an artifact hunt more often than not, dating back to before Sara got into the game and continuing after she left. He knows that. So why me—why both of us? And why now?”

“Could there be more to the message?” Mrs. French asked. “Nigel is only one man, one contact. Perhaps he only has part of the message that Roland was sending. Who else do you know in common?”

I frowned. “I didn’t make a lot of friends back in the day. We didn’t even share that many clients, since Roland tended to dive into the murkier end of the pool. It should have been someone obvious, but there really isn’t anyone I can think of. What about you, Nigel?”

He shrugged. “As much as it pains me, I’m forced to agree with you. More than that, Sara was always known for operating on her own. My association with her was competitive back when Roland and I were working....” He narrowed his gaze at me. “Is there anyone else you would consider your competition?”

I made a face. “I’m telling you, I didn’t work like that. Most of the time, the artifacts I sought weren’t on any official radar until the job started. There were only a couple of highly coveted items that drew the attention of multiple hunters.”

“Okay, then, what about the money behind the clients?” Nikki hazarded. “Your buddy Mercault funded a lot of searches. Could he be a connection?”

“Maybe...” I blew out a breath, but I still wasn’t feeling it. The head of the House of Pentacles was a Frenchman with a penchant for pretty baubles, particularly those that might augment his own natural ability. He was by no means the strongest Connected I’d ever met, but he held his own, in large part due to the combination of crystals, totems, spelled devices, and flat-out magic he’d harnessed, purchased, or stolen to advance his own aims. I didn’t think he was still in the artifact-hunting game, but he certainly kept his finger on the pulse of the arcane black market. And he definitely heard things. But still...

“This is worse than a needle in a haystack,” I grumbled, edging close to a whine. “If someone was affected like Nigel was, and no one was around to see it, then Roland’s lost that opportunity to communicate with us. Why wasn’t he more clear?”

“Most likely, he couldn’t afford to be,” Nigel said. “Maybe he had to send things in code. The message that he decorated my body with would have made no sense to me—no matter how long I studied it. It was only with your penchant for translation that you got the gist of it, not because it made any sense.”

“But how did Roland know I had a penchant for translation?” I pushed. “It’s not like I

make a point of advertising that.”

Nigel waved off that question. “He’s not stupid. When you started working for the Magician of the Arcana Council, we all took note. That was one of the highest rollers in the arcane black market. His grasp of the arcane was pretty legendary, so any puzzle you were sent, it’s reasonable that the Magician would be involved in solving it.”

“I guess...” I was feeling argumentative, but I could be excused. Throughout the conversation, I could feel the presence of the Magician growing in my mind, seeking out avenues of ingress. I’d long since warded Nikki and Mrs. French from his inquisitive touch, but I hadn’t ever done the same for Nigel. Anything in the Brit’s mind, the Magician was privy to, but he was deliberately remaining silent—even though we were now straight-up talking about him. Did he want an engraved invitation to the party?

Despite the fact that my mind remained warded against him, the Magician was also adept at reading emotions and body language, the kinds of things that were nearly impossible to ward against. His chuckle was smooth and amused.

“I no longer run the Arcana Council, Miss Wilde,” he reminded me. “You are under no obligation to involve me in your deliberations. I, however, remain, as always, at your service. I also cannot enter Justice Hall without your or your people’s explicit permission, as you may recall.”

“Well, come on, then. We don’t have all day—”

Before I’d even completed the thought, a knock came at the door. Mrs. French whirled in a bustle of Victorian efficiency.

“Well! It’s a good thing I tidied up,” she sniffed, and a few seconds later returned

with Armaeus. He was looking much better by far than he had on the plane, fairly bristling with electricity, but no longer outright glowing.

“So what’s the word?” I asked. “You know something we don’t.”

“Almost certainly,” the Magician agreed smugly. “But in this case, I’m happy to share. Nigel, your assumption was correct. Roland’s message went out to five other operatives that I’ve been able to find—and then only by searching for the unique distress signature that arcane runes appearing all over one’s body would cause, as well as the beacons of magic that were required to light up these unfortunate operatives. You’ll be interested to know they stretch throughout the world: Cairo, Moscow, Tokyo, Johannesburg, Sydney.”

“I don’t even know five operatives from the bad old days,” I protested. “I barely put up with Nigel.”

Nigel’s muttered response didn’t quite reach my ears, but made Nikki snort.

“That leads us to two possibilities,” the Magician agreed. “Either Roland put out a general distress signal, triggered by the ring but available to any and all capable of responding...”

“Or it’s a call to the hunt,” Nigel interjected, his pale brows winging up. “An open bid.”

The Magician nodded. “Or he is creating the illusion of such an open bid in hopes of inspiring your and Nigel’s actions, Miss Wilde. Because to your point, you have no direct connection with him, and you have many, many other causes that could occupy your attention.”

“An open bid...” I muttered, mulling over that idea. Even back in the day, I hadn’t

usually responded to those. I'd certainly never needed to once I'd met up with the Magician, though open hunts were by far the most lucrative opportunities. "So what you're telling me is Roland used me as a catalyst to send a message to hunters all over the world to come find him, without giving any indication of what the bounty was? Or the artifact?"

"Unless he is the bounty," Nigel said. "'Come save me,' he said. At least to us."

I could hear it then, the excitement in Nigel's voice, an excitement that, despite my best efforts, I could feel echoing deep within me. The lure of the hunt was on him.

"The other afflicted parties, they're all hunters?" I asked, wondering how anyone could survive the carvings in their flesh, muscle, and bones to possibly kick off an earnest hunt. Nigel had been lucky I'd been so close. Were the other message bearers that fortunate?

"They are. Some of them I've even used." Armaeus rattled off a list of names that meant nothing to me.

"That's a good list," Nigel mused. "Unless I miss my guess, most of them are still in operation. Meaning that if they are not currently on a job, they're with a client, or with other hunters either preparing for or recovering from a job."

"But what's the likelihood that they'll be able to decipher the message?" Nikki asked.

"Or surviving it?" I put in tersely. "Nigel was hurt."

"I wasn't hurt that badly," he scoffed.

"Oh, bullshit," I countered. "Those glyphs were cut into you all the way to your bones. I know. I was the one who took them off you."

“Well, you were the most important of the hunters to convince, right?” Nikki put in. “Perhaps the others just had some, you know, temporary tattoos. Or watercolor marker notes. Anyway, there’s still the problem of understanding the message. You said yourself it was a bunch of glyphs in random order. That’s great that Sara here has a facility with Scrabble, but what about these other hunters?”

Nigel turned to her. “Good point. What if their message is neither so dire nor arcane? What if it’s more straightforward and leads them to wherever it is we’re supposed to go?”

“Or, what if they each got different messages that sent them all over the world?” Nikki countered. “They could all be wild-goose chases.”

“All good questions,” the Magician agreed. “Here is another. Who would be savvy enough to create a message that would only be triggered when the Justice of the Arcana Council received the opening salvo? Who’s behind this hunt? I’ve told you that the winds of change are stirring. Power is percolating at a level I haven’t felt during my entire time as Magician, power, if not equal to mine, then certainly a challenge I have heretofore not experienced.”

I grimaced. He was as excited as Nigel was, though arguably for different reasons. Armaeus had been kicking around this earth over eight hundred years. It was reasonable that he was bored. But surely he would recognize that boredom for the trap that it was.

“Are you sure this magic is as strong as you think it is?” I challenged. “Could it be that you’re being made to think that it’s so strong to lure you into a trap?”

“It’s possible,” the Magician agreed. “And yet the magic I felt handling the ring after you gave it to me was nothing compared to the jolt I felt when you first slipped it onto your finger. You were the trigger, Miss Wilde. A highly specific trigger, only

recently come into her own power. Evoked by an ancient magic I've never felt before, yet one which knows you intimately. Altogether, it makes for a very curious situation, and one that requires much study."

"Well, respectfully, I'm afraid you're going to have to crash that final exam," Nigel said. "The operatives you listed, they're not going to stick around and think about this all that much. And if they got a message we didn't get...we'll need to catch up. Quickly."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

“Catch up to what exactly? Can we figure what the other operatives received?” I looked at Armaeus. “Can’t you, I don’t know, read their minds or whatever?”

He regarded me with mild reproach. “There are approximately seven billion souls on this planet, Miss Wilde, all of them with extremely noisy minds. Finding the five afflicted parties was not difficult, but they are surrounded with the gale force wind of chaos that is the human experience. In person, yes, of course, I could read them. But from a distance...”

“Well then, that’s where we start,” Nigel put in, his excitement bubbling up again. “Out of the five hunters you’ve named, the dumbest by far is Douglas Fricker. He’s tenacious and a mean fellow, but he falls distinctly short in the brains department. I’d pick him to be on my crew in a heartbeat, but not to make any decisions, if you catch my meaning. Any message he got has got to be clear as a bell or he’d never pick up on it. So we find him, figure out where he’s heading, and we’ve got a plan. If it’s South America, we head there. If it’s not—we reassess.”

“Or we head for South America and be done with it. We’ve got an opal and moonstones, right?” Nikki said, pointing to the ring. “And those are moon symbols. Moon, moon, and moon. And, whaddya know, we kind of want to track down the Moon. We just need to find a cult of moon worshippers to get us started. Where are there temples built for the moon in South America? I gotta think Machu Picchu, yeah? Could it be that easy?”

Armaeus shook his head. “Almost certainly not. I cannot imagine the Arcana Council Moon, if that is the agent behind this search, would telegraph his or her location so blatantly after having remained hidden for millennia. It isn’t logical. Furthermore,

while the temple of the moon at Machu Picchu is a seminal site, it's not the only site dedicated to worship of the moon. Nearly every ancient society built structures for that purpose, and some of them remain to this day."

"Yes, but..." I countered, again holding up the ring. "This came directly to me. And Nikki's right, we've just started looking for the Moon. That can't be a coincidence."

"We'll probably know a lot more once we track down Fricker," Nigel insisted. He turned toward Armaeus. "Not to put too fine a point on it, but I rather think you'd be able to crack his head open like a melon once you got within ten feet of the man—and those would probably be the only thoughts you find inside."

Armaeus lifted his brows haughtily. For a second, I thought he'd reject Nigel's suggestion out of hand, especially since he wasn't used to taking direction from any mortal, Connected or otherwise. But the gleam in his eye gave away his own sense of curiosity. "It could be interesting to see how much damage another hunter who received the message might have sustained, given what you endured," he allowed.

"And you're the only one who can learn that quickly enough to make a difference," Nigel agreed somberly. "I can focus on getting us provisioned here, and once we have our destination, we can go wherever in the world it is we're supposed to go."

"Uh-huh," I said drily. "To find whatever it is in the world we're supposed to find? Do you not see the flaw in this logic? We're being led on some sort of chase, a hunt with no direction and no discernible prize other than recovering a hunter who's quite clearly been used as bait for someone far more powerful. What's really the end game here, for whoever has dangled Roland out there for us? I don't know if something's changed since I hunted on a regular basis, but if I didn't know what it was I was looking for, I didn't go. And if I didn't know how I was going to get paid, I also didn't go."

“But it’s a riddle quest,” Nigel shot right back at me, his tone far less circumspect than the one he took with Armaeus. “That’s what makes it so interesting.”

I turned to the Magician. “Am I the only person seeing the problem here?”

“It could be a problem. It could also be an opportunity,” Armaeus offered, which was no help at all. “If the Moon is behind this, a hunt in the darkness is, I am forced to agree, a very reasonable path to follow.”

“And if the old girl is looking to have her ego stroked, the idea of a brace of eager hunters searching for her hidden domain is kind of hot, you gotta admit,” Nikki put in.

I blinked at her. “What?”

“Think about it,” she said, gesturing her lacquered fingernails toward Armaeus. “You all haven’t seen or heard from the Moon in thousands of years. She’s not just going to waltz onto the scene like she’s finished her morning coffee and is ready for her first-ever photo op. She’s gonna want to set the stage. If she’s some great and magical sorcerer, she’s gonna want all eyes on her. That’s the way you guys work.”

She said this last to the Magician, but he didn’t dispute her logic.

“There is very little in any of the archives regarding the Moon,” he allowed. “It was a role that was established when the Council was founded at the fall of Atlantis, but, much as with the Sun and the Star, those Council members fractured off very early in the process, leaving the work of the Council to others. The Council’s membership has gone through iterations over time, some quite a few times. But not the Moon, the Sun, or the Star, until quite recently.”

“Would Qadir know anything about the Moon?” I asked, referencing the newly

ascended Sun of the Arcana Council. “He inherited the memories of the last Sun, right?”

“It wouldn’t be a bad place to start,” Armaeus began, but once again, Nigel interrupted.

“It would be a bloody awful place to start when we’ve got operatives right now who have already had more than thirty minutes to start their launch,” he said tightly, clearly trying to keep hold of his temper. It was an unusual outburst for him, but then again, he’d just had his body carved up. He could be excused for not maintaining his typically British stiff upper lip. “We’ve a clear lead with Fricker, and we’d be foolish not to follow it. If the man’s up to his ears in rum, talking about nothing at all, then bully for him. But if he’s assembling a team and heading off to Bora Bora, we should know that. Sara here can go, if you don’t want to, right? Maybe with Eshe to help her target Fricker?”

“That won’t be necessary.” Armaeus stood with his own burst of enthusiasm—and for a second, I imagined him as he first started out in his role with the Arcana Council, a young Magician brimming with energy and focus. “I have located the man and can take us both there quite easily. Miss Wilde?”

He held out his hand. I transferred the ring to my jacket pocket, laid my hand in his, and we were off in a puff of smoke.

The Magician’s mode of travel was efficient and painless, in marked contrast to my own. No sooner had we dissolved into little more than spinning atoms than, around us, the world was transformed into a flash of energy currents zipping and spinning in all directions, yet somehow forming a cohesive path for us to follow. We raced across the planet in the space of a single breath.

When we emerged, I gripped Armaeus tightly for a second, blinking at the transition.

From the quiet enclosed confines of Justice Hall, we had transported ourselves into utter chaos. People crowded around us in rioting profusion, bodies wrapped in bright colors, many with heads covered, skin glistening from the touch of the sun and the heat of the day, despite the fact it was now full dark.

We were in a narrow alleyway filled to bursting with shops and articles for sale, fabrics and textiles, cups and bowls, along with metal statuary of every description, from giant elephants down to miniature sphinxes. The air was redolent with the smells of cooking food and the press of humanity. The noise was deafening. The Magician stood still, his golden-black eyes gleaming as he looked around the space. He remained dressed in a suit, but it was slightly longer in cut and fashioned in a deep, midnight-blue silk. With his long dark hair flowing over his shoulders, his burnished skin and high winged brows evoking his Egyptian heritage, he looked as if he had walked the alleyways of Khan el-Khalili his entire life.

I looked around with curiosity. I wasn't a complete stranger to this souk, though this particular alley blended in along with all the rest. I had done many a deal in the most famous market of Cairo, one that dated back to an era even before the Magician was born. It was predominantly an area for ordinary people and ordinary transactions, but the arcane black market had long thrived here by hiding in plain sight, and this section of the souk was a favorite, especially its famous coffeehouse.

This wasn't particularly good news, however.

"You think Fricker is in El Fishawi? That wouldn't especially be great, if he ended up receiving the same message Nigel did, in the same way." I grimaced, imagining the hunter enjoying the local specialty hibiscus tea as he burst into a bloody and glowing Rosetta stone.

"In this case, I think not," Armaeus said. "If he's here, he's being hidden, but there is very little in this souk that can hide from me. I have walked it more times than I can

count.”

He reached for my hand, and I took his quickly, the gesture less one of solidarity than necessity. There were too many people pressing close, hawking tourist-level trinkets, trying to catch our eye for the primary goal of picking our pockets. Most who were bold enough to approach sheared away when they encountered the unconscious energy of the Magician. I didn’t think Armaeus knew he was warding them off so obviously, it was merely who he was. That caused its own problem, though, which I picked up on within no more than a dozen steps.

“Exactly how recently was the last time you visited here?” I asked as I noted the slowly building entourage that had started shifting with us through the labyrinthine alleys of the souk. First a couple, then a few more, then easily a dozen men and women, their faces serious, unlike many of the other tourists and locals milling around, their gazes intent. They didn’t look at anything in particular, but with every shift of Armaeus down a new pathway, more followed. A ripple of energy snaked through the souk, and I could see men up ahead of us turn, either alerted by their senses or their cell phones to the Magician’s presence.

“When I come to Khan el-Khalili, I come to buy,” Armaeus said easily. “And these people are here to sell.”

“I don’t think it’s just the shopkeepers who’ve gotten the memo,” I countered as a trio of dark-garbed men stepped into the throng behind us, the three of them looking like they could be Armaeus’s younger cousins. Dark hair, trimmed beards, arched eyebrows, and golden eyes. “Are you the head of a fan club I don’t know about?”

We turned down another alleyway, and at the far end, I could see the signage for the famed eighteenth-century coffeehouse that had justifiably become a tourist destination in its own right in the famed bazaar. With its long hallways lined with mirrors and crowded with small tables, featuring local Egyptian delicacies and drinks

along with the more common offerings of coffee, El Fishawi served as the gateway for many an arcane black market transaction. But Armaeus angled sharply away from it as a young child stepped out of the crowd.

The boy was no older than twelve, I suspected, though his soft features and thin frame made guessing his age difficult. He lifted a hand to Armaeus, then jerked as a small gold coin flashed in his palm. He gripped it so quickly that only the most discerning would have been able to tell the transaction had happened, and his face broke into a delighted smile.

“Someone will have noticed that,” I muttered, glancing around me.

Armaeus shook his head. “Only you, and only because I wanted you to.”

I slanted him a glance as we followed the young boy through the maze of people and shops, the market still rolling noisily despite the late hour. While some businesses closed on time in the souk, I knew well enough that others would remain open as long as there were people who might buy.

We reached a particularly tight alley, covered over with an archway lined with shops that seemed to be little more than shadows set into the walls.

“Stay close, Miss Wilde,” Armaeus murmured as we stepped into the narrow passage. “In the last thirty seconds, the energy force of one Douglas Fricker has reversed quite dramatically. That is very dangerous indeed.”

I blinked at him. “Someone killed him?”

“Regrettably not,” the Magician said. “Someone brought him back to life.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

Armaeus shifted his conversation to his inside voice. His seriously inside voice.

“There is a great deal of magic being worked in this place, more than I have ever experienced before here,” he spoke inside my mind. “That is...concerning.”

I did my best to nod mentally. Well, if they are practicing necromancy, I would say it's absolutely concerning. What's with that, anyway? First we had the pizza guy in New Jersey, now it's here in Cairo? What gives?

“Necromancy has been practiced, along with every other form of magic, since the first spells were ever cast. Death is the ultimate mystery. Humanity, as a rule, isn't fond of mysteries.”

Yeah, but in this case, almost always, the cure is worse than the disease, I protested. I mean, am I wrong? Am I missing something?

“It would appear we are all missing something in this calculus,” the Magician said. “And again, if you go back to the original focus of our search, the Moon, it makes for an interesting juxtaposition. The moon is highly connected to life cycles, as she often served in mythology as a guide through death and the afterlife. I suspect in Douglas Fricker's case, he may well have been a victim of particularly poor timing.”

The message he received killed him, I sighed mentally.

“Not exactly. I suspect he was already dead when it appeared upon him. Which was rather inconvenient all around, I should think.”

As Armaeus spoke, he continued moving through the souk, on the heels of the young boy who looked back periodically to ensure we were still following. He needn't have bothered. The gaggle of people tagging along right behind us would also have ensured we didn't slacken our pace.

At length, we came to a shop recessed a bit further into the walls of the alleyway, fronted by rows of metal dishware, plates, cups, serving platters, even utensils. Far too many for this deep into the market, certainly. Some of the items looked particularly heavy too. Who would want to carry all that hardware back out again?

It wasn't the time to share this question aloud, as the shop owners glanced up at Armaeus and then me, their eyes flat and their expressions carefully disinterested as we passed in front of their booths. Their attention sharpened as the followers crowded in behind us, and quick words were exchanged in Egyptian and Arabic as we reached the door in the back of the open-air shop. It swung wide silently to let us inside, or perhaps better stated, any noise made by the door moving was sufficiently drowned out by the cacophony that awaited us within.

Music with a decidedly Middle Eastern flair thundered from the room, creating a blanket of noise. Mostly men but some women too thronged the space, not so much dancing as jostling each other. Some appeared to be focused on the bar area, others on the circulating attendants carrying platters filled with cups not unlike those being sold outside. I studied those cups a little more closely as we passed, but I couldn't make out what they were holding. The Magician offered no clarification either, as his focus sharpened on the more tightly packed throng of people toward the back of the room.

The object of their attention was made clear a few seconds later as I caught sight of a man sitting upright toward the back of the chamber. He listed slightly to the side in a high-backed chair that curved round while stopping short of being full wing-back. Though deathly pale, he appeared to have enjoyed quite a robust life, his shirt

unbuttoned over a crimson-hued undershirt and flapping loosely to either side of his ample belly. His thick thatch of dark russet hair curled around what was once a jovial face, but now seemed to merely accentuate the lines of florid text that decorated the man's skin from his brow line to his navel.

Perhaps more alarmingly, the man was awake and talking, though his mouth was slack, his eyes vacant and staring off into the distance.

“Fricker,” Armaeus confirmed aloud for me before I had a chance to ask. “In the reanimated flesh.”

I winced to see another man marked the way Nigel had been—though Fricker was covered with tattoos, from all appearances, not burning gashes that went to the bone. Still...if I hadn't been there to take those marks from him, would Nigel have ended up like this unfortunate, captured and propped up in the midst of the avaricious crowd of eager onlookers, straining to hear what he said?

The thought made anger twist inside me. I was being used. Taunted. Forced into a hunt I didn't want, for reasons I didn't understand.

Someone was going to pay for that, dammit.

Fricker spoke louder now, his words ringing out in a gravelly monotone, and I recognized the language as German, which surprised me. This didn't seem to be a likely German crowd, but they followed the man's words with ardent interest.

I did the same, peering at Fricker more closely. It might seem rude to assume he was most rightfully dead, except for the deep slash across his collarbone that was now blackened with blood. Pillows had been stuffed to either side of his temples to make sure his head didn't fall right off his body, and attendants hovered at either side to intercept an errant head roll, eyes wide, clearly hoping they were not about to be

pressed into service.

“Find the lost city,” Fricker intoned, with a marked lack of enthusiasm. “The lost city holds treasures as yet undiscovered, a treasure that will unlock the magic for you all. Magic that has long since been your right.”

I narrowed my eyes. Not this again. Every time I turned around, it seemed the Connected of the world, particularly the one-percenter Connected, were eagerly fomenting the dissent and breakout magic of the remaining ninety-nine percent. And the worst one-percenter offenders? That would be the Arcana Council’s current archenemy, the Shadow Court. These guys seriously would not let it rest.

While on the surface it seemed like letting your freak magic flag fly would be a call for empowerment, the truth was far shadier. The Shadow Court’s ultimate goal was the eradication of the majority of the Connected, who would come across as mutants and freaks to those of the world who had not yet acknowledged, let alone accessed, their innate magic. These vulnerable Connecteds would be stamped out violently and quickly, returning the world to a place where only the few could wield magic, and therefore retain control of it.

The Shadow Court was evil, pure and simple. The Arcana Council kept knocking them down a little further each time we clashed, but the Court kept coming back. They were gunning for us, without question—but we had all our weapons trained on them too. If only I could figure out a way that the altercation we were speeding toward wouldn’t result in Mutual Assured Destruction of all the world’s Connected, we’d be good. Unfortunately, I hadn’t gotten that far yet.

And this definitely wasn’t the time to ask this audience to stand down. They hung on the recently dead guy’s every word.

“Which lost city?” came the question from the back of the room, in Arabic. “It could

be anywhere in the world.”

The voice was truculent and bitter, but the guy had a point. From cities lost to natural disasters, to those submerged by high tides, to the ones overtaken and swallowed up by other civilizations, fables of “the lost city” existed on nearly every continent. Based on the ring still weighing heavily in my pocket, I had to assume we were talking about Machu Picchu and the lost city of the Incas, but when Fricker spoke again, he threw another curveball.

“All of them,” he intoned. This brought a babble of responses in multiple languages. I blinked, and sensed Armaeus moving beside me, the ripple of his magic noticeable to me but far too subtle for those gathered in the room—most of them, anyway. I watched a few stiffen and shift uncomfortably, the overall energy signature of the room seeming to ratchet up.

One of the closest figures to Fricker moved, a woman with white hair and a lined face, who could have been a thousand years old or sixty, as lightly as she moved. She drifted toward Fricker’s face, lifting a hand to smooth back his sweat-dampened hair from his clammy brow. She murmured something to him, and he exhaled, both from his mouth and, somewhat disconcertingly, from the gaping wound at his neck. I fought the pitch of my stomach as Fricker spoke again.

“There are as many entries to the lost city as there are to Hell. Any of these entries work for the righteous and the pure.”

I barely resisted rolling my eyes. I’d seen how well that had gone for the hunters in the Indiana Jones movies. I wasn’t buying that bullshit. Righteousness and purity were in the eyes of the beholder, full stop. And if the beholder had enough money, he didn’t give a rat’s ass.

But Fricker wasn’t done. “Time is short, and the enemy presses close. Riches and

power await only the first few to reach the fabled city and reclaim the Moon to shine upon her court once again. Do this, and you will rise above even the greatest of all sorcerers on the planet.”

This statement should have occasioned another hubbub of enthusiasm, but the group was struck dumb as Fricker turned his head in a squishy flap of skin and blood and severed muscles. He fixed his gaze on Armaeus, causing everyone around us to turn our way as he spoke loudly. “Not even the Magician of the Arcana Council could defeat you.”

Those were clearly fighting words, but the Magician showed no reaction. I suppose he’d probably been fending off those kinds of threats for arguably the last eight hundred years and change. I thought he wouldn’t respond at all, but the Magician was first and foremost a passionate seeker of knowledge. And Fricker was already beginning to fade.

Armaeus stepped forward. “If every path to the Moon leads through a lost city, and all arrive at once, how will the Moon choose her escort?”

The question seemed to catch Fricker off guard, as much as a zombie could react to anything. He blinked at Armaeus, and his face shifted, lightening even further to a ghostly pallor, like mist sweeping over a desolate plain. He blinked, and his eyes shone with pure white power, his nose lengthening, his lips softening and becoming fuller. An illusion of long and silvery hair swept over his face, and his brows peaked up in supplication.

“Save me,” he begged. It was no longer Fricker’s voice that spoke, but a feminine plea as old as time.

The moment passed, and Fricker seized, jerking upright, the symbols that had lashed his body flashing white a final time before dissolving completely. With a sickening

jerk, Fricker's torso fell one way, his head fell the other, both of them dropping into the arms of completely freaked-out attendants. Somebody screamed, several others shouted, and Armaeus and I were instantly besieged. A ring of black-clad men circled us, the white-haired woman in their center getting right up into Armaeus's space—not his face, since she only came up to his chest, but she tilted her head back and pierced him with a furious gaze.

“You have no right to be here. You and your Council, you have had your day. The Order of the Moon shall have theirs.”

“You truly think the goddess is behind this?” Armaeus drawled. “What did she say to you specifically?”

“Begone.” The woman flapped her hand. “You are not worthy of kissing the hem of her gown.”

I processed all this in a rush as the woman rattled on. She was some sort of witch or sorceress, that much was clear. I had never heard of the Order of the Moon, though they clearly knew Armaeus. But he merely stared down at the woman with imperious disdain.

“Do you not know your own son?” he asked mildly.

The woman abruptly shut up, cut off midrant. Armaeus lifted a hand almost lazily, and as he did, the woman's hair lifted at her hairline, revealing a long line of ink that had been etched into her skin all the way down her temple and around her ear. It was too frail and spidery for me to decipher, and it was invisible except with her hair lifted the way it was. She stood stock-still, her eyes as wide as mine.

“My mother was a high priestess of the Order of Lah-a,” Armaeus said quietly. “I would never do anything to dishonor you, Grandmother, but this is a path I began

some eight hundred years ago when she still walked this earth. It is a path that I must follow to its end.”

All this sounded appreciably ominous to me, and apparently, the old woman thought so too. She stepped back, her face markedly paler, then drew her hands together. “So it is true,” she said.

Armaeus nodded, then gestured to what was left of Fricker, draped now in funerary garments. “I didn’t know you had such magic as this in your order. You didn’t in my mother’s time.”

The old woman’s smile was ancient and sad. “It is a magic that takes more away than it gives. We have waited long for Lah-a to return, and she has finally awakened. This fool died by his own deceit before she could use him as her vessel, but we called upon the grace of Lah-a’s magic, and she granted it.”

I stared at the woman, acutely aware of Armaeus beside me, my mind scrambling to make sense of what was happening. Was this why Armaeus was so interested in returning the Moon to the fold of the Arcana Council? If his mother was a high priestess of the Moon, whether in goddess form or as a Council member, would the Moon’s return impact him more dramatically than I expected?

The priestess turned to me, her gray eyes somber and direct. “You carry her ring. Who sent it? From where?”

“I have no idea where,” I said, which was more or less true. “As to who—”

“A hunter,” Armaeus interrupted. “But not necessarily the hunter we’ve been led to believe.”

“Yes, yes,” the old woman said, her face creasing into a weary smile. “Riddles upon

mysteries upon enigmas. The way through the night is filled with shadows. If you find the sender, however, your path will be shortest. You are marked by Lah-a, but it does not mean you will be chosen.”

Ever so not helpful, I thought, but before I could protest, Armaeus spoke.

“You believe Lah-a can be found through any of the lost cities?”

The old woman shrugged. “This man was a cheat who paid for his deception with his life mere moments before he was visited with the call of the Moon. I suspect all who were chosen as her messengers are charlatans and deceivers at their core.”

Irritation flared within me. Nigel was a hell of a lot of things, but a charlatan and deceiver? Not a chance.

The priestess continued, oblivious to my growing annoyance. “Have a care. The information shared through such deceivers is available to the darkest and the blackest of the arcane community. The way will be fraught with danger. And death.”

I barely kept from rolling my eyes. “You know, you seriously have a future in the travel business.”

She refocused on me, her gaze every bit as imperious as the Magician’s. “Deceivers and charlatans. Think on that.”

She turned and left the room.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

I expected Armaeus to reach for my hand and once more dissolve us in a puff of smoke, rushing us back to Las Vegas, but instead, he took my arm and curled it into his, shielding me protectively as we turned toward the doorway of the bar.

“This space is too crowded,” he announced, and together, we threaded our way back through the throng of people, most of whom seemed to take absolutely no note of the fact that a man had died, been brought back to life, and then died a second time on their watch. We emerged into the sultry night, the press of humanity still far too close, and the Magician didn’t stop.

He moved through the shallow storefront, paying no mind to the entourage that almost immediately assembled upon his reemergence. There were fewer of them this time, but more of them wore long black robes with flashes of red and silver. One turned as we passed, his face impassive, golden eyes gleaming, and I caught the double loop of a heavy belt hung with something long and leather wrapped. A knife, I suspected. I wasn’t sure what the weapons laws were in Cairo, but I also wasn’t sure that what I was seeing was something that was visible to anyone else. These men and women had a strong current of energy that flowed around them and danced into the crowd. If they were throwing illusions, they might appear as ordinary tourists with nothing more weaponized than an aggressive fanny pack to ward off their enemies.

Armaeus seemed to be walking with a purpose, and I wasn’t surprised when the tourist haven of El Fishawi came into view. While the Magician was not normally given to tourist haunts, it was different when said tourist haunt had been around for a good three hundred years. So I didn’t argue as he loosened his hold on my arm and reached down to grasp my hand. I also didn’t miss the fact that he was proclaiming for all the world to see, and in particular his fan club, that I was with him. Far from

being reassuring, the move only made me think of Kreios's words about Armaeus's role on the Council. I didn't want to be the Magician's backup plan. I didn't want to think about needing a backup plan for myself.

We stepped into the brightly lit interior of El Fishawi, and the Magician looked around with obvious pleasure. "It doesn't change much. The owners come and go, but all the fixtures remain."

No one greeted us, but Armaeus continued down the long, skinny restaurant aisles between tables. Those tables brimmed with tourists and locals alike, though I wasn't sure I would necessarily know the difference between the two. However, as we got deeper into the building, a man emerged from a shadowy alcove and gestured us forward. He was dressed in a suit as elegant as the Magician's, and his manner was aristocratic.

"Will he have seating for all our new friends?" I asked quietly.

Armaeus chuckled. "He should. He's their leader."

We stepped into another narrow corridor and emerged a few moments later into a private seating area, a world away from the hustling, bustling coffee shop. The walls were lined with richly colored tapestries that deadened the sound, though I assumed the heavy ripple of magic that raced along the walls helped that out as well.

A long table sat in the center of the room, flanked by chairs. The table was bare, no food or drink, but Armaeus moved toward it anyway, taking his position at its head and gesturing me to his right. The man in the silk suit moved into position to my right as well, and then the men and women in dark garb, their faces studiously blank, but their eyes alight with transcendent joy flowed in around us, taking every seat. Servers stepped into the room, bearing trays of drinks, from redolent teas to the more traditional lemon- and hibiscus-flavored drinks, both steaming and cool. I opted for a

lemon, as did Armaeus, and I was not surprised to see the man in the suit choose the same.

“You’re not hungry?” he asked Armaeus in Egyptian, and Armaeus smiled and shook his head. The conversation had taken on the air of a ritual, one that it seemed these two men had performed many times before. I lifted my drink with my right hand, my left settled down beside me, and waited.

Armaeus reclined in his seat, casting a proprietary eye over the men and women assembled there. He glanced again to the man in the suit, who bowed slightly as if giving him permission to proceed. I wondered at the dynamic between these two. It wasn’t exactly that of equals, but it was clear the Magician held a tremendous level of respect for the man in the suit. And perhaps even more for the men and women who joined us.

“You have questions,” Armaeus murmured.

The man in the suit didn’t hesitate. “So what of the dead man’s revelations? You will seek out the Arcana Council’s Moon in her hiding place? You know who the Moon is? And where she’s been hiding?”

Armaeus took a long sip of his drink before responding. “We know only who the Moon was. At the dawn of the Council, that position was occupied, along with the Sun and the Star. The Sun hid itself quite convincingly for untold generations, while the Star has been lost to the mists of time. The Moon, it would seem, has taken a somewhat middle path, her creatures emerging in myth and legend, then disappearing again as quickly. To know she has buried herself in a city forgotten by time is not all that surprising. But it makes our job no less difficult. There are innumerable cities that could lay claim to that title.”

“Then you must go—and we will help you.”

“No,” the Magician said. “You must prepare. The Shadow Court is preparing to set itself against the Arcana Council, and take down all the Connecteds of the world in the process, save those it considers worthy of inclusion in its own order. The Council has worked long to forestall this war, to stamp out the Court, but we have succeeded only in lopping off the body. The head remains and the body regrows, until now it is stronger than ever.”

“We have fought snakes before,” the man said pridefully.

“You have,” Armaeus agreed. “But this snake has a venom that strikes at the heart of its victims. The power you have cultivated over time will mark you as outlaws and rogues when the masks fall away from those in power. It will be dangerous to show who you are to anyone but those in your innermost circles.”

“Such wars as these have come and gone over the centuries,” the man insisted. “We are ready.”

“I sense a difference this time,” Armaeus said. His voice had gone slightly soft, and his gaze was fixed on the far wall, as if he were lost in his own labyrinth of thought and calculation. “I see only the destruction and not the rebirth, and that is unusual.”

A lick of panic danced along my nerves as the man in the suit leaned forward.

“There is magic in this world that you have never accessed, magic we would gladly bend to your service.” This proclamation came not from the man, but from a woman halfway down the table, her dark eyes gleaming more black than gold. I’d seen Armaeus adopt that particular look as well, when his magic was particularly strong and on the verge of being unleashed. Were these his acolytes, I wondered? He’d said the suited man was their leader, but they were acting far more like an elite army dedicated to Armaeus than dutiful followers of their elegant host.

“And this is not the first time we have offered,” the man agreed. “We have asked to step in, to help many times over these past months. You know this.”

His words were gently chiding, unexpectedly so, and I blinked at him in surprise, but Armaeus’s face remained placid.

“To all things there is a proper time. Magic wrought too early is worse than no magic at all.”

“So long as it is not wrought too late,” the woman farther along the table said. She spoke with authority, but not anger. I got the feeling that, much like the Magician, this group prided itself on putting forth the appearance of a measured response. But also like the Magician, I suspected they could be pushed too far.

Armaeus nodded. “I pledge to you that you will know when it is your time to act, and you will know the degree to which such action is required. There will be no confusion in the final hour.”

Once again, this was taking on nearly biblical levels of gloom. I wasn’t a big fan. As it happened, I wasn’t the only one.

“What is it you’re not telling us?” came another question, this one from an older man whose luxurious black hair was shot through with strands of silver. “Are we preparing for a war or a wake?”

Armaeus smiled, and in that smile I saw the glint of resolve that also seemed a throwback to a Magician of a former time. A Magician who had destroyed artifacts and secreted them away rather than let them be perverted by the humankind he supposedly served.

“I will tell you this. I enter into no battles I do not expect to win, and I would never

ask you to follow me on a fool's gambit. Your magic has descended through you for centuries, and rarely have you been called upon to exercise it to such a degree. I wish you to be prepared."

No Hall of Fame coach could have done more to excite the passion of his players with a speech like that. Everyone straightened, stopping just shy of offering high fives and fist bumps, and instead busily attended to their drinks with their right hands. Even I felt a wave of go-team fervor, and this wasn't really my team. The suited man smiled with a very real expression of relief.

"We will be ready," he agreed.

It was another half hour of idle conversation and lots of chilled drinks before Armaeus and I walked again through the streets of Khan el-Khalili. The crowds had dwindled some, vendors closing up shop, the shouts, sighs, and press of humanity lessening as we made our way. I knew we had no specific destination in mind, because our ultimate target was halfway around the world and we could shift there with a moment's thought. But Armaeus seemed to revel in the chaos of the declining crowd, drawing in deep breaths of the heavy aroma of heat, sweat, and perfume.

I shot him a sidelong glance. "You know you can get out more than you do. There literally is the whole world at your disposal to explore beyond Las Vegas. I know you're a big fan of your fortress of solitude and all, but maybe you should take a break now and then."

He chuckled. "As always, your comments are prescient, Miss Wilde. The Council's base of operations has always been where magic is at its height. Yet now we see that the world has devolved into a dark labyrinth of power, where magic is hidden away in boardrooms and government chambers, not flaunted on the streets the way it is in Las Vegas, the way it was in Munich before and then Paris and even here in Cairo once upon a long-ago time. We are coming to understand that the concentration of the

Council in any given place matters less in times like these.”

“So, what, you guys are going to start working remotely? We’re going to start Zoom Council meetings?” I pressed, and his smile was not at all rueful, which made me happier than I wanted to admit.

“I mean only that our strongholds might perhaps be more fluid than they have been before, and that we should not be afraid of change. We should play to win and not merely to protect the lead.” He held out a hand to me. “Shall we?”

I no longer knew exactly what he was asking, but I also didn’t care. “Always,” I said, taking his hand. “Always.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

The return to Las Vegas was unsettling for a couple of reasons. The speed with which the Magician whisked us out of Cairo's market and back along the circuits to home wasn't all that startling, I was used to that. But when Armaeus left me outside the office door to Justice Hall, I got the sense that something was off.

First, he left without another word, whispering away from me almost as soon as he'd ensured my safe arrival. Second, I felt out of sorts, like my internal clock had been set askew. I patted my pocket to make sure I still had the Moon's class ring, then moved down to the doorway almost nervously, not sure of what I would find on the other side. Mrs. French, almost certainly. Possibly Nigel and Nikki, but otherwise? It had only been a few hours, after all.

The door didn't open as I approached, which was another indication that something was a little off. I keyed into it with a touch of my hand, using the fingerprint recognition system Simon had installed at some point, but which I rarely needed given the keen sensitivity of Mrs. French. But nobody appeared on the other side of the door. The Hall was silent, the library apparently closed.

I frowned, suddenly uncertain.

"Mrs. French?" I called, only to hear an "Oh!" from deep within the library, as if I'd startled the head librarian nodding off at the stacks.

Mrs. French emerged from the main library a few minutes later, and I blinked to see that she was in a long gray house robe, a white cotton nightgown visible beneath its severe folds. Her gray hair, normally swept up in an efficient bun, was braided down her back, and she looked so unexpectedly small to me that my heart caught. I lifted

my hands in dismay.

“What time is it?” I asked, thoroughly confused. “We weren’t in Cairo that long.”

“Oh, indeed you were, Justice Wilde,” Mrs. French said, her demeanor as cheerful as always. “It’s going on two a.m. If you would like me to ring up Nikki, I’m sure she’s up to no good in one of the local clubs. She seemed intent on showing Mr. Nigel a good time. Her words, I should say, not mine.”

“Two in the morning?” I blinked. That was another twelve hours lost in translation. Had the Magician and I gone somewhere else without me realizing it? Would he have done that to me willingly without telling me? It had been ten in the evening when we’d left Cairo, which should’ve equaled early afternoon in Vegas.

Armaeus? I reached out mentally, but there was no response. What had just happened here? Had the Magician tried some sort of test of my sensitivity, which I had clearly failed?

I didn’t know, but I couldn’t deny the growing pit in my stomach as to what it might mean. Something weird was going on with the Magician, as if he were a puppeteer with a few too many strings dangling and no more marionettes to move. I shook off my dismay as Mrs. French looked at me expectantly. “No, no. You don’t need to find them. I can. Have you heard anything from Sariah?”

“Oh! Well, yes, indeed. She called several hours ago. She has taken it upon herself to assist Dixie Quinn in some task, and she seemed quite delighted. She said you knew all about it, and advised me not to worry, so of course, I instantly worried. But Nikki and Mr. Friedman had already set off, and as Miss Pelter was also heading to the Flamingo, I thought it prudent to advise Mr. Kreios.”

“They were going to the Flamingo?” I asked. “Dixie and Sariah?”

“Yes—the whole lot of them. I thought it rather odd, but Mr. Kreios assured me he would keep a close eye on everyone. The Flamingo tends to attract some rather obscure players, I’m given to understand. It’s perhaps the darkest of the casinos on the Strip.”

I lifted my brows at her assessment. I couldn’t say I was surprised at the observation, or that I disagreed with it. The Flamingo had been built in the 1940s by one of the most notorious gangsters who had come to the man-made oasis that was Las Vegas, and it served as said gangster’s primary residence. But that wasn’t what disturbed me.

“Um...has anything else happened in the last twelve hours or so?” I asked. “Any other disturbances in the Force?”

It was a testament to Mrs. French’s familiarity with me that she didn’t even blink at the odd question.

“Indeed, we’ve got nearly two dozen requests for aid,” she confided. “Interestingly enough, they’ve come mostly from artifact hunters, pleas for help that were generalized, not necessarily directed to you, but just—”

“To come save them?” I asked, but she shook her head.

“Not even that coherent, I’m afraid. More pain, fear, and confusion. I’ve tallied them all for you. They’ve come in mostly on scraps of parchment, sent with expedience, not finesse. I figured given what Mr. Friedman said, you would want to know their locations. They’re from all over the globe.”

“Sites known as lost cities?” I asked, but again, confoundingly, she shook her head.

“Not lost in the traditional sense, though certainly each has its own shadowy district. But Nikki cross-referenced them with her contact at the House of Swords, and

additional information came back almost immediately. Most of the sites are primary locations of the darker operations on the black market. Syndicates that we have barely begun to look into, I believe she said.”

Oh, great. “Any affiliation with the Shadow Court?” I asked, but Mrs. French merely lifted a hand and dropped it.

“We still know too little about that organization, I’m afraid. Even those members the Council managed to single out during their last attack have scattered far and wide. Nothing attaches them to these missives, but nothing doesn’t attach them either, if you see what I’m saying.”

I did, but it didn’t make me feel any better. “Where do you think I’d find Nikki now? Still at the Flamingo?”

Mrs. French sniffed with only cursory dismay. “Oh, I wouldn’t think so. She’s never in one place for too long, I’m given to understand. She was curious about the Sahara, wanting to see what the Sun was up to. I rather expect you’ll find her there.”

She was right.

Twenty minutes later, I entered the glittering main casino of the Sahara, walking into the wall of sound that was so familiar to any of the casinos along the Strip—the clattering yammer of the slot machines, the buzz of conversation, the music set behind the noise to give the feeling of both complete insulation and isolation. A quick scan of the energy in the room indicated that while there was plenty of magic going on, it was decidedly lower level—the bubbling possibility of scoring a big prize, the knife-edged panic of making a wrong bet. But none of it spoke of the freewheeling loquacious style of Nikki Dawes or the Brit I suspected she had well into his cups by now. That meant I’d have to find her the old-fashioned way. I continued moving through the casino and followed the signs for the pool area.

Jackpot.

As I stepped outside, I heard Nikki's bright, delighted laugh. I scanned the area, expecting to find her in the center of a crowd of the young, beautiful resort set of Vegas, embodying the irony of the old casino that had been made new again. To my surprise, however, only Nigel was dancing attendance on Nikki. And he was grinning at her like a loon.

Nikki saw me first.

"Dollface!" She waved me over with a lift of her enormous glass, a wildly orange-tinted concoction with a pineapple wedge stuck on the rim. "We want to know everything."

Nigel turned as well, somewhat less steadily. He sobered up visibly as he caught sight of me. Not because he was on the job and I was some sort of team lead, but because of the same sixth sense that had always flipped on for him when a job was about to start. It was a feature of being an artifact hunter, with the need to get the jump on anyone else who might be after the same McGuffin you had targeted.

"You found him," he said.

I nodded as I settled into a cabana chair next to them. A server appeared almost immediately with another giant glass of something fruity. I took it and handed it over to Nikki, then held up a finger.

"What's your house scotch?" I asked.

"For you, it's Glenmorangie." A new voice spoke, rich and redolent with the sound of the real Sahara, complete with shifting sands and flapping silks. I looked up and then up farther as the newest member of the Arcana Council strolled to our table, a bottle

in one hand and a cut crystal glass in the other, with the telltale amber liquid gleaming within. Rippling with muscles visible through the thin material of his caftan, his golden bronze skin gleaming, and his bald head mirror bright—like Mr. Clean playing Lawrence of Arabia—the Sun handed me the glass and put the bottle on the table beside us before turning and murmuring something to the server. The young man nodded and moved off smartly—not scurrying, still walking with a swagger—but definitely hopping to it.

Nikki watched him go appreciatively.

“I must say, I sincerely approve of the new management at the Sahara,” she drawled. “Every single one of your staff, young or old, big or small, conventionally or unconventionally beautiful, carries themselves as if they own the world.”

“I am but a humble servant to the owners of this physical building,” Qadir said, gesturing expansively. The Sun had no drink, and I didn’t know what millennia-old djinn drank, for that matter, but he seemed on the edge of ebullience, so something was coursing through his veins. I reached out with a flick of my mind and traced the sparks of energy that radiated through him from the medallion that hung around his neck. He’d inherited the Sun medallion from the last Council member who had occupied his role. I knew Armaeus had spent some time researching the medal, but I never learned the outcome of that research. Another mystery.

Qadir slanted a glance to me. “In the night, it becomes more difficult to discern the thoughts of those around me who are as strong as you, Justice Wilde.”

I smiled. I wasn’t wholly certain of all the Sun’s supernatural abilities, but one of them definitely required me to avoid bright shafts of sunlight if I wanted to stay hidden from him. He also could break himself apart into many smaller versions, but I suspected that that had more to do with his Djinn heritage than his capacity as Sun. However, there was no disputing perhaps the most marked of his abilities, that of

buoyant influence.

Was that what I had to thank for Nikki's and Nigel's unexpected bonhomie? I narrowed my eyes at the Sun, and he smiled expansively.

"What is life without love?" he asked.

I barely kept from rolling my eyes. Still, Nikki hadn't chosen this location because she was interested in a party. I needed to take advantage.

"What do you think about this outreach effort on the part of the Moon?" I asked him.

Once again, Qadir smiled expansively, but shrugged. "I don't think the Moon is behind it at all. My predecessor's memories are quite hazy of both the Moon and the Star, let alone of the relationship they'd forged with his long-ago ancestor who knew them best. Inherited knowledge is never reliable and often slanted to the benefit of the person doing the remembering."

I nodded. "Fair enough. But why don't you think the outreach is legit?"

"Oh, I think it is quite legitimate. I just question the source," Qadir said. "The Moon, by all accounts from anything I can conjure up, has been a careful schemer, one who loves the shadows and does not seek the light. Unlike the Sun, who walked with humanity and happily so, even if he hid from the Council, the Moon preferred to stay tucked away."

"Preferred to or was forced to?"

Qadir turned to look at Nikki as she spoke, his thick brows lifting. "A worthwhile question, and one that should give us all pause. Because if, in fact, she was forcibly hidden away, and yes," he turned, waving off my immediate question. "I do believe

she is a feminine presence—if she has been held against her will, then who is doing the outing? Is it the Moon finally finding a crevice in the veil between the worlds to get her message out...in such an elaborate and obvious fashion? Or is it a trap, and we're being lured in to free a spirit who does not want to be freed?"

Nigel pinched the bridge of his nose. "So, are we rescuing Roland, the Moon, or a third unknown party or artifact?"

Qadir spread his broad hands. "You can see the conundrum."

I sighed, lifting my hands to my temples. Oh, I could see it all right. "So you're saying we shouldn't even make the attempt to find the Moon?"

Qadir shook his head. "Not at all. In fact, you must make every effort to do so. Because if you don't, someone else will, and I suspect that will be a far worse scenario than any of us would like to manage."

Nikki scowled, and Nigel sat up straighter. Qadir was right, of course. We were being herded like all the other hunters to this chase, but the stakes were higher for us. If anybody was going to find the Moon, it had better be us.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

The call to join the Council came a few hours later, late morning in Vegas, when the diehards of the night had finally toddled off to bed, but the casinos had not yet geared up to serve the daytime crowds. I wasn't surprised to see that the invitation extended to Nigel and Nikki. I couldn't imagine going on a search of any type without Nigel, whose experience was more recent than mine. And Nikki was just Nikki. No matter what the circumstance, she would be invaluable by my side. Plus, she had already survived multiple experiences in the hinterlands of space and time and lived to tell the tale. She would not be hurt again on my watch, I resolved, but she'd also rather die than miss out on the challenge.

Nikki picked me up in front of the Palazzo hotel in her usual guise of chauffeur, and I entered the vehicle to see Nigel inside as well. He was freshly dressed, shaved, and looking a little dazed. Not surprising if he'd spent the rest of the night with Nikki. Wordlessly, he handed me a tall to-go cup of coffee, never mind that it was already several hours into the start of the day. I took it happily enough.

I savored my coffee as Nikki drove down the Strip, my eyes invariably going to the soaring residences of the Arcana Council. Seeing them in the full light of day reminded me of Mrs. French's conversation the night before. "I understand Sariah and Dixie were doing some recon work at the Flamingo last night," I said to Nikki. "Do you know anything about that?"

"Oh, yeah." Nikki grinned. "Some of my girls have a regular show there, and the best clientele in Vegas flock to it. My friend Gina thought Sariah was you and so she texted me to see if I was on-site, but of course I wasn't. I asked her to keep an eye on them, just in case. Not that Sariah is your little sister or anything, but that girl can get herself into some trouble."

I chuckled grimly. She could at that. “And?”

“And it seems like the Moon’s little call to adventure was not just delivered to points far from here,” Nikki said, surprising me. “Apparently, one of Dixie’s newer Connected friends got the same symbology treatment, and it freaked the crap out of Dixie, the messenger who received the Moon’s call, and their whole psychic posse. Fortunately, the fellow had only been temporarily tattooed, and he had been alone with Dixie and her closest acolytes at the time, so the little caucus at the Flamingo was much more along the lines of what to do with the information, if anything, and specifically how to sell it. She wanted Sariah on hand because Sariah knows the worst players of the arcane black market—particularly those whose jaunts through the underbelly take them all the way to Hell.”

I blinked. “Your friend got all that just from eavesdropping?”

“My girls shine at eavesdropping,” Nikki informed me. “I mean, we’re not just a bunch of pretty faces and exceptional gams. Some of the ladies have a variety of psychic skills as well, including one with acute hearing. We stationed her three tables away, and bada-bing bada-boom, we were in. It was better than one of Simon’s technical toys and completely undetectable. Pretty slick.”

By now, Nigel was openly staring at Nikki. “You mean to tell me you have a girl gang of burlesque dancers working the Strip, some of them with psychic abilities?” he asked, sounding somewhere between outraged and awestruck. His gaze swiveled to me. “You knew about this?”

In point of fact, I didn’t, but I couldn’t say I was all that surprised. Very little about Nikki would surprise me. She was a one-woman force of nature.

“So now we’ve got that to deal with as well,” I mused. “Because if it’s happened here to lower-level Connecteds, it’s happening other places as well—clearly with much

less damage to life and limb like Nigel and Fricker experienced. So we have bona fide hunters getting the information and using it for their own purposes, then we've also got hunters who have no intention of jumping into the race, but who can sell their data to those who are. And is the information the same no matter who the recipient is?"

"That, at least, I can help you with," Nikki said. "From what my girl reported, Dixie's contact gave a full rundown of the message received. The location was quite clearly spelled out in this case, some village in the Mississippi Valley that was flooded and lost some several hundred years ago before the Europeans had even gotten that far. According to what they were saying, it was a matter of showing up at the right place at the right time with the right sequence of actions to unlock some sort of door, and they would be in. Dixie was all over that, totally wanting to get this information out on the open market, stat."

"Mississippi?" Nigel asked sharply. "They could already be there and in by now, if that were the case."

"I don't think so," I said. "I mean, come on. The Mississippi Valley? That's gotta be a red herring. No self-respecting sorcerer would make it quite that easy."

Nikki met my gaze in the rearview mirror. "You think it's another message designed specifically for you, some kind of push? That's involving quite a bit of sophistication. I'm not sure that I like that as a scenario."

I sighed. I couldn't disagree with her, but it made a certain amount of sense. "Whoever is sending out these messages, they want to make sure that the message is being received. Roland is somebody I worked with, albeit not for a long time. Nigel, of course, has a much tighter connection with him."

Nigel snorted. "Tight wouldn't exactly be the right word. More like strained."

I looked over to him. “Have you heard anything more from Roland?”

“Not a word. I got the high sign from the Magician that his jet is at our disposal to take off as soon as the meeting with the Council is complete. To him, it seemed a foregone conclusion that we would be traveling traditionally rather than Air Armaeus.”

“Really,” I murmured. I hadn’t gotten that message. Armaeus hadn’t reached out at all to me. I tried not to read too much into that, but it was difficult not to wonder what was going on.

We continued the rest of the journey in silence. After parking the limo, we ascended to the upper reaches of the Magician’s complex without saying a word too. When we arrived at the conference room, I was surprised to find it already full—apparently, it was a slow day in Vegas.

The Devil stood at the head of the table, appropriate for his current position as head of the Arcana Council. The Magician stood to his right, leaning up against the plateglass windows that looked out over the Strip. Both of them wore their trademark multithousand-dollar suits loose and easy, as if they were as comfortable as track suits.

Sitting at the table, hunched over a laptop, was Simon, the Fool, the most techie of the Arcana Council, and one of its newest members. I studied him, wondering if he fully understood the ramifications of a potential all-in battle with the Shadow Court. We’d already fought the gods, successfully booting them to their side of the veil between worlds, and we’d knocked back the Shadow Court several times already. But full-on war? Against other Connecteds, some of whom might be as strong as us? That wasn’t something Simon had ever faced.

Then again, none of the Arcana Council were unkillable, and they all knew it.

Immortal status meant little more than a permanent seat at the poker table for as long as you were able to hold the cards.

Simon looked up as I entered, clearly more unperturbed by the prospect of a coming battle than I was, and grinned. “This is freaking fantastic. The Moon’s little treasure hunt has piqued the interest of every bad guy from here to Outer Mongolia. We’ve got the message this Roland Franklin sent out—and a handful of other blurts spread across the arcane black market. None of them as rough as what Nigel endured, though all of them bold enough that people took note. Yet somehow, it hasn’t percolated up to government sectors yet.”

“It hasn’t been all that long,” I pointed out.

“And there’s money involved, money these Connected operatives aren’t too keen on sharing,” he agreed. “They’ll get the government involved if it’s to their advantage to do so, but not right away. I think we’ll have a pretty clean shot to start.”

“What about the Shadow Court?” I glanced around the room as I asked the question, taking in the other members of the Council who had deigned to show up. Eshe was here, which wasn’t all that surprising. She lived in Armaeus’s fortress, apparently unable to be bothered to create her own residence on the Strip. Beside her sat Viktor Dal, Emperor and Arcana Council member voted most likely to be an asshat. I was surprised he wasn’t out searching for the Moon himself.

Then again, who’s to say he wasn’t?

Next to Viktor, the Hanged Man reclined, his fastidious hair sleekly pressed back from his high cheekbones and ghostly face. Nikola Tesla, in living color.

There was a notable absence from the Council, however. I’d wanted the Hierophant here in particular—and not only to ask him if he’d ever checked out Demonico’s

pizza. The Hierophant's role had been occupied by Michael the Archangel since right after the fall of Atlantis, at which point he had promptly sequestered himself in Hell. He'd always claimed he knew nothing of the Council's past or current membership. But surely...

"Where's Michael?" I asked sharply, drawing the Devil's indolent smile.

"The Hierophant has already offered us what information he can. He had already decamped for Hell before the ascension of the Moon and Star. He doesn't know how they were chosen for Council membership, or from where. His concern right now is more for the demons that are stirring in ever-greater numbers."

I lifted my brows, remembering in a flash one of the pizzeria owner's offhand comments. "That's what Barry meant by magic waking up in Hell?"

Kreios inclined his head. "Not entirely, but it is part of the larger whole. There has been an inordinate amount of demon activity since the ascension of the Sun. That, combined with this new surge of magic in the nether regions, has the Hierophant concerned. He's looking into it, along with the Syx."

"Got it." The Syx were the archangel's own team of enforcers, a group of high-level demons making a bid for salvation in return for a few thousand years of indentured servitude. The Hierophant drove a hard deal, but the payoff was worth it, it seemed.

"We're expecting a report from him shortly, though he is currently out of contact," Kreios continued. "Meanwhile, Death and the Hermit express their regrets. The Lovers are...otherwise occupied."

I snorted. "I'm sure. What about Gamon?" As Judgment, she was the second-newest Council member after me, and her reactions remained decidedly human amidst all these longer-lived demigods. I needed a little humanity in this room.

“The imminent deaths of the mafiosi and their bodyguards captured her interest,” Kreios said, surprising me. “Though you didn’t collect them, they expired under your watch, and that allowed her to step in before the denizens of Hell could claim them. Right now, she’s learning a great deal about the arcane black market and its hooks into the underworld.”

“Really.” I couldn’t say I minded those men finding another reward than what awaited them in Hell, no matter what they’d done here on earth. And if it helped us out...

I sighed. The path the Council was treading was growing murkier and murkier, no question. “Do they know anything about the demon activity?”

“Not enough,” Kreios said candidly. “And the numbers of the horde are only increasing. It troubles me, so much so that I have asked Danae to join us here today as well.”

Relief speared through me. The current head of the House of Swords was a bona fide witch—one of the few human groups who could wield any sort of command over demons and send them back to their holes in Hell. Danae would be an asset in any fight, but against the denizens of Hell, she was particularly skilled.

“Tell me you didn’t send that request by personal messenger—” I began, but I could tell from the ripple of amusement in the Devil’s expression that he’d done exactly that. He’d sent Qadir. The newest member of the Arcana Council was a demon in his own right, an ancient djinn...and he was completely, intractably, head over heels in love with Danae after she’d helped free him from eternal entrapment in a sacred chalice. Danae, of course, had no time for his emotional outburst, but Qadir was a force of nature. Literally.

“She has already informed us she will be attending virtually, and the Sun will be

attending at her side. As for Qadir, he advised that he can think of nowhere else he would rather be.”

The Devil waved vaguely, and one of the walls dissolved into a screen a good five feet across by four feet high. It flickered to life, and the screen revealed two figures on the sun-drenched patio of the headquarters of the House of Swords. Danae sat dressed in a cream-colored tunic and pants that somehow still looked like combat gear, her muscled body both elegant and fierce, her face as dark as murder. Her deep brown eyes were slitted with annoyance as she stared into the camera. Beside her, Qadir lolled back, sipping a fruit drink and looking happier than any one person on any plane should.

“She wouldn’t come to you,” Qadir boomed, slanting Danae a completely adoring look that she pointedly ignored. “And I wouldn’t leave. A match, I should say, a perfect match.”

Danae’s words were icy. “I have your report, Kreios, but your information only scratches the surface. Our research is turning up far more than demons. We’re talking creatures or sorcerers using illusion magic, animals behaving unpredictably, and mentions of supernatural creatures attacking in the night. We’re even getting stories of shifters.”

I blinked. “Shifters? You mean like werewolves? I didn’t think that was a real thing.”

The Magician finally spoke at this, his grim chuckle drawing my attention. “All stories have some kernel of truth to them, Miss Wilde. In this case, however, I think we are dealing more with deception and illusion, to stir up the faithful and distract the foolish.”

“You don’t know that,” the Emperor said, leaning forward. For the first time I noticed his energy was tight, almost electric, causing him to bounce in his seat. “This is the

Moon we're talking about here. The Moon rules animals as well as shapeshifting magic. The fact that we haven't seen werecreatures on this planet other than in highly stratified pockets could be because the Moon has not walked the earth in so long. If she returns, it could change everything."

"Or that could be what we are being led to believe," the Magician countered.

"Exactly," Danae put in virtually. "When Qadir suggested what we were seeing was likely the result of the Moon's machinations as well as his own recent ascension, it made perfect sense."

"You see? I am eminently sensible," Qadir agreed, beaming as he spread his arms wide.

Danae shot him a bemused glance, then pushed on. "But it could also be someone putting these stories out there hoping to trip the triggers of people looking for the Moon and the Star. Helping us along to see what we're wanting to see. I don't spend much time keeping tabs on the covens anymore, but I checked, and there's been some unusual activity there too, particularly in the northeast United States, but to some extent all over the world. More initiates seeking to join—and some long-term members expressing an interest in splintering off, forming smaller, more specialized groups, or even breaking free entirely of the coven system and going rogue. There's just a lot of energy circulating with nowhere specific to go."

Armaeus turned to Tesla. "Ungrounded energy is your area of expertise. Have you noticed anything unusual?"

Tesla didn't answer at first, his gaze darting from one of Simon's tech toys to the next with rapt fascination, but at length, he focused on Armaeus. He preened under the Magician's attention, clearly happy to be asked. More than anyone, the Hanged Man of the Arcana Council was deeply in touch with the electrical networks of magic that

circled the globe.

“There’s definitely something happening, something new,” he said softly in his rich Eastern European accent. “Not entirely of this plane. Spontaneous eruptions of electrical energy are surging along the circuits, overloading power grids and causing shorts where the weather shouldn’t be causing any issues. The two most recent flares of particular power were in southern Peru, and in Cairo.” He flicked his glance toward Armaeus. “That second energy blip shorted out quite quickly, though. The first was sustained for a longer arc, with no discernible local source. It simply...appeared. If anyone was watching, they would have noticed it, and wondered what it was.”

Armaeus shrugged, but my tension ratcheted up a notch. Too many indicators were pointing to Peru. Whoever was behind this summons, they were clearly hedging their bets. “You mean it was like a beacon? It could draw others in even if they weren’t sure why?”

Tesla spread his pale long-fingered hands. “It could, Justice Wilde. It certainly could.”

“We’ve got to get there first, then.” I turned to Nigel. “I don’t suppose you know someone in Peru we could use to show us around?”

“Of course.” He smiled with his usual offhanded unconcern, though I knew he was bursting to get going already. “I have a local man there, someone I worked with back in my hunting days, who will serve admirably. I’ve already put a call out to him, and it turns out he remembers Roland too—and has recent information on the man’s whereabouts, which were, as it happens, in Peru. We can leave at your word.”

“But to what end, ultimately?” Eshe asked, speaking up for the first time in her haunting, haughty voice. She flipped back her long braided hair with a bracelet- and

ring-bedecked hand, her heavily outlined eyes wide with feigned guilelessness. “What is it you hope to find in locating the Moon, bringing her into the light? Even saying that sounds ridiculous. If she stirs, she stirs. Until she takes some action, what do we care?”

“As with all things, the goal of the Arcana Council is to ensure the balance of magic,” Kreios put in when Armaeus didn’t speak. “If the Moon does step out of the shadows, we’d do well to make contact with her before anyone else can.”

“I don’t know, I think I agree with Eshe,” the Emperor protested. “If this ancient Arcana Council member proves a threat to the Council, then yes, there is some reason for concern. But there’s no need to ambush her, or show our hand prematurely. Let her come to us. We’re the ones who’ve sat atop the hierarchy of the Connected all these long centuries. We’re the ones who’ve done the work, while she hid herself away. We bow and scrape to no one.”

“That’s not the point, though, right?” Simon said, swiveling around to frown at the Emperor. The sharpness of his tone made me blink. “We’re a team—one team. We’re the Council. If one of our own comes out of the woodwork, we’re not going to sit back and say, ‘Hey, good luck following the yellow brick road to find us, watch out for the flying monkeys.’ We’re going to turn out to welcome them.”

“And I’m sure having you there to welcome an ancient sorceress of the Moon’s status will make her want to join the ‘team’ right away,” the Emperor scoffed. “No. We should assess the danger she represents—and the opportunity—and take best advantage. This...sorceress, for lack of a better word, has remained hidden for thousands of years. We know nothing about her. We should hold the power position, not her.”

The High Priestess folded her hands upon the table. “Bring her here, yes. But Viktor is right. If you treat this random stranger like our master, she will quickly ascend to

that level, whether we want her to or not.”

“And if you treat her like your slave?” Armaeus asked quietly. “Will that be to our benefit? Or merely chase her back into the shadows?”

Viktor muttered something beneath his breath, but no one else spoke for a long minute. I studied the assembled Council with growing trepidation. A break was coming here. I could feel it. A break that had potentially dire complications. But would these demigods actually go to battle against each other—some of them aligning with the Shadow Court? Was that even possible?

I didn’t have time to chase those errant thoughts further as the Devil turned to me. “Justice, assemble your team. You’re going to Peru.”

“On it.” I tapped my pocket, triple-checking that the Moon’s ring was still there, and bit back a smirk as Nigel managed not to sigh too audibly in relief.

Kreios glanced around the room. “Armaeus, I need you here to work with any deeply buried memories Qadir may still have left over from the previous Sun, but the rest of you, the choice is yours. There are now likely a half dozen teams of hunters who have taken up this quest, so we have to move fast. Who wishes to go with Sara to find the Moon, bearing in mind that none of us in this room is unkillable?”

I slanted the Devil a sharp glance as his words echoed my own earlier thoughts. The Council seemed unimpressed with the warning, but it was Nikki who stepped forward first.

“Done,” she said.

Nigel chimed in right behind her. “Of course.”

But over all of them came a third voice, hard and clear and more resolute than I'd ever heard it.

“Count me in,” the Fool said.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

We decamped for the Council's jet. By the time we completed the approximately eight-hour flight to Peru, it was full dark. We arrived in Cusco as the bars and nightclubs were hopping, and I could tell from the gleam in my traveling partners' eyes that this was not going to be an early night. The energy of the high-altitude city beat like a living thing. Everywhere we went, I could sense the excitement of the hunt mingling tight with the celebration of simply being.

"You know it's not an easy hike to Choquequirao," I warned, though my heart wasn't really in keeping anyone from a beer.

Nikki scoffed. "Yeah, I bet the hike is a bitch for ordinary hikers, what with the two days through the jungle, wild animals and bugs the whole way. If only we had a hike leader who could throw fireballs from her hands to clear our path. And you know as well as I do we can cover that ground in about thirty minutes if we wanted to."

"Which I, for the record, still want to," Nigel put in. This had been a point of contention nearly the whole flight down, with Nigel and Nikki advocating for the fastest approach to the hidden city that his contact had named as Roland's last known location, while the Fool maintained a steadfast insistence on reaching the city on foot. As we approached the brightly lit nightclub closest to our hotel, Nigel continued his lament anew. "We can be careful not to land anywhere we shouldn't, but we have the advantage here, and we should use it. We can even drop in close to Choquequirao without actually landing square on top of it. We've done it before."

Simon shook his head. "And I'm telling you, you're missing the entire point. I've done an extensive study of the secondary stream of glyphs that were on you, Nigel, beneath the message to come save this Roland guy, as well as the ones Armaeus

viewed on Douglas Fricker. Both of them are chock-full of warnings not to cut corners. There are a half dozen lost cities that people are going to be descending on—maybe more. It wouldn't surprise me if we've got competition here, though I'm thinking most of them would head for Machu Picchu and the temple of the moon there, not Choquequirao, no matter where Roland ended up. Doesn't matter. If the other hunters see us tearing off out of Cusco like a bat out of hell, it's going to tip them off."

Nigel arched his brows. "I have never rushed off anywhere like a bat out of hell," he informed Simon coldly. "Discretion would, of course, be paramount."

The Fool waved him off. "This isn't your typical hunt. The players or the Connecteds behind them are all going to be higher level, and they'll be attuned to any magic in play. If they detect a disturbance in the Force, they're gonna follow it."

"Enough. We go on foot, as stealthily as possible," I finished the argument when Nigel opened his mouth again. He rolled his eyes, but didn't argue anymore.

"Then tonight, we have a drink," he announced, as if that logic followed. "I've staggered my way through more jungles than I can count half looped out of my mind. I don't need to be sober for this one."

"And we need to meet our guide anyway," Nikki said, the soul of reason. "We don't know, he may want us to take off tonight."

"Perish the thought," Nigel muttered as two young women passed us, laughing and jostling each other as they entered the bar. He glanced their way, and Nikki grinned.

"I don't need to be a psychic to know you're not getting lucky tonight, buddy, so you can give up that idea right now. What's our guide's name again? He's meeting us when?"

The two of them continued their banter as they entered 7 Angelitos, one of Cusco's most famous bars. As had been clear from some distance, the place was rocking with an ebullient band at the front of the building space, while cheek-to-jowl dancers filled every open square foot inside. I could sense the haze of magic in the air as well, a fluttering energy that seemed to shift with the rising tide of humanity.

The Fool noticed it too. "Those are protection spells," he said. "Very low level, frankly, barely more than a mist of Lysol. But effective."

I nodded. The world had become a much deadlier place over the past few years, with illnesses of every stripe striking the unsuspecting. Those establishments that had the ability to keep their clientele safe had become very adept at it. Their methods weren't exactly ones that could be adopted as government policy, but arguably, they should be.

All further conversation among us ceased as we stepped into the chaos.

The place could have been any bar in any city, with loud music, dancing bodies of all ages, and alcohol flowing at an ever-increasing pace. The cool temperatures of southern Peru were nowhere in evidence here, and the sultry air of the bar hung close. Nikki turned to Nigel and pounded him on the shoulder.

"Go take the kid to the dance floor," she said, hooking a thumb toward Simon. "Don't get into any trouble I can't get you out of."

"Hey, you know I was born before either of you assholes, right?" Simon pointed out, but Nigel just laughed and grabbed him by the shoulder, urging him deeper into the room.

"That should prove to anyone that we're here having a good time," Nikki mused, and I glanced around as casually as possible. We'd already drawn the attention of several

small groups of people. Their focus became heightened as they tracked Simon across the room.

“There are so many of them,” I muttered. “Who the hell thought summoning all these hunters was a good idea?”

“Someone looking to understand the playing field.” Nikki somehow had already managed to score two beers.

“Yeah,” I agreed, taking one from her. “This does have all the hallmarks of a player who hasn’t been paying that much attention, but who now wants to get up to speed quickly. Trouble is, that introduces almost as many questions as it settles. Why was this agent so out of the loop? Why the rush to get up to speed? Who’s behind all this?”

The Fool had given us the rundown of possible kingpins from his review of the Shadow Court, but those agents didn’t seem to be in motion. This was a different group, I was pretty sure. Or at the very least, an additional group.

“I gotta tell you, dollface, I don’t like it,” Nikki said with a distinct heaviness to her voice. “I’ve been tracking what’s going on back in Vegas with Dixie and Sariah, and there’s a unmistakable sense of anxiety hanging over the Connected there too. Like something big’s about to break, only no one knows what it is. If they’re feeling it in Vegas, you can bet they’re not alone. I think we’re going to be facing some clashes between Connected groups, clashes that will eventually draw the attention of local governments, whether we like it or not. That’ll put the Connecteds of the world in danger, which at any other time would just result in garden-variety persecution. But now...”

“But now the Connecteds will be coming out in force, and they’ll be thinking they can fight back, courtesy of the Shadow Court and all the disinformation they’ve been

sowing.” I blew out a breath. “If the Connecteds start a war—or if they’re outed during a public war between the Shadow Court and the Arcana Council—they’ll be annihilated. And then there won’t be any magic left except that belonging to the Shadow Court and their cronies—and those allied with the Arcana Council.”

“Pretty much.” Nikki took a long pull on her beer.

I rolled my own bottle in my hand, considering. What I’d just said was true, but it still wasn’t the entire problem. I’d been sensing it for some time, this growing sense of uneasiness, of outright anger. Some of it had been fomented by the Shadow Court, sure, but some of it went beyond the Shadow Court’s influence. There was a restlessness among the Connecteds of the world, a need to be recognized. The Arcana Council had worked for centuries, even millennia, to keep all the various Connected societies under the radar, out of the common view. But the world was a different place from when Armaeus had first taken the helm as head of the Council. Even Armaeus was a different person now, all his centuries of prudence, his careful, methodical steps, giving way to a wilder, even reckless energy. Did he know something he wasn’t sharing? And how much would my ignorance cost me?

On impulse, I reached out with my mind, the barest touch to see if I could register the Magician’s presence. In times past, such an outreach would always be met with an equal and opposite force, almost too much of a force, as the Magician seemed constantly attuned to my thoughts, my movements, always wanting to understand more about me. I’d had to work hard to keep my mental barriers strong, to keep him out of my business except for when I wanted his attention. Which had been rarely.

Now, however, as had been happening more frequently, there was no sense of the Magician on the other side of my touch, no hint of his focus. I didn’t doubt Armaeus’s affection for me, so the realization didn’t make me angry; it didn’t even make me sad.

It did worry me, however. I'd seen the Magician depleted to the point of exhaustion all too recently. Was he doing that more and more? And if so, why? What pursuit was occupying his focus so much that he would allow himself to grow incredibly weak, and what would happen if I wasn't there to heal him in a time of need? Did he even need my healing help as much as he sometimes led me to believe? He was, after all, a master of illusion when he wanted to be. It was not unreasonable to think he'd overstated his need for me, for reasons of his own.

As if this last realization finally broke through the Magician's focus, a soft gentle laugh rippled through my mind.

"Never doubt my need for you, Miss Wilde," he said. "You will always be my last best defense against any enemy. But look sharp, your guide approaches, and it's...an unlikely one."

Even as he spoke these words in my mind, Nikki shifted beside me, hissing out a low breath as a dark-haired, deeply suntanned man skulked toward us, lean, small, and feral.

"You know him?" she asked, but I shook my head. Nigel had recommended the guy, but I'd never seen him before. Still, his face brightened as he glanced our way and caught sight of us. He moved toward us with the scuttling fervor of a scorpion, and it was all I could do not to edge back slightly as he grinned.

"Good. You're here," he announced in heavily accented English. "I am Emilio. There are a bunch of expeditions starting out tomorrow morning, half a dozen all going the wrong direction, three more going the right one. We start early." He narrowed his eyes at me, then at Nikki, nodded, then he turned toward the dance floor, his head moving quickly from side to side, as if he couldn't scan with just his eyes. He stopped, and I didn't need to follow the line of sight to know he'd pinpointed Nigel and Simon.

“Just the four of you? That’s good too. Nigel is a man of his word.”

Nikki and I exchanged a glance.

“How do you know Nigel?” I asked.

Emilio turned back to me and placed his hand on his chest, his eyes going to perfect Os as he nodded several times. “He saved my life, nothing less. Didn’t have to. Didn’t need to. Probably shouldn’t have. I owe him for that, and for my entire setup here in Cusco. I would repay that debt by guiding you safely to your destination.”

“How noble,” Nikki said, with a hint of sarcasm.

Emilio grinned at me, a little more shyly this time. “You don’t remember me, Madame Justice. But that job in Rio however many years back, I told Nigel it was a job I needed. You were the better hunter, but I had the graver need. I’d made some bad decisions that came back all at once to haunt me. Of course, even with all that, I couldn’t recover the amulet—you did. Nigel saved me from the hunter’s cut after that job. Didn’t have to. Didn’t need to. Probably shouldn’t have.”

There was no rancor in the man’s tone, but I couldn’t help the pang of dismay deep in my stomach. Artifact hunting was a cutthroat business, meaning that the hunters who failed their clients often got their throats cut for their troubles. It helped thin the herd and keep competition strong, and it also sent a message to potential hunters that failure was not an option. I’d known on many hunts that I hadn’t been the only one looking for a particular McGuffin. I much preferred it when I was, when the artifact was so arcane and elusive that I didn’t have competition. Emilio reminded me that that was not always the case, and suddenly, I considered the other hunters on this expedition in a new light.

“Someone’s thinning the herd,” I muttered. That added yet another ripple to this

process. Was this competition solely for profit, or also for strategy?

Emilio grinned. “Don’t think I didn’t consider that possibility too, which is why I’m happy to be working for your team on this particular hunt, Justice Wilde. We leave at dawn. I’ll find you.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

The next morning, it rained. Not the soft, subtle rain of a spring day in Ireland, but a torrential downpour.

This didn't stop Emilio from showing up at 6:00 a.m., of course, outfitted with a small knapsack that hung close to his body, and appearing grimly determined to get our show on the road as quickly and quietly as possible. Neither Nigel nor Nikki looked pleased with the idea of heading out, though Simon held his own. There were some added perks to being an immortal Council member, for sure. Either way, it was good that our guide didn't spend much time on small talk. We headed out in more or less a single file, though only after we'd emerged from the hotel from different doors. Emilio clearly was in no mood to alert his competitors.

I watched his small, poncho-clad body hurrying forward, and reflected again on the life of an artifact hunter. Had it gotten worse since I left their ranks? And how lucky was I not to have to pay much attention anymore? My responsibilities had changed dramatically over the past few years, without question. I still had my share of problems, but they'd gotten infinitely more interesting.

The downpour kept chatter to a minimum until we were well out of the city, past the Jeep ride to the head of the trail, and officially on our way to Choquequirao. Even the first few hours of our trek on foot remained quiet, though the tree cover provided adequate protection from the worst of the rain.

We broke for lunch at the edge of a small clearing. Emilio was careful not to allow any of us to venture into the sunshine, despite the fact that the clouds had finally broken. "You have good wards," he said, nodding first to Nigel and then to Simon. "I can't make them, but I have just enough Connected ability in me that I can detect

them. Well, no matter how good your wards are, there's somebody out there with a better set of eyes. Even if you don't believe it, it's best to act that way."

Nigel grunted, but I couldn't dispute the logic.

"Will it really take another day for us to get to Choquequirao?" Nikki asked. "Seems to me we could have done something to shorten the time. You can bet our competitors will be cutting every corner they can."

Simon held up a small device he'd been studying, one of the apparently fifty-seven small whozits and whatsos he'd stowed in his very own Simon-designed fanny pack. Slung around his waist the way it was, the pack didn't look cool, but I suspected it would come in handy.

"Emilio, my man, you're absolutely right on eyes beating wards," he said. "It's way easier to see something than to keep from being seen. To that end, you'll all be happy to know I bugged the hunters who were at the bar last night, which wasn't all of them, of course, though it was a damn good bar. We've got two teams in the area, but their angle is off ours by a significant measure. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, but I'm going to vote for a good thing."

We all turned to Emilio, and he shrugged.

"There are many ways to get to the lost city of Choquequirao, but only one is truly out of the rain. There's a cave system not far from here that provided access during particularly troubled times. It's not the easiest passage, and to be perfectly clear, I myself have never traversed it. But the source who gave it to me, I trust with my life."

"Somebody else who owed you?" I asked, "Or somebody you owed?"

Emilio flashed me a quick, tight smile. "Someone who owes me, and who knows that

even in the event of my untimely death, especially in the event of my untimely death, that debt must be paid.”

“I don’t know if I think all that much about y’all’s line of business,” Nikki said drily, her gaze sliding from Emilio to Nigel and then to me. “It seems like you base a lot on debt collection.”

“It’s definitely a game of who you know, as much as what you know,” Nigel agreed. “And as your current clients, Emilio, it might be helpful for us to know who you got your information from.” He stared pointedly at our guide.

Emilio hunched over his bowl of soup, thinking for another long minute. “Your question is fair and sound, and the information is mine to share. I am the one who is owed the debt, not the other way around. This underground system was shared with me by Jorge Metier.”

I shot a glance at Nikki, but she shrugged, the name meaning nothing to her.

Nigel, however, straightened with a frown. “Argentinian black market barterer,” he explained for our benefit, but he kept his gaze on Emilio. “He sells his information to the highest bidder. What makes you think he won’t sell you out? I suspect your lien on his services wasn’t so high that he couldn’t find a way to profit on this information somehow.”

Emilio grinned smugly. “Your concern is well-founded. In fact I would not at all be surprised if he did betray me in this way, but as a wise British man once told me, it’s always best to have two sources, not one. And the second source, a shaman of a local tribe in Cusco, gave me the additional information I would need to keep Jorge honest.”

“And how do you know he won’t rat you out?” Nikki asked.

Emilio shook his head. “It’s a she, and as to the rest, there are layers upon layers, contracts upon contracts. It is how business is done among hunters and among the people we serve.”

“You’ve got another assignment,” Nigel guessed. “You’re running a side hustle—for the shaman, I bet.”

Emilio didn’t deny it, and I found myself oddly warming to the guy. He was a rat, there was no doubt about it, but he was a straightforward rat. And a man with a second hustle would not want to die before he could get paid.

“How far to the opening of the caves?” I asked, and Emilio stood, pouring the rest of his soup down his throat, then stepping out into a fresh fall of rain to clean the bowl.

“Closer than you think, and farther than you’d imagine,” he advised, with what I was quickly coming to understand was his typical patter for those he guided. Useless, and not terribly encouraging. We set off again.

We reached the cave system opening about three hours later, just in time for yet another downpour to come streaming through the canopy of leaves. Without Emilio’s guidance, we would have missed the opening to this cave, which I supposed was a good thing. But I couldn’t help feeling a little unnerved as we stepped into the shallow indentation. Mainly because for the first time since we’d set out, Emilio looked nervous.

“Well, if we’re heading to Choquequirao, then Choquequirao is one seriously magical place,” Simon said, staring down at his handheld device. “My readings are leaping off the chart.”

“But I thought Choquequirao was just some place where the Incas holed up after some kind of failed battle with the Spaniards, right?” Nikki asked. “And they didn’t

do such a great job of that, if I recall correctly, so how magical a place can it be?”

Nigel snorted. “That is an exceptionally good point. Another is this. You don’t think we’ll find what we’re looking for, do you, Emilio? Even though you’re taking us to where we want to go.”

I blinked, but Emilio shook his head.

“The lost city you seek is a tourist trap, albeit for tourists of a slightly higher caliber than those who are satisfied with Machu Picchu. A beautiful place as well, but a place that now caters to tour groups and dilettantes, not true spiritual warriors or even advanced hikers. Choquequirao is a cut above, but only for that latter group. Its spiritual value is no greater than Machu Picchu’s. Some would say it has less.”

“Uh-huh,” Nikki said. “And yet—you’re taking us there?”

“I am. It’s not what lies above, but below, that’s important, the shaman advised. To me, that means the caverns are what is magical, not the city itself—there’s no other possibility. Perhaps I’m wrong—perhaps I’m right. Either way, we shall see what there is to be seen.”

Nikki made a face. “Okay, let me hit you with this, then: tourist trap or not, something’s definitely tripping Simon’s magical Geiger counter up ahead, and I can’t imagine all that is benevolent magic. What trouble’s waiting for us down here in these caverns?”

“No trouble. Not here anyway,” Emilio said hurriedly, though not with the fervor of a man trying to keep a secret, more with the determination of a man who wants to believe what he’s saying. “The shaman would not betray me like that. She knows I would be back to haunt her if she did anything to get me killed. I asked her quite specifically what magic we would encounter, what creatures. She was steadfast in her

belief that we would face no danger on our journey. We will have more difficulty with the other hunters seeking out this place than we will any natural guardians.”

“And why is that?” I asked. Something wasn’t adding up here. “If there are guardians of Choquequirao that roam these caverns, why would they be willing to let us through with open arms? That’s not how things usually work.”

Across the cavern, Nikki snorted. “Believe me, we’ve had our share of subterranean guardians who take issue with our exploration. That, at least, makes sense. Guardians standing aside for us to stroll past doesn’t.”

“Maybe,” Nigel put in, sounding thoughtful. “Then again, we don’t know who these guardians serve. We know only that we’re looking for the Moon. If these guardians work for the Moon, who now wishes to be found, she would arguably order them to stand down. And if we are working for someone who wants us to find the Moon, to release her from her hiding place, then perhaps they have already cleared the way for us. There’s too much we don’t know.”

“All right, so now what?” I asked, glancing at our guide. “Even though you’ve never taken this path, I assume you’ve got some indication of how we should proceed? I mean, we’re not going to be relying on the roll of a twenty-sided die here, right?”

Nikki snorted, but Emilio shook his head, pulling out his own small device. “The map is here and on paper, should batteries fail us later in the search. My GPS unit is very basic, I assure you.”

“Let me see that,” Simon said, and I watched with keen interest as he approached Emilio. If the guide was up to no good, he wouldn’t be too keen to let his secret map become public knowledge, but Emilio turned his device over to Simon easily enough.

Beside me, Nigel huffed a soft laugh. “I wondered about that as well,” he confided.

“But while no one is entirely trustworthy, Emilio takes his obligations seriously. I did save his life; he does owe me. That matters. He wouldn’t knowingly betray us—though he might unknowingly do so. But that’s a risk on any hunt, no matter what quarry we seek.”

Nigel was right on that last score, for sure. It had been a while since I’d taken on a hunt like this, and I was beginning to remember the less enjoyable bits of it. Nostalgia only went so far.

“It’s pretty straightforward to start out,” Simon said, his voice echoing around the chamber. “Things get dicey a couple of miles in, but it’s not bad, and if this map is to be believed, we’re going to be cutting off a solid eight hours of hiking...somehow. We’ll make it there before morning if we hoof it. There’s no need to camp because it’s all protected. Catch a few hours shut-eye maybe, and that’s it.”

“Then let’s roll,” I said. “Nigel, you stay up alongside Emilio, Nikki right behind, Simon back with me to start.”

We set out anew, once again falling silent. The path angled downward quite distinctly, but it was dry and soft underneath our feet to start, before giving way to rock. With every step, I felt the walls closing in around me, not an uncomfortable feeling, but a distinct one.

“Ah...are we traversing through Hell at any point during this trek?” I asked Simon quietly. He slanted a glance back at me, and I could tell from his expression he knew why I was asking.

“Yeah, the Magician told me that he juiced me up on the sly, and that might unlock some doors that would ordinarily remain locked to me. I don’t feel any different, though. So I guess we’ll have to see. I can’t say I mind having my brain amped. MCT oil goes only so far.”

“He doesn’t know if it’s permanent—but it could be,” I offered and Simon chuckled.

“Everything is temporary to the Magician. He wouldn’t be able to do what he does otherwise.”

Something in his words touched off a worry deep inside me, buried so deep that I couldn’t quite place it. “So you’re good if we end up in Hell?”

“You always take me to the nicest places.” The Fool smiled, and the glow of his tech illuminated the eager twinkle in his eye. “But I’m good if the world suddenly goes devil shaped. I didn’t think I’d ever get to see Hell, though. Goes to show, you just can’t plan too far ahead in this job.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

We trekked on, and—to my surprise—didn't encounter any creatures in the subterranean passageways, supernatural or otherwise, humans included. The first hour passed, then the second. I couldn't seem to put off the nagging feeling that something was wrong, out of place. Missing, maybe. It took Nikki leaning against a cavern wall during our dinner break to point it out.

“You know, there's no sound down here at all,” she observed. “We don't have anything scurrying, dripping, or moving at all in any direction that I can pick up. That's weird, isn't it? That seems weird. This is a natural cave. It should make noise.”

Emilio frowned at her, then gusted out a soft breath as he leaned against the cavern wall, the faint hint of words mixing in with the sigh. A prayer, I thought. The guy was praying. That didn't necessarily make me feel any better.

“We got no movement, that's for sure, not underground,” Simon confirmed, fiddling with his handheld device. “And I'm not doing any outreach up on the surface right now. It's too risky. Anyone trying to protect themselves would feel the push.”

“But why?” Nikki asked. “Why aren't there animals screwing around, or spiders, or any of that? Was there ever? I mean, this is some nice real estate. It seems to me that somebody should be enjoying it.”

Nigel turned toward our guide. “Well, we're in here far enough, Emilio. We're not turning back. You can go ahead and tell us the rest.”

Emilio gave a credible job of looking confused. “The rest of what?”

But Nigel wasn't having any of it. "You were warned against taking this risk, weren't you? It's cursed. That's why there's no sound. Cursed and possibly booby-trapped. You mollified this shaman, I suspect, only with the explanation of who your traveling partners would be and that we could handle ourselves. Either that or this shaman has real skin in the game, and her urgency overrides her caution. Was Roland her hunter originally?"

I stared at Nigel for a hard second. The Brit had played this one close to his vest, but I didn't begrudge him that. A cursed path wouldn't have stopped us, which he well knew. But now that Emilio had gotten us this far, he needed us more than we needed him. At least if he wanted to get back out.

"It—it's not like that," Emilio stammered.

Nigel lifted a canteen full of tea toward him. "You've got quite the captive audience. What is it we need to know that you haven't told us?"

"Nothing. That I swear," Emilio said, seeming almost too relieved at the specific wording of Nigel's question. "Yes, you are right, Roland was known in these parts, had gone on several hunts for minerals the shaman used in her practice. On one of those hunts, he came up with a chunk of labradorite and several small moonstones, which are not native to the area. The shaman isn't stupid. She may be a simple woman with simple needs, but she appreciates money as much as the next Connected. She sold what he found, and sold it at quite a profit, then sent him down for more. Then came the time that she needed her plunder more quickly. She told him about these caves, and he walked these paths, telling her about the curse but giving it scant attention. Only then, she had a vision of a ring of great worth. She had to have it, so she sent him running again. She wasn't the only one. This time, however, Roland didn't come back."

I frowned. I still had the ring that had been sent to me via Justice Hall, tucked tightly

into my jacket pocket. It didn't seem like a good idea for me to flash it to Emilio now. "So that's what everyone is looking for? This ring?"

"No," Emilio said, surprising me. "The ring was a symbol of a greater bounty. Through her networks, the grandmother shaman in my village learned that shamans all over the world had gotten the same vision. The ring would be where the Moon would be, but the Moon herself was the ultimate goal. The ring was simply a sign that everyone was in the right place."

Oh, great. Suddenly, me carting this rock back into the lost city didn't seem like the brightest idea. "It's a homing device?"

"A beacon," Emilio agreed, nodding eagerly. "A siren song for the Moon. The shaman believes it is in the lost city, perhaps recently unearthed, and where it beckons, the Moon must follow."

Nikki shifted against the rock wall, taking it all in. "Back to these caves," she said. "What is this about them being cursed? Cursed by who, and with what?"

"Stories of lost cities in Peru don't date back solely to the Incan times," Emilio said. "There were many people who sought refuge in these sacred mountains, many who bartered with the gods for their safe passage and protection."

"Yeah, well," Nikki said. "The fact that these cities got lost in the first place doesn't seem to argue too much for their rep as a safe haven."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Emilio said. "Yes, enemies prevailed on occasion, but not before that which was most sacred was able to be secreted away and protected. In those dark days, the survivors gave up their lives, but not their legacy. The secrets of this land remained."

“Buried treasure,” Nigel said. “That’s what you’re talking about, treasure of one stripe or another.”

Emilio nodded. “There is no end to the magic of this place, the healing totems and plants, deadly venoms that, mixed in the right way, can transform those who take them into creatures of myth and magic. And protecting all of it was a deep and powerful magic—perhaps the shadows, darkness, and the mystery of the Moon.”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “There’s a temple of the moon at Machu Picchu, but it’s tiny compared to the temple of the sun. Moon worship isn’t the primary focus of this area of the world. It never has been.”

“It never will be,” agreed Emilio. “The moon is ever a retiring maiden, hidden behind the brightness of the sun and the glittering strength of the star. She makes her way quietly across the skies, never drawing attention.” He flashed a grin. “Until now. Now she has grown fierce, yes?”

“Right,” I echoed. I stared down the long corridor. About twenty yards ahead, it split off into two directions. “No one else knows of these caverns?”

“The shaman guards her secrets most zealously,” Emilio said. “If she shared it with anyone, it would only be because she thought they had a better chance than we did of getting her what she wanted. That is unlikely, given your involvement, Justice Wilde. But not impossible.”

“She also is not impervious to attack or corruption,” Nigel pointed out. “If someone got to her and extracted the information they needed from her, we could have company down here before we know it.”

“Yeah, but, like I said, I’m not picking up any readings,” Simon said. “So if there are other people down here, they’ve got better toys than I do, which would put them in a

highly specialized group.” He stopped short of saying it wasn’t possible, but that assessment was certainly implied. I tended to agree with him.

“Okay, well, we’ll go with that,” I said. “If someone else got to your contact, she didn’t send them this way. That doesn’t mean there isn’t another way into the lost city. We’ll head out in five.”

I moved off from the group, leaving them to reset their packs. Meanwhile, I had some instrument readings of my own to do. I dipped my hand into my pocket, not for the gaudy Moon ring, but for my deck of cards, this time illustrated in a more standard Rider-Waite style. I drew three cards out of the deck at random, pulling them free and flashing them toward the dim light shining from Emilio’s lantern.

The first card that caught my eye was the last I’d drawn, and one I expected. The Moon. I smiled despite myself. Always nice of the cards to let me know I was on the right track. Still, one of the images on the card caught my attention specifically, the dogs howling up at the crescent moon, paying no attention to the lobster beside them. I could almost hear their howls against the dark and lonely night, and I wondered again about the guardians of this place and where they might be.

If Simon couldn’t pick up on their energy readings, who was protecting them? Or where had they gone?

The other two cards drew my focus, but I knew them so well already that I stuffed the pack back into my pocket, willing to chew on the information without further study. The Four of Swords was a card of rest and recuperation. That could also speak to the Moon herself, secreted down here in her lost city, potentially in some sort of long, protracted contemplation. But I’d been through my share of cave systems enough to bet on a slightly different reading. Namely, that we were going to find ourselves knocked flat on our backs before too long, whether by choice or not.

Then there was the final card, one of the few cards I actively disliked in the deck, and one I'd already seen once all too recently. The Five of Swords. You win, but you're not happy that you win. Or, someone else didn't want you to win. Or, whatever it is you wanted wasn't going to be handed to you on a platter, you had to work for it. It was a messy card with messy readings influenced far too much by the cards around it. Only, this wasn't a traditional reading, and the supporting cards had shed no light on the subject. Feeling incomplete, I drew another card.

The Six of Cups. Something from the past was going to become really, really important.

Here we go.

"Sara," Nikki called, indicating we were ready to start out again. I turned back toward her, but the card tugged at me, and I glanced down at it more closely. Two children playing in a yard, one handing off a cup to the other. The Six of Cups was the card of nostalgia and childish things, remembering the past, celebrating it, being like a kid again. Something about all this bothered me. My childhood hadn't been especially fantastic, though I was still luckier than most people in the world. What was it about the past, then, that was important? What was the clue hidden in the card?

The answer was doomed to elude me, as the first sound outside our group in twelve hours broke across the chamber—so loud, it practically shattered my eardrums.

Screaming.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

We rushed together in a tight knot, Nikki and me in front, Nigel, Simon, and Emilio turned slightly to the side, unsure of whether the threat was coming from before us or behind us.

The noise was deafening, screams of terror high-pitched and feral accompanied by long, low howling moans that sounded like the bones of the earth were grinding together. A first gust of air came from the passage ahead of us, making Nikki wince and shrink down a little bit. She stood above the rest of us by a good half foot, and she grazed the top of her head with her hand as if surprised it was still there.

“That’s some serious cold,” she informed us. “That wind—it’s not right. I don’t know what’s going on, but it’s not good.”

“Get as low as you can,” I ordered, and pushed forward. The passageway angled downward, and a few moments later, another surge of foul wind came up, the sound of screaming once more hard upon it.

This cut was lower, and I felt it slash across my brow. I crouched as much as I could and scrambled forward.

“Your shaman say anything about this?” I demanded of Emilio as we passed an open corridor, but he turned to me, eyes wide.

“She said nothing, nothing,” he assured me, legitimately panicked. Watching him, I could see the shift in the air behind him, a rush of wind that seemed to take on a living form. I could almost see the hands reaching out, sharpened nails grasping and grabbing. Those hands clipped Emilio in the back of the head and sent him sprawling,

out cold.

“What the hell?” Nikki barked.

I dropped to one knee by Emilio, pulling him around. He was breathing, but only just, and the spark of his life force had dimmed to almost nothing. Drawing on my own deep reservoirs of energy, I did the first thing I could think of, pouring my own energy back into him. He was only marginally Connected, though like most hunters, he had some ability within him, and it was enough for me to kindle the healing process. His eyes fluttered open, and he gasped, but I didn’t have time for him to ease into his recovery. I yanked him to his feet, shaking him hard.

“She said nothing about this?” I demanded again, but he stared at me, mute with shock. From what little I knew about him, Emilio wasn’t one to volunteer himself for hazard duty. That didn’t necessarily improve our position.

“We’ve got another wave coming,” Simon said, only this time, he was facing behind us. “Based on the trends, this one will hit us at the waist.”

The passageway opened up slightly ahead of us, then sloped precipitously. If we could just get over that hump, the fell wind might easily soar over us. It was worth a shot.

“Get out into the room, then drop to your back,” I directed, remembering the Four of Swords card with the knight resting flat on his pallet. “Keep your body as tight to itself as possible. I don’t want anyone’s arms getting ripped off.”

“Roger that,” Nigel said, and we dashed forward.

We’d barely gotten over the ridge when I heard the howling Simon had tracked. It rushed up behind us.

“Down!” I shouted.

I felt it skim over the top of my body, barely a foot over my face, and I stared with wide eyes at the sight. There was definitely something in that mist—wraiths of some sort, bodiless forms. Absolutely something more than a really cold breeze.

“Okey doke, I’m airborne,” Nikki called out. I angled my gaze farther down and gaped. A strand of the wind had curled beneath Nikki’s head somehow and had lifted her body a good two inches off the ground. “Sweet Mother Mary on a—whoa!”

Without any further warning, she hurtled down the passage. My instinct to leap up and fling myself after her caused my own shoulders to get clipped, my body jerking and giving the stiff gale-force wind more purchase. A second later, I was airborne too, rocketing forward on a current of wind that thrust me bodily down the stone corridor.

Simon’s excited shout echoed down the rock walls, louder even than the wind. “We’re human luges,” he announced, his delight tempered somewhat by Emilio’s panicked scream as our Peruvian guide was also picked up and thrown forward.

I could hear Nigel explode into a flurry of proper-sounding British curses as the last member of our team also gave himself over to the unwanted conveyance system. Leave it to the Brit to have maintained his control longer than the rest of us, but this wasn’t a fight we were going to win, not at first.

The howling wind rushed us down the passageway, paying no mind to when the thing curved or split off. We slammed into walls, low-hanging ceilings, and outcroppings as it shoved us through the passageways. In one particularly harrowing swerve, we were thrown over a short cliff, falling twenty feet or more, a drop that could easily have caused broken bones at our speed but for a new and possibly more vicious wind tunnel that opened up beneath us, buoying our descent until we were hurled into

another set of subterranean passageways.

At one point, I was pretty sure I blacked out, but was jolted awake a second later by a particularly hard knock to the side. I blinked my eyes wide to see that the passage had opened up in front of us and was no longer merely lit by the bouncing lantern of Simon's device, which he'd somehow managed to hold tight against him during the long race through the caverns. The wind gathered itself for one final push. We were blown out the side of the mountain, bouncing and tumbling down a vine-covered slope until we finally came to rest on a wide rocky terrace. A stone wall loomed over us, dark rocks interspersed at regular angles with startling white stones set in the pattern of...llamas?

We lay there dazed for a long moment, then another.

"I don't think I ever wanna do that again," Nikki spoke first.

"You've got that right," Nigel muttered, sitting up and shaking his head.

"Injuries?" I managed, but got only low groans and mutters in response from everybody but Emilio. The guide had crawled over onto one side, propping himself up to stare up the mountainside.

"Choquequirao," he said, his voice oddly hushed. "We are on the steps of Choquequirao—the stairway that leads to the sky."

"And we're definitely the first ones here," Simon agreed, rolling nimbly to his feet. He studied his device, moving it up and down as he pivoted in a slow circle. "I've got no life-forms, at least not any on two feet, closing in on the site. I don't know how long that's going to last, but we've got the place to ourselves for the time being."

"How far a range can you pick up?" I asked.

He shrugged. “All the way to Vegas if you want to get technical about it, but that’d trip some triggers. With just a gentle nudge, I can cover about ten miles. We’ve got some time, in other words, but not a lot of it.”

“So now what?” Nigel asked, also rolling to his feet, though with decidedly more difficulty than Simon. “We’ve got no people heading here, but if you’re not picking up any human readings at all, that doesn’t bode well for Roland.”

“Not exactly,” Simon said. “I do have a two-legged life-form inside the walled city. Way inside, like practically beneath these terraces. That could easily be him.”

“He’s alone?” I asked, dragging myself upright and brushing off my legs—happily, they were more or less intact.

“If he’s got anyone with him, they’ve got shields stronger than I can penetrate,” Simon said, which, I noticed, wasn’t exactly a no. I frowned at him, and he waved the device at me.

“The signal gets pretty erratic. It could be the natural magic of the place, it could be the influence of another Arcana Council member, I just don’t know. There’s also this.” He pointed to the device and showed me the glowing red dot on its screen, far up the mountain from what was presumably Roland Franklin’s life indicator. “You want to know what it is?”

“Your tag?” I guessed. “When you sent out the homing beacons to tag all the members of the Shadow Court, you said you hit two other powerful magicians. This is one of them?”

“This is one of them,” he agreed. “I don’t have all my data to determine if it’s one of the outliers or a tag we’d previously assigned to a known bad guy, but just looking at it, it doesn’t look familiar.”

“So it’s the Moon,” Emilio said, his voice sounding slightly strangled. “The shaman was right. She has returned.”

“Either she has, or somebody’s trying really, really hard to make us believe she has. I’m not sure which is better.” I peered out over the lost city—or what I could see from this angle. Under the surprisingly bright light from the thin crescent moon, which now shone down from a cloudless sky, the ruins of Choquequirao looked otherworldly. A few impressively intact buildings emerged reluctantly from the mountainside, stretching up out of the thick foliage as if surprised to find the world was still going on without them. It was far less excavated than its sister city, Machu Picchu, but I could understand why hikers from around the world found this site to be more mystical. There was something affecting about a city that time forgot, especially one steeped in a mythology that spanned hundreds, even thousands, of years.

I turned to look up the mountain, then over to where a long stone aqueduct sluiced down to a series of shallow clearings—doubtless some kind of fountain or bath, fed from above. That was where Roland was, according to Simon’s device, while the tag Simon had sent out to all sorcerers of merit seemed to have landed far higher in the city, probably wedged inside some other ceremonial structure.

I glanced at Nigel. “Let’s go back over Roland’s likely role in all this. None of his usual clients seem to be attached to this job, which makes it, what, something he did on spec?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Nigel said. “Roland is a fan of making money, but he’s not one to put himself out on a limb. He would have contracted a team to help him, even for a spec job.”

“Unless he couldn’t count on anyone to be a reliable team member,” Nikki put in.

“Or unless we’re the team,” I suggested. Nigel shot me an irritated glance, making

me suspect I was on the right track. “You said it yourself, Nigel. He’s one of the slipperiest competitors you’ve ever hunted against. I barely knew the guy, but he obviously knew me, you, and the fact that you and I worked together. What if all this was an elaborate recruiting gambit?”

“Yeah, but we weren’t the only ones summoned,” Nikki pointed out. “That’s a pretty far-flung request for proposal if you’ve got every hunter on the seven continents with money to burn and serious skills converging on the same place.”

“And there is the problem of the other cities,” Nigel said slowly. “Not every hunter is coming to Choquequirao. So how does that work? Are all the rest a red herring, or are we the ones being fooled?”

“Or are all the hunters simply being weeded out, group by group?” Simon asked, peering around. “We made it this far, but we’ve got a pretty impressive team. What if part of the point of this hunt is to knock off a bunch of experienced hunters?”

I squinted up to the nearest six-foot-high llama bricked into the enormous stone steps. He wasn’t all that forthcoming.

“There’s only one way to find out,” I muttered. “Let’s go find Roland.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

With Simon's device to guide us, we made good time, scaling the tall steps of the ruins with relative ease and working our way through the crumbling structures that still remained. We ended up at a large, partially intact stone building that had withstood the ravages of time and the scant attention of excavators. It gleamed like a mottled pearl beneath the wash of moonlight.

There was only one problem, though. It was empty.

"He's here, or somebody is, I'm telling you," Simon said, fiddling with his device. Even from a few feet away, I could see the glow of a life-form on his tech. We were right on top of the guy, but there was nothing in this roofless building but walls, windows, and a doorway, and the shallow indentations in the ground that indicated that maybe there had once been some sort of pool or bath in the room.

"What about your other beacon?" Nigel asked. "Your bad-guy indicator?"

"It's not visible in this view. One sec." Simon said. He widened the scope of the device, then squinted up the mountain. Way up the mountain, until his head was focused high above the horizon. He chuckled a little grimly. "Okay, someone is screwing with me. According to this, my beacon is on the actual moon. Like the thing up in the sky. Very funny."

"I'm getting kind of tired of this particular game, yeah," I muttered. As I spoke, I opened my mind, reaching out to the one person I knew would be paying attention at this point, even if he had been distracted before. I felt the touch of the Magician like a balm against my senses almost immediately, a flood of reassurance, but also interest. Scholarly interest. The kind of interest that did not always bode well for me.

“I would like to see this hand played out, Miss Wilde,” the Magician murmured in my mind. “Simon is right. There is great power being wielded here to cloak the obvious. Such shadowy efforts could well be the province of the Moon. She has waited a long time to reveal herself. I would have her do it on her own terms if possible.”

That’s all great, I thought right back. But we didn’t just break land speed records to get here in advance of all the other hunters to sit around on our hands and lose our advantage. That doesn’t make any sense.

“Understood, but perhaps a better way of looking at it is that you were brought to this place early for a reason, and your advantage would best be leveraged by gathering whatever intelligence you can and shoring up your position, not to liberate the treasure before anyone else gets there, which would only delay the ultimate battle.”

Except I’m a big fan of avoiding the ultimate battle, I argued. It seems to me if you scuttle out of a place before your enemies arrive, you win.

The Magician didn’t respond to that before Simon spoke again. “We’ve got some movement.”

I slanted him a hard glance. “Other hunters?”

He shook his head. “No. It’s Roland’s life force, or the life force voted most likely to be Roland’s. He’s not alone anymore.” He studied the basin beneath us. “There’s something here, something we’re not seeing.”

“Okay, everyone.” I peered around, once more on edge. “Spread out, survey the stones, see if there’s been anything etched into them, whether ancient or relatively new graffiti.”

As I issued this guidance, my hand dropped to my own pocket, and I quickly

withdrew three cards. The first didn't surprise me—the Moon again checking in, maybe to tweak me a little, maybe just to remind me of what the end goal was here. The next card gave me more pause. It was the Hermit. As usual, I took the card at face value, discounting its larger meaning for me personally, or its positioning within the Arcana Council. The Hermit of the Council was, after all, my father, but it wasn't like we were tight. I hadn't even known the man had existed until barely two years earlier, and given that the Hermit's job took him beyond the realm of the human world to guard the veil between the realm of the gods and Earth, we didn't have a lot of together time.

I glanced skyward a little, wondering what precisely he was doing now, or what he thought of all the turmoil the Council was currently experiencing. Hell, he might not even be aware of said turmoil. One of the many benefits of working remotely.

The third card was the Ace of Cups. A cup overflowing with water, symbolizing a new beginning, a creative wellspring, hope in the future. Too bad I wasn't feeling particularly hopeful right now.

“How far away are the other hunters?” I asked Simon, and he obligingly checked his device.

“Still several hours distant, unless they play the same Chutes and Ladders game we did,” he said. “They're making progress, but only measured and steady. They're not trying to haul ass to get here.”

“They can't,” Emilio agreed. “The jungle takes back the trail as quickly as it can, and there aren't a lot of hikers who make the trek. A handful a day, if that. And definitely not in the dark of night. The legends grow as quick as the vines out here, with many believing the jungle doesn't want Choquequirao to be found. They're building a road, so that may change. In short order, the jungle would be tamed.”

“I’d like it to be tamed a little bit more right now.” I scanned the floor with frustration, the shallow basin bathed in the shadows as moonlight struck the far wall.

Nikki called from the same area. “Yo, I’ve got blood over here, or something dark and rusty looking that looks a lot like blood. No way to know how old it is unless you’ve got something else up your sleeve, Simon.”

“I don’t, but let me see...” He moved over toward Nikki, while Nigel sidled up to me.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen you consult the cards twice in a row so quickly,” he commented drolly. “Almost like old times.”

I grimaced. “It feels worse, though, doesn’t it? It feels like I shouldn’t be running quite so blind at this stage in the game. What’s the point of being one of the most powerful Connecteds on the planet if I still have to rely on the cards to help show me the way?”

He lifted a brow. “I think you’re asking the wrong question. How about instead, what’s the point of having a facility with the cards if you’re not willing to avail yourself of that pathway, regardless of your other abilities? If the universe has a message it wants you to receive, how else do you propose it gets it to you?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered. He did have a point, but something else was bugging me. “What if, though, it’s not the universe that’s trying to communicate on that particular frequency? That could get ugly pretty quick.”

He blinked, shooting me a more worried look. “Has that ever happened before?”

“Not really, no.” I shook my head. “Armaeus screwed with my cards once, forcing them all to appear in his image, but that was an illusion that lasted only a few seconds. Once I refocused on the cards, they returned to their original forms. I’ve

never had anyone try to reach me through the cards. Doesn't mean it can't happen, though."

"A lot of things could happen," Nigel agreed, with his irritatingly British pragmatism. "The best you can do is prepare for the other possibilities, while not giving in to worry about them. Hedge your bets without folding your hand. And trust the cards until they give you a reason not to trust them anymore."

"I've got nothing," Simon announced from the other side of the chamber, straightening. I squinted over at him, realizing the room had grown brighter, the effect of the unnaturally luminescent moonlight hitting more surfaces of the smooth stone.

"Could be old, could be new, could be human, could be animal," Simon continued. "I don't have the equipment to test it, and I'm not getting any real sense from it one way or another."

"It doesn't feel like spatter to me, though," Nikki said beside him, still squinting at a spot on the wall. "Not in the conventional sense. It's a splash of blood, maybe, but more like a flick." She flexed her fingers and snapped her wrist to show what she meant. "That could be the result of an attack, or it could be part of some sort of ritual. It's hard to say."

I nodded, but my gaze was still fixed on the gleam of moonlight as it brightened another row of bricks.

"You know," I murmured, "the floor of this room is shaped sort of like a cup. And I just drew the Ace of Cups. And we've got some rapid moon action happening here, which makes me wonder..."

"You think it's some sort of false floor?" Nikki asked, now studying the shallow dirt

basin as well. Something that might be triggered by moonlight?”

“Maybe,” I hazarded. I squinted down, flipping open my third eye, which was useful for detecting the underlying circuits of energy in a given space, usually a surefire indicator of where magic was in play. Right now, however, all three of my eyes blinked in surprise. There was nothing here that I could see—no energy, no circuits. We’d encountered a magical dead zone out here in the middle of nowhere, on top of one of the most supposedly supernatural sites in all the world.

How was that possible?

Nigel squatted down, knocking a few leaves to the side. “Can’t exactly be a false floor, I don’t think,” he reasoned. “There’s too much debris here, blown in from God knows where. I would think that if the Moon triggered the floor to drop every night, it would be clear.”

“Gotta go with Nigel on that one,” Nikki agreed. “It’s not like this cozy little cabin in the woods has a line of maintenance workers that comes in every day to sweep the floors. There’d be no reason.”

“Unless they are in service to the goddess,” Emilio said, his voice reverent. “If they kept guard over the sacred entrance to her underground realm, they could easily sanctify it every day.”

I started, glancing over to him. He’d been so quiet, I’d almost forgotten he was with us. But now our guide stood with eyes almost transfixed, his face tilted up toward the moon as its light gradually filled in the spaces around him. “Seriously?” I asked.

“I’m thinking no.” Nikki shook her head when Emilio didn’t respond right away. “Ain’t no six-thousand-year-old woman got patience for all that fuss every time she turned around. Even Eshe is getting lower maintenance these days, and she’s a baby

by comparison. Plus, I'm not entirely buying the whole concept of an underground realm for the Moon. She kind of seems like somebody who would prefer the wide open spaces, you know what I mean?"

"Well, somebody's down there, we know that," Simon protested, waving his device at me. "We've got the life force formerly known as Roland, plus another dozen or so flickers that could be just about anyone, and that shows us that not only is there some sort of chamber right beneath us, but it's got oxygen, and it's got access from another location. So maybe the big reveal here is that we've pinpointed the guy, but we need to reach him via a more circuitous path."

I shook my head, decidedly uneasy. Despite my momentary third-eye blindness, there was a reason for the Ace of Cups. There had to be. I joined Nigel at the edge of the basin, trying to peer across it, to make out any sort of crack or deformity. I didn't see anything—no break in the rock, even with the brighter wash of moonlight filling it.

"This is stupid," I muttered. There was a really easy way to test my theory out, so why was I hesitating? I was either right or wrong and the sooner we knew which way it went, the better off we would be.

I stepped off the edge of the shallow basin, taking the few quick strides required to get to the center. Nothing happened. I turned, my hands going out almost defensively as I expected chaos to rain down, but nothing shifted in the night. The sense of eerie stillness remained constant around us.

"Well, it was worth a shot." I turned to stare up the mountain. "Maybe we just need to spread out and look for other cave openings? Or maybe..." I stopped, frowning, the image of the Hermit coming back to me.

"What is it?" Nikki asked, as always more attuned to me than anyone else in the room, with the possible exception of the Magician.

“He’s holding up a lantern,” I muttered. “Something bright and shiny. Is that all it takes?”

I shoved my hand into the pocket of my hoodie, then gestured for the others to join me. “If I’m going down and Roland needs our help, I’m not going down alone. And if I’m going to look stupid, I want you all here to tell the tale.”

The others quickly joined me in the shallow depression, and I paused for another second more, wondering if the added weight would trip the trigger, but nothing happened.

“All right, here we go,” I said, though I had a sinking feeling this wasn’t going to do it either—or a not so sinking feeling, as it happened.

I pulled the chunky opal-and-silver ring out of my pocket and held it high, not missing the avaricious intake of breath from both Nigel and Emilio. Once a hunter, always a hunter, I supposed. I stretched high, trying to turn the ring toward the moonlight, feeling a rush of wonder as it gleamed in the spectral light, taking on a fire of its own. That fire burst with the momentary brightness, then dimmed, leaving us all standing there feeling stupid.

Or maybe it was just me.

“Well,” Nikki said. “It was worth a—”

The dirt floor dropped away.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

As we plummeted, I instantly knew something was wrong...mainly because we didn't land within a few seconds.

Instead, the world exploded into a burst of sparks. The breath was sucked from my throat, and panic surged through me as my entire body seemed to catch on fire. Stars pinwheeled all around me, giving me the sense of getting sucked into a wormhole of pure, incandescent light, and suddenly I knew—knew where we were heading. All of us.

Not to Hell. Not the In Between.

Something far crazier.

I turned midair and flailed for Simon's hand, roaring at him incoherently. He understood enough that he pulled in Nikki and Nigel, and I caught Emilio, all of us huddling together in a human cannonball as we fell and fell and fell. When we finally crashed to the floor, I expected my heart would explode along with the rest of my body. But we'd made it. All of us. And no one had had to be spiked bodily to me to come along for the ride.

Maybe Armaeus had amped me after all, juicing me into full Uber-alternate-universe rideshare status. Or maybe your first trip to Atlantis was always the hardest.

"Sweet Mother Mary on a tricycle. That hurt," Nikki groaned, rolling over to sprawl spread-eagle on the tile flooring.

I peered down, my mind too scrambled to make sense of what I was seeing smashed

up against my cheekbone for a second. Tile?

Oh, yeah. Tile. The richly inlaid tiled floor of a civilization whisked out of existence, suspended in time and space. I rolled to my back as well and peered up at the pinhole light in the ceiling, dread gathering within me. It had been night when we'd fallen through, but the light that now shone down in a narrow beam was decidedly sunlight. How far had we actually fallen? And when all this was over, would I have enough strength to get everyone back home?

"We are dead, we are dead, this is Hell, we are dead," moaned Emilio on the other side of the shaft of light, as he curled himself into a tight ball.

Nigel, at his side, nudged him. "Snap out of it, boyo. If we're in Hell, we're going to need everyone to help get us out."

"But we can't be in Hell," Nikki managed from her sprawled position on the floor. "Sara and Simon are here."

"It's not Hell," I began, but my words were barely a whisper, barely audible to me through the pounding in my brain.

Beside me, Simon sat up and peered around with definite interest. "You really think this is Hell?" he asked. "I would have expected it to be, I don't know, warmer."

He flicked on his device, but nothing happened, and he frowned at it, giving it a good shake. Everything about his demeanor expressed confusion.

"What the...?" he muttered. "This device is certified in three dimensions. Like, it should even work in the In Between." He glanced up at me. "Maybe we are in Hell."

"We're not in Hell," I repeated, louder this time. "We're...you know, first things

first. Where is Roland?”

Simon waved his no-longer-blinking box at me. “I would love to be able to help you out with that question, but it seems I’ve lost my tracking device. So unless the cards have anything else to share with us, I think we’re out of luck other than what our own physical senses are willing to share.”

I rolled to my side and saw I’d dropped the opal ring in the fall. It now lay in the pool of sunlight, seeming to pulse slightly. I shimmied over to it, scooped it up, and hauled myself to my feet. If this was Atlantis, and I was almost sure it was, we needed to get moving. “It’s warm to the touch, but not as hot as it should have been given the fire show we just went through.”

“That was pretty radical, I gotta admit,” Simon said. He craned his neck to one side, then the other, stretching out the kinks.

“How is it daylight?” Nikki asked, abruptly sitting up and staring at the pinhole in the ceiling. “Ain’t nobody gonna tell me we fell through that tiny little hole. Unless it’s like a mile up, and I’m not quite getting that sense.”

“Agreed,” Nigel said, standing and helping Emilio to his feet. The guide immediately started rocking back and forth, his mouth moving in some sort of soundless prayer.

“Okay, okay, let’s figure this out,” Simon said. “What do we know about Hell—”

“It’s. Not. Hell,” I said again, this time with enough finality that everyone shut up and looked at me—except for our traumatized guide. I pointed at Emilio. “Do you need to rest?”

“No, no, I am good. Very good,” he assured us hurriedly, as if he ran the risk of being left behind if he gave a different answer.

“The shaman told you nothing about this?” I asked him, and he shook his head.

“No. She said if the goddess smiled upon us and granted us entry into her domain, we would see riches untold and images not revealed to the human eye for millennia.” He shrugged. “But she was pretty drunk at that point. I didn’t think too much of it.”

“So where are we, Sara?” Nigel asked, peering into the shadows beyond the pool of light. “Do you know for sure?”

“I...have a suspicion. But I’ve only been here once.” I found myself strangely loath to say the name of the ancient city out loud. It was so laden with mythology, mysticism, and flat-out fantasy that it seemed almost a joke, even in my line of work.

Ever attuned to me, Nikki gasped. “Oh my gawd. It’s Atlantis, isn’t it?” she demanded, her eyes going saucer-wide as I turned toward her. “Where you came back from stuck full of weapons like a Sara-upholstered pincushion.”

“What—” Nigel choked as he turned to me, nearly dropping the newly shocked Emilio, as Simon whirled around, his delighted laughter rolling through the space.

“Seriously, Atlantis? This is so cool! But where’s Roland? He was supposed to be, like, right beneath us.” As he spoke, Simon pulled his small waist pack around, rummaging through it and pulling out a small rectangular unit. He moved into the light and stared down at the small device in his hand, then breathed out a hushed breath.

“It just spins,” he said.

I moved over to him and saw he’d pulled out a small analog compass. Not a bad idea, but he was right. The dial on the compass spun in long lazy circles, never finding its North Star.

“Nifty,” I sighed. “What else do you have in that pack? Any matches, lighter, flares?”

As Simon rummaged, Emilio piped up, his voice only sounding slightly strangled. “I have flares, a battery-operated torch, handheld torches that are more like tapers for a limited amount of light—or could be used as fire starters.”

I nodded. “Good. See if you can get the battery-operated flashlight to work.”

Of course it didn’t, but the matches lit, the burst of light undetectable in the stream of sunlight.

Even better, the match remained lit once we took it out of the cone of illumination.

“Okay, it’s good to know that we’ve got some options, but I don’t want to use them unless we need it. Blow it out for now. Simon, same thing goes with anything in your kit. Don’t try to mess with it. Anything that triggers magic could be tracked.”

“Roger that,” Simon said.

I gestured us forward. “Let’s head out. Straight line, keep close beside each other, whoever hits a wall first, be sure to let the rest of us know.”

We moved ahead, hands out, the dim light provided by the hole of sunlight diminishing rapidly until we were cloaked in gloom.

“Nice floor,” Nikki observed as we crept forward. “I would have expected it not to be in such great shape, you know, given the last time Atlantis threw a party.”

“You don’t know,” Simon countered. “They could have an entirely new standard for maintenance down here.”

It all smacked a little of gallows humor, but in another dozen steps, Nigel humphed. “Well. Here we go, then. Wall.”

A second later, we all encountered the same obstruction.

“More inlaid tile,” Nikki observed, her fingers moving over the wall. “No discernible pattern, but somebody spent some time on their interior décor. Seems kind of a shame to leave it in the dark like this.”

“There’s probably a good reason for that, and not one we’re going to like,” Nigel commented drily.

“I’ve got a doorway,” Simon said. “We go in? Or, I guess...out?”

“We go through,” I agreed.

The moment we stepped through the door, however, everything changed. Sconces lit up in a parade line down the long hallway, visibly brightening the corridor, while behind us, the entryway we’d just cleared—disappeared. Nothing but a flat wall of rock remained.

“You know, I generally like to be in charge of my own search and rescue mission,” Nikki complained. “Not herded around like ducks.”

“No kidding,” I muttered. Any further conversation was halted as a low moan rolled down the hallway.

I shot a glance at Nigel. “Did that sound like a Roland Franklin moan to you?”

He shrugged. “It sounds like somebody’s not having a very good day, whoever it is.”

We moved on, picking up the pace, none of us missing the fact that as we passed each of the sconces, they winked out again. “Well, someone’s doing that, even if it isn’t Roland,” Nikki muttered.

“It’s not even that impressive magic when you think about it,” Simon countered. “Illusion magic doesn’t take a lot of energy, especially with a captive audience.”

“Yeah, but we’re all seeing the same thing,” Nikki said. “That’s gotta count for something.”

Another moan, closer this time, stopped the argument before it could get truly started.

“That is sounding a little bit more like Roland,” Nigel said.

Emilio nodded quickly.

“Very much so. He is an old man. Tough, but old.”

The passageway split to either side ahead of us, the lights extending to the right while darkness reached out to the left.

Nigel hesitated, glancing at me, and I nodded.

“We go in together,” I said, and the five of us turned sharply left, piercing the veil of darkness.

A bright light flashed, momentarily blinding us. When it cleared, we could see our target easily. A bulky white-haired man, lying on a low pallet in the center of the room, guarded by a dozen honest-to-God...wolves.

“The guardians of the goddess,” Emilio gasped, and the only reason he didn’t drop to

his knees was because Nigel caught him in time.

“Act like you’ve been here before,” Nigel muttered. “Even if you haven’t.”

Emilio stiffened, his breath coming quickly. “Old magic,” he whispered. “Very old. The guardians of the goddess haven’t ever been seen by human eyes—only in stories and legend.”

“Well, if you’re telling me these guys are gonna turn into big strapping men under the light of the full moon, I am totally dead,” Nikki put in.

As if he’d finally heard us, Roland’s newest groan turned into a rasping cough.

“I knew you bastards couldn’t stay away,” the older man gasped, struggling to sit up. “You’ve gone and hung the Moon, haven’t you?”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

Before we could take a step forward, the wolves vanished, leaving Roland alone on his low pallet. He grunted as we reached him, but didn't try to stand, and he kept his eyes on the floor, breathing deep as if to recover his sense of equilibrium. His hair was long, almost to his shoulders, half pulled from a leather tie at the base of his neck. Even in the warm light of the sconces, his skin looked pale, his cheeks sunken. He was a surprisingly big man, solidly built, and he dressed for the jungle—lightweight, bug-resistant layers, which now draped too loosely on his big frame.

“How long have I been down here?” he asked.

Nigel huffed a breath, and I could see the mist of it in the flickering scone light. It was cold down here, which couldn't have been comfortable for Roland, even if the wolves didn't mind so much. “I got your message, if you want to call it that, a couple of days ago, no more. How long does it feel like you've been down here?”

Roland snorted. “Most of my natural life. You come in through the pinhole room?”

I fielded that one. “We did. That was a pretty narrow hole in the ceiling—what's it for? It didn't do much in the way of illuminating the room.”

“No, it wouldn't,” Roland agreed. “It would be better if we started there, though. Quickest way out once you can see the door.”

“What is this place?” Simon asked.

Roland rolled his shoulders, then managed a shallow cough. But though I expected

him to announce “Atlantis,” his response was more pragmatic. “Just the holding cell, mate. Easy access for her little honor guard to keep watch while they waited for somebody more important to show up.” He squinted at Simon and Nikki, then refocused on me. “She cast the net pretty wide, I see. Didn’t expect to reel so many of you in.”

Roland’s words were slurred, the cadence rising and falling on the strength of his breath. Simon moved toward him, and so did I.

Meanwhile, Nigel stepped in front of Roland but a few feet away, squatting to peer up into the man’s face. Nigel’s jaw set. “He’s not himself,” he said tightly. “He’s off.”

“Have they given you food? Water?” Simon asked.

“Both, I think,” Roland sighed. “But down here, it’s hard to remember what you need to do and when you need to do it. Everything is off its axis.”

I thought about that and the spinning compass from the other room. “I can help,” I offered, but I waited for him to nod before I placed my hand on his shoulder. I knew in an instant that my hesitation was warranted.

“Um... This is going to hurt a little.”

He grimaced. “I figured that.”

Roland’s circuits hadn’t merely been blasted like Emilio’s had, they’d been completely rewired. He hadn’t been kidding when he said that he didn’t know what was up and what was down or what to do, even when the course was obvious and right in front of him. I signaled the others to step away and leaned into the work, losing myself in the effort to heal.

It was painstaking work, but also strangely restful, because I knew without doubt there was a proper pattern to Roland, to his electrical circuits, the pathways of neural networks that wove through his body, every bit as important as his network of veins, bones, and muscle connectors. Like Emilio, he had a smattering of Connected ability, and I used it for all it was worth. I found myself thinking again of Tesla and his passion for electricity both in life and in death, not to mention his renewed existence as a member of the Arcana Council after he'd spent decades floating through the air, surfing the electrical currents that spun around the world as a disembodied ghost.

Humans were capable of so much more than we believed, even humans like Roland, who'd barely accessed their Connected abilities...

In the detachment of my work, I noticed something else. Unexpected sparks flared along the reconnected circuits that had been magically healed with my aid. Tiny explosions with dancing lights signaled new connections, new pathways for learning, energy, and power. The power, I knew without a doubt, hadn't been there before to such a pronounced degree, which meant I wasn't returning Roland back to his original state...I was changing him.

Crap. Was that also a side effect of Armaeus's tinkering, or was that simply because we were in Atlantis? Or something else entirely?

I didn't know, and couldn't stop now, of course. Roland groaned softly as each new connection was made, but I didn't know how to put a human together in any other way than, well, the right way. I didn't know how to do it so they were the image of who they were before, only how to make it so they could be who they were meant to be.

That sounded great and all, but a rising tide of dread shifted deep within me. I shouldn't be doing this...I really shouldn't. I banked those thoughts as quickly as I could, focusing on the healing at hand. We needed Roland to get us through this

mess. The rest we'd have to sort out later.

I don't know how long it took before I sat back, only that when I shifted my weight, I kept going, eventually falling into the strong arms of Nikki Dawes.

"There you go, dollface, I've got you," she cooed, and she pressed a bottle to my mouth, water I thought at first, then revised my guess. It tasted like juice or nectar, so maybe not water. Probably from Roland's supply, and I didn't care. Still, good to know what I was in for.

"Drugged?" I wondered, and Nikki's chuckle made it clear I'd spoken aloud.

"Probably, but when in Rome..."

"We've all drunk it while we were waiting for you," Nigel said, nodding when I glanced his way. "So far, no observably ill effects. Figured we'd roll the dice."

"Good," I said, and it was as much a commentary on their decision as the taste of the strange liquid. I watched Simon and Nigel help Roland to his feet, then shook myself to refocus. "How long was I out?"

Nikki shrugged, helping me to stand. "Hard to gauge. Felt like a long time. We slept in shifts, if that gives you any indication, after the first twenty minutes or so. Figured we needed to stay fresh. The honor guard never did show up again, more's the pity."

"Six hours, give or take," Nigel offered, turning toward me as he braced Roland's large body. "We did some exploring in pairs. Sconces are lit all the way back to the pinhole room, which is open to us again. It's dark now outside. We figure if it's a clear sky there should be moonlight flowing in soon."

"There will be moonlight," Roland agreed. "We should get out there." He waved off

Nigel and took a step, then wheeled back to me. “You did something to me, didn’t you? I feel different.”

“You feel alive, and you should be grateful for that,” Nikki pointed out, a little sharply.

Roland shook his head, his hands coming up in quick denial. “No, no. Believe me, I’m grateful. I had a number done on me right smart, no question. That’s not what I’m talking about.” He turned and squinted at Nigel, then at Simon, his eyes widening with the latter.

“You’ve got magic in you,” he said to Simon, then swung toward Nikki. “And you do too.” He turned again toward me, then he flinched, standing back. “Right.”

He swung back to Nigel. “And you’ve got more than you know, boy-o, but it’s buried pretty fucking deep.”

“Okay, Mentalist,” Nigel said, rolling his eyes. “How about you give us some information we can actually use?”

“Right, right. The pinhole room. Let’s go, then. That’s where everything starts.”

Nigel stepped away as Roland moved forward, the Aussie’s gaze scanning the chamber. He easily found the doorway where we’d entered, but seemed momentarily confused despite that.

“Wait. That’s not right,” Roland muttered. “There were other openings in the wall before, weren’t there?” He kept up his mumbled commentary as he walked forward.

Beside me, Nigel chuckled. “I’d forgotten about that. Roland has a habit of never shutting up, but he isn’t talking to anyone else, just himself. I’d never worked with

him long enough to realize he was working out the path as he went. He's good at it too—or at least he was."

"Maybe he's always had a little bit more than intuition?" Nikki put in.

I shot her a wry glance. When I'd tumbled into her arms, her own ability had clicked into action, that of being able to read the recent memories of anyone she touched. Mine had been suffused with concern over the man I'd put back together in a slightly better incarnation than the one that he'd been before. It still didn't sit right with me, and I found myself hoping she was right, and that some of that native magic had already been inside Roland, waiting to be released. That I hadn't created some kind of Frankenstein's monster out of whole cloth. A monster whose abilities I didn't even know.

"Maybe," Nigel said, though whether he was being honest or picking up on Nikki's intention, I didn't know. "Somebody chose him to start this process, though, and the more I think about it, the more I suspect the net being cast wide wasn't the original plan."

"I caught that too," Simon said as we followed a few paces behind Roland, letting him mutter his way forward. "It seems like there was some other plan to get this Moon character out of whatever it is she's hiding, and it didn't work. So we are officially Plan B."

"And we still don't know who put the plan in motion," Nikki put in. "The Moon, or somebody else."

"It wasn't the Moon. You can put that notion to bed right now," Roland said, talking over his shoulder at us. "Now shut your pieholes and take a look at this. It's pretty damned impressive, and I've seen some things."

He stepped into a chamber I knew was the pinhole chamber by the pattern of tile on the floor, but unlike the shrouded space we'd left hours before, this room was fully illuminated. I stared, my skin going cold.

Oh, yeah. I remembered this.

Enormous images stretched up the wall toward the pinhole at the top, from which flooded moonlight that struck the tiled floor and was refracted to all sides in a way the sunshine absolutely had not been able to mimic. The images stretched from floor to ceiling of the domed room, glorious depictions in the Greco-Roman style of gods and goddesses, Herculean men, and Amazonian women, living, fighting, and loving in resplendent style. I'd seen these images before, a long time ago and—I'd thought—far, far away. I knew what they were. But I still had a hard time reconciling what I saw.

"Nice, isn't it?" Roland said. "But keep looking higher."

Obligingly, I craned my neck back, my gaze searching the ceiling. Above the gods and goddesses, the sun, moon, and star circled close together. Given the proximity of the heavenly beings to each other, the illustration was stylized well beyond any attempt at accuracy. It was beautiful all the same, and I stared at the artwork with some surprise.

Why had I not noticed it before? The answer was simple enough. When I'd last been to Atlantis, I'd been under siege, gathering weapons to save the vulnerable and the weak, as well as my own sorry ass. I hadn't stayed long, and I didn't much feel like staying now.

"Here we go," Roland said, and the moon shifted another degree, the fall of light striking the floor in such a way that rivers of illumination appeared all through the domed chamber. I blinked. This was not the same place I'd been before, I decided.

That place had been a ruin, while this remained beautiful and filled with light.

“What is all this?” Nikki asked, her voice uncharacteristically faint with wonder. “It...it’s so beautiful.”

Nigel’s voice sounded over her. “What the hell?” he barked, clearly surprised, “Sara. This looks like you.”

I turned to see the image etched into the wall that he was staring at. The resemblance was uncanny and, once again, not unknown to me.

“Vigilance,” I said. “Not me. It’s one of the incarnations my mom took, once upon a time.”

“Are you sure?” Nikki said, pacing toward it. “I mean she’s got that crazy look in her eye that would certainly qualify as your mom, but she’s dead on you otherwise.”

“You ask me, she looks mostly like Sariah,” Simon offered. That line struck us all dead quiet for a second. We shook it off as Roland pointed to a shadowed doorway the illumination had revealed, far on the other side of the room.

“You want out? That’s the way out,” Roland said. “But we step out that way, and the shit’s going to hit the fan right quick. Probably should give you the full story as I know it before that happens.”

A sudden commotion split the night air from outside the doorway, an explosion—and then a chorus of shouting.

“You may want to make that fast,” Nikki drawled.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

“Let’s hit it,” Roland agreed. “But go slow. You’re going to want to know what’s happening out there before you see it.”

“Yeah?” Nigel fixed him with a hard stare. “And how is it you know what we’ll see?”

“Because I’ve got ears,” Roland snapped. “And the Moon’s honor guard like to talk, at least when they aren’t all dressed up as wolves. To hear them tell the tale, she’s been stuck on this bloody rock for millennia, seemingly happy, but how could she be? They think she’s afraid of facing the real world, or maybe she’s brokenhearted or some rot. They’ve been waiting for someone to come and save her arse since God was a child, and they were pretty damned certain I was it. When I broke through, it’d been the first time anybody had been to this sector in literally millennia.”

“Why didn’t she just leave?” Nikki asked. “She was a member of the Arcana Council. Presumably, that means she had some pretty strong magic.”

“It’s a good question,” Roland agreed. “According to her guard, her magic rocks the casbah. She was the goddess of shapeshifters, to the surprise of no one, and she knew how to wield that power. Her mind wasn’t always easy to follow, but nobody thought much of that, because that was a hazard of the position. She tended to think of things in a different way from most. Anyway, shortly after she went on an unholy tear of magic all over the world, enough to feed six thousand years of moon worship and create an entire collective unconscious full of fairy tales, she came here. Never gave a reason. Seemed happy as a clam. And here she’s remained. She’s rebuilt this part of wherever the hell we are, mastered more spells, but she never wanted to leave it. Not once.”

I blinked. Roland didn't know where we were, precisely. I decided that was for the best.

"Didn't she get lonely?" Simon asked, and the grizzled hunter shrugged.

"She was a big fan, apparently, of believing she was lonelier in the real world than she was here."

Nikki snorted. "That happens."

"The long and the short of it, her guards were and are willing to do whatever she wanted, but secretly, they felt like she should return to her homeland and take up the fight."

"What fight?" I asked, blinking, as the many options for battles flooded my brain. There was the age-old fight between the more powerful Connecteds and the weak. There was the fight against the Connecteds by ordinary people who had not fully accessed their magic—and who preferred to oppress those with abilities rather than understand their own. And, of late, there was the fight between the Shadow Court and the Arcana Council. All in all, the entire Connected world was on the brink of war, in one way or another. "Any fights we should know about in particular?"

Roland shrugged. "They weren't real clear on that. But she wanted nothing to do with it. Would never tell them why. She's psychic, obviously, so maybe she knew it wouldn't turn out so well, or maybe she just liked this place better."

Nikki glanced around the carved walls, peering at the richly inlaid tile. "If the rest of it looks like this, I can't say I blame her."

"Yeah, well, I showed up and she took me out at the knees. All I got on that score was, I wasn't worthy. Not very helpful and hurt my feelings besides." He said this

last with a wry smile, and I shook my head. Roland was definitely feeling better.

“How did you get the job in the first place?” I asked. “Who hired you?”

He sighed heavily. “Woman, rich as God, handled everything through intermediaries. Never met her. Only knew her as a ghost, honestly. I’m not entirely sure she’s female, if you get right down to it. I just got the feeling she was.”

“The feeling,” Nikki said, her tone derisive. “What kind of feeling would that be?”

“I can’t say,” Roland said, sounding legitimately perplexed. “Nothing she ever said or did hinted at gender. And her negotiation was tough, smart, steady, and mean as a snake, but that can go both ways. But whatever her gender, she means business. She had a couple of goons pluck me out of a dive bar that I bloody well hadn’t thought anyone had ever heard of. They threw me in the back of the car and drove me out in the middle of the goddamned outback. At that point, one of her goons put a gun to my head, told me the job, and asked if I wanted to take it. Not being a stupid rabbit, I took it.”

“What was the job?” I asked, glancing toward the opening. We were almost upon it, and the chants were getting louder.

“Go to Peru, find an opal ring, take it to Choquequirao, find the Moon. I know my opals, so I wasn’t all enthused about the idea of trekking halfway around the world to find something I could get right in my own backyard, but of course, this wasn’t your ordinary ring.”

“I guess not,” I said, pulling the ring out of my pocket and tossing it to him. He stepped back and let it hit him in the chest, then drop, only Nikki ducking in fast enough to catch the bauble before it fell all the way to the tile.

“A little respect for the artifacts,” she protested.

Roland shook his head. “I made the dumbass mistake of putting that thing on my finger once. It was a long, long fall to get to where you found me, wherever this godforsaken plane is. And a second before it all went dark on me, I flung that piece of shit as far away as I could, setting in play the call to you, Sara—which I’d made sure to have in place ahead of time, since I didn’t trust this setup in the slightest.”

“Why’d you put the ring on your finger if you didn’t trust it?” Nikki asked. “Did your contact tell you to or not?”

“Because the ring was just the first step. I got more cash if I found the woman who went with the ring. I don’t know if my employer expected me to put the ring on or not. She’s a twisty bitch.” He held up his hands. “And I mean that in an equal opportunity kind of way.”

“So where is the Moon?” Nigel asked, eyeing the chunky ring. “You found this ring, where? Up top? Cusco? Did she just leave it behind somewhere when she was shopping?”

“Not exactly,” Roland said. “There was some pretty dark magic involved in knocking that out of the rock that held it.”

“You excavated it?” Nigel asked, clearly shocked.

Roland stared at him in surprise. “No, you dumbass, I stole it from the Larco Museum in Lima. Some seriously messed-up artifacts there, I’m not going to lie, but I found what I needed, sprung it free, and came to Choquequirao. So I saved you all a pile of work. You’re welcome.”

Before we could properly express our thanks, we stepped out into the moon-swept

landscape.

“Whoa,” Nikki said. “I begin to understand why a girl might wanna hang around.”

We looked out at a mosh pit of exquisitely built warriors, male and female alike, gathered around a central dais at the base of a wide amphitheater, chanting and shouting at the top of their lungs. Circling the dais were gorgeous Greek statues, all with limbs intact.

Simon whistled. “Did something special happen to pull in this crowd or is this just all-you-can-eat Tuesday?”

Roland waved a weary hand. “They come to exalt her every night. I’d hear it and weep with relief that another cycle of the Moon has been completed and I’ve been spared, and she’s been spared as well.”

“Yes, well, they’re not alone, not this time,” Nigel put in. “I know some of those buggers down there, and they are not the guardians of the Moon.”

I stepped forward to see what he meant, and he was right. It had been a few years, but the hunters in the world of the arcane black market didn’t experience a lot of turnover unless it was of the permanent kind. Not at this level. In the midst of the chanting and cheering guardians, there were all too many faces I recognized.

“How did they get here?” I protested. “I barely made it myself.”

“They didn’t get here of their own volition, I can tell you that,” Roland shrugged. “Someone very powerful pulled them in—or pushed them.”

“Forget all that, look.” Nikki pointed at the warriors paying absolutely no attention to the hunters. “How dumb are her guardians? They don’t see that these are enemies in

their midst?”

“Not enemies,” Roland corrected. “Remember, they’re here to free the Moon. Her guardians support that.”

Nikki scowled. “But why? If she doesn’t want it, why do they?”

Roland shrugged. “They’ve been stuck here for millennia. They believe they can defend her, should she wish to be defended. And they could, if she would call on them to fight for her. But she’s not a general of some army. That’s not her personality.”

My mouth quirked into a wry grin. Maybe the Moon and I had more in common than I wanted to admit.

Nigel gave Roland the side-eye. “And you know all this, how, again?”

He gestured vaguely to me. “The blasted ring. You put it on, right?”

“Not for long,” I countered, and he grunted.

“Well, I didn’t stay in her brain long enough to get cozy either, but it was enough to know who she was as a person, what she wanted, what she hoped for. And to be clear, that was a whole lot of being left alone. She’s an immortal. She makes her art and protects her people by making sure they cannot be hurt.”

I made a face. I’d gone down this rabbit hole myself. I understood the desire not to harm the people who had pledged their allegiance to me. Others had told me it was their choice, but that didn’t make it any easier.

“So now what?” I asked. “Is this going to be a brawl?”

“We’ve got some additional guys coming in,” Simon said, and I looked to where he was pointing. More artifact hunters, and some other outliers too, men, women, even children emerged at the edges of the amphitheater. My gaze rested on this last group a moment longer. How many thousands of years had they been trapped in Atlantis by a woman who believed she was a benevolent goddess, keeping her children from experiencing a life beyond the borders she’d so carefully set for them?

If they wanted more than that, and from the hope in their eyes, it seemed clear they did, then they deserved to experience it.

“Not gonna lie, this is taking on some serious shades of Garden of Eden for me,” Nikki muttered. “And the natives clearly want out.”

The calls of the crowd grew even higher, and were at last rewarded by a shaft of moonlight piercing the clouds. It bathed the central dais as the crescendo of noise leapt. A woman formed in the gleaming spotlight, exactly what I would have expected the Moon to look like, tall, statuesque, with elegantly outstretched arms and long, sinewy legs. She was dressed in a toga, her skin pale, her flowing hair almost a blue white. Her eyes were large and luminous, her features as symmetrical as the marble effigies surrounding her.

“Girl has got to up her costume game with a body like that,” Nikki said, passing judgment. “What I could do with her in an afternoon in Vegas...”

The Moon turned, her arms going out, her fingertips almost seeming to brush the air, as if she was picking up the energy of the crowd. She smiled benevolently, but there was something definitely off about her.

“She seems a little checked out,” Simon murmured.

“She’s barmy,” Roland scoffed. He squinted at me. “You didn’t pick up on that when

you put on her ring?”

I shook my head. “I told you, I didn’t wear it for longer than a few seconds, definitely not long enough to get a sense of her.”

“Well, no wonder you’re confused, then. She’s no longer got a seat at her own table, not entirely. Her people don’t know it. Or if they do, they don’t talk about it.”

“Why would the Star need her, then?” I asked. “If that’s who’s trying to free her—which it has to be. She’s certainly not trying to free herself.”

“Been asking that same question,” Roland said. “I don’t like any of the answers.”

“Celestine!” shouted a man in the front, tall, dark haired, and swarthy, bristling with muscles. “The world clamors for your return. We would serve you in a realm that can appreciate your beauty and your strengths. Unfurl the sails of midnight, and allow us to celebrate you as you were meant to be celebrated.”

“Ooooo, diplomatic,” Nikki observed with a grin. “I like this guy.”

Celestine’s smile deepened with genuine affection. “I have seen all, Torsten. I know all. The light of the Moon cannot protect you there as it can here.”

Her voice was oddly melancholy in contrast to her smile, and I could see from the ripples of dismay that swept through the crowd that this was not an unexpected response.

“We will fight. We will live! We will do honor to you, Celestine,” someone else called out.

But Celestine was having none of it. Her eyes shifted up, her chin tilted, and she

seemed to grow slightly more transparent, a shimmer of stars visible through her hands.

“She’s leaving,” someone shouted, rough and loud, not a guardian or any of their kin.

As one, the hunters rushed the dais.

The battle was on.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

I didn't waste any time. Fixing my gaze on the dais, a good fifty feet away from me as we stood at the top of the amphitheater-like arena, I gritted my teeth as my body caught fire and puffed into the efficient, if painful, rearranging of molecules that allowed me to travel from space to space. While the Magician could disappear in a cheery plume of mist, my process was a little more, ah, incendiary.

It remained effective, though, even in Atlantis. With a sizzle and grimace, I dropped into nothing and then reappeared atop the dais. Six feet away, the Moon turned to me, her eyes brightening with excitement and an almost childlike glee, her mouth tilting into a smile, her arms widening in welcome.

I strode toward her. "We have to—whoa!"

My earnest plea to convince the Moon to come with me was abruptly cut short as a compact, leather-clad body barreled into me from the side, knocking me flat on my back and nearly off the dais altogether. I looked up, shocked to see the hard, weathered face of Gamon, Judgment of the Arcana Council, her flat-black eyes bristling with intensity, her dark hair streaked with silver and lashed back in a severe braid. She wore her usual black tactical gear, always ready for a fight, and she lunged toward me as I scrambled back.

"What in the—"

"Just go with it!" Gamon snarled, and then her fist came down, checking only slightly as she clocked me across the jaw. I skidded a few more paces, then came up in a fury, my hands bursting into flames.

“What the hell?” I demanded, swinging away to relocate the Moon, only to be knocked sideways again by Gamon.

“You can’t bring her back,” she insisted. “You’re too strong.”

I stared at her, totally confused. “I’ve got to bring her back. Nobody else can.”

“Celestine!” The voice that cracked across the dais chilled me to the bone, a voice I’d grown to loathe, then made my peace with, then loathe all over again in rapidly reducing spirals. I spun around.

“How in fuck’s name did you get here?” I demanded of the Emperor, Viktor Dal, who stood in his full raiment of gold-and-silver robes, an honest-to-God crown on his head. I had never seen this asshat dress in anything other than a suit, but across the dais, Celestine’s eyes grew wide as she took in his blond Aryan perfection. It made my stomach turn.

“He can’t bring her back either,” Gamon announced, but he was closer to the Moon, and while I didn’t actually know the full extent of the Emperor’s powers, I knew he was tight with Tesla, and that changed everything about his ability to move between the planes. He took a step forward, and then Simon, of all people, came bounding up the stairs.

“You’re not supposed to be here!” Simon howled, and the bad blood that had long simmered between these two members of the Arcana Council boiled over, the thin, wiry Fool launching himself at the much more physically powerful emperor with a fury that clearly took the elder Council member off guard. He stumbled back, only a few steps, but it was enough to topple them both into the crowd.

I still didn’t understand what was going on, but I certainly supported that move. I jolted forward, only to feel a hand wrap brutally into my flying ponytail and jerk me

back, nearly separating my head from my shoulders.

“What in the actual fuck,” I growled as Gamon whirled me around.

She let go of my ponytail before I toppled into her. “I told you, you can’t be the one to bring her back. Nobody from the Council can. It’ll reveal the extent of their strength or something, and that’s no good.”

But I shook my head, furious to the point of hysteria. “What are you talking about? Freeing the Moon is the entire reason I came here.”

“Armaeus unraveled another thread of this ball of crazy, and the game has changed. I don’t understand it, the guy’s a freak. But he shot me into this godforsaken hellhole to warn you and I let him, so he owes me. A lot.”

The mention of the Magician caught me up short. But not for long. The first line of attackers broke and surged up onto the dais. Now Gamon and I no longer had the luxury of fighting each other. We had to turn and fight off the rabble, some of whom I recognized, some of whom recognized me, and the fights quickly shifted in tone from a desperate pursuit of the McGuffin into an all-out rumble. Gamon was also not completely unknown to this group, and as we fought with greater intensity, she seemed to come to the same realization I did.

“We don’t have too many friends,” she gasped as we knocked into each other before roundhousing our current pair of assailants off the dais.

I grunted. “Wonder why that is?”

I got too close to the edge of the dais, threatening to topple, when a pair of catcher’s-mitt-sized hands and gorgeously muscled arms shot out of the crowd, attached to the inimitable Nikki Dawes.

“You’ve got this, dollface,” she crowed, and I turned to see Nikki practically climbing on the shoulders of two meaty-looking warriors, using her new vantage point of greater height to wield a long wicked-looking blade. Where in the hell had she gotten that?

It was doing the job, though, clearing a swath of attackers while the hapless men beneath her seemed somewhat stunned, holding on to her thighs for dear life. Nikki had a way of doing that to people.

Throughout all this, the Moon seemed transfixed, watching the fight spool out around her with an expression on her face that surprised me. Delight was the first word that came to mind, as if she was taking unreasonable pleasure in the idea of all these people fighting over her. If that was something she craved, she could have had that any time. Humans were a race uniquely suited for the veneration of the gods, as millennia of true believers could attest.

Yet here she remained, locked away in her own private paradise, a paradise her own most loyal followers were desperate to leave. I’d heard all about the Moon being an enigma, a shadowy, inscrutable entity. I didn’t expect it to be quite so on the nose.

“Watch your six,” Nigel shouted, drawing my attention back to the battle at hand. Through an opening in the chaos, I could see Viktor struggling back to the dais, Simon on his back, pounding on his head. There was definitely no love lost between those two, but Viktor was not the Emperor for nothing. He swung back a powerful arm, partially dislodging Simon, and then reached into his robes and pulled out something bright and shiny that he launched onto the dais.

I scowled. We’d been able to bring very little with us into Atlantis, and certainly nothing that would qualify as a weapon. So what had he...

I peered more closely as I ducked under another savage swipe from a hunter I

vaguely recognized from the bad old days, and realized the item Viktor had thrown was a bracelet. One of Eshe's intricate arm cuffs, designed to circle the bicep from shoulder to elbow. It was bright silver and studded with a large, milky-green jade stone along with opalescent flashes of green and pink. In my distraction, I barely missed getting kicked off the dais, and I blew my newest assailant back several feet, catching his clothes on fire.

Then I heard it, a girlish cry of pure pleasure, and I turned to see the Moon rushing across the dais, heading for the bracelet. She wasn't the only trinket-obsessed hunter in the crowd, though. A woman pounced on the bracelet, holding it up high to the light, her pursuit of the Moon clearly forgotten in the wake of this priceless bauble. Such was the creed of the smart hunter. You can't always get what you want, but if you can come away from the hunt with something, take it.

The Moon cried out in outrage, and for the first time, her warriors leapt into action. Whereas before they'd seemed content to see what might happen when the Moon's ostensible liberators reached her, clearly, they'd discerned she wasn't happy with somebody taking her toy. They bounded up onto the dais, knocking everyone out of their way. As the female hunter whirled in surprise, her fist tight on her prize, the nearest guardians transformed, converting in a blinding flash of light to creatures with bushy fur and four legs—not to mention giant snapping jaws.

This wasn't the woman's first rodeo, but when one of the creatures crunched shut its heavy jaws on her forearm, she dropped the bracelet with a scream, and the jeweled piece soared away from the dais.

It caught the light as it spun, and another wolf leapt high, its jaws closing around the cuff before it twisted back toward its mistress, flinging it her way.

The Moon thrust her hands skyward to catch the bracelet, her chin tilting up, her hair wild and free around her...and she disappeared. Her warriors, both man and beast,

also disappeared, leaving a good two dozen hunters scattered around the amphitheater, with nobody left to fight.

“Where did she go?” the Emperor demanded, finally flinging Simon off his back and turning in a tight circle. “That should not have been able to work without my express direction.”

“And where exactly are we?” someone else demanded.

“And how the hell do we get outta here?” a third hunter whined. “I got deadlines, man. If there’s no juice here, I’m out.”

I heard the battle cry before any of the rest of them did, and I froze.

Oh...no.

I turned quickly, scanning the horizon, but I knew what was coming. Funny thing about Atlantis. It was the one place in the universe where the fight between angels and demons had never completely petered out.

With the Moon gone, natural sunlight returned to Atlantis, and so did the district’s intractable foes. Over one lip of the amphitheater, a host of angels appeared, wielding fiery swords. On the other side, a horde of demons boiled over the horizon, fire licking along their gangly arms and clawed hands, their gazes fixed on the opposite side of the rim. They were there to fight the angels, most likely, but considering all the fresh meat in between...

“What in the...” Gamon muttered.

“Roland!” I shouted, turning to find him in the crowd. “Did you have any plan on how to get out of here?”

“You, basically. That’s it,” he responded, gaping at the host of angels. “Why do you think I summoned you? Nobody said anything about those guys.”

“Yeah, well, nobody ever does,” I said. “Nikki? The Syx?”

“I’ve already put out the call,” she said, leaping onto the dais for good measure. “Ain’t nobody can pray like this bitch, but I got no way of knowing if I connected. We’re kind of a long way from home.”

The angels and demons launched forward—flowing down the open seats, rushing toward each other, and perforce the mortals in the center of the amphitheater. The knot of hunters scrambled together, climbing up onto the dais, united in their common dread of a new enemy. It took a full ten more seconds, but then a flash of light appeared in six bright points around the dais, and when the spots cleared from my eyes, I could see the six members of the Demon Enforcers team appear, a half dozen demons sworn to service to the Archangel Michael, the Hierophant of the Arcana Council. The Hierophant himself didn’t put in an appearance, but there was no way his demon enforcers would have been here without his express permission. So score one for the home team.

The Syx held no weapons. They didn’t need any. They roared with delight as they leapt into the oncoming melee.

That gave us just enough time to get the hell out of there, I wagered, but this still was going to hurt. Silently, I threw up a prayer of my own that Armaeus’s magic making or my own luck would hold just a little while longer.

“Everybody, get as close together as you can. You want to get home, prepare to get a little fried around the edges.”

They crowded tight, and I linked arms with Nikki, Simon, Nigel, and Gamon. Roland

and Emilio hunkered in, and at the last minute, a knifelike jab of searing heat slashed across my back, the whoosh of my own fiery wings wrapping around us.

Viktor had already fled, but it was enough. We huddled together, and I closed my eyes and thought of Vegas.

We burst into flames.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

The only place I could think of to transport everyone safely, especially considering the incendiary nature of this particular rideshare, was the Bellagio fountain in front of the fabled casino. With a crackle of fire, we plunged into the shallow pool, any errant flames immediately doused with a crackle, hiss, and spark—and final spurt of pure fire.

What I hadn't counted on, however, was hitting the Bellagio in the evening, in the middle of one of the fountain's performances. No sooner had we staggered upright than a burst of water erupted all around us, an artful spray of celebratory burbling leaping in buoyant time with a Rat Pack standard I only dimly recalled. All around the fountain, onlookers burst into applause.

I stumbled forward a step. I'd never transported so many people at once, and I felt like my brain was floating several feet above my head. My magically incarnated wings had vanished as well—which was just as well. Some things, you couldn't explain so well. Not even in Vegas.

“What in the...” Some of the soaked hunters started wading forward with wobbly steps, trying to get their bearings, while others gasped and sputtered, having taken in the foul water of the fountain. Nikki grabbed two flailing hunters and started hauling them to the side, while Simon raised his voice.

“Viva Las Vegas,” he shouted, and as if on cue, the crowd split to let pass a dozen compact tunic-clad men and women, their faces wreathed in smiles, their eyes bright, the lines that deepened around their eyes and mouths the only indication they weren't the spry teenagers they seemed to be.

The Moon was not the only Arcana Council member with an honor guard, and Simon's were the best of the best, a team of Mongolian hunter-gatherers who had pledged themselves to his service and were unwavering in their loyalty.

"Right this way, right this way," Simon announced, gesturing for his team to help the hunters out of the pool. As the crowd continued applauding, the hunters managed to exit the fountain without any further disaster befalling them, gratefully accepting the fancy robes in multiple colors Simon's team handed out.

"All part of the show," Simon continued loudly to more applause, and Nikki pounded him on the shoulder.

"You're the best," she decreed. "We may have a spot for your guys in our show at the Flamingo."

Simon kept the line of hunters moving into the opulent entryway of the Bellagio and down the central corridor. The hunters were so dazed, they didn't argue, and I appreciated the efficient and easygoing nature of Simon's patter. By the time he had them all locked in a room off the main casino, stiff drinks in their hands, none of them looked like they wanted to escape.

Instead, they studied us with the same curiosity we leveled their way, theirs tinged with years of experience in the arcane underbelly of the Connected community.

"Is this the part where you give us an offer we can't refuse?" one woman drawled, the one who'd gotten to the bracelet of the High Priestess before the others. Now her forearm was wrapped in a heavy bandage, though at least no blood seeped through. One of the benefits of traveling Air Sara—incidental healing was handed out along with the peanuts.

I glanced around the room as I considered the woman's question. Gamon sat against

the wall at the far corner of the room, a bottle of scotch in one hand, her elbows resting on her knees. At one end of the long conference table, Nikki, Nigel, Emilio, and Roland all sat near Simon, who was busily murmuring to and high-fiving his team of honor guards.

The remaining eighteen or so hunters were some of the best of the best, from what I could remember, as well as a few new faces I couldn't quite track. They were also waiting for a response.

"That depends on what you have to offer back," I said. "I mainly wanted to understand who sent you and from where, because that was a mess."

"I'll tell you what was a mess. A member of the Arcana Council threw that bracelet out. In other words, somebody on your own team," Emilio protested while Nigel looked ready to throttle him.

"You're right," I said, arresting everyone's attention. "Viktor is one of our own, and the fact he showed up to make his claim on the Moon makes things more interesting than I personally care for. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Where did you all enter...the Moon's domain? What lost city got you there?"

Only three of them had been in Peru, it turned out. The others had entered in cities across the world: Petra, Sukhotai, even the lost city of the Anasazi, Mesa Verde. I stared in surprise at a slender but tough-looking Japanese hunter who claimed to have come in by way of diving down near the Yonaguni pyramid, off the coast of Okinawa. And to a one, their stories matched up regarding the source of their information. Whether it started out as a message to a friend through a client through a past collaborator—nobody knew the ultimate source—all of them got the impression that the person who hired them for the job was a woman, but when pressed, they couldn't say why. More than that, the job was simple. Find the lost city and recover the sorceress hiding within it. Even more interestingly, each hunter had been given a

bauble to either track down during or to aid them in their search.

“What kind of baubles?” I asked, thinking about the thick silver ring that still weighed heavily in my pocket.

With the influence of liquor warming their bellies, liquor that was almost certainly spiked, the artifacts came out readily enough. Rings, a necklace, earrings, several scattered stones, all of them stunning in their craftsmanship and size, soon lined the table.

“We weren’t given any information about the jewelry,” the woman who’d picked up Eshe’s bracelet said, her tone tinged with annoyance. “I had no idea they were supposed to lure the sorceress out of her hiding place. I would have played things differently.”

“Same,” Roland said with a scowl. “I thought it was the key to get into that hellhole, nothing more. Kind of an important piece of information to leave out.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I said. “The Moon didn’t strike me as an entirely rational individual back there. If you’d all come at her with your trinkets, you may not have gotten very far.”

“You would have spooked her,” Nikki agreed, nodding. “I don’t know that she would have come out if the chips hadn’t fallen the way they did.”

“So now what?” Roland asked, turning toward me. “Where is the Moon?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. I’d sent out a call to the Magician immediately upon our crash landing, but he’d remained quiet. That could have been for a number of reasons. Either he didn’t know where the Moon was, he didn’t want to reveal it quite yet, or he was afraid this conversation was being monitored. I shrugged. “She’s in

this plane now, though. I have a feeling she's going to out herself pretty quickly."

"And remember, she's not the only one who came through," Nikki put in. "We've also got her entire passel of werewolf guardians. I don't know if they're going to keep their shifting capability when they touch down, but I'm gonna tell you right now, they pull that move at Walmart, it's gonna cause a stir."

"I'm already on it," Simon said, reaching out to take a tablet proffered by one of his guards. He waved it at me. "The moment she showed up in this plane, the beacon that'd locked on to her reanimated and found her. It took her a good half an hour to fling it away, but at least we have a place to start. Not that far away either. The Craters of the Moon National Park. You know it?"

I grimaced. "Not at all."

Nikki straightened. "You have got to be kidding me. That's a national park out in Idaho, a nature preserve on top of it. Why would she go there? Other than the name, but how would she even know that?"

"Could have been something magically imposed with Eshe's bracelet?" Simon hazarded. "That's the most likely situation."

I nodded. It made sense. "And if it's a park, that gives her and her guard some wide open space too."

"More than that," Simon said, tapping on his tablet. "There's all sorts of woo groups affiliated with that park, moon worship, that kind of thing. If that sort of energy is playing out there, it might have been a natural draw for her."

"So now we need to go to Idaho?" Nikki asked, frowning. "What do they wear in Idaho?"

“We don’t need to go anywhere,” one of the hunters said. “The job’s done. We get to keep the trinkets as a kill fee, and we’re out.”

They rumbled in agreement. Truthfully, there wasn’t much I could do to make them stay, nor would I want them to. These hunters made their living chasing down artifacts for wealthy buyers. They would be best in their natural habitat. But that made me think...

“You know, I actually think I may have an offer you won’t want to refuse,” I said, looking at Roland a long minute. He’d been broken, his wires disintegrated, his connections shattered. When I’d put him back together, he was better than he was before.

I couldn’t go that far with these hunters, maybe, but I was tired of playing by rules I hadn’t made. And if I could help them out in return for their cooperation and collaboration, why wouldn’t I? I was Justice of the Arcana Council, but that didn’t mean I was Glinda the Good Witch. If there was to be a balance between the peacekeepers and chaos makers among the Connected community, I’d need to make it happen.

“This is what we’re going to do,” I said.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

It was another several hours before the last hunters left the Bellagio.

In the end, it hadn't taken much to rewire the hunters into a better form of themselves. They all possessed more Connected abilities than I had originally suspected, as evidenced by the magic that flowed and hissed beneath my fingers as I traced the lines of connection through them. Their abilities varied with their natural talents, and no one was completely sure of how they would manifest, but contented themselves with listening to Roland's stories of his brawler fists and magical sensitivity, while imagining how their own abilities might manifest.

In return, they pledged their skills to the Hall of Justice, should I ever have need of them. It was a trade none of them made lightly given Gamon's dark presence, taking down their names and memorizing their faces as they stepped up to take their place in line. Where necessary, I trusted their fear of her even if I suspected their goodwill toward me would wane, though time would tell.

Now only Emilio remained, practically buzzing with excitement. "It's happening!" he announced. "I don't need to wait any longer. It's happening. I can feel the healing power flow inside me, and that's what I'll do. I will heal. I'll take the place of the grandmother shaman of our village, and I will heal both illnesses of the body and the mind. It is why she sent me to you, yes? She knew. I understand that now. She knew. Hmmm." He quirked a glance at me. "Do you think I will become psychic like her?"

I smiled at him, utterly exhausted. "I don't know? Will you?"

"Exactly." The grin he shot me lit up the whole room. "Thank you, Justice Wilde.

You didn't have to do this. Didn't need to."

I winked at him. "I know, I know. And I probably shouldn't have. Don't make me regret it, okay?"

"Never," he promised. He turned to the door, bubbling over with enthusiasm.

I watched him go, then sagged back in my chair at the conference table, thoroughly drained. By the time Nikki returned, it took both her and Nigel's efforts to haul me out of my chair and get me outside into the dry desert air of the Vegas night.

After a bit more prodding, we made it out to the Strip, blending in with the tourists. Nikki and Nigel walked beside me, all of us soothed and maybe even healed a little by the press of humanity, the ebb and flow of chatter and the clackety-clacking casinos. By now, it was pushing midnight, and it was a star-filled night, the moon a bare crescent, even skinnier than before to my eye.

"The new moon comes in a few days. That's not good," Nikki said, squinting up at the sky.

I glanced at her. "Why not?"

She shrugged. "I mean, I'm not Dixie, so astrology isn't really my thing, but I know this much. The moon is strongest when it's full. That's its flowering moment, where it extends its efforts and bounty across the world. That's why you launch ventures you've been working on at a full moon, if you go in for that kind of thing. It's a good time to harvest, to reap what you've sown, to get paid for your efforts, like that. The new moon, however, is a much shadier situation. Literally. She's dark. You can't see her. It's the best time to set intentions and see the person you might become in the fullness of time, but it's not a good place to strike, to attack. She's just not strong like that in her new moon phase."

“That explains part of the reason why the Star or the Shadow Court or whoever is behind this brought her out of hiding when they did,” Nigel mused. “If the Moon is at a position where she’s just not that strong, she can be more easily bent to someone else’s agenda.”

“The Moon reveals that which is hidden,” I muttered. “She’s already done that in spades. If Viktor is working against the Council, that can’t stand.”

“Agreed, but,” Nikki countered, “not to put too fine a point on it, what do we really know about the Council?”

I shot her a look. “What do you mean?”

She waved a hand at the Flamingo as we passed. “We’ve got these demigods of great and mighty power—hell, you’ve become a demigod of great and mighty power, same with Gamon, same with Simon—and yet we still don’t know everything that’s going on. I love Mr. Wizard so much it makes my heart hurt, but he’s been holding out on us, or, worse, he doesn’t know everything there is to know. If the Moon crawling out of Atlantis triggers a big reveal of all the mysteries of the world, I say that shit needs to start here at home. We need some answers. And don’t think I haven’t asked Mrs. French for some history books on the Council from Justice Hall, but no dice. As big as that library is, it’s chock-full of cold cases or the detritus of solved cases, but nothing we can use.”

“Solved cases...” I said. “I wonder...”

Nigel looked at me. “If you’re wondering the same thing I am, I’m more than a little concerned, but I’m way ahead of you. What if we’re not the first Council-friendly souls to run afoul of the machinations of the same organization we’re standing up to help? I mean, surely that’s happened before. And what if, in particular, it was a complaint involving the Moon? Perhaps we can find out more about her that way.”

“That’d be back from pretty much the dawn of time,” Nikki said. “I wouldn’t even know where to start looking.”

“Well, that’s the beauty of it,” Nigel countered, growing more excited. “You start back at the very beginning. Anything past, oh, I don’t know, 3000 BC is probably going to be a winner.”

Nikki and I glanced at each other. “You think?” she asked as I felt a soft pressure against my mind, a questing touch. I hadn’t registered how firmly I’d erected the wards against anyone penetrating our conversation until now, but I knew the Magician’s touch when I felt it, and I welcomed it. It felt like far too long since I’d connected with him.

“I tell you what,” I said. “You two head back to Justice Hall, wake up Mrs. French if you have to, and see just how far back our files go. It never occurred to me to ask exactly why the Council split once before, when the Moon, the Star, and the Sun spun off from the mother ship. Maybe it’s not a bad idea for us to see if we can figure that out.”

“Done,” Nikki said. She glanced from me to the enormous shadow fortress that anchored the far end of the Strip, Prime Luxe. “You going to see Mr. Big?”

I nodded. “He has to know everything that went on with this night, if he sent Gamon to stop me and allowed Viktor to get as far as he did. He’s peeling back the veils of everything the Shadow Court and I guess maybe the Star is trying to keep hidden. I think he believes he just needs to stay one or two steps ahead of them to win. But I’m beginning to have my doubts that that’s the best strategy.”

“I’m pretty much voting for team Sara on this one,” Nikki said, and Nigel grunted his agreement.

“All right, choppity choppity,” Nikki continued. “We’re heading back to Justice Hall by way of the Flamingo, I think. I need a drink. Those complaints against the Council have been sitting up in that mausoleum for six thousand years. They can wait another couple of hours.”

I laughed. “Truer words were never spoken. Get some rest after those drinks, okay?”

I hadn’t gone more than a few steps, however, when I felt someone coming up behind me. On a crowded night on the Strip, this wasn’t an unusual feeling, but this was no ordinary gambler, as I realized when she reached my side. Death’s steps were long and certain, her body lithe and hard. Cool reassurance radiated from her in all directions—not the comforting reassurance that everything was going to be okay, but the understanding that it wasn’t going to be okay, it was simply going to be.

“War is coming,” she said.

Of all the things I anticipated her saying, that...wasn’t one of them.

I slanted her a quick glance, taking in her sharp, fair features. Death wasn’t a conventionally beautiful woman, but you couldn’t help noticing her, with her long, straight nose, chiseled features, and the shock of white-blonde hair she wore swept over one side of her head and shaved along the other. She was famous among certain circles as a tattoo artist and an airbrush specialist, and she looked the part tonight with her black leather jacket hung loose over a gray tank, beat-up jeans, and black boots. She ambled easily, her hands in her pockets, and she looked neither happy nor sad.

War is coming. The clattering slot machines seemed to take up the cadence as we passed the open doors of a casino. War always comes.

“Okay...” I allowed. “Will I know that war when I see it?”

She chuckled a little grimly. “You’re already in the thick of it. I’ve been watching for a long time, yet it never seems enough years pass between the great upheavals. The hubris of the old is that they think that no one ever watches them, that no one truly sees. But what they forget is that all humans die. They are but a spark of life that breaks free upon this plane, surges to varying heights, and then dissolves. Some of those flames flash quick and hot, some linger over decades. A few, a very few, linger over centuries. But all humans die. Only immortals know what it’s like to pass the natural arc of a lifetime and still find yourself standing. You may yet see the future beyond your normal span. Possibly.”

“I’m not sure I’m really excited about the fact you can’t say that with a little more certainty,” I said, going for sardonic but ending up sounding a bit dismayed. The truth was, I felt dismayed. This cozy audience had all sorts of doom and gloom attending it, and there was a knot growing in my stomach so heavy, it reminded me of the Star of Arabia stone from the bad old days. “You can see the future, can’t you?”

“I can see death,” she corrected. “But the death I see does change. Humans, mortal or otherwise, have the capacity to cause that change. Generally speaking, anyway. But there comes a time when so many lifetimes have been lived that the psyche becomes more fragile, more easily broken. Sometimes it’s an obvious break, and sometimes it’s calcified in such a way that it becomes a thing of beauty, hard and crystalline, with no outward indication of the chaos within.”

“Cut the crap,” I said abruptly. “Does Armaeus die? Does somebody else close to me? Is that what you’re warning me about?”

Death’s smile was sad. “Oh, Sara Wilde, I regret to inform you that you will know the deaths of those you love over and over again. You’ve seen it already so many times, and you’ll continue to see it. That’s not why I’m here this night, though. It’s not my place to warn people of the deaths that come for them. Not bodily deaths, anyway.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, because I was an adult like that. “I find myself wondering why you can’t just come out and tell me directly whatever’s on your mind. I didn’t think anybody constrained Death.”

She lifted a shoulder, dropped it. “The discipline of long experience.”

Yeah. I couldn’t argue that. A soft wind had picked up as we passed darker alleyways, heading for the far end of the Strip, where the Magician’s fortress loomed large.

“I’ve found that when people know what’s coming, they change its course,” Death continued. “It’s why they’ve sought out diviners of the future all these centuries untold. Not because they wish to know what’s going to happen to them, but because they wish to control it. I’ve found I’m not immune to that desire as well. But I’ve seen more than people think. I’ve seen them when they weren’t looking. I’ve gone between the planes and found the truth embedded in the very stones.”

“You’re talking about the In Between,” I said, remembering those dark passageways I’d stumbled into in Ireland, searching for yet another truth, trying to hold off yet another war and only partially succeeding, given that we were at its doorstep once again. I sighed. “Look, I know you want me to figure something out, but it’s been a really, really long day. What do I need to know?”

Death laughed softly. Then she seemed to take pity on me as we came around the curve of Las Vegas Boulevard, and drew closer to the Luxor casino, atop which the Magician’s fortress soared. “It’s important for you to be strong when facing death, especially those you don’t expect. But it’s perhaps more important to know that no one ever really dies, Sara. Our time on this earth is but a blink, except when it isn’t.”

“Okay, well, if your intention was to freak me out, congratulations. You succeeded,” I groused. Death shook her head.

“Of all places it could go, the Council came to Vegas to ground its power into the deepest, darkest magic it could find. And now we’re almost all but complete here.”

“Well, sort of,” I said. “We’ve got the Moon set free, but we don’t know where she is, and God knows about the—”

But Death waved a hand, silencing me. “To fight this war, there will be death and there will be transformation. Be at peace, Justice, and let what happens happen. But please, know this. Of all the Council members, you have the ability to cause the greatest destruction, a perfect storm of alchemical retribution. Don’t use it.”

I stared at her, wanting to deny what she was saying, but more nervous about why she was saying it. “Um, seriously. Who’s going to die?” I asked again.

Death only smiled at me. “Everyone dies, if they’re lucky,” she murmured.

And then she slipped away into the night.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

I entered the Luxor casino the conventional way. I had been to the Magician's office often enough that there was no need for me to use regular elevators to reach him, but there was something comforting about availing myself of the trappings of normal society, especially in the wake of Death's ominous sidebar.

She was trying to warn me without warning me, alarm me without unnerving me, I suspected. Um, yeah. That hadn't worked. I chewed on my thoughts as I strode into the brass-and-glass glitter bomb of the Luxor's foyer, then edged past a crowd of carousing midlife crises to the slender onyx elevator bay that most people couldn't see because they weren't Connected. Or at least, they weren't willing to access the Connected part of their minds enough. I lifted my hand and heard a startled gasp.

I looked up to see a young attendant in a Luxor uniform standing with a tablet in one hand, his gaze fixed on me, his brows tenting over his horn-rimmed glasses.

"That's an elevator door," he said, tilting his head and frowning. "But that's not where the elevators are. That's not how..."

I blinked, but before I could explain, he shook his head, his face clearing.

"I'm so sorry. I thought I was seeing things. I pulled a double shift. I'm just tired, I think. I apologize."

I opened my mouth and closed it again, wanting to reassure him what he'd seen was real. But then what? What could I offer this young man to take him to the next step...?

He turned away, but not before I'd lifted a hand to stall him, sending out the slightest pulse. His mind responded, reaching back to me, a quickening in his energy indicating there definitely was Connected ability here, even if it was buried deep.

Before I even registered what I was doing, I imagined the business card into my hand, with a single name on it. NIKKI DAWES. No number, of course, was required, at least not in Vegas.

I blinked. I'd thought to recommend this young man to Dixie Quinn, the unofficial den mother of Vegas, who was used to shepherding the Connected who came to this city without friends or community into the existing family of psychics. But I didn't mind Nikki being on this card, actually. She was fabulous in every circumstance, and she would be fabulous in this as well. I handed the young man the card. He took it, seeming a little confused at anything so analog.

"If you ever think you see something again, and you want to talk to someone about it, call her. She'll help you out."

He flipped the card and glanced down at it. To my surprise, his brows lifted.

"Nikki Dawes," he said with a smile. "She runs the new show at the Flamingo. She's total fire."

I nodded, happy that anyone shared my opinion of my best friend, which of course, was richly deserved. "She is awesome," I agreed. "You should talk to her sometime."

"I will," he said, then he turned around, holding the card tightly as he hurried off, as if prolonging the conversation with me might somehow dim the magic of the moment.

I watched him as I stepped into the elevator bay, until the doors whooshed shut.

The elevator climbed past several floors, then shot straight up for another few heartbeats, to wherever in his fortress the Magician was. I thought of the young worker downstairs. It wasn't the first time I'd been faced with the reality of Connected abilities and people who had no idea what to do with them. The hunters were one thing—they knew things, and binding them to me had been a smart move. But a total innocent? Someone who didn't know what they were capable of?

Was it so wrong to want to encourage those abilities? I mean, who got to make that choice? The mortals who wanted to access their Connected capacity, or those who already were skilled in their arts, and who maybe didn't want the competition?

The Shadow Court had betrayed itself by wanting to eliminate the lower tiers of Connecteds while elevating the higher ones for its own purposes, but how much better was the Council, who was content to let these low-level Connecteds find their own path, without any direction or intervention? There had to be a better way.

I was still deep in the throes of this thought process when the doors opened onto a new vista, but one so confusing, I remained inside the elevator bay for a moment longer, peering around. Because we were outside. The elevator had opened up to reveal a deep forest glade, clearly sometime in the spring, as petals spilled lazily from overlaid branches that were gentled by a soft breeze. I didn't know this place, so it was probably just as well I hadn't tried to beam myself directly into the Magician's office. Because that wasn't what this was.

"Miss Wilde." The Magician's voice carried to me as if from a great distance. I stepped into the forest, setting my teeth as the elevator doors snicked shut behind me and the unit disappeared.

"Ah...hello?" I offered, taking a few experimental steps forward. I wondered for a second if this was an elaborate illusion, but if it was, it was top-notch. The ground was remarkably spongy beneath my boots, the air was redolent with the smell of thick

vegetation and humidity. I could hear water burbling somewhere nearby, and all around me was lush, verdant forest.

“To your right,” the Magician offered, and I obligingly turned, blinking as a path opened in the woods, clear now that I was looking at it, and in the distance, a flash of color. A crimson robe, I decided, my brows lifting. Okayyy...

Odd, Armaeus generally favored expensive business suits. I headed his way, surprised and a little unnerved to catch the sound of his low chant as I approached. The Magician of the Arcana Council was a wizard of some renown, of course, and deep sorcery was his bag, but I never really thought of him as Dumbledore. Clearly, I needed to reassess.

I emerged from the forest to see him standing in front of a flickering fire that danced with multicolored sparks. His hands stretched out, and between them swirled a glittering orb of mist, small crackles of electricity flashing from its depths.

“Do I want to know?” I asked when the Magician didn’t at first turn to me.

“You do,” he said, but he spoke the words in my mind even as he continued his low chant. “You have done a great thing, Miss Wilde. We have done a great thing. The ramifications of which I’m still trying to sort through.”

“Okay,” I said aloud, shifting over to the right, where a low wooden bench sat, apparently waiting for an expectant audience. I was more than happy to oblige it. I settled on the bench as Armaeus lifted his hands and widened them slightly, the balloon of smoke and electricity expanding along with it.

“The Moon is not the sorcerer I expected,” he said. “She is weaker in some ways, not tethered to reality. But her command of her magic is extensive. She is pure nascent power. The kind of power that can break a soul as well as a mind. The kind of power

that hearkens back to the dawn of the world, when the gods were first corralled.”

I thought about that. “That might explain why she decided to closet herself in Atlantis.”

The Magician nodded. “It also explains why she was so heavily sought out once a hint of her location was revealed.”

“Through Simon’s beacons,” I said.

“Yes. We weren’t the only ones who realized what he’d uncovered. I didn’t foresee that, in tracking the most powerful magic in the world, he might unwittingly clue our enemies into that which should have remained hidden.”

I straightened, a zip of anxiety darting down my spine. “What do you mean?”

“I mean we’ve come full circle. Great magic has been released with the event of the Moon coming out from behind the clouds, magic that opens up the eyes of the blind, whispers words into the ears of the deaf, awakens a magic heretofore unexpected.”

“Um...seriously?” I asked, suddenly alarmed. No wonder Death was so keyed up. “You mean by the Moon leaving Atlantis to come here, she’s tripped some kind of magical power trigger?”

He nodded. “She’s tripped several triggers. At least she has in me. In you as well, I suspect. Which is important, since I’ve tripped a few other triggers already.”

I blinked, glancing down at myself. I didn’t look any different, but as to how I felt...

“Ah... Like what triggers, specifically?”

Armaeus drew in a deep satisfied breath. “For you? I don’t fully know. For me? It’s

far easier. I've been restored, Miss Wilde. To the magician I was prior to ascending to the Council, and the Magician I became at my height of power. A reset button has been pressed, you might say."

"Well...good. We need you at full strength if this war that Death spoke about is at our doorstep." My mind turned again to the coming fight between the Shadow Court and the Council. First, we needed to secure the Moon, and then find the Star. Maybe if both of them added their strength to the Council instead of against it, we could finally rout the power behind the Shadow Court for good. But if either of them were in league against us...

"Ah yes, Death," the Magician mused, drawing my attention again. "There's much she still hides, despite the illumination of the Moon. The Moon can't shed light on the In Between, or on the knowledge learned there, after all."

"Yeah? Can she shed light on who the hell is behind all this? Like maybe who's running the Shadow Court?" I asked, a little more sharply than I intended. "Because that would be super useful."

The Magician turned to me, and something in his expression made me stiffen in surprise. There was a wonder to his features, as if he'd been holding off on looking at me, and now that he had, it was everything he'd hoped it might be, and more. A rush of warmth flowed through me, and I unaccountably wanted to cry.

"Um...Armaeus?"

"Miss Wilde," he whispered, as if the words were a benediction. Then he swallowed, visibly trying to control himself, and continued. "To answer your question, I don't know who the Star is. However, I don't believe it will take long for her or him to make themselves known. The Moon is already creating ripples of power starting here and farther north, echoing through the desert, the canyons, the mountains. The Star

will need to make its move quickly. When it does, everything may change. As farseeing as I am, a full 87.6% of outcomes during these next few weeks point to the eradication of the Council and the death of several of its members.”

“What? What are you talking about?” Death’s words came rushing back to me, but I shook my head. “No. No, nobody’s going to die, Armaeus. That’s not going to happen. The Council has to be in place to handle what’s to come. There has to be the balance.”

He eyed me with more than a little amusement, but there was a gentleness to his gaze that made me more worried, not less. “That sounds like something I should have said, not you. You’re evolving into your own definition of Justice—but your definition is not necessarily the right one for all people.”

“Well, I’m damn sure right about this,” I countered. “You’re not going to die. If you think you set that idea up with your little stunt in the airplane on our way back from New Jersey, I’m here to tell you that it’s not going to work.”

“There’s more to your response than what I’ve given you,” Armaeus murmured. “I’ve come to realize that too.” He flicked a hand, and a spray of cards flashed into the midst of the smoke, one of them, of course, catching my eye. Death.

“What is Death but transformation?” he asked, and he looked at me with a glance that should have warmed me to my toes but suddenly reminded me of the Armaeus I’d known and been thoroughly irritated by for way too many years. The Armaeus of old who might have loved me, did love me, but who nevertheless studied me like I was a bug all too often.

The Armaeus who’d known me through and through.

Who maybe...knew me again?

My breath caught in my throat. “You have your memories again?” I whispered. “Your memories of me?”

All at once, my heart thudded heavily to the side, my senses reeling as my brain struggled to catch up with my thundering emotions. I didn’t need Armaeus to confirm my question. I knew—I knew. A dam of grief, fear, doubt, hope suddenly broke into pieces within me, and I shuddered, not knowing whether I should shout or cry or burst into hysterical laughter. I had never realized how tight the grip was I’d held on myself until I suddenly could—let it go.

Let it all go.

Would that—could it ever be possible? When the torrent subsided, could I...could we?

My mind and heart screamed together like coeds at a slumber party, and I felt the sting of tears desperate to sluice down my face, the need for my entire body to collapse—and yet I didn’t speak, I barely even breathed, but something of my internal war must have betrayed itself, because Armaeus closed his eyes as if the moment was too much for him to face and nodded. “My memories of you, yes. And, too, your memories of us. Even those you once hoped I’d never know.”

Opening his eyes again, he widened the distance between his palms, and the cloud of smoke grew bigger, the swirling mist settling on two figures that turned into a full-fledged scene—the Magician and me standing against a villa built along the side of a mountain, overlooking a blue-green ocean.

My heart jerked again, my own eyes flying wide. “Armaeus?”

“Sara.” He moved toward me, and I stood in the same movement, the two of us meeting as the illusion-balloon expanded, swirling around us in a rush of cards and

smoke, and then suddenly, a light, playful breeze against a sun-drenched clear blue sky. We stood on the terrace I'd watched him build brick by brick, the home we'd lived a lifetime in while I'd been in Hell, trapped in an illusion orchestrated by Sariah that had been the height of cruelty when Armaeus had died in my arms at the end of his long life, before he'd disappeared and Sariah had revealed the trick for what it was. Only now, Armaeus stood before me, his golden eyes soft with emotion, his hands clasping mine to his heart.

"All the wounds you've suffered because of me, and this one I didn't even know," he murmured. "I don't deserve your love, Miss Wilde. You don't deserve the path your connection with me takes you down, over and over again. But for as long as you will have me, I am yours. You will never pass a moment without knowing I'm with you, body and soul, in this plane and in all others."

I tried to speak, but I couldn't get the words past my throat the first time. "This better not be some metaphysical bullshit," I finally said, my teeth chattering. "I don't want you in my mind or in my heart, Armaeus. I want you living, breathing, and fighting beside me. It's nonnegotiable. I'm the fucking Justice of the Arcana Council."

"You are that," he agreed, his words as gentle as the sun on the shimmering sea. "And I am yours."

I still didn't believe him, not completely, but a second later, I didn't care. He dropped his lips to mine, brushing a kiss against my mouth, igniting all the memories we'd shared, memories he could remember now too. From the very first time he'd contacted me for my services in Rio to our disastrous early attempts at understanding the magic between us, to our rush and tumble flirtation that had quickly caught fire, and everything that came after. He was here. He was back with me, and when I reached out for him, I realized with surprise that wasn't the only thing that had changed.

“Armaeus, the network of energy within you is different. You’re different.”

“I am different,” he agreed. “The return of the Moon is triggering all sorts of changes. Not every person is willing to make the leap naturally. Some need a little more help—but serious changes are stirring within the warp and weft of the world. And within any of the Connecteds who have eyes to see.”

I leaned back from him, studying him narrowly. “The guy in the lobby. You sent him?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t have to send him, but I sensed your work with him. Your outreach despite yourself. The balance you seek becomes ever more precarious, but I no longer have to worry about that. I only have to worry about you.”

He pulled me into his arms and, turning, laid me down on a wide teak chaise that overflowed with cushions. A chaise that hadn’t been there a second before.

“Cheater,” I murmured. But I couldn’t deny how good it felt to have his arms around me, to feel his strength alongside mine. The grip I had on my emotions fractured further, and I sank against him, glorying in the simple ability to let go...with perhaps the only man on this world or any other I could. The only man who could be safe with me—and who I could give everything to, body and soul, without fear of it being too much. This was Armaeus, the Magician, the man. This was Armaeus...mine.

“Merely decorating,” Armaeus countered, though his voice fractured a bit, and I knew he was following my thoughts, my emotions, as keenly as I was following his. Before I could say anything else, the world shifted around us, the fabric of reality disintegrating as if it were returning to pure magic and possibility, and in this world, in the heart of his magic, it was.

A moment later, we were both undressed, and Armaeus bent over me, his fingertips

igniting whirls of sensation as he traced the curve of my breast, my waist, my hips, his eyes devouring every inch of me, as if he'd never seen me before.

“It is different, knowing everything again, knowing what you and I lived in this place,” Armaeus whispered. “I missed the gift of a lifetime with you. A lifetime of us together. What wonders you created in your own mind for us to share! Far beyond whatever spells I could have woven, beyond the dreams I would have dreamed for us. A gift, a blessing, and one I never thought I would deserve.”

There in the shadow of a villa he'd never built, on stones he'd never set into the hillside, I no longer totally understood what was real, what was imagined. Armaeus and I hadn't spent this lifetime together, had we? If I could remember it and he could remember it, did that mean it had actually happened? What was life anyway but a shared experience on a given plane of existence? Who were we to determine which planes mattered more than others?

“I could make you forget the rest,” Armaeus whispered, and I knew what he meant. The hideous moment when I watched him grow old and die in my arms, a sight I didn't think I could ever unsee.

To my surprise, though, I didn't want to unsee it. It made what was happening now all the more impossibly precious.

“No,” I murmured back, drawing him close, feeling his warmth surround me as he held me tight, real and vital, present and true. “Let's just make new memories.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

Islept like the dead.

Armaeus had to have swept us out of time for a period, because when my phone pinged again, waking up was like coming out of a deep fog. We were no longer in an anonymous Mediterranean retreat perched on the side of a mountain, but in Armaeus's expensive bed in Prime Luxe. Not a bad trade-up, I decided as I snuggled down deeper into the sheets.

Then my phone pinged again. I opened one eye malevolently, glaring at the nightstand. "What time is it?"

Armaeus stirred. "It's going on midnight," he murmured.

I groaned. No good messages came in after midnight. They were either bad ideas waiting to happen, or bad ideas that had already played out. I rolled toward him, wanting to shut out either possibility for a few seconds more. "Do you already know what it's about?" I asked.

"It is almost certainly related to the influx of new energy that's flooding the Flamingo," Armaeus said, sounding profoundly unconcerned. I jerked upright, rolling away from him, and swiped my phone on.

"What kind of new energy? Nikki's there, and so is Nigel, or they were a few hours ago. Are they getting targeted? What's going on?" As I asked all these completely reasonable questions, I checked my messages. Nikki's was the most recent one.

Strangers at the Flamingo, dollface. Stranger than usual. Thought you should know.

“Well, she doesn’t seem all that worried,” I allowed.

“She wouldn’t be concerned. Nikki has never met a stranger that stayed that way for long.”

Then he sat up as well, stretching luxuriously, my eye greedily following the line of his chest and abs as the sheets fell away from his body. He truly was a beautiful man. Demigod. Whatever.

“Speaking of that, so you’re shipshape right?” I asked. “With the Moon revealing herself, I get that you have your memories back, but you didn’t lose anything in the transfer, did you?”

He eyed me with affection, but he didn’t pull his usual inscrutability act. “I did not,” he said frankly. “The release of the Moon has made that which is hidden clear to those from whom it was being obscured. Those who are already seeing clearly might have some issues, as their vision is obscured or colored with moonlit fantasy, but that’s never been much of a concern for me.”

“Moonlit fantasy,” I echoed. “Deliberate or delusional?”

“Delusion is often in the mind of the observer, not necessarily the beholder,” Armaeus said. “What I may believe is a foolish assumption on your part, you may subscribe to with such force that it overrides any rational truth. The time for great clarity is coming, but before that’s possible, all potential paths will seem viable to those who long for them.”

I blew out a long breath. It had been so nice, that scrutability, while it had lasted.

“So you’re saying we’re about to have some epic cases of the grass is always greener?” I asked, immediately seeing the problem with that. The lines of power were

changing in the Arcana Council, and with this group, more was always better.

Armaeus nodded. “When anything seems possible, that which is practical loses some of its appeal,” he said. “Something to watch out for.”

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood, unsurprised to see that I was dressed once again, though at least in new clothes. I surveyed the sleek black pants, black vest, and black hoodie, all in a light, adventure-ready fabric that I suspected they didn’t sell at REI.

“What’s this all about?” I asked, extending a foot to survey the sleek leather boot that covered it.

Armaeus shrugged. “War is coming, Miss Wilde. It would be best to dress the part.”

He stood, and I took in his own dark pants, sleek shirt, and heavy boots, all in deepest ebony.

“We’re going to look like SWAT,” I complained as he moved toward me, his body already growing more diffuse, mist billowing out around us with a surge of magic.

“Considering who will be watching, I’d suggest that’s not a bad thing.”

He wrapped his arms around me and we vanished into the night.

A breath later, we appeared on the dance floor at the Flamingo casino, and I blinked at the transformation in the place even from the last time I’d seen it. In an unreasonably short time, the stage at the far end of the room had been transformed into a technological wonder, with glittering lights, a full-on DJ station, and special effects that included cannons shooting glitter that somehow managed to explode into the air without ever landing on the dancers or the floor. The Devil’s illusions at work,

to a degree I'd never seen before.

He and Nikki might not be an item, exactly, but they certainly were a partnership to be reckoned with.

"Dollface!" Nikki said, surprisingly close. I turned to see her break away from Nigel and a small collection of dancers. As she strolled toward me through the crowd, I noticed she'd changed clothes too. I suspected she kept an entire clothing suite at the Flamingo, given her new role as mistress of ceremonies there. Now she wore a deep-cut silver-sequin dress that hugged her from shoulders to waist and then trailed down one side of her body, a thigh-high slit on the other leg allowing easy movement. Her boots were a sight to behold, tight black leather that stretched up to her knees, studded with a line of rhinestones down her shapely calf. They were heavier duty than her usual stiletto numbers, and I thought of the Magician's warning. Nikki was dressed to party, but she was absolutely ready for whatever direction that party took.

"So what have we got?" I asked as she approached.

"You ask me, we got werewolves." Nikki's smile was wide but a little hard. "Werewolves, ThunderCats, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, I don't know what they are, but there is something decidedly hinky about the strapping group of gorgeous ballers that just hit the Flamingo. Like it amped our level of hot to the stratosphere, and I'm not talking the casino at the wrong end of the Strip."

"She's right." A man threading his way through the crowd in a waiter's uniform morphed smoothly into his more usual form of Kreios as he reached us, all long, tawny hair, sun-kissed face, and easy smile. Tonight he was dressed in a business suit, its sleek lines whispering along his tautly muscled body like a second skin. "I haven't been on this Earth as long as you, Armaeus, but I have never encountered creatures like these before. Have you?"

Armaeus shot him a questioning glance, and Kreios nodded off to the right. While the Magician glanced over with casual curiosity, I swung that direction a little more slowly, well aware we might be under surveillance as well.

I needn't have bothered. The tight knot of men near the bar were laughing and passing around drinks like frat boys at a keg party.

They were also tall, broad, and bulky, with enough wildness about them that I could absolutely understand why Nikki decided they were wolves in human clothing. I didn't necessarily recognize them as the Moon's honor guard, but I didn't not recognize them either. They definitely seemed...familiar.

Armaeus's brows arched, and despite his shit-kicker attire, he once more looked like the intrigued professor greeted with a new puzzle to solve.

"Definitely wolf," he murmured. "All the same...breed, I guess you would say. Certainly deeply attached to each other. There are no others with a similar energy to them lurking close."

"So are they like demons?" I asked quietly. "Able to assume a guise that humans can tolerate without losing their marbles?"

"No, they are a true dual nature," Kreios corrected as the Magician nodded. "Both man and supernatural creature at once. These aren't true wolves—or humans turned wolf. That's not how it works. They are magical constructs, not traditional flesh and blood and bone. They may bleed and die like an animal if they're caught in that form—or like a human if they fall while in that guise—but they are an entity unto themselves, not some sort of human hybrid."

"So you're saying they can't turn one of my girls," Nikki said wryly. "'Cuz I gotta tell you, I've already had a couple of volunteers."

The Devil laughed, but when he returned his gaze to us, his face was set. “They are here for a reason. It’s in each of their minds so strongly that I don’t have to make any effort to pull it out.” He flicked a glance to Nikki. “You know it too, yes?”

“The ring,” she said, making me blink as she turned my way. “You still have it, don’t you, Sara?”

“I...” Belatedly, I patted my pockets, not surprised but still relieved to feel the ring’s comforting weight tucked near my kidney. Of course, the Magician wouldn’t have omitted that detail in dressing me. He was nothing if not thorough. “Why that after all the junk people hauled to Atlantis? All of it worked to get us to her.”

“All of it worked to open the door, but not all of it was originally the Moon’s,” The Devil said. “Apparently, she wants her ring back, and they have the skills to find it. Therefore, they’re risking detection by moving in the open. Not wise, but it would seem that what the Moon wants...”

Because I still had my gaze trained on the creatures, I could see what he meant. A few of them had stopped laughing quite so broadly, had started looking around with an air of intensity. Not all of them, though. Others were staring openly at a knot of sequin-covered dancers swaying to the music. Nikki’s troupe, I recognized immediately, statuesque bombshells in gowns that lit up the room with their vibrant colors. They attracted the attention of the shifters more than anyone else in the room, which was not to say the other humans were completely escaping the shifters’ notice. A pulse of pheromones rolled through the space, strong enough to catch me up short as Nikki straightened.

“Hold the phone,” she muttered, waving a hand in front of her face. “What’s the sudden influx of he-man body spray all about? My eyes are watering.”

“We don’t know anything about how these warriors fight,” the Magician murmured.

“You should have a care. If they’re asserting their strength, setting the ground rules, if you will, on a primal level, they could be about to strike.”

“If you’re telling me they’re about to mark their territory, I’m flat-out going to go ballistic,” Nikki advised him. “That level of personal expression may fly where they come from, but it’s not working here. We just polished the floor, for criminy’s sake.”

“We can’t help you,” Armaeus said, his expression going sharp as his eyes deepened in color, drifting into the inky blackness that revealed he was accessing particularly murky magical thoughts. “The Council cannot interfere with these agents of the Moon if we don’t want to betray our true strength. Not yet. There is still too much we don’t understand.”

“Yeah, well. Lucky for us, we don’t need you,” Nikki said. “Dollface, let’s go. You boys stay here.”

She spun away, and I blinked for a moment at Kreios and Armaeus. The Magician’s brows were tented in rapt fascination, while the Devil merely smiled.

“If I’d understood how delicious Nikki Dawes would be in a position of power, I would have made sure to arrange it long ago,” Kreios purred.

I turned quickly to catch up with Nikki, matching her long flowing strides as best I could. She caught the attention of, well, the pack before she was halfway across the room—and particularly the largest member of their group, who I now recognized as the warrior Torsten. All dark-eyed, dark-haired badass with sharp features and an iron jaw, he nodded first to Nikki, then to me as we approached. He wore similar gear to his buddies—scuffed leather jacket, thick, no-nonsense jeans, a T-shirt in a neutral shade. His feet were wrapped in heavy-soled motorcycle boots.

“You guys raid a Harley-Davidson store before you got here?” Nikki quipped, with

such brash challenge that despite her innocuous words, the man stiffened. Man? Wolf? Whatever he was.

“You protect this place?” he asked, and I nearly rocked back on my heels at the strange resonance to his voice, a low murmuring rumble not unlike a growl, though his words were easily audible despite the banging music.

“You bet your sweet ass I do,” Nikki confirmed, her bright smile hard in the glittering lights. “And I know trouble when I see it. I’m just here to give you all the friendly suggestion not to start it here. It’s Torsten, right? You’re part of the Moon’s honor guard.”

The man regarded her with cool appraisal, taking in her curves, her muscles, and her muscular curves. His nostrils practically flared with awareness, and I could feel the heat of his quickening interest. The stench of testosterone shot straight past He-Man and well into Max Alpha territory.

“I am Torsten,” he finally acknowledged, giving Nikki the barest nod, though his gaze remained sharp, assessing.

“Great. I’m Nikki.” She held out a hand, her lacquered nails gleaming silver in the shimmering lights, looking remarkably like claws. Torsten and the two men flanking him noticed, and it was a long, awkward moment before he reached for her hand. When he shook it, Nikki’s grin tightened slightly. “I mean what I say, Torsten,” she advised, with a tone that brooked no bullshit. “You want to tell the Justice of the Arcana Council why you’re really here, or should I?”

I watched this exchange with keen interest. Nikki’s particular ability was to read the memories of anyone she touched—not the truth, necessarily, but the truth as the person she was interviewing saw it.

Torsten slanted his glance to me. “The Moon has had something taken from her. She wants it back—now—and she believes it’s likely you know where it is. Tell us, and we will recover it. You don’t know what powers you’re playing with. You can’t protect her. You can’t even protect yourself.”

I bristled. “And maybe you don’t know who I am.”

“Oh, he thinks he knows,” Nikki drawled. “He thinks he knows that the Arcana Council is weak and not to be trusted. That you’re a member of the Council, and by some stroke of dumb luck, you helped to free the Moon. And that you’re tangled up in a problem that’s way over your head, because you’re just a girl.” She narrowed her gaze at Torsten. “How am I doing so far?”

Torsten blinked, then set his jaw, clearly taken aback by Nikki’s tone. “The Moon has ancient enemies, and they too want her ring—are desperate for it. We sense them coming even if you don’t. They are massing for an attack even now, which means you must have the item she seeks. Celestine sent us here to protect you.”

“Oh, bullshit.” Nikki waved him off. “You were sent to intimidate Justice Wilde into giving you what you want, full stop.”

Torsten’s eyes flashed, and he smiled, all teeth. “Your defiance is misplaced. We’re here to help you.”

“Fantastic. You can help us by leaving.” Nikki gestured toward the front of the casino. “Now would be good.”

Torsten chuckled with what sounded—almost—like regret. “Unfortunately, that’s not possible. Instead, we’re about to tear this place apart—now, I think.”

He jerked his hand forward, as if punching the air, and the men around him leapt into

action.

Nikki whirled toward the dozen or so of her troupe who had assembled behind us and cried out simultaneously, “Go!”

The Flamingo lit up.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

Nikki swung back around as the pack of men exploded in all directions, two jumping over the bar to start smashing everything in sight, more scattering through the crowd, pushing and shoving. She didn't ask for an explanation, she just led with her fists, decking Torsten flush across the jaw with all the power of her outrage and former fighting expertise as a cop. The guy dropped like a sack of stones, visibly startling the two men flanking him, who leapt for Nikki with snarls of outrage.

A throaty scream sounded from somewhere in the center of the room, and Nikki jolted. "Sherry!" she gasped, her momentary distraction all that was needed to give the men opposite her the upper hand, I bolted forward to blast them into the next dimension, but Armaeus's sudden warning shattered my eardrums from the inside out.

"No," he commanded, and a moment later, he was at my side. "This fight is hers, Miss Wilde. It's important."

I jerked my gaze to Armaeus's face, taking in the fact that his eyes had gone completely black, only the barest hint of gold visible at their edges. He was channeling deep magic, which was the only reason I didn't move. But when two other members of Torsten's little biker gang attempted to join the "let's beat up on Nikki" party before she could recover her balance, he nodded, and I channeled my frustration into singeing their hair off with a couple of well-placed firebolts.

With that, the fight was on. Nikki's troupe of showgirls gave as good as they got, wading in with fists flying even though I noticed with grudging appreciation that Torsten's boy band didn't so much fight as shove and herd the shouting throng toward the entryways. They swarmed up on the stage, playing the part of Hulk

Smash, but I got the feeling even that was mostly for show. Why were they making such a racket? And for whom? I turned and found Kreios watching it all from his position in the center of the room. He nodded as if to confirm my own suspicions.

This was a demonstration of some sort. Maybe an alarm going up? Some kind of alert or announcement—or maybe even a dinner bell?

It didn't take long for the truth to come out—because it literally burst through the walls.

With an unearthly shriek, a veritable horde of demons hit the dance floor and exploded into action. The few non-Connecteds who remained in the room screamed in terror, while Nikki and Nigel continued to fight, merely changing their targets as Torsten's crew also turned to attack the new danger. Both Armaeus and the Devil moved into action, but not to affect the fighting on the floor, merely to help get the humans out of harm's way. Armaeus was holding to his position that the Council shouldn't—couldn't interfere. Not yet, anyway.

Kreios swept up a couple of hard-charging bombshells who barely had a hair on their wigs out of place despite the fact their knuckles were bruised and bleeding. They clung to him with wide grins, as one after the other he ushered them out of the room. But there were too many humans compared to demons, I knew in a blink. This wasn't going to end well.

I hated when I was right.

All at once, it was as if a command had been given, directing the demons to a new course of action. A particularly lousy one. In the space of a breath, they turned and, instead of attacking the humans outright swarming around them, they shifted closer, intimately close. A second later, there were no more demons in the room, only humans, who turned on each other and started fighting.

“You bastards,” Nikki howled.

Torsten struggled to his feet, and his men stared in patent shock as the humans turned on them and started kicking, punching, biting, flailing.

“How do we...” Torsten began, utterly confused.

“They’re possessed. You can’t kill them, but you can knock ’em out,” Nikki ordered, seamlessly taking command. “You each get one punch. You can’t get the job done in that time, you’re off the squad.”

The shifters roared with approval of this plan, and Nikki turned to the woman next to her, a knockout redhead in a bright green dress.

“Sorry, babe,” she said, and with a roundhouse punch, she dropped the woman to the ground. But what happened then shocked me even worse—the demon slid from the woman directly into Nikki, the violation of possession making Nikki’s hands go up to her own neck, as if she’d rather choke herself to death than be taken in such a way. She’d been possessed before, after all. She wasn’t a fan.

I leapt toward her, but I didn’t get far.

The demons inside the nearest humans howled, and then they rushed me. I wheeled back, confused, knowing that with my amped-up abilities, I stood more than a good chance of damaging their human hosts even if I succeeded in eradicating the demons within them.

“Miss Wilde,” the Magician shouted in my mind, but I was overrun. It was like being buried in a human tidal wave, a rush of heavy hands and fingers pawing over me, running through my hair, down my shirt, poking and prodding and prying. I figured out too late what they were after, of course, but it made no sense. Since when did

demons care about the baubles of humanity? The answer to that was: never.

My brain was still struggling to connect the dots even as I felt my jacket being ripped away.

“Let them take the ring,” Armaeus advised. “Demons are not ruled by the Moon.”

Well, whoever does rule them is going to get my foot in their ass, I thought right back to him, but I obligingly let my jacket flap open and felt the heavy weight of the ring get yanked from its pocket at last.

A keening cry of triumph spread throughout the room. The humans turned toward the door, protective meat sacks for the demons possessing them, but Kreios hadn't been idle. The room had shifted during the fight, and now there was only one exit—through the main doors.

Standing at those doors were the demon enforcers of the Syx. Their commander, the Hierophant, might not have put in an appearance, but that didn't mean his enforcers couldn't be put to the task.

“Leave the humans behind, safe and sound,” Warrick announced. “Or end up as an oily streak on the floor. Your choice.”

One of the demons held up the oversized moon ring, howling with triumph. With another shrieking cry, the demons abandoned their human hosts, leaving them in sprawling piles as they shattered into nothing and disappeared in a blink back to wherever they'd come from.

Nikki slumped back, right into Torsten's arms. He took her weight easily and kept her from sinking to the floor.

“You never get used to that,” she muttered, her voice a throaty sigh that barely reached my ears. “I thought I’d gotten over it from the first time. No such luck.”

My heart twisted. I remembered when Nikki’d been forcibly occupied by a demon, courtesy of Viktor Dal—it had been a bad, bad time. I wouldn’t wish that trial on anyone.

Torsten stood back and surveyed the room—the remaining Council members, Nigel and Nikki, the Syx. He bowed, this time more respectfully.

“It’s good to do battle again against dishonorable foes. It has been a long time,” he said.

Warrick of the Syx strode deeper into the room. “These demons weren’t controlled by a witch. Their commands went higher than that.”

“Humans?” the Magician asked sharply.

“I don’t think so,” spoke the second of the Syx, a blue-eyed charmer named Finn. “It felt slimier than that, and more powerful too. You got any of your Arcana Council members dabbling in demon magic? Because that shit ain’t gonna fly. We’ve got enough problems with idiot humans getting into that game.”

A third member of the Syx, his red eyes flashing over his cocky grin, held up a finger. “Well, technically, the shit just did—”

“Shut up, Stefan,” Warrick and Finn said together.

I’d recovered my jacket by this time, or what was left of it. Sure enough, the ring was gone.

“Why in the world would they care so much about that moon ring?” I muttered. “Roland wasn’t that good an artifact hunter. They could have taken it from him at any time.”

“Maybe when Roland had it, it wasn’t such an interesting item,” Armaeus said.

Torsten lifted his head, his brows furrowing. “That ring belongs to Celestine. She needs it. She wants it.”

“So, maybe the demons wanted the thing because the Moon did. But why?” Nigel asked. “They have no need of the world’s magic. Why would they care about this?”

“They wouldn’t,” the Magician said thoughtfully. “Which makes this all...very interesting.”

Torsten looked around, seeming to notice for the first time that the room had been set to rights. “We destroyed that entire wall,” he growled. “I enjoyed that.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you should be a little bit more discerning about the shit you decide to break,” Nikki advised. She straightened her sequined gown, somehow managing to look even more beautiful with a split lip and charred shoulders. “I know you guys have been stuck under a rock for a while, but even in Atlantis, they should have taught you better manners.”

Torsten stared at her in momentary confusion that only deepened as Nikki wiped her jaw and shook the blood from her fingers.

“You’re not afraid of us,” he said, then eyed the bombshell brigade now downing shots at the far bar. “None of your people are.”

“Child, my people could eat your people for lunch and still be hungry by happy

hour,” Nikki informed him, and he blinked again.

A new sound rang out, making me jump. It was shrill beeping, and Nikki cursed, plunging her hand into her bodice and pulling out her phone as Torsten’s eyes goggled.

“That’s Dixie,” she said, worry instantly crossing her face. “And it’s late. I’m not thinking there are any newlyweds lining up at the Chapel of Everlasting Love in the Stars at this hour.”

She swiped through what had to be other messages, her eyes shooting wide.

“She’s got company for sure.” Nikki scowled at Torsten, then me. “A woman with white hair, pale skin, big eyes, and not a stitch of clothing strolled into her chapel twenty minutes ago, she says, and now the place is surrounded by demons. She says it looks like they’re pals.”

The Syx disappeared in a rumble of colorful cursing.

“No, no, no, that can’t be right,” Torsten insisted, even as the Syx vanished. “Demons don’t attend the Moon. We had plenty of them in Atlantis. They’re like oil and water. They never cross paths with us if they can avoid it. Celestine cannot abide it. She would no sooner draw demons to her than she’d slit her own throat.”

He spoke with such sincerity it was impossible not to believe him. “Do we know anything about this Moon?” I demanded of Armaeus. “Is Dixie in danger?”

“I can tell you that the wards around Dixie’s chapel have been strengthened, easily ten times over,” the Magician said, sounding bemused. “Not by Simon either. Interesting...”

“Well, Death is right next door,” Nikki offered. “Maybe she gave Dixie an upgrade?”

“Perhaps,” the Magician allowed. “Either way, we should go. Now.”

And without another word, smoke billowed through the room, catching us all up in it.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

Nikki, Nigel, the weres, and I landed inside Dixie's chapel, in one of the small, sweetly decorated, vaguely official-looking rooms dedicated to launching the union of those hardy or foolhardy enough to begin their married life in Las Vegas. This particular antechamber was empty, but we could hear the demons howling outside the building. More alarmingly, bright light filled the space, as if the parking area between Dixie's chapel and the tattoo parlor across the way bristled with floodlights.

"Is that Celestine?" Nikki asked.

Torsten looked around with some confusion. "Probably. She can't abide being indoors." He strode up the slightly angled center aisle, clearly looking for a way out.

"She's got a lot of things she can't abide, seems like," Nikki observed drolly, but she headed out after him.

I noticed that, though the Magician had deposited us all inside, he wasn't with us. Neither was Kreios. I didn't wait around to think about what the implications of that might be, but hoped that they would jump into the fray sooner rather than later. I followed at the back of the pack, feeling weirdly like I shouldn't leave anyone behind. Who would I leave behind? Nikki was out, Nigel right beside her, Torsten's boy band on their heels. But as I cleared the doorway of the chapel, the feeling got even stronger.

Despite the urgency of getting outside, I slowed, letting the others pull ahead. I could hear the demons roar again, and Dixie's sharp cry of relief, probably as she saw Nikki and the others emerge. The demons' howls immediately stopped, and I wondered if the Syx had been brought to bear as well on the problem. They'd left before we did,

after all, and their mode of transportation was every bit as efficient as Armaeus's.

I strode past the closed door of Dixie's office, when a force of anger punched out at me, so strong it rattled my teeth and knocked me up against the wall.

Without even hesitating, I turned to her door to yank it open. It was locked, but I didn't have time to screw around. The urgency I'd felt was, well, urgent. My hands lit with fire, I blasted the doorknob open. The smoke cleared, and there was nothing different. No change.

What the...Armaeus said Dixie had upgraded her wards after a series of break-ins and mishaps, but I was Justice of the Arcana Council, not your average lockpicker. I channeled my energy and felt a current of awareness from outside the chapel. A shifting of focus, like the Eye of Sauron turning toward me. Panic flared through me, and I pushed every bit of power I could into the freaking door, this time blowing it off its hinges.

And nearly choked on my own scream.

Inside the office, Sariah lay stretched out, suspended from the ceiling by four thick cords she'd wound her hands and feet into, her body flayed open with a million cuts. She hung faceup over a bed of spiked nails, their tips crackling with fire. Sariah's back was a mass of scorch marks, her body healing new layers as fast as the fire could blast them off her. And she wasn't alone. A flat, thin pallet lay on top of her, and sprawled upon that were at least two adult-sized bodies and at least two smaller ones I could see. Corpses or knocked-out people, I couldn't tell. What was clear, though, was that they were only being kept out of the fire by Sariah's stubbornness to not let herself fall—or be burned to the point where her body disintegrated.

The innocents, I thought instantly, remembering Sariah's words at the pizzeria only a

few days ago. Not their battle to fight. Not their day to die. But how—why—?

Sariah jerked her face toward me, her eyes boiling with fury, and I didn't need any further explanation. I rushed forward with my hands blazing, my arms stretching out—and more too. I screamed as flaming wings broke free from my back, triggered by me drawing on my deepest magic. I swept the lot of them up, even as I knew this had to be a trap—a trap that'd been laid for me, not Sariah—or not only for her. The bed of nails exploded as I crashed through it, and though I transported all of us to the parking lot between Dixie's chapel and Death's tattoo parlor, I could feel my power being sucked away, ripped bodily from me.

Then we were in the parking lot. Sariah and what I suspected were a newlywed couple and their three small children, one little more than a baby, slammed against the front door of DarkWorks Ink—all of them except Sariah knocked out cold. The door opened instantly, and a shadowy figure yanked the family inside—Sariah too, I saw blearily. Good. I needed her safe. She had...she had done enough.

But I wasn't fully present in the parking lot. I was held in a position of stasis. I could see but not act. And what I was being shown made my blood run cold.

Dixie might have screamed when Nikki and the others had come out, but I understood now her cry hadn't been one of alarm or even dismay. She stood on a makeshift stage in the middle of the parking lot as if she was born to it, her petite, hourglass body wrapped in a white cowgirl dress that ended midthigh, paired with a petal pink cowboy hat, pink boots, and a jaunty pink scarf. Her broad smile lit up her face with pure, unadulterated joy, her blue eyes dancing, her blonde curls flowing gorgeously over her shoulder. She preened beside the cowering Moon, who blazed with frantic white light, and in her hand, she held the Moon's ring.

“Well then. If I had known that all it would take to lure you out of your little shell was a pretty trinket, I would have solved this problem a thousand years ago, darlin’,”

Dixie drawled, jolting me. She spoke with her habitual confidence, but there was something harder, even defiant gilding her tone now. “It would have saved us all a whole lot of trouble.”

Desperately, I peered through the smoke. Where was Armaeus or Kreios? Clearly, this was a bad situation—and in their own backyard! Why weren’t they stepping in?

The Syx also stood outside the ring of demons, their faces stoic and resolute, but they didn’t move. What the hell was everyone waiting for?

I scanned the crowd again and blinked. There weren’t any humans here, other than Dixie, Nikki, and Nigel. Otherwise, it was demons and shapeshifters, and those weren’t the kind of victims the Syx were called to protect.

I struggled against the miasma of smoke surrounding me. The Magician might not want to act, but I wasn’t the Magician. I didn’t know what game Dixie was playing, but it felt deeply wrong. Was she somehow channeling the deep energy of the Star? Was that what was happening here? Or was she...

No. Even as the idea slammed into me, I rejected it. Dixie couldn’t be the actual Star. There was no way. But the alternative wasn’t much better. Had she deceived us all and used our affection for her to deliver us on a platter to the most hidden Arcana Council member? Was that even possible?

“You can’t win.” The soft, plaintive cry came from a completely unexpected source. Beside the posturing Dixie, the Moon straightened, and I instantly saw what so enthralled her honor guard, despite her frailty. She was beautiful, of course, but that wasn’t it, exactly. The Moon seemed draped in a gossamer shimmer of wonder, radiant with the energy of pure potential, of planting and growing, flowering and transforming, the cycle continuing over and over again, time without time. When she looked at Dixie with deep and profound acceptance, a chill ran through me.

The Moon was psychic. She knew what was coming with some part of her fractured mind. Knew it and both welcomed and dreaded it at once, the sign of a Connected who had survived more lifetimes than anyone could count.

“Of course I’m going to win, sweetie,” Dixie cooed, and I searched her voice for the core essence of the being that was channeling itself through her. Was the Star, in truth, male or female? Or something else entirely? “You yourself beheld it, the glorious rise of the Star while all the Council tried so desperately to return the world to order after the fall of Atlantis. The Sun saw our chance to rule, but he told me to wait, to grow my strength. He didn’t tell me you would run away from the battle altogether. That surprised us all.”

Dixie lifted a lazy finger, curling it in a come-here gesture, and the nearest demons howled with salivating delight. One of them cracked a switch I hadn’t seen it was holding, and a mark appeared on the Moon’s forearm, her blood blue and shiny in the supernatural light surrounding her.

I jerked forward in anger, but I couldn’t move. Furious, I pushed out with my mind as hard as I could.

Armaeus!

This time, the Magician responded.

“This is a fight between members of the original Council, Miss Wilde,”he said heavily.

The Devil unexpectedly chimed in. “Between members of the original Council who have specifically excluded themselves from our protection. We have no power here.”

What? How is that possible?I stared furiously around the place. Nikki and Nigel were

caught in some sort of a weird thrall with Torsten's crew, the silent shifters in service to the Moon held fast by the Moon's own magic, while the demons writhed and chanted, in service to the Star.

Where the hell is Michael, then? I demanded. Shouldn't he be involved?

Only silence greeted me. I turned around, a wave of fury burning more deeply within me. What was the point of the Council if they refused to help in times of need?

"A question worth considering," Armaeus agreed, though I hadn't thought that last protest out loud. It'd been loud enough, apparently. No matter what happened here tonight, the Council was heading for a serious identity crisis after this.

Is Dixie possessed? I pressed Armaeus, glancing back to her as she admired her shiny ring.

He didn't respond, but Nikki pushed forward as if she could hear my thoughts, shoving against a wall of energy.

"What has gotten into you?" she demanded of Dixie, equal parts of anger and genuine concern.

Dixie turned to her one-time best friend with an indulgent smile that turned harder along with her knife-edged words. "Oh, you're a fine one to talk," she said. "Since the moment you turned up on my doorstep, I've had the distinct displeasure of watching you slowly build your grub-like abilities to something approaching skills. How often did I long to dispose of you, but I couldn't draw the anger or the attention of the mighty Council, a mighty Council that treated me like a second-class citizen when I was far more powerful than you are. More powerful than any of you."

The subtle shift in Dixie's speech made me narrow my eyes. This wasn't the

declaration of a Possessed. This was the rage of a woman truly spurned.

Nikki seemed to pick up on it as well. And, being Nikki, she doubled down on the insult.

“Oh, please. You didn’t have enough ability in you to pull together a proper bake sale,” she sneered, her bold defiance drawing the cool, ethereal gaze of the Moon. Her expression softened as she took in Nikki’s fierceness, her lips curving into a smile that made my heart shiver. For all that her mind was fractured, she was truly a wondrous creature—a goddess, through and through.

“You think you’ve got what it takes to best the Moon?” Nikki continued. “You think you’ve got even one ounce of her badassery? You can’t get people to stay married longer than thirty hours after they leave your door. What power do you have?”

“Enough!” Dixie shouted. She flapped her hands again, and a dozen demons cracked their fiery whips, making the Moon cry out in pain as she staggered back. “I’ve been drawing down this pitiful wretch’s power long enough. I’ve gotten everything I need.”

She pulled something out of a hidden pocket, bright and steely, and I could feel Nikki rush forward before I could shout a warning.

“No!”

The knife came down, but it struck Nikki, not the Moon, the blade sinking deep in her gut.

I exploded.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

I had no power left within me, so I drew on pure rage. I punched through the force field hemming me in and broke out, not into the field of battle on the parking lot, but into a crowd of gray figures, faces slack, arms out in supplication. All moaning and groaning in utter despair, rage, or mindless confusion.

“Justice,” they groaned, whispered, even shouted, but faintly, weakly, as if from a far-off distance. “Justice.”

I whipped around, seeking any way out, but the figures converged on me from all sides. The first one reached me without me realizing it, coming up from behind, but I felt the cold weight of him as he passed through me, and I knew his story. A man killed by a local witch for threatening to take over her tiny farm. He’d been beset by dark shadows while traveling. The shadows had spooked his horse, and the horse ended up throwing him into the ditch. In death, he knew his killer, however, and he’d cried out for Justice. Justice had never responded. All this had happened centuries before I’d been born, and by then, jobs had already been piling up in Justice Hall.

“Justice.” Another wraith walked through me, this one female, a young woman killed for her eyes in a barbaric ritual that had echoes in the arcane black market even today. She was sighted in the way of the Connecteds, and then blinded and killed out of fear and covetousness. I couldn’t save her either. There were so many like her I hadn’t saved, despite the handful that I had, and I felt the weight of her passing slow me down ever so slightly.

By the time the third wraith reached me, pushing, shoving, straining close, I understood what was happening here. I’d fallen into a trap within a trap, one only an ancient, malevolent member of the Arcana Council would know how to engineer in

their spare time, when she or he wasn't possessing Dixie. What did we know about the Star? What did anyone?

I twisted this way and that, trying to avoid the weight of humanity seeking to drape itself upon me. Stars were remote and shiny, hanging bright in the far sky. Everyone who looked upon them was filled with desire and longing. They were too distant to truly care, too remote to understand, a perpetual guide that no one could reach. They also saw everything, bearing constant witness, especially everything that happened in the shadowed night. Where the Moon was brighter, they dimmed, and beneath the Sun, they vanished altogether.

These thoughts ran together in my head as the fourth and fifth wraiths slammed into me, lending their outrage to the albatross these creatures were seeking to hang on me.

"Justice," they hissed, but these were no saints, no victims without recourse. These were members of the arcane black market, from maybe only a hundred years earlier. Running prostitution and smuggling operations and blasted out of business by Connecteds who were more powerful and more ruthless than they were. But even they felt righteous enough to call for help. Everyone had their limit, after all. Everyone thought their way was the right way.

Each new body flowing through me weighed me down, and there was always another to take its place, but I could see the far-off sheen of the Moon on the horizon. And so, rather than trying to fend off the moaning supplicants from all sides, I bent my shoulder and pushed through. Taking on their problems, their complaints, their miseries willingly.

Never mind that I couldn't solve them, never mind that I could never right the wrongs that had befallen them during their lives. They were dead. They were human. They had left this plane of existence to reenter at some other point, and they carried their outrage with them to their new incarnations. I couldn't help that. I could only

acknowledge the outrage they felt, agree it wasn't just. And move on, as there was nothing more I could do.

Strangely, that seemed to be enough. As I proactively took on the draining force of each new victim, acknowledged it, pushed through it, and moved forward, no new weight was added to me. If anything, the tiniest sense of relief and release peeled away a layer of my misery. I didn't have time to think on it too much as I continued through, faster now, harder. The trap the Star had set for me became another gateway, another path of understanding.

I didn't know how many bodies I punched through, both those I deliberately plowed over, and those that reached me from the sides and even from the back, desperate for their piece of me, desperate to be acknowledged, but flowing away with a new rush of emotion that left me feeling strangely heartened in the end.

I hadn't saved them. But I'd honored their cry. I'd heard them. Whoever they were to become in their future lives, I'd honored the pain they'd felt in this one.

In front of me, the Moon shone brighter, as if she were rising on one of those surreal evenings when her fullness appeared to hang low to the earth, unnaturally large—

I burst into the raging battle of demons and shifters.

Nigel instantly caught my eye, whaling on a pair of demons, but I couldn't see Nikki, and I whirled quickly, my hands alight with fire. The demons outnumbered the shifters three to one, so that was an easy place to start, but where was Nikki? Where were the Moon and the Star?

Justice was with the people, but dammit, she needed to be up on stage.

“You bitch!”

Through a break in the crowd, I felt a streak of starlight rake across me. I looked up to see Dixie glaring at me.

“You should still be locked in that prison of those you had failed.” She gestured sharply with her hand, and another score of demons filled the tight space, fire erupting in pockets at the edges. A vehicle exploded, and spectral fire danced along the spire of the Chapel of Everlasting Love in the Stars. A bolt of white fire lanced me through the shoulder, while twin roars of defiance sounded in my ears—feminine and strong. Two women rushed forward from the shadows, both of them surprising me. Judgment of the Arcana Council and Danae, Queen of Swords.

Gamon instantly fell into the fray, slashing and hacking at the demons for the mere joy of it, but Danae drew herself up straight, lifting her arms and tilting her chin, as if compelling the heavens to do her bidding. “You, who must obey me, fight!” she cried.

She wasn’t calling on the heavens at all, as it happened, but creatures from a far more southerly location. A new rush of shuffling bodies surged out of the darkness and flowed around her, converging on the parking lot. Dough-faced golem warriors, their mouths slack, their eyes hollowed out, their bodies rich with the smell of Italian seasoning, pounded into the fight.

The value of a doughboy army. I stared in absolute shock as Sariah’s words floated back to me, offhanded and sly.

Was this why she had saved Barry? Had the vision she’d siphoned off Eshe been clear enough to show a band of golem warriors coming to our aid?

Either way, it appeared that Barry had offered up his demon minions for the use of the Arcana Council, and Danae had taken over from there.

I lunged forward into the renewed battle, as fire raged around us and one building after another exploded, first Death's tattoo parlor, then Dixie's chapel. I fought through the inky blackness of demons, gaining new ground, when suddenly an entire swath of demons screamed in front of me, and burst into a shower of primordial goop.

The spatter had barely cleared before Danae saluted me.

"I don't need the approval of the Council to fight this filth," she declared. "And this army will serve as well as any other." She whirled, directing her Gumby battalion to strike again as a group of the horde leapt toward her.

I turned as well, gesturing to the largest of the Syx, who still glowered at the edge of the parking lot. "She's a fucking human," I informed him.

Gregori stared at me impassively. "She's a witch."

"She's a human witch. And she needs your help."

"She doesn't—"

"Go," I demanded, gratified to see the big guy finally move as I thrashed forward again.

At length, I came up alongside Nigel, who grabbed me and all but flung me forward. "Get Nikki!" he gasped, before another wave of demons knocked him to the side.

I surged on. I still couldn't see my friend. A wall of demons rose ahead of me, dozens more than there should be. It was worse than the throng of humans who had called Justice for help. Those, at least, I had understood, while these asshats were only crowding in front of me to keep me from reaching Nikki. Screw that.

I pressed my hand down on the tattoo I'd received from Death nearly two years earlier, a tattoo that connected me to my best friend, my earthbound anchor. In a flash, I was no longer battling my way through claws and talons, but was up on the stage with Nikki, Dixie, and the Moon. Nikki was down on one knee, braced and wielding the same knife Dixie had buried into her gut moments earlier—a wound that was still leaking blood. Beneath Nikki the Moon lay crumpled and bloody, Nikki as her sole protector now. I rushed forward, and Dixie spun to face me.

“My dance card is full today, sugar,” she said with her trademark Southern drawl. “I’ve got what I’ve come for.”

She flinched and turned back, snarling with rage as Nikki landed a well-timed slash along her lower thigh. A long, dark wound gaped open along Dixie’s creamy skin, the blood that leached out midnight blue. I jerked my gaze from it up to Dixie’s face as she flung her hand toward Nikki. My hand came up at the same time, my bright blue fireball lashing out to combat her bolt of crimson flame.

The explosion of the two fireballs connecting knocked me on my ass, the fire bouncing off the stage and skittering into the crowd of the battling shifters, demons, Danae, and the Syx. Screams erupted as the fire caught the fighters unaware, but I could only worry about one thing at a time.

I lurched around to confront Dixie in time to see her draw her blade up high. As she did, the dagger became a flaming sword. She plunged it down in the space between Nikki’s arm and torso.

Nikki struggled to pull the Moon away, but she wasn’t fast enough. The fiery sword plunged into the Moon’s body, and even I jolted from the impact, the unearthly crack of magic. The Moon arched beneath the blade—and expired. Instantly. There was no fight. There was no counter magic.

The bright light bathing the parking lot merely...went out.

I leapt for Dixie, but by the time I reached her, she was gone. I heard nothing but her exultant cry, which was apparently an order, as the brace of demons who hadn't yet succumbed to Danae and the Syx disappeared a moment later.

I staggered forward another step, then slumped to my knees where Nikki and the Moon lay tangled in a broken heap.

I vaguely heard the sound of footsteps running up, and the rush of smoke. A moment later, the Magician knelt beside me, one arm around my shoulder, the other beneath Nikki. Nikki, who did not breathe. Nikki, whose life essence was burning down to an impossibly low level. I reached out instinctively, my hands gripping her body, the Magician's as well. And I felt the cool whoosh of air as Death appeared beside us.

"It's not her time," I insisted. "She can't have survived everything she has to die like this."

"It's not for humans, even immortal humans, to make that call," Death murmured, but it was Nikki who convulsed beneath me.

"I'm not going down because of bitch-faced Barbie," she muttered, with what seemed like the last of her strength.

I choked out a laugh that might also have been a sob. I no longer cared what the rules were. I was Justice of the Arcana Council, and I was going to make my own goddamned rules.

"Miss Wilde," the Magician murmured beside me, but for once not in a repressing tone. He wouldn't take this from me, I knew. He wouldn't let me fail.

I focused all my attention on Nikki until I blacked out.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

I lay with my body half slumped over Nikki's, one hand on her shoulder, the other on her hip, my ear pressed to her chest, the faint beating of her heart the only thing giving me hope.

We weren't in the parking lot of Dixie's chapel anymore. Nikki was on some sort of gurney, and the room around me smelled sterile and metallic. Bodies moved around me, people spoke, but my attention was fixed solely on the electrical currents that ran or should have run through Nikki's beautiful form. They had all been blighted, as destroyed as Roland's had been, but the damage was far more staggering given the level of magic that Nikki dredged up to fight Dixie Quinn. Every last ounce of her strength had been given over to protect the weak and the vulnerable. She'd given everything she was to protect the Moon. I wasn't about to give her any less.

I stitched and shredded and infused each blackened snarl with light, power, and fire.

"Miss Wilde." The words flowed over me with a comforting familiarity. The Magician hadn't left my side. He'd started to, I had vaguely noticed at one point, then had split himself to be in two places at once.

Something had shifted in me, as well. The Magician didn't lend his power to me this time, but he didn't need to. I recognized now that his and my power were one and the same, drawing on the same deep well of primal energy. His stunt in the airplane had begun the shift, a precautionary maneuver I wasn't entirely sure he'd expected to end up this way. But he'd prepared for it just the same.

How much of this had he foreseen, I wondered? How much had he known?

“The Council meeting begins,” Armaeus continued.

“Fuck the Council,” I gritted back, never shifting my focus from the delicate stitching together of dancing currents within Nikki’s life-form.

“You have healed her,” he insisted, though his tone was as quiet and gentle as I’d ever heard it. “All you have set in motion is coming to pass. It is time to finish the job.”

That got my attention. I pulled away slightly, lifted my chin. We were in some sort of makeshift clinic. It had the earmarks of Dr. Sells, the Council’s private physician. But it wasn’t secreted away in some concrete bunker. Rather, only a few feet away, several members of the Council stood in attendance. Several, but not all. Viktor, Eshe, Tesla, Zeus, and Hera were all absent. Those who remained, along with the Magician, were more than enough. Gamon, Kreios, Simon, the Hierophant, the Sun...and the Hermit. I blinked to see my father for the first time in what felt like months, but he appeared to be lost in deep thought, and I slid my gaze to Death beside him.

Death did not look happy.

“Where are the rest of them?” I snapped, my voice harder than intended.

The Devil fielded the question. “We put forth the summons, and those who chose to respond, responded. We have all we need to make decisions.”

Nikki sighed beneath me, groaning a little, and my gaze shot back to her. I no longer saw the woman who was my best friend, but a mass of circuits and connections, neural pathways that sparked and flared. I knew instinctively she was different than she had been, but she was alive, and the energy that pulsed deep within her remained quintessentially Nikki.

“Nikki?” I tried, and the raspiness of my voice betrayed the fact I’d spoken her name a thousand times before.

“Dollface,” she whispered back to me, though her lips didn’t move. “I’m good. Really. I’m...sorry I couldn’t save the old girl.”

“You did great,” I assured her, blinking rapidly as tears burned against the backs of my eyes. I jumped a little as the Magician curled his hand over my shoulder.

“There’s work to be done, Miss Wilde,” he murmured. “Work that Nikki Dawes can be a part of, now. It is not an easy path, however.”

I straightened, reluctantly pulling away from Nikki, and turned to where Armaeus gestured.

A small collection of artifacts had been laid out on the conference table beside the standing Council members—Simon alone sat, peering intently at the haul. The Moon’s ring, a full moonstone tiara, and the short blade Nikki had used to gash Dixie’s leg.

“The Moon returned to the realm beyond the veil this night,” Armaeus said quietly. “We have the right to raise a new Moon.”

There was no question who he had in mind for the job, and I jolted, my heart filling with a fierce pride, so strong it nearly choked me as Kreios took up the conversation.

“Nikki Dawes is no longer the woman she was but a few hours ago, though in some ways, she has not changed in the slightest,” he said. “You’ve put her back together better than she was before, Justice Wilde. Your skills are improving in that regard.”

I shot a look to Nikki, whose eyes were open now, the softest grin curving her lips as

she slowly lifted herself to one elbow—then thought better of it and collapsed back down. Still, her voice was almost jaunty as she spoke, her eyes drifting shut beneath glitter-painted lids. “Best work I’ve ever had done, dollface. And that’s saying something.”

“Yeah, well. This isn’t a skill I want to be exercising too often.”

“It’s a gift. And one for which I am deeply grateful.” The Devil appeared a little shaken as he spoke, and his gaze moved toward Nikki. “There are few humans on this earth as valuable as Nikki Dawes, I think you will agree.”

“Can she handle it?” The question came from an unexpected quarter. Gamon stood with her arms crossed, her face harder than usual. “Ascension is no picnic even when you’re healthy. I still don’t understand what you guys did to me, exactly, and I’m still a little bitter about that. But she’s been taken down to the studs and built back up again in the last few hours. Is it too soon?”

“It’s a reasonable question, but we don’t have the luxury of time,” Kreios said. “If Dixie Quinn is the Star, whether she serves as a vessel for that entity or she has lived these past several years in our shadow gaining information on us, building networks of Connecteds, experimenting with drugs, and exploring the darkest corners of the arcane black market, then we are not in an ideal situation. We have to assume the worst.”

“Bring me up to speed on that,” Gamon said drily. “What exactly is the worst?”

“I think you can already draw those conclusions,” the Magician said. “You’ve fought in your share of wars. We’re missing five seated members of the Council who are arguably the most cunning of our number. We have a rogue Council member who potentially has access to many of our innermost workings. We cannot assume that because Dixie wasn’t in on some of the highest-level conversations that she didn’t

know some way of gaining access to them. We have extreme unrest among the Connected community, a mobilized demon horde, an incentivized troop of artifact hunters who are trained to follow the money, an awakened arcane black market eager to see how they can capitalize on this potential new freedom, and the Shadow Court who are poised to marshal the Connecteds of their choice to eradicate the Connecteds they do not deem worthy of inclusion in their little cabal.”

Gamon blew out a breath. “Okay, fair. That’s a pretty bad position,” she acknowledged.

“Dollface.”

I turned back to the woman on the gurney, my best friend, my tireless champion. Nikki’s eyes were open again and lucid, though there was no denying the exhaustion that hung over her face like a caul. For the first time, I saw tiny lines at the corners of Nikki’s eyes, deeper brackets at the edges of her mouth. But I was mostly arrested by the expression in her gaze. She was fully aware of the conversation all around her, and she was asking me a question.

Should she do this? Not could she, not would she, but should she.

I knew it wasn’t for herself that she asked. To the end, she was my best friend. She wouldn’t do anything that would put me at risk, especially a move that would take her from my side. She would let this opportunity pass by her in a heartbeat if it might somehow cause me pain.

That, more than anything, firmed my resolve.

“There’s a whole lot of people who need you every bit as much as I do,” I said, my voice cracking. “And you can’t get rid of me that easily.”

She smiled, a shadow of her usual grin, but there was no denying the return of cocky expectation. Nikki didn't merely face her challenges, she wrapped her arms around them and carried them with her into the new adventure that was her life. She lay back down on her gurney and flung a long, well-muscled arm over her forehead. "I do believe I'm ready for my close-up, then."

I turned my attention to Kreios, then to the Magician. "Let's do it."

The Magician moved forward, and Kreios took a position on the opposite side of Nikki's body, while I maintained my position over her. Arguably, it was a little overkill, even for an ascension, but nobody was interested in screwing this one up. As the Magician spoke, the stars outside the Magician's fortress flared suddenly, then weakened, the night sky going preternaturally dark. Far below, the revelers on the strip probably didn't even notice, but I could feel the darkness closing in, surging up. A new moon passing its final stage of darkness.

The Magician began murmuring a song I hadn't heard before, a song that was different from when I ascended. I shot a look to Gamon, and her face registered surprise as well. Had she and I gotten some sort of rinky-dink ascension package? If we did, I didn't care. Of anyone I'd ever known, Nikki deserved the best of the best.

Within only a few minutes of this new melody, however, a bolt of pure magic radiated out from the Magician to suffuse Nikki's body with light. She gasped, convulsing, the electrical charge zipping along newly formed connectors and pathways, filling her with a blue-white light.

The Magician deepened his song, and to my surprise, Kreios's voice joined in. I had never heard the Devil sing before, but I shouldn't have been surprised as his full rolling baritone slipped and slid through the room, speaking of wonder and magic untold.

As it happened, the Devil and the Magician weren't the only souls to sing this night. A new chorus sounded in the far distance, and Simon pushed back from the table, standing and striding over to the windows to peer outside.

"Holy crap," he muttered. "I mean, they're still not as awesome as my guys, but this is pretty cool."

As he spoke, I heard the refrain of howls rising up from far below, and I didn't need second sight to imagine the wolves of the Moon's honor guard assembling around the fortress of the Magician. Another surge of pride welled up within me. Yes—yes. Nikki deserved her own honor guard, their praise and adulation, and the love of noble creatures across this world and every other. She was worth everything they could give her, and more.

Nikki seemed to hear the wolves' cries too, and she blinked open her eyes. She reached for my hand, and I helped her to her feet, her body seeming to shimmer a little with the strength of the power coursing through her. She lifted her chin, drawing her hands down her body as she surveyed herself in the far window with a critical eye.

"Dollface, you knocked this one out of the park," she decided, then grinned at Armaeus and Kreios. "You two aren't half bad either. Glad you could keep up."

The howls leapt to a deafening crescendo, and Nikki jolted, trading a startled glance with me. She strode over to the window. As she did, the clouds parted, and the moon emerged from behind them, the barest crescent of bright white visible to mark its rebirth. That light shone through the window and electrified Nikki, sending a corona of white fire skating down her arms as she lifted her fingers and cupped them, literally holding moonbeams in her hand.

She poured those beams out, refracting them back through the window, sending them

down, down, down, a shower of glittering light that bathed her people far below. A great cry sounded, and there were no more wolves but warriors standing tall—men, women, children— lifting their fists to the night sky in solidarity with their new leader.

As their cries were carried off into the night, Nikki leaned against the window, tears glistening in her eyes.

“Sweet baby Jesus on a tricycle,” she sighed. “I’m gonna need some bigger boots.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:27 am

I left Nikki with Kreios and Simon, the three of them arguing over where her residence might be. Nikki had a soft spot for the older casinos on the Strip, but everything about her energy argued for the flashiest complexes with the luckiest tables. Just hearing her voice unburdened by pain was enough luck for me. She didn't need me for this discussion.

Instead, Armaeus and I stood outside the police lines that had been erected around the explosion site at Dixie's Chapel of Everlasting Love in the Stars. The devastation hadn't stopped at the chapel's doors. The fire had extended across the parking lot to the other businesses, sparing most of them, but completely gutting DarkWorks Ink. There was no indication of bodies inside, Armaeus had already searched. But he hadn't found the young family Jimmy had welcomed through the front door, or Jimmy himself, for that matter. And there was still no sign of Sariah either.

He didn't seem concerned.

"Worst case, Death would have taken them In Between," he assured me. "Sariah is not to be underestimated. Her ability to pierce the High Priestess's vision alone is, well, surprising."

"That's why we were in that godforsaken pizza parlor," I muttered, still having a hard time believing it. "She saw Eshe's vision of a dough army helping us, and when Maria's call for help came into Justice Hall, she jumped. It wasn't sympathy for Maria at all."

"So it would seem," Armaeus agreed, but I twisted my lips slightly, remembering the look on her face as we'd spoken. There'd been a little sympathy there, I decided, even

if she'd deny it now. Something in Maria's plight had touched her.

Armaeus blew out a long breath, refocusing me. "Our work here is only now beginning, Miss Wilde. The fact that Dixie had enough power, or the Star through Dixie, to do this, indicates her power is very great."

I slanted him a sharp glance, but though it made my stomach pitch to consider it, I knew the truth when it was staring me in the face. I suspected Armaeus knew it too. "It's not a possession, Armaeus. It's Dixie. It was always Dixie. I don't know where she came from or how she managed to pull it off, but...she did."

"She could have been near us this whole time, all these thousands of years," the Magician allowed, though he sounded like he still didn't believe it. "Leaving the area only to come back as a new incarnation."

"A new Star is born," I muttered. My head hurt with all the ramifications—so many years I'd known her, so much information I'd inadvertently shared. How much of it would come back to haunt us all? "What do we know about her next moves?"

Armaeus squared his shoulders. "Simon hasn't been idle on that score. Tracking Dixie has proven easier than anticipated. With Nikki possessing so many things of hers, and Simon having been the one to install Dixie's surveillance equipment, we have plenty of material to work with."

I made a face. "You don't actually think Dixie would let him see anything valuable?"

"Oh no, but we have her DNA. Modern technology has gone quite far, but modern technology combined with magic goes even further. And Dixie is proud. She'll maintain her current form. She'll flaunt it." He made a lazy gesture toward his own body. "Had I wanted to switch out my form or improve it, I certainly could have, and there's no question she inhabits a very beautiful form."

“Well, good for her,” I said darkly, shoving my hands into my hoodie pockets.

Armaeus tugged my hand from my pocket and brought it to his lips, pausing to give me a too-knowing look. “There is no one on this earth who will ever surpass your beauty, your strength, your importance to me, Sara. Never doubt it.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I flushed as he continued.

“With Simon’s aid, now that we know what to look for, we have been able to detect the presence of Dixie’s DNA at some of the highest levels of government internationally. It is also riddled through the homes of Jarvis Fuggeren and a few other prominent members of the Shadow Court.”

“Fuggeren,” I groaned. “Why can’t he just stay out of things now? He’s dead.”

“What is also important is where we have not found Dixie’s DNA,” Armaeus continued. “She has been in the casino of the Sun, but not in his private residence. She has not been in any of the residences of the Arcana Council that we have access to, and there’s no reason to believe she would trust any of them. They talk. They gossip.”

“And she didn’t know she would need to play her hand quite so quickly, did she?” I asked. “She was taken by surprise. After all these centuries, millennia of preparation, she was rushed in the end. She wouldn’t have liked that.”

“Agreed. If the Star has taken the side of the Shadow Court, as seems almost certainly the case, I suspect she intended to remain behind the scenes. After six thousand years of hiding, there’s a certain appeal to remaining hidden, a constant reminder of your strength over your enemies because they don’t even know you exist. You can move a lot more easily if you are hidden.”

“So does she have to act now?” I asked, reasonably enough. “I mean, it’s not like

anybody but us knows...”

Armaeus tilted his head. “We know, and so do the honor guard of the Moon. So do the demons the Star manages and has come to rule quite successfully. And so does the Court as well, if they were not already aware. That would be more than enough to force her to act now. But I suspect there’s more to the picture than we yet understand. Further, Dixie has also revealed herself at least as a shadow figure to the arcane black market, in addition to government figures around the world, the rich and powerful. Even if she’s not the Star incarnate, she’s got something to prove. It will be easy enough for her to maintain the illusion that everything is going as planned. But not if she doesn’t act boldly and swiftly. I suspect we are once more on the precipice of war, Miss Wilde. Only this time...the enemy might well be our own Council members.”

“Oh, gee. Is that all?” I shook my head. “I think I preferred fighting the gods.”

“Speaking of,” Armaeus said, turning toward me. “How are you feeling after all you have endured? Physically? Personally?”

I blinked at him. “What do you mean? Why would I feel any different?”

“You have exercised your abilities to a degree that you arguably didn’t even know you could in rapid succession, first with Roland and Emilio, then with the hunters you returned from Atlantis, then with Nikki. And of course with me. You are evolving to a position higher than most Justices aspire to, the balancing of what is real and what is potential, the blending together of those disparate forces. That’s not what Justice does now, is it, Miss Wilde?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What is this? Am I getting reprimanded for straying outside my job description?”

“I could not presume to reprimand you, not now—perhaps never again. If anything, I

think you're taking on a new role. And I am fascinated to see where it may lead you, and the Council at your side."

I blinked at him, but I couldn't deal with that speculation now. I needed to stay focused. "Speaking of new roles, what about the rest of the Council? Eshe and Viktor? Tesla? What would be the benefit of them going to the Star?"

The Magician grimaced. "Just because they weren't in attendance this night doesn't mean they've defected, but there's been dissension in the ranks for some time. And there has never been complete accord in any of the Councils. Dixie in any of her incarnations is proof enough of that—as is the Moon. And the Sun."

"But there can't be two Councils, right?"

"There cannot. There is always one Council, even if its members are at odds with each other. The ruling power lies in the seated Council, until it is disrupted. The Devil will prove particularly hard to unseat."

"Harder than you, you mean," I said drily. "You're not saying that in a hopeful manner, but in a certain one. The Devil will be more difficult to unseat than you would be in his position. Why?"

Armaeus smiled. "Because the Magician doesn't rule. It's not the point of the card or the point of my magic. I don't gather followers the way the Emperor does—or the Empress, for that matter. There are other roles better suited to leadership. The path of the Magician is most usually a lonely one. It is not the place for building empires."

"I don't really think of Kreios as being all that into the empire-building thing either."

"Not intentionally, no. But he draws people to him whether he likes it or not. It is part of his makeup. He is the best choice for ruling the Arcana Council through this crisis."

“What about Death? She won’t defect, will she?”

The Magician snorted. “There are only two Council members who care not even the slightest about the politics of the actual structure they’ve adhered to. Death and the Hierophant. Michael’s place in this pageant remains a mystery, but he is bound tightly to Death in their distance from and yet deep concern for humanity. He will not defect; neither will she. How they will act in the coming trials is not something I can predict other than that. There is much to learn...and much to relearn as well.”

With that, he reached out his hand to me, and I slipped my fingers in his. He lifted my hand to his mouth, his lips brushing over my knuckles. Magic surged within me in a new and slightly disturbing manner—both quick and slow at once, cool and hot, blending together and at war with itself.

“That’s...different,” I said, blinking at him. “What’s happening to me?”

He smiled. “I can say with absolute delight I have no idea, Miss Wilde. But I can’t wait to watch it happen.”

Then he pulled me close, bending his head to mine, and once more swept me away.

* * *