

Font of Fertility Chapter 28 Beta

By BreaktheBar

The following is the Beta Draft of Font of Fertility Ch 28. As a Beta draft, this is not the final work and may see major changes prior to final posting out in the wide world.

=====

All Characters in sexual situations are 18 years or older.

This story is a continuation of the Font of Fertility series. I suggest reading Chapter 1 if you have not already. This chapter includes only a bit of sexual reference, but lots of magic stuff.

Jeremiah has a long night of magical issues.

Returning Dramatis Personae

- Jeremiah 'Jerry' Grant - Seat of Fertility, aka. Powerful Sex Shaman
- Lauren Baxley - Public girlfriend, Jerry's Prime in the magic world, closest friend and confidant
- Leandro de la Roca - Spanish Paladin of the Orden de la Espada de Piedra, protector of the Stone Sword
- Lindsey Baxley - Girlfriend/Concubine, Lauren's step-sister via marriage, girl-genius
- Stacey Wilde - Girlfriend/Concubine, godchild of Jerry's parents, athletic
- Esmerelda - Seat of Death, aka. Powerful Death Wizard, second-youngest Seat, weirdo

Referenced Characters

- Ayoub Nicali - Former Seat of Life and skilled warrior, his seat is currently empty. Died
- Benji - Jerry's guy friend from high school, the one with the attitude
- Ezekiel - Former Seat of Fertility, his death caused Jeremiah's ascension
- Gao - An ancient bladesmith, either an Ascended or potentially even a Seat, who crafted the 'demon blades.'
- Houdini - The famous magician, who was mundane. Attempted to gain the secrets of magic from Esmerelda but was rebuffed.
- Jay - Jerry's best guy friend from high school
- Ndia - Eldest Seat of Fertility, aka. The Most Powerful Sex Shaman
- Poi Fung - Former Seat of Death, occupied Esmerelda's seat before his death
- Uwe - Seat of Death, aka. Powerful Death Wizard, second-eldest
- Xi Zuang - Seat of Life, aka. Powerful Experience Wizard

=====

For a night that was supposed to be relatively quiet, just breaking in the penthouse with my girls, things had gotten out of hand really quickly.

“I still think I should come,” Lauren said. I was busy getting dressed out of the tiny duffel bag worth of my own luggage that I’d brought on the ‘move Lindsey and Stacey back to school’ road trip. At some point, I would need to start getting more clothes to keep in the penthouse for when I teleported in, but that hadn’t exactly been a priority.

“Most other situations, I would agree,” I said as I pulled on a pair of jeans and started looking for my belt. “Lauren, I don’t ever want you to feel like I’m cutting you out of things, but Esmerelda sounded *pissed* and I’d rather not risk any of you as collateral damage. And my magic levels aren’t- I need to be able to be as quick as possible if I’m going to reduce the amount of magic I expend if things go poorly.”

“Do you honestly think Esmerelda would turn on you that quickly?” Lauren asked. “She was willing to be friendly...ish.”

“I don’t know,” I said, feeling the exasperation in my voice. “I just don’t know. I wouldn’t have thought so, but she *was* a little emotionally unstable at the dinner, and someone had to have put that shadow thing on me. What if it was, like, her pet? What if I just kicked her dog and locked it in a cage?”

Lauren grimaced and sighed, coming over as I was feeding my belt through the loops and taking it from me, doing it up herself before looking into my eyes. “Don’t let her push you around, but be apologetic if that’s the case. It *is* her fault if she did that though. You couldn’t have known.”

“I know,” I said, taking a breath and then kissing her. “I need to go. Hell, she might have been the one who made the ghost ninjas to begin with and *that* is what she’s pissed about.”

“Really doesn’t seem like her style,” Lauren grimaced. I already knew that her guess was Xi Zuang, the creepy Life Seat that we hadn’t really interacted with. He was high on my list as well, but the fact that they were *ghosts* made it feel like a Death Seat thing, so Uwe was high up there too. His territory was anchored in the UK as far as I understood, and they’d had their fingers in East Asia as much as the US had during the 20th century, so it was possible he’d imported some ninja skulls or something.

“I know, but we’re still trying to piece things together,” I said. “They’ve all been working around each other for centuries. If it isn’t Esmerelda hunting Leandro, then she probably knows who it could be.”

Lauren kissed me again, tugging a little on the front of the sweater I had put on. I wasn’t sure how else I could reassure her, so I just kissed her back and tried to play it off by giving her butt a squeeze. That made her smirk a little into our kiss.

Back out in the main living room, Stacey and Lindsey were busy. Lindsey was taking pictures of the Stone Sword with her phone in the kitchen, using the greater lighting to help illuminate

whatever tiny runes she was finding. Anything she could start piecing together about it could be important - the fact that it really did seem to be made of stone but *felt* like a black hole when I was attuned with the Rod of Ash and Hew was concerning. Stacey, meanwhile, was using sticky notes to flag all the damage that had been done during the fight. When the ghost ninjas burst in through the windows and I'd stopped the glass from splashing the entire room I'd done a decent amount of damage to the furniture and floors - fixing specific things, instead of generally 'fixing the room,' would reduce the magical cost even if it took longer.

Leandro, meanwhile, looked like he was on edge and alert for another attack. He was sitting on one of the stools near the kitchen island, perched on the edge, his eyes travelling across the large window wall that looked out over the city. The fact that the knife block was positioned near him, rather than back on the counter, wasn't lost on me - I'd turned his sword into a spirit prison, and his other sword could split continents based on legends, so he was currently without a proper defensive weapon.

"Alright, I've only got a minute or two before we're supposed to meet," I said. "Did you figure anything out, Linds?"

"These are a completely different style than the stuff from the skulls, the Rod, and the Sanctum," Lindsey said. "It's like completely different languages and alphabets, and I've got zero in the way of reference materials."

"OK, thanks for trying," I said. "Stace, any thoughts?"

"Tell Esmerelda if she's pissed she should try trusting you instead of doing things behind your back," Stacey said.

"We don't know if she did," I said.

"Oh, please, Jeremiah," Stacey sighed. "She's either behind the ninjas, or the shadow thing, or both. That's the only way she would know what happened so fast. And my money is on the shadow thing."

I nodded and pinched the bridge of my nose for a moment as I thought. Having multiple highly intelligent, opinionated girlfriends was great right up until they all started thinking on the same wavelength. "Alright," I decided to just agree rather than hash out my other theories with the time crunch. "Leandro - you've still got my Sanctuary, but I swear to whatever deity or higher power your Order believes in, if you do anything to piss off these three I'll turn you inside out and then ship you snail mail to whoever is hunting you. Preserved in salt."

"OK, a bit much," Lauren said as she gave me a look.

I let out a breath, knowing she was right, but Leandro beat me to the punch. "I understand what you mean, Lor- Jeremiah," he said, catching himself before calling me 'Lord Seat' again. "I

swear not to abuse the hospitality of your home or household, and will give my life for them if necessary.”

“Thank you,” I said, then glanced at Lauren again. She nodded, her jaw clenched. It was time. Still, I felt uncomfortable leaving them when there could be another wave of ghost ninjas or something worse coming after Leandro. I went and tugged one of Stacey’s sticky notes off of the couch and focused, putting a spell into it and then handing it to Lauren. “If there’s an emergency, rip this and I’ll know,” I said.

“Did you just make me a medic alert button out of a sticky note?” Lauren snorted.

“Actually, that gives me an idea,” Lindsey said, looking up from her notes in the kitchen. “But, uh, not for right now.”

“Tear in case of emergency,” Lauren said with a nod.

“I’ll be back,” I said to everyone, trying to reassure myself as much as them, and headed for the bedroom door. Then I stopped, pivoting on my heel. “Soon. I’ll be back soon. I wasn’t trying to make a pun.”

All three of my girlfriends groaned, and I turned and grabbed the door handle for the bedroom. I was just forming the teleportal spell in my mind as I heard Leandro say, “I don’t get it. What was the pun?”

With limited locations where I knew we’d both been, I ended up suggesting that Esmerelda and I meet up outside Ezekiel’s Sanctum. I already knew that *she* knew where it was since she’d pretty much admitted to helping Ezekiel make it using the Rod. And considering how volatile she’d sounded, I wasn’t exactly ready to meet her at the restaurant in Miami again.

It was still mid-afternoon on the island as I popped the seal on the old bunker top that was the first ‘line of defence’ for the Sanctum. I’d teleported in as usual and climbed my way out, not wanting to keep her waiting. Of course, once I was up and out, Esmerelda wasn’t there yet. I closed the bunker hatch and took a breath, looking out across the side of the volcano and to the ocean. Every time I went out there, even during the awkward stuff with Jay and Benji, I was struck by how different it was from home. Beautiful, yeah, but it almost didn’t feel real.

Pacing impatiently took me further from the bunker than I intended, but the ridge went a good way but lacked any meaningful trees or super-tall shrubbery so it wasn’t like I was going to miss her. The lower scrub brush was thick though, and I idly started to wonder if Hawaii had any poisonous snakes, or scorpions, or whatever else that could have been a danger hiding among the thick leaves and grass.

“Jeremiah,” Esmerelda said, her voice thick with anger and edged in frustration.

I managed not to jump in surprise even though she appeared behind me out of what felt like thin air. Did she teleport in? Fly? Or had Ezekiel shown her teleporting, or had she figured it out herself?

Turning, I came face to face with an Esmerelda that was somewhere between the one I’d met in the Council chamber space and the one we’d eaten with at dinner. She was dressed in casual clothing for a warm climate - a modest crop top that only revealed an inch or so above her belly button and high-waisted jeans - but her face was painted like a skull and her bad dye-job of pink was gone, replaced by the thick red.

“Esmerelda,” I said. “Do you want to start, or should I?”

She sneered slightly, the facepaint twisting, and I wondered if she’d put a bit of magic into it to make it more menacing or emotive. “You killed a creation of mine,” she said. “Start there.”

“So I assume the thing in my shadow was from you, then?” I asked. “It’s not dead, by the way.”

Esmerelda glared daggers at me for another moment, then blinked and the anger drained from her face as if she’d rebooted to neutral. “If it’s not dead, where is it?”

“It got caught up in a spirit trap I made,” I said. “I had no idea it was there until the trap was already deployed. I assume either my runework or the silver I used has cut it off from you.”

“Silver doesn’t stop magic, only enhances certain properties,” Esmerelda said. “Has your Houdini truly begun piecing together rune work for you already? It’s dangerous to play around with things you don’t understand.”

“That’s neither here nor there at the moment,” I said. “Look, Esmerelda, I had a judgement petitioner throw himself at my feet and beg for sanctuary because he was being pursued, and *after* I gave it to him my home was invaded by ghost ninjas with a Terminator complex. I’ll just ask you straight up - did you-”

The crack and peel of thunder was deafening, and both Esmerelda and I were forced to wince away from it because of the sheer force and closeness. Lightning, on a clear day, would have been shocking enough. Having it hit about fifteen yards uphill from us was brain-dazzling and I instinctively touched my pool of power - first using it to reorient my senses and then keeping my mental hand in it, ready to cast.

“There you are!” Xi Zuang growled as he stepped *out* of the lightning bolt that had struck the rock and frozen in place. It was a blinding crease of light in the landscape, but it thankfully disappeared as soon as he had both feet on the ground. “Jeremiah Grant, you have meddled where you are not wanted. Esmerelda, you have no business here.”

I backed away from both of them, edging towards the lip of the ridge. "So my first guess was right, then," I said. "It was *your* creatures that broke into my home and attempted to kill or injure people under my protection."

"You took in a fugitive of the council, you disrespectful whelp," Xi Zuang growled. His face was twisted into a sneering grimace, and he was dressed in what I could only think of as a Buddhist monk robe, but in all black. His body, more revealed than what I'd seen in the Council chamber, was chiselled, hard muscle that could only have been magically crafted. "You disrupt plans that were decided before-"

"Xi Zuang," Esmerelda boomed, her voice impossibly loud and deep as she rose to hover about a foot in the air, wind whipping around her as her eyes turned a black that sucked up light. "Do you think it's wise to simply attempt to dismiss me?"

Zuang, for his part, took his own couple of steps back, spreading us out into a triangle. His muscled arms flexed in irritation and I could see his fingers twitching like he was mentally preparing hand movements for a spell.

I felt *heavily* underprepared for a fight, especially with two other Seats in the open. The closest doorway was the Sanctum hatch and it was a good thirty yards uphill past Xi Zuang. He looked like he was prepared to unleash some sort of spell, though the only thing I had going for me in that regard was that he was now much more focused on Esmerelda than me.

Unfortunately, Esmerelda was starting to look more and more like some primal demigod writhing with power. Her hair and clothing were whipping around in a wind that I couldn't feel and those black eyes seemed to be growing without distending her face, sucking in the light enough that everything around us started to feel washed out and lacking colour.

I couldn't compete with either of them in a fight. That was just utterly true. I didn't have the magic reserves, and I didn't have the experience. Hell, they most likely both lived with defensive countermeasures already established while I felt fucking naked. Violence would be a *big* loss for me no matter which of them came out on top in the end. So I needed to do this some other way, and it wasn't like I could *charm* them into things, and I had no leverage to apply in the moment.

I really only had one card to play to get what I wanted, and at the moment what I wanted was to be left the fuck alone like the unwritten rules of the Council said I should be.

"Alright," I said, throwing up my hands in a flat 'stop' motion to both of them. "Hold on, don't start slinging spells for the sake of your overinflated egos."

Both of them looked at me and I regretted that last bit.

“Here’s the way I’m seeing things,” I said slowly, the weight of both of their attention on me. “This right here is my territory, as acknowledged by the entire Council. I *invited* Esmerelda here to talk, but I didn’t invite you here, Zuang, and you definitely didn’t send a friendly notice that you wanted to meet. So here’s the fucking deal. I have proof that you have had creatures of your creation actively working in my territory, and not only that but they crashed into my home, threatened the lives of people in my household, *and* tried to kill someone that I had given temporary sanctuary.” As I spoke my voice started to rise into an angry growl as my frustration and fear at what *could* have happened fed into my mini monologue. “So the way I see it, motherfucker, is that *you* have some apologising to do.”

Esmerelda’s black eyes narrowed slightly as she turned to watch Xi Zuang’s response.

The Life Seat didn’t seem to move, though I had a sense that something *shifted* and he went from an imminently aggressive stance to a guarded one. “You are a *child*, Jeremiah Grant,” he spat. “You have no understanding about *what* the Council allows and doesn’t allow.”

“Except that he isn’t *wrong*, even if he doesn’t fully understand,” Esmerelda said. “Do you admit that the creatures that invaded the home of a Seat of Fertility were your creations?”

“Do you think that I would purposefully break the Council peace?” Xi Zuang snarled. “And that *he* would be my first target?”

“I think the Peace was broken when Ayoub died, so *he* wouldn’t be the first if that was you as well,” Esmerelda said. Her voice had dimmed from the ‘primal deity’ state to her regular, sharp snarl of anger but she was still hovering slightly and her eyes still sucked in the light.

“I had nothing to do with Ayoub’s death. He ended himself, just like Ezekiel, and Poi Fung before,” Xi Zuang said, waving dismissively. “This has never been in question.”

“Perhaps not *in* the Council,” Esmerelda sneered. “But by those *on* the Council? You can’t be so sure.”

“How about we focus on the Now, and we can have another friendly chat like this about previous Seats some other time,” I said sternly. “I know the centuries probably start to blend together, but the problem *here and now* is that whether you did it purposefully or not, you are *clearly* the culprit.”

Xi Zuang sneered. “If simple, mindless hunters broke into a protected sanctum in pursuit of their prey, it says more about your preparations than my hunters.”

“Great,” I said. “We have an admission of guilt! What the *fuck* makes you think that you have any right to send ‘mindless hunters’ into my territory without even a fucking heads up?”

“Hah,” he laughed. “You think I feel *guilt* over this little spat?”

I had to work my jaw a bit as I raised my hands, trying to grasp the cultural, or historical, weirdness of talking with someone so *different*. “It’s a fucking legal term, you out-of-touch loon. You admit that you are the person behind the attack. That’s a great place to start since it’s more than anyone has admitted about the *last* time I was attacked by a Seat. Now answer my fucking question.”

“Those hunters predate your ascension, little Shaman,” Xi Zuang sneered. “I set them on their mission, and they hunt. A mission approved by the council three centuries ago - the hunt for the Demon Blades of Gao.”

“Yeah, great,” I said. “I don’t give a fuck that you all agreed to that mission before I was alive. They are your creatures doing shit in *my* territory.”

“Do you honestly believe they are my only machinations on your continent? Or that I am alone in that?” Xi Zuang asked. “You are even more blind and pathetic than I thought. Ezekiel’s territory was abandoned, thousands of Ascended were left without an authority to keep them in line and millions of human chattel were left spinning in a rut serving no one. My influence has kept your pathetic home in check since his death, and I have no doubt that others have been doing the same.”

I couldn’t help but wonder, amid the frustrations and big dog versus little dog shit, if I was marking modern historical changes. Ezekiel ends his extended life shortly after the end of the Cold War, and the US isn’t in any wars. Then Xi Zuang, and any other interested Seats, start leaning in and the US gets stuck in the War on Terror and everything starts going to shit as China threatens to become the next world superpower.

Happenstance? A fluke? The natural course of history?

Or was the natural course of history, the rise and fall of civilizations, based on the rise and fall of Seats?

“Sure,” I said, tossing it away spitefully. “Great. You saw an opening and wriggled your fingers in, and now you’re used to it. You didn’t think it was important to let me know what you’d been managing, or how, or that you even were?” I took a breath, gritting my teeth. Just looking at him, I knew I was on thin ice. But where I felt like I could relate, somehow and despite her emotional fluctuations, with Esmerelda... all I saw in Xi Zuang was a ridiculous, cliché anime villain. A villain I couldn’t just overpower through will, and one I was going to be forced to live with for untold decades in balance.

All I had was bravado and an appeal to greater authority. And I knew there were going to be consequences; for me, but also for everyone I was supposed to look after. The Ascended of North America. The regular people. But I had to do it now, or I’d be on the backfoot forever. I’d be integrated into their system, bound to him and the others.

“All of that is done now,” I said. “Every creature or servant you have in North America pulls out immediately. I bar you from entry to my territory until such time as I invite you. Any influence you impose on my sovereign territory will be considered an act of sedition against the entire Council, and I will present it as such.”

Xi Zuang, despite his dusky complexion, started to turn red as he levelled the sort of accusing finger at me that felt like it should be shooting death rays. “You are a foolish, disrespectful child. Do you think you will stand tall with this, Jeremiah Grant? Do you think the others will think you are some sort of an honourable soul and will protect you? Today you make your first, true enemy, Seat of Fertility. My memory is long, and my wrath comes cold and bitter.” He looked at Esmerelda. “You agreed to my hunt for the swords, Esmerelda. All of this because a *boy* has hurt feelings over his house, or his pet humans? You support *this*?”

Esmerelda had been grimacing through our exchange, and that turned back into a sneer as she glared at Xi Zuang. “I believe the Lord-Sorcerer has been fairly explicit in his demands, and none of them break any Council edicts,” she said. “And you, High Magister, broke a Seat’s Sanctuary whether it was through mindless servants or not. *He* has every right to demand a sacrificial tribute from you, and if your creatures broke *my* Sanctuary I would be carving it from your very hide.”

The Life Seat snarled and looked like he was about to re-open the possibility of magical hostilities, but he took a breath and lowered his clawed hands. “Fine,” he growled, turning his hateful gaze on me. “You will give me the sword-bearer and the sword, and I will remove all influences that affect or reside in your territory so that you can scramble like the child you are to try and hold all of your toys at once as they crumble and break.”

“The sword-bearer and sword are currently awaiting my Judgement,” I said. “You won’t get access to them unless my Judgement deems it necessary.”

“It is my right to collect the swords!” Xi Zuang roared, clenching his fists.

“Prove to me that the sword he carries is a Demon Sword of Gao,” I said. “Show me the evidence you have.”

“There *is* no evidence without the sword,” he said. “That is the nature of the swords!”

“Then get fucked,” I said. “He’s in my territory, and until such a time that the sword is *proven* to be one you’re looking for, then it’s in my power to decide what happens to it. I’ll let you know what I find out at the next Council meeting.”

Xi Zuang snarled again, his face turning sour. “By the next Council meeting, Jeremiah Grant, you will be reeling from the shockwaves of your decisions here today and will *beg* for my aid, and I will refuse, and you will curse the day you chose to draw a line between us.”

"If you're going to threaten me, just spit it out," I said.

"I think you Americans have a saying for this sort of situation," he said, his snarl turning to an arrogant grin. "'Fuck around and find out,' I believe. Well, now you've fucked around, Jeremiah Grant - when you find out the consequences, I'll be waiting. And you," he looked at Esmerelda. "Four centuries, you have not made an alliance, and this is the best you can do?" He shook his head. "You will both learn your places."

"You know, you can just say 'Fuck around and find out;' it's self-explanatory. Explaining it doesn't make it more ominous," I said.

Zuang blinked and opened his mouth to say something else, but Esmerelda cut in. "Just fucking go," she said darkly.

Xi Zuang sucked in a deep breath and then did a complicated set of hand and finger gestures that were hard to follow before another strike of lightning came crashing out of the clear sky and then froze. The Asian Seat dusted off his black robes as if he were disgusted by the idea of bringing any particles of Hawaii with him, then turned and stepped *into* the lightning bolt as it winked out of existence.

I turned, working a finger in one ear to try and relieve the stress from the close proximity of the thunderclap, and looked at Esmerelda knowing I was probably skirting close to her tipping point. The look on her face, and the fact that her eyes were still black even if the unfelt wind had stopped rippling around her, told me I was right.

I'd forced things that she hadn't wanted forced. I'd drawn a line in the sand, challenged Xi Zuang over it, and she'd been caught in the collateral of that decision.

I had, in effect, just ripped my 'don't fuck with the new guy' pass up and tossed it out the window like a handful of confetti into the wind. Between the US and Canada I had something like 350 million people in my territory - plus the Caribbean and Greenland. How many of those people were Ascended? How many lives had I just impacted with my demands?

Recently I'd been trying to figure out how to make my life look normal, at least for a while, and I'd just made that so much harder.

I needed to grow, in power and knowledge, very quickly.

"I apologise for you getting sucked into that," I said to Esmerelda. "I had no warning that he was going to show up, and when I said we should meet here I assumed I would be contacting him later and you wouldn't need to be part of it directly."

Esmerelda let out a long, frustrated sigh, then spit a black wad out of her mouth that landed in the brush and hissed like acid. When she blinked and looked back at me, her eyes had returned to normal. "You realise you just did something none of us can foretell the consequences of?"

"I do," I said. "I know you wanted to move slowly on your ideas. This might jeopardise that. Again, I apologise."

She pursed her lips, still taking deep breaths in and out through her nose, and slowly shook her head. "To be clear, Jeremiah, we are not *friends*. Allies, possibly, especially by circumstance. But not friends."

"I understand," I said.

"And alliances have costs," she said. "Before that self-righteous *puta* showed up, you were asking me if I sent the attackers after you. Now you can be sure I didn't. I did, however, attach a being of my own creation to watch you and warn me of any dangers. I want it back, and I need you to tell me everything you can about this petitioner who came for judgement and the sword he carried - if it *is* a Demon Blade then we will have a much harder time rallying any of the others to our side on this."

I nodded. "Should we head down into the Sanctum?" I offered.

Esmerelda looked around, narrowing her eyes as she considered our surroundings, before shaking her head. "Just tell me here. Quickly."

I filled her in on what I knew - Leandro was from an Order that had protected an artefact called the Stone Sword based on the orders of Merlin. It was supposedly the tool used to sever 'Albion,' or England, from the continent. I described the sword to her from my quick look at it, plus what I'd seen through the Rod. By the end of it she looked troubled.

"Alright," she said. "The good news is that it isn't a Demon Blade. Gao was alive during the time of Merlin, but at the tail end of his life and Gao lived a long time afterwards - his swords were made after Merlin was dead and replaced by whoever took his Seat. Now here's the bad news - I've never heard of the 'Stone Sword' before, and your description tells me it is extremely old and very powerful. The cost of my alliance with you here is that artefact. I need to know what this Stone Sword is and why it was hidden away for so long and so carefully."

I closed my eyes and took a breath. Leandro was *not* going to like that. And, at the moment, I was in possession of the sword. Other than the Rod, and the little impregnation wand from a branch of the Tree of Life, it was the only other artefact I had and it was Esmerelda who caused that. She held every book and item that Ezekiel had collected over his millennium-long life, and now she wanted me to just hand over the one thing that could possibly be my nuclear deterrent.

"It's not mine to give," I said carefully, treading cautiously in how I spun my bullshit. "The bearer, Leandro, is sworn to protect the blade and he carries it under oaths set down by Merlin. His Order owns it, and while he is under my Sanctuary you can't just take it from him."

Esmerelda clenched her jaw, the face paint turning her grimace macabre. "Jeremiah," she said quietly. "Don't fucking start."

"This is what I can do," I said, thinking quickly. "Come back to my place. You can collect your shadow creature, and get a better look at the sword yourself before any decisions get made."

"Fine," she said. "We'll go to 'your place.' But don't expect me to fall into bed with you."

"Why do you keep assuming I'm trying to have sex with you?" I asked in exasperation.

"Because it's in your nature," she said. "And because your harem left me an open invitation, which means *you* left an open invitation. And lastly, because it's obvious that you find me attractive."

I tried to put words into a denial, but I couldn't. Even with the creepy face paint, Esmerelda was hot as hell.

"Fine," I said. "I'll accept the last two, but it's not *in my nature*."

"Maybe not yet," she said, looking off up the volcano. "But it will be. Now, bring me to 'your place' so we can see the sword that caused all of this."

Now we did head down into the Sanctum, and Esmerelda proved her knowledge of it by opening the main vault door herself, which was kind of annoying and made me wonder if there was a way to scramble the lock. We walked down, around the tower-like interior stairwell, and she headed directly for the teleportal door before looking at me, proving she knew Ezekiel's form of travel. "Well?" she asked.

"It's just strange, knowing that you knew this place when it was Ezekiel's," I said, shaking my head lightly. "Um, the spirit trap is still active back there, so if you're carrying any other ghosts or spirits or whatever, you'll want to get rid of them."

Esmerelda gave me a glare, and then reached into her jeans pocket, moved her hand around for a moment, before pulling it back out and flashing me the finger.

"Nice," I said.

"I'm powered by death, I'm not a necromancer," she said. "Most of the time."

“Tell that to your face,” I mumbled, stepping forward and taking her hand before reaching for the doorknob.

“What was that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“You’ve got skull face paint on?” I said.

“Oh,” she said, blinking. “Right. I forgot.” She waved her hand over her face and the paint peeled away, revealing her bare and pretty face. “Now, take me home.”

“You realise that sounds like-”

“Oh, shut up and teleportal us.”

- - - - -

“Well, he’s not dead,” Lindsey said with a smirk as we teleported through the front door and into the penthouse. She’d been sitting near the fireplace in the main common area of the apartment that hadn’t been shredded by glass, and she stood up and came to me for a kiss that pressed her front to me.

I was reminded, at that moment, that all of this had started with us being interrupted mid-fuck.

Lindsey let go of me as Stacey and Lauren came out of the master bedroom hearing the front door open, and Leandro came out of the back hall where the girls must have put him up in a guest room.

“Hey, Ezzie,” Lindsey said, and Esmerelda made an uncharacteristic squeak as Lindsey wrapped her up in a hug next. Esmerelda always came across as an *imposing* figure when I saw her, so it was strange seeing her next to Lindsey and realising the Death Seat was the shorter of the two.

“I didn’t think we were on hugging terms,” Esmerelda said, awkwardly patting Lindsey’s back.

Linds laughed and let go of the woman. “We shared a meal, you’re in our home, and it looks like you didn’t try to kill Jerry even though you were pissed. You also technically got naked in front of us when you did your teleport thing out of the restaurant - I think seeing you naked counts as us getting closer, even if you did strip off a little more than expected.”

Somehow, someway, Lindsey got Esmerelda to snort a brief laugh.

“Hey, babe,” Lauren said as she reached me, hugging me gently from the side as Stacey took my other hand in hers for a brief moment before letting it go. “Esmerelda, welcome to our new home-for-now,” Lauren said.

“Thank you,” Esmerelda said with a nod to Lauren and Lindsey, though her eyes were quickly scanning the room before fixating on Leandro. “Is this the swordbearer?”

“It is,” I said, stepping away from the girls and towards Leandro, who looked hesitant. “Esmerelda, this is Leandro, who is under my declaration of Sanctuary. He has a much longer name and title he can share with you. Leandro, this is Esmerelda Romero, one of the Seats of Death, who has an even longer string of titles if you two want to rattle them off.”

“It is an honour, my Lady,” Leandro said, falling to one knee and bowing his head.

“Finally one of you shows me some proper respect,” Esmerelda said, pursing her lips lightly as she raised an eyebrow at me. She glanced back down at Leandro. “Stand,” she said. “Tell me your full name.”

“Leandro de la Roca, *Paladín* of the *Orden de la Espada de Piedra*,” he said as he rose back to his feet.

“Mm,” Esmerelda hummed. “*Ha pasado mucho tiempo desde que regresé a España.*” Her accent was lispy but I managed to catch some of it from my mandated Spanish classes - it had been a long time since she’d been in Spain, or something like that. Before Leandro could respond she looked back at me. “Show me this trap you made.”

I brought her over to the fireplace and the mantle, taking down the sword that I’d covered in silver. “I used what I had to hand at the time, which was Leandro’s more mundane sword,” I said, handing it to her.

Lindsey hovered close, looking over our shoulders, but Esmerelda didn’t say anything as she examined the runes in the silver. “You used the Rod to help create this?” she finally asked.

“I did,” I said.

“I’ll need it,” she said. I glanced at Linds, who went and fetched it and hesitated for a moment before handing it to Esmerelda - I had a feeling she wasn’t thrilled at the possibility of us losing it back to her. Little did she know we were possibly losing a lot more than the Rod. “Stand back,” Esmerelda said, gesturing us back with the flanged rod in one hand and the silver sword in the other. We did as she asked and she closed her eyes for a beat, then all at once the Rod glowed for a brief moment, the sword turned a bright purple, and then was covered in a black goop that slithered up Esmerelda’s arm and settled onto her skin like a tattoo. The glowing faded from both implements, and Esmerelda exhaled heavily.

“There,” she said. “I have what’s mine, and your enchantment is in place.”

“No additions?” Lindsey asked. “Like maybe excusing *your* ghosts from coming around?”

“Speaking of which, I assume this confirms that the shadow thing was you?” Lauren asked. She, Stacey and Leandro had been watching from the kitchen.

“It was,” Esmerelda confirmed.

“Cool,” Lauren said, then turned and started playing Rock-Paper-Scissors with Stacey. Stacey won with rock and came over towards us, stepping up to Esmerelda.

“Yes?” Esmerelda asked.

Stacey slapped her.

My eyebrows went up and might have crawled all the way into my hairline.

“That’s for spying on us,” Stacey said sternly. “Friends don’t spy on friends, especially in vulnerable moments, and that thing definitely watched us fuck.” Then she pulled Esmerelda into a hug. “But thank you for telling the truth, and we forgive you.”

I thought Esmerelda might have been frozen with shock. She wasn’t moving, the bright mark on her cheek already starting to fade - the fact that it was there at all proved Stacey hadn’t exactly held back. Sometimes, when the girls did shit like this, I wondered if there wasn’t something to the whole ‘Harems should be locked away from the world’ thing because when I left them alone to talk they came up with batshit ideas like slapping a woman who could murder the entire city and get *more* powerful because of it.

Esmerelda blinked, and my brain went in six directions trying to figure out what thing I needed to do first to stop everyone from dying. But she didn’t cast a spell. She leaned forward and kissed Stacey right on the mouth, firm and full but brief, and took her hand. “*Pido disculpas*,” she said. “But that is the only one you get.”

“Slap, or kiss?” Lindsey asked.

Esmerelda rolled her eyes and Lindsey smirked.

Stacey went to step away and I gave her a ‘*What the fuck!?*’ look and she shrugged, heading back to the kitchen.

“Well, with that out of the way,” Esmerelda said, working her jaw with one hand for a moment. “I think it’s time I examine this Stone Sword.”

I was right earlier - Lindsey wasn’t a fan of Esmerelda getting her hands on anything magic-related in our house. Still, it only took a couple of quick whispers as we went to get it from where she’d stashed it under the bed in the master bedroom to get her on side. She’d wrapped

it in a blanket, rather than the ratty piece of canvas Leandro had been carrying it in, and we brought it over to the kitchen island to unwrap in and bring it under the overhead light.

Esmerelda watched as we unbundled it, and for a long moment she just looked it over, her pupils dilating slightly and her face twitching as she did something magical in how she was viewing it. Lindsey and I were on one side of the island and Leandro was on the other. I could tell the swordsman was nervous - to be fair, he had been since Esmerelda stepped into the apartment, but he was more so now.

He knew that if Esmerelda decided to take the sword, he had little chance of getting it back.

“Interesting,” Esmerelda finally said.

“Really?” Lindsey asked. “That’s it? Did you see the rune work right up next to the hilt? The wood almost hides it unless you look closely, and-”

“Interesting,” Esmerelda said more firmly. “What I can say now is that I was right when you first described it to me, Jeremiah. It is an ancient work - old enough that I couldn’t say if it was something crafted in Merlin’s time, or from before. Ndia or Uwe might know better, but revealing this to them would be a very foolish move. They are likely the only two who currently hold an artefact of this power in their possession, and knowing there is another in the world would make a large shift in how they act until it was secured by one of them. And if one *did* secure it, the balance of power in the world would change significantly.”

“Do you have a hint at what it does?” I asked.

“The legends...” Leandro said but trailed off.

“No, I don’t have a strong hint at what it does,” Esmerelda said. “But the level of power even just when inactive is immense. I told you when I gave you the Rod of Ash and Hew that it was an old creation that required the work of at least two Seats in concert to create. This sword would have required... five? Six? Part of the problem is that there is a secondary enchantment on it, extremely strong. I’ll need much more time to study it and begin to piece together the complexities.”

“That can’t happen,” Leandro said, and he flipped his side of the blanket back over the blade and began to bundle it back up. “This sword was hidden away from the Ascended and the Seats for a reason. My Order is sworn to keep it safe. I can not allow it to be taken.”

“Do you really think you could stop me, *Paladín*?” Esmerelda asked with a little lopsided smile.

“I would fulfil my oath and fight you to my last breath,” Leandro said.

“Well, we can’t have that,” Esmerelda sighed, shaking her head. “The good news, *Paladín*, is that Merlin’s enchantment binds the sword to members of your Order. I believe he made it so that it would be useless without you. If you die, the Stone Sword becomes a humming piece of magical potential without any way to ever activate it.”

“Don’t,” I said quickly, looking into Leandro’s eyes. “Do not consider offing yourself. She’ll just animate your corpse or something to get around the enchantment.”

Esmerelda smirked. “You’re catching on, Jeremiah.” She turned to Leandro. “He isn’t wrong, though. Now that this artefact has surfaced, it can’t be forgotten again. If it has a lock, and you are the key, you should be separated until we know what is behind the lock. Xi Zuang believes that you will not be separated from the sword, even if he doesn’t know what it is he almost got his hands on, and he believes Jeremiah is weak-willed and wouldn’t remove it from you. That means he won’t suspect that I have it, while you are with Jeremiah. The sword will be much safer in my vaults than anywhere Jeremiah can provide for now, and I will need to bring it back to you once my study is complete.”

“Or, I’m just saying, you could crash and study it here,” Lindsey suggested. “I could help. Be your assistant, take notes, do research...”

“Nice try, Houdini,” Esmerelda said.

“What? *I* wasn’t the one to slap you,” Lindsey smirked.

I looked at Leandro. “Tell me what you’re thinking,” I said. “She isn’t wrong.”

“This Xi Zuang, he is the Seat of Life, correct?” Leandro asked.

I nodded. “Old and powerful. He interrupted our meeting and we argued. He didn’t like that I was sheltering you and things got complicated. I don’t think he’ll take another run at you while you’re around me, but if you try to disappear he will likely try to find you.”

“If my enemy has become your enemy because of me, then I owe you even more now,” Leandro said grimly. He looked to Esmerelda. “I... will allow it, if Lord Jeremiah agrees. And when you are done, if what you say is true... Well, I know the man I must kill to avenge my brothers and sisters.”

That was something that future-me could deal with. I did *not* have the bandwidth to go through the issues of potentially setting him on a murder quest at the moment.

“Alright,” I said. “Then we’re somewhere near an agreement. Esmerelda will take the Stone Sword into her vaults and attempt to discover what it does, and when she’s finished she will bring it back to us with her answers. Leandro, you’ll stay under my Sanctuary, and tomorrow I’ll perform the Judgment you requested so that we can make things official. Agreed?”

Leandro nodded, if still a little reluctant as he kept one hand on the blanket-covered blade. Esmerelda clearly wasn't thrilled at the insistence that she bring the Stone Sword back, but she nodded as well. "Thank you," I said. "For this, and earlier."

"You, Jeremiah Grant, are much more trouble than I expected," Esmerelda said. She hefted the stone sword, bundled the blanket a little tighter, and then looked to Lindsey. "Apologies, Houdini, but no flashing this time. No matter how close we might be." She headed towards the front door, pausing a moment to look Lauren in the eye from across the room as something passed between them, and then she went and opened the door. The other side wasn't the hallway and the elevator, but rather some sort of a dark, stone-walled interior. She stepped through, closing the door behind her, teleporting away as she proved she knew Ezekiel's spell.

"Alright," I said to everyone. "Leandro, I assume you're good with one of the guest rooms? Xi Zuang won't be sending anything else against you, especially not tonight, so you should be safe to sleep without one eye open."

"You're sure?" he asked.

"I'm sure," I said.

He nodded, and his shoulders softened a bit, and I could tell that months, if not years, of vigilance while on the run was about to crash down on him.

"The rest of us will be in the master bedroom, just knock if you need anything," I said, then turned to the girls. "Linds, you can put away the Rod. Then the four of us should talk."

Leandro thanked me again for my Sanctuary and tried to apologise for causing me problems, but I just sent him off to his bed. It was kind of strange having a grown man looking for my forgiveness or approval.

I followed the girls into the bedroom after I hit up the fridge and pulled out some ice from the freezer, filling a glass with water. I held it in my hand for a long moment, just sort of staring at the ice. There was so *much* that I needed to do already, and now I'd just put an even larger time pressure on myself.

What was going on to the people in my territory right at that moment because of my demands for Xi Zuang? What plans were suddenly being made, or dashed? Who was left in need, or were suddenly free?

I drained the water until I was sucking noisily around the ice, then tossed the cubes into the sink. The cold of the water ran down my throat and helped wake me up.

Inside the bedroom I found all three of my girls out of the clothes they'd put on since they'd changed after Leandro and the Ghost Ninjas burst in. Lauren had stripped down to her bra and panties, while Lindsey had on one of my hoodies - both she and Stacey had 'borrowed' one to bring with them to school. Stacey still had on her comfy pyjama pants, but had stripped off her shirt and bra and was laying back against the headboard topless.

"OK, babe," Lauren said, coming to me as I shut the door. She wrapped me up in a hug, squeezing me tightly for a moment. "We're here."

I was led to the bed and stripped down to my boxers, and then the girls surrounded me in love for a long moment as they snuggled up to me. Stacey ended up on my left, and Lauren on my right, each hugging an arm and holding my hands. Lindsey sat in front of me, crossing her legs and resting my legs around her hips comfortably. She wasn't wearing anything under the sweater so I had an open view of her pretty pussy exposed to me, but it wasn't the time.

I didn't hold anything back as I told them about going to meet Esmerelda, the entire confrontation with Xi Zuang, and then the talk with Esmerelda afterwards. I got interrupted frequently by questions from all of them - some were observational, others were opinions, and some I had to stop and consider before answering. I felt like, between the three of them, I was functioning with a brain trust. Stacey and Lindsey had such different ways of tackling things mentally than I did, and Lauren looked at things more similarly but from a different emotional angle.

"So we're not at war, but we definitely have a major rivalry going," Stacey grimaced once I was done.

"And there is a lot that needs doing," Lindsey agreed. "And quickly."

"That's what I'm feeling now," I said. "It's like a crushing weight waiting to settle onto me, hanging by a thread. At any moment it could drop and I need to catch it."

"Oh, Jerry," Lauren sighed, hugging me a little tighter. Then she sat up. "Alright, we need to talk about priorities. I think the obvious one is we need to start looking at how to get Jerry more power, faster. Industrialise it."

"I'll tackle that," Lindsey said. "The rune stuff might be helpful with a lot more time, but it will be slow going until we get our hands on *some* sort of primer, otherwise I'm reinventing the wheel instead of refining it. Raw power harvesting is a more tackleable project, I think."

"Just don't start suggesting I impregnate people," I said. "I'm still not ready for that."

"I know," Lindsey said, rubbing my leg. "But there is the question of what part of the reproduction process actually generates power. Everyone says impregnation, but what about birth? Wouldn't

that be another point of power release? Unless it's more like a 'spark of life' thing, so the birth is just a natural consequence of the initial-

"Linds," Stacey interrupted her. "Maybe do the brainstorming *after* the planning."

"Right," she said, smiling and a little embarrassed.

"What's the second highest priority?" Lauren asked.

"It needs to be getting a grip on my territory," I said. "There's so *many* people and so many unknowns. I was supposed to meet with Aidra on Monday after school to talk magic stuff and have sex, but I think that needs to shift. I think I need to get a meeting directly with her Mom since she's a Witch as well and likely knows more."

"We should also start up the Judgment email," Lauren said. "The interview article hasn't gone out yet, but we need to open the door for people to start contacting us or else we might start getting more drop-ins like Annalise and Leandro. I'll manage it if you make the Proclamation, Jerry."

"We'll contact Other Anna tomorrow and see if she can put out an American press release for us after I make the Proclamation," I said. "I'll also see if our relationship with her can squeeze out a primer dossier on major Ascended political groups and individuals. I really should have asked her for that when we were there."

"To be fair, you *were* coming off of a witch hunter attack and a pretty intense foursome," Lauren said.

"Which is why *you* should have asked for it," Stacey said with a little smirk to Lauren.

"Hey, I was in that foursome too," Lauren chuckled.

"What's the third priority?" I asked. "One and Two are pretty big."

"You Judge Leandro tomorrow morning," Stacey said. "And, awkward warning, if you're holding to needing a payment then either he's sucking your dick or you need to take something else in payment, and I don't think he's got a lady in his life."

"Shit," I sighed. "OK, well, we'll think of something."

"Bodyguard," Lauren said. "He can be a live-in bodyguard here while we live elsewhere."

"What?" Stacey asked.

"Boo," Lindsey frowned. "That means I can't walk around naked."

“You can’t walk around naked outside of the room anyways,” Lauren said. “Maya is moving here too, remember?”

“She’s seen tits before,” Lindsey scoffed.

“Annalise will get a permanent dent between her eyebrows, she’ll frown so much if you’re naked around her sister,” Stacey chuckled.

“Fine, fine,” Lindsey sighed.

“I’ll see what he thinks,” I said. “It *would* make me feel a little better about things.”

“We’ll just need to figure out how to explain his presence when we have normal people over,” Stacey said. “What are the chances we can convince people he’s someone’s cousin who is paying rent?”

“Speaking of protection,” I said. “Tomorrow I’m going to take some time to set up some magical defences. Make the glass shatterproof, reinforce the walls, roof and ceiling, that sort of thing.”

“In between the judgement and your date with Moira,” Lauren reminded me.

“Ah, shit,” I said. “I totally blanked. Fuck. Um-”

“You aren’t backing out, Jerry,” Lauren said.

“Or postponing. That might even be worse,” Lindsey said.

“Why would postponing be bad? I could have a legitimate reason.”

“Because she’ll be asking herself if it’s true, and if she trusts you, and if it’s even a good idea to go on a date with you at all. Again,” Stacey said. “And because even if everything is going crazy, you can’t be the one to buckle and change because of it. You like her, and even if you’re not bringing her into the Harem right now you still want her. So you can’t postpone it unless it’s a real emergency.”

“OK,” I said, letting go of Lauren’s hand so I could rub my forehead. “OK. You’re right. Judgement, then modifications to the apartment, then the date with Moira.”

“I’ll help Lindsey with the Sex Harvesting ideas,” Stacey said. “At least until there’s another job that needs handling. Anything else we need to discuss before bed?”

“I have something that needs discussing,” Lindsey said.

We all looked at her expectantly.

“Linds?” Lauren prompted.

“Oh, I thought it was obvious,” Lindsey said. “I only got half a fuck earlier. So I’m hoping that I can get my ass stuffed before we sleep.”

“Nasty bitch,” Stacey chuckled.

“That’s my Linds,” Lauren laughed.

It didn’t take long before the girls had me naked and hard, and I was behind Lindsey in doggy and groaning as I slowly pushed into her ass. She was still wearing my sweater, which was somehow comfy and cute as I ran my hands up under it. Lauren, not one to pass up an opportunity, laid down in front of Lindsey and pulled her panties to the side, silently inviting the other blonde to eat her. Which, of course, Lindsey immediately started doing. Stacey, seeing that, sighed and pulled off her pyjama pants and climbed on top and sat on Lauren’s face as she smirked at me and shook her head.

What a life we were living.

Leandro was alone, the door to the bedroom shut and locked. It was a nice place - nicer than any that he’d stayed in... maybe ever. The rooms at the Rock had been comfortable but sparse. The filthy motels, the hostels, and even the homes he’d broken into while on the run had all been empty of life. This place had that same feel, but it had a hopefulness to it, as if life was just about to fill it.

He was looking down at his phone. It was a flip phone, just a prepaid thing. A year old now. Only one number was saved in it.

A number he’d never called or texted during that year since it had been programmed in.

Leandro didn’t know if the other end would still be active or not. If it would receive.

“*I’m alive,*” he typed in but hesitated to push send. In the end, after almost ten minutes of consideration, he pushed it.

“*Might be safe. Will know more tomorrow,*” he followed up.

He sighed and set the phone on the bedside table, taking a deep breath. Standing, he unlocked the bedroom door and went to the bathroom that the guest rooms shared. Stripping off, he looked at the bruises and scars on his body. There were so, so many more than when he’d

started running four years before. Some, the oldest and faded, were happy memories of training in the Rock. Each one connected to a face that was gone now, a laugh or a grunt that he'd never hear again.

The rest were testaments to his desperation. To hard-won lessons. To survival.

The shower was hot, and while there wasn't any soap to use he took his time and scrubbed himself as clean as he could get. There were towels, at least, and he wore one around his waist back to his room after washing his clothes in the bathroom sink. He hung up the damp clothes over the closet doors and positioned his shoes beside the bed carefully so he could slip into them if needed. He reached under the pillow that Lady Lauren had brought him, feeling the hilt of the long-bladed kitchen knife he'd stashed there, nodding to himself.

He checked that the blinds were as closed as they could get, and then shut off the light in the room and sat on the bed and picked up the phone from the bedside table, checking it by rote as he had for a year. His eyes went wide as he realised his message had gotten a response.

"I'm alive too," it read. *"I'll come when you call."*

He clenched his jaw, closing his eyes in the dark and feeling his weariness suddenly ache all through him.

It wasn't over yet. It wouldn't be over for a long time. But maybe things would be different now.

He could stop trying to figure out how to kill them all and focus on just one.