

Arcana Zero

Chapter 1 - Fortuna Dubia

I took a single step out of the apartment complex into the cold November morning and my day was instantly ruined.

One of the apartments boomed to the rhythm of--I had to do a double-take--Shostakovich's Second Waltz. As if that wasn't weird enough, a woman in a burgundy dress was dancing in the small park just ahead. Beneath the tall linden tree, in the wet grass, she waltzed without a care. Her auburn hair swayed with each graceful move and the blindfold looked like a blank canvas wrapped around her head. The only thing about her that was unchanging.

Taire noticed me and stopped, and with her, the music did as well. That was probably one of the least odd things happening whenever she appeared. I gnashed my teeth as she started toward me. It had been relatively peaceful the last couple of days.

A quick glance up to the gray, amorphous mass that was the sky told me there'd be a chance of rain today. Also a chance of storm and lightning bolts from an angry Goddess. I decided to be civil this time.

"Alex, my Voice," she said and the smell of hazelnuts that always accompanied Taire's appearances hit me. "Today is a good day. I would like you to procure five blue stones for me on this magnificent day of days."

I must have stared blankly at her for a few seconds because she started tapping her foot in a puddle in a series of splats. She was barefoot. Just seeing it sent shivers through me.

"What am I, a level one adventurer? I've got classes today," I said and deconstructed my own careful plan of being civil, "get your own damn stones."

I couldn't tell because of the blindfold, but I could feel her eyes burning holes through me. Maybe I shouldn't go outside today. Or this week for that matter.

"You shouldn't speak to me in such a way, my Voice," Taire said in an icy tone, "I'll bust your fucking kneecaps."

She wasn't joking. She really, really wasn't joking.

"F-forgive me, my Goddess," I said. I kept my voice level and bowed my head, careful as if dealing with a wild animal.

"Aspect," she said and with that, Taire, along with her hazelnut scent, disappeared.

I straightened my back, shook the hair out of my eyes, and took a few deep breaths. The air flooding my lungs was cold and damp, smelled of rain. It always took a few moments to recover from Taire's antics. Dealing with her was like trying to babysit a spoiled, overpowered five-year-old child.

Alright, I'll admit, at first I thought I was hallucinating, but Taire is definitely the real deal. I mean, there are a lot of people claiming to have spoken to Gods, most of them institutionalized, but has anyone ever claimed a Goddess head-butted them?

I heard the front door of the building open behind me and turned to see a neighbor walk out, greet me with a slight nod, and start toward the parking lot. As my thoughts returned to the present, I remembered that I was, in fact, in a hurry.

I put the Goddess--pardon, Aspect--of Chance out of my mind and hurried over and around puddles toward the bus stop. It wasn't really that far, maybe a good five-minute walk, but it was somewhat unnerving. It was that part of the morning after most people had already left for work, so the streets were empty and silent. Only my footsteps and the occasional splash broke that silence.

As I reached the bus stop, though, the city's typical noise greeted me, that is the noise of cars rushing back and forth. Apart from that, there were few people around. Crows were cawing and flying around in circles, so I moved underneath the protective cover of the waiting shed. A crow-surprise down my neck sounded a bit too plausible considering Taire's mood as she departed.

I caught a whiff of smoke and saw an old lady puff one final time from a cigarette, throw it away, and light a new one. I could bet she was on her way to get her asthma prescription. Next to her sat a young man around my age reading some article or another on his tablet through a pair

of thick-rimmed glasses. I inadvertently peeked and saw the headline, "Father murdered by son, the--" and with that I turned and looked away. I'd had enough of murders in the last couple of weeks. I realized it made no difference whether I read the article or not, but I was just sick of it. Every couple of days someone went berserk and brutally murdered whoever was closest to them. After that all of them claimed to remember nothing, to have blacked out. Nobody actually knew what was happening. Especially since in most cases, the person physically *couldn't* have perpetrated the crime. They were just that gory.

It seemed as if the cases weren't related, which was the official statement, but nobody actually believed that. So many identical murders had close to zero percent chance of being unrelated. People on the internet started flinging around hypotheses, one less plausible than the next, but nobody knew what was actually happening. I guess that's why I avoided the subject. That and also because of Taire. I couldn't shake the feeling she was, if not responsible for it, somehow involved. Any attempt to wring information out of her had failed miserably, of course.

The bus neared the stop, so I put my thoughts aside. The old lady threw her half-smoked cigarette away and waited by the bus's doors until they opened. I waited for the passengers to get off before stepping inside.

She went toward the back of the bus and stopped next to a boy that looked to be in grade school.

"Boy, give up your seat," the old lady said, pulling on the boy's jacket to get him off, "can't you see I'm old?"

I wondered what kind of life you'd have to live to end up so bitter, but decided I didn't care and headed for the front of the bus, as far away from her as possible.

A vile stench came over me from a bum sitting close by. He was huffing paint from a plastic bag with a blank look on his face. I shuddered and groaned, but ultimately decided I liked him better than the old lady. The bus started moving and I turned my gaze outside the window. There was something unnerving about the atmosphere in the bus--apart from the smell that is. Nobody spoke, there was no music on, everybody just stared idly out the window. Heavy. The atmosphere was heavy.

Until the bus screeched to a sudden halt and I felt myself being flung shoulder-first into the driver's cabin. A jolt of pain spread throughout my right arm, but that was nothing compared to that horrible screech of tires. A familiar thud came as some car crashed into us and I toppled over onto my back. Somebody screamed, maybe several people, I don't know. I tried moving, but I was shaking too much, my eyes wide open, my breaths quick and shallow.

I rolled over, grabbed a railing and pulled myself up. It shot a vivid pain through my arm but I pulled desperately and moved to the driver's cabin.

"Open the door," I said, nearly shouting, barely containing the panic that threatened to turn me into a bumbling mess, "open the door, open the damn door."

The driver seemed confused, only barely recovered from the shock, but he opened it and I stumbled outside, nausea welling up inside of me. I noticed the car that had bumped us. It hadn't been much more than that, the sudden break had hurt me more than the accident itself.

The front of the car was slightly bent out of shape. Out of it came a balding man in his forties with a thick, fuzzy mustache, dressed in an expensive-looking suit. He went straight for the bus driver and started shouting something. I couldn't care less, I just needed someplace to sit down, or I was sure I'd throw up. My skin felt clammy, I was cold and my hands still shook.

I went over the broken pieces of plastic from the accident and some broke beneath my boots with sharp cracks. On the side of the road, I found a patch of grass and sat down. It was cold and wet, soaking my pants, but I didn't care. I held my knees, rested my head on them and started an all too familiar exercise.

I breathed in through my nose as much air as my lungs could hold until I felt my chest muscles painfully complain, held it in for a few moments and exhaled through my mouth. I did this again and again until I felt my heartbeat return to normal, until the shaking stopped and the feeling of nausea receded.

Only after managing to stop myself from having a fit did I realize people were arguing. I raised my eyes to see the balding man and the bus driver shouting very creative profanities at each other. The bus driver shoved the other guy and he nearly toppled over his own car. His

wide, round face contorted in anger and he went into the car. The bus driver made a few steps toward it, but the man came back out holding a baseball bat and getting ready to strike.

I got to my feet in an instant and sprinted toward them. I grabbed the bat and rammed into the man. Now I'm not very tall, about average I guess, neither am I well-built, but I compensated for that with speed. I managed to wring the bat from his sausage-like fingers as he toppled over the hood of his car. Another jolt of pain shot through my right shoulder, so I held the bat firmly in both hands and backed away from them.

The bus driver almost instantly rushed the man but one of the passengers grabbed him from behind. The fat driver got up and started toward me, but changed his mind mid-way, probably as it connected with him that I was holding his bat. Instead, he turned back toward the bus driver, but a few bystanders intervened to break up the fight.

Eventually, everyone calmed down. I handed over the bat to someone else and headed toward the university on foot. I was already late for the first class and I'd had enough of moving vehicles. I estimated it would be a while until I could board a bus without having another panic attack.

The first class of the day was over by the time I arrived. The old building's wings were spread as if to embrace the garden in front of it. To my eyes it looked like a castle and it gave the impression of endurance. It seemed like even if the whole city would be razed, this building would still stand.

As I passed through the wrought iron gate, the heavy atmosphere I'd felt on the bus intensified. It wasn't just the overcast sky. Before, people would have a chat over a cigarette beneath the two towering pine trees during break. Today, everybody just looked down or stared blankly into space, occasionally puffing on their cigarettes.

Well, everyone but Roland that is. He flashed me a smile as he noticed me and started waving as if I could overlook him. Roland was one of the few classmates I was somewhat close to. He was a handsome guy with perfect hair and teeth whiter than my thoughts during an exam. He was always cheerful, carefree and I assumed grooming was a hobby for him by the passion he put into it. I could smell his perfume from ten steps away.

He extended a hand in greeting as I approached and I shook it.

"The wizard is late, I see," he said with a grin.

"A wizard is never late, you plebeian," I said. "Also, would you stop calling me that."

"Alex, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but reading books about magic at school is weird. I know you're struggling with the concept, but--"

"It's a purely academic interest," I said before he could finish his obnoxious rant. "But seriously, stop that, I'm getting a weird reputation around here."

"And?"

"And some girl called me to ask if I could get rid of the ghosts haunting her apartment," I said. "That merely a few days after one asked if I could contact her dead grandmother."

I barely got to finish before Roland broke out in his typical booming laughter. All of the ten other people around turned to stare at us. It took an exasperatingly long time for him to finish laughing, but eventually, he wiped his eyes and sighed. It wasn't funny, but that's the nature of friendship between men--the other's pain brings us to tears.

In the meantime, two other classmates had joined us and were giving Roland inquisitive looks. They were an odd pair. Joan was nearly as tall as I, slender, and her straight blonde hair fell down to her shoulders. Karin, on the other hand, was short and plump, with unruly hair dyed in every imaginable color.

"Think you could tone it down a little?" Joan asked Roland with half a mouth so the cigarette between her lips wouldn't drop. "You're being insensitive."

Roland raised an eyebrow, "Really? I'm being insensitive to the guy who offed his dad?"

"To the people around," Karin said. "To those who knew him and cared about him. Don't be so quick to judge."

"Am I missing something?" I asked.

"Another murder," Joan said and puffed on her cigarette before continuing. "A second-year student killed his father last night. Same as the others, claims he can't remember anything."

I recalled the article from earlier that I refused to read. It made sense now, the tension and dark atmosphere in the school. I wondered how the university would respond.

"Yeah, big deal," Roland said and waved it away, "people die all the time. People are dying as we speak. Am I supposed to cry for each and every one of them?"

"No," Karin said, "but it might be nice to show some consideration."

"And how would that help, exactly?"

I grabbed Roland's shoulder and pulled him after me. "Come on, I wanna get a can of lemonade. Help me carry it."

"Help you--how large of a can are you planning to buy?" Roland asked, but he followed me.

I bought the drink from a nearby store and came back out to Roland giving me a level look. I opened the can and took a sip.

"Well," he said, "out with it. Seeing how you can carry it just fine, I assume you brought me here to give me a lecture."

"Something like that," I said. "Karin's right, you need to stop antagonizing people. They're anxious enough as it is."

"I need to, do I? Suppose I should bend over for them as well," he said, a disdainful look on his face, "let them blow off some steam."

"If you're into that," I said. Roland huffed and leaned against the building. Behind me, cars were rushing and I heard a few groups of girls pass by. I waited until they'd passed.

"Listen, people are scared," I said and took another sip from my lemonade. "Until now, all these incidents were far enough to ignore. Everyone knew something was happening in the city, but it was something abstract.

"Now," I continued, "it happened right next to them. Now they look to their classmates and realize each and every one of them could be a potential murderer. It scares people, it makes them uneasy. I'm not asking you to feel the same, but don't stress them even further."

Roland sighed and looked down. He was rubbing two coins against each other and was tapping his foot.

"It's just how I deal with it," he said and looked up to me. "It hit me pretty hard too, but what am I supposed to do? This should be your area, right? Weird stuff that we can't explain."

I leaned against the wall next to him and felt the cold, uneven bricks even through my coat. "I've got nothing. Besides, even if I could explain it, would you believe me?"

"No," he said and gave me a smirk, "no offense man, but I don't believe in magic. That's just how people thought to explain what they couldn't understand."

"Well, by that reasoning," I said and returned his smirk, "it is magic, isn't it?"

Roland dropped his head back. "You are infuriating, did you know that?"

"Relax," I said, "I don't believe in magic either. I told you, it's purely academic. Come on, let's not be late for class."

In my defense, it wasn't an outright lie. Roland was right about magic being an explanation to things we couldn't understand. I just thought there were more things we couldn't understand than we liked to admit. Like a crazy goddess only I could see.

By the time we returned to the university, Joan and Karin had already headed back up. We headed on after them, but before we could get inside, a very interesting person came out of the building.

Helen was, without the slightest exaggeration, the most beautiful girl I'd ever laid eyes upon. It wasn't just a subjective opinion, every one of the guys and a few of the girls were drooling over her every time she walked by. Helen wore a long, pleated black skirt, a white pullover, a black denim jacket, and leather boots. I think the simplicity of it was part of her charm, like she wasn't beautiful on purpose. Her black hair was cut short and she had the most mesmerizing deep-blue eyes.

As she noticed us, Helen shifted the backpack she wore over one shoulder. "Alex," she said, though for a moment I thought I was hearing things. Helen knew my name?

"I'm glad I caught you before leaving," she said, her melodic voice haunting to my ears. Hey, snap out of it, what are you, in fifth grade?

"I'll," Roland said and paused for a moment with a blank look on his face. I think it broke his brain as well. "I'll go on ahead."

"Thanks," Helen said and turned to me. She handed me a folded note and gave me a vague smile oddly coupled with a distraught look. "Please."

With that, she turned and left. I was speechless for a minute or so, watching her disappear beyond my line of sight. Only after that did I turn my attention to the note, my heart threatening to stop from overexertion.

"Please meet me in Iulius Park, by the lake, tonight at nine. I need your help. Sorcerers are trying to kill me."

I nearly dropped the damned note. What the actual f--