

‘Dark fantasy at its most intoxicating...I was completely enthralled’

#1 NYT BESTSELLING AUTHOR JENNIFER L. ARMENTROUT



SHANNON J. SPANN

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Praise for *A Stage Set for Villains*

“Dark fantasy at its most intoxicating. Shannon Spann delivers a world where gods crave applause, mortals bleed for love, and every truth feels like a curse. I was completely enthralled.”

— #1 *NYT* bestselling author Jennifer L. Armentrout

“*A Stage Set for Villains* is a love story drenched in beauty, blood, and betrayal—a performance so mesmerizing you forget where the fiction ends. I couldn’t put it down.”

— J. Elle, *NYT* bestselling author of the House of Marionne series

“Absolutely thrilling. Be ready to be hooked from the first page to the shocking end.”

— *NYT* bestselling author Elise Kova

“As enthralling as it is unique, *A Stage Set for Villains* will have you spellbound!”

— #1 *NYT* bestselling author Mai Corland

“Part novel, part script, *A Stage Set For Villains* is a fascinatingly unique world like nothing you’ve ever read before, where mirrors are to be feared, life-eating curses abound, and vicious humans-turned-gods called Players perform on a voracious playhouse stage, that will have you riveted from the first casting call!”

— *USA Today* bestselling author Amalie Howard

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A STAGE SET FOR VILLAINS

SHANNON J. SPANN

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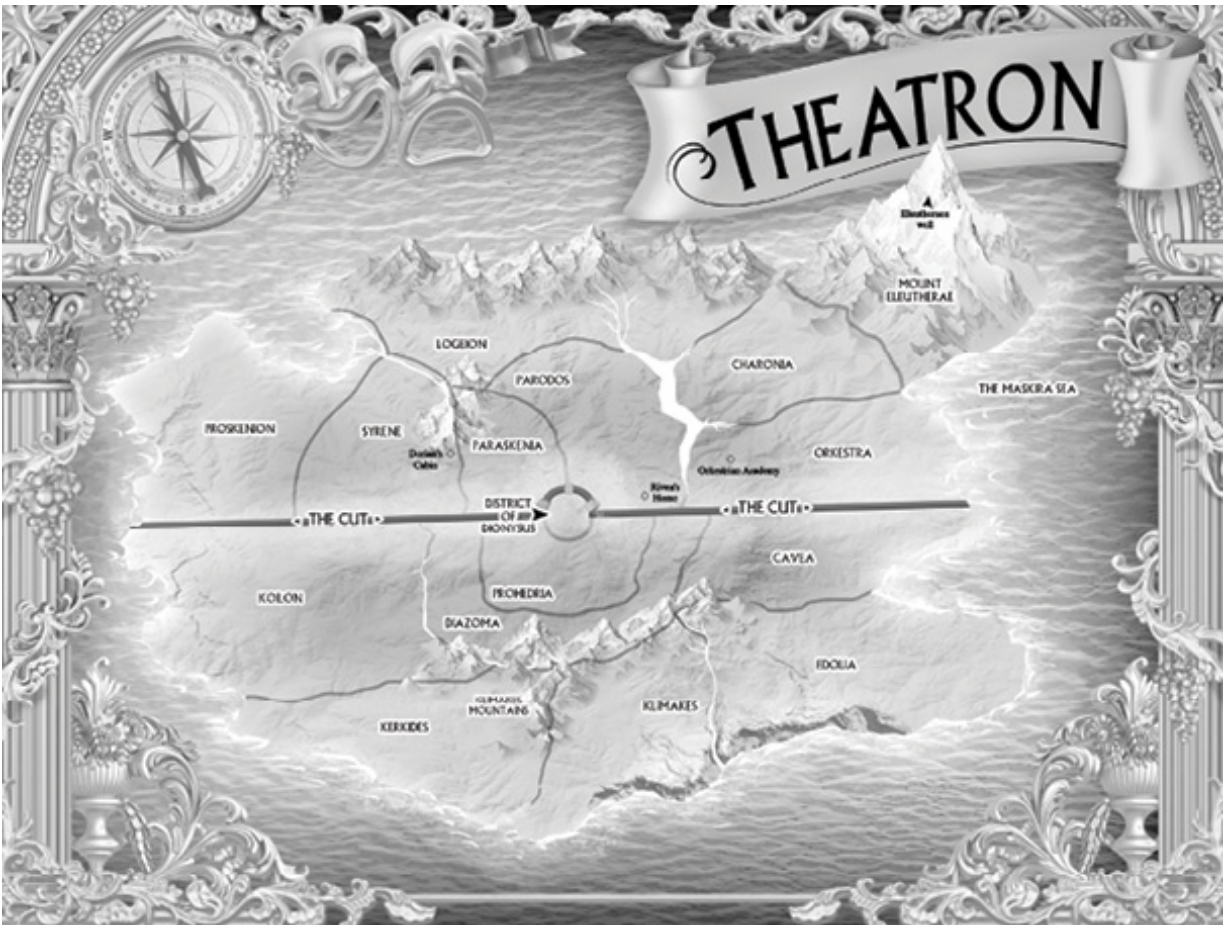
For Grandma

Who always believed in me, but had to go home before this book made its way to shelves. I'm sure you've already requested it at heaven's library. I miss you.

And for Star

Hey, look! Look, buddy! I did it!!

Map of Theatron





[*A Stage Set for Villains*](#) is an atmospheric dark fantasy set in the brilliant and brutal world of Theatron. The story features elements that might not be suitable for all readers, including death, blood, violence, illness, torture, imprisonment, starvation, loss of autonomy, murder, burning, and graphic language. Suicide and poison are discussed in backstory. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note, and prepare to enter the Playhouse...

OVERTURE

For as long as I can remember, we have feared the Players. I know of only three ways to survive an encounter with one.

“Never look a Player in the eye,” I recite as we shuffle a few steps forward in line. My older brother’s hand clutches my gloved fingers a little too tight, and I wonder if he’s nervous, too. Last night, I was so excited that I couldn’t sleep. But the longer we wait, the more I wonder if being marked will hurt.

“That’s right,” Galen says. “Remember, that *doesn’t* mean ignoring them, Riv.”

I nod eagerly. If you’re going to bruise a Player’s ego, you might as well throw yourself off a cliff while you’re at it. It would be less painful.

“What’s the second rule?” Galen quizzes as another newly marked boy, somewhere between my eight years of age and my brother’s twelve, passes us on his way out of the enormous courthouse ahead.

There’s a bandage pressed just below the boy’s throat like a necklace, gold bleeding through the layers. He’s crying.

“*Just ten minutes,*” Aunt Cassia told us before we left this morning. “*Ten minutes of discomfort for a lifetime of protection against the Players. Against the lure of the Playhouse.*”

I touch the tips of my fingers to the dip between my collarbones, trying to imagine the mark that will go there soon.

“The Three Compliments Rule,” I finally answer, mentally reading the memory cards I made in class last week. “Pay a Player three compliments and you might satisfy their ego long enough to get away.”

“Good!” My brother offers an encouraging smile while I throw another searching look over my shoulder, trying to spot where we left our mother at the gates in the distance. “And the third way to escape a Player?”

I press my lips together, my thoughts stalling back to that crying boy. The

bandage. My heart begins to pound in my chest. How badly *will* it hurt?

Galen squeezes my hand, and I realize I haven't answered his question. "Oh, um—give them a gift?" I guess, my memory cards momentarily fleeing my mind.

He shakes his head while a voice somewhere ahead shouts out, "Keep it moving!"

They call us next, and we're ushered into a bare, circular atrium, interrupted by a single stone hallway. My brother herds me up to a half-moon granite desk beside a gurgling fountain, our steps echoing.

"Fill these out," instructs a sour-faced woman from behind the desk, extending several pages of parchment to Galen. I snatch the forms indignantly, and the woman startles.

"I can read. I'm *eight*," I announce, plucking a pen from the jar on the desk while Galen apologizes for my brash behavior.

"Eight, is she? Tall for her age, I think." I feel the woman's gaze linger on my pen as I spell out my name: *Riven Hesper*. She inhales sharply.

I peer up to deal the woman a venomous look. It's easy to tell when people are mentally comparing me to my father; they always stare like I've risen from the dirt of his grave. My father's face is nearly as infamous as the Players who murdered him.

I go back to ignoring her and concentrate on filling out today's date.

Until my pen freezes at the sound of a scream.

It all happens at once. The desk woman jumps to her feet as the shriek ricochets off the vaulted ceilings, followed by a second scream—this one, in the shape of the word *help*. Then another scream, and another. At the frantic pounding of feet, my attention startles toward the cavernous hall. Somewhere, a man's voice yells out a warning that makes my blood run cold.

Player.

The word scorches my mind, fear wiping it blank of everything I have been taught. Instinctively, my eyes search for the closest grown-up, but the woman behind the desk has dropped to the ground, covering her eyes.

Before I can move, a tall, angelic figure flutters into the atrium, layers of

purple rippling behind her. The Player whips around, a curtain of dark curls toppling over her shoulder. As if she senses an audience.

Her eyes glimmer like live embers, and I think she must be the most dreadful and beautiful thing I have ever seen. Catching my eye, the Player smiles—it's a wrong smile, though. It stretches wider and wider until each side reaches the blood rubies that dangle from her earlobes.

Aunt Cassia warned me of their unnatural faces—exaggerated so patrons in even the worst seats of the Playhouse can still make out a Player's expressions. Up close, it's as breathtaking as it is grotesque. She looks like a god.

But we don't have gods anymore.

We only have Players.

Sentries uniformed in black and silver fill the room, encircling the woman and barking orders at one another as she extends her palms out. Broken, golden shackles dangle at her wrists.

There's blood on her hands.

Suddenly, my brother's panicked face fills my vision, his hands clamping around my shoulders. "You look at me, okay? Look *only* at me, Riven," he whispers, frantic.

How could I have already forgotten the first rule?

I nod rapidly and focus hard on my brother's gaze—wide and round and scared. Except something is wrong with his eyes. They're too still—glassy, like a doll's.

"Galen?" I ask. Why isn't he blinking? "Galen!" I try again, alarmed at the sound of my own voice.

Because my voice is *all* I can hear.

The shouts echo into nothing, the world shuddering to a stop. I look from Galen's frozen stare to the fountain behind him, where the water is stuck in midair like it's hardened into ice. Around me, the sentries are locked in place, a museum of lifeless statues. Galen's hands press on my shoulders, cold and heavy as marble.

I blink a few times, baffled.

The whole world is still.

In the silence, a hand peels over my brother's collar. I shiver, watching as it hooks around his shoulder one long, elegant finger at a time—each adorned with a ring. Several nails are stained red.

Then the Player's face appears, hovering just over Galen's shoulder.

I glance back at Galen, obeying his instructions *not* to look. But the Player's skin glows so bright, it feels impossible to keep my eyes away.

"Oh, dear heart. You look so scared." I shudder at the sound of her voice. It's slow, the timbre light and airy, like silk. It fills the room, sinks into the walls. "At least look at me, won't you?"

Never look a Player in the eye, I chant mentally. My breaths are coming too quick, my vision beginning to swim.

In the corner of my eye, her smile falls at my silence and her hand lifts off Galen's shoulder, glides to his face. To my horror, the Player sets the sharpened edge of her ring against his cheek. Then drags it across his skin, slicing open the soft area below his eye.

Still, Galen doesn't move. Doesn't react.

And suddenly, I forget everything I should—and should *not*—do in this situation.

"*Stop it!*" I shout, locking eyes on the Player. Fear gathers in my throat, and I spit it back out as fury. "Or *else*," I add, hoping she doesn't notice the way my knees are trembling.

The Player tilts her head at me, curious. "Why, what lovely golden eyes you have."

A compliment? Wait—three! I'm supposed to pay her three compl—

"They're *brown*," I hiss at her. Like my father's were. "*Liar*."

She throws her head back and laughs. The sound ricochets off the stone, ringing in my ears. "What a *beautiful* temper," the Player muses. "*Lying* is a part of living. The truth is too often vile, wouldn't you say?"

I'm not sure, really. Most people I know *can't* lie. Pulling in a breath, I cast a nervous glance around the room. "Why aren't they moving?"

"Well, I've suspended our reality, you see," she whispers, like it's a shared

secret between us. “Do you know what that means?”

I press my lips into a frown, frustrated. I *don't* know.

“It means this conversation doesn’t happen,” she says, gathering her robes as she settles on her knees before me. Her figure still towers over me at this height. I straighten my shoulders and stretch my neck a little higher, searching for confidence.

“They’re going to take you away,” I warn in a way I think sounds threatening.

“Oh, I know!” the Player says, excited. “You see, they’ve promised to burn me at the stake. And I cannot resist a spectacle.” She smiles softly. “What is your name?”

Before I can speak, her gilded eyes fall to the pages in my hands—documents that declare I’m to be marked. Safe. Protected from Players. At the top of them, my name.

“Riven!” She howls another laugh that shakes my boots. “What could divide you so fiercely to merit such a name?”

I don’t answer, keeping one eye just to her right, to the blood now trickling down Galen’s neck. I wonder if he can feel it. The Player pulls the pages from my hands, the startling warmth of her touch loosening my grip like melting ice. She raises them between our faces, then, in one beautiful, violent motion, tears them to shreds. They fall around us like new snow, landing gently in the quiet.

“You aren’t getting marked, Riven,” the Player murmurs, and it’s then that I notice how white and pointed her teeth look up close. “*You* are coming with me.”

I don’t even hear myself scream. The will, the *desire* to follow her overwhelms my every thought as the Player reaches for my hand and summons me forward. I watch her golden eyes.

Compelled, my hand reaches for hers. I’m not marked yet. I can’t help it.

Maybe *this* is how it feels to watch a Playhouse performance. Galen says Players pluck the heartstrings of thousands in the audience every night like delicate threads on a quilt, wiping away and rearranging their spectators’

thoughts, ideas, and beliefs with little more than a pretty word.

Players can make you believe anything.

But there is at least one thought she has no hold on: *She's going to kill me.* She's going to force me to follow her, an eternal audience, until my legs give out. Until I die from exhaustion or starvation.

An audience, wholly and solely devoted. This is what all Players crave.

As my mind blurs, I grip the edge of my brother's coat, cling to it, certain I'll be gone forever if I let go. My arm stretches and stretches as the Player drags me away, the gap between Galen and me widening.

Then I see it—a glint of gold in Galen's pocket. Father's knife. Galen carries it everywhere.

The third rule for surviving a Player flashes through my mind: *A Player can only be slain with Eleutheraen gold.* I squeeze my eyes tight and reach for the handle. My fingers scrape at the wood—

“*Riven,*” the Player chimes sweetly. It sounds a little forced now.

I stretch my fingers, clawing at the knife.

“*Riven, darling, there's no reason to make this difficult—*”

It all seems to happen in a blink. One second my fingers are wrapping around the knife's hilt and the next, I'm bringing the blade down as hard as I can.

The Player's words shatter into the most terrible scream I have ever heard. She falls onto her knees, wailing and clutching her hand. A puddle of gold gathers beneath it, dripping onto the stone floor like drops of sun. *Player blood.* Brimming with power, with *Craft.*

She looks at me with eyes full of hellfire, rising from the ground with a lethal sort of calm. I scramble away, bracing myself, waiting for her to rip my eyes from their sockets. To break my legs and drag me to the Playhouse—

But a gold chain loops around the Player's throat, and a man holding it wrenches her backward. He screams something I barely register, his face white with terror. Almost instantly, a dozen more sentries are upon the Player.

All around me, everything starts to move again, free from her charm. *I am*