

THE TAROT SEQUENCE

Scenes from the Holidays

“The Equinox”

The first thing Brand said to me as we sailed away was, “What the fuck are you waiting for? A catchphrase?”

That’s when I realized parts of me were still on fire. I doused my Aspect—and I was getting better at that, wasn’t I?—and made sure I hadn’t singed anything around me.

Addam called his rented yacht to rendezvous with us. That was good, because I really didn’t have any desire to keep this miserable vessel. It didn’t even have a flag with crossbones on it. So, about a mile out to sea, the baby kraken swam off, and we transferred everyone from the *Waratab* onto the yacht as Brand and I discussed plans to scuttle the steamship.

That discussion was prematurely answered by the ocean roc, who gracefully descended from the sky and landed in its old nest. It turned its head to regard us regally, and then flapped its wing.

One of the *Waratab*’s masts snapped and fell.

Another flap and another. A building burst into kindling. Another mast fell. It was the most controlled, systematic episode of destruction I’ve ever seen. Barely a single wave reached us—and the one that came close was smothered by a quick uplift in the ocean roc’s wings.

When it was done, the roc hopped from the sinking brothel onto the yacht, and perched quietly on the pilot’s cabin. Its head vanished under its wing while it made tired cooing sounds.

“It needs to rest for a moment,” Kellum said on an exhale, which was when most of us realized we were holding our breaths. Some of us maybe were even holding in screams. The yacht crew didn’t seem too happy with their commission, at the very least.

Kellum and Diana climbed on top of the cabin to clean some of the worst wounds on the ocean roc's wing, and when that was done, Addam climbed up too and used a Healing sigil to mend membrane tears.

The rest of us drank. There was still a lot of champagne left.

Not far from Sun Estate, Diana, Kellum and I were gathered on a small lounge on an elevated platform off the stern. Kellum was quiet, which made me quiet, until he eventually smiled at me.

"You feel like you have something to say, Lord Sun," he said.

"Please call me Rune," I said.

Kellum bowed his head.

"You..." I started to say, and then had to pause to arrange the words as diplomatically as possible in my head. "That was a very powerful demonstration of your abilities, Kellum."

Kellum nodded at nothing in particular.

"I think I can speak for all of us," Diana said, "when I tell you that you have earned our discretion. I understand why you hide these gifts."

"We do," I said. "I do."

"It's...not exactly powerful," he admitted. "The ocean's economy is based on trade. We trade for everything, even an act of ability. There will be consequences for what I've done. There will be obligation."

"What can I do to help?" I asked.

He stared at me. For a long time, actually. Then he said, "You can tell me more Arcana are like you."

"There are," I said. "Some." A couple?

Kellum laughed.

Once the mainland was within sight, the ocean roc stirred, preened its wings, and swiveled its long neck until it caught sight of Kellum. The two stared at each other for a long moment, then the majestic raptor launched into the air and soared towards the horizon. It gathered speed every second until it was simply a blur at the vanishing point.

As we tied ourselves to the short pier, Kellum said he needed to return to the Green Docks. Addam offered the yacht for the trip back, but Kellum laughed and said he could move faster on his own. He slipped out of his black silk outfit and handed it to Diana, who promised to have it dropped off. Then—tall and freckled and nude—the siren dove off the jetty.

I felt a frisson of magic, and when Kellum emerged from the waves, his face was a kaleidoscope of iridescent scales that had replaced most of his freckles. A beautiful fin—vibrant like a peacock’s tail—snapped out to full length

We stared. You might think this sort of sight would be commonplace to an Atlantean, but merfolk sightings were just as rare in Atlantis as the human world. Almost nothing was known about the ocean kingdoms.

“We’ll see each other again, Rune Sun,” Kellum said as he bobbed in wave foam.

“I would like that,” I told him.

Behind me, I heard Diana whisper *guest privileges*. I said, “You have guest privileges in my court, Kellum Greenwater of the Jade Tide School.”

Kellum rose above the waves, waved, and knifed back down. A torpedolike trail of water appeared in the direction of the Green Docks. I snuck a glance at Diana, expecting to see exasperation that she had to nudge a formal response from me, but instead saw...respect?

My phone buzzed. I pulled it out, saw Anna’s name, and answered.

“We may need some adults,” she said.

“What did you do?” I asked.

She said nothing. I said nothing. She still said nothing. I said, “What did I do?”

“You refuse to see the monster hiding in our midst,” she said. “Just because he’s six.”

“Do you just need adults? Or sober adults? And where is the Tower?”

“He’s ordering three hundred pizzas, because he overreacts even more than Addam does.”

“Why is he ordering food? We have food cooked for the equinox.”

She said nothing, like she always did when she was waiting for me to ask the right questions.

“Okay, two sober adults,” I said, and hung up. I said to everyone else, who’d heard enough to be crowding around me, “We need to draw straws. Don’t let Brand hold them.”

Diana sighed and began to walk back to the mansion while whispering a Sober cantrip. Corinne mimicked her sigh—*mimicked it!*—and walked after Diana, asking for the cantrip too.

Addam, Brand, and I caught up quickly, and I only stumbled twice. At the top of the dunes we reached a fork in the path that led to the mansion or the guest parking lot. There appeared to be some sort of activity happening in the parking lot, and car headlights glowed through the wet tree branches which had finally shed their freak piles of snow.

As we passed through a parting in the undergrowth, we saw a crowd of people gathered before the estate gates. Mayan and Anna were there, and Corinne was whispering with them.

One of the people was a middle-aged man with a large stomach and gray beard. He watched me approach with wide, round eyes. He stood next to a car, and a brightly-wrapped present was resting on the hood.

“Hello,” I said. “My name is Rune.”

“I’m going to kneel, but my knee is bad, no offense, my lord,” he said quickly, and began to brace himself on the driver’s side door of his car.

“No, no, please,” I said quickly. “Please don’t. But you are?”

“Oh, Thato, Sir. Thato De Jager. I was the Dawncreek’s mailman. Well, I was, I mean, at their old place, before it blew up.”

I blinked.

“Young Corbie invited me to his dinosaur’s birthday,” he explained. “I figured it was one of his stuffed animal tea parties? He left a message with me through my supervisor. Clever kid. I just wanted to check in and see how he was doing.”

“Excuse us for a moment,” Brand said, and then squeezed my shoulder. He pulled me back towards the tree line. When we were alone, he whispered, “Did you tell Corbie he could invite people to Flynn’s birthday?”

“Of course not!” I said.

“Rune,” Brand repeated. “Is this one of those times where Corbie maybe asked you, and you responded by saying *absolutely* without even bothering to listen to what he said?”

I decided not to answer. Brand wasn’t happy with that, so he waited until I admitted, uncomfortably, “I don’t know that he precisely asked me anything worded like that. And I only say *absolutely* when I’m distracted and trying to be a little funny.”

“It is going to be your job to literally write fucking laws for our court,” Brand said in a hissing rush. “I can’t believe we’re going to need to have a conversation about how words work.”

I deserved almost every reaction that came to my brain, so I said the only thing I could to distract Brand. “It’s kind of funny that Corbie got away with all this without you knowing.”

As Brand puffed up half a size, I returned to the parking lot, then went person to person and introduced myself. There was an old Dawncreek neighbor (whose late, much-beloved cat was also named Flynn); the owner of an ice cream store near Corbie’s favorite old park; and the agrarian faery who tended the playground of Corbie’s favorite new park. There was also a woman who helped run the local daycare for Houses in this area of the city—Atlantis’s neighborhood-based answer to American kindergarten, which Corbie was soon to age out of.

I was profoundly conscious of the fact that Sun Estate was only partially rebuilt. It was not a showcase at the moment. But every apologetic comment I made was brushed aside as people asked excitedly about Corbie, and how he was doing. On and on, person by person—a bunch of often-overlooked Atlanteans who were on their own on an

Equinox, without friends or family, who seemed to adore Corbie, who wanted to make sure he was alright and happy.

“We can just leave our gifts and go,” the mailman said anxiously. “It’s good to know the lad is doing so well.”

“No, please,” I said. “We’re already ordering food for everyone. If you’re here, it’s because you mean something to Corbitant. It means you’ve been kind and patient with him, and people like that will always be received as guests in my court. I cannot think of a better way to celebrate a holiday eve.”

Brand said, “Though we should warn you in advance that the dinosaur is real. Technically not a dinosaur, but real. Welcome to Sun Estate.”

First, Mayan moved the guests along. At Corinne’s recommendation, we go and put them in the sitting room for now, while we scrambled to set out refreshments.

Discussing those refreshments took up most of our walk to the front door. Layne joined us for that, an anxious look on their face.

“Ciaran found an apron,” they said. “He won’t leave the kitchen. Queenie keeps touching her knives.”

“I heard the Tower ordered food,” I said.

“He ordered a million pizzas. We’re trying to make a salad and other stuff. We could use some help.”

There was a pause while everyone not-stared at each other. Diana cleared her throat and said, “For a moment, I was worried the men were all staring at the women in the crowd.”

Anyway, that was how Addam was sent running to the kitchen with Layne to frost cupcakes.

At the front door, the chaos agent himself, Corbitant Dawn creek, was standing on top of the welcome mat. There was a small pigtailed girl with fake, plastic elf ears standing next to him.

In his hoarse, mumbling voice, Corbie said, “This is Elsie Her parents brought her. She doesn’t know if she wants to get married yet.”

The girl’s eyes went wide. She shook her head so hard that an elf ear was knocked askew.

So Brand herded the kids into the ballroom, where the older teens were setting up banquet tables and finding mismatched chairs from the mansion. The remaining sobering-if-not-sober adults started moving toward the sitting room, to keep the guests entertained.

The Tower waited on the threshold.

“Matters are under control,” the Tower told me, once the guests were past him and the door had been partially shut.

And I nearly bit my tongue, because Mayan sneaked Lord Tower a dirty look. Or if it wasn’t dirty, it was as close to a candid, negative emotion as I’d ever seen Mayan show around the Tower.

“Oh *what*,” I asked. “What else happened? I have to know. Please. Should I get Brand?”

The Tower flicked a look at Mayan. “I am perfectly capable of making decisions on my own.”

“It will be a security nightmare,” Mayan murmured.

“The pizza?” I said, confused. “Or the guests?”

“Neither,” Lord Tower said. “Mayan is referring to something else.”

Mayan said, “Corbie asked the Tower to his daycare to be his Show & Tell.”

Lord Tower said nothing.

Mayan added, “He was Corbie’s second choice, since apparently Corinne told Corbie that, no, Corbie may not bring a dinosaur to daycare.”

“Brand should really be here,” I said.

“I’m going to help with the ballroom,” the Tower said, and retreated with all the dignity he could muster. There were two perfect, small chocolate handprints on the back of his silk shirt.

“Thank you,” I said to the universe in general.

I was about to go into the sitting room with the guests, then heard Brand speaking loudly on the other side of a nearby door, which led to a smaller room off the ballroom, and where we'd put the holiday tree.

“One!” Brand was saying loudly. “You can shake one present, Corbie.”

I couldn't make out Corbie's words. He had a tendency to sound like a dolphin with a sore throat when he was excited. Just a string of rough, yipping vowels and consonants.

Brand shouted, “Jesus, I said shake! Shake! Why did you kick it?”
Dolphin sounds.

“I know you asked for a red ball, but how do you *know* that's a red ball? What if it's a fishbowl? What if you just kicked your new pet fish in his head?”

The dolphin sounds rose in panic and broke into sobs.

Actual fear streamed through our Companion bond. This from the man who had faced down a lich and the Hanged Man. Who had actually slapped the Hanged Man across the cheek.

“What are you doing?” Corinne demanded from the sitting room.

“Thinking this may be time for more booze,” I said. “Not to escape, but because I'm really enjoying this?”

But since she'd said what she'd said as if to imply I should actually be doing something else, I went into the sitting room with her. I shut the door on Brand's shushing, redemptive sounds.

We didn't have nearly enough alcohol, at least not until a liquor store dropped off a pony keg. In the middle of an Equinox night. When most liquor orders were placed four months in advance. Sufficient to say, Addam's wallet, which really needed a formal name, made it happen.

I stayed with the guests for a while. When we got word that enough food had been laid out, everyone was ushered into the ballroom, taking

pains to dodge the new and unwrapped red ball that was being kicked from room to room.

There was a long period of general pleasantness. Max made Corbie's little friend double over in laughter by manifesting purple sunbursts on his fae skin whenever she poked him. The postal carrier snuck Corbie butterscotch candies—with Corinne's permission, though they both let Corbie think he was sneaking it, because it delighted him. I brought the man another slice of pizza for that.

I even spent time talking to Elsie's parents and introducing myself. Though if I was being honest, I'd been railroaded into that one by Corinne, who told me I was expected to be chummy with the parents of the court kids' friends. That sounded suspiciously like mingling and small talk, which I liked only marginally better than Brand.

“Are we going to move everyone to the paddock?” Brand asked me at midnight.

“To see Flynn? We need lights.”

“Corbie asked Ciaran if he could make lights so everyone could go and sing happy birthday to Flynn.”

“Why did he ask Ciaran?”

“I'm not going to question the way the kid gets results. Ciaran ran off to prepare the paddock, didn't he?” Brand pointed to a ballroom window. “Do you see the glow in the distance? That's a very dramatic principality trying to out-do flashlights.”

So we organized everyone into a loose group to head toward Flynn's enclosure.

I could see an explosion of faery lights in the distance as Ciaran used his abilities to brighten the space. Brand used his own superpower, ordering the teenagers to carry two banquet tables ahead of the crowd so we could bring snacks with us.

Under the flickering pastel lights—like lazy, slow-moving fireworks—the guests oohed and ahed over Flynn, who stood calmly in the middle of his grassy, ward-surrounded lawn eating grass. Eventually Corbie ran

up—after having been delayed by several large and recently dropped pinecones. Flynn made a fluting noise and trotted over to the edge of the invisible barrier.

“You did all this because Corbie wanted to visit his pet?” I murmured to Ciaran.

“Well I don't have any children, do I? I don't know better. Most adults seem to say no to young ones on general principle, so I've decided to do the opposite. The idea of being reasonable is monstrously limiting.”

In the near distance, Corbie's arms were now empty of pinecones, and Flynn was making dainty crunching sounds. The party showed no interest in moving back to the ballroom, so drinks and food were passed out, and Max hooked up his cell phone to portable speakers and started playing *10,000 Maniacs*.

I ended up sitting on a rock outcropping with Corinne and Ciaran. I didn't even realize what an odd pairing it was until Corinne stared dead straight at Ciaran and said, “I know Layne has a gift.”

“They do,” Ciaran agreed. “They really do.”

“And Rune says no one knows more about rare magics than you.”

“Did he,” Ciaran murmured. A sly glimmer in his eye was gone just as I properly spotted it.

Corinne sighed and drained her Solo cup. “I know Layne needs to find...advisors outside the Sun Court. I'll probably continue to be an ass about it. I can't help myself—I worry. But I'm trying to understand it too.”

“Are you?” Layne said. They weren't exactly eavesdropping, but they'd been near enough to listen.

“Is that enough for now?” Corinne asked.

Layne's eyes got a little glassy, and they nodded. They came over to Corinne and hugged her.

“I remember the first time I saw you,” Corinne said, running a hand along Layne's brown hair, which had new blonde highlights in it. “Really, really saw you. When you were a baby.”

“I was adorable,” Layne sniffed.

“You were fat and red and squishy and took up all of Stevan’s time. I was jealous. And then you shat on him.”

“I *what?*” Layne laughed.

“He was talking off your diaper, and you shat right in his hands and laughed hysterically. The...oh, the look on his face. I fell in love with you right there and then.” Her gaze sharpened. “Corbitant Dawncreek, get off that ward stone!”

Layne, deeply flushed and more than a little teary, said they’d handle it, and ran off to grab Corbie before he messed with the rocks keeping Flynn enclosed.

Corinne closed her eyes as her smile drained into a weary concern. She glanced at Ciaran. “I think part of it? It feels like Layne is growing up. Right now, and right all at once. Layne’s childhood is just...it’s just gone.”

“That ship has sailed,” Ciaran agreed, and there was a heaviness in his own voice. “Hasn’t it?”

Corinne nodded quietly.

“Sailing can be fun, though, with the right crew,” Ciaran said. “We’ll just keep Layne company a while longer. Won’t we?”

More drinking. More merriment. Addam used Telekinesis to float the keg down to the paddock, only he was drunk and kept banging it into tree trunks. We toasted his accomplishment with foamy beer.

Corbie asked if we could bring Flynn back to the mansion to open his gifts. Even I knew that was a bad idea. Ciaran distracted the six-year-old by asking Corbie what Flynn would want for his birthday.

“I completely forgot to bring a gift,” Ciaran said. “I must make amends.”

Corbie chewed on his lip, conscious that the entire crowd of people were staring at him. “Can you make people dream? Layne says.”

“I dabble,” Ciaran said.

“Can you make Flynn dream about all his old friends? He misses them. There’s no one like him anymore.”

Ciaran stared at the boy for a few seconds, lips parted in surprise. Finally he said, “I suppose I can, little sun. What a lovely idea.”

Corbie decided that merited a hug. When he was done, he grabbed Elsie’s hand and pulled her back to the ring of wardstones to tell Flynn.

“That was soft,” Brand said.

Ciaran smiled at him, his lips nearly neon red in the shifting lights. “I can visit your dreams too, Brandon Saint John.”

Brand decided not to push his luck, and refilled Ciaran’s beer with another three inches of foam.

Eventually there came the time when dawn was a gray smudge on the horizon, and the Equinox had been toasted. Addam was going to order taxis for everyone who had imbibed, but then a bright yellow school bus pulled up out front. The Tower explained he had few options on such short notice, but seemed to take a small amount of pleasure in arranging the cross-city trip. Brand nearly used the remaining space on his phone taking pictures. (At one point, he had Corbie run up with a hand-help stop sign that Brand found on the bus. The Tower stood there, staring at the sign in confusion, while cell phone flashes went off.)

They took the keg with them.

That left the core family in the ballroom, surrounded by torn wrapping paper and new gifts. We’d done a secret gift swap so that each person had another’s name—except for Corbie, who had a not-insignificant pile of presents in front of him. The first gift he unwrapped was a stuffed rhinoceros as large as he was. Layne and Anna had found it online. Corbie was so happy he started crying, which made him embarrassed, so he hid his face in the stuffed animal’s plush neck. That lasted about ten seconds until he started snoring.

The rest of us sat in a circle and went person by person, telling each other what we were thankful for and opening our gift. Brand went first. I’d bribed Anna with a month of chore work to swap her for his name.

Brand stared at the unwrapped shirt in his arm, and then turned it so the rest of us could see that it said: “*I BROKE THE WARD SEALING THE MONSTER GHOST IN THE JEWELRY STORE.*”

Quinn said, “Oh it’s your favorite shirt! You wear it until the seams come loose, or the incident with the jam, but that only happens when we’re elves.”

Brand unsuccessfully tried to hide a blush or a flush, I’m not sure which. His eyes zeroed on me. “I thought this was going on my birthday cake?”

“Why limit the joke?” I said. “I printed it on *oven mitts.*”

“Are you having fun?” he asked.

I decided to take the question seriously. “I am.”

His scowl faltered for just a second in a smile. “Good. Just make sure you get some rest, because tomorrow you explain why my grenade smelled like fucking flowers.”