

THE TAROT SEQUENCE

Scenes from the Holidays

“The Playground”

I couldn't stop staring at the back wall of the solarium.

It had been painted recently and looked clean and new, but we had little furniture to fill the room, let alone fussy stuff like mirrors or paintings. We were lucky to even have the folding banquet table for now—and this was going to be the room I held Court sessions in.

“Does that wall look bare to you?” I asked Brand. “It looks bare to me.”

“We spent fifteen years in a nine-foot-wide house,” Brand said without raising his head from a magazine article on bacom fighting. “What the fuck do you expect?”

“Maybe I can spruce it up.”

“By all means, use your extensive decorating background. I'll fetch a candle so you can melt it in a wine bottle.”

“Can I light the candle?” Corbie asked in his raspy voice, looking up from a crayon box. He'd camped out on the floor about twenty minutes earlier.

“I can't help but notice you always volunteer to light things on fire,” I said.

“Oh,” Corbie sighed. “Can we go to the playground then?”

“Like a fast-food playground?”

“That's not what he said,” Brand told me. “Don't put ideas in his head.”

Corbie chewed on his lip, saying nothing, as he waited for a word that sounded like yes.

“We can go to the playground,” I sighed.

Corbie jumped up and started to dance from foot to foot. “Can we bring Flynn?”

“How would that exactly work?” I asked him.

He started to chew on his lip again, so I headed it off by saying no, we would not be walking the prehistoric Siberian unicorn to the park.

It took us a small eternity to put together what we needed for the outing, mainly because Brand and I had no idea what a kid needed. Corbie’s helpful suggestions came one by one, and only when we were about to walk out the front door. Eventually we had shoes, snacks, jackets, Grandfather Octopus, and empty bladders. We moved from mansion to parking lot and surveyed our choices.

“It’s only across the streets from the gate,” Brand said. “We could use the motorcycle and sidecar.”

“Do you have a kid helmet?” I asked.

“I have an extra helmet and duct tape,” he said.

“Don’t tape the ducks,” Corbie mumbled sadly to his feet.

“Yeah, Brand,” I said. “Don’t tape the ducks.”

“Fine, we’ll walk. But I’m not carrying anything else.”

Since he was already carrying everything, I quickly agreed, and we set out. Corbie lasted until we’d made it to the estate gates before deciding it was best if he rode on someone’s shoulders, which is when I spotted Brand’s clever trap.

So we crossed the last quarter mile on foot, with a six-year-old in a dinosaur hoodie kicking my collar bones in excitement. Someone, I thought to myself, better be keeping score.

Sun Estate had been built in a quiet corner of the island, in a neighborhood of quiet, gated estates. Most buildings were hidden behind the trees of a maritime forest: stately black and white oak trees with wintergreen and bracken growing along the ground.

The shared playground occupied a cleared half-acre. It was a warm day—just warm enough that you might wish for a lighter jacket in the sunlight. The denim sky didn’t have a cloud in it.

“Now what?” I asked Corbie, setting him on the ground.

He peered eagerly at everything laid out in front of him. “First we sit,” he said. He took my hand and pulled me toward a free bench. We each took a seat, and Corbie added, “Now you wait a while and look.”

And indeed, that’s what he did, craning his neck from left to right in a constant search. Brand stared at Corbie, first in confusion and then in fascination, as if a new breed of martial strategy was unfolding before him.

It was lunchtime on a Sunday, and kids seethed over the equipment. Most of them looked much older, too. But finally Corbie made a satisfied sound, climbed down off the bench, and ran into the fray.

“The see-saw is free,” I said.

“I’m not doing the see-saw with him,” Brand said.

“No, I mean, you used to love the see-saw. Remember?”

Brand made a face at me which was his version of fake-innocence. “No.”

“You liar. I know you remember. You had stronger leg muscles than me, and always tried to slam me into the ground. I could never blame you, either, because it’s not like you were actually cheating.”

“Huh,” he said casually, while smugness lazily flowed down our bond.

“Yeah, huh,” I said. I watched as Corbie crossed the playground, giving a wide berth to any mob of kids. “Gods. They’re all so much bigger than him. Should we be worried?”

“The difference between a short fighter and a tall fighter is just training,” Brand said.

“Well, sure. But it’s a little scary that you jumped right to fighting techniques. I just don’t want him to get bullied. Are we supposed to do something about that in advance, or just wait and hope for the best? I’m still figuring out all the rules.”

“Meh.”

“Not *meh*. I mean...are we good parents? Can we be good parents?”

Brand gave me the side-eye, but did take a moment to think about that. Finally he said, “Remember the goldfish?”

“Brandon Saint John, I will literally commit an act of violence right here, right now, if you don’t stop mentioning the stupid goldfish. It’s been thirty years. I will straight-up turn into a pillar of fucking fire if you mention it again.”

“Okay, okay, easy,” he said. “And look, I’m just considering it a personal victory that you haven’t tried to go on any of the equipment here yet. Do I have to be a good dad too?”

I didn’t say anything and just let that sit for a long minute.

Sure enough, Brand eventually mumbled, “I mean, we’re not *bad* dads, right?”

“I’m worried about Anna,” I said. “I’m worried I’ll screw up.”

“These kids have, like, thirteen people raising them. They’ll be fine. Anna will be fine.”

“But there are things only I can do. How do I make her a well-adjusted kid *and* train her? She’s so damn powerful, only she uses magic in all the wrong ways. I need to break her of bad habits so that she gains a measure of control. She can use the godsdamn Arcana Majeure, Brand. And she needs to keep it secret. And something is going on at Magnus—she’s been too quiet lately.”

“That doesn’t mean we’ve failed her. We’ll pay more attention to her. And look at Layne. Layne is doing great!”

Brand had a soft spot for Layne. He was proud of the way they’d bounced back from their nightmare with the Hanged Man. But Brand’s blind spot with Layne was his same blind spot with me—he never liked realizing how deeply I’d buried my rage over my own trauma.

“Max and Quinn are doing great. And Corbie,” Brand said. “Corbie is happy.”

“Corbie would be happy with a breadstick and a piece of wax paper. And it’s not about him being happy, it’s about him being safe. Was it

right to move him and everyone else back on Sun Estate? Are we sure we cleared out all the dangers?”

And *there*. Right *there*. I felt a blip of guilt strobing through our bond.

“What?” I asked him.

He shrugged and pretended to search his pockets for a granola bar.

“Brand, what?” I said again, in a lower but firm voice.

“Maybe not all of the haunts are gone. I spotted some activity by that bunker on the northeast corner of the property. The one used as a back-up wine cellar? It’s circled in wards,” he said quickly as I opened my mouth. “Nothing can get out. But you and I will need to check it out.”

“Let’s do it this weekend, then. Before it eats a kid and makes us bad dads.”

“Done,” he said. “We could—oh, *hell no*.” He got up and started walking across the playground.

I wasn’t sure what the problem was. Corbie was standing by himself, carefully climbing up onto the seat of a large, painted bug. It was attached to the ground by a metal spring as thick as a lamppost pole.

“What’s wrong?” I hiss-whispered as I caught up with his long-legged stride.

“That is the worst ride on the playground. It is literally the backwash of playground equipment. No one uses those stupid things.”

I couldn’t object, because we reached Corbie, and he was thrilled to have us there.

“It’s my favorite!” he said. “Watch.”

He threw all his weight forward. The bug and its thickly painted spring made a slight creaking sound. So he threw all his weight back, then forward, then back, then forward... After an exhausting thirty seconds he relaxed and tilted his ecstatic face toward the sky. The ride wobbled a quarter inch by itself for two pendulum swings, then returned to standing position.

“No,” Brand said. “Nope.”

He went over to the nearby swing set, where the oldest kids swarmed and fought over the seats.

He said, “Why are you still here? I would have thought you’d be after the ice cream.”

“What ice cream?” an older kid said.

“There’s an ice cream truck giving away free samples in the parking lot. Over there.” He aimlessly pointed.

The kids stampeded away.

“Okay, load’r up,” he said to Corbie.

Corbie watched a twisting, recently-abandoned seat with wide eyes. I picked him up under the arm pits and carried him over. “I’m ignoring the moral argument at work here,” I said.

Out of the corner of his eye, Brand saw a small figure dart in, and said, “You’ll want to think about that.”

Then we both saw that it was a small girl—as small as Corbie—with blond hair in pigtails tied with a red ribbon, a pink old-fashioned dress, and fake Yoda-ears.

“I can share,” Corbie mumbled. He gave us a guilty look. “Or do you want to go first?”

“Nah,” Brand said. “You two can play.”

So we left Corbie to make friends and walked back toward the bench. “See,” he said. “We’re not bad dads.”

“You just sent a dozen children running after a strange van handing out treats,” I said.

He blew a raspberry.

“Maybe... I don’t know.” I tried to put my thoughts in order. “Something you said made sense. These kids? They have a lot of people raising them. That’s not the way we were raised—but it’s that way in a lot of courts. There are a ton of wives and husbands, and everyone raises each other’s children. When it’s done well, it really does work. That whole *takes a village* thing.”

“I think you’re a good dad,” Brand mumbled.

I didn't look at him, because he'd make an excuse to punch me in the arm or do wind-sprints. "I think you're a good dad too," I said.

"See-saw's still free," he said as we passed it.

"I have a Flight spell in my ankle chain," I said. "I will launch you into the fucking stratosphere."

He stared hard at me. The corners of his lips twitched.

"Challenge accepted," he said.