

# THE TAROT SEQUENCE

## *Scenes from the Holidays*

### “The Sanctum”

One would think living on an estate would make privacy easier to find, but apparently there were age considerations for things like that. If we weren't stepping on teenager and kid detritus, we were trying to put the teenagers and kid on the other side of locked doors.

But Addam and I were alone in the estate's new sanctum. The other estate spell-casters would be arriving soon to put the final touches in place; but soon was not now, and Addam looked good in his old, tight jeans as he moved around the tower room.

“You seem most interested in my pants,” Addam said as I cast another look at him.

“Stop that,” I replied. “I already have one man reading my mind.”

“It was not an objection. Just an offer to adjust said pants however you might wish.” His Rs became very clear and very sharp.

Then he pressed a kiss on my head, laughed, and settled on the floor next to me.

We'd decided to build the new sanctum in one of the mansion's towers. Despite the many, many stairs. Even Brand was a little surprised at my insistence. But there was something about the skyward space that I was drawn to. It had a beautiful view of the ocean, along with every corner of the property. Also, it was a space I'd rarely used when I was a teenager myself. Building a sanctum here made it feel like mine, not just a rehabilitated piece of my father's rule.

Addam turned his body so that he could lay his long legs in my lap. He was barefoot, and his feet were dusty from the cleaning we'd done. I brushed my thumb along his ankle and said, “Thank you for helping me.”

“It is something we should do together,” he said. “To make it ours.”

“I thought people would complain about the stairs more,” I admitted.

Addam’s burgundy eyes narrowed into a faint web of laugh lines. “Brand has started a betting pool. He thinks you’ll ask for an elevator within two weeks.”

“I’m not going to install an elevator,” I said flatly.

“Of course not, Hero.”

I kept staring at him until he added, “I bet that you’ll begin storing Flight or Levitation spells on a daily basis. Max and Quinn pooled their finances. They believe you’ll make a smaller sanctum near your bedroom. Somewhat like a half-bath.”

“I honestly thought being an Arcana would be different,” I said. “I expected a few more bows and Sirs.”

“Shall I remove my feet from your most august lap, Sir?”

I continued to brush my thumb along the bone of his ankle. “Nah. They’re your feet, after all. I’m just grateful you have two of them.”

It took Addam a full second to get the joke, then he gaped at me. I held my breath to see which way it would break—and then laughter came roaring out his mouth.

He said, “My brass foot would be just as sexy!”

“I bet it would,” I said. “See? I bet my money on positive things.”

His smile dimmed. “Do you believe that?”

“That you’ll wind up with a brass foot? That’s really unlikely, Addam.”

Addam slowly flexed the fingers of his brass hand. I’d caught him doing that often—I think he was trying to get the fingers to move in a fluid, staggered wave. But precision was still difficult. The fingers wanted to move in concert.

I felt a little hitch in my heart, and let my body reply for me. I removed his feet from my lap and crawled onto his, so that I could tap my forehead against his own.

“I like the hand,” I whispered.

“Truly?”

“Addam, I’m pretty sure I’ll be okay looking at that hand for the rest of my life, remembering what it means.”

That was when the door banged open and the others entered. I heard Brand immediately say, “Fucking hell, Addam. There are children here, and they have eyeballs.”

“This isn’t nearly as bad as that time we walked in late and—”

“A little of that goes a long way, Quinn,” Brand said. “Pick your battles.”

I groaned and climbed off Addam’s lap. I didn’t fail to notice that Brandon had directed his quip at Addam, and not me, which means he was still sulking because we lost a boardgame last night.

“Okay, spell-casters in a circle,” I said. “We’re ready for the attunement.”

“Which sigil are you going to loan me?” Anna asked.

“You don’t need a sigil for this,” I said.

“Brand lets me practice with his weapons,” Anna pointed out.

“Sure, but a sigil is more dangerous than a hundred weapons.” I smiled at Brand’s stiffened back. I could almost *feel* the effort it took him not to say something appropriately withering.

“But you’re going to let me use mine, right?” Max said worriedly. He’d rethreaded the ivory cameo sigil I’d given him with a leather cord. It sat, somewhat absurdly, against the logo of a crossbow company that adorned the t-shirt he’d stolen from Brand.

He’d been very good about only practicing with the sigil in my presence—and even then, only smaller spells, barely hyped-up cantrips. He was ready to try something real.

“I will let you use yours,” I confirmed.

We—the spell-casters of Sun Estate—spaced ourselves into a loose circle on the hardwood floor: me, Addam, Quinn, Max, and Anna.

Corbie was too young for training, and Layne had made it clear that they preferred to train their necromancy as opposed to sigil magic.

“You can sit with us if you want,” I told Brand.

He whistled and rubbed at a smudge on the window.

Max looked at me, looked at Brand, and looked back at me. “Is he still mad you lost Pictionary?”

Brand said, “He drew eyelashes on his stick-figure. He took the time to do that. Did eyelashes have anything to do with the answer, Rune?”

“They did not,” I sighed.

“Did you have time to complete the drawing?”

“I did not,” I sighed again. “But let me tell you what a delight it is to find a whole new type of experience that you can be cranky about. We never really played board games before.”

“I’ll sit over here,” he said, and went back to ignoring me.

The next hour passed swiftly.

Addam and I took turns explaining to the kids how to form a bond with the room around us. The deeper and more familiar the connection, the easier it became to store spells.

We talked about the power of a sanctum, and the different ways magic-users tapped into its power. Addam danced while storing spells; I meditated over my sigils; Quinn told Max that he just remembered times when he’d stored the same spell really, really well in one future or another.

Brand was joined by Corinne, who came in late with a bowl of popcorn and two mugs of hot chocolate. They kept quiet except to occasionally snort when we described a spell, and whisper about how a blade would be quicker.

Max decided to try meditating, like me. He’d insisted on storing Fire, which wasn’t a beginner magic, so I kept nudging him into practicing with Shield. Most young scions began their training with defensive magics.

“It keeps slipping out of my hands,” he complained. “And the magic feels cold. Shouldn’t it feel hot?”

“A Shield would—”

“Fire,” Max said stubbornly.

“We could move onto elemental magic next,” I offered. “I know you’ll get the Shield right away.”

“Fire,” he said, and screwed his eyes shut to concentrate.

Across the room, Brand coughed. When I looked at him, he raised his mug to his lips. The words *Get a Fucking Clue* were printed in fancy script along the side of it.

“Max,” Addam said. “Remember when Rune burst into fire in the Iconsgison?”

“Kind of hard to forget that,” Max said.

“Remember it. Remember the heat. It helps to think of strong memories and the actual element.”

“I’ve got some matches on me,” Anna mumbled, and stared pointedly at Max’s sleeve.

So Max tried that, and everyone gave him the time and quiet to do it. It was an odd moment—that small bit of consideration. As hard as we could be on each other, there wasn’t a single person in the room who wanted Max to fail. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, and could feel the sanctum singing with the power of our bond and community. We couldn’t have stumbled on a better way to connect ourselves to it.

And then I felt a surge of heat on my face, and orange shadows bloomed behind my eyelids. I opened my eyes to see a perfectly round ball of orange-red fire in Max’s outstretched hand. His eyes were wide and he almost dropped it in Quinn’s lap by accident.

“Look at that!” I said, clapping my hands. “Max! That’s perfect! I couldn’t do better myself!”

He blushed and ducked his face, which became the moment I got a fucking clue, and realized why Max had been so stubborn about making Fire his first spell.

“Looks like fire runs in the family, then,” I said quietly, and leaned forward to tap his knee.

“Now do something with it before he burns a hole in the ground,” Brand said.

“The hole works for me,” Corinne said. “I bet money you’ll build a stripper pole to slide back to ground level.”

“It’s getting a little warm,” Max admitted. “Should I throw it?”

“Do not throw it,” I said.

“What happens if I squeeze it, maybe?” he guessed. “Or flick my hand?”

“I didn’t even want my own sigil, I just wanted to *borrow* one,” Anna whispered.

I hurried over to show Max a few techniques to reabsorb the magic. I actually did flick my hand—but a lot of young scions started by touching the now-empty sigil, which helped ground and disperse the spell.

“Now you learn Shield,” Brand said from the sidelines. “You’ll need it tomorrow. You’re coming with Rune and I in the field.”

Max gave Brand and I a look that teetered between suspicious and hopeful, because knowing Brand, dodging an actual lawnmower in one of our fields was a true possibility.

“There’s a haunt to clear out,” Brand said.

I blinked and looked at Brand, who hadn’t mentioned Max would be coming with us.

Quinn and Anna both jumped to their feet and opened their mouth. Brand said, “No and no. Taking one of you into the field is enough of a fucking disaster. I’ll take Rock Slide this time, and Tsunami and Tornado can wait for the next fucking chance.”

“Make sure you dress warmly,” Quinn said, jumping to his feet. “*Because it’s snowing.*”

The tower had a window at each cardinal point, and sure enough, the skies around us had darkened, and fat, lazy snowflakes were spiraling

down. Snow hadn't been in the forecast for the Solstice—not even a little—though I'd heard that Lady World and Lord Magician were working together to undo the lingering weather abnormalities caused by Ashton Saint Gabriel's interference from over a year back.

Corinne's phone began to buzz. Before she could answer it, Brand's pocket vibrated. And before he could answer that, my phone started making short dinosaur-roar sounds.

"I'm not building a snowman with him," Anna said. "He always wants to give it eight arms."

Corinne heaved up to deal with the youngest. On her way out, she put a hand on Max's shoulder and squeezed it. The way his face lit up reminded me of the days that he couldn't even understand a compliment if you explained it to him.

We'd come a long way, hadn't we?

"Let's practice the Shield," I said. "We've got to get you ready for the field."