

# THE TAROT SEQUENCE

## *Scenes from the Holidays*

### “The Ghost”

My eyelids opened and closed in lazy, long minutes, as bars of morning sunlight oozed across the bedspread. Eventually they touched the hairs on Addam’s leg and set them on fire.

Addam never slept with all his arms and legs under the covers—he was always a massive tangle of flesh and quilt. It’s possible I helped matters by stealing the sheets: but to be fair, he was a greedy sleeper too. He frequently manhandled me into a better position, much like a lumpy pillow.

Reluctantly, I began to slide out of bed.

“Mhm,” he murmured.

“Sorry,” I said. “I have to get up early today.”

He grabbed me around the waist and pulled me back under the sheet.

“You could make this easier by waking up in the middle of the night and setting the clock back a few hours,” I pointed out.

He laughed into my neck. Something that maybe wasn’t an elbow poked at me. I barely had time to debate the implications inside my brain before Addam sighed in regret and shoved me to the edge of the mattress.

“Are you sure you do not require my help with the ghost?” he asked.

“We’ll be fine. You’ve got enough on your plate preparing for our Solstice party.”

Addam yawned and stretched his arms behind him, gripping the headboard in a backwards stretch. The wood under his brass hand creaked in protest.

“Why Max, though?” he asked after a moment. “Is Brand really to train him today?”

“I don’t know. Maybe? But I think... I think maybe Brand knows more about the ghost than I do. It may be a personal haunt. I could be wrong, but I think he’s *including* Max. Like it’s a family affair.”

Addam’s dark reddish eyes warmed into a smile. “That is somewhat sweet. And if it is, indeed, something personal, then I’m glad you’ll all be together when you handle it.”

“I may need a nap later,” I said.

“As one does,” Addam yawned.

I tapped him a few times on the head. “Hey. I said that in my sexy voice. Didn’t you hear it? Did my morning breath ruin the sexy voice?”

He cracked an eyelid open again. “Go hunt monsters, Hero. Call me when you’re...sleepy.”

He put his own sexy voice into the word sleepy, and bet your ass I took notes.

Downstairs, while I pulled on my heavy black boots, I stared in hapless resignation at the poster in front of me. Addam hadn’t been kidding: Brand had indeed started a betting pool on how quickly I’d get tired of climbing stairs to the new sanctum.

When Brand came in a side entrance, I stabbed a finger at one of the squares filled with block crayon letters. Brand read it out loud. “*Fonze shyd*. I’m pretty sure he meant fun slides. He bet all his jumping jacks and a doll’s arm.”

“So if I don’t build a slide, he doesn’t get the doll arm back? Are these really the lessons we should be teaching him?”

He fastened the straps over his back-up knives and walked out a patio door.

“Where are the kids?” I asked, catching up.

“Max is outside. I haven’t seen the others.”

“Anna and Quinn are just going to ignore the fact that Max is going on a monster hunt? That sounds exactly like them.”

“Eh, we’ll clear as we go, and hope they at least try to pretend they’re not there,” Brand said.

“Do you have any idea what we should expect?”

Brand shrugged and pretended he needed to tighten another strap. He didn’t.

“So it may be a haunt from the estate’s fall,” I concluded.

“Probably. I thought... I don’t know. Max is really good about never asking questions, but maybe he has the right to know a little.”

“About that night,” I said, and kept my voice from breaking.

His eyes shot to me. “No. No, Rune. I was thinking if it’s someone we knew, we could lay them to rest, or whatever you do. Maybe it’ll be a good thing. If it’s someone from when we grew up, there’s more to them than just that night.”

I nodded and avoided his worried eye. Then I felt shitty about that, because Brand would start to stress. “It’s a good idea,” I said out loud. “Really.”

The patio outside was covered in a rime of frozen snow, barely a quarter inch thick. Our footsteps crunched as we joined Max by the bushes on the other side of the balustrade. Brand vaulted over it without losing his footing, and I carefully tiptoed over the slippery spots until I reached a break in the railing.

Brand led us across the property to a hillside near the orchard, where the ground was hard and cold. My father’s seneschal has built a back-up wine cellar there—something about the island’s clay gave it good temperature control. We’d sealed it off during construction to delay the cost of rehabilitating it.

Half of my sigils were filled with spells to protect Max and Brand if we ran into something truly horrible. Outside the pitted wood and steel-plate door, I anchored a Slingshot to an oak tree.

“If I tell you to activate your Shield, do it,” I told Max. “If you hear me shout the word *sound*, it means I’m releasing a Silence spell. I’ll do that if there’s something dangerous about the spirit’s voice.”

“No winter banshees, please,” Max said.

“Not even our luck is that bad,” Brand said. “But regular banshees are a possibility. Our goal is to pin the spirit down and let Rune cast a spell that lays the spirit to rest.”

“And I only have one shot, so I need a clear path,” I added. “The spell takes hours to prepare.”

“When we’re inside, pay attention to your surroundings. *Everything*,” Brand stressed. “Everything you might bump into, trip over, use as a barricade, use as a weapon... You should always be aware of what’s around you. Like those two conveniently placed barrels by the door that are clean and have no dirt or leaves on them.”

One of the barrels vibrated a bit.

Brand pulled out a massive keyring while opening the door. It was like something out of a gothic horror movie—big and iron and flaked in rust. Brand had always preferred keys to modern locks, though he was coming around to the concept of key cards now that he realized he could sharpen the side of them.

A fresh breeze was sucked into the open doorway, forcing out a waft of stale air and dust spores. It may have been my imagination or nerves, but I felt the stirring of something Other from beyond—like a starved finger plucking a single strand of spider webbing.

“I can’t remember the layout at all,” I murmured.

“No fucking blueprints either,” Brand said. “I was in there once. There are at least two sections—one for the wine, and a desk for the estate sommelier. I think your dad kept vintages here that he didn’t want used by mistake in the main house. Let’s try not to fucking wreck everything.”

“You’ve really lost all respect for the swear jar, haven’t you?” I asked.

“That’s not a thing anymore,” Brand dismissed.

“What made you think that? I told you I made a spell.”

His eyes narrowed. “What spell?”

“It magically tracks swears and keeps charge of what you owe.”

Brand didn’t say anything for a second or two. “You are stone-cold lying. Are you singing show tunes in your head? Stop fucking with me.”

“I’m not lying. Not even a little. I didn’t even put your full name on the list. I just nicknamed you Vacation Fund.”

Brand clamped his own lips together and continued to glare. Slowly, the color left his cheeks, as he retreated to that spot he did when things required killing.

*Oh he is pissed,* I thought in delight.

I took a step toward the entrance of the wine cellar, and Brand swiftly blocked me so that he could take point. From the threshold, I realized the hidden room was freezing. The chilled wind carried an undertone of vinegar and soiled laundry.

The three of us moved in: Brand and I more or less jockeying for the lead, Max in the rear. Brand waited until Max picked a spot and said, “What’s the most secure side?”

“You mean like in your argument?” Max asked.

Brand actually stopped to look back at him.

“Oh,” Max said, flushing a bit. “I was just going to hug the wall.”

“Good. It’s a secure spot and frees up my aim if I need to turn and meet an ambush.

“Nice one, Max,” I said. I whispered a quick cantrip, and a ball of light sped forward.

The walls were hard-packed earth, which was more artifice than actual, since I knew there was a complicated series of atmospheric equipment built behind them. That equipment was long since defunct, though. I tried a light switch and had no luck.

“Hallway branches left and right,” I said.

“Which way do you think?” Brand asked.

“Maybe left?”

“I’m going to try something that normally works,” Brand said, and went right.

“*Hide...*” a raspy voice whispered, the sound all around us.

“Shield, Max,” I said. I didn’t turn to make sure he complied, but I felt a quick spike of magic as a sigil spell was loosed.

“*Find them...*” the voice hissed.

“Rune, go high and right,” Brand said, lowering his voice to clipped single-syllables.

“*Boys...*” the voice said.

We stepped into a modestly large room, filled with heavily-cobwebbed, solid oak bookshelves and a dusty desk. An old PC with a massive, fat hard drive sat on a smaller desk next to it.

Brand prowled along the bookshelf, signaling for me to wait. There was a cubbyhole where the bookshelf ended, or maybe a smaller adjacent room

Just as he neared the corner, the air filled with a spectral shriek, and a rush of energy snapped the rusted brackets holding the bookshelf in place. It began to fall on Brand. Max leapt forward, his fists awash in Shield magic. He punched the bookshelf, delaying its fall long enough for Brand to get clear, and then danced back himself.

“Max, hold at our rear,” I snapped while running a hand along my emerald ring. The Soul Bind spell slid out. I whispered a few quick words and sent three more light cantrips spinning ahead of us, illuminating every corner of the office area.

A white lady cowered in a corner.

“*Must find the boys,*” it hissed. “*Must hide them. Must hide the boys.*”

Recognition was a gut punch. For Brand, too—I heard his soft, inhaled *obb*.

White Ladies were a shared, global mythology. No matter what the culture, no matter how interlinked or withdrawn its people were from the world, the myth of white ladies persisted. They were spirits gripped by deep mourning; the victims of murder, self-harm, or violent death.

This white lady glimmered with the pearl light of spirits, but even in real life she'd worn that color. She was the third shift cook—staffing the kitchen overnight and preparing breakfast in the morning.

“Ohh,” Brand repeated. “Miss Barrie.”

*“Must find the boys,”* she sobbed quietly into her translucent hands.

I blinked away the wetness in my eyes and slowly—very, very slowly—approached the corner. “Harmony Jean Barrie,” I said.

She stopped sobbing.

“We’re here. The boys are here.”

Brand came over to my side. He said, “We were found, Miss Barrie. We were helped, and now we’re safe.”

*“The boys are here somewhere, I must find them,”* she whispered.

There were tears on her front apron—from either arrow or blade. I'd always assumed she was one of the burned bodies.

“Harmony Jean Barrie, you may stop looking now,” I said. “It’s time to rest.”

I exchanged a look with Brand, who nodded. Then I raised my hand and released the Soul Bind. The stillness was broken by a single, sharp crack—and the white lady faded in a ruffling of wind.

I took a deep breath and inhaled everything—musty air, spoiled wine, regrets, grief. Inhaled all of it deep, deep down.

On the exhale, I turned and went over to Max, who was watching everything with wide eyes. There were droplets of sweat beading on his brow.

“That was a clever trick, moving the Shield to your fist,” I said.

Max nodded.

“I’d like to shake your hand,” I said, and stuck my own out.

Max swallowed. “Not necessary,” he said.

“Because you broke a few fingers?” I asked.

Max closed his eyes and nodded.

I focused on the chain around my ankle. A moment later, the warm rush of healing energy filled my body. I took Max's fist, made him disperse the Shield spell, and set about healing his broken bones.

"It *was* a good idea," I said. "But you need more than one sigil. Just because your hand is Shielded doesn't make it invulnerable. Another spell to buttress the skeletal structure was needed."

"Does he need a healing spell? I have a Healing stored!" Quinn shouted from the wine cellar entrance.

"Stay there!" I shouted. "Or maybe start running!"

"Miss Barrie?" Max asked softly, looking between our faces.

"The night cook," Brand said. He cleared his throat and shook his head, coming out of his momentary surprise. "She would have been here that evening. We didn't have many staff who spent the night, but she was in charge of late meals and prepping breakfast. She was...nice. She was a very nice woman."

"There was this one time..." I said, and then stopped to smile. It was hard to talk and smile at the same time just then, and I wanted to smile, because I'd just swallowed a lot of sadness.

I said, "We were about six or seven. Brand and I had separate training tracks by then. He was learning about nutrition, and because he was already insufferable at that age, he decided the lesson on nutrition applied to me, not just him. So he marched into the kitchen with his puffy blue Trapper Keeper notebook and asked Miss Barrie about my saturated fat intake."

Max laughed. "Really? What did she do?"

"She started making cookies. There's still a photo somewhere of Brand licking the spatula."

"That is a lie," Brand insisted.

"It is not," I said. "I've been waiting for the right moment to turn the picture over to the kids so they can make memes."

"I don't believe you."

“Well, you believed we actually have a jar that is somehow magically sentient, and which understands if a person is swearing, and which then keeps *track of it*. Without any hands or a pen or anything.”

Brand glared at me.

“Honestly, how long have you known me?” I said. “At what point did I become Gandalf?”

“We decided not to run!” Quinn shouted from the entrance. “Can we come in now?”

“Yes,” Brand said on a loud sigh.

Quinn and Anna thundered into the office. They were both still in pajamas. Quinn also had what appeared to be a glue trap attached to his bottom jaw. The sort of thing we used to catch roaches.

Brand pointed at it.

“Oh, it’s clean,” Quinn said quickly. “I just opened the package last night.”

“Did you honestly think that was my first question?” Brand asked.

“You mean how? Anna dragged me out of bed this morning. Kind of literally? And the dragging continued across most of the floor.”

“He wanted to sleep through this,” Anna said with no remorse. “Can I see the photo?”

“Max, take them inside, okay?” I said. “We’ll join you for breakfast in a bit.” I tapped on his knuckles to make sure he wasn’t wincing in pain, then let him go.

The three of them tromped out of there.

“Miss Barrie,” Brand whispered, shaking his head. “There’s a memory.”

“I guess she was looking for us that night,” I said, whispering too.

He studied my face, taking apart every muscle twitch, every twist of the lips. He put so much time into handling me, my Brand.

Finally he said, “You did good, Rune. That spell? I’m glad you have it.”

“I guess I am too.”

“Let’s go find some cookie batter,” he said. He slung an arm around me, gave me a quick, rough shake, and led us out of there.