

THE TAROT SEQUENCE

Scenes from the Holidays

“The Tree”

It should not have been snowing like this. Not this time of year, not these fat, lazy flakes that muffled everything in a half-foot of powder.

The Convocation had been quick to reassure people that it was a good sign. After over a year of climate-related craziness thanks to Ashton Saint Gabriel’s weather magic in the Westlands, the Ladies World and Priestess were close to undoing the damage—but the final stretch promised some extremely unusual storms.

So we had an equinox celebration in front of us with lots of snow, and with Corbie cobbling together about six different human winter celebrations—all with a heavy emphasis on gift-giving. We’d be celebrating most of those the next day.

“It’s not as if Atlantean holidays are fucking kid-friendly,” Brand said as we trekked with the kids through the forest on Sun Estate. “Corbie making a raft for his action figures from the stalks of the Belladonna Lily was a fun fucking use of healing sigils.”

Each equinox and solstice had their own sacred yet toxic flower, and each flower generally subsidized an economy of safety paraphernalia to curb hospital visits. After Corbie went after the Belladonna Lily, we’d had to buy a locked display case. He asked for a Christmas tree as a substitute.

“What about that one?” I said, pointing.

“It’s the first fir tree you’ve seen,” he said. “Try a little harder. And I’m not carrying anything over six feet.”

We were distracted by a low buzzing sound through the branches of the pines. Half a second later it was followed by a whistle, a thunk, and a staticky cough as a drone plummeted into a bush.

“Goddamnit,” Brand said. He looked over his shoulder at Anna, whose knife holster was now empty. “Quinn, pack that damn thing up! Anna, drones do not grow on trees!”

She gestured at the neatly disabled drone on the ground as if to say, *And?*

“Congratulations, and thanks for not killing anyone,” Brand said.

“You look like you want to tell me not to put anyone’s eye out,” Anna said. “I have thick skin. Do you want to say that to me?”

I thought to myself, *She’s fucking cheating.*

Brand peered at her. “You’re not good enough or bad enough to hit an eye. Don’t flatter yourself.” He turned, stopped, turned back. “*Yet.* You can do anything once you grow up and get your head out of your ass.”

Max sidled up to me and whispered, “She’s cheating. And did he say money doesn’t grow on trees?”

“He said drones, so it doesn’t count,” I whispered back, because I’m almost positive it wouldn’t help me win a row.

I very deliberately did not check the paper in my pocket. Brand hadn’t figured out yet that the kids made bingo cards filled with Brand’s new and awkwardly dad-like responses for handling the influx of children in our life. The winner wouldn’t need to mop marble for two months.

Bushes shook to our left, and Addam and Quinn tromped out. Quinn had a sad look on his face and an unresponsive remote control in his hands.

“We found nothing over there,” Addam said. “I’m almost positive we have some Eastern red cedars in the glade by the back road.”

Then the bushes shook to the left of us, and Corbie, with a sound of great effort, tugged an old-fashioned sled with metal runners into the clearing. He sat down on it with a grunt and gave us all a hopeful look. When no one responded, he casually kicked the rope leash in our direction.

“He didn’t eat his oatmeal this morning,” Max hissed quickly.

“Corbie, remember when you didn’t eat your oatmeal this morning?” I said. “Now you’re going to have to wait until someone messes up and has to pull your sled as a punishment.”

Corbie didn’t seem to think that would take long. He rolled off the sled to make angels—or at least a big circular dent. He was more or less one, big, padded cushion, trapped in a puffy winter coat Corrine had to pull out of storage.

“Max and Quinn and Anna, look over here with me,” Addam said. “We can do this.”

Brand came over to me as they vanished back into the snow-laden undercover. “Why do people keep saying stupid things to me?”

“Mmmm?” I said.

“And Quinn keeps checking a piece of paper in his pocket.”

“That’s strange.”

“Rune, is there a piece of paper in your pocket too?”

“You mean like money?” I said cagily.

Or maybe not that cagily, because Brand said, “I can tell you all the ways that this will go.”

I ended up slapping the bingo card into his hands. His eyes scrolled up and down it, and then he handed it back to me. The fact he said nothing was perhaps even more worrisome than an actual threat.

I heard a crunch of snow, and Corbie tugged on the back hem of my jacket.

“Can I have a birthday party for Flynn tomorrow too?” he asked.

“Flynn’s birthday just happens to be tomorrow?”

Corbie nodded seriously.

“I can’t help but note that you’ve found yet another holiday with presents,” I said.

Corbie did what he always did when I said something that didn’t particularly appeal to him. He waited.

I sighed. “Sure. Absolutely. We’ll have Flynn’s birthday too.”

“With carrots and lettuce?” Corbie said. His eyes drifted left as he saw an opportunity escaping. “And saltwater taffy. And this.”

He managed to extract a crinkled piece of paper from his pocket. It had been torn from a glossy magazine, and showed a picture of not just a bouncy house, but a miniature three-story bouncy house. There was even an inflatable pool behind it.

“What kind of magazines are we ordering?” I asked Brand.

“Don’t look at me. Addam gets about sixty of those *hey-you’re-rich-here’s-some-shit-you-don’t-need-and-no-one-else-can-afford* catalogs. The ones where you can buy islands in the classifieds. Do not mention the swear jar,” Brand added seriously, bending over to stare straight into Corbie’s eyes.

“Corbie, we need to draw a line at the bouncy house,” I said.

“Like with crayons?” he asked.

“Not like with crayons. You get your dinosaur birthday party with carrots and lettuce. No bouncy house.”

“Okay,” he said, and went back to tow his sled further into the clearing.

“Were you able to get Addam to cancel the dinner?” Brand asked.

“Well, I did start asking a question about the dinner, and Addam asked if I was going to try to get him to cancel it. Does that count?”

Addam and Corinne had got the idea in their head that we needed an “adults’ night out.” He refused to tell me what he had planned—only that we’d need to dress nicely, and it would take place at sunset, a few hours before the equinox party tomorrow evening. Traditional equinox parties began close to midnight, but we were fudging it by a few hours for the youngest folk.

“Do you *think* that counts?” Brand asked.

“No. We’re going to have to go to dinner. I need to do laundry today,” I sighed.

“If we’re going to be in the field, I’ll need to wear my tactical gear.”

“Not a fucking chance,” I said. “If I have to wear a button-down shirt, so do you. You can carry your knives in a fanny pack if you have to.”

I expected a little more pushback, but Brand had frozen in place. I watched him tilt his head and smile a little. “We’re being flanked,” he whispered.

Then he turned with unerring accuracy and spotted Max, who was crouched behind a tree and patting a ball of snow into shape. Max, now visibly nervous, shifted his weight and cocked his hand.

“Please,” Brand told him—and a snowball smacked him in the back of the head.

Brand, incredulous, turned to face what he’d assumed would be the least likely threat. Quinn, half-hidden behind his own tree, rapidly grabbed for another handful of snow. His Adam’s apple jumped as he said, “I’m a seer? A really good one? I know which way to duck.”

“And I’m a Companion?” Brand said. “A really good one? And I can engage in a complicated series of random motions leading to an unpredictable attack that will result in all the snow I can grab being shoved down the back of your fucking shirt?”

Quinn didn’t even have time to consider this as Brand launched. There were leaps, pivots, and madman-like rolls that took him closer and closer to Quinn, who yelped and ran.

As Brand pursued, Addam and Anna and a newly arrived Layne came into the clearing.

“Hero,” Addam said. “Should I be concerned that Brandon has learned techniques to fight seers?”

“Nah,” I said. “He knows how I feel about prophets. He learned these moves ages ago. It’s actually rather sweet. But maybe you should give Quinn some backup?”

“I’m on Brand’s team!” Max shouted, and dove into the brush. Addam said something he usually didn’t under his breath and bolted after them.

“And find a tree!” I shouted.

Anna looked at me, and then she looked at Layne. “Fine, you’re on my team,” she said, grabbed their hand, and dragged them off into the woods.

Corbie and I exchanged a look. Neither of us were really runners, but I suppose we’d be good at laying down in comfortable ambush points. “What do you say?” I said. “I could be your teammate.”

Corbie bit his lower lip and looked around.

“There is literally no one else left,” I said.

“Are you a Companion though?” he asked.

“I am not.”

“My aunt Corinne is a Companion. She makes the snowball for me. And she throws it where I tell her. She never misses.”

“I can fly and light things on fire,” I pointed out, maybe a little defensively.

“But will that melt the snow?” he said.

I picked Corbie up in one arm, grabbed his sled in the other, and trudged in the direction of Quinn’s high-pitched screams. Before I’d made it out of my first glade, I was passed by Corinne and Queenie, who were carrying what appeared to be a ten-foot-long saw.

“Found this in the attic,” Corinne said, not even a little out of breath.

“I don’t know half the things my father got up to,” I said, marveling a bit.

Corinne ran a thoughtful eye over Corbie, maybe to make sure he wasn’t bleeding, and then a more critical eye over me. “Addam said you were asking about dinner.”

“Just casually.”

“We’re not cancelling it. I promise, it will be fun. We have something planned. We invited Aunt Diana too.”

We broke through the treeline. There was another clearing ahead with a ring of trees, including at least two that looked like promising holiday victims. People were weaving between trunks and plastering each

other with snowballs. Since I had Corbie in my arm, I dropped the sled and brushed a finger along my emerald ring, releasing a Shield.

“You chickenshit,” Brand called.

Corbie looked up at me and I said, “That counts. Add it to his bill.”

My cousin began to squirm, so I set him down. He ran over to Corinne—or at least he made a series of up and down motions with his puffy snowsuit legs—and began to make hoarse sounds of entreaty.

“Listen up!” Brand shouted. “I want *this* tree cut down in an hour. I don’t care who does it. Make sure there are no animals or undead in the branches. I’m going to get a hot chocolate.”

“Why don’t we get to go have a hot chocolate?” Max said, looking a little abandoned.

Brand raised his voice just a little and said, “Because I said so.”

As he headed away, I felt a lump in my throat. I pulled the piece of paper out of my pocket, spotted *Because I said So*, and said, “Bingo.”

“But he almost always gives it to me,” Quinn said, confused.

“How would he give it to you?” Max demanded.

Layne, who was picking up one end of the giant saw, said, “He caught Quinn with the bingo card yesterday at lunch.” When Max opened his mouth in outrage, they added, “And he caught you at dinner. And Anna at breakfast.”

I said, “So he didn’t just choose me, he chose me *over all of you*.”

I started to follow Brand to the hot chocolate.

“He’s not going to stop talking about this all evening,” I heard Max mutter behind me.

“I’m sure that didn’t occur to Brand at all,” Anna said.