

# THE TAROT SEQUENCE

*Scenes from the Holidays*

## “The Dinner”

I sat at my desk, signing off on a batch of subcontractor claims while trying not to jump up and help Brand with his tie. The shadow of Brand doing it himself looked like puppet murder against the wall.

“Stay where you fucking are,” he growled at me.

“You could have done more to get us out of this,” I said pointedly. We were not fancy dinner type of people. The fact that Corinne and Addam insisted on an adults-night-out genuinely mystified me.

I felt a tug on my shirt sleeve, and a small hoarse voice said, “Can I borrow this?”

“Absolutely,” I told Corbie, while saying to Brand, “You could have even viewed it as a bodyguard activity. A way of protecting me.”

Brand stopped tying his tie and scooped up Corbie beneath the armpits before the boy could run out of the room. He shook Corbie gently in my direction. It took a second for me to realize Corbie had a pair of giant scissors in his hands.

“Um,” I said.

Corbie swiveled his head to look at Brand upside down. “I’m making place settings for Flynn’s birthday. You said I could.”

“Fold the paper, don’t cut it,” Brand said. He put Corbie back on his feet but snatched the scissors away. Corbie scampered, passing Addam along the way, who swooped in with two flutes of champagne.

He put one glass in front of me, and the second on a table near Brand. Then, as if it was the safest, most natural thing in the world, he took the ends of Brand’s tie and began to fasten it for him.

“Diana’s car is pulling up,” he said. “We will leave shortly.”

He wore a black button-down shirt tucked into snowy white slacks. It was an odd look for him—or at least, I thought that, until a casual angling in front of a table lamp proved that the slacks were very thin, and he wore no underwear. What was visible under the hem of the tucked in shirt burned a memory on my brain like a lithograph.

“It’s like living with fucking mimes,” Brand said. “Rune checks out your package, you know he’s checking out your package, he blushes, you smile. You need new material.”

Addam patted the final, tied knot, and stepped back. “Take up your drinks, heroes. We have guests.”

Alcohol seemed like a plus, so we grabbed the flutes and followed him. I don’t know where Max and Quinn were, but I heard faint, explosive-like poundings from outside the corridor windows. Max was practicing sigil magic, mostly likely; which meant Anna was probably there trying to convince him to Will the sigil into joint custody, and Quinn was using his own magic to stamp out flames.

The sun was angling low by then. It would be an early dinner, so we could get back for the equinox festivities before midnight. We’d fudged things a bit “for the sake of Corbie,” but the truth is none of us were anxious to drink until dawn.

“Does it seem weird that the Tower is babysitting for us?” I asked as we covered ground to the main hall. “It feels like a favor.”

“Mmm,” Addam said. “He is Quinn’s godfather. I believe his protection of Quinn in our absence is an expectation.”

“Plus,” Brand said, “if he’s nearby, maybe that means we’ll get an emergency call while we’re out.”

“That’s right,” I said. “I mean, what else can we do if Lord Tower calls us with a mission?”

I said that as we entered the main hall, where Diana was putting her coat on a coatrack that we’d made from plywood. Corinne was pouring more champagne from a bottle she’d nestled in an ice bucket we’d found in the basement.

“If that happens,” Diana said, “I suspect your court administrators will answer the phone and remind Lord Tower that you are now a King.”

It was a comment that made me feel good, even if no one in the room reacted as if they were, in fact, in the presence of a King. Also, the look on Diana’s face clearly aimed to remind me that her nephews were in my care, so Standards.

At that second, car headlights flashed through the glass panes above the front door. Brand peeked out a window and said, “Shit. You didn’t even need to say his name three times in a mirror.”

We set the Tower and Mayan up on our best patio and dropped Corbie onto a nearby chaise lounge. He was on his best hyperactive behavior since we promised that the Tower would walk him down to Flynn’s enclosure to visit our pre-historic rhinoceros.

On my way back inside, Anna waited patiently in the front foyer, holding the door open for us. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I have everything under control. There’s a plan.”

“Okay,” I said. “That won’t obsessively worry me at all for the next three or four hours.”

Corrine added, “If Corbie gets locked behind, in, or out of anything, you will not enjoy the next month at all.”

“So many loopholes in that,” Brand whispered.

Then the five of us, wearing our finest, trailed down to the beach. I had no idea why, or what to expect. But I had to admit: we cut a nice figure. With the sun setting and our fancy attire, as well as the suddenly-warming temperatures, there was something vaguely Gatsby-esque about it. Or maybe it was the champagne.

As we crested the dune that led to our beach, I saw a yacht was parked by our barely-rehabilitated dock along a stone jetty.

“You bought a yacht?” I whispered.

“Rented for the evening,” he said.

“I can’t even tell if that’s better or worse,” I said.

We boarded the yacht. It was small but sumptuous, and came with a small team of professionals to keep us alive and afloat. There was more champagne on the....prow? The word for the front of a boat. As we drifted away from the jetty, powerful motors churned beneath us, and we began to cut through the evening wind.

“Okay,” I said. “Maybe dinner on the ocean isn’t so bad.”

“The yacht is taking us *to* dinner,” Addam said. “We are eating elsewhere.”

Brand and I exchanged a glance, and even Corinne joined in.

Brand said, “We’re not eating on this? You rented this just to take us from point A to point B? Like an Uber?”

“It’s a thing,” Addam said.

We broke up into weird eddies of conversation after that. Addam struck up an animated, amateur conversation with the captain, while Brand went to search the ship for just-in-case weapons. Diana, equally amused and horrified, followed him. She seemed excited too when Brand found a harpoon.

“You’ll have fun,” Corinne said, joining me at the railing. “I promise. Do you honestly think I’d set up a night that wasn’t wholly built around you and Brand?”

“Really? Is that a warning at all?”

She finished off her champagne. “Nope. You two deserve this. I know you’ve been missing field action.”

“There’s going to be field action? Is that why Addam told me to store some stealth spells?”

“Reconnaissance only, and after dinner. It’ll be dessert.”

“I’m going to need to write you a thank you card afterwards, aren’t I?”

It was a joke, and a bad one, but the look on her face became speculative. “No. We’re beyond that, aren’t we? You’ve given my kids a home. You’ve...” She choked off a bit, and shook her head. A gust of

damp, salty air blew her dark bangs off her forehead. “You’ve given them a yard. They eat well. They are constantly surrounded by people who look after them. I don’t know how this is my life, but I’m grateful.”

“I feel like I don’t do enough,” I admitted.

“That’s insane,” she said, and decided I needed more alcohol. The prow was dimly lit—perhaps atmospherically—so she had to hunt a bit. When my glass was full, she continued. “Why would you even say that?”

“Because Anna is my heir, and I don’t know what’s going on in her head half the time.”

“She’s been upset her boobs are growing and it’s fucking up her knife swing,” Corinne said. “Do you want to talk to her about that?”

“Not ever,” I said. “That doesn’t sound like a Me thing. And if it is a Me thing, then it’s going to be a Brand thing. Because of the knives.”

Corinne smiled at me, though maybe a little in exasperation. “I think all adults are worried they’re messing up their children. We are Atlantean. We spend small eternities as adults, but only a handful of years as minors. And those years? They influence *everything* that comes after. I’m terrified I’m failing Layne and Anna.”

“You aren’t,” I said, because that was just the truth.

“Really? Because Anna and I... It’s not like what I had with Kevan. I don’t feel like a Companion to Anna. I still feel like a mother. And Layne? I don’t know what Layne wants from Ciaran, and it worries me.”

“Well, *that* I can answer. Layne isn’t looking for a lover, Corinne. They’re looking for a teacher. And you can’t blame them, because they’ve got a gift worth teaching.”

“You can’t teach Layne?”

“Not necromancy. Not a rare type of necromancy like immolation. And... Ciaran is... insanely powerful. More powerful than he lets on. You just need to trust me on that. If Layne is looking for a mentor, they could do a hell of a lot worse than one of the strongest magic-users in the city.”

A motley skyline of lights had appeared on the horizon, close to shore. I knew what it was, and was more surprised than anything when the yacht veered *toward* it.

“Holy shit,” I said.

I heard footsteps behind me and Brand said, “Are we going to the Green Docks?” He pointed. “Are we having fucking dinner there?”

“Dinner at the *Honey Pot*, and unfinished business for dessert,” Corinne said, tipping her glass at the shimmering lights.

The *SS Vaitarna* vanished in the Arabian Sea many, many years ago. If you relaxed your eyes just so, ghostly echoes of its faltering remained—such as a half-second glimpse of a student in a three-piece suit being flung across the deck. I tried not to relax my eyes, though. It could be an overwhelming sensation to see everything the ghost ships of the Green Docks wanted you to see.

New Atlantis’s renowned redlight district had been built from moored ghost ships and tens of miles of branching, folding, and overlapping piers. There were paths more dangerous than the one around the *Vaitarna*—one route in particular led to an American battleship I hadn’t quite figured what to do with. But the *Vaitarna*, and its brothel-restaurant *The Honey Pot*, was close to the lights of mainland, which offered relative—highly relative—safety.

We were shown into a private stateroom. It was far enough away from the main bar that we couldn’t even smell its gently-intoxicating smoke. I assumed Addam had shelled out a small fortune for the privacy, but even he seemed surprised by the dining arrangement.

“I wasn’t even aware you had this room for rent,” he said to the face waiter who showed us to the cabin.

“We don’t, but you’re with royalty, aren’t you?”

He came over to me, passed me, and tapped Brand on the cheek. He left with a promise of water and drink menus.

Brand hadn't said a single word since we were shown inside, and looked even more uncomfortable with the attention he'd just received.

"What's wrong?" I whispered to him. "You're not worried that I'm upset that you still come here, right? We already had that not-a-fight."

He gave me a stubborn look, marched past everyone, and studied the table. He picked the seat that put the most defensible wall without a porthole at his back.

Just as he was about to slide into it, Corrine cleared her throat. "Are you the only Companion here?" she asked.

Brand immediately knew this was a conversation with multiple landmines. "No," he said mulishly.

"Are you the oldest Companion here?" she asked.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he said, and muscled the table out and slightly clockwise, so that both he and Corinne had access to the same defensible stretch of wall.

"Perhaps next time a stiff vodka gimlet instead of champagne," Diana murmured. "This group isn't nearly lubricated enough."

But we did manage to find seats around the table. Getting settled in—with fancy clothing, hidden weapons, and not-so-hidden weapons—took a while. After that there was an uncomfortable pause while we just stared at each other. It seemed much easier to have table conversation when one of the kids was messing around and needed to be yelled at.

Addam cleared his throat. "I hear they have a very nice selection of bread."

"Wait, what the fuck was that?" Brand said. "Was that small talk? Are we doing small talk?"

"Will you behave yourself if I tell you that you may get to hit someone later?" Corinne asked.

Brand glowered. Then, "Is it someone who deserves to get hit?"

"Be patient and you'll see," she said.

The glower went nuclear. "You said the same thing to Corbie before we left."

We were saved from that declining conversation by a brief spurt of chaos. The door to the stateroom opened, and we heard a waiter rummaging through ice buckets and bottles. In advance of them, a dream sprite flew in the room, zipped in seven circles above our heads, then shot like an arrow to my lap. Its nostrils flared with scent, which would have been extremely embarrassing if it hadn't said, "*Cord-ee-roy.*"

Satisfied, the sprite zipped back out of the room.

"You brought the button?" Addam said with a little smile.

"I always carry it. It helps with fidgeting," I admitted. Plus, I was still secretly convinced that the gift I'd received my last time on the *Vaitarna* wasn't as mundane as it appeared.

The waiter entered the room—only it wasn't a waiter at all, but someone we'd met on our last visit.

"Salutations," Kellum Greenwater said, surrounded by a windy billow of kimono and cocoa butter. He had a tray filled with no less than a dozen shot glasses balanced on a freckled hand.

The merman gave the room a practiced flick of his eyes, absorbing details. He appeared as a human man in his early thirties, but there were fathoms in that stare.

He ended up pointing a nail at Diana. "You," he said. "I know performers who will shamelessly steal that look. I bet you could hold your own in a tough room."

He put a shot in front of Diana and picked up one of his own. Diana, amused, and trying not to gloat at a table full of people who also thought they could hold their own in a tough room, clinked glass with Kellum and threw it back in one swallow. The smell of silver tequila wafted across the table.

"Oh yes, more of that," Diana said.

"We are not making soppy toasts," Brand said. "That is where small talk leads."

"Use your imagination," Kellum said, and gave him the second shot glass. "You could toast to violent takedowns. I'll judge the winner."

And then *he* gave Brand a friendly pat on the shoulder too, which had me straightening in the chair. I wasn't jealous. Not entirely. But I sniffed a good story. Brand had obviously been back here since last fall.

"Why did the waiter say Brand was royalty?" I asked Kellum.

"Rune," Brand said.

"Shush," Kellum said, while depositing shots in front of the rest of us. "It's not a secret. Brandon has graciously stepped in as a vigilante bouncer when needed. He's beat up three customers who got rough with the staff." He paused and considered. "There was that fourth, but what you did to him isn't quite covered by *beat up*."

"Aww," I said.

Brand rolled his eyes and threw back his shot. Kellum neatly swapped it for a full one.

"May I make the toast?" Kellum asked Corinne—who he apparently knew as well. "I have the information you need."

She smiled and shrugged.

"I found you a clever little path through the dead docks," he said, and held up his shot glass. "Who wants to take a field trip to the *Chained Rock*?"

Brand perked up at the phrase *dead docks*; Addam and Corinne were smug; Diana had no idea what was going on. I breathed, "The ocean roc. Did you find which house owns the bar?"

"Not yet, that's why it's just reconnaissance," Corinne said. "We asked Kellum's help in finding an...unobtrusive path to them, so we won't be spotted."

"We are moving against a House tonight?" Diana asked sharply.

That led to a long tangent about our adventures in the Green Docks, starting with meeting Kellum in *The Honey Pot*, and ending on a ghost ship called the *Waratab*. There was a bondage brothel on it called *The Chained Rock*, a vicious wordplay on an imprisoned ocean roc on its deck. The capture of such a rare, legendary beast was a disgusting display of power that appealed to the sort of person I afforded very, very little consideration.

As we told the story, we had shots. Appetizers and food came in. I do remember that much—tasty respites between flinging back good tequila. Kellum had pulled up a chair by then and joined us.

“Earth magic,” Addam suddenly announced. He lifted his shot glass, slopping some onto his chicken wing, which was basted in honey that came from an island off the shore of Greece and cost two hundred bucks a jar. There’d been a very long conversation about that.

He waited for everyone to do the shot with him, then realized he hadn’t made the toast. “My most violent takedown. When Max was kidnapped by Lord Hanged Man’s people, I used earth magic to stop a man in the park. I believe I accidentally removed an arm or a leg from him.”

“Poison,” Diana said. “I once swapped the plates between my mother and a man who was trying to poison her. He never even spotted it. Not for another few minutes, that is.”

I watched Brand give her a look that said he was acutely aware he was sitting next to her with a dinner plate.

“You must have good stories,” Diana said to Corinne. “Your rejuvenation went splendidly, by the way. You look exactly like you did on the fields of Drafayim.”

“Now *there’s* a memory,” Corinne murmured. “I’m honored you remember. You fought side by side with your sister.”

Drafayim was a battle from old Atlantis, back in the days when Houses made open warfare with each other. I mentally adjusted Corinne’s age by at least fifty years, if not a hundred. Even Brand seemed to be surprised at that, because his gaze was fixed in that not-blinking way it got when he respected something *just* enough not to roll his eyes.

“We must discuss this endlessly,” Kellum said.

So that got them talking about battles in a world that Brand, Addam, and I had never seen. It was humbling and interesting, and there was lots more liquor.

“Wait, I was distracted from my point,” Diana eventually said. “Are you sure it’s wise to move against a House without knowing its alliances?”

“It’s not,” I admitted, and realized I was holding my shot glass at an angle. I saved about a thimble’s worth. “But we’ve had enough tequila to act really, really sneaky.”

“Because this is just reconnaissance,” Corinne said.

“No, you said I could hit someone,” Brand argued.

I shook my wrist and funneled some willpower into my sabre, with the idea of transforming it into a hilt with a molten garnet blade so I could demonstrate how expertly I’d cut through the ocean roc’s chain. Or at least that was the plan, but somehow the sabre ended up clattering to the ground and burning a hole in the carpet.

Brand seemed oddly concerned about the rug. I kept trying to tell him I’d replace it until he grabbed my jaw and said, “You’re not going until you remember what’s on the other side of the floor of a boat.”

Kellum’s phone began to buzz. He removed it from a pocket and read something on the screen.

Then he said, “Who is Quinn, and why does he say I should go with you?” His phone buzzed again. “And why is he thanking me for the moisturizer I almost always recommend to him someday?”

When we were finally prepared to head out with our new friend, there was a large argument about whether we should use a cantrip to sober up. Or at least, *I* made a large argument against it, even as Diana went around and cast the cantrip on each of us.

Cantrips were quick and dirty magic, usually with immediate drawbacks to balance out the benefit. The alcohol flushed itself through my system, leaving me with a pounding migraine and a full bladder. So we had to spend time rotating into the stateroom bathroom, then getting our headaches Healed by Addam’s sigil magic.

While sobriety tempered my ideas of descending on the *Chained Rock* like a Highland warrior, it didn't change the fact that I was ready to hold someone accountable.

Plus, it was my first trip through what Kellum called the "dead docks," which was a wholly new and eerie slice of New Atlantis.

The dead docks were stretches of piers and ghost ships long since abandoned. The paths were too empty to be generally unsafe; and it afforded us the chance to advance on the *Chained Rock* without the attention that a party such as ours would normally acquire.

The ships on the path Kellum picked were old. Very, very old. Most boats came from countries that no longer existed, or empires that had long fallen. On the deck of one I spotted clay olive jars. Many others were heaped with rotted, handwoven fishing nets.

There were no lights beyond our cantrips, though I did spot a silvery glimmer in the cabin of one old Roman galleon. I'm not sure what drew my attention to it, but there was a power source in the cabin that scratched shivers up my spine. I breathed easier when we passed it. The fact that no one else saw or sensed the potential threat only made me more wary at its skill at hiding itself.

"Are you planning on releasing the Roc tonight?" Addam asked me.

"No," I said. "I don't think so. I really wish I could, but I may want to run that by Ciaran or Lady Death. Or even Lord Tower. It would be safer releasing it in the Indian Ocean, away from any island or mainland. If we release it here, and it's angry, it could create a...problem."

"Such as a tidal wave as large as the island," Diana said dryly.

Brand said, "Then we're not doing that. I'm tired of us getting fucking blamed for everything. We still get side-eye because of the weather."

"The plan," Corrine reminded us, "is to find out which House owns the ship."

"Will be encounter resistance?" Diana asked.

"We shouldn't," Corrine said, but not confidently. "I've kept an eye on this place for a week. No one lives on the ship, and they don't open

their doors until ten o'clock. We should be able to observe without interference, if we're quick."

"And you have no ideas at all which House owns the ship?" Diana asked.

"We suspect the Gallows or one of its houses," Addam said. "It would make sense—the ship is where Kellum's cousin Sherman was hiding, and he had connections in those houses."

"He was also hiding from them," Kellum murmured. "There are other possibilities. I've been asking around. The Heart Throne owned quite a few brothels on the Green Docks. When they fell, ownership became...muddled."

"There's no shortage of Arcana that could be involved in such a sour affair," Diana said. "They could be a relic of the Anchorite's rule."

Well, that shut everyone up. No one talked about the Anchorite—which said a lot, considering how many distasteful topics were fair dinner conversation in a city like New Atlantis.

Kellum—who'd changed into a slick black jumpsuit made from silk—put a hand on Addam's forearm. "My apologies, Lord Saint Nicholas. I'm embarrassed not to have mentioned sooner that Sherman is doing well."

Addam hid his face from me, which meant he was blushing.

"Sherman took you up on your offer to get help?" I asked. My first meeting with Kellum's cousin hadn't been my finest moment. I'd used his addiction to get what I wanted. I'd do it again, but still, decisions like that left scuff marks on my decency.

"He did," Kellum answered for Addam. "He's been sober nearly three months. He's considering a move to the human world. I'm not sure if it'll be good or not—but at least the dangers there don't have as many grim and immediate endings."

The fog was getting thicker the further we walked—not unusual for Nantucket, and at least it wasn't the pea soup that occasionally blinded you. After another few minutes, Corinne held up a hand and simultaneously tensed.

“Ahead,” Corinne breathed. “Addam?”

“I’m going to cloak us all in Camouflage,” Addam announced. “We should blend into this fog nicely.”

He ran a finger across three of his platinum belt sigils, combining the released spells to allow him to expand coverage to the entire party at once. I feel the cool trickle of magic wash down me, briefly turning the world into color negative. When the magic settled, my arm reflected the fog, mirror-like, and my feet were the color of the scuffed green deck paint.

We continued a cautious advance. Slowly, in the near distance, the dead docks reconnected to a more common thoroughfare lit by fae lanterns. The *SS Waratab* gradually resolved from the fog.

Many decades ago, the five-hundred-foot cargo steamship was lost on its way to Cape Town. My magical vision saw flashes of a broken ship moored on a frozen, craggy landscape—likely Antarctica. Two hundred and ten souls had been lost with it.

The ocean roc was hidden in a nest of dirty straw. I did not see it until we closed in on the ship’s plank, at which point the massive creature raised its head weakly and gazed into the concealing fog.

It was appalling. Its wings—with a span as wide as California Redwood branches—were scored with badly-healed wounds and membrane rips. Last time I was here, they’d threaded holiday lights through the tears. Those were gone now—maybe in a pathetic attempt to kill their attraction less quickly, because its wounds were festering.

Its legs were clamped in cold iron chains inscribed with runes.

There were few ocean rocs left in the wild. They were masters of elemental magic—capable of moving as fast as hurricane winds or lifting rogue waves with a flap of their wings. What had been done to this creature was disgusting. It reminded me of the equally unsavory practices inside the brothel: the red and blue doors which permitted violent tastes against its staff, and offered the same to clients who wanted marks on their own skin. It had not been an entirely consensual arrangement. The

bar's management had employed slaver devices to keep its sex workers under control.

I felt a hand grab my wrist. Kellum had stopped walking, and there was a stricken look on his face. "It's failing," he whispered. "It's dying, Lord Sun. I had no idea it was kept in such horrid conditions. I shame my school for my inaction."

"Kellum," I said, not but ungently. "We cannot release it now."

"It won't hurt us," Kellum said.

"That's a very uncertain gamble."

"It's not," he said. "Not necessarily. I am a merman. A merman siren. I am kin to sea elemental. If I can make a connection with the poor beast, I can tell it we are friends."

"Rune, you promised me you'd stop adopting things," Brand hissed.

"Lord Sun, *please*. It requires no care that you can offer. It needs the open ocean to heal. It does not want to be landlocked."

"Let's get closer," I decided.

And then I stumbled. Brand grabbed my elbow without comment, but gave me a look until I had my feet under me.

I didn't have a way of telling him, even through our bond, that I'd had a flashback to an ifrit. Another powerful, chained being—only I'd had to kill that creature, and it haunted me to this day. I was so tired of having that sort of blood on my hands.

"Let's see what we can do," I said, in a stronger voice.

"I just checked for life signs," Addam added, pulling his hand away from another sigil. "The ship is empty for now."

So Brand and Corinne took point. Crouched low, they moved almost silently down the plank, splitting to starboard and portside. They stopped at every porthole and looked inside.

After a few tense minutes, Brand reappeared at a railing and waved us onto the ship.

"Addam's right, I think it's empty," Brand said when I reached his side. "But we need to clear the two lower decks. Corinne and I are going

to take the lowest level. Addam and Diana will clear the main cabin structure. Rune, you and Kellum keep watch and check out the bird.”

“We’re looking for documentation,” Corinne added, mostly to Diana. “Anything that points toward the identity of the owners.”

I watched them infiltrate the hatches and vanish inside the ship. I spent a few minutes using a lens cantrip to check the piers stretching to and from the *Waratab*, but saw no sign of impending visitors or workers.

By the time I refocused my attention on Kellum, I saw that he was standing at the foot of the giant raptor. The roc’s head was laying on Kellum’s shoulder. Its featherless neck was scaly with rash and dermatitis.

My sadness lasted barely a moment before I recalled what Diana had said. She was right. I was no longer a Prince. I was a King.

With a burst of willpower, I melted my sabre from wristguard to hilt form. A crimson blade boiled upwards, shedding lazy, firefly sparks.

“Kellum?” I asked.

“It wants the deep ocean. It’ll take all its energy to fly there. It is no threat to our mainland.”

I went over, swung my sword over my shoulder, and separated the first shackle with a single slice. I went around the creature and cut its remaining bindings. I wasn’t sure I could remove the actual shackle without cutting its skin; but I got as close as I could.

Ending where I started, I made sure to catch the Roc’s eye, and bowed to my waist.

The bus-sized creature shuffled its hind legs, then made a pigeon-like cooing noise when it felt no resistance. It stretched up to the sky and spread its wings. Its first, failed hop shook the vessel—and I took pains to funnel calm, safe thoughts through my Companion bond so that Brand wouldn’t be worried about attack.

Its second hop took it off the ship, but it went crooked quickly and needed to land on a nearby dock. The distance was short enough that I could see its rapidly rising and falling breast.

“Goodbye,” Kellum whispered. His cheeks were wet with tears.

The roc spread its wings, launched into the air, and vanished into the fog. Kellum and I stared long after the fog had seeped back through the hole that had been punched through it.

Brand boiled out of an open hatch, knives drawn.

“Didn’t you get the feeling through our bond?” I said in exasperation. “I tried to tell you we weren’t being attacked.”

“The boat shook,” he said. “I didn’t think we were being attacked, I thought you’d done something.” He went over and kicked the chains on the deck. “I guess you did. It flew off?”

“It flew off,” I said.

He didn’t ask if I’d made the wrong decision, because there were some things Brand never had to ask. As much as he loved a good, snarky line, he trusted my judgment when it came to big decisions; and releasing an ocean roc wasn’t the sort of decision you made every day. Or every lifetime, even.

At that point, a large man walked up the gang plank. He had a small paper cone of roasted peanuts in his hand. He saw us, blinked, and put a hand on the knife at his side.

Brand started to laugh. “Oh, my friend, you’re going to want to walk away. This is just one of those times.”

“I remember you. You’re one of the bouncers,” I said. “What a day to show up early.”

The bouncer looked at my glowing blade; the empty space where the ocean roc had been; and the collection of knives in Brand’s chest holster. He turned and walked away.

“Is it bad that I’m disappointed?” I whispered.

Brand was staring into the fog, his head cocked. Behind him, Corinne emerged from the hatch. Brand glanced at her, and she immediately pulled a clawed gauntlet from her evening purse. Brand pulled out his phone, dialed, and said, “People coming, Addam.” He hung up.

“Kellum, you should take shelter in the bar,” I said. I sent a thought into my sabre and dissolved the blade. It was too bright in the fog—it created a bullseye nimbus.

“I am not without my own protections,” Kellum murmured.

By then I’d started to hear tromping on the planks myself. They didn’t appear to be particularly hurried, which made me think the guard we scared off hadn’t warned them.

And then the footsteps became footpounds as we were rushed.

Brand pulled the pin from a flash grenade and tossed it, shouting at us to cover our eyes. The world lit up in a flesh-colored explosion through my eyelids. We heard excited, urgent shouts from the docks, and then a waft of flowers washed over us.

“What the fuck,” Brand said.

That was when I remember that Max and I had infused Brand’s grenade chemicals with essential rose oil during the pandemic lockdown. We’d been bored. It hadn’t occurred to me that, maybe, it would keep us from being taken seriously in a fight.

“About a half dozen of them,” Brand said.

Corinne snorted.

“No killing,” I said quickly. “Not yet. We need to find out who—”

“They’re calling the Consortia,” Kellum interrupted. To Brand’s sharp look he said, “I hear sounds across water better than you. They sent a runner back for the Consortia.”

“What’s the Consortia?” I said.

“Some of the businesses band together and share the expense of back-up security,” Brand said.

“Evil businesses?”

Brand gave me a grim look.

“Okay, back to what I said: no killing yet,” I told everyone. Then something caught my eye. Or, rather, someone. “Except him, maybe.”

I brushed a thumb over my emerald ring. Angular lines of light sprang up around me and then sunk into my skin. “Get Addam and Diana out here. Shields for everyone.”

Brand evaluated what I meant—that I was taking point—and nodded. He pulled out his phone.

I strode toward the gang plank. At the edge of my vision, nearly obscured in fog, were a group of tough men and woman, along with some people not nearly as tough. Workers, maybe. But at the forefront was a disheveled man with bad teeth.

He no longer had a slaver’s bracelet on him, and I took a small amount of pride in seeing that.

“Remember me?” I said loudly.

“You let it free,” he said hoarsely. There was a tremor to his words. “The owners won’t like that.”

“My only real regret,” I told him, “is that the owners aren’t here right now.”

“Oh, I suspect they’ll be close behind, along with a squad of thirty and two armed skiffs. You have no claim here. The Arcanum’s own law is on my side.”

I closed my eyes and called on my Aspect. Felt the warmth of its magical flame lick at my hair and ruffle my shirt.

“I am Arcana,” I said. “I am Arcanum. I am the Sun of Atlantis.”

Someone cleared their throat. Rather anticlimactically. But it was Diana, and she had a thick ledger in her arms.

“Huskely,” she said. “Minor house associated with the Gallows. Given your role in initiating the Raid against Lord Hanged Man, you likely have legal grounds to contest ownership as a spoil of war.”

“We have a plan,” Brand said from my other side. I glanced in that direction and saw that he, Addam, and Corinne had moved to the side of the ship and were cutting mooring lines. He added, “Mutiny.”

“When people from outside a ship take over a ship, I think it’s called piracy,” I said. Then I listened to myself. “We’re pirates!”

“We can’t allow you to sail off like this,” the man said nervously.

“Can’t you?” I asked.

Kellum strode forward. Magic clung to him like a second-skin, and silvery-indigo scales began to spiral across his face and down his neck. As he passed me, he said, “Cut all lines except the anchor. Trust me.”

At my nod, the others began to follow Kellum’s instruction, while Brand and I stepped up to flank the merman.

“You speak for a miniscule patch of misery and rotting wood,” Kellum said to the people on the other side of the gangplank. “I speak for the oceans of the world. You think you can claim ownership for one of its creatures? Trust me, little man, I can call in favors much, much larger than yours.”

A surge of water rose in the darkness. I thought for a moment that Kellum was raising a wall around us—until a tail fin splashed back into the sea, sending sheets of water everywhere.

The boat shuddered and began to move.

The men and women on the dock began to scream and run.

A head the size of a small whale peeked its snout above a wave and regarded the boat calmly. Then the baby kraken submerged again and began to tow us by the anchor into open sea.

***Best to imagine this story as a Part 1 of 2. The final Holiday Story  
will continue from this point, and cover Events Upon  
Their Return to Sun Estate.***

***To be concluded in the next week or so!***