

THE TAROT SEQUENCE WORLD

“The Separation”

From his crib, Rune tried to explain—with escalating volume and wide arm gestures—that something wasn’t right.

It more or less translated to this: *You must know who I’m talking about. Blue eyes? About this height? He usually sits right there. Well, he sits wherever he wants, but he usually gives me the blanket.*

“Oh dear,” his governess breathed. “This will not go well.”

Rune shook a pudgy fist to add, *And he’s taken the orange rattle with him.*

The governess stretched a bright smile across her face and backed away from the crib. The baby’s wordless cries were getting louder. She turned to see one of the morning wet nurses peeking into the nursery, and said, “Our new Master Drex insists on this, you say?”

“He picked baby Brand up himself and carted him off, Patience,” the young woman said with a sniff. “Says its part of the ‘program.’”

“This will not go well,” Lady Patience repeated under her breath.

She folded her hands across her stomach and sailed out of the room.

The new scholar, Master Drex, was in the infants’ playroom. He’d cleared a space for his desk—or, rather, stubbornly shoved toys and building blocks into a messy pile. The ridiculously large desk faced an absurdly oversized wooden chair that baby Brand had opted to stand on.

Nonsense syllables rattled from fifteen-month-old Brandon’s mouth like machine gun fire as he stabbed a finger over and over at the tall, gaunt man.

“Master Drex,” Patience said in a calm but firm tone as she closed the door behind her. “This is quite a surprise. On your first day, even.”

The gaunt man, who for some reason had a ruler clutched in his hand as he warily eyed the babbling infant, turned filmy green eyes on her. “I was unaware I had to submit my lesson plan to you as well. Perhaps I should retrieve it from Lord Sun and let him know you insisted on reviewing the material first?”

Patience did what she always did to men like this. She widened her smile and showed a little more tooth. But, as was her way, she also gamely made an attempt at diplomacy.

“Master Drex,” she said. “We were thinking that it may be best to postpone their first true separation until they were five.” *Or fifty*, she thought. “They are quite strongly attached to each other, even for a Companion bond.”

“Companion bond,” he snorted. “An archaic institution that stunts the true potential of the Atlantean. I will not delay my charge’s instruction. Lord Rune will be trained in the proud tradition of all heirs.”

“Well, to be honest, *Lord Brandon* is your charge, too.”

Brand, either responding to his name or Rune’s, must have decided he was getting somewhere, because he began to squirm off the chair.

“It’s just,” Patience said. “They tend to react...aggressively when separated. Baby Brand, in particular, is quite skilled at utilizing anything in arm’s reach as a cudgel.”

“He strikes Lord Sun?” the man said in surprise.

“Oh, good gods, no. Not usually. He mostly finds little clubs when the two of them feel threatened.”

“I see,” the scholar said. “And Lord Sun?”

“He... Well, he mostly just points at what he wants hit. They’re very intuitive.”

The teacher opened his mouth to say something else Patience probably didn't want to hear, which is when Brand put his rattle to use against the man's ankle. It was made out of amber and gold, and weighed enough to have the man yelping and jumping into the air.

“Enough!” Drex snapped. “Take this one outside. I don't even want them in the same building during their sessions. Perhaps give *Lord Brand* to the cleaning staff. He will pick up some useful skills.”

He plucked the orange rattle from Brand's fat fingers, which first had the baby's virulently blue eyes widen, and then his mouth in anticipation of a strong howl.

The door began to rattle in its frame.

Neither adult knew where to look—the sudden shaking, or Brand's imminent shout. Then orange light began to leak through the door frame. With one final, almighty bang, it flew open.

Baby Rune stood on the threshold, wavering unsteadily on his chubby legs. His eyes were filled with a searing light, as bright as the razor-bright filament of a sunset.

The light was so powerful that the shadow of the ruler and rattle—held before him like a ward—fell across Drex's chest like a highly prophetic X.

Rune, seemingly anxious to make himself understood, put aside arm gestures in exchange for a single, clear word.

He said, “Band-Aid.”

Brand's frozen shout melted into a smile. He trotted across the room and hugged Rune. Then he shoved Rune away so he could peer at Rune's eyes. He poked Rune's nose to see if it would glow too.

“I do not know what is happening,” Master Drex said quietly. “But this is untenable. I will not start my tenure with such...such nonsense. Take these stubborn creatures now, this instant, and—”

The orange glow from Rune's eyes was swallowed in a bomb's blast of light. A pillar of fire stood in the doorway behind the children.

"Master Drex," a man's sibilant voice said from the pillar. "I came to let you know that your request to separate the children is denied."

Patience dropped her head. From the corner of her eyes, she saw the teacher drop to his bony knees.

"Lord Sun," he babbled. "How nice of you to visit on my first day."

"And your last, it appears. Please collect your things. Patience will assist."

"M-my Lord?"

"I'm afraid I didn't vet you thoroughly enough. It seems your teaching style is at odds with mine."

The pillar of fire began to fold inwards, a bomb-blast in reverse. Patience still couldn't begin to see the man at the center of it, because sunspots danced across her eyes.

The outline of Lord Sun kneeled and spread its arms. He collected both children at once, and stood up.

He said, "I've learned to pick them up at the same time. The one who gets lifted first always cries, at least until the other is picked up as well. It is a strong, strong bond. And it will save my boys' lives over and over and over. I am as sure of this as I am of the next breath I draw."

With that, he turned and swept away, back to the nursery.

Patience folded her arms across her waist and turned to the still-abased instructor. Brightly, she said, "Well! Let's get you packed."