

# THE TAROT SEQUENCE

*Scenes from the Holidays*

## “The Principality Ciaran”

*Ciaran... Ciaran...*

Ciaran put down the braided hose of the half-story hookah. The voices were annoying, but honestly, what day didn't involve spending a certain amount of time deciding which voices in your head to listen to?

Then the voice shouted, somewhat defiantly, “Goddamnit, Ciaran, stop drifting off and answer my fucking question!”

*Ah, that's right, I was on a phone call.* Ciaran looked down at his hand and saw the readout said: “The Grouchy One With the Nice Eyes.” That was how he'd entered Brand's number, back in the days before learning his name became inevitable.

“Yes, dear?” Ciaran said, lifting the phone to his ear.

“Do you even remember what we were talking about?” Brand accused.

“What a strange question. If you suspect the answer is no, why ask me to admit it? It's a rather stark assessment of your conversational abilities.”

“Layne,” Brand said, possibly through a firm row of teeth. “Have you seen them? They're supposed to let us know when they go out.”

“I have not seen them, no. Why would I have?”

“Because they're sitting in the park in your neighborhood.”

“If you know that, then why call?” Ciaran asked, genuinely confused.

“Because I don't know *why* they're there. And maybe they don't quite know that I can tell where they are at any given moment.”

“You really are rather lucky they put up with you,” Ciaran decided. “Showing love through cell phone spyware isn't always a good look. Now. Listen. I'll just trot over and say hello. Is it about Magnus?”

“Magnus Academy? Why would it be about Magnus?”

“Because I dreamt of Magnus last night.”

Brand was quiet for a beat or two. “I...don’t know what to do with that. It’s like you and Quinn mailed away for the same diploma from the same shitty crystal ball infomercial. Just make sure Layne is alright, please?”

“As you say,” Ciaran agreed, and disconnected. Or at least he put the phone down, confident someone else would end the call for him.

He gathered the folds of his silk robe about him and walked to his dressing wing. A speedy sixty minutes later, he performed said trotting across the street.

Outside his compound, he remained both seen and unseen. He’d layered his property with a most particular bit of magic, which kept neighborhood people from understanding where his house actually was, while allowing them to appreciate him and his outfits.

The very patient Layne Dawncreek sat on a park bench by the manmade pond, staring at the floating lilies.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Ciaran said, sweeping into a seat and folding one long leg over a knee.

“Oh. Sorry. I was looking for you, but couldn’t find your place. And I didn’t want to intrude. So I thought maybe I’d see you taking a walk.”

“Really? That sounds rather vigorous of me.”

Layne smiled back. They’d dyed the ends of their beautiful brown hair with some sort of household chemical. The uneven frosted tips bobbed along with their laughter. Ciaran would need to teach them better hair color tricks. His own hair was blue today with cotton-candy streaks.

“Is everything okay, sweets?” Ciaran asked. “Does it have to do with Magnus?”

Layne’s mouth opened in a small O.

And why wasn’t the blue-eyed grouch here to witness this? Ciaran always regretted a wasted flourish. For now, though, Ciaran simply

folded his hands on his lap and kept quiet, because he'd found it was the best way to help young people get around to their point.

"I...showed them a spell," Layne finally admitted. "I wanted to get your advice."

Ciaran was fairly sure this wasn't the point, either, but they were closer. "Of course. By all means."

As a flush crept up their neck, Layne got up and started kicking at the ground. Ciaran wasn't sure what that was about, but eventually Layne bent over and picked up a thin, flat rock.

"Okay, this is messy, but I'll wipe up afterwards." And then the dear child rolled up their sleeve, pulled out a box-cutter razor, and sliced a thin line across a raised lump on their forearm.

Magical spiraled around them—and *oh what a flavor it had!* Ciaran nearly stuck out his tongue to taste the air.

Layne put the flat stone on the ground and spread their fingers above it. As blood pattered into the dirt, necromantic magic consumed the living infection in the lump on their arm. Slowly, grains of sand and dirt began to creep to the stone. The raw material was absorbed, and turned the flat surface into something more round and thick.

Gasping, Layne pulled out a red-and-white handkerchief and tied it around their arm.

"There," they said, pleased. "Rune's been obsessed with one of your spells, and this is the reverse of it."

"*My* spell?" Ciaran said in surprise.

"He calls it Shale. He said you once turned a solid wall into a brittle layer of rock, back in the Westlands. I thought if you can make a rock smaller, why not make it bigger?" They continued to dart their eyes to and from Ciaran, nervous. "What do you think?"

"Many things," Ciaran admitted. "Is exposing the infection to air necessary for the magic?"

"I...don't know. It works better that way for some spells. But I think it's about my willpower and the blood, not the infection."

“Hmm. I’m not a big fan about the injury.”

“Oh, it closes up very quickly—that’s part of the magic. And I don’t always need to cut. For defensive spells, I can reabsorb the infection. But, like I said, for some spells, this just works better.”

“I can appreciate that, dear, but it *stains*. Perhaps some sort of batting for your arm. Oh! Like a leg warmer?”

“That’s a good idea. So you think the spell is interesting?”

“No,” Ciaran said. “I think it’s masterful. It’s ridiculously talented, even for immolation magic. I’ve already made a mental note to talk with your Aunt—you are horrifically undertrained. The people you showed at Magnus must have been drooling at the prospect of training you.”

“Oh. No. They rejected my idea.”

Ciaran stilled. “Excuse me?”

“I was applying for an independent study. I don’t want to attend full time—Magnus is mostly for scions using sigil magic. But I was wondering if they had ways of helping me develop my necromancy.”

“They turned away the kin of an Arcana,” Ciaran said, to make sure he had all the details.

“Well. I mean. Yes? But I didn’t use Rune’s name when I applied. I want to do this on my own.” Layne saw Ciaran’s intense focus, and their flush slowly paled. “It’s not exactly a surprise. I know Magnus can be stuffy and inflexible. You should hear the stories Anna tells me. It really frustrates her.”

“Anna too?” Ciaran murmured.

“I shouldn’t speak for her, but—”

“Field trip!” Ciaran announced, sweeping up from the bench. He began to stride back to his house, and saw that Layne remained standing, open-mouthed, with a sopping cloth tied to their bleeding arm.

Ciaran realized he was failing some basic childcare lesson.

“Mmm. Maybe a bandage and a cocktail first. Then we’ll have some fun.”

One hour and a horse-drawn carriage ride later, Ciaran found himself sitting on a patio at Sun Estate with both Anna and Layne.

The house was unusually empty—apparently most adults were off hunting down supplies for the Solstice party they were hosting over the upcoming weekend.

Layne vanished for a bit to prepare tea, which left Ciaran and Anna alone for a good twenty minutes. They spent most of that time staring at each other. Ciaran was almost impressed at the thirteen-year-old's intensity. If she ever learned to arch an eyebrow, she'd become quite devastating.

“So,” Ciaran finally said. “Tell me about Magnus.”

Anna's face emptied of all emotion.

Ciaran sighed. “Yes-yes, you are a frightfully resourceful child, and yes-yes, you are quite capable of looking after yourself. But indulge me. Layne seems to think that some of the stories you've told are a touch frustrating.”

“Why do you want to know?” Anna asked.

And *oh* did that speak volumes about this child, Ciaran thought. Most scions her age only focused on the question, not the motivation behind it.

“I suppose,” Ciaran said thoughtfully, “that I'm in the mood to do mischief. And between you and me, my favorite targets of mischief are arseholes.”

“Oh. The etiquette teacher,” Anna said. “What did Layne tell you?”

“They've left the subject enticingly blank.”

Anna huffed a bit and fidgeted on the patio chair. “It's nothing I can't handle. Lady Fitch is just...annoying. I hate etiquette class.”

“Good for you,” Ciaran said. “But how exactly is she annoying?”

More fidgeting. More huffing. Finally the sore tooth pulled free. “She keeps docking my grade because she says I don't smile enough. She

says a scion needs to smile even when they don't feel like smiling, and I could do it if I practiced more."

Ciaran kept quiet and waited.

"It's just..." Anna waved a hand at her face. "The muscles on this side don't work well. When I smile it looks like I'm... What's the word? Sneer. Lady Fitch says it looks like I'm sneering. I'm trying, I really am, but she keeps telling me I need to try harder in front of the entire class. I hate it."

Anna suddenly straightened in her chair. Her eyes went wide and round.

Ciaran knew his eyes had gone quicksilver. He batted his eyelashes and banked his Aspect before it could grow. It was a little too...*on the nose*, given the secrets he worked so hard to keep.

"Well," he finally said.

Layne bustled back onto the patio with a laden silver platter. Brand was behind them, his arms full of overpacked paper bags. He put them down on the ground and gave our tea party a curious look.

"I need to borrow these lovely people for a quick trip," Ciaran told him.

"What for?" he asked.

"I'm going to destroy their enemies."

Brand paused. "Will you have them back by dinner?"

"With an appetite," Ciaran promised grandly.

The carriage clattered to a stop just outside Magnus's main administration building. All of the roads on the campus were paved in cobblestone, which gave their entrance a rather nice, clipped Victorian fanfare.

It had been many, many, many years since Ciaran was taught at Magnus—and even then, it had been under an alias, and back on the

original campus in Atlantis. He doubted any of his peers from that time were even alive.

“Sweets,” he said to Layne. “Who evaluated your request?”

“Lord Martin,” Layne said. “He’s the vice chancellor. Are...are we really going to talk to him?”

“Oh yes. And Lady Fitch.”

Layne and Anna exchanged looks—an entire sibling conversation governed by face muscles and eye narrowing.

Ciaran turned in his seat so that he could look at both of them at once. “Have you not noticed that people seem to be calling you Lady or Lord an awful lot?”

“That’s how stupid scions talk,” Anna said.

“Mmm. No. Remind me to have a possibly physical conversation with Rune about this later. He must do better. You see, my little friend: you *are* scions.”

“Our Dad—” Anna started.

Ciaran waved a hand, noticed his platinum ring was a bit smudged, and breathed hot air on it. As he buffed it to a nice glow, he explained. “Your father’s status, and how it changed, is irrelevant. Rune has claimed you as kin. You are cousins, however many degrees separated. And you are his *heir*, Annawan. Do you understand? You are kin to an Arcana, darlings. Anna, you are Lady Dawncreek. Layne, whatever word you prefer is yours as well, though may I suggest *Liege*? It suits your pronouns.”

“We...what?” Layne said.

“That...” The gears behind Anna’s eyes were moving fast. She seized on the most unbelievable thing of all. “*Lord Corbie*? Are you telling me Corbie—Corbitant Dawncreek, who pees when he laughs too hard, is a Lord?”

“Quite,” Ciaran said.

“But,” Anna said helplessly. “But I don’t want that! What does it even mean? There better not be a dress code!”

“It means,” Ciaran explained, “that you have one more thing that people will try to take away from you. And while, yes, there is an entire line of argument that says you must treat your title with subtlety and responsibility, I’d also argue that it makes a fairly good cudgel against the right asshole. Follow me.”

Ciaran’s mind wandered a bit after that. Eventually he found himself seated in a classroom, admiring the room while he waited.

It was cleverly staged for etiquette, Ciaran had to admit. Fake wall partitions helped create a series of different settings, much like department store displays. There was a formal dining placement; a restaurant table; a scaled version of a court audience chamber. In the right hands, the course could actually be useful.

Then Ciaran spotted a desk in the corner. With a sound of interest, he hopped over there and took a look. The only thing of curiosity was a locked drawer. Ciaran concentrated, channeled a whiff of willpower, and snapped the lock with a good pull. Inside was a series of folders labeled in elaborate cursive.

He found Anna’s, removed it, and returned to his seat for some reading.

“I did tell them we were here, didn’t I?” he wondered out loud after a minute.

“You made the receptionist shake,” Anna said.

Ciaran vaguely remembered that. “But the vice chancellor is on his way, yes?”

“And Lady Fitch,” Layne said. “She was at lunch.”

“Well, that won’t do,” Ciaran said.

Anna narrowed her eyes. “You told the receptionist that you hoped Lady Fitch had a chance to get a few bites in, and that she didn’t trip in her rush to abandon it.”

Ciaran also vaguely remembered that.

“Are we still going to be students here afterwards?” Anna demanded. “Can I get home schooled?”

“Trust me, darling. I really will do my best. And you should be pleased I’m including you. Aren’t adults supposed to lie to children whenever anything meaningful is happening?”

“We’re not children,” Anna said stubbornly.

“Everyone at Sun Estate, with the possible exception of your Aunt, is a child. Talk to me after you’ve removed the training wheels from your first century.”

Anna looked like she wanted to dig into that comment, but the door opened and two people stepped in.

Lady Fitch wore a sweeping seafoam gown. Lord Martin wore brown. Just...brown. And a cardigan.

“Good gracious,” Ciaran said. “There you are. I was nearly about to start knocking down walls.”

The vice chancellor blinked in surprise. “I... my apologies, Lord Ciaran. This is quite a surprise. I believe this is Lady and Lord Dawncreek, then?”

“Liege Dawncreek,” Layne said, with just the right amount of bite.

“Liege Dawncreek, I see,” Lord Martin said. “While it’s...nice to see you all, I should state upfront that it would be inappropriate to discuss their schooling without their Aunt in the room, or perhaps an official from Sun Court.”

“Trust me, Lord Martin,” Ciaran said. “You would not want Rune Sun in this room right now. So let’s set that unfortunate comment aside so that we may first discuss Liege Dawncreek’s independent study.”

The skin around his tight collar turned a mottled shade of purple and pink. “We gave the matter ample consideration. That said, we are not equipped to train scions in such a rare, obscure form of magic.”

“I should say not. You’ll be quite the busy bee finding the right tutor. But at the end of the day, I’m sure your Board of Regents would hate to

miss the chance to add such a *rare, obscure form of magic* to their roster. It will be quite the feather in your cap.”

“I—”

“You may thank me in a moment for correcting your misstep,” Ciaran said. “Lady Fitch, I don’t believe I’ve had the occasion. I am the Principality Ciaran.”

“Your reputation precedes you,” she said through thin lips. “Of course, I don’t believe you have any wards enrolled?”

“Quite so,” Ciaran said. “Though I’ve always held out hope that there will be fat, blue-haired godbabies in my future. How long have you taught Anna, Lady Fitch?”

“Since she began her current course,” Lady Fitch said, flicking unhappy looks at Lord Martin, who pretended not to notice.

“You must have realized by now that she’s an unusually talented scion.”

“That may be so, but Etiquette is not about power.”

“What an outrageous statement,” Ciaran said cheerfully.

“Lord Ciaran,” Lord Martin said with a considerable amount of throat clearing. “The faculty are in the middle of an administrative retreat today, so Lady Fitch and I must—”

“Excellent,” Ciaran said, clapping his hands together. “I imagine that includes physical therapists?”

“It does. But as I was saying—”

“Because I was just thinking that a physical therapist would be so wonderfully appropriate for Lady Dawncreek. She has quite a few advantages these days that she once lacked. I’m quite sure the muscles on her face are stronger than she imagines. She has the capacity to improve. Wouldn’t you agree that providing such therapy—to, say, improve her *smile*—is a much better training course than public censure?”

Lord Martin opened up his mouth, and Ciaran stood. It was a sharp and dramatic gesture, and Lord Martin’s mouth snapped shut. Ciaran

said, “I have had to interrupt you twice now. You will not enjoy how I handle a third such instance. Choose your words wisely.”

The puce coloring reached his cheeks.

Ciaran sighed. “Darlings, you have missed nearly every point. They are there, at your feet, swimming about like duckies. So let me make this painfully simple. *Do as I say.*”

Ciaran air-fluffed the back of his cape and sat down. He opened the file he’d been reading and resumed.

“Lord Ciaran,” the vice chancellor said with painstaking care. “I am unaware of any issues Lady Dawncreek may have been having, though I will gladly—”

“She is recalcitrant,” Lady Fitch said.

Ciaran smiled at the papers and slowly raised his gaze.

“You appear to appreciate bluntness, so let me be blunt. Anna is bossy and recalcitrant. I train her in good habits by breaking bad ones.”

Next to Ciaran, he could hear Anna breathing. A deep, angry inhalation.

“Bossy,” Ciaran said, rolling the word along his tongue. “I have always hated that word. It’s been used like a gag on young women for centuries. It creates pliable young women, and pliable young women do not make great leaders. Annawan Dawncreek has been named Rune Saint John’s *beir*. And yet, I can see here that you are quite committed to using words that seek to undermine her potential. They’re all but littered through her file.”

Lady Fitch actually stamped a foot. “My Lord, that is most inappropriate! Those are private!”

“Mmm,” Ciaran said. “Your notes make quite the read. They say as much about you as—”

And now Ciaran interrupted himself. Because he saw something in the file that made his pulse burn. He actually went back and read it again to make sure he wasn’t mistaken.

“Anna,” Ciaran said. “Layne. Please excuse us.”

“But—”

Ciaran turned his gaze on Anna. Layne grabbed their sister’s hand and pulled her out of the room at a stumbling jog.

When the door closed behind them, Ciaran stood up, walked over to Lady Fitch, and handed her the file. He then tapped his best nail against one of the passages.

“Is this true,” he whispered.

The comment read: *Anna became angry, and everyone heard the sound of wings. Aspect? Slapped ruler against desk—sharp sound settled her.*

“We were in class at the time,” Lady Fitch said, and only a quick tremble of her lower lip betrayed her nerves.

“Tell me,” Ciaran said. “How many children have you ever known to manifest an Aspect?”

Lord Martin took a step to the side.

“Modern Aspects are rare and, in most instances, exaggerated or fraudulent,” Lady Fitch said. “There are quite a few respected academic studies on the matter.”

“Anna’s Aspect is quite real,” Ciaran said. “And you have interfered in its development.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” she insisted as Lord Martin took another sideways step.

“You foolish, foolish woman,” Ciaran said. “Do you have any idea what Rune would do to you? What Corinne would?”

“Anna’s aunt—”

“Anna’s aunt is a Companion of Atlantis and has been rejuvenated to peak health. Keep that in mind.”

Lady Fitch swallowed.

Rivulets of bright silver light began to shine on their faces, a reflection of the rising power in Ciaran’s eyes. “These children are dear to me, and you have *failed them*. That ends now.”

“Lord Ciaran, perhaps, if you’d like to come to my office, we can discuss a way to manage this situation?” Lord Martin said anxiously.

“Discuss?” Ciaran said, and they both stepped back against the flare of magic that poured from him. “You will *listen*. A salary will not be necessary, but I will require a certain budget for couture. I don’t have a single closet dedicated to the schoolmarm look.”

“E-Excuse me?” Lord Martin said.

“I’m Anna’s new etiquette teacher. And I’ll supervise Layne’s independent study. They are simply too valuable to leave to your thick-fingered efforts. Lady Fitch, do have a wonderful time cleaning out your desk and burning your files. Lord Martin, it will be a *pleasure* seeing you so frequently. The mind can barely imagine.”

Ciaran swept out.

Things ended with an ice cream cone, as things were wont to do.

They were sitting on the carriage’s tailgate, legs swinging free. They’d parked by a pier on the north shore, facing the still, black-green Atlantic.

“You’re quiet,” Layne said to Ciaran.

“Am I? I suppose today has come terribly close to a moral lesson. I should really do something about that soon. Possibly with a lime peel.”

“But you’re really going to come to Magnus? And teach me?” Anna said.

“And I’m really going to school?” Layne asked, followed very hastily by, “Just for the one course! I’m not enrolling.”

“Are you sure about that?” Ciaran asked.

Layne took their time to think about their answer. “Yes. I don’t want to be a student. I just want to know more about my magic. And keep volunteering at the hospital. And...everything. There’s so much I want. I want *everything*. Does that make sense?”

“Does it ever,” Ciaran said with relish, and nibbled the waffle cone.