

Eight: Knife

Ellen: I ain't what you'd call an educated person, Father. I never had schoolin' beyond reading and numbers, and the only thing I ever read are novels. Father Froud used to say how novels were immoral and not really...what's the word he used? "Improving." Anyway, even those I have to get Jack to pinch for me from the bookseller's stall by the fountain, because Ma would never let me spend real money on a book.

But educated ain't the same thing as smart. I'm not simple, and if you listen on the streets you learn an awful lot. I know a thing or two about resurrection men, even if I didn't know that Aidan was one. I know that medical schools pay good money for fresh bodies, no questions asked. And I know that they pay even more for bodies that are...unusual. I've heard stories about what happens to freaks when they die. The people who made money on them their whole life make even more money selling their bodies to whoever has the most money.

When I was ten or eleven, I paid a penny to see a travelling freak show outside of town. Ma was with me, and Aidan and Roisin, this was before Emma and Sean and the little ones come to live with us. It was all in one big tent, filled with a bunch of dead things in jars and behind glass. Most of them were fakes. Like obvious fakes--a fish tail sewn onto a monkey they were calling a mermaid. An unborn cow or a horse floating in a jar. Fakes. Even at ten years old I could see that.

But there were two that weren't fake. One was a woman covered in hair, dressed in a fancy ball gown. She was long dead, had been stuffed like the taxidermy rabbits you can buy in the market, but she was real. You could tell. The little sign in front of her said "The Ape-Woman of

Borneo," but I don't know if she was really from Borneo, or where that even is. The other was a skeleton almost ten feet tall. It was behind glass, held up by wires and rods, towering above everything else in the tent. The sign called him "William MacReady, the New Hampshire Giant." There was no faking those long leg bones, that massive skull.

Ma shook her head and clucked her tongue. "The poor dears," she said. I asked her what she meant, and she said "they pay a pretty penny for a freak's body. It's good business, I reckon." And we all stood there silent, thinking how the poor dears were good business.

Looking back, I see what a hypocrite Ma was being. But it's not like that's a surprise, if you see what I mean. Just one thing on a long list of Ma's hypocrisies.

But I remembered it right away when I saw Aidan in the house that night. "That night." It seems like a long time ago. It was actually tonight, I suppose. Or last night. It must be near to dawn now. Not that time means anything to you, Father. Not any more.

Anyway. When I saw Aidan in the house, I knew what was happening. I knew Dr. DeQuincey had decided that Saoirse was too dangerous, and that he had figured out a way take care of her and profit into the bargain. And I knew why Deirdre was crying.

Aidan was there for Saoirse's body.

[Theme music; opening credits]

I saw right away that Aidan hadn't known I worked there. I think it's the first time I ever saw him look shocked, when he saw me on the balcony above him. I wish I had had time to enjoy it. He and the doctor looked up at me, and Mr. Clutch jumped up and down and gibbered at me. I

ran from the landing, back to Saoirse's room, through the parlor and dollhouse room, directly to the bedroom.

Deirdre's wails had already alerted her. She was standing on the bed, making us nearly the same height, and she had her dark blue robe pulled close around her. She saw my face and knew something was very wrong.

"Ellen, what is it?" she asked.

And I told her. She knew as well as I did what it meant for Aidan to be in the house, and we both knew there was no more waiting.

"Tell me what I need to do," I said. "We've got to go, right now. I need to move charms, or take them down? Tell me."

Saoirse looked around the room, at the window, the door. She looked much calmer than I felt, and I could see her thinking it all through. It only took her a moment, though.

"Talbot has a knife," she said. "An iron knife with a bone handle that he keeps on his belt, under his coat."

"A knife?" I said. I hadn't expected that.

"It is more than a knife. The iron in it keeps me from touching it, but it is also a powerful talisman," said Saoirse. "It can cut through every charm in the house, like cutting a thread."

I thought about Talbot. He had never been actively unfriendly toward me, but he was a big, powerful man and he had a grim look about him all the time, like he was always angry about something that had just happened. He didn't seem like an ally.

"Is there any other way?" I asked.

"Nothing as quick or as sure," she said. "Each charm can be broken on its own, but I don't

know the words for them all. The knife is the key to our prison."

"And we have to get it from Talbot," I said. "Okay. I can do that."

Saoirse put her arms around me. "You are very brave, Ellen," she said, and even in the midst of the urgent fear that was all around me, I blushed.

"I'm not brave," I said. "I'm scared shitless."

Saoirse laughed. "That's what bravery is, my dearest one. Being afraid of the dark and walking into the forest in spite of it." She kissed me, hard, and I felt her strength of her belief in my whole body.

"Once the charms are cut," she said, "I can walk free. If you can get Talbot's knife, we can leave tonight."

I threw some clothes in an old leather valise of Saoirse's, followed by her two of her plain dresses and her best green silk gown. I kept expecting Dr. DeQuincey to burst in, bringing Aidan with him, to call out our whole half-planned conspiracy. But the house was quiet around us. Even Deirdre's crying had faded away.

I finally pushed the valise toward her. "I'm going to fetch the key," I said. "You grab whatever else you need and put it in here. I'll be back."

"Ellen," she said as I headed for the door, "be careful. Talbot is more dangerous than he seems. He is not at all what he appears to be."

"No one here is," I said. "I've picked deeper pockets than Talbot's."

Mr. Clutch was not on the balcony, when I went out. I made it down to the foyer without seeing anyone. I didn't have any idea where Talbot might be, but the kitchen was a place to start,

and then the back yard. I headed through the foyer and into the kitchen.

Grace was there, cleaning up or preparing for the next day, I didn't know. I had never had a conversation with the little moth-like woman, and now I never will. She barely acknowledged me as I passed through the room. I wondered if she was also fae, if we what was about to happen was me and Saoirse sneaking away together or something bigger. Were we about to release every denizen in the house?

One thing at time, though. I had to focus. It was no use asking Grace where Talbot was, so I kept walking, outside into the dark.

The only time I had ever seen Talbot off-duty was the first night Saoirse and I had walked in the back yard. He had been...*lurking* is the word, I suppose, and Saoirse had said something about Dr. DeQuincey not knowing what he was up to. She hadn't ever explained what she meant, because she rarely does, and I hadn't thought to ask again. After that night there had been other things to occupy my thoughts, if you see what I mean. But it was my best lead.

I walked under the flickering faerie lights, past the pavilions and the trees, looking down side paths and behind tents, listening for anything that might be Talbot. It was well after midnight, and the air was sharp. I wished I had put my coat on before I had come out. The only sounds were the crickets and the lapping waters of Jenny's pond.

And then I heard it--the crunch of a heavy foot on the gravel path. I stopped still where I was, just outside a grove of trees, and held my breath.

Talbot came out of the trees, walking fast in that odd loping way he has. Like the first time I had seen him out there, he was carrying a rough sack over his shoulder. He was looking down, hunched under whatever he had, so he didn't see me until he was nearly in top of me.

"Talbot," I said. "We need to talk."

He clearly hadn't expected anyone to be out on the path. He jumped back a step, and when he did he lost his grip on his sack, which fell to the gravel. We both looked down at it.

I saw something inside the sack move, a slow shifting, and I heard a small, weak cry, like a sleepy child. Talbot cut his eyes at me, and his face was a mixture of anger and embarrassment. He bent to pick the sack up, and as he did I saw the knife, hanging from his belt, under his jacket just like Saoirse had said. It was bone-handled and wicked, not as long as O'Donald's but big enough to make someone wish they'd never seen it.

I just did it. Without planning, without thinking. I said, "I'm sorry, Talbot, I didn't mean to startle you. Let me help," and I bent down with him to grab the sack. As I knew he would, he pushed me away--I wasn't sure what was in the sack, but I figured he wouldn't want me to get a closer look. We did a little back and forth, not really a struggle, just Talbot putting himself between me and the sack, and me pushing off his body with my hand to keep from falling over.

It was one of the easiest pickpocketings I'd ever done. It's a shame I botched it so thoroughly a minute later.

Normally, when you lift something off somebody, you take off running. I'm fast and clever, and I've never had a problem dodging away. I'm gone before they even miss whatever it is got taken.

I hadn't thought this one through, though, and I didn't realize it until it was too late. I had just seen the opportunity and gone for it. But Talbot was between me and the house. I had no crowd to disappear into, and the only direction I could run was away from him, towards the pond.

I only hesitated a couple of seconds, but it was enough. Talbot stood up and I was still there,

in front of him, clearly holding the knife I had just lifted from his belt.

We stood like that for another second, both of us too shocked to move. Talbot said, "What are you playing at, you little minx?" And then I took off for the pond, Talbot hard on my heels.

Like I said, I'm fast. I wouldn't have thought a big man like Talbot would have any chance of keeping up with me in a dead sprint. But as I reached the edge of the water and turned around, he was right behind me. I held the knife out, and we squared off, the water to my right and my back nearly up against the back fence.

The faerie lights, which had seemed so sweet and enchanted when Saoirse and I had walked the same path, were flickering wildly, flashing agitated shadows across the whole scene. But even in that weird light I could see that Talbot was changing, and I saw what Saoirse meant when she said that he wasn't what he seemed.

There were long horns growing from Talbot's forehead--sweeping, goat-like horns that swept back and up, twisted and sharp. His face had grown thinner and longer, and dark hair had sprouted across his face, spreading out from just below his eyes to stretch into a pointed beard below his chin. One of his hands was a sharp hoof, pawing out toward me, and the other was melting and contracting, hardening as I watched it.

"Stay away from me!" I said, and I jabbed forward with the knife.

Talbot pulled the hoof back. He was afraid of the knife, clearly, but he didn't back away. I measured the gap between him and the water, wondering if I could feint to one side and get past him on the other.

Talbot continued changing. His clothes were tearing now, his shoes splitting open as he extended hooves on two goatish legs. His breathing was audible as snorting bleats. He was

lapping toward me like the water, surging forward and then drawing back from the knifepoint. I kept moving the knife side to side, holding him at bay.

And then something happened. Something...*magic*, I suppose. There was another rolling wave on the pond, like the one Saoirse had shown me that first night, and I felt something. When I moved the knife to the side closest to the pond, I felt something pushing back against it, like I was holding it against cloth, even though there was nothing there you could see.

The wave rolled again, something big just under the surface, and I felt it even stronger, like I was standing next to a heavy curtain. This time when I moved the knife to that side, I pushed it farther, slashing it sideways, hoping I was right. I don't pray regular, Father, but I think I prayed right then.

There was resistance, a muffled wall, and I pushed harder. I heard a sound like tearing fabric, and the knife moved easily through the air, trailing a faint spray of sparks behind it like kicking a fire. And then, just as Talbot finally rushed forward to attack, I saw Jenny.

The moment the knife cut through that invisible curtain, she rose up from the pond in a fountain of water, a gaunt and glistening figure, hair streaming water, her skin mottled and sagging, her arms long and reaching. She was huge and terrifying, and I knew why Saoirse had warned me away.

I crouched where I was, holding the knife up and out, hoping it could protect me. But I needn't have worried. Jenny roared, reaching out her taloned fingers, and pulled Talbot to her. The big goat, black and bleating, kicked its legs and tossed its head, trying in vain to wound her. Jenny buried her teeth in Talbot's back and sank beneath the churning waters, and I ran for the house without looking back.

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