

Nine: Insurrection

Ellen: I don't know what I thought would happen when I got back to the house. That we'd just cut the charms and walk out, I suppose. The house had been sleeping and dark when I'd gone out after Talbot, and I was hoping to find my way back in quietly, get Saoirse, and leave.

But of course that's not the way things work. Nothing is easy, not for people like me. That's not whining, Father, that's just the way it is. So, it wasn't really a surprise when I came out of the kitchen and found Dr. DeQuincey in the foyer waiting for me.

Flanking him on either side were Mr. Clutch and O'Donald. Mr. Clutch was grinning his maniacal grin, and O'Donald had his thick hand on his knife. I was still holding the knife I had taken from Talbot. They were blocking the stairs.

"Miss Sheridan," said the doctor, spreading his arms wide like he was welcoming me. Like we were friends. "I had the honor of meeting your brother tonight. He is a very interesting businessman."

"Aidan's no more a businessman than you are," I said. "You're both criminals. Slavers and murderers." I held the knife out between us. Dr. DeQuincey eyed it but kept talking anyway.

"That's rather unfair of you," he said. "We all do what we have to pay the bills." He glanced at O'Donald, and the big goblin slid his long blade out of his belt. "I think we can still come to an understanding," the doctor said. "There's no reason for things to get ugly."

"You should have told me that before I killed Talbot," I said. I was bluffing of course. Jenny had killed Talbot, and I had gotten lucky. But I saw the doctor falter. It was quick, and then he slid back into his huckster face, but I saw it. "I need you to get out of my way," I said. "I'm leaving here, and I'm taking Saoirse with me."

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that," he said. "O'Donald here will stop you, if you won't see reason."

The redcap raised his blade and took a step toward me.

"Why do let him tell you what to do?" I said to O'Donald. "He's your jailer. Why do you let him push you around? Are you that weak?"

"He has no choice," said Dr. DeQuincey. "My charms bind him like they bind Saoirse. They have nowhere else to go. I've told you this before, Ellen." He looked at the two goblins at his side. "The fae are not like us. They have to be kept down like beasts. It takes a strong hand. You have been misguided."

I moved slowly to one side, trying to find an opening, a path up the stairs. O'Donald was so big, so fierce looking. His cap was vivid with blood. Mr. Clutch for the moment was hanging back, watching.

"You hear how he talks about you?" I said, still talking to O'Donald. "What were you before he took you? You could roam at will. People like him feared you. You were powerful."

O'Donald had his knife raised at his waist. He was squaring off from me, his sharp underbite jutting up over his lip. Mr. Clutch was listening, his grin gone, his leathery lips held in a tight line.

"You could be again," I said. "I can set you free."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Dr. DeQuincey. "They would be lost without me. These hobgoblins could never survive in the city! You are out of time Miss Sheridan. Put down that knife and O'Donald may spare your life."

I held the knife out as far as I could, and I felt it. The little resistance, the fabric-like pushback that I had felt before I released Jenny. O'Donald growled and took another step

towards me, and I slashed sidewise with Talbot's enchanted knife, cutting the magical bonds that held him.

O'Donald stopped still. He could feel the freedom, I suppose, the falling away of the bonds DeQuincey had woven around him. He stood there, confused, like he was unsure what to do. I tried to dodge around him, and Dr. DeQuincey grabbed me. He put his arms around me from behind and swung me so hard my feet lifted off the floor. I tried to fight back, but he was much stronger than me.

I heard a high-pitched laugh and realized Mr. Clutch was standing in front of me. He was jumping up and down like a demented monkey, delighted by the struggle. So what did I have to lose? In for a penny, in for a pound.

I bit Dr. DeQuincey's hand, and he let go just enough for me to swing out with the knife. I cut the charms off of Mr. Clutch.

Mr. Clutch did not wait or act confused. He leaped onto Dr. DeQuincey's back and started pulling at his hair and ears. The doctor yelled and let me go. I hit the floor and ran for the stairs. As I did, O'Donald shook himself out of his stupor. He watched me start up the stairs, and then swung his long knife sideways, burying it in Dr. DeQuincey's shoulder.

[Theme music; credits]

Saorise was in the little dollhouse room, waiting. I burst in, breathless. I could hear the commotion downstairs, Dr. DeQuincey screaming, the sound of the door being thrown open against the wall. I grabbed Saoirse and held her, just for a moment, trying to catch my breath and stop myself from crying. She held me tight, stroking my back with her hand.

"My darling, my own," she said. "You've done it. You've saved us all."

I let her go, and looked at the knife in my hand. Then I slashed it across the air in front of my Saoirse, and I felt her bonds drop away.

A light came into her face, an awareness, maybe? Like she was stretching her wings, if you see what I mean. Feeling something that had been kept from her for a long time. For a moment I was almost afraid of what I saw in her face, but it was only a moment. How could I be afraid of Saoirse?

Dr. DeQuincey lay on the floor on the foyer in a spreading pool of blood. He was still moving, but only a little. He wasn't a threat. The front door stood open, the night air curling into the house like cold fingers. I had not seen Deirdre at all--had not heard her since her wailing had stopped an hour before. Lifting the knife, I felt the air in front of her door, found the invisible charm holding her there, and cut it away. Then we turned for the door.

Before I reached it, something caught my foot and I fell, hard. The knife skittered away across the foyer floor as I kicked at Dr. DeQuincey, who held my ankle with one bloody hand. His fancy dress clothes were in ribbons, streaked with gore and clinging to his broken body.

"Look at me," he said. Blood was leaking from his mouth as he spoke. I could see a dozen places where O'Donald's long knife had bit into him. "This is what they are," he said. "What *she* is."

I looked at Saoirse, who was standing by the door, watching. She looked at him as if he were a curiosity, the way we had looked at them stuffed freaks in the big tent when I was ten. She looked...amused.

And then we heard screaming. Outside. From a little ways away--people running and screaming and shouting.

Dr. DeQuincey coughed up more blood. "It's started," he said.

Saoirse put her hand on his forehead, and his eyes rolled back in their sockets as he convulsed. I pulled my foot away.

"We have to go now," said Saoirse.

The streets were in chaos. O'Donald had left a clear path and we followed it for several minutes. Smashed windows, overturned carts, and bodies. We saw at least four dead men, hacked and slashed like Dr. DeQuincey, and one woman, her little boy crying next to her corpse.

I carried Saoirse in my arms, to move faster. She was light as paper, and she wrapped around me like armor. As we walked she whispered in my ear.

"They don't matter," she said. "We are free. Just a little further and we are together forever." She said it over and over again. "They don't matter. They don't matter. Only us."

I tried to keep my eyes ahead, on the street, not on the things we passed. It wasn't my city any more.

In the square by the park we found O'Donald. Three policemen had surrounded him against the park fence. They had drawn their revolvers, and were shouting at him to drop his knife, but it was easy to see that he wasn't about to do it, just like it was easy to see that O'Donald would make short work of them. His cap was wet again, freshly dyed, and his knife was rusty with blood.

"They don't matter," said Saoirse. I kept walking. Children ran screaming from an alley as we passed, and I squinted into the darkness to see Mr. Clutch, gibbering and giggling. I kept walking.

Past the park it was quieter. People were running toward the commotion, unaware of what was happening, rushing to find out. We were near the docks when I finally stopped under the awning of a pawn shop and set Saoirse down.

"There is but a little more to do," Saoirse said. "I have to prepare our passage. I need you to wait for me."

I looked at the dirty streets. "Wait? Here?"

"There," she said, and pointed at the church. This church, Father. Our Lady of the Wood. It was just across the street from the pawn shop. Such a beautiful church, all stone and stained glass, reaching up. I hope you were proud.

"Go there," Saoirse repeated. "O'Donald and Clutch cannot go there. You will be safe until I return."

"They can't enter the church? But you can?"

"I am not like them," she said. "My father was a human man. His blood allows me to walk wherever I wish. You stay there, take its sanctuary, and I will come for you."

She led me across the street, and up the steps of the church. But just as we crossed the portico and I reached for the door, a shape came out of the shadows of the columns, swooping like a crow and shoving between me and Saoirse. I smelled a strong earthy smell, like wet dirt or clay, and I felt the air charged with magic--Talbot's knife in my hand throbbed with it.

"Now I have you!" croaked the old hag. "You have been a wicked girl, but now I have you!"

"I am not yours," said Saoirse. "You monstrous creature! I am no one's."

I shrank back against the door, unsure what to do. I had the knife, but could I use that as a weapon? Could I actually use it to hurt someone? I'm a lot of things Father, but I didn't think I could kill someone. My head was hazy from all the blood I'd already seen.

The old woman was sweeping her staff in front of her, driving Saoirse back into the porch, away from the door. Saoirse had her hands out in front of her, palms outward, like she was saying "stop," like she was pleading. She bumped against a little table where there were some

small prayer candles. Two or three of them were lit, but all but one went out as Saoirse knocked the table.

"You will pay when I get you back," said the hag. Her back was to me, she was focused completely on Saoirse. "I am ashamed to call you daughter. You will never walk free again."

"You cannot have me," Saoirse said again, and then she said something I didn't understand, something in Gaelic, maybe? Whatever it was, it enraged the old woman, she flapped her arms and beat her staff on the ground. And then she said something in the same language, but it didn't sound like a reply to Saoirse. It sounded like a chant, or a declaration. Her voice raised loud as could be, and she lifted her staff up in front of her. An incantation.

And then I felt something, Father. That charged air seemed to start moving, and I could feel things coming out of the darkness beyond the streetlights. Things moving in the shadows, sliding through the black toward the church steps. I tried to see what they were, but I when I looked directly there was nothing there. But when I looked back at Saoirse and the hag I could just make it out. Some *things* were crawling toward us through the shadows, and the whole place felt like a firework about to go off.

I raised the knife--I figured the only way to save us was to stop the old woman--but before I could make a move Saoirse reached out, quick as light, took the burning candle off the prayer table, and thrust it into the old woman's robes.

A blast of heat washed over me as the old woman went up like a torch. Saoirse caught the hag's falling staff and swung it down on her mother's head, again and again, the blood black in the light of the burning woman.

I screamed. I couldn't help it. It was so fast, and so violent, and Saoirse looked so calm as she did it. I screamed like I hadn't ever screamed.

And here's the end of the story, Father. Here's where you came in, and where this whole thing began, I suppose. You must have heard me screaming, and you came to see what the commotion was. And if you hadn't startled me it wouldn't have happened. And if I hadn't been terrified from the whole tense terrifying night it wouldn't have happened. If I hadn't already had the knife raised and ready...

But it did happen, Father. And there's no going back, is there? For either of us.

I screamed as Saoirse killed her mother, and then the door opened at my back. You didn't even have time to ask what was happening. I felt the door open, and I turned and stabbed you in the chest.

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