

Six: Deirdre

Ellen: I know what you might be wondering right about now, Father. If you could still wonder, that is. You'd be wondering why I haven't said anything about the other denizens? I know I haven't talked much about Deirdre or O'Donald, but they weren't really part of my day to day life in the house, if you see what I mean. I was concerned only with Saoirse; I dealt with Mr. Clutch because he didn't give me any choice. I saw the other denizens when they took their meals, and occasionally I would see one of them in the back yard when Saoirse and I walked in the evenings. O'Donald lurking between the tents, sometimes, or Mr. Clutch sitting on a tree branch. But that night, the night that I watched through the curtains and Saoirse struck down that customer, I had my first experience of Deirdre.

It was something like an hour and a half after we had run from the room. Saoirse and I had been talking, and she had told me things that...well, that's not what I'm talking about right now. It's not really, what's the word, relevant. Maybe I'll tell you that later.

The point is that after an hour and a half or so, I heard something downstairs. At first I thought it was the wind howling outside, even though it hadn't been windy earlier that night. It was a low moan, long and keening. It didn't sound like a person, not at first, but it did sound sad. Or not sad, that's not strong enough. It sounded like whatever was making the noise was more than sad, it was lost. It was devastated. It sounded like all the joy had gone out of the world, and would never come back again.

Saoirse had raised her head, listening, when it started, and she still sat that way, still and silent, her hand still holding mine. The longer the sound went on, the clearer it got what it was: it was a woman crying, pouring out grief in an unending howl. It washed over both of us, that grief, until I felt like I was going to cry too. And that's not something I'm easy with, if you see what I mean.

"What is that?" I asked. It seems I was always asking that of Saoirse. But this time she answered me.

"It's Deirdre," she said, and she looked sad too, though her eyes were dry.

"Why is she crying?" I asked. "Is she okay?" I imagined poor old Deirdre, so frail and doleful, crying alone in her room.

"It is her nature," said Saoirse. "She can no more refrain from crying than the night wind could refrain from caressing the leaves of the oak."

"I've never heard her do it before," I said. I didn't understand what she meant.

"The banshee never cries for herself," said Saoirse. "It always means something."

The wailing had gotten louder, more insistent. It filled the house. "What does it mean?" I asked. I was crying openly now.

I felt Saoirse's hand tighten around mine, and she finally looked at me. She said, "Someone will be dead before morning."

[Theme music, opening credits]

I hope I didn't worry you, Father. None of the denizens died that night, and Talbot and Grace and the doctor came through fine. That night, anyway. Oh, someone died, but it wasn't anyone so as you'd mourn. You can guess, can't you?

I suppose what happened that night with Dr. DeQuincey won't make complete sense unless I tell you what Saoirse said to me. What we said to each other.

This was after she did what she did to that man. Everything was in confusion, as you can imagine, what with the man thrashing on the floor and the other two running around like there was a fire to put out. The doctor had been calm, like I said, thoughtful like. But Saoirse had pulled me away and we had left, fled, through the curtain. We had sat in the dollhouse room for a few minutes, waiting, breathless. I thought surely they would come in after us, that we would be called to account for what had happened. But we heard the doctor calm things down somewhat, and eventually we heard all four men leave the room. By then my breathing had slowed down a little, and we felt safe enough to move into the bedroom.

We sat in the middle of Saoirse's bed. The gaslight flickered across us, casting Saoirse's face half in shadow, half in a soft bluish glow. She laid her hand on my cheek again.

"You saved me," she said, and there was wonder in her voice. "You stood against those men. For me."

"Well, of course I did," I said. "Did you think I would just let them have you?"

"My last attendant would have," she said.

I was quiet for a moment. I hadn't thought about her having had other attendants. I mean, of course she had. It's silly to think otherwise. There's no reason for that to upset me. No reason to feel jealous.

Finally, I said, "It sounds like she wasn't a very good attendant." Saoirse dropped her hand. She smiled one of those little smiles.

"But *you* are," she said. "I want no other attendant."

"If I help you escape," I said, unsure what I was saying as it happened, "will you still want me to attend to you?"

"Ellen," said Saoirse. "We are bound together, you and I. You are mine as surely as the water belongs to the moon. Our lives are intertwined forever, inextricably. We live, or die, together."

And then Saoirse kissed me, sitting there on her bed at the back of the house, and I knew everything she had told me was true. I knew I was hers, and I believed she was mine. Something changed in me, Father. Everything...*shifted* like, and by the third time we kissed my world had recentered itself.

It was an hour or so later when Deirdre's cries started. I was half asleep against the pillow, Saoirse's head on my shoulder. We both started when we heard it, and she told me what it meant.

I was a little shaken, I don't mind telling you, Father. More than little, if I'm being honest. I think I had done okay, getting the job, finding out the faeries were more than just stories. I handled it all pretty well. Deirdre was just another link in a weird chain that was forming around me. It shouldn't have gotten to me like it did. But I had seen a lot that night, and there had been highs and lows, if you see what I mean. I was pushed pretty far and then there was...

Well, here's what it is. Saoirse said someone was going to die in the house, and I was worried. More than I would be normally, I mean. It sounds silly, I suppose, but I felt like I suddenly had much more to lose.

Later, after the sounds had trailed away and Saoirse had drifted off to sleep, her breathing evening out to a bird-like flutter, I got up and went downstairs. I don't know what I was looking

for. I felt restless, and needed to move a little. I used to walk the streets at night after everyone at Ma's was either sleeping or out. It calmed me down if I was upset or couldn't settle for whatever reason. I was uneasy about Deirdre, and feeling protective of Saoirse, I suppose. I needed to see the house for myself.

The landing was shrouded in shadows. I stood for a moment, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness. But then I thought I heard a slight movement behind O'Donald's door, so I went down the stairs to the foyer. The silence lay like a blanket, and I could feel the house around me, not sleeping, but waiting. I began to wish I had stayed in bed.

There was light coming from under the kitchen door. I thought maybe Grace was up late, or early, cleaning or cooking. I didn't know what her day was like; I never saw her outside meal times, really. I pushed the door open and looked in.

Dr. DeQuincey was sitting at the kitchen table. I wasn't expecting that, and I didn't know what to do. I curtsayed, and I said, "Oh, I'm sorry, doctor. I didn't realize it was you." I turned to go, but he called to me to stay.

"Don't go, Miss Sheridan," he said, and his voice sounded strange. Thicker, like. I came completely into the room and saw that there was a half-empty bottle on the table in front of him, and an empty one on its side next to that. Whiskey. I could smell it now that I had come a little closer. He was sitting at the table, and it looked like he was having problems staying upright. He slumped forward, peering up at me through a lock of his dark hair that fell across his eyes. His collar was open, which was maybe the strangest thing about it. I couldn't remember ever seeing Dr. DeQuincey less than perfectly turned out. But now his cuffs were rolled back, and his hair was sticking up in a dozen directions.

"Join me for a drink," he said. He poured whiskey into his cup, spilling a little on the scarred wood of the table.

I said, "No thank you."

"Sit down, Ellen" he said, and made a vague gesture toward an empty chair. "You work for me, I hope you remember."

"I'll stand," I told him. "I'm not paid to sit with you at night. Not when you're drunk."

"A night like tonight earns a bottle of whiskey. Or two. I have been forced to do things tonight, Ellen. Things I'd rather not think about."

I said, "What do you mean?"

"Those men," he said. "The ones from Saoirse's room. I had to take care of that whole thing."

I asked him what he meant, and he looked at his cup for a long time. "I couldn't let them go telling tales. I had no choice." And then he said, "It's not the first time."

"What did you do?" I asked, and I thought of Aidan.

He kept looking at his cup, and I thought he wasn't going to answer me. But then he looked up and his eyes cut through me like glass. He looked gutted. I suddenly felt cold all over.

He said, "I gave them to O'Donald." I didn't know exactly what he meant, but I didn't ask. I didn't think I wanted to know. I felt sick.

"She knew better," Dr. DeQuincey said. "It's her fault for doing what she did. I didn't have a choice." He threw back the whiskey in his cup.

I said, "Saoirse didn't do anything but protect herself." I know I shouldn't have talked like that to him, but I was angry. I wasn't thinking about my job. "You put her at risk. You took that man's money."

He sat staring into his empty cup. I wondered what all he had seen that night. I waited for him to say something else, but he didn't move. Finally I turned to go, and once again he spoke to stop me.

"They lie," he said. "She may have told you things. Made you pretty promises. But they can't be trusted. They'll say anything to get what they want. They're not..." he struggled to find a word. "*Moral*," he finally said. "You may think she's your...friend. But she doesn't feel what you feel. They can't. She's not like you and me."

"I am not like you," I said, and I pulled the kitchen door closed behind me.

I laid awake that night in Saoirse's bed, staring at the ceiling, feeling more than ever that I had to help her. That I had to protect her. I couldn't mourn the loss of those men, and I couldn't find it in myself to feel sympathy for Dr. DeQuincey. They had made the bed they were lying in. To cage up a creature like Saoirse!

The next morning I had to go to market, to fetch some silk for a handkerchief and to buy Saoirse some of the little brown elfcap mushrooms she loves so much. She laughs at the name, says that they aren't very stylish caps, and I never know if she's serious. But anyway, two things.

It was cold out, and misty, and I was pulling a cloak around myself, standing in the foyer about to leave, when O'Donald came downstairs.

I never spoke to O'Donald. Truth be told I had never heard him speak a word. He was tall and ugly and scary, and I avoided him as much as I could. That morning he looked like he always did--dirty tunic and pants, wide leather belt with that wicked long knife stuck through it. But his hat looked different. It was the same close-fitting cap as I had seen him wear a dozen times, but instead of the rusty red-brown it had always been, it was now bright red, a vibrant crimson. It was clearly the same cap newly dyed, it still looked wet along the edges. I froze where I was,

looking at it. O'Donald saw me looking, and smiled a long toothsome smile. He lifted the cap slightly, like he was tipping it to me, and I saw a smeared line of red against his hairline where it rested. I hurried out of the house.

And then the second thing. I went to the market, and like always it was full of people. I was of two minds, if you see what I mean. I was happy to be out of the house, away from Dr. DeQuincey and O'Donald and all the rest. IT had gotten so much more dangerous, so much scarier. But I was also eager to get back. I didn't like Saoirse being there without me, and I didn't like the memory of the doctor's thoughtful watching us the night before. I wanted to get what I was there for and get back as quickly as I could.

I saw her first through the crowd, a glimpse so quick I wasn't sure I had actually seen her. Across the square, between two men arguing in front of the fishmongers'. The old hag. She looked smaller, moving among the shoppers and booths, but it was the same woman who came and shouted up at the window at me two or three nights a week. Bu then the crowd closed between us and when I tried to see her again, she was gone.

I got the mushrooms, and after waiting much longer than I should have for the silk, I was finally ready to get back. I had learned how to find the house, even though I still didn't completely understand how it fit into the city. Talbot had told me how to take particular turns through the streets that always got me back to the house, thought it made no sense when I thought about it or tried to work it out on a map. He called it a shortcut, but I think it was faerie magic. But it worked, and it was the only way home.

I crossed the square and took the first turn, which led me through an alley behind the courthouse. It was darker in there, and it smelled like piss and garbage, so I always went as fast

as I could through it. This time though, there was someone in the alley ahead of me, slouching against the wall on my right. I kept my head down and moved to push past whoever it was.

But then the figure stepped out of the shadows and grabbed me, and before I knew what I was about I was shoved against the opposite wall. I dropped my basket and tried to shout, but the wind had been knocked out of me.

It was the hag. She pushed her ancient face up against mine and whispered.

"She's got her hooks in you, hasn't she?" she croaked. "It doesn't matter. You can't keep me from her. She's mine!"

[Theme music; end credits]

