

## 110 – Letting Go

Understandably, Emily was upset at the revelation that the Dullahan we’d both run from in Sacramento, was now disguised as Saoirse and had been hanging around us nonchalantly. But the thing that upset her the most was not the fact that I’d kept this truth hidden from her, like what I’d assumed, but rather the fact that Saoirse had killed Seramosa.

The Dullahan, fortunately, seemed to understand the girl’s grief and explained it in the same way she had explained it to me.

“A Condemned Ifrit is not a normal Ifrit, they do not fully control their own fire, and they feel the pain of their burning body whenever they are covered in flames. Such an existence is cruel, and I will not apologise for putting an end to her suffering. But I am sorry for taking away your friend.”

It was hard to tell what Emily truly thought, but she’d probably need some time to digest the answer.

Some minutes later our rowboat came against the shore of Altar Lake, a few kilometres from the city docks. Like where we’d exited from the catacombs tunnels, the coast here had a small pebble beach, and then about three metres of cliff made of compacted sediment and large rocks. Nearby was a channel into the cliff-wall where the lakewater flowed down a stream that snaked its way north.

After we’d all disembarked from the boat, Saoirse made a simple gesture and the vessel fell into its own shadow and disappeared.

“Wow,” Emily said, then asked, “Are you capable of doing that with your horse as well?”

Saoirse nodded. “I can manifest any vessel I desire, as well as the armour that Armen and I are wearing.”

“I had no idea such a thing was possible,” the Spellhand replied. “It’s like true magic.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” I told her. “Once you become proficient enough with your Air Affinity, there are probably few limits to what you can accomplish.”

“I once delivered death to a man who wielded that same Affinity,” Saoirse commented, apparently okay with sharing such tales with the girl, now that her secret was out. “He conjured a typhoon that tore down half a forest in his efforts to stop me, though it was to no avail.”

Emily didn’t seem to like the mention of Saoirse’s Reaping business, so I quickly changed the subject. “Do you know any way to help Emily learn to wield her Affinity?”

“I can only speak of what I’ve seen, for my own magic is second nature. All I need is to wish for a result and my power will manifest it.”

“Sounds convenient,” I said.

We made our way up over the cliff-wall, with Armen helping to push Emily and I up, before climbing up-and-over himself. Above the small cliff was a verdant patch of land for a few hundred metres, which was dotted with trees here-and-there, and past which was a road that led either east or west. We’d take the west-going road for a bit, until it led north through a narrow pass that eventually sloped upwards, such that we’d come out above the valley that Altar was located in.

There was just one problem.

“Can you manifest more than one horse?” I asked Saoirse.

“Of course, though I believe something *like this* would be better.” The Dullahan waved her black gauntleted hand and summoned a flat shadow on the ground with the black smoke that oozed from her body. The shadow grew-and-grew, while the smoke built a shape from the ground-up. It was not too unlike watching a 3D Printer doing its work, but fortunately much faster.

Once completed, a large black and ominous carriage stood before us, at the front of which were two steeds like the one I’d ridden with Saoirse from Sacramento to Altar. It didn’t escape me that the design was eerily-familiar.

*Did you draw this straight from my memories...?* I asked internally, slightly put off.

*It seemed a very potent shape in your mind,* she replied.

The carriage was an exact replica of the one that Leopold Schuber had used, although there was no giant spider tied to the front, for which I was eternally grateful.

“**Change it,**” Armen demanded.

Saoirse frowned, but with a wave of her hand, the design became more ‘normal’. Granted, it was still dark and foreboding, but no longer evoked the nightmares of my past.

Emily was the first to approach the carriage, cautiously touching the wooden side of it.

“I can’t even feel a difference from the real thing,” she remarked in surprise.

I walked over and touched it as well, and, despite expecting no less, I was also astounded by this. Whatever sort of magic it was that a Dullahan possessed, it clearly wasn’t just based on illusions or dense shadows, like the kind that the Larder Keeper’s body and cocoons had been built from.

“Will this travel as fast as a lone horse?” Armen wondered.

“Of course. It will go as fast as I desire.”

“Let’s keep it within the bounds of reality,” I said, “Although I wouldn’t mind our trip to Camp Dusk Hill being expedient.”

“Very well, I will see to it that we reach this place before the sun begins to set.”

I blinked at the proclamation, as that would mean just about two hours of travel, and from what I’d been told, it was a full day’s journey from Altar on horseback. It was quite possible that I’d made a mistake in asking a being like Saoirse for expediency...

It was peculiar, because, as our carriage was flying down the roads that led to our destination to the northwest of Altar, the rapid movements of the shadowy steeds and the burden they dragged were unfelt by the four of us seated within.

Despite Saoirse being the ‘driver’, she sat opposite Emily and I, next to Armen, within the carriage itself. I wondered if she had simply asked of her magical construct to take us to our destination on some fantasy-styled autopilot, or if she was manually controlling it, while still capable of keeping track of the conversations we were having. Given that Armen had needed to use the oars on the rowboat to propel the vessel forward, I was inclined to believe it was the latter, which meant that Saoirse had some tremendous multi-tasking skills.

“What will happen if someone sees us?” Emily asked. “Will it not draw a lot of attention for us to be moving this fast?”

“I am obfuscating their ability to observe us. Only a few will notice our passing. It is how I have always travelled, as I am sure you can understand that the sight of a headless rider would naturally startle any who saw it.”

“You’re saying you didn’t use to travel with your head attached?” I asked.

“Not always. Sometimes I would cradle it in my arms.”

“Why?”

Emily nodded eagerly, wondering the same thing.

“I never really thought much about it, to be honest,” Saoirse admitted. “I suppose it was comforting, in a way.”

“...Are you still able to remove your head?” Emily wondered darkly.

“Yes. Would you like to see?” she asked, putting her hands on the side of her head. She had transformed her black armour back into the green summer’s dress, though Armen was still clad in a full suit. I obviously hadn’t told Emily what he was yet, since I wanted to wait until the shock about Saoirse fully died down.

“Please don’t,” I said.

**“I concur. I would rather your head remained affixed to your neck.”**

“Suit yourselves,” she said with a slightly disappointed tone to her voice.

I leant back in my seat, marvelling at the softness of the fabric cushions on the backrest and bench.

*Karasumany, show me the coachman.*

My eyes and ears were transported into a gliding vantage above a forest road, where a carriage was steadily making its way down a well-travelled path. I wasn’t entirely sure where it was going, but based on the location of the sun, my guess was that the coachman was returning the way he’d come. The Vanguard and Native who’d sold the Black Box had undoubtedly been heading for Arley’s border, but it was obvious that the coachman had no plans to travel to his destination without his passengers.

*It seems he is blameless in this. That’s a relief.*

Saoirse, who somehow seemed to be hijacking the same connection to my Observer’s clone commented, *What if he is returning to the Demonologist?*

*If he did serve Carmine, then returning to beg for forgiveness is not something I would expect, but I suppose I will keep my crow on him a while longer, just in case.*

*Karasumany, show me the crow near the shore.*

My perspective changed, and this time it was a vantage point on the branch of a tall tree with pine needles that grew close to a sandy beach. Nearby were several houses built from reddish clay bricks. It was a quaint place that oozed relaxation, and it was not my first time observing the area.

Next to the large tree was a two-storey house, with the bottom-floor belonging to a baker, and the top floor belonging to an Otherworlder who had recently moved here. There was a staircase that snaked around the back and led to the door of the top floor apartment.

The gift I’d delivered with my crow still sat untouched on the windowsill outside, but I knew the person living inside had seen it. The letter had also been delivered to the windowsill, but it was gone. I had no idea if she had read it or if the wind had blown it away.

*So this is where your lover resides,* Saoirse commented, snooping even on this intimate moment. Although, it was perhaps less intimate and just plain creepy for me to be keeping tabs on Rana in this way.

*I don’t think that term is applicable anymore,* I told her.

*Do you wish it to be?*

*I don’t know,* I replied, wistfully watching her new apartment through my crows eyes.

*Why not? Your memories of her are quite fond.*

*Yeah, well, the foundations of our relationship were revealed to be pure fabrication. I suppose I should've known. But I didn't even consider the fact that her feelings for me weren't genuine.*

*I have not experience love, Saoirse started, but from what I have seen, the death of such a bond is not too unlike the death of a person. The bond itself becomes a living entity that two people sustain through their mutual love. Even if you believe it began with illusions and trickery, it does not discredit the bond you felt and nurtured.*

I let out a deep sigh and cut the connection to my familiar.

*I suppose you have a point. Thank you. Never thought I'd actually follow the advice of a Dullahan.*

*Karasumany, please get rid of the clone I just used. I do not wish to observe Rana Thorn any longer.*

There came a sombre **CAW** from outside our carriage and I let a shaky breath leave my mouth.

*It's better this way, I told myself. She'll come back if she wants to, so I shouldn't force the issue.*

Before I could wallow too long in my self-pity, Emily said, “Your eyes looked really creepy just then. They were all black.”

“Thanks...”

**“It is quite unsettling, isn't it?”**

Emily smiled at Armen's words, while I just shook my head.

“Why do I always end up the butt of every joke?”

“It's a sign of affection between humans, isn't it?” Saoirse asked.

“Please be less affectionate towards me then,” I deadpanned.

Armen chuckled in response and Emily laughed a little.

Outside, the world flew past as the carriage thundered down the road.