

## 123 – Left Unfinished

Our dark carriage was heading for Fortress Major, shooting down the road that led away from the Mossbloom Redoubt. The sky above was rapidly darkening as the sun vanished behind the distant mountain range.

Emily and I were sitting out on the roof, while Armen and Saoirse sat at the front by the horses who had no reins.

“Is it okay to leave like this?” she asked me.

“Without exorcising the Lich?” I replied, wondering if that’s what she meant.

“Yea.”

“Apparently, she has been haunting the Redoubt for a long time, so I don’t think she would leave it now. And, to be honest, I don’t think she *can* leave, even if she wanted.”

“It seemed really dangerous,” Emily remarked. “You dealt with the Demon thing so easily, so to see you lose like this.”

“I didn’t lose,” I replied. “I decided that it was better to come back when I’m stronger.”

“A good friend of mine taught me that it’s important to think about what you can do and the risk-reward of things. Maybe I could have exorcised the Lich, but I might also have died in the attempt. She *was* really strong, but I was also underprepared. Next time, I’ll make sure I can finish the job.”

“I see,” she said. “I’d like to get stronger so I can help you by then.”

I smiled. “Thank you, Emily.”

“It was difficult for me to practice without you guys. I was really worried actually. Maybe I could feel that something wasn’t right.”

“You know, your unique power to see the unseen might actually be a boon for when we return to deal with her.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “I’m sure of it. You see, the way a Lich stays alive is that it hides its true heart, sometimes called a Phylactery, and uses illusions and lies to confuse anyone who want to kill it. It also spreads fragments of its soul everywhere, so that, even if you get to the heart and destroy it, it might still survive if the fragments are alive.”

“That’s why Saoirse couldn’t kill it?”

“Yeah. I’m surprised that a Dullahan has a limit to its power.”

“Sometimes,” Armen started, “**A beast can be so big and terrifying, that it struggles to catch prey that are good at hiding, because its power lies not in perception but in brute force.**”

“Who are you calling a beast?” Saoirse replied.

“**It was a metaphor.**”

“It’s not nice to call a lady that,” Emily joined in, jokingly.

It was nice to see that she wasn’t afraid of my supernatural companions and was capable of treating them like people.

Armen made a dissatisfied noise.

“Sometimes you have to know when to give up,” I told him.

Saoirse chuckled at his expense.

“But, you know. This was the first time I wasn’t able to complete an exorcism. Granted, I hadn’t officially accepted the Quest, so it’s maybe not the same, but it still does hurt a bit to know. And the fact that the Lich is someone who I held dear before ending up here... the pain won’t seem to leave me, as though there’s a claw gripping my heart and lungs.”

“We will return and put a proper end to her life,” Saoirse said confidently.

“Thank you. I don’t want her to go on suffering like this.”

The Mossbloom Woods disappeared into the horizon as we tore our way across the landscape, heading east. Forests, hamlets, villages, and farms all passed by in a blur. I spent most of the time looking through my Encyclopaedias, thinking about what sort of familiars could be useful for when I went back to deal with Kumi.

There was one that was repeatedly mentioned as useful in dealing with illusions and hallucinations, such as what Demons often employed. It was a Visitor entity known as ‘Tranquil Mind’ and which took the shape of an upside-down pyramid with an eyeball hovering above it. The drawing was highly-detailed and seemed to indicate that the pyramid was made of some kind of flesh and dotted with scales and small mouths.

The summoning requirements were quite complex though. It required a unique pyramid shape with exact dimensions listed and which was to be made from glass, then filled with three types of berries in an exact ratio and numbers, before springwater from three different sources were poured into it in an exact ratio as well.

“Have you encountered something like this before?” I asked Armen and Saoirse, showing them the entry.

Saoirse seemed like she was trying to remember, but Armen immediately said, **“I once saw a creature such as this in the in-between. They emanate a soothing birdsong.”**

That matched the description of the ‘Tranquil Mind’, which had the side-effect of constantly emitting a relaxing birdsong while manifested, as well as giving everyone who heard it a sense of nostalgia for a specific place that the tome referred to as ‘The Old Forest’.

“Now I remember,” Saoirse said, “I once made a deal with a Summoner who possessed such a familiar.”

“A deal?” I asked.

“He wanted his wife returned from death, so he summoned me. In exchange he offered me the life of his daughter.”

“...That’s horrible,” I said, regretting my curiosity.

**“There are many who would make such a bargain,”** Armen agreed.

“You had a wife right?” I asked him.

There was silence for a long moment, which Saoirse seemed to enjoy and which Emily found unsettling, based on how her aura fluttered.

**“I did,”** he said.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to pry.”

**“Do not apologise. But I have not thought about her for a long time. She was Native born and her name was Charlotta. She was someone I once saved. We were married for thirteen years and tried to have children together, but, as you know, such a thing is near-impossible for Otherworlders. In the end, we adopted two orphans who had lost their original parents to war.”**

“Did you ever wonder what happened to them after you died?” I asked.

“You shouldn’t ask about that,” Emily scolded me.

**“Thank you, Emily, but it is only fair that he knows. After all, I have seen the depths of his soul, so why should he not know mine?”**

This was a change from how he’d treated our relationship in the past, and I wondered if the recent events at the Redoubt had maybe changed his mind. Either way, I was glad to hear it.

“Thank you,” I said.

**“I do not know what became of my widow, but I know the fate of my adoptive children. My boy, Arran, became the Guild Master of Evergreen’s Adventurers’ Guild and my girl, Errie, became a talented Clothier in Altar, eventually marrying and passing on her shop to her children. It still stands there to this day.”**

“Wow,” Emily muttered.

“Does it help knowing?” I asked.

**“I think it helps, yes. I am glad that my family was fortunate and lived well after my death.”**

“Were they the reason you didn’t pass to the afterlife?” I asked, knowing it was a heavy question.

**“No. Initially, what kept me bound to the in-between was a righteous anger at being murdered and having my life’s work stolen and credited to him. But I learnt to let go. However, once tethered to the in-between, only an exorcism can release you, thus I ended up the tool of Summoners and Exorcists. That is, until I found you. Your soul was a bright beacon that I knew not to ignore. I am glad that I was not mistaken in seeking you out. You have returned personhood to me.”** He was looking at his arms as he said this last part.

I smiled, touched by his words. “I too am glad to have gotten such a great friend out of you. I owe you my life several times over.”

Saoirse watched the exchange with fascination, while Emily was looking at me with what seemed like newfound respect.

According to Saoirse we were closing in on Fortress Major and I connected with Karasumany to see what lay ahead. Outside darkness ruled.

Immediately, I realised that the trap had sprung on the Demonologist’s cronies, but it hadn’t gone smoothly. Guards and members of the expedition from Altar were standing around at the foot of the mountain upon which the castle was built, holding torches and seeming to be on the brink of some huge brawl.

I manoeuvred the crow higher to view the marketplace at the top of the mountain, and saw that an active fight was ongoing, as several people were exchanging colourful spells, while what looked like familiars were going amok. Amongst the fighters, I saw Elye, Renji, and Ludwig.

As I tried to figure out what exactly was going on, the Brawler and Elfin pushed forward, while Ludwig used some kind of strange metal wand to support them from afar, shooting purple-pink orbs that made those they touched seem to lose balance or become inebriated.

“We have arrived,” announced the Dullahan.

I broke off the contact with my familiar, then told Armen, “Let’s go. Saoirse can you stay with Emily?”

“I’m coming to!” said the Spellhand.

“It’s okay, I’ll make sure no harm befalls her,” Armen promised, before I could protest.

“Maybe I’ll just watch,” Saoirse remarked, though she still swapped her green summer’s dress for black metal plate.

The carriage came to a halt and we all exited quickly, moving towards the entrance at the foot of the mountain of Fortress Major.