

109 – A Brief Departure

I looked in awe at the rowboat that had been summoned by Saoirse’s powers and now bobbed in the water. Granted, its wood was dark to suit her preference, but it could still easily pass for a normal boat.

Armen was the first to board and he seemed well-at-ease, balancing his weight against the way it bobbed in the water. He sat down by the oars, naturally assuming the role of steering. I followed him and he shifted his body to counterbalance my weight, proving that he’d used boats a lot. Lastly Saoirse jumped aboard with a grin on her face. She refused to sit down like Armen and I, and stood on the front, as the Crusader began pushing the boat away from the shore.

We had emerged out of a semi-submerged cave perhaps a kilometre from Altar’s docks, so it was quick work to pass the outer wall and reach the wooden pier, where I got off with Saoirse, while Armen stayed behind.

We have to hurry and get Emily, I said internally.

“**I will await your return,**” he replied, while the Dullahan walked next to me down the pier. I’d been keeping tabs on my friends and the assembled Otherworlders, and thus it was easy to locate them.

Ludwig was the first to spot us, and though he seemed a bit confused at first about why I was arriving by the docks, he didn’t say anything out loud. Renji noticed us shortly after and suspicion was clear on his face.

“Did you succeed?” he asked, though I could tell he had other things he wanted to say.

I nodded. “I did. I had to do it outside the city walls, for obvious reasons, and Saoirse found a boat that we used to come back.”

Emily and Ludwig both looked around. “I don’t see your new familiar,” the Incarnate commented.

“He is guarding our rowboat.” I turned to look at Emily, “Are you ready?”

She looked nervous but said, “I am.”

“You’ve got enough rations, right?” Ludwig asked, as though he was a teacher sending students off on their own for the day.

“We do,” I replied.

“Before you go, can I talk to you?” Renji asked.

I knew this was coming.

“Of course.”

Elye, Emily, and Ludwig all watched as we left, while Saoirse stayed behind with them.

Can you do something to prevent Ludwig from snooping on our conversation? I asked the Dullahan. *Like that bubble thing.*

Of course.

Renji led me down to a corner of the dock, near where the wooden walkways and piers bordered the wax-covered stone walls of the city.

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked him, although I knew exactly what it was.

“It’s about Saoirse.”

I nodded.

“She’s your familiar, right?”

I smiled a little. It was no surprise he’d figured it out.

“How did you realise?”

“There were just a lot of things that didn’t make sense. Like, she knew where to go when you used the Bone Whistle, even though I know from using it that only the person holding it can see the trails. And like, she changed into a full set of armour in an instant. And just some of the ways she was acting, as though she knew what you were thinking. Also, my Magic Sense kept going off around her.”

“Why didn’t you just tell us?” he asked. It was clear he was hurt by the fact that I had kept a secret from him.

“It’s because of what kind of entity she is,” I told him. “And it’s because I don’t know where Ludwig’s loyalties lie. If he were to find out *what* she is, he would perhaps hand me over to the Witch Hunters.”

His eyes widened in surprise, then a revelation hit him.

“She’s... she’s the Dullahan!?” his excited tone was so loud it made me cringe.

“You sure you don’t want to climb the wall and yell it for all to hear while you’re at it?”

“Sorry. It’s just. That’s so wild!”

“I’m not so sure,” I replied.

“Is that how you survived encountering it then? I couldn’t really understand why you survived, when you said it killed your familiar.”

“I can’t tell you anything specific. Not yet anyway. But just trust me on this.”

“Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Not really, and I’ve got the worst Luck possible, so no counting on that, but she doesn’t seem to want to use me for nefarious means. In fact, she is interested in settling a score with the Demonologist, so that’d ostensibly put her on the side of justice.”

“I wish you didn’t need to keep secrets.”

“It’s unfortunately how things are for people like me. The more someone knows about me and my familiars, the more exposed it leaves me. I have people who hate me just for the Role I was assigned, so I’d rather not give any fuel for their already-burning flames of hatred.”

He looked a bit sad at that answer. “I’d never betray you,” he then said.

“I know. And I promise that I’ll tell you the full story after Fortress Major. Perhaps you can figure out what sort of person Ludwig truly is in the meantime. I’d like to be able to tell him as well.”

Renji flashed me a grin.

“Oh and by the way, if you start hearing rumours about me being a corpse defiler or the Church gunning for me, please ignore them.”

“...What?”

“Alright, let’s head back,” I said, chuckling at his expression.

“You can’t just drop something like that and not explain it!” he exclaimed as I started walking away.

“Watch me,” I said with a devious smile.

Emily and Saoirse came to find us suddenly, with Elye and Ludwig trailing after them.

My eyes met with the Incarnate’s briefly, and I could tell he had tried to spy on us, as well as the fact that he was surprised to have found it ineffectual.

Man, Exorcists are truly paranoid individuals...

“**You spy on people all the time,**” Armen commented in my head.

I am enjoying this dynamic between you two, Saoirse remarked.

“Y’all done?” Ludwig asked.

“Yep, all sorted,” I said, though Renji had a look on his face like he had a secret he couldn’t tell. But I knew he wouldn’t spill my secrets, and hopefully what he now knew wasn’t enough of a threat to me yet. Of course, if he shared that I had a Dullahan familiar, it would bring my character into question, since most knew it as a Demon. However, that was leagues apart from having people know I’d formed a Soul-Pact. And it wasn’t as if Ludwig didn’t already know that I’d wielded a Demon familiar before, so even if he found out, the damage was probably going to be minimal. The main concern was what the Church would say about me, following my defilement of a sacred historical

tomb. My best hope was that they would keep the matter internal, for fear of losing face if it came out that the body of one of the founders of Altar was missing.

“We’re still waiting on the Witch Hunter’s two squads they’re lending us, so it’ll probably be an hour or two before we take off.”

“I think we’ll just leave right away,” I told him.

“Alright, well, until we meet again.”

“If you wouldn’t mind waiting at Fortress Major, then we’ll join you there, otherwise we’ll meet in Lacksmey.”

Renji came up next to me, and, having regained some of his composure, said, “Let’s see how the wind blows, but keep some of your crows in the sky so you know where we’re heading.”

I nodded.

We all stood around for a few moments, before Saoirse was the first to break from our group and begin walking to the rowboat where Armen waited.

“Man,” Ludwig commented, “Are you always so awkward when you say your goodbyes? Hug or shake hands or something, I can’t bear to watch this.”

Renji laughed, then clapped me on the back.

“See you soon, Ryūta.”

“You too.”

Elye came up and took my black hand in both of hers then shook it violently. “*Yuuta, come back soon, okay?*”

“It won’t be that long,” I promised her.

The Elfin then hugged Emily tightly and whispered something in her ear that I didn’t pick up.

As I began to walk away, Emily hurriedly approached Renji.

“Thank you for all your help!”

“Don’t mention it,” he replied. “Keep practicing, and, who knows, maybe you’ll have mastered your Affinity by the time we meet again.”

“Hopefully it won’t be that long,” I said.

Emily quickly came up next to me, and our friends waved at us as we went down the steps to the pier, where Saoirse was waiting next to the rowboat with Armen seated by the oars.

By the way that Emily’s aura was fluctuating and she avoided looking back, I could recognise a pattern I’d seen a lot in high school.

Renji and his charms...

He’s too young for my taste, Saoirse remarked and I couldn’t tell if she was joking or not.

“Normally, such charming personalities are found in Paladins. He is the first Brawler I have known to possess such a carefree mindset. Most with his Role are hot-headed and reckless.”

Well, he’s definitely reckless. And no, he isn’t one to lose his mind to anger or violence. But I also didn’t think personality was tied to the type of Role someone was assigned.

“The rules of how Roles work are still a mystery, but it is a commonality I’ve often seen.”

So all Exorcists are just Paranoid people then? Schizophrenics who like to talk to themselves?

Sounds about right, Saoirse replied.

I shook my head.

“Are you talking to your familiars?” Emily asked.

“Is it still that obvious?” I wondered with a sigh. I’d really been trying to avoid scrunching up my face or miming words as I spoke through my mind.

“Yes.”

“Amusing isn’t it?” Armen asked out loud. His deep voice made Emily suddenly freeze. **“Apologies if I startled you. My name is Armen. I am a Priest Crusader.”**

“I hadn’t noticed you at all,” she said, sounding apologetic about it.

“I suppose I was just sitting here, not moving.”

A small grin formed on Saoirse’s face. She seemed to enjoy awkwardness and stilted interactions, as well as playful jesting. For so alien a creature as a Dullahan, such minor mundane things were apparently novel, though I guessed that it was because they were so far removed from her life as a Reaper.

He offered up his hand and though Emily was hesitant, she carefully placed her fingers on his dark gauntlet as she boarded the boat. I got on after her, and then Saoirse, once again, jumped onto the front.

A moment later, the rowboat started moving backwards as Armen began pushing the oars through the water. Renji, Elye, and Ludwig were watching us from further up the docks as we moved out onto the lake.

“The Exorcist is attempting to observe us with a familiar of his,” Armen remarked out loud.

“He won’t be able to for long,” I said, “We’re leaving the reach of his Obsessive Stalker.”

“I am also still preventing it,” Saoirse said.

Emily looked between the three of us, confused and a little worried.

“Since you’re coming with me, I think there are some things you should know,” I started.