

## Housekeeping

“I don’t think I like this.”

“What? Why not?”

I eyed the repulsive rubbish bins lining the alley with a petulant turn-up of my nose.

“It’s not exactly the most *well-maintained* district of town. Are you sure this is safe?”

“You worry too much.” Susan kept walking down the cracked asphalt, her jean-clad legs swinging confidently with each step.

“About wandering aimlessly through a derelict part of town with little idea of where I’m going and the percentage chance of being stabbed to death rising with every step?”

“We’re not wandering aimlessly.”

“...That’s what you took from that?”

She turned to me and sighed, her hands on her hips.

“Look – you have a problem don’t you? This guy is supposed to be able to help. So unless you want to go home and face it by yourself, this is best solution we’ve got so far. Now are you coming?”

I thought of home. A small, detached flat, quiet and cozy enough for one. Dirt-cheap on the post-recession market, too. But something was out of place there. That was the reason I was standing in the increasingly pungent alley.

Susan always had a way of dragging into her crazy schemes, and I soon caved to her stare.

“Fine.”

We walked in silence another few minutes, but then I couldn’t resist breaking it.

“How did you find out about this guy anyway?”

She shrugged.

“A friend of a friend. Matt’s uncle’s cousin’s brother’s twin – or something – had a wendigo removed from their estate building last year.”

We walked in silence after that.

Eventually a large, unattractive apartment block loomed up on the road before us. The brick building squatted on a section resembling a moonscape – completely barren and dry. My face gave away my thoughts.

“Well, it’s not exactly a well-known profession,” Susan defended.

“I’m surprised he can afford even this.” Clearly I had decided to set my attitude to ‘cynical’.

Susan glared as we pushed into the foyer.

“Be nice.”

A handwritten sign proclaimed the lift “shot to shit”, so we took the stairs. Empty beer bottles and snubbed out cigarettes were easily overcome obstacles as we ascended.

“How does this work? Do I pay him first or is it by the hour? Think I could write this off as a company expense?”

“You should take this more seriously.”

“He’s going to be a hack, Suze. He’ll probably give us a bunch of crystals and send us on our way. Maybe throw in a dreamcatcher and some salt lamps to boot.”

We eventually arrived at the twelfth floor and I stopped complaining, but only because my lungs were tightening up. I tried not to lean against the moulding wallpaper as Susan counted out the flat numbers.

“Two... Three... Four. It’s here.”

A knock, silence, the sliding of a chain, an Irish accent.

“What the fuck do you want?”

He wasn’t a hippy, that was certain. Although he was young, maybe only a few years older than me, a faded suit hung off his frame like melting tar. His hair was long, but slicked back. I hoped that it was with gel.

“My friend’s got a problem.” Susan pulled me over a bit too hurriedly.

“A haunting,” I managed to grit out between awkwardly clenched teeth. My cynical attitude had dialled down to the ‘uncertain and shy’ setting. “At least, I think. There’s strange noises – I don’t know what exactly is causing them. But the house is old... really old. And I think someone died there.”

The man smacked a hand to his face and ran it down his bleary features.

“A’right, get in ‘ere.”

He opened the door wide and disappeared into the apartment’s depths. I hesitated, but Susan pushed me inside and prevented any attempts at escape.

The place was chaotic. Paper lay everywhere, like a fresh, crumply snowfall. We crunched across it recklessly.

“Have a seat.”

Susan sat, but I preferred to stand. Black candles dripped wax on all the surfaces, and I didn’t trust the dark stains on the couch.

The man went into another room and I saw a small, grubby kitchenette peeking through when he opened the door.

“What the hell have you gotten me into?” I immediately complained under my breath to Susan.

“What? Its not so bad.”

“Susan, there is a fucking *pentagram* on the wall.”

“So? Maybe its decorative...”

The kitchenette door opened again and we clammed up. The man returned with a clipboard under his arm, wiping his hands on his jeans and leaving red marks down them. I started to feel sick. It smelt like burning and vomit in there. I wondered why the man didn’t open a window.

“What’s yer names, then?”

“I’m Susan,” she said politely. “This is Gavin.”

I inclined my head but the man was busy hunting for a pen under the papers and didn’t see it.

“Yours?”

“Albern.”

I couldn’t contain my worries any longer.

“So what’s that for?”

He looked up and followed my finger, pointed at the star on the wall.

“Summonin’s.”

I felt myself blanch.

“Summoning *what*?”

Susan kicked me subtly from her seat, and smiled at Albern. I recognised that smile, and stared at her. She was going to flirt with *this guy*, of all people?

“So... you live here by yourself? That must get lonely,” she said. The Irishman didn’t reply and I wasn’t sure if he hadn’t heard, or was simply ignoring her. “Especially with a job like this. Such a big responsibility...”

Internally, I groaned. Susan’s complete lack of good choices didn’t surprise me – she had a history of falling for bad-boys, the kinds of guys with questionable pasts and risky futures. And of these, she usually ended up with those who had some kind of power. Even if it was just the freedom to ride a motorbike anywhere around the country whenever they pleased. A good job and a clean place didn’t cut it – I knew that a little too personally.

Susan’s eyes sparkled with admiration as Albern moved a pile of papers and pulled out a wooden stake. He frowned at it a moment, and then tossed it into a different pile.

“What’s that for?” she asked in awe. But Albern had managed to find a pen at last, and with a satisfied muttering of “there you are, you bastard,” he began scribbling onto the clipboard.

“A’right, so you think yer’ve got a ghost, huh? Okay, I’m gonna ask you a few questions, so I know what I’m up against here. ‘ow long have you been living at the place?”

“Three months.”

“When did the ‘aunting start?”

“The strange noises started as soon as I moved in.”

“‘ave you actually seen the ghost take a proper form?”

“No...”

“I have,” Susan injected. “It was at your birthday party, remember? I went out onto the balcony to have a smoke, and I saw an old man. He was wearing suspenders and had a cane, and he was standing by the railing. I thought it was weird because I hadn’t ever seen him before. I dropped my lighter and when I looked up, he was gone.”

“I said it was probably just the neighbour,” I replied tersely.

“A neighbour who walks around on property uninvited when anyone could spot ‘im, then hangs out on your balcony just taking in the view? Right in the middle of a party?” Albern scoffed. “Don’t think so. Now listen ‘ere; ‘ave you ever, to yer knowledge, been cursed, hexed, or bewitched?”

“What? No.”

“Ever stood in a mushroom circle or sounded a bell over runnin’ water?”

“No.”

“Been bitten by a bat, dog, wolf, or any persons, both living or undead?”

“No.”

“Are you or yer family in anyway related to the following evils: reclusive cults, secret orders, witches’ covens, magicians councils, zombie ‘ordes, necromancers, demon summoners, fairy folk, or Republicans?”

“Are you serious?”

He looked up from the page. “Do I look like I’m kiddin’?”

“Of course not, what kind of stupid question is that?” I snarked. I didn’t like the look of surprise and excitement that was slowly growing on Susan’s face as the man listed each creature. I could almost see her imagination running wild and figured that any second now she’d beg to be the man’s assistant.

Albern scratched at his five o’clock shadow and ignored me.

“And when you told it ‘ta leave, was there any sort o’ violent reaction?”

“When I what?”

His bloodshot eyes suddenly bore into me.

“You did tell the ghost to leave, didn’t you?”

“Uh...”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, you ‘aven’t even demanded it ‘ta leave yet? Christ, fucking amateurs...” He threw down the clipboard. “Listen sunshine; nine times out o’ ten these things are just some ‘armless spirit who doesn’t realise they’re dead yet. So go home, and next time you hear the noises, try telling them to shut up. Try that before you come back here and waste even more o’ my time.”

My anger was riled.

“Because clearly its so very *valuable*,” I muttered sarcastically.

“You better watch yourself, or I *will* curse you with eternal warts, so ‘elp me Jesus,” the man threatened, wagging a dirty finger under my nose. “And they won’t be on yer face.”

“Alright, I think we know what to do now,” Susan interrupted, standing up and pushing me towards the door. “Gavin, hurry up and pay the man.”

“Pay him!? For *what*?”

“Do you *want* eternal warts?” she snarled.

Reluctantly I handed over forty quid, frowning as Albern rolled up the notes and stuck them into the waistband of his jeans.

“It was nice meeting you,” Susan smiled at him as we loitered in the doorway. “I don’t suppose I could maybe come around and see one of those summonings some time? I’d *love* to watch you work.” A strand of hair was twirled around her finger.

“No,” the Irishman said, and the door was slammed in our faces.

“So did it work?” Susan leapt on me as soon as I opened the door.

“...It’s eight in the morning, Suze. What are you doing here? And why are you all dressed up?”

She barged past me with no restraint. Not that it really mattered; there was nothing in my house that she hadn’t seen a million times before. But it was the principle of the thing.

“I want to know what happened!” she said, sitting down at the kitchen table.

“What if I’d had a lady over?”

She looked me up and down.

“You’d wear a pink dressing gown around your lady friends?”

I was too sleepy to argue. Flopping down opposite her, I rested my head on my hands.

“I don’t really know what happened. I heard the strange noises last night, so I did what Albern said and...”

“What did you say?”

"I just... I said 'I know you used to live here, but this is my place now. You're dead, and I'm sorry about that, but you need to leave right now. I...' I stumbled, embarrassed at the retelling. "I said 'I demand it.'"

"Jeeze, no need to be a jerk to the poor guy... ghost."

"Well I don't exactly have experience in these sorts of things!" I defended.

"And what happened?"

"There was a really strong gust of wind outside, and the noises got louder, and then there was a bang, and then nothing."

"He's gone?"

"I don't know. I'm not even really sure there was anything there to begin with now."

"But the sounds are gone, that's got to be proof, right?"

"I guess so." It was true that the house did feel a little less creepy that morning. And although I didn't want to tell Susan because I knew she'd make a big deal out of it, I thought I saw a light glow briefly and then fade on the balcony last night after I'd made my little speech. I tried to tell myself it was just a streetlight burning out.

"Good, then you won't mind coming with me to go see Albern again today."

"What? But it's eight! And I have work later. *And* he's probably asleep..." I'd had enough of the Irishman to last me months.

"Look, I think there's a nymph blocking my sink drain," Susan said, "so I'm going with or without you. Into that shady neighbourhood, all by myself..."

She didn't look at me as she said this, and I knew her reasons for the return trip were far more vain. That explained the dress. Before Albern she had never met a man who could say 'no' to her. Unfortunately, that also included me.

I made a show of lingering, and then sighed.

"Fine, I'll go get changed."

I had the sinking feeling that Albern was about to become a regular expense.