

WILD MAGIC

IEUAN LEDGER

Sample

I hate ghosts.

Nine times out of ten you'll have nothing more than a wee moaning groaner on your hands and all you need to do is give them a shoulder to cry on before you can nudge them off the mortal coil. Job done.

Less commonly, the ones who die in anger or fear might manifest into the much more dangerous poltergeists, known for their tendency to throw folk down the stairs or unhelpfully stacking the furniture. These are more difficult to deal with and can cause serious damage if not treated quickly, but usually a banishment does the trick. There's also the option of helping them move on, but that's dangerous and with all due respect I'm not going to risk my neck for the echo of a person; I'm still alive, and I'd prefer to keep it that way for the time being.

And then rarely, oh so rarely the chance is laughably small,

you're going to find your personal ghosts. While not technically ghosts, in that they are formed of memory and emotion rather than being an echo of a scrap of a dead personality, they are the worst. A haunted person soon becomes a phantom themselves.

Fortunately for me, this was not a ghost and instead a loose pipe and some floppy fiberglass insulation. I was on my back in the crawlspace of an attic, swimming goggles over my eyes, nails between my lips and a wrench in my hand as I tightened a nut; I'd learned long ago that what most people assumed was ghosts often turned out to be something as innocuous as a poorly constructed home and I carried tools with me as much as I carried my magical accoutrements.

Needless to say, I wasn't about to tell the owners of the house that their problem had been entirely mundane in nature and as I clambered down the ladder onto the landing, I contemplated the morality of having used less glue than necessary to affix the insulation to the plaster; repeat jobs are the best jobs.

"As far as I can tell, that should be all sorted," I said to the worried woman, not entirely untruthfully. "Though if you have any more issues I can come back and have another look. Discounted, obviously. Here."

From my hoodie I pulled out a half-finished stack of post-its and scribbled my number on it with a leaky biro before handing it over. I needed some business cards. Did people still use business cards?

"Thank you so much!" said the woman whose name I hadn't bothered to remember; it's easier to defraud people if you don't give them a personality. She pushed a wad of notes into my hands which I quickly stuffed into the near bottomless pocket of my hoodie.

"Cheers. Well, I'd best bounce," I said, eager to put as much distance between me and the lie as possible. "Other customers, more ghosts. You know the drill."

"Will you not stay for a cup of tea?" she asked. "I've just put

the kettle on.”

I glanced over at her husband who was watching me from beneath a furrowed brow; I could tell he wanted me gone as soon as possible and probably had only agreed to hire me to appease his wife and he certainly hadn't been too eager to let a skinny man with a grubby hoodie and a neck tattoo into his house.

“Tempting, but I really have to run. Yours isn't the only house I have to hit up today.”

Well, that was a lie. Unsurprisingly, most people didn't put much stock in curses these days which, as Glasgow's only Curse-Breaker, put a damper on my business and even though I had branched out into hauntings as well, commissions were few and far between.

The morning's clear skies had been swaddled in thick grey clouds and a fine drizzle hung in the air so I pulled up my hood over my recently buzzed black hair and tried to ignore the damp that was already creeping in through my ragged Doc Martens. The pay for this gig would absolutely be going towards a new pair.

This house had been in one of my less well-known parts of the city, just off the life-line of Glasgow's Great Western Road, which as a man who liked to brag that he could tell where he was by how the ground felt below his boots was not something I was proud of. I pulled out my phone to double-check my directions and saw a message flashing on the screen.

Meet u at Underbridge. Might have something 4 u.

Even as a teen I hadn't been able to stomach text-speak and it was with a grimace that I changed my direction and began a thankfully short walk out of the labyrinth of modern houses and onto the main road that led almost directly to my destination, leaving me alone with the hot heavy lead of guilt

that was now safely settled in my stomach.

I didn't plan this life. Well, I suppose I should say it wasn't my 'Plan A'. Plan A was to study for one degree after another until finally I had enough academic clout to worm my way into a Classics department at some university or other and hide away with dusty books and records until Mr. Grim came about the reaping. But it was those dusty books and records that... side-tracked me, if you like.

It started with a note in the corner of a book. If you're imagining some dusty, leather-bound tome with metal clasps, then I'm sorry; it was your average 1970s paperback containing one specific article I wanted for an essay. The note was nothing special either; a couple of sentences underlined and the title of another book, with page number. So I followed the breadcrumbs, as I thought any student eager to procrastinate would. One book led to another which led to another, almost always with a seemingly random titbit of knowledge highlighted. My procrastination gave way to full-fledged obsession in a matter of months and soon my 'Grecian Urns and History' notebook had become a reference guide to hundreds of texts, each complementing another in a complex esoteric spider web; a paragraph on the history of some obscure ritual in one book, a couple of pages about the secret code of an Elizabethan madman or mystic in another. One book led me to spend another few months deciphering a dialect specific to a region of Slovenia that hasn't existed for centuries. Thus began my foray into the arcane, though at the time I was just putting off doing any actual work.

I pitter-pattered my way down a stone staircase beside an old tenement building, decorated with a mural of flowers and robots, and crossed the River Kelvin. I bet you thought the Underbridge was a mystical waypoint, perhaps where the city trolls like to gather? Try again. Instead picture an unironically hipster bar beneath a bridge across one of Glasgow's major rivers and you'd be more on the mark. The cosy interior,

adapted from abandoned train arches, was heaving and I was loath to join a table of strangers, so I settled on a picnic bench mostly sheltered by the bridge above and waited. To pass the time I counted the curses around me; as expected, there were dozens. I'd thought I would make a killing in this line of work, what with the thick fog of curses that surrounded me at any given moment. How wrong I'd been.

There was a ripple through the intangible plane of magic and instinctively I raised my protections, though I knew there was no need; I recognised the energy. I waved Donald over as soon as I caught sight of him. His sandy hair was pulled back into a top knot and, judging by the deep-necked black t-shirt, he had just come off the day shift at the bar. His golden chest hair curled out over the top.

"All right?" he asked, after retrieving a couple of pints of Joker.

"Aye, can't complain. You got something that merits summoning the great and powerful Rudy?" I asked, aiming for powerful and mysterious but landing somewhere closer to conceited and pretentious.

Donald snorted. "I don't think anyone gets to refer to themselves as the great and powerful anything when they're chatting to someone who's washed their boxers."

"Yeah yeah, funny guy. What's the craic?"

Donald doesn't really exist in the peripheries, the realm where your ghosts, ghouls and goblins hold court. Well, not so much the goblins; the fae were reportedly cut off from our world centuries ago, but you get the idea. He dips a pinkie toe in now and again but he never really took to it like me. We'd been flat mates back in uni, and whereas I genuinely developed an interest in the occult, he'd seen it as a way to cultivate his dark and mysterious backdrop. I'd never let him forget the chipped black nail varnish. But still, he has his ear to the ground in the right circles and his bar is frequented by some of the more... *unseemly* denizens of our great city.

“Before you say yes or no,” said Donald with a weird leading tone. “You need to know that you were asked for directly, and this might have a touch of your speciality about it.”

“I should hope so,” I said. “Otherwise why the hell did you drag me here?”

“There’s a lot of money on the line for you,” he said, still not giving me a clear answer.

“Oh, aye? Go on then, what’s the job?” I asked. “Haunted painting? Goblin in a well that turns out just to be a very large toad? I can handle that.”

“Not quite,” said Donald. “It’s a girl. Seventeen years old. Missing.”

“No,” I said, instantly. “Absolutely not.”

“Rudy—”

“I said no, Donald. I don’t do missing persons. I don’t do assault, battery, larceny, murder, nothing that’s going to get me mixed up with the police.”

It’s important to have limits. My limit was never having to explain to the authorities that I, a man with no fixed income and Doc Martens held together with duct tape, was only poking my nose in because of magic. Doesn’t sound too good, does it?

“Here’s the thing though,” said Donald, ignoring me. “Police are at a loss. They’ve got nothing to go on and their investigation is stagnant, apparently.”

That piqued my interest.

“How’d you know that?” I asked, frowning. “Police reports? Wee bit above your paygrade, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t get any of this from the police,” explained Donald.

“Then who?” I asked.

“Are you interested?”

“Interested, aye. Committed? No.”

Donald sighed. “Look, you’ve been sought out by name. I know it’s not your usual bag but there’s a good bit of cash on the line here.”

I thought of my leaking boots and relented.

“Go on then. Who’s your contact?”

“That would be me,” said an unfamiliar voice.

I didn’t jump; it doesn’t do much for the image to appear easily scared but I certainly pushed some energy into my tattoo. No one was getting in my head today. I calmly took in the young woman watching me from the next table. Mid-to-late twenties, heavy eyeliner, blonde dreadlocks streaked with pink, blue and purple, tied with beads and feathers. She was small, I realised; standing I doubt she’d have reached my chest, though being six-foot-four meant I tended to tower over most people. Glass and plastic jewels adorned her ears, nose and eyebrows to the point that when the light hit her just right I had to squint.

“Older sister?” I asked, sipping my beer and raising an eyebrow.

“Impressive,” she said.

“Not really, all things considered.”

She joined us at the table. “Laura Baxter. Sorry for the theatre but I wanted to see if you were the real thing,” she said.

“Do I pass your test?”

“We’ll see. Are you willing to answer a few questions?”

“Do I need a lawyer?”

Not that I could afford one, but I’ve found it helps to have friends in the right places.

“Funny. First question. Is magic real?”

“Yes,” I replied, simply. “Next question.”

She frowned, as if I were an exam question that she was struggling with. “Can you find my sister?”

“I don’t know,” I answered truthfully. “Look, I’m a Curse-Breaker. Detective work has never been my area of expertise. If your flat is haunted or you think you might have been hexed, then I’m your man. I’ve never even tried investigation before.”

“But you do know magic?”

How could I put this, I wondered. You can’t ‘know’ magic. Saying you know magic is like saying you know the breeze or

the stones or the stars. You can study them and know *about* them, but you can't *know* them. I'd been up to my eyeballs in the stuff for years and I could fit everything I knew about the *how* and *why* of magic on the back of a cigarette packet. It didn't matter to me. What mattered was that it *was*.

"I dabble. Look, hiring a private investigator will probably get you further than employing a broke warlock. Or go back to the police."

"Donald already told you the police aren't doing anything," snapped Laura.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"I've got a guy on the inside," she said, shrugging. "An hour of passion and I've got him spilling any secrets I like."

"Respect," I said, before I could stop myself.

Laura shrugged. "Meh, he's a good lay and it's smart to keep your pieces sweet. Anyway, after I told him I'd filed a report, he said that he'd not heard anything about it. A couple of days later he calls me and tells me that there's not a single lead to be followed, despite two reports being filed. One from me and one from my parents."

She didn't quite spit the word parents, but it wasn't said with warmth.

"Tell me about your parents," I said, then wished I hadn't; even I could hear the cliché.

"Does this mean you'll help?"

"It means I'm interested. Go on."

"They're textbook narcissists," she scoffed. "Nothing mattered to them except how good their perfect family appeared on paper. No friends except the ones they pre-approved, no going out past six p.m., we could only wear clothes that they picked out. And then they acted surprised when I retaliated?"

"Why the past tense?" I asked.

"Oh, I've been no contact since I turned eighteen. I couldn't shake the depression the whole time I was under that roof. Go

here, wear this, speak to them, ignore the others. I wasn't a kid to them, I was a china doll and it was killing me," she said. "As soon as I was legally an adult I was out of there like a rat out of an aqueduct. Mum howled and wailed and asked how I could do such an awful thing to the people who have only ever loved me."

She blew a raspberry and helped herself to a mouthful of Donald's beer.

"Do you think they do love you?" I asked.

Laura swilled the beer from cheek to cheek, carefully considering her answer.

"I do," she said eventually. "In their own way. It doesn't make up for the years of psychological torture though."

"Of course not," I added quickly. "They did put out a report for her though."

Snorting, Laura shook her head. "If someone stole your car or diamond necklace, you'd report that, wouldn't you?"

"Is your sister like you?" I asked. "Is getting the hell out something she might do?"

"Not at all. She's always been softer than me. I could see her moving away for uni or something, but never running. Look," said Laura. "Are you going to help me?"

"One more question," I said, sitting back. "How did you find me?"

"Oh, that's easy. I drink at his bar," she said, jerking a thumb at Donald. "And this was pinned on the wall."

Laura dug into her pocket and pulled out a crumpled rectangle of card bordered in emerald green; it still bore the name of my predecessor.

Jason MacAffee

Professional Curse-Breaker

Mystic to the Posh and Plebs Alike!

"I suppose I should have seen that coming," I muttered.

“Okay, let’s say I was on board. Why me? Why do you come to the only consulting warlock working in Glasgow?”

“I told you,” said Laura, with a shrug. “I drink at Donald’s bar and there’s been. . . whispers.”

“Whispers?” I repeated, throwing a glance at Donald. “What whispers?”

“There’s something that got a lot of folk on edge,” said Laura. “I don’t know any more about it than that, but the rumours in his pub are that the night Leigh-Anne went missing, something new to the city had apparently left a few people all of a flutter.”

I was certainly interested now. “What was the date?”

Laura told me and I racked my brains to see if anything had stood out to me, but nothing out of the ordinary struck me; it had either been too minor for me to notice, or I’d simply not been paying attention.

“So, that’s why I’m sat here and not in some old boy’s office,” explained Laura. “I don’t believe in coincidences and that seemed like a hell of a coincidence to ignore.”

Biting my tongue, I resisted the urge to explain how the universe is in fact governed by coincidence and instead gave a resigned nod.

“That night, how do you know that’s when she went missing?”

“I couldn’t get in contact with her. She said she was going out with some friends and I asked her to let me know she got home safe. Didn’t get a text, no response when I called her in the morning,” said Laura, her voice suddenly small. “Finally called Mum and Dad and they were frantic.”

“And the friends she was with?”

“The police spoke to all her school pals, no one knew anything about her going out that night. That was the last I heard about the investigation.”

“And no one knows if she was with anybody?”

“Not to my knowledge,” said Laura with a shrug.

So I had no leads from her friends, no indication of who the last person to see her was and a dead police investigation. Great.

“Fine,” I said, resigned. “Let’s talk rates.”

I don’t think I’d ever spoken about ‘rates’ before in my life. That being said, it was easier to be taken seriously discussing rates than if I’d asked her to cross my palm with silver.

“Five hundred quid now, another five hundred when you bring Leigh-Anne back.”

God, I hope I didn’t look as gob smacked as I felt. A grand! That would cover my rent and amenities for two months!

“That’s . . . acceptable,” I managed to squeak.

“And I want to make this absolutely clear,” continued Laura. “You bring her to me. Not my parents.”

“You’re paying,” I concurred.

“One thing, before you go,” said Laura as I stood up to leave.

“It’ll cost you.”

She looked briefly taken aback, before she grinned.

“Can you prove to me that this isn’t all bullshit? I’ve just dropped five ton on you. Give me a little something to let me know you’re legit.”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t have to. Instead I clicked out a soft syllable; there was a soft hissing sound and the smell of burned hair, before one of the metal beads on her dreads fell to the table with a soft ‘plunk’, the singed purple loc smoking where the metal had burned it away.