

Full Service

By Clint 'Concolor' McInnes

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I did NOT want to wake up; I'd had two long, tough days of unpacking following a long, tough week of relocating, and I needed my beauty sleep. Plus, I was having that really hot dream again, the one where we went to Kauai after our Pawfasting instead of going to visit my relatives in the Catskills, and we had that stretch of beach all to ourselves because my mate had won some super-prize or something, and we were taking full advantage of the privacy thus afforded, and things were just getting reeeeeeally interesting ... when a seagull started screeching right in my ear.

My eyes jerked open.

Then once I was awake, I didn't want to get out from under the covers. The full moon shining in through the window showed me my breath. It was mid-March, and freakin' cold in that creaky, drafty old house in the wee hours of the morning, especially as I'd yet to figure out how to get the main furnace going, and we'd had to make do with a fire in the fireplace in the living room ... on the other end of the house. But it wasn't like I had a choice. When a four-year-old pounces your head, it sort of forces the issue.

Since Sophie was crying when she first got to me, I just held her and let her sob for a minute before rearranging her on the bed between me and April, helping her snuggle into her mother's back. My mate's fur is very long, and still kitten-soft, and all three of the girls have enjoyed luxuriating in it practically from birth. They all inherited my short coat, though the twins got April's fur pattern.

Once Sophie had tapered off to sniffles and gasps, I asked her if she'd had a nightmare.

"No, Poppa. 'E was a ghos' in my woom."

I pushed up onto one elbow and looked her in the eye. "A ghost? In your room, you say?"

"Uh-huhhhh."

"What'd it do?"

"Made a scawy noise. An' 'e fwoated my quilt off."

"He did, huh?"

"Uh-huhhhh."

"Did either of your sisters see this ghost?"

"Dey bofe asweep."

"Were they still asleep when you left to come in here?"

"Uh-huhhhh. C'n I sweep wiff you an' Mommy?"

"Oh. Uh, no, I think that might set a bad precedent. Maybe I can fix things some other way."

"I don' wan' da ghos' a come back!"

"Howsabout if I just keep the ghost away?"

She looked at me with that solemn expression that only little kids can produce. “C’n ya do dat?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure I can.”

“C’n I stay here?”

“Just until I get back. Okay?”

She closed her eyes and scrooched up as close to April as she could. “Okay.”

I got up, shivering a little, and looked for a robe in our armoire, but I didn’t find one. Failing that, I rummaged through the big boxes sitting against the wall that we had only begun to unpack. I came up with a serviceable garment in less than a minute, and quickly shrugged into it. Those who built the house had not seen fit to include closets as standard equipment, but that was pretty common for Pennsylvania in the late 1800’s, as I understand things. As a stop-gap measure we had picked up a couple of armoires and three chests-of-drawers from a consignment shop in the area, so our clothes would have somewhere to hide when we didn’t need them.

I scooted down the hall to the girls’ room and poked my head in the door. Jesse and Annette were both snoring softly. They take after April in that regard. She’s a *very* sound sleeper, which explains why our daughters always wake *me* up when they need something in the midwatch. I love my mate dearly, but she’s effectively useless for six or eight hours once she zonks out.

Padding down to the library, I flipped on the light. Even though nothing was really unpacked here yet – we were saving this room until after the more critical areas were done – I knew right where to put my finger on what I needed, and gathered the various articles in a trice. Then I proceeded to the attic, via the rickety set of stairs at the back of the house.

See, the thing is, April has a real soft spot for unique architecture, and fell in love with this ratty old pile on sight. I knew the first time I stepped on the porch that I was staring the mother of all “honey-do” lists square in its peeling-paint-and-loose-shingled eye, and I could kiss goodbye any discretionary time I might otherwise ever have had. But my mood mellowed markedly after I got a good look at the attic. The roof was classic Victorian, very steep, and the distance from the ridge beam to the attic floor must have been at least five meters. Yeah, that’s right, it was floored. Hardwood, if you can believe it. It had built-in shelving running down one side, really sturdy, well-built stuff, and overhead lights, and a little window unit at the end closest to the stairs. That attic made me a convert, and we struck a deal for the property.

Of course, any place that’s been around for better than 150 years is going to have some history, some secrets, some skeletons in its non-existent closets. This house was no different, and the real-estate agent had been very straightforward about the rumors. Let me just take a moment here to plug Acorn Valley Real Estate. There are excellent reasons for using a full-service broker, I kid you not.

I flicked on the light and looked around for the rocking chair she’d told me about, finally spotting it where it had been shoved against the far wall. The old thing was in sad shape, weather-beaten, one of the runners broken and the opposite arm-rest missing entirely. I pulled it into the center of the long space. Then I turned the light back off, sat down in it as well as I could, and waited, holding in my lap one of the items I’d brought with me. Nor did I even have time to get uncomfortable. My eyes hadn’t yet fully adjusted to the gloom when a diaphanous figure floated up through the floor.

It was fairly well defined: male, dressed in a frock coat with a high collar, and wearing a high hat. I could even make out his cufflinks. But his glowing red eyes, purulent boils of naked malice, commanded my attention. It raised its arms and advanced.

I placed both thumbs on the stone in my lap and pressed down. At the same instant I spoke the Word of Power that would activate it. And I made sure my eyes were closed.

After a slow count of ten I looked again. The ghost was cowering in the geometric center of what appeared to be an armillary of pure light some two meters across. I stood and walked over to it. It looked up at me, the eyes no longer red, and whimpered.

I asked, "Are you ready to talk now?"

It nodded.

"Fine. Just remember I've got this thing set on automatic, if you get any funny ideas about possession or remote control."

< A^L L R^I G^H T >

I released the pressure on the stone and the rings of light flared and then faded to a dim outline. "First off, I saw to it that you get to retain limited haunting rights." I pulled out my copy of the sales contract and flipped to a page near the back. "You've got the run of the first floor of the house, as long as you don't damage anything. You can manifest whenever you want, to anyone who's already awake. But you may *not* pick on anyone sleeping, either to haunt or to affect their dreams, and you may, under no circumstances, haunt the kids."

< T^H A^T I^S N^O T F^A I^R ! >

I looked him right in his hollow eyes. "Deal with it."

< T^H E L^A S^T H^O M^E O^W N^E R^S D^I D N^O T M^A K^E M^E
D^O A^N Y O^F T^H A^T >

"Then they were stupid."

< P^L E^E E^E E^A S^E ! >

"No. You stay away from my daughters."

< B^U T K^I D^S S^C A^R E B^E T^T E^R >

"When my in-laws come to visit, it's open season on 'em, which is the main reason I let you stick around in the first place. In that case, knock yourself out. But if I ever hear of you so much as sticking your vaporous schnozz into the kids' room, I'll have an exorcist out here so fast you won't catch up with your ectoplasm for a month."

It crossed its arms and sulked.

I folded the contract back up and placed it in its box. "Now, do we have an understanding?"

< W^H A^T E^V E^R >

"No, not 'whatever'. I require an oath from you." I held out the stone. "Touch it right here. And speak clearly, please."

It took several minutes, but I extracted the necessary promise. I put the stone back into its red velvet sack and retied the complex knot in the gold-chased cord at its mouth, making a mental note to send the real-estate agent a very nice fruit basket.

< A^R E Y^O U D^O N^E N^O W ? > Its tone was most petulant.

“Sure. Now that I know you’ll abide by the contract.”

< I A^M G^O I^N G T^O T^H E C^E L^L A^R >

“That works.”

It turned and moved off down the room, slowly sinking into the floor as it went.

“And don’t forget that the second floor is off-limits between dusk and dawn!”

I noted that its shoulders hunched before it slipped out of sight, leaving a heartfelt and disgusted sigh in its wake, and pulling a wry chuckle out of me. I stretched and rubbed my back as I made my way down to our bedroom. I knew I’d have to carry Sophie back to her own bed.