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Hauntings

by

EA Robins

The train whistle calls my thoughts back to the present. I feel the great breaks of this massive, metal beast engage. We are almost to Vsandelin, a rural town to the north of Telsemar. I sigh and look out of the window. The heaviness of nostalgia is slow to leave my mind. There are too many days gone and too much heavy history for me to refocus so abruptly on the now. The dreariness of the day begs a mind to wander in the mists of the past. The grey buildings of the city have given way to grey skies, grey green trees and golden grey fields. The inconsistent rain and consistent clack of wheel to track served to lure me from my purpose. I slide my fingers over the folded card in my gloved hands. Its brief message has drawn me away from my own pressing research at the university.

*Dearest Katherine,
I have found it. Come at once.
Martin*

His handwriting is atrocious, but familiar, and thinking on its content, I take another breath, hoping to slow the quickened beat of my heart. I haven't traveled this far from the city in years, but this trip is a necessity. He wouldn't have written unless he was sure. He is, undeniably, a man who delights in flights of fancy. But, he is also a levelheaded and professional scholar.

The train edges into the station. I am already standing in the passageway, impatient for it to completely halt so I may disembark. Patience is a virtue, I've often been told, but not one I've ever managed to master. I touch the note, which is now in the deep pocket of my skirt, and step out before the attendant has time to offer me assistance. I scan the small crowd, looking for him. And there he is.

Dr. Lawrence Martin Nathaniel Hayward the Third, a prestigious name for a prestigious man. The retired dean of the College of Folklore & Mythology at the University of Telsemar, he was once my mentor and colleague and is now a cherished friend. He's a man renowned for the research that led to the unearthing of several significant historical artifacts. Now in his mid-sixties, he's still a strong, handsome man with a square jaw and intelligent blue eyes, blue eyes that widen in recognition as he spots me and smiles broadly. He lifts his hand to make sure I see him and heads toward me, walking with a slight limp that I do not remember. He takes my hand affectionately between both of his and presses it to his lips.

“Senior Professor Katherine Helen Bowers,” he addresses me formally, “what on Soria took you so long?”

“Oh, you know these new-fangled contraptions,” I respond, waving a hand at the rather revolutionary locomotive behind me. It noisily belches steam onto the platform. I had been hesitant to book passage, but the papers claim traveling by train is swifter and less exhausting

than other modes of transportation. In my experience, not all new things are better things. Now, however, I think I prefer a quiet seat in a compartment over the jarring and crowded and somewhat odorous coaches.

Martin chuckles, pleased with my playfulness. He pulls me into a warm embrace and then holds me at arm's length, his hands on my forearms, studying my face. I know what he sees, an unexceptional, soft woman in her forties. Mousy brown hair shot through with grey, properly and modestly tied back. I have light, mossy green eyes and mostly straight teeth. Wrinkles where wrinkles belong and a small scar in the corner of my mouth.

"You look as beautiful as ever, Katherine. Truly stunning." His wide smile fades as he gazes into my eyes. His seem to turn a darker shade of blue as a memory begins to haunt him. I know where his mind has gone.

"I am so sorry to hear about Roland," he says.

"Oh, Martin," I say, preparing to console him.

Before I can continue, there is a polite, purposeful cough.

"Ah!" Martin's hands fly up as he turns to reveal a young man, mid-twenties, standing behind him. The man is dressed in a dark, well-tailored suit. His auburn hair is cut short and he has the same devastating square jaw as Martin. He is holding a large, closed umbrella. He adjusts his round bifocals and steps forward as Martin motions to him.

"Katherine, please let me introduce my exceedingly clever nephew, Aiden. Sarah's son. He's a graduate student at UT and is hoping his current assistance on this project will boost his application for adjunct in a few years." Martin turns to me conspiratorially. "Not to mention his familial affiliations."

He laughs warmly, clapping Aiden on the back. I offer my hand to the young man. He politely takes it, raising it but not touching it to his lips.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Professor Bowers," Aiden says. "I have heard great things of your work. I look forward to your input on our current project."

A polite and practiced response, there is no warmth in his welcome. Aiden's eyes are not as brilliant blue as his uncle's, but they are no less observant. I watch him take stock of my person. I do wonder what his calculations make of me, but whatever conclusion he comes to, he says no more.

I look at Martin suddenly realizing what Aiden has said.

"You are not presently in possession of the piece," I say, part in statement, part in question, feeling in total quite misled.

"We have found it, but not yet retrieved the item, no," Martin clarifies, looking dismayed. He takes my arm and turns me, walking me away from the train and patting my hand. "I did not mean to deceive you, Katherine. I had simply thought that you would desire to join us for the discovery."

It is my turn to feel apologetic.

"Of course." I take a breath. "Of course, I do. It is no less exhilarating to be part of the expedition. Perhaps more so."

Martin looks reassured. He turns to Aiden, who is walking behind us. "Be a good lad and collect the professor's luggage, would you?"

Aiden says nothing and moves off before I can tell him which is mine. I turn to Martin, but he's already beginning to talk about his process of discovery and how stimulating it is being back in research, good for the heart and all that.

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Martin guides me through the small train station and outside to what appears to be a main thoroughfare. The street is unpaved. I use my free hand to hold my skirts up out of the mud. I never thought I would consider cobblestone “clean,” but apparently I have grown accustomed to city life.

The way is lined with a few trees and many two and three-story wood and stone buildings, most of which have small signs hanging by their door: “chemist,” “shoemaker,” “textiles.” Vandelin, though simple, is larger than I anticipated. As we pass the open door of a tavern, I can hear several loud patrons already at their drinks. I catch a whiff of old ale and something a little fouler. I raise my hand to cover my nose.

We walk leisurely, allowing Aiden time to join us. He finds us just as it begins to rain again. He immediately opens the umbrella to hold over us and he is, surprisingly, holding my valise. I congratulate him on his discovery, and he honors me with a slight smile.

“It was the only one remaining,” he confides.

I return his smile warmly and the three of us continue. I, on Martin’s arm; Martin, discussing the merits of living out of the city; and Aiden, silent and trailing. Shortly we turn down a side street with slightly larger buildings. There are no signs and each building has space for a small garden—an affluent residential district. Martin directs us to one of these and welcomes me through an unlocked front door.

I pause in the foyer, struck by the warmth and simple charm of the dwelling. Everything is polished wood and brass. There are thick, braided carpets in the entry hall and lit candles in every sconce up the flight of stairs and down the hall. To my right is a wide, doorless entrance to a sitting room with wonderfully clear glass windows facing the street. I see shelves of books and I can feel Martin watching as I walk in and gasp. An impressive painting hangs above a large fireplace, covering the space between mantel and ceiling. The image is of a radiant white unicorn boldly defending itself against a fiery bat-winged dragon. They seem truly alive. I shudder.

“This is extraordinary,” I say, and Martin comes to stand next to me, gazing at the painting. He nods.

“Quite terrifying, isn’t it?” he asks. “A young woman in town is the artist,” he continues without waiting for my response. “Her work is, as you can see, exquisite. Many in town think what she does is unseemly but, mark me, she’ll be something, someday.”

I turn to him, and his eyes are twinkling. He is excited. Aiden has come to stand in the doorway. He clears his throat.

“I’ve put your luggage in your room, Professor. You’ll want to change before dinner.”

“Yes. Thank you, Aiden,” I say.

“Please show her the room,” Martin requests of his nephew. “We have so much to discuss this evening,” he says in parting, turning back to gaze up at his painting. We are dismissed.

Aiden leads me up the stairs to a small but comfortable guestroom. There is a fire burning in the fireplace and one look at the four-poster bed tells me I will be sleeping in simple luxury. There are two bubbled glass windows that look out onto the street and a lady’s vanity in the corner. A few books and extra candles sit on the mantel above the hearth and lantern on the ledge of one of the windows.

“Will this be satisfactory, Professor?” Aiden asks from the doorway.

“This is lovely. Thank you.”

He nods and turns to go.

“Aiden,” I say. He looks back, one hand on the door. “Please, call me Katherine. There is no need for formalities between friends.”

He regards me for a moment in his calculating way, then bows his head and departs, shutting the door behind him. Something about his silence creates an uneasiness in my chest. I consider locking the door. I shake my head to clear away the feeling.

I take off my gloves and begin to search my room. My fingers trace over the joints of the fireplace and bed frame. I check the window mountings. I carefully lower myself to the floor next to the bed. Corsets and full skirts, though fashionable, are fairly limiting to movement. There is nothing under the bed apart from the underside of the frame. I stand and feel under the washbasin on the vanity, finding nothing. I had hoped for something, some sign to the course of action the council wishes me to take, but it seems I am on my own. The uneasiness returns. This is not standard procedure.

I run my thumb over the brand on the inside of my wrist. It is an old scar and the habit eases me. I had been sure to send notice to justify my sudden departure from the university and usual duties. If I have not yet been left instructions, then perhaps someone in the house holds my orders.

My valise sits on the bed. There is nothing to do but to compose myself and wait. When my directives come, I will be ready. I open my suitcase, taking out my dress for dinner and laying it on the bed. It is wrinkled.

There is a knock on the door.

I smooth down my skirts and turn to face it. “Come in.”

The door opens and in steps a lovely little maid. She quickly blinks large, brown eyes and executes a careless curtsy.

“Dr. Hayward sent me to help you dress for dinner.”

“Excellent. I’d like a warm bath and my dress will need ironing. But, you can start by helping me with these laces and out of this filthy traveling get up.”

She immediately closes the door and comes around to begin unlacing the corset. A difficult fashion, though not impossible to don on one’s own. I do find, though, I appreciate how it firms all the places that grow soft with age. I feel the pressure around my chest begin to slacken and for the first time in hours take a truly deep breath. She lays the silly thing on the bed and helps me out of my overdress, which she also lays on the bed. I sit on the small bench at the vanity, and she begins to take the pins from my hair.

“What is your name?” I ask her.

“Mathilde,” she answers.

“A goodly name. Are you the one who did up my room so well?” I ask.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“How old are you, Mathilde?”

“Fifteen this summer, ma’am.”

“Have you worked here a long time?”

“Since the beginning of winter, ma’am.”

“You must be doing a wonderful job to be here so long,” I say, realizing I am too coarse in my questioning. She begins to brush my hair, and I can see her smile a little at me in the polished tin and glass mirror. She soon finishes.

“I’ll get the bath,” she says, “The steward will bring the tub up, ma’am.” She heads for the door.

“Mathilde.”

She turns back.

“How many staff does Dr. Hayward employ?” I ask.

“Three, ma’am.”

I dismiss her and wait. Soon there is another knock on my door and the steward brings in a large copper tub. He sets it in front of the fire. I am sitting on the bed in only a shift. He doesn’t so much as glance my way as he hauls in buckets of hot water. He departs without saying a word. A modest man and obviously not in the council’s employ.

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After bathing, I dress, again grateful for Mathilde’s assistance with laces. After, I stand by one of the windows, a hand on the smoothness of my belly. There is very little traffic on the street. A man is lighting the Azotath lamps on their posts. I watch a woman pass by, holding an umbrella, and a man with the collar of his coat turned up to stop the rain. I rub the brand on my wrist. I trace the outer circle with a finger. Perhaps there will be no word. It has happened before, once, ages ago. Before I was Katherine.

Mathilde returns to tell me Dr. Hayward and Master Aiden are awaiting my company and if I would please join them for dinner. I pull on my long gloves and ask her to show me the way.

Dinner is in a lovely, albeit dark, dining hall and is delicious. There is a young roast goose with spiced pears, candied potatoes and forest nuts, buttered greens, apricots and cream and a robust red wine. Martin is spoiling me, and I am enjoying it. I tell him as much. He glows with my praise and says it has been too long since his home has been graced with such a delightful guest. Upon my request, the cook joins us for a moment. I give him my compliments. He, like the steward, and Mathilde before him, is cool and competent.

When we finish our meal, Martin suggests brandy in the sitting room, to enhance our conversation on his findings. He dismisses the staff for the evening, and we sit in low wingback chairs in front of the fire. Aiden rolls in a brass and glass drink cart, positioning it behind our seats. He brings us each a small glass and then take his own to stand in front of the fire. We sit listening to the flames consume the wood. It is a pleasant, still moment that reminds me of similar evenings with Roland.

“Alright, Dr. Hayward,” I say, turning in my seat. My patience can take no more. “Where is the dagger?”

Martin hands his glass to Aiden, who sets it on the mantel. The old scholar leans forward in his chair and, reaching into the pocket of his dinner coat, produces a small notebook. It is worn and has numerous, odd bits of parchment stuck between its pages. He flips through and pulls one of the odd pieces out. Unfolding it, he hands the paper across the space between us.

It’s a map of the countryside north of Vsandelin. There is a small area in the middle of a wooded area circled in black ink. It looks to only be a full day’s trek into the wild. Martin has written all over the edges of the paper, but it’s in his horrid scrawl. I cannot decipher the meaning. I look up at him, I know my eyes betray my excitement.

“Here?” I ask. “It’s so close.”

The old man nods.

“Further than it seems,” Aiden says, turning from the fire. “There are no roads into that part of the wood. And no towns or holdings closer than Vsandelin.”

He pauses, meets my eyes and says, “But it’s there.”

His conviction is stirring. I believe him.

“Do you know which one it is?” I ask.

Aiden looks at Martin, who elucidates. “We suspect it to be the blade used by the Duinmar in their healing ceremonies. Maybe even the same blade that healed the hero Vardok. We consulted—”

I interrupt him. “The Duinmar? Vardok? Martin, the Duinmar vanished on Kohrem. Their blade was lost with them. And that Vardok had any contact with them, that is pure speculation.”

Martin’s lips thin as he allows my protest. The set of his eyes tells me he is not impressed with my little outburst. Without saying more, he opens his notebook and points at a page. As usual, I can’t read what he has written without focused inspection.

“What is this?” I ask.

“This was copied from the journal of the mage,” Martin says. “It is a passage that tells of a great warrior stumbling into the Duinmar camp, gravely wounded.”

It is my turn to thin my lips. I will not rule out the possibility of Aiden and Martin’s conclusion, but I’m unconvinced.

“Who is this mage? I am unfamiliar with the mythos,” I say. I am lying. I have heard of this man before, though only in passing and much too long ago to rely on memory.

“Well, it’s someone who calls himself ‘the mage.’ We’re not sure there was anything magical about the man,” Martin admits. “In truth, it could have been a man or a woman, Zanbaqi or —”

“We believe,” Aiden interjects, “the author, whoever he might have been, was a storyteller, or simply a collector. A literate man who traveled hundreds, perhaps thousands of miles, gathering the stories of the Tribes together into one tome.”

“There’s more?” I ask and look at Martin. It feels as if my heart stops beating, waiting for his response. If this collection exists, it may hold evidence of other items the council seeks. Items that I seek.

Martin shakes his head and says, “Nothing so glorious that we’ve been able to uncover. Only scraps, bits in fairy stories, and occasionally an odd mention in obscure texts.”

I can only sigh my disappointment. I look back at the map in my lap.

Aiden pulls a footstool between our chairs and sits down.

“There is a little more. This isn’t the first time Uncle has used the writings of this storyteller to find historical artifacts,” he says. “But a lot of the actual writings are lost. We think someone tried to destroy the stories.”

Martin is nodding, quiet for a moment as he begins to leaf through his notebook.

“Destroy stories?” I ask. “For what purpose?”

“Uncle and I have a theory,” Aiden says, glancing at Martin, who is lost in the search through his records and notations. “What if someone doesn’t want the stories known? What if there are people working against the discovery of any magic left in the world? There is a fragment of a story we found which alludes to some marvelous incantation. But, it seems enchanted items are necessary to complete the spell. And, we must ask, what purpose does the magic serve?”

As Aiden speaks, I focus on keeping my face interested, but skeptical. They do not know how close they come to the truth. They have found enough to suspect there is someone else looking for the daggers.

“Ah, here. Read this.” Martin thrusts his notebook into my hands, interrupting my thoughts and concern. “While the other writings seem to be from older, perhaps oral stories, this appears to be from an event the mage witnessed.”

I bring the pages close to my face, squint in the firelight and begin to decrypt Martin’s handwriting.

*Fr. Mage – Duinmar...fish people use knife to cure sick child. Boy.
Dying. Lives but changed, always cold. The magic is strong.*

“What is this?” I ask.

“We found this copied into a larger, older book of mythology. One of the books we,” Martin coughs, “borrowed from the less frequented part of the university library. The writing is credited to the mage. It speaks of the Duinmar as the fish people.”

“Fish people,” I scoff, “are an Elitor legend, only stories.”

Martin holds out his hand and takes his book back. “Is the knife only a story, Katherine?” he asks. “Did you come just to sit by the fire and speak of stories?”

I lower my eyes, an act of being justly humbled.

He continues, “All good stories house a seed of truth, and this small bit of writing says the Duinmar are the fish people of legend.”

Gooseflesh covers my upper arms as I realize what he has patiently repeated for me, a stubborn child. Pieces of puzzles slip into place, hinting at answers to many questions that had before seemed hopelessly unanswerable.

“The Duinmar are the fish people,” I repeat, my eyes wide. “They survived.”

Aiden is nodding, watching me carefully, witnessing the moment of true comprehension.

“At least for a time,” Aiden clarifies.

“Long enough to reach Elitor?” I ask.

“We believe so,” he says.

I look at the map in my hands.

“There is something there, Katherine. And I intend to have a look,” Martin says.

“To have it so close after so long,” I say. I am hopeful despite inherent misgivings. I make a decision to write to the council in the morning, to inform them of my intent to travel with Martin and Aiden to the location on the map. If there is something to find, I will find it.

“In truth, I wasn’t looking for a particular piece until after our conversation last year—”

Martin is interrupted by a knocking on the front door. Aiden visibly starts, almost dropping the book. He shuts it and stands, looking at Martin. Martin and I exchange a look and then Martin turns to Aiden.

“Expecting guests?” Martin asks, teasing Aiden with a wide smile. Aiden shakes his head, eyes wide and cheeks pale. He is clearly upset. Martin looks at me again. I also shake my head. No, of course not. I know no one other than he in Vsandelin and there are very few who even know I am here.

“Perhaps the wind?” I suggest with a smile.

There is another firm knock at the door.

“Aiden, be a good lad and see who that is,” Martin says.

Aiden swallows and sets the book down on his stool. He does as he is bid, though he hesitates at the door. I understand. At this hour, surely all decent persons are in their own parlors, drinking their own brandy. Aiden opens the door. Martin watches from his chair, but I stand. It is

better to be on your feet in uncertain circumstances. Aiden looks toward us and back at the door. He steps through the doorway and disappears. I realize I am holding my breath as he steps back in and shakes his head.

“There is nothing.”

“Nothing? No one?” Martin asks, rising from his chair. Together we join Aiden to confirm his observation. Martin steps out, raising a hand against the light rain, and looks up and down the street. I peer around his shoulder, also looking up and down the lane and return to the foyer. He walks back in, shaking his head, an echo of Aiden’s actions.

“Nothing,” he confirms, “Very strange. Quite peculiar.”

Aiden closes the door behind us, and we return to the warmth of our chairs in the sitting room. We exchange glances. The curtains flutter and a cool breeze dances through the room. I shiver and Martin notices.

“Close the window, Aiden. It’s a terrible night to have it open,” he says.

“The window?” Aiden turns and stares at the window. It is about halfway open, and even from where I sit I can see a few raindrops hitting the dry sill. It was not open before the knock at the door. Martin watches as Aiden shuts the window. The young man stands there a moment looking out onto the dimly lit road and the darkness beyond.

“I do believe you have mischievous spirits, Martin,” I say. “I rather think we should all have another nip before we turn in, to scare them away.”

Martin chuckles and hands Aiden his cup. I reach for my own and find it set on top of a small piece of paper. I pick up the glass and stand, holding out my hand to Aiden.

“Let me,” I say. “You’ve been so kind to serve us all evening.”

He allows me to take his cup, but he does not sit. I see him glance again towards the window. I collect Martin’s from him as well and set them on the drink cart. I take a breath and peel the piece of paper from under my glass, turning it over.

I know the design: a four pointed diamond placed inside of two circles, inside of a larger, round shape. The same pattern as the scar on my wrist. It is a star inside our double moons inside the sun, all the sources of Lessa’s sacred light and the sigil of the Society of the Divine. It has been drawn in red ink. The council has spoken.

I close my eyes, only for a moment, and quietly take as deep a breath as my corset will allow. I put the sigil into my pocket and take out a small paper packet from a deeper, hidden pocket. I tear the corner and as I pour brandy into Aiden’s glass, add the powdered contents.

I hand their glasses back to them and then retrieve my own. I raise my cup, and the gentlemen follow suit.

“To finding what is lost,” I say, words close to my heart and purpose.

Aiden drinks first, drinks deeply. The evening has worn on him. The drugs work quickly and he soon excuses himself, claiming weariness. He will not wake tonight. When my work is finished, he will not wake ever again.

In an indecorous act, I gulp the remaining liquor in my glass. Martin clears his throat. He is watching me. I have the grace and skill to look abashed that he has caught me in so improper an act. My breath catches as I look into his blue eyes, acknowledging the true, heartbreaking conclusion of my orders.

“Your playful ghosts have me somewhat unnerved,” I say, taking his glass from him. “Let’s indulge in one more before we complete our evening.”

“You? Unnerved? By ghosts?” The old man chuckles. “Of all the people I know, and I know quite a number, I’ve always considered you one of the most stoic.”

“Martin,” I interrupt him, “who else knows of your research, your findings?” I pull the gloves off my hands and set them next to our glasses on the drink cart.

“I believe only the three of us at this time,” he replies. “However, we should write to the university in the morning and request assistance for our little adventure, yes? Getting to the ruins won’t be too difficult, I’m sure, but who knows how long it will take to discover—”

As always, I am taken aback at how easy it is to push the knife into someone, as if it longs to be sheathed in a warm body.

I feel the familiar surge of vitality. It sets the small hairs on my arms on end and causes the muscles in my middle to contract. I take a quivering breath. It is not an unpleasant feeling. I lift my eyes to the dragon and unicorn painting above the hearth, as what is left of Martin’s life energy courses into me. His hand pulls at my own, but the magic is strong. I feel his fingers weaken and slip away. I begin to tremble as the torrent slows and stops. I close my eyes and pull the knife from his neck. Tears, warm and wet, slip down my cheeks. I always cry after.

I lift a hand to wipe away the tears and feel the smooth fullness of my cheeks. I open my eyes and look at the back of my hands. They are also fuller, smoother, less of a woman in decline and more of a woman in her prime. I lift my skirts and slide the wet knife into its secret sheath on my thigh. It feels warm.

From where I stand, behind his chair, I place a hand on Martin’s cheek. I close his eyes and kiss the top of his head. I will deeply miss his companionship and guidance.

I lift my eyes and see the book on the footstool by the fire. Martin’s missing piece. I wonder how many more clues for our mysteries are waiting within its pages. I will deliver it to the council and they will have it examined. The other blades must be found.

I pick up the map and Martin’s notebook and put them into my pocket. I can’t look at Martin, but I stare once more at the painting above the fireplace. In this unsteady light, the dragon is fierce and he is winning. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, I shiver. Someone is watching.

I turn, strangely expecting Aiden to be in the hallway, but there is no one. I hold my breath and I listen. There is no sound in the house, no creaking, shuffling or breathing. The logs in the fire shift and my hand jumps to my chest. Stoic, indeed. I shake my head at my own foolishness. I have spooked myself with stories of ghosts and acts of murder.

Movement near the window catches my eye. I turn, thinking it to be the curtains—perhaps in his disquiet Aiden hadn’t shut them completely.

The windows are shut fast. I start as I realize there is a face behind the glass, looking directly at me. A face I recognize.

“No,” I say. The edges of my vision blur. I see nothing except the face in the window. I can’t breathe.

“You’re dead.”

I don’t realize I am stepping back until my hip bumps into the drink cart. It tips. I am too slow. The sound as it hits the ground is monstrous. Cups and bottles shatter. The sharp scent of alcohol permeates the air. It serves to focus my mind. I raise my eyes to the window. The face is gone. But there is fog on the glass where warm breath met the chill of the night. I stumble to the front door and hasten into the darkness, chasing the ghost.

The End