

THERE'S A GHOST IN MY HOUSE

by pwatson1974

Jackie blinks, scratching her nose, "Ooooooooo, that's better. I've had an itch there for the past week!" she turns towards Dell, "An' as fer ye, ye'll get yers. Just ye wait."

"Promises, promises. Didn't you enjoy yourself?"

"Oh, I enjoyed it. In fact, it would be downright selfish not to share how good it felt, don't ye think?"

"As if. You think you'll do any better at poker this time?"

"Well, yeah. The boss won't be influencin' things s'much this time."

"I didn't need him last time." Dell replies, although she doesn't look quite as confident as she tries to sound.

"Doesn't matter. It's not as if playtime is all tha' structured normally."

"Huh?"

"Ye don' normally get a plaything fer a week or so. More as an' when ye get a particularly fun idea. An' we've had a lot o' time t' think up some really, really fun ideas for ye." she grins, "Enjoy. We'll discuss this again soon." and saunters out of the room, waving over her shoulder.

Dell looks over at Paul, "Uhm, she's kidding, right?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure she's kidding."

Dell breathes out in relief.

"There's no way she'll tell you what she's planned before it happens."

"What??"

He shrugs. "I did try to warn you."

"Well, you didn't do a good enough job."

He shrugs again, "Not my fault you're getting deaf already. And it's time to bring Zil back."

"Do we have to?"

"Yes, we have to. Turn around."

Dell pouts, folding her arms in a sulk, but she turns around as requested. As Paul pulls the zipper down her back, she feels the suit pulling away from her. She hears a giggle as it finally pulls free, standing empty in front of her, hands on its hips, the empty face tilted quizzically.

"What? What's she looking at?"

"Uhm, well..."

"Don't you start? Hey!" she jumps back as a purple finger pokes into her chest, "What did you do that for?!" she rubs her chest, and looks down, feeling a bust that wasn't there last month, "Hey! I've still got boobs!" she throws her arms around Paul,

"Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou!" and rushes out the door.

Zil tilts her head, looking at him, "Don't ask me. I didn't do anything. I guess her body got used to being your shape. She was wearing you an awful lot, after all."

Zil reaches down her back, her foot tapping, "Oh, right, sorry."

Jackie lounges across the sofa, "Oh, stretching just feels soooo good right now."

"Hey, where are we?" Petra asks, looking out the window.

"Oh, that, we're doing a special show or something, sis. Something spiritual for an anniversary."

"How do you know that?"

"Boss was talking to Dell, and for the last month, I've been her." she sighs, "Was nice to be young again."

"Awww, poor old Zil. All 20 years of ye, an' Dell's makin' ye feel old."

Zilvara sticks her tongue out, "Oh, 'Zbbttttt' Anyway, it's some sort of Halloween anniversary show. Although that doesn't sound very spiritual to me."

"It's a spiritualism show, Zil, not spiritual. The original owner of the theatre was connected with the Davenport Brothers, not sure how, and his family wants us to do a show. And the theatre's supposed to be haunted as well. So we'll see if the real ghosts want to join in the fun."

"And you know this..."

"Because one of us pays attention, and because I do handle the bookings mostly, remember? Ever since that monorail gig my husband," she smiles, "got for us, the boss has got me doing the management. So be nice, peasants, or you don't get paid." she grins.

"Yes, y'r' 'Ighness. Jes' remember we've got a good supply o' guillotines in case we decide t' storm th' Bastille."

"Good point. Maybe I'll just..."

"If ye mention Dell now, I swear I'll lamp ye. Give it a rest, fer God's sake, Sam."

"She's a..."

"Assistant. Co-worker. Flatmate. Get used t' it. The rest of us've just been put through her revenge fer a month and yet yer still the only one who hates her. Grow up. She's the one who's s'posed t'be an immature little brat, not ye."

The door opens before Sam can reply, "You were talking about me, weren't you?" Paul asks as he walks through the door and into the suddenly silent room.

"Just wonderin' where ye've taken us this time. An' why."

"Didn't Sam explain things?"

"Well, yeah, sorta. A spiritualism show in a haunted house fer some old agent's relatives."

"Something like that."

"Meanin' what?"

"Meaning we'll need someone who can be a convincing medium and talk to the spirits, and we'll need a ghost."

"Ghost?"

"Someone to disappear and handle all the ethereal stuff for the spirit cabinet. Do I have any volun..."

"Dell." Jackie replies, smiling sweetly at the young woman as she stands behind Paul in the doorway.

"Huh?"

"Oh, yeah." Zilvara grins, "Dell should definitely do it. She's used to being the ghost in the van."

"Mmhmmm." Petra nods, still looking out the window."

"Well, I guess that seems settled, then." He turns, "Alright with you, Dell?"

"I guess."

"Excellent. Now, for the medium, I was going with Sam, but I'm not sure letting you two get into a spirit cabinet together wouldn't produce a lot more ghosts. Jaks, do you think you can do dark, spooky and mysterious?"

"I think I can manage. He does know this is all woo-woo nonsense, though, doesn' he?"

"Woo-woo nonsense? You've been reading James Randi again, haven't you?"

She shrugs, "But he does know we ain't exactly contactin' the departed?"

"He knows we're a magic act, not a medium, yeah."

"So we're bein' honest in tellin' him we're thieves and hucksters?"

"Pretty much."

"I'll dig out the long black dresses, then."

"Not too low-cut, either. We're supposed to be recreating the feel of the times. That goes for the rest of you too."

“As we’re getting into the times, can we...”

Paul rolls his eyes, “Yes, Zil, you can get the corsets out. Just don’t pull too hard, especially on Dell’s.”

“Spoilsport.”

Dell stands in the wings, barely listening as Paul begins his spiel, the corset pulled tight, and she's sure someone, beginning with Z, pulled it too tight, how did they breathe with this around them anyway, and why on earth did they make it so uncomfortable. A pale orange dress covers her, the long skirt brushing over the floor, a darker hooded cloak draped from her shoulders. Her hair hangs in ringlets, tied up and feeling thoroughly odd and heavy on her head, as she fingers the amber stone set in her choker.

“Stop fidgettin’.” Jackie hisses, her hair unbound, cascading over her shoulders, the dark green gown seeming to fade into black in places.

“How? These things are digging into me. And how do you breathe anyway?”

“Breathe with the shoulders. And jes' grin an' bear it. Ye won't be feelin' 'em fer long.”

“Oh, that reassures me.”

“...I present, the mysterious Madame Jacqueline and her familiar made flesh.”

“Showtime. Now remember to keep quiet.” Jackie grins, and walks out, her hand closing on Dell's, long fingers wrapped in a forest green evening gloves, pulling her out onto the stage. The applause is polite, and Dell smiles out at the audience, all decked up in long gowns or tuxedos. A quick squeeze on her hand reminds her she's supposed to be acting and her face assumes a studied neutral face, what she calls the 'I didn't see nothing' look. Paul takes Jackie's hand, resplendent in a tuxedo, the shirt gleaming white. Jackie curtsies stiffly to the audience, leaving Dell standing mutely behind them, her hands held together.

“And now, Madame Jacqueline will send her spirit familiar back into the ethereal world bordering ours where the souls of the departed reside to establish contact.”

Dell steps forward as Paul stands to one side of the stage. She reaches up and raises the hood of her robe, pulling it over her hair carefully. She turns, the thick robe hiding her from the audience.

Jackie takes hold of the edges of the hood, “Return from whence you came, spirit. Walk the grey path before me and mark my passage in the spirit world.”

Dell smiles, and the robe collapses in Jackie's hand as she vanishes. Dell feels her body pulling away, going numb as she watches herself fade away. She feels the robe fall through her, the cloth tickling as it collapses through her phantom body to the stage. “*That always feels sooo weird.*” she floats upwards as Zilvara and Petra carry a tilted Ouija board out to Jackie. “*Oh, well, nothing for me to do yet. Might as well look around.*” She looks out over the audience. And stares at the woman floating above them, her long hair waving of its own accord, the colour unknown, as washed out and transparent as Dell's own body. The figure's lithe figure is covered, if only just, by a one piece costume, long boots covering her legs up to the thigh and long gloves over her arms, her thighs and shoulders bare. “*Who, what, who are you?*”

The woman looks up, staring straight at her. “*You can see me? You can see me!*” she surges forward, arms outstretched. Dell shudders, getting flashes of horror movies her Dad doesn't think she's seen, as the ghostly woman rushes towards her. Translucent, ethereal hands grab her shoulders, “*How can you see me? Who are you? Why... I can touch you? Are you real? I haven't gone mad, have I?*”

Dell pushes, shoving her back, “*Get off me!*” the woman flies backwards.

“*What did I, you touched me, oh, God, you're real! I'm not mad. You're real. And you can see me and touch me!*” she looks back at Dell, tears running down her face, falling through the audience below.

"Yeah, I'm real, are you?. What are you? A ghost?"

"Sort of, I guess, but not really."

"God, you're about as vague as the boss."

"What?"

"Never mind. If you're not a ghost, what are you?"

"I'm, well, I'm a witch. Sort of."

"A witch? Ok, I suppose I can buy that. Are you," she pauses, "you know, are you..."

"What?"

"You know. Are you, well, alive, really?"

"I, I think so."

"You think so? How can you not know if you're alive?"

"I've been like this for more than a year! How am I supposed to know if I'm really alive when no one can see me and I can't touch anything?! Maybe I died, maybe I just vanished, but I'm not real anymore. I'm not me. I'm just a memory of me."

"Oh, come off it. You grabbed me. And that hurt, by the way, so you're real. At least as real as I am."

"And you're a ghost. So how real's that?"

"Only for the show."

"That's how I got here. Practicing."

"Practicing?"

"For my show."

"Your show?"

"My first show, the MagiciAnne. Only, it, well, it didn't work, did it? "

"Seems to have been pretty successful to me."

She looks down at her body, *"Only if I come back. And I can't. I'm not real like this, so I can't cast a spell. There's nothing to, to, I'm stuck like this..."* she starts sobbing, the tears running over her ethereal fingers.

"Why?"

She looks up, *"What do you mean 'why'? Weren't you listening?! The spells don't work when I'm like this!!!!"*

"Well, yeah, I got that, I'm not stupid, but when I get back, the boss can get you back after."

The woman blinks, and blinks again, *"Could he?"* she asks,

Dell shrugs, *"I can't see why not. I've been eaten and I don't think this can be that hard to sort out."*

"Eaten? Really?"

Dell grins, nodding, *"The others have really weird ideas of fun."* she pauses, *"Ok, so do I. But that's only because of their bad influence."*

"Right. You really think he could do that?"

"Probably."

"Just probably?"

"Probably's better than what you've got now, isn't it? It's a chance at least, right?"

"I suppose."

Dell feels a pull, tugging her back towards the stage as Faustus ties Jackie tightly to a heavy wooden, high-backed chair, the whole process being watched by a couple from the audience, checking the ropes, Petra, Zil and Sam folding out a screen around them. *"Time for me to go to work. Want to join me?"*

"Me?"

"Well, unless you're doing something else that's more important, of course."

She looks around, wiping her eyes, finally breaking into a slight grin, *"I think my diary's clear for the rest of today."* she drifts after Dell. *"What are we doing?"* and looks at the set up, a tray of instruments sitting to Jackie's side. *"Oh, the Spirit Cabinet?"*

Dell nods, *"And we're the spirits."*

"Well, that could be fun, I suppose." she floats around Jackie as the volunteers step back.

"Who's she? The boss's wife?"

Dell laughs, *"Wife? He'd be lucky. That's Jaks. Boss's main squeeze. She's cool."* The screen closes.

"Guess we'd better get started."

"Guess so." Dell picks up a tambourine, the cymbals clashing as it hovers in the air. The ghost picks up a set of maracas from the tray, moving to the Jackie's other side.

"Dell? How are ye doin' that?"

"♪I get by, with a little help, from my friends.♪" Dell giggles, trying, unsuccessfully, to beat time on the tambourine.

"Aha. So, your name's Dell? Naughty, naughty, keeping a poor girl in the dark like that." she wags her finger, the maracas rattling.

"Well, it wasn't as if there was a good time for introductions. And you didn't tell me your name, either."

"Ooobie. I'm Anne, or Annie, or even Annie-May if it's a very, very cold day in Hell. Take your pick."

"Spirits, cease!" Jackie exclaims. Dell feels the tambourine slip through her fingers onto the tray, the maracas clattering on the floor.

"Now that's not fair!" The screen opens and the volunteers walk back in, examining Jackie's bonds carefully, making sure she's still secure. They walk through Dell and Anne, one woman shivering slightly, before they agree that she is definitely still secure.

"Sir, may I borrow your jacket?"

The volunteer quickly takes off his jacket, and Paul hangs it up on the back of the screen before closing it. Dell picks up the jacket. *"How are you going to put that on? Those ropes are definitely secure."*

The jacket fades in Dell's hands, becoming as transparent as she is. *"Watch and learn."*

"Will ye get a move on, girl? We haven't got that long, y' know."

Dell sticks her tongue out, pulling the jacket through Jackie's ropes. She pulls her hands away and the jacket shimmers back around her, slotted under the ropes.

The cabinet opens, the volunteers gasping as they check the jacket. Anne drifts over, *"Shall we try something a bit different?"*

"Like what?"

She grins, *"Trust me. It'll be fun."*

The cabinet closes. Anne reaches out to Jackie, her fingers closing around the dress. The dress shimmers, Jackie's eyes widening as Anne pulls the dress away. *"Dell, ye'd better have a really good explanation fer this, girl. Or there won't be enough left o' ye fer the boss to put back t'gether."* Jackie hisses, bound to the chair in only her corset and petticoats. Anne grins at Dell and tosses the dress out of the cabinet. The collective gasp of the audience sounds very loud.

"Uhm, well, ladies and gentlemen, it seems the spirits are feeling a bit playful tonight. Still, I'm sure the Lady Jaqueline will be able to get them under control." Paul's voice comes from just outside the cabinet, a slight edge to it. The dress drapes over the top of the cabinet. Dell snatches it in, quickly slipping it into place, pulling the jacket off, all the while glaring daggers at Anne as she giggles in the corner.

"That wasn't..."

"Oh, of course it was. The look on her face was..." she dissolves into helpless laughter.

“Well, ok, maybe it was funny. Just a little. But you shouldn't have done it.”

“Oh, fishsticks! I've been stuck like this for a year! A year! I finally get to have just a little bit of fun and...”

“And you piss off the person who's going to bring you back by screwing up his show. Your brain going more ghostly than the rest of you?”

“Oopsie. He, he won't not help me just for that, will he?”

“Probably not.”

Anne lets out a long sigh of relief.

The cabinet opens, the volunteers filing back in to inspect the still bound, and tightly smiling, with murder gleaming in her eyes, Jackie. One collects his jacket from the peg at the back, shaking his head.

“Are you all satisfied that Jackie is still secured?”

The volunteers all give their assent, to polite applause, and Paul sends them back to their seats, and proceeds to untie Jackie. She rises, smoothing the dress down, glaring around the cabinet. Dell swallows.

“An' now we should be bringin' my familiar back. I need to be havin' a word with her about keepin' the spirits from doin' whatever they want.”

Dell swallows again as Jackie lifts up her folded orange cloak, letting it unfold to the floor. Dell steps into the hooded cloak, feeling her body settle back to solidity, although looking into Jackie's face, hidden from the audience, she's not sure if having a body is something she should really get used to. She turns to the audience, looking contrite, head down, the hood falling back, as Jackie fixes her smile behind her. The audience applaud as the curtain falls. The curtains rise for curtain call, Jackie still smiling as she bows, her hand tightly clenched on Dell's arm.

The curtain rises and falls twice more before they're allowed off the stage. “Now, Dell, p'rhaps ye'd be carin' t' explain what the hell ye thought ye were doin' back there?”

“It wasn't me. It was Anne.”

“Anne? Who's Anne?”

“She's a ghost, sort of. She was...”

“Do I look like I'm stupid t' ye, girl? Ye're way too old t'be blamin' an imaginary friend fer yer pranks. Still, if ye want to behave like a kid, I'm sure we could arrange tha'.”

“But it wasn't me, she's...”

“Dell, ye're not makin' things easier by lyin' t' me.”

Behind her, unseen, unheard, unbelieved, Anne glares at her back, tears trickling down her cheeks to fall through the floor as Jackie half-drags Dell away.



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