

## THE GHOSTLY GAMBIT

At the exact stroke of midnight, the ghost appears.

He is hovering at the foot of Rose Trelawney's bed, his feet hanging down until his bare toes almost brush her thick carpet. His arms are covered in dripping seaweed, which glows a phosphorescent green that lights up the sickly markings surrounding his bushy beard. His eyes are hollow pits that gaze balefully toward the bed.

"Witness my flesh, Rose," he intones between croaking gasps. "My ships sent sailors to their doom, lost souls who returned to drag me down to the briny depths!"

Mrs. Trelawney is bolt upright. She clutches at her sheets, white-knuckled with terror. "Jason," she whimpers. "No."

"Yes!" the figure roars. "And the same fate awaits you, Rose Trelawney! As long as you send boats across the dreaming seas, they will await you! Your death is fast approaching! Do you feel it?"

A faint briny scent drifts across the room. I'm actually quite impressed by the showmanship, but I'm also getting worried that Mrs. Trelawney isn't going to survive to the confession. "Let me guess," I say as I step out of the closet. "She needs to sell her share in the business, as soon as possible."

Both Mrs. Trelawney and the mysterious 'Jason' turn to gape at me. I suppose it's not every day that a middle-aged man with a cane steps out of your closet, let alone one as weathered and lanky as me. Right now, I probably look more like the pirate that I once was than the detective that I've become. "Now, now," I say. "My mother often told me that I could frighten the dead, but I suppose I didn't believe her. Jason Mormont, I presume. Or rather, a dashing talented impersonator."

The ghost manages to croak out, "Who the hell are you?"

"Basil Stark," I say. "Private detective." I turn to Mrs. Trelawney, moving to doff my hat before remembering that I'm not actually wearing one. "Your daughter hired me, ma'am. She was quite concerned for you."

Mrs. Trelawney is trying to blink away the remnants of sleep. "Cares for her inheritance, more like," she manages after a few moments. She looks between me and the would-be ghost. "Is this a dream? It feels unreal."

“That would be the wolfsroot,” I say. “It amplifies dreams, causing them to leak into your waking mind.”

“You shut up,” not-Jason growls, losing an inch of air and almost touching the ground. He turns back to Mrs. Trelawny, his voice rising in tenor. “This is what awaits you, Rose! Spies at every turn! Pirates lurking to kill you for your wealth! Assassins in the night! It will destroy you, as it destroyed me!”

“Dear God,” I say, “you’re still going for it. I applaud the determination, but you can’t possibly have a plan.”

“We will be dragged to hell together!” The false Jason lunges for me, as the light outside the window turns a sickly shade of red. “*Repent!*”

As plans go, it’s not a terrible one. First, he’ll grab me. Then, his associate will yank us both out the window using the rope cleverly hidden in the seaweed. He’s being held aloft by pixie dust and the warm thoughts of how much money this scam will make him, so he’ll fall slowly; I’ll fall quite a bit faster. At that point, he and his partner can deliver me a solid beating while Mrs. Trelawney slips back into her drug-induced dreams, dismissing my accusations.

This plan only has two flaws. The first flaw is that I’m ready for him. He’s expecting me to try and dodge, but instead I step into his attack, drive my cane into his gut, and then step around, as he gasps for breath, to deliver a series of stinging blows.

The second flaw is that his associate is no longer entirely conscious, so when not-Jason gets yanked out the window, falling more quickly than anticipated as the pain and confusion banishes the power of the dust that was helping him to float, he finds himself landing in the waiting arms of Todd Malcolm, one of my three assistants. Not-Jason is large, but Todd is larger, and has the advantages of being both entirely sober and in possession of a rope tied to his opponent.

I leave that fight to its inevitable conclusion and cross to Mrs. Trelawney’s bedside. “Rose?” I ask gently. “You may want to take this.” I hand her a small pill.

“What is it?” she asks suspiciously.

“Nothing much. Ground-up blue coral and a pinch of mint. It strips away illusions, such as the ones you’re suffering from.”

Rose eyes me as though expecting that I’ll be the next one denouncing her. “I am not,” she murmurs sleepily.

“You’re only half-awake,” I correct her. “As I said earlier, you’ve been dosed with wolfsroot. This will help counteract it. You’ll get a hell of a headache, but you’ll be able to think straight and see clearly.”

She studies me for a moment, but the wolfsroot is working to my benefit; whatever she sees, she trusts it. She takes the pill from my hand and uses the glass of water from her nightstand to down it. “Now what the devil is going on?” she asks, as color begins to return to her cheeks.

“It’s a classic Dickens scam,” I say. “I see them all the time.”

“So my old business partner, who died last year, was not hovering at my bedside?”

“He was not. It was an imposter.”

“He was glowing,” she says dubiously. “And floating.”

“Painted seaweed and Dust. It’s a drug. They make it from a mixture of actual fairy dust, cocaine, and a few other fillers.”

“I know what Dust is,” Mrs. Trelawney snaps. She is looking much more herself. “And you say they drugged my tea?”

I nod apologetically. “Technically, your maid drugged the tea.” I’d already confronted the maid and given her a chance to clear out ahead of the reckoning; she didn’t need to be a part of this.

Mrs. Trelawney gasps. “Sylvia? I thought she cared for me.”

“Well, caring for you and the two hundred dollars those two gave her will pay for her brother’s medical bills.”

Mrs. Trelawney’s face clouds over. “The nerve,” she says.

“I just saved you from a Dickens scam, so I think I have some leeway,” I say. “Here’s how it works. Your business partner dies – the crooks don’t cause that, they’re just alert for the occasion. Over the next few months, you begin to see haunting apparitions, hear strange sounds, and so on. You start to think that you’re haunted. It gets worse, until you’re visited in the night by the ghost of your partner.”

Mrs. Trelawney is sizing me up. She looks out the window, which is still glowing faintly red, where we can hear the sounds of a continued scuffle. Not-Jason is doing better than I expected, although that’s probably due to Todd trying not to hurt him too badly. “He had all of the details about my shipping concerns,” she said.

“Bribed your accountant.”

“Maurice? I can’t believe it.”

“You had promised him the position of harbormaster, as I understand it,” I say. “And then took it away from him.”

“He’s a damned fine accountant,” Mrs. Trelawney protests. “I couldn’t spare him. Anyone can move boats around.”

“Well, he didn’t see it that way. A betrayal meets a betrayal, that’s what he told me yesterday.”

Mrs. Trelawney deflates a bit at that, and tries to change the subject. “They use my secrets against me, and then what?”

“And then the payoff, in which your supposed partner tries to use your own guilt and bad behavior on a day of critical significance – in this case, Christmas Eve – to terrify you into selling your stake in the business at a loss and using the money to repair your reputation.”

“And they have a buyer lined up, I expect,” she says.

“High-ranking mob lieutenants, ready to use the ships as cover for their own business,” I agree. “Through a few deniable cut-outs, of course.”

“And you lurked in my closet to catch them in the act?”

“Well, I lurked in your closet, my associate lurked in the bushes, and a second associate lurked on the roof.” I pause. “My third associate has the night off.”

“At my daughter’s behest.”

“Yes. She saw that you were deteriorating, became concerned for you, and hired me to investigate.”

Mrs. Trelawney’s eyes narrow again. “Mr. Stark,” she says, “you are a smooth liar.”

I let myself wince. “And you’ve clearly recovered fully, madam.”

“What did she want?”

“She was hoping,” I admit with an air of reluctance, “that I might find evidence to have you declared not mentally competent.”

“So she was, in fact, only worried about the money,” Mrs. Trelawney says triumphantly.

“No, madam. The thought of you evolving a conscience made her assume madness,” I say bluntly. “She told me that no specter would, and I quote, ‘shake a bent penny out of that old bat’. She also said that you would never admit to

anything being wrong, and that she was afraid that you would bring yourself to harm.”

There’s a knock on the bedroom door. “Is everyone okay in there?”

“We’re both decent, Todd. Bring them in.”

Todd walks into the room, pushing not-Jason and his associate from outside in ahead of him. The two of them have been bound with the ropes that they used to pull the fake ghost out of the room, leaving their legs free to walk. Mrs. Trelawney looks them over with a suspicious eye.

“Well,” she agrees. “That’s certainly not Jason.”

“What should I do with ‘em, Mr. Stark?” Todd asks. Both of the crooks are big, but he’s still bigger, and he looks more like he’s just had a long jog than like he’s just been in back-to-back fights. “They don’t want to say anything.”

The fake ghost tries to meet my eyes, blustering. “You don’t know who you’re messing with, pal,” he starts.

“Do you?” I ask. “I gave my name upstairs, but I don’t think it had the desired effect. The name is Basil Stark. You must have heard of me.”

The other crook is getting a sickly look on her face. She’s not quite as big as her partner, but she’s brawny, covered in old and faded scars. I’d be willing to bet that she’s the actual mobster, and the other guy is just someone they brought in because he looked like the dead Jason and could fake it around a sufficiently drugged victim. “You’re Basil Stark? Like, the for-real Basil Stark?” she asks me.

“Yeah, well we’re with the Outfit,” the fake ghost starts, “and you’re looking for a world of hurt.”

“Shut the hell up, George,” the woman says. As the other crook turns to stare at her, she tries to muster up some courage. “I thought you didn’t mess in Outfit business, Mr. Stark. Thought you had a deal with Mr. Schaefer.”

That gets George’s full attention, and he looks back to me with newfound worry on his face. It’s never good when someone drops the name of your boss’s boss’s boss.

“You’re entirely not wrong, Ms...?”

“Call me Emm.”

“Alright, Emm. Schaefer and I don’t have a deal, precisely, but we have a truce, and we do our best not to start any chain of events that will lead to a war. And the truth is, I don’t much give a damn about a Dickens scam under normal

circumstances. If you gangsters spend your time investigating and defrauding the least savory elements of Everland high society, it's no skin off my nose."

"What?!" Mrs. Trelawney exclaims.

I ignore her. "At the same time, I have a responsibility to my clients. So I'm going to make you an offer. Todd will cut you free, you will leave, and you won't seek any kind of revenge against us, Mrs. Trelawney, or your accomplices in her employ. In exchange, I don't give your names and descriptions to the police, and I don't have to explain any newly turned-over dirt in my yard to my neighbors. What do you say?"

"I'd say that seems pretty fair," Emm says. "Right, George?"

George is gaping at her. "But..."

Emma shoots him a glare. "I said *right*, George?"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah, no problem."

"Not every business deal works out. No hard feelings on either side," I say smoothly.

"No hard feelings??" If Mrs. Trelawney was hoping that raising her voice would draw our attention, she's sorely disappointed.

"I sure don't want any hard feelings with you," Emm agrees. She turns to George as Todd cuts her loose. "Chin up, George. You had a fight with a legend. Might be worth a couple of drinks."

As the two vanish down the stairs, Glimmer drops through the window to land on my shoulder. My last associate is bundled up against the cold; fairies are vulnerable to weather, especially when they're running aerial recon for me. She asks if she should follow them.

"It might be a good idea," I agree. "Just to make sure they aren't planning to double-back. Todd, follow along in case she needs help."

Glimmer nods and takes off again, and I close the window behind her. Todd pauses at the door to give an uncertain half-bow to the aghast Mrs. Trelawney. "Nice to meet you, ma'am." Then he's through the door before she can respond, closing it behind him.

Mrs. Trelawney stares at me in undisguised horror. "You're just letting them *go*?" she demands.

"They didn't kill anyone," I say, finally turning my attention back to her. "They paid a few people fairly in exchange for information, and then they took a shot at your money and missed. Having to explain that to their bosses will be

punishment enough, trust me. Besides, it's Christmas Eve. If there's any night for a second chance, this is it."

"They poisoned me!!"

"Drugged you," I correct. "What do you want to do, go to the police and tell them that you were taken in by a fake ghost?" I shake my head. "Your daughter didn't hire me to send anyone to jail. She hired me to make sure that you were all right, and you are. Case closed."

"I'm the one that they hurt!" Mrs. Trelawney insists. "Not you!" She sits further upright, pointing a finger at me. "How dare you! You come in here and rattle off allegations against all of the closest people in my life!"

"Your daughter, your accountant, and your maid are the closest people in your life?" I ask. "That's depressing. Also, to be fair, you're the one who made the accusation against your daughter. I defended her."

"What gives you the right to say those criminals should be let free?" Mrs. Trelawney is undeterred by my correction. "Just who do you think you are?"

I've had enough. "Who do I think I am?" I repeat her question with deadly calm, locking eyes with her. "I think that I'm Basil Stark. I think that I was Gentleman Starkey, first mate of the Jolly Roger, who survived in that position longer than any other pirate because I was cruel enough to keep my captain's amusement and cunning enough to evade his displeasure. I've committed crimes that make yours seem like idle jokes, and atrocities that would haunt your nightmares forever." Mrs. Trelawny shrinks back at the cold fury in my voice. "I am living proof that there is no justice in this world, Mrs. Trelawny, because I did not deserve even the mercy of a quick death. Who am I?"

Carefully, with some effort, I let the old mantle of the pirate that I've started to wrap around myself fall back into the past. "I'm the man who was given a second chance that I never looked for, simply because the people who gave it to me believed that it should be offered. To become someone better. To live my life to atone for my sins."

"And did you?" Her voice is almost a whisper.

I laugh gently. "I never will. It's not possible. There are those who will never forgive me, and that's their right. There are harms I can never undo. There are times that I slip up, and I hurt someone again. But I won't stop trying, not until the day that I die. Maybe not even then. Maybe one day I'll be the one dripping in seaweed, warning prospective pirates to avoid my fate."

Mrs. Trelawney shakes her head. “And you’re at peace with that?”

“You don’t atone because you want to be forgiven, Mrs. Trelawney. You atone because you want to be better.”

She thinks about that for a moment. “Why did you stop those two, Mr. Stark? If I’m just another one of the least savory elements of Everland high society, as you put it, why not let them ruin me?”

“Your daughter was worried about you.”

“As simple as that?”

“Sometimes it is. Good night, Mrs. Trelawney.”

I meet Todd downstairs, by the front door. He’s nursing a bruise on one cheek, but he gives me a lopsided smile. “Crooks cleared off proper, Mr. Stark. Glimmer’s in the car. How’d it go upstairs?”

“Hard to say,” I admit. “The blue coral helped, I think. Stripped away some of the illusions she’d been holding onto along with the ones these two foisted on her. But it’ll be up to her. Maybe by tomorrow she’ll have rationalized it all away, be back to the way things were. Maybe a year from now I’ll be taking a client investigating her for some crime or another.” I meet Todd’s smile with one of my own. “But maybe she’ll choose to become someone new. The sort of person whose daughter worries for her.” I pat him on the shoulder. “Come on, let’s get moving. It’s damned late, and Holly won’t like it if we oversleep tomorrow.”

I glance back at the Trelawney manor as we walk away, outlined in the snow. I expect it will be some time before we can see whether this story will have a happy ending, but if an old pirate like me can become someone who has a family waiting for them on Christmas morning, anything is possible.