

The Bittersweet Magick

By

Josh A. Stevens

How many years had it been since I left this house? Too many, and I was about to lose my last chance to return. Some said that it had already been and gone, but they didn't know the truth behind the house tucked in the corner of that street, hidden behind a hedge that swallowed even the iron fencing. I was taught magic in that house by the last living sorcerer. Well, he *was* the last living, but since when did technicalities like that ever stop people like us? I needed to put some things of my own to rest, and the night before the keys would be exchanged was my last chance, before his precious sanctum joined the trees in the forest of overpriced family homes.

I sneaked in through my usual entrance around the back, but I guess I still had a lot to learn about cloaking my presence, as I was met by the house silky who waited to greet me in the porch. I know it's not exactly unusual for a spirit, but she looked the same as she did the day I left. The house ghost was still pale, petite, and wore the same simple silk dress. The only difference was that she greeted me with a serene smile and not the banshee wails of when I walked out.

'Sorry I'm late. It's been... y'know.'

I had never been good at this. I even extended my hand only to realise that *of course* she couldn't shake it, but the silky was patient with me. She led me into the kitchen, which despite its small size had always been stuffed to bursting point with a whole range of pots and pans probably only used once or twice, as well as a table with far too many chairs crowded

around it, and an office's supply of stationary mixed in with the cutlery. To call it a mess would have been polite.

That isn't what I saw though.

It had been stripped bare. I could actually see the beech surface of the table, and even the place-mats with the ducks were gone. It didn't look new, but hollow. Something fundamental was missing, and it felt wrong.

One of the only items still in the room was a black marker pen, which the silky lifted into the air with telekinesis, and used to write on a white board affixed to a cupboard door.

'Welcome home Lyra.' she wrote.

'Have the others been?' I asked.

'You're the last one.'

'Has anyone else performed the spell?'

She shook her head.

Of course.

'Sorry I couldn't do anything about this place. What will you do now?'

The silky shrugged. While she couldn't speak with words, her face told of a reluctant acceptance.

I was always told that the silky was bound to this house by its very first owner, and she'd served generations of sorcerers since. She was here long before me and was always going to be here after, but... in a house where she'll no longer be seen? It seemed like I had a lot that I needed to settle with my master.

When I entered the front room, those childhood memories of sleeping through magical lectures and squabbling over the best spot to watch TV seemed so distant, just like the room itself. Everything had been cleared out except for the bookcases that lined the walls, but every tome and relic that they ever held were now in places unknown (probably claimed by the other, more obedient students). If there was one upside to suddenly realising just how big the room was, it was that the open floor was the perfect place for me to paint the runes of the summoning circle.

I lit candles around the room, which returned some semblance of a homely glow, before I put on my old robe and pointed hat. It wasn't exactly my aesthetic, but I had to make myself look the part. To reach out across the veil, I needed something of value to both of us to serve as a conduit. Around my neck I wore a green agate stone that my master gave me when he first took me in. Despite everything that had happened since, I couldn't part with it. Perhaps I always knew that I'd need it for that moment.

I stepped into the circle and clasped the agate tight between both hands as I bowed in prayer.

'Great Spirits of this Earth, hear my plea. I, Lyna White, apprentice of Solomon the Nurturing, request an audience with my master.'

There were no doors or windows open, but a gust of wind rushed through and blew the candles out. I wasn't left in darkness, however, as the agate in my hands and the runes on the floor began to pulsate with a verdant glow.

Then the air went stale. My shoulders tensed under the weight of a presence looming over me. No matter how hard I tried, my head refused to turn and look behind me, but I could feel that it was his suffocating aura.

'It's nice to see you too.' I said as I opened a clenched hand, sending out a pulse of magical energy that caused the presence to fall back. In an instant, the weight lifted. Lights crackled

in the palm of my hand as I summoned my African Blackwood staff, which I held in an offensive stance.

‘Is that really how you say “Hello”, after all this time?’ my master’s voice boomed throughout the room.

‘You’re the one who snuck up on me. You’re just cranky after waking up.’

‘Did I *ask* to be woken up?!’

Flames erupted from the candles, and the sudden light they brought allowed me to finally see *him* again. Stood on the other side of the circle was a man with an anteater’s stature: he could pass for sweet and gentle most of the time, but when angered as he is now, he made full use of his spindly frame by stretching out and showing how imposing he could really be. His scruffy beard had thinned and greyed since we last saw each other, but he had the unmistakable aura of a powerful mage.

‘I figured you’d want a break from the fire and brimstone.’

A candle flew across the room and missed me by an inch. I guess I touched a nerve.

‘You don’t get to play God just to satisfy your conscience.’ he said with a low growl.

‘I know, and I wouldn’t have if it wasn’t our last cha-’

‘You *had* your last chance to make your apologies while I lay dying, or any day in the years before the sickness ravaged me!’ my master conjured a wand in the palm of his hand and raised it upwards. The wand started to glow white as he began to undo my spell and return himself to the afterlife.

‘Master, wait!’

I brought my staff back down, and after aiming it at my master's wand, disarmed him with a single swiping movement.

'How dare you call me that. You're the one who ran-'

That was the first time I saw my master speechless. In one hand, I gripped my staff tight. In the other, I held out the agate pendant, still glowing with my magic. The first gift he ever gave me.

'I'm not here to apologise, I'm here to explain. I needed time to be me.'

I don't remember a lot of my life before I was found by the man who would become my master. What I do remember, though, are the stench of cigarettes, and a hunger that would drive a child to tear open bin bags in an alley. It was raining that day and while ordinary folk just walked on, Solomon was the only one who held an umbrella over me. His cloak was clean, his beard trimmed, and his cheeks full. When he offered his hand, of course I didn't hesitate to accept.

I didn't know that he was a sorcerer, or that I wasn't the only child he picked up off the streets. He gave us a roof over our heads and warm meals to eat, but I soon learned the price of that. He wasn't called Solomon the Nurturing for his altruism, but for his dedication to continuing the magical arts. He made us learn it so that it wouldn't die with him. At least, that's what I thought at first.

My master made no effort to hide that I was his favourite. On my sixteenth birthday he gifted me a staff made from Indian Blackwood. No-one had to tell me how expensive it was, as I could feel it in my hands. I thought it an odd choice for a young apprentice, as we were

taught of the wood's roots in necromancy. What use would someone just starting their magical life have in death?

'On the night your body attains adulthood, my body will claim its new vessel, and my magic will live another lifetime.' he told me with a coldness that betrayed my image of the man who saved me. He detailed the ritual he would have me perform, and when I asked what would become of my soul once I'd submitted my body, he just laughed.

'This is payment for the new life I gave you.'

I asked the silky who her first master was. Her whiteboard remained blank, but her eyes avoided mine in shame. I knew that if I had left back then, he would have just moved to the next orphan in line. So, for nearly two years I endured his teaching of a cruel necromancy and the honing of my body so it might endure his rotting soul. Then, when I knew it would do him the most damage, on the eve of my eighteenth birthday, I ran. I ran into the pitch black unknown because it was still better than the shadows cast by the harsh light I had been shown. I had no idea if I had stopped my master that day, so when I heard he'd died, I had to make sure.

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'You don't know how happy I am to see your face.' I told Master Solomon with my staff pointed straight at it. Back in the magic circle, he was being held prisoner by the same spell that was supposed to release him. 'I'm the only one you taught this too, aren't I?'

He chuckled.

'Is that why you came all this way – to identify a corpse?' With a flick of his fingers he retrieved his discarded wand and aimed it at me. I took a step forward.

‘That, and two other reasons.’ When I took a second step forward, he fired an energy blast, but I swatted it away. ‘I’m going to free the silky. You’ve made her party to your sins for far too long.’

A crushing pressure suddenly crashed down on my shoulders as Master Solomon exerted his spiritual presence. If the air were like water before, pushing through it now was like a thick syrup.

‘I thought I was resigned to my fate, but now that you’ve brought me back, she’ll continue to serve us young Lyna, once I’ve claimed my rightful body!’

It was a struggle, but I pushed through the spiritual pressure to raise my staff. As I concentrated, it and my agate stone took on the same glow. With a thud, I let the base of my staff hit the floor. The green glow, and the pressure in the air, dissipated.

‘The second reason is,’ I said as I walked towards my master until we were close enough that were he still living, our noses might have touched. ‘I wanted to thank you, Master’.

‘So, you’ve had a last-minute change of heart?’

I shook my head and held out the agate stone in my free hand.

‘You gave me a second chance at life. For that I am genuinely grateful. I did consider returning, you know. But you also helped me realise... despite everything, I want to live, and that just because you gave me life, that doesn’t mean I owe you it.’

‘You ungratefu-’

Before he could even finish his desperate insult, I overloaded the agate with magical energy, and shattered it. The spell was broken, and he was gone from this world once more.

As the dawn broke, I turned my back on that house for the final time. I cried no tears, nor did I beam with a triumphant smile. I knew that I could never turn back because, despite everything, I'd yearn for the familiarity of those tall hedges, the little iron gate, and to be welcomed into that weathered porch. However, there was nothing for me inside that house any more. Even the silky, who had been bound to serve it, was able to pass on after that night. So, I had to as well, and move on to the next chapter of my life.

THE END