

SLATE & ARROW
By Arika Tanaka Yarnell

*You don't have a soul.
You are a soul.
You have a body.*
—C.S. Lewis

1. Scrying

The stone is talking to Sable again.

Not with words, but in steady vibrations like mumbled whispers or secret codes.

Only, she's not listening.

For the past three days, Sable wakes up early with the feeling she needs to find something buried in the garage. But by the time she rubs her eyes and draws the curtains overlooking the S-shaped street of Tigertail, she forgets all about the thing buzzing in the garage like an unanswered phone.

Now Sable runs downstairs into the kitchen, where jack-o'-lanterns line the window with hungry, crooked grins.

"Careful," Mom says, when Sable grabs a pumpkin muffin, nearly knocking over the coffee cup on the table. Sable almost wishes she did spill the thing since all Mom does these days is stare into space. Maybe she needs a broken coffee-mug puddle to wake her up.

Typical, Sable thinks, as she tips the last two drops of orange juice from the carton into her cup. Things are always running out in this house.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing." For a minute, Sable wonders if she spoke out loud without meaning to. "I gotta go. I need to get to school early." *Lie*. She just wants to roam the streets on her bike and clear her head before getting to class. She didn't sleep well. Something kept nudging her through

the night, like a finger poking her heart. *Annoying*. She stuffs her bat hoodie into her pack and heads to the garage for her bike.

In her haste, Sable disrupts a pile of her brother's collectible cards for some stupid game he plays. Or rather, he *wants* to play. He's saving up for his own set, but meanwhile his friends give him all their duplicates because despite being a scruffy pest, he's somehow popular.

"Watch out, turd brain!" Clark says, re-stacking the cards.

"That's what you get for drinking all the OJ," Sable says, but still helps pick up some of the mess. Most of the cards feature armored villains or hybrid creatures, but one catches her eye: a cloaked figure staring into a violet crystal ball. When Clark turns away, Sable pockets the card.

"Later, douche-igator," he calls out as Sable opens the garage door and disappears into the void.

As the door closes behind her and she flicks on the light, a tingling feeling in her chest ignites. Must be some kind of mold spores or mildew having a party at her allergies' expense.

Every morning, Sable fetches her bike Whiz from the overstuffed garage and rides to school. And every time, she knocks the storage shelves, inching the dusty shoebox a little closer to the edge.

Today, the box falls and spills its guts onto the cold cement floor.

Bombs away!

Sable scoops the contents back inside the box: a series of old cassette tapes and something else: a smooth, black pendant in the shape of a raindrop.

As she runs her thumb over the sleek surface, she's simultaneously invigorated and soothed. She drapes its leather cord around her neck and lets the stone rest on her chest. It feels at home there, somehow. Complete.

"Are you okay?" Mom calls from inside the house. She must have heard the ruckus.

"Fine!" Sable stuffs the shoebox into her pack, opens the door to Tigertail, and hops on Whiz, escaping into the crisp autumnal air before anyone can stop her.

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"It's just too weird," Sable says to herself as she parks Whiz and heads to the school library before class starts. "First that crystal ball card pops out at me, then I find you." She clutches the pendant, camouflaged in her long, black hair. "You need a name."

This isn't Sable's first time bonding with a stone. She used to carry crystals in her pack, hoping they would exude some magic into her life. They never did. But this one is different. It speaks to her.

"Slate," she announces, without thinking too hard, because it's blank and it feels right and why not. "Hello, Slate. I'm Sable Daigo. Pleased to meet you."

Maybe it's her imagination, but he seems to vibrate in response. It's more than anyone gives her at school. Certainly not Pascual or literally anyone else. Even during roll call yesterday, Ms. Diaz forgot to say Sable's name. She might as well be invisible.

"But you see me, right?"

The polished stone reflects Sable's image.

Inside the library, she reads about this thing called “scrying” where if you look into a crystal ball or a blank surface and squint just right, it can show your fortune (or *misfortune*, as the case may be).

“Scry,” Sable turns the word over in her mouth, tasting it for the first time. It seems like a combo of “spy” and “cry,” which immediately makes her heart sing. But when she looks up the etymology of the word, it’s apparently derived from “descry,” or “describe.”

Maybe it’ll describe how to find my tribe, Sable thinks.

Sable exits the library and searches for a secluded spot on campus. This time of day it’s too risky to go to the rooftop of the science building, and there’s no time before class to walk across the street to Grit Park. So she settles on a patch of grass in the half-shade of a eucalyptus tree and hopes it’s shelter enough from onlooking haters.

“You wanna scry with me?” she asks Slate with a half smile as if she’s asking him to dance.

Might as well. After all, it’s Halloween and it’s not like she’s been invited to a party or anything with a social pulse. Maybe the stone will show her something hopeful. Or inspiring. Or just a break from her loner existence.

She releases the leather cord from around her neck, holds the shiny raindrop in the palm of her hand, and is about to stare into it like an idiot, when the first bells rings.

Smeg. Five minutes until class.

But Sable continues to sit and stare into the stone anyway. The glossy black surface sucks her in like she’s a victim of a tar pit. Slowly, without meaning to, her eyes glaze over and her mind begins to clear. Time seems to dissolve and the space around her warps. A solar flare sparks

through the leaves, lands on her palm, bounces into her eyes, ricochets off the stone, and jumps back up to the sky where the sun warms her below.

Her eyes blur and Slate turns to fog.

At first it's just a feeling of something coming.

Then the fog lifts.

A pair of iridescent eyes appear.

Oh my god!

Sable flings the pendant on the lawn a few feet away just as something envelops her with warmth. She realizes she's not scared. Startled, maybe. Surprised, definitely. But any hesitation is replaced by a glowing ray and it's too strong to let slip away.

She retrieves the black stone and finds the eyes waiting for her. They remind her of the rainbow patches of oil on asphalt after a rain. When she stares into them, it's as if she's traveling through the outer reaches of the universe. There are no voices, but she hears something. No words, but she feels something. It could just be her mind playing tricks on her. But it makes her feel good, this "talking" to Slate, so what's the harm?

"Hello, Sable," the eyes say wordlessly to her.

"Who are you?"

The eyes laugh without mocking her. Nothing mean-spirited about them.

"Why don't you ask yourself that question?"

Sable glances toward the science building and nearly loses focus. When she looks back at the stone, the eyes are bigger, brighter.

"You can call me Arrow," he says.

Chills run up her neck and scalp and she swallows hard. There's a familiar feeling to hearing his name. It's as if she's known him her entire life.

"Where did you come from?"

"There is no 'from.' Just like there is no 'to.' We are infinite, you and me." His eyes spin and turn to shimmering wheels of light. No beginning, no end.

"Why are you here?"

"To talk to you, of course."

"But why me?"

"Because we're part of this, together."

"Part of what?"

Arrow's eyes blink and display a whirlwind of images: a pine-scented forest, a coral reef, a misty waterfall, a snowcapped mountain, a lavender field, an erupting volcano, the sparkling bay water at Enola Park.

Sable squints harder, trying to make sense of what she's seeing.

"Should I go to Enola Park?" It's one of her favorite hangouts, after all. It's a good place to take pictures.

With the sound of footsteps in the grass and a shadow now blocking the dappled sunlight, Sable loses focus and Arrow's eyes disappear.

Lexy and Roxy tower over Sable, who remains cross-legged on the lawn. Roxy snaps her chewing gum in a loud pop as Lexy taps her phone screen.

"What the—"

Ding! The final bell for class rings, jolting Sable to finally look up at the girls in front of her.

“I always knew you were a freak. Now I have evidence.” Lexy flashes her phone, which plays a video clip of Sable caressing Slate and muttering like a deranged Smeagol.

Roxy spits her wad of gum on Sable’s lap. “Oops.”

Both Lexy and Roxy laugh, then walk away, not bothering to look back at Sable, who tucks Slate under her shirt and grabs her pack. Just what she needs, the resident mean girls on her case.

As Sable scrapes the sticky gum from her faded black jeans, she wonders if she’ll ever feel comfortable in her own skin.

Then something stings from within her chest like a needle in her heart.

2. Pony Sandwich

“Freak.”

Sable scans the locker hallway, but it’s too crowded to figure out who insulted her. Not that she has a rebuttal ready to shoot from the hip. The only thing she shoots is pictures and there’s not a cell in her body that’s hip. Even her literal hips aren’t hip.

“*Smeg*,” Sable says under her breath. She stands at her locker, which has been painted over so many times it barely closes. A gouge on the door reveals the old layers of paint like a multi-flavored cake or a cross-section of the earth’s surface. As she turns the dial of the lock, she can’t help but think it’s laughing at her. The combination is 36-24-36, as if mocking her straight, flat figure.

A group of girls laugh behind Sable, then someone slams into her, pinching her finger in the locker door.

“Oops,” Roxy says.

Despite her throbbing finger, Sable remains planted, rummaging through her locker like it holds all the answers to make this situation go away.

Lexy stands too close. If invading people’s personal bubbles were a sport, she’d be the champion.

“What do you want?” Sable says in her most assertive voice (i.e., that of a dying hamster).

“Wow, she speaks! I thought you only talked to your pet rock.”

Great. It's freshman year all over again.

"I was just—" Sable starts, but her throat closes. There's no explaining herself to these girls. Anything she says will just add fuel to their fire.

"Just what?"

Lexy and Roxy stare at Sable in wide-eyed anticipation of whatever flub might come out of her mouth. Sable's heart beats against Slate vibrating on her chest. If only he could provide her with the right words.

"Oh my god, I forgot to tell you," Roxy says, turning to Lexy and proceeding to detail some mishap involving a curling iron and rubbing alcohol. "I knew I was on fire, but I didn't think I'd literally burn!"

The girls continue their in-depth convo, still in front of Sable's locker, then turn to her and say, "Why are you still here?"

Instead of waiting for a witty retort to beam down to her (which probably wouldn't be until later the next day while sitting on the toilet), Sable uses the opportunity to slip into an alcove, just as she spies Pascual rounding the corner.

Oh, god.

Pascual, her secret crush with the impossible black-and-gold eyes. The one with the star-shaped birthmark on his right earlobe. The one whose dark curly hair springs from his head in a wild fury. His brown-olive skin matches hers, though she guesses his family is from south of the border, whereas Sable is Eurasian—Japanese and Swedish, to be precise. But growing up in the Golden State of sunny California, she's as far away from her ancestry as Pascual is from her now.

“Hey, man,” Pascual and his best friend Iain exchange dude greetings, which basically consists of an upturned chin bob.

Semi-hidden in the alcove, Sable wonders if Pascual can sense her presence. She sends him secret vibes just in case.

But then Pony blocks Sable’s view with her perfectly groomed mane.

Drat.

The conversation is muted, but Sable infers they’re talking about a party.

“It’s gonna be *wicked!*”

And then Pony dares to squeeze herself into a sandwich between Iain (her supposed boyfriend) and Pascual.

Pascual? Since when were they so chummy?

Double smeg.

“See you at your place tonight!” Pony sings as they part ways for class.

So the party’s at Pascual’s McMansion. Of course.

Sable waits for the hallway to die down before slinking away.

“Did you hear all that, Arrow?” She untucks Slate and stares at him for a moment, even though she’s too agitated to scry. “Pascual is throwing a Halloween party, and guess who’s not invited?”

No eyes appear on Slate, but she imagines what he would say.

“Crazy!”

Sable looks up to find a group of boys rushing past her, laughing.

One of them is Pascual.

3. Death Sentences

“Soon,” Sable mutters into her embarrassment of a flip phone. It’s so old and sad that she doesn’t even bother to name it.

“How soon? After dinner?” Mom says on the other end of the phone, probably pacing the living room with the local news in the background. She has a love/hate relationship with the news, both wanting and not wanting to know what’s going on in town.

“I don’t know, I’m finishing up at the library and am going shooting later.”

“*Shooting?*”

“Taking pictures.” For being so smart, Mom can sure be dense.

“Just watch out for those trick-or-treaters with the big bags. You never know what they’re hiding in there.”

“I think they just want a lot of candy, Mom.”

“Be safe.”

As soon as Sable snaps the phone shut, she lets herself deflate. Her throat tightens thinking about Lexy’s sneers and Roxy’s taunts and god, did Pascual see her too? Judging from the snide laughs from random classmates, Lexy had probably sent that video to all her friends, which pretty much means the whole school thinks Sable’s a nut job. Just another thing to add to Sable’s list of woes.

As she makes her way to the bike lot, she touches Slate, still firmly around her neck.

“I have questions,” she whispers to him.

But this time, she'll find a safer place to talk.

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Sable hops on Whiz and rides to Enola Park to scry. Or cry. Whichever comes first.

A half-broken tree branch teeters above the road on the path to the park.

Not a good sign.

When she pulls up to the park, she finds herself alone (no surprise there), so she settles on a flat boulder overlooking the bay to the city of Sealand filtered in golden-pink light. She takes a few pictures with her old-school digital camera, Cyclops, but instead of finding relief, she only feels more separate from all the life happening away from her.

She wonders what shenanigans will go on between Pony and Pascual at the house party tonight. Maybe it's just as well she stays in the dark.

Ow.

Something pokes at her chest again.

She untucks Slate from under her shirt and stares at him. "Are you the one poking me?"

But Slate remains silent and still like an unblinking eye.

Sigh.

The sun dips a little closer to the water.

Sable figures, since the town of Glorietta is near a military base, that Enola Park is named after the *Enola Gay* plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. It's fitting since the place has a desolate, blue-gray flavor and features a cluster of broken cement blocks with rusted metal poking out where the park meets the shoreline of the bay. Whenever here, Sable can't help but read the sign backwards:

Enola Park. Alone Krap.

There it goes again, the pinging in her chest. She stares at Slate and lets her eyes blur. But just as she's about to call for Arrow, something in the water sparks and catches her eye.

Caught between the rocks in a miniature tide pool is a corked bottle.

Curious.

Sable crouches, easing it over, and then—*snatch!*

Something is inside. A secret message just for her. She pops off the cork and releases the scent of salt water and, oddly, a trace of kerosene. She shakes the bottle, and out comes a crinkled piece of torn newsprint. It says:

RETURN
DEAD FINDS YOU
DIE SOON
LIVE NOWHERE

With all the mentioning of death, her heart beats wildly. She'd always wanted to receive a message in a bottle, but now she's not so sure.

The newsprint reminds her of the one and only obituary she'd ever read. It was for her neighbor Jane, who'd jumped off the Glorietta Bridge last year. Somewhere in this very bay, Jane had made her last splash.

Sable shivers and turns the message over in her hands. The sun turns from gold to red as it plunges into the bay, giving her the same sinking feeling when reading that obituary. Not because she was so saddened (she hardly knew Jane), but because she felt connected to the event. Like she could be next.

The paper is torn all around the edges and weathered badly. Seems fitting, given its message. Sure, the wording is a little awkward, but really, it's four sentences:

Return (to the land of the dead). + Dead finds you. (It's inevitable.) + Die soon. (In case there was any question.) + Live nowhere. (Duh.)

It's a redundant four-for-one death-sentence special. Of course she would be the one to find this message. Not a love letter. Not a note of hope. Only she would find a memorandum of doom.

Ping! That thing pierces her heart again. She looks down, her dark hair tangling with the cord of the black stone pendant and the bottle, still in her lap.

Also: is it Find Weird Shit Day or something?

What bothers her more than the thought of her death, what creeps up her shoulders and the sides of her neck and bores through her skull and into the maze of gray matter, is the idea that she might not fight it. She hasn't done anything that warrants taking up more space on the planet. If a magic message in a bottle is giving her a heads-up that she could croak soon, who is she to refuse?

Another sting in her chest. Maybe it's some rare disease. Or maybe you really *can* die from a broken heart.

A jab.

A nudge in her ribcage.

"DIE SOON," she says out loud. *Maybe it would be a good thing*, she thinks.

And immediately there's a stab to her heart.

"What about me?" Slate calls to her.

Wait, what?

Clutching her heart, Sable settles back down on the boulder, and takes the shiny black raindrop pendant in hand again. Arrow's eyes are back.

"There you are."

"I'm always here. You just don't always listen."

"Well I'm listening now and I have some questions for you, Arrow." Never mind the past. It's the current threat that's at the forefront of her mind. "Why did I find that message? Am I really going to die soon? Or is this all a big joke?"

Her throat clenches and she gets another pierce in her heart. She almost lets herself cry but is pulled away by a flash: an image of her bike.

"Go," Arrow says.

"You're trying to get rid of me?"

She sees herself riding toward the other side of town.

"Where are you taking me?" But she doesn't need to ask. She already knows. "No, no. I can't. I wasn't invited."

The eyes smile the way eyes can do: with feeling. Then they disappear.

Sable is left staring at the blank stone, then out to the water turning amber-gray with dusk.

Whiz itches for a ride.

It's true, she hasn't been invited, but she's a bat, not a vampire. She doesn't need an invitation to creep in. And even though she's not exactly sure who Arrow is or where he comes

from, she has a sense that he's on her side. In the distance, a muffled car radio plays a song about partying. It's like the universe is begging her to go.

A glance at the message in the bottle: "DEAD FINDS YOU."

"GO," Arrow reminds her.

Sable shakes her head but climbs on her bike. She rides under the broken tree branch and along the bumpy road. A few blocks later in the near dark she pedals with part hesitation, part excitement, and part fury but never breaking the momentum of the spell.

Riding past glowing jack-o'-lanterns, she whispers to Slate, tucked inside her shirt with the bat hoodie on top: "Oh my god. I'm about to crash my first party. And it's at Pascual's house on Halloween night. What the actual smeg."

4. A Greeting from the Dead

Pascual's backyard is darker than expected.

Sable opens the sliding glass door to the house and steps into a nightmare.

Fake blood splatters on the walls, and the whole place seems to be taken over by an army of overactive spiders. But here she is, for once not on the outside looking in.

"Whoa, look what the cat dragged in!"

Sable's face turns hot until she realizes no one is talking about her and all eyes are pointed toward a black cat rolling a cooler behind her.

"Meow!" someone says, and while a group forms around the cooler of drinks, Sable takes the opportunity to plant herself firmly against the flowered wallpaper.

With everyone in costume, it's easy to blend in. Sable's just another body, maybe someone's sister or random hookup. (*Ha.*) She certainly isn't an uninvited guest or the girl who sits alone at lunch on the upper deck of the science building watching them below. In many ways, this is just like being in class: surrounded by people who ignore her.

Just then, a skeleton peeks out from behind a gauzy curtain.

His eyes lock with Sable's as he grins through white-and-black skull paint.

She steps toward him but he disappears behind the drapes.

Before Sable considers chasing some random ghost, she spots the rock star: Pascual Silva.

Zing!

Pascual, the only boy who'd given her a valentine in the seventh grade (or any grade since) and is some kind of math genius. Numbers aren't really her thing, but she likes watching his face when he's concentrating on something complex, imagining his brain firing synapses to unlock the answers. Until recently, he'd flown under the radar—cool enough to hang with the popular kids, but a little too nerdy and clean to get their full attention. He'd been the underdog.

But things have changed this year. He's branched out.

Pascual stands close to Iain (a shabby werewolf) and Pony (a perfectly nauseating ballerina), and they're all slugging back the contents of a black plastic cauldron labeled "Witches' Brew." Pony and Iain, the king and queen of on-again off-again relationships, are apparently "on" right now, if their intertwined limbs are any indication. But like earlier at school, Pascual's close proximity to Pony is troublesome. Pascual gestures wildly, as if telling a joke with an intricate setup, and it doesn't take long for Pony to neigh her patented soft-muzzled laugh. *Puke.*

"Everyone in this room is doing shots!" some dude announces, which is Sable's cue to creep out of the kitchen and find a random bedroom down the hall.

She untucks Slate from her bat hoodie and stares at the black stone.

Nothing.

"Arrow," she whispers, squinting and trying to quiet the yappy part of her brain. "Why did you tell me to come here?"

But her nerves are too erratic and it's like staring into an inky Magic 8-Ball that's too shaken up to even reply, "hazy, try again."

"This was a mistake," she whispers.

Her throat constricts as she remembers the “DIE SOON” message-in-a-bottle and Arrow beckoning her to “GO.” Well, she’s here now. She might as well take some pictures or at least find Pascual’s room. Besides, she has to weave back through the party in order to leave.

Sable exits the spare bedroom and works her way back toward the kitchen, knocking down a bowl of eyeballs (gummies, *duh*). Nearby, Troy, who she guesses is a ’70s male porn star, spots her and nudges his friend in the gut. *Smeg*. One of them pantomimes a “she’s crazy” gesture and they both laugh. Sable kicks the bowl aside and hums along to retro songs about mashing monsters and purple people eaters as if nothing’s happened.

Another neighing laugh erupts from the group. *Pony*. Who is now so close to Pascual that they share the same orange cupcake frosting on their elbows.

Sable’s eyes narrow, but nearby is Robyn, who’s dressed as some kind of spider girl with atomic-red streaks buzzing through her natural brown twist out and get this: she’s spitting sour balls into Pony’s long mane. Sable can’t help but laugh and sneak out her camera from the custom-made inside pocket of her bat hoodie. At one point Robyn catches sight of Sable snapping pics and either smiles or scowls—it’s hard to tell which, with all her makeup and the way she tugs at her lip ring with her teeth.

Just as Sable works up the nerve to move closer to Pascual’s cluster of activity, she’s accosted by a pack of she-devils.

Donning a red vinyl corset and matching horns, the self-proclaimed “Sexy Lexy” accidentally-on-purpose spills her drink on Sable.

“Oops.”

“Foxy Roxy,” dressed in an identical too-tight atrocity, looks Sable up and down. If her grimace is any clue, she doesn’t seem to appreciate Sable’s ingenuity in fashioning a bat-winged hoodie coupled with a pair of fuzzy pointed ears and black jeans. “Nice costume,” she scoffs.

At this rate, they’re going to resurrect that dreaded name from freshman year.

“Did your pet rock come up with that one, *Sybil*?”

And there it is.

Sable rattles her brain for a clever comeback but all that comes out of her mouth is, “Um, what rock?”

Sexy Lexy steps in. “You know, the one you were just talking to in the bedroom. Or the one you were whispering to after school that day? The one shaped like a bread stick?”

The she-devils both giggle hysterically.

Sable is now profusely regretting her costume choice, and sweating bullets. It’s a good thing she’s not holding a drink. She’s shaking so hard, the contents would be all over the floor—alongside her entrails, ripe and ready to be stomped on.

“Oh, that,” Sable mumbles. Slate is smooth and flat but that one from freshman year was long and apparently phallic. “That was just a crystal selenite wand.”

“A *what* wand?” Foxy Roxy raises her eyebrows.

“A magic wand, I’ll bet.” Sexy Lexy snorts.

“What are you ladies laughing about?” It’s Robyn, apparently finished with bedazzling Pony’s hair. In a small town, most people know each other by face, if not more. Yet somehow Sable is surprised when people mesh together like this, disrupting her vision of them as a thousand islands with Sable rowboating her way around them.

“Oh, just questioning Sable’s choice of bedroom toy.”

Sexy and Foxy erupt in laughter, but Robyn remains cold-faced.

“Is that so?” Robyn says. “I wonder what one might find under your mattress, *Alexis*. Or yours, *Roxanne*.”

Sable can’t remember the last time anyone had dared called Lexy or Roxy by their given names, and now Robyn is staring the two devils down. Glad to have the heat taken off her, Sable sidles away. She’s about to sneak upstairs to snoop for Pascual’s bedroom when a mob of murderous clowns block her path, and she is spit into the adjoining room.

If she were living in a different era or trapped inside the board game Clue, she might be in what they call the Study. It’s darker, warmer, stranger. People cluster together drinking or dancing or taking selfies by the mechanical goblin hanging from the rafters. The music is different here, less kitschy, more spooky. Some girls sprawl on a dark velvet chaise lounge while others sway in the blacklight. She doesn’t recognize half the people, and it isn’t just due to their disguises. Like the group of monsters hovering in the back corner—they certainly don’t go to Glorietta High. Or the one looking right at her through a skeleton grin.

The one walking toward her and reaching for her hand.

5. The Skeleton's Game

“Your hand, madam?” That’s what the skeleton boy says to her. As if it’s expected, ordinary even. And she gives it over so willingly, so obediently, like she’s been hypnotized by the red eyes (or are they green-blue?) peeping through the face paint. Or maybe it’s his forest smell—like Douglas fir mixed with cedar and sandalwood. Either way, she feels like one of those cartoon animals following a delicious ribbon of scent. But usually those scenarios end with an inviting pie cooling on a windowsill . . . that turns out to be the mouth of a salivating fox.

“Where are you taking me?” she says, like a dimwit. Just an hour into her experimental party and she’s already surrendering her power over to this disguised stranger.

“You’ll see.”

Smeg. In her limited experience, the phrase “you’ll see” seldom results in the fun surprise it promises. For her, it usually means a gaudy thrift-store outfit from Mom, or Dad’s list of chores pawned off as “adventure.”

In the hand not holding hers, the skeleton carries a large shopping bag, which seems too light to be filled with murder weapons and too big to contain drug paraphernalia. She bites her lip as he leads her down a narrow hallway and into a neglected den. No one has bothered to decorate this room with the Halloween spirit. There aren’t any spiderwebs or candelabras, but there *is* a flickering light (not from a chandelier, but a buzzing fluorescent bulb) and two ironically creepy portraits on the wall.

The skeleton sinks into a mushroomy couch and motions for her to do the same. That's when he busts out the Ouija board.

"None of my friends will do this with me," he says. "They're either too freaked out or they don't believe. But I just have to try."

Sable has heard that Ouija boards are pretty lame, one of the lowest forms of "magick," and not very reliable. They're the stuff of campy horror films and slumber parties (not that she knows from experience). They're either a hoax or straight-up evil. And why is this polite-yet-possibly-sketchy skeleton asking her to do it with him? There's no such thing as a "chosen one," or if there is, she certainly doesn't fit the bill. Maybe he senses she has a knack for communicating with inanimate objects.

She shrugs in her best meh-but-whatever way. "Okay."

He smiles and claps, then drapes a crinkly purple scarf on the coffee table in front of them.

"I've seen you before," he says.

"That's impossible," she answers automatically. Since she doesn't frequent these social circles and he doesn't go to GHS, it's doubtful their paths would've crossed.

"It was a while ago."

Despite his haunted look (or perhaps *because* of it?) she finds him fun to look at. With a chipped front tooth, he isn't classically handsome, but his voice is pleasant and curiously comforting. Not that anyone can make her heart waver from Pascual, but he's in the other room schmoozing it up with Pony and hasn't even acknowledged her presence.

"We never met, but I saw you from a distance."

Now he's really off. *She* is the one who looks at others from afar. She is the one who sneaks into people's houses without being invited. But if the idea of a strange guy spying on her is supposed to creep her out, it doesn't. It's oddly flattering. She just doesn't know whether to believe him or not. More than once, people had mistaken her for a friend, only to retract in bewilderment when realizing their error.

"I would've noticed you."

"I wasn't a ghoul back then. Or maybe I was . . ." He rubs his chin, squinting, seemingly preoccupied by the implication of his past ghoulishness or lack thereof.

But all Sable can think about is where he would've seen her. Maybe on a rooftop doing one of her gargoyle impressions? But how would he have noticed? Her impressions were the best.

"You must've known her. Or at least known *of* her," he says.

"Known who?"

He gets a faraway look and half-whispers, half-croaks, "Azure."

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"She, uh, died. Last year."

Oh, smegging belch. Of course. This dude was clearly hung up on some chick who'd figuratively bit the dust and transitioned into the land of exes.

"I just want to know what happened," he says, looking down and biting his thumbnail.

"She was troubled, sure, but who isn't?"

Okay, so maybe he's somewhat telling the truth. But she still has a feeling he's hiding something. His hair, clearly blond but sprayed black and silver, dangles in his eyes when he

hunches over the coffee table. He takes the board out of the box and neatly arranges a pen with a pad of paper, then lights a votive candle followed by a stick of incense.

“Do you believe in this stuff?” he asks. Some of his makeup has smudged across his cheek, which she finds endearing.

“What, like ghosts and communicating with the dead? I’m not sure.” She flashes to seeing Arrow’s face on the surface of Slate. Was she communicating with some kind of ghostly haunting? No. She doesn’t fully understand what’s happening, but whatever or whoever Arrow is, is very much alive. His energy pulses through her.

“Yeah, I’m not sure either,” he says. “But if there’s a chance it works, I have to try, right? I want to tell her I’m sorry for not being there for her. I want to know what happened.”

He sinks deeper into the enveloping couch. She considers whether to prod or console and ends up doing neither.

“Let’s find out,” she says, nodding toward the board.

He scoots over a little so they’re both dead center. Their legs touch. He takes a deep breath and sighs, then unfolds the instructions for the game.

“Wait, you’ve never done this before?”

“What do I look like, some kind of ghost freak?”

As if on cue, part of the fluorescent light flickers off, so now the room is even dimmer, lit by the remaining sputter of one dying bulb and the single candle under-lighting the skeleton’s painted face.

“Uh, kinda.”

He shrugs and reads the instructions, which apparently aren't interesting since he tosses them aside.

“Don't we need those?”

“Listen,” he says, and takes her hand for the second time that night and holds it flat against his like they are each one half of a prayer. That, or giving the world's slowest high five.

She tingles with sparkling heat.

“Do you trust me?”

How can she possibly trust this strange, cute-ish boy who may or may not be flirting with her but is definitely leading her on with this hand stuff? Her mind goes blank as he looks at her with the white-and-black paint contrasting against his green-blue eyes. There is something in them that pleads with her. Whatever forces brought them together have culminated in this precise point of space/time. She doesn't understand why, but at this very moment, he needs her.

“I guess?”

He releases her hand and places it on the cream-colored pointer. It looks like a wireless computer mouse except it's shaped like a teardrop or an upside-down heart.

“It's called a planchette,” he says, glancing back at the instructions. He puts his hand on the thing and closes his eyes. “Now we ask a question.”

She closes her eyes too, but it's only a second before they pop open again. She focuses intently on his face and imagines what he looks like when he's not a skeleton.

“Azure, are you there?”

The planchette remains still and silent.

“I'm sorry, Azure. I should've been there for you. Are you okay now, wherever you are?”

Their hands are motionless.

“I’m sorry. So sorry,” he says, his voice cracking.

Still nothing from the planchette.

Sometimes Sable can sense subtle shifts in moods from different places or things. Often it isn’t a description in words or visions so much as a sense of colors or flavors. Like this room. In some ways, it’s the most normal room she’s seen in the house (she still has to find Pascual’s bedroom!), but it has a completely different vibe—a pea-green feeling. Maybe it’s the kind of hangout for a disembodied soul. Perhaps Azure really is floating around them, arms crossed, assessing the situation.

Wait, are they getting the silent treatment from this dude’s jealous ex-girlfriend’s ghost?

But he looks close to tears and keeps repeating how sorry he is and that he wishes things were different and hopes she’s okay.

Sable thinks about the message she received just a few hours ago.

RETURN. DEAD FINDS YOU. DIE SOON. LIVE NOWHERE.

Even if Arrow isn’t a ghost, could the message in the bottle be from some kind of spirit?

No, she thinks, without knowing why. It’s just a piece of trash. And yet she doesn’t believe in coincidences. And here she is now with this random skeleton boy who is now wiping his eyes and brushing the hair out of his face, which smudges his makeup more.

She swallows hard.

The planchette moves to the letter “I.”

“Oh my god, it’s working!” he shouts, grabbing hold of the pen and paper with his free hand. It continues to land on letters.

T-S-O-K

“ITSOK,” he says. “It’s okay! It’s okay! She said it’s okay! Oh my god!”

She smiles. Then the planchette moves to spell out more words.

A-S-K-H-E-R

“Ask her? Ask who what?”

She looks at him sideways.

He turns his head toward her and for a split second his eyes light up in the reflection of the candle flame and she feels, for the first time in her life, that someone is truly seeing her.

But like some kind of rotten fairytale or stroke of bad luck, a blow horn erupts at that very moment and the party crumbles.

“*Break it up!*” someone yells from the adjoining room. “Cops are at the door! Everybody go home! Party’s over, people!”

A trapeze artist barges into the room and shouts, “*There* you are! We have to go! Iris needs you!” She grabs the skeleton and tears him away from the devouring couch.

Before disappearing, he says, “I’ll find you.”

“You don’t even know my name.”

“Sure I do, Sable Daigo.” He smiles his skeleton grin one last time, stuffs his things in his paper bag, and leaves her in the lurch.

6. Cosmic Egg

And so it begins.

I am an Arrow through her heart.

Yes, I mean literally. And yes, I mean figuratively. Sometimes they are the same.

Isn't Sable beautiful? If only she thought so with her physical mind. But look: her heart center is opening. She's inviting us in.

Come closer.

Take my hand.

I will show you all you need to know about her.

Glide with me through the vermilion layers all the way to the rose-gold core. See my inscription? An arrow, through and through.

There: feel the heart pulsing, shimmering and new? It throbs with the vitality of the moment.

I can see you are confused. Let me offer some clarity.

First, we need to create a landscape.

Of course, you create everything—didn't you know?

Close your eyes, squeeze them tightly, and on the count of three, open.

One . . .

Two . . .

Three . . .

What do you see?

Ah, beautiful! I see it too. You're influenced by the Southern Californian suburban terrain. A place to rest your space/time machines and recharge. Oh, right. You call them gas stations. Of course. You don't know why you chose this place? You think it's dirty? Ugly?

Oh!

You must borrow my eyes. Take my heart. There you go. Now you will begin to feel with more understanding. Notice the oil on the ground—the remnants from ancient creatures, their bodies' gift to you so that you may travel faster through this space/time. So that you may experience more and expand at a greater velocity. Oh, isn't it all so lovely the way it's orchestrated?

There's the—what do you call it? Convenience store? Let's go inside, shall we?

Ah, all this gorgeous pre-packaged food! You've thought of everything, haven't you! What brilliant minds you and your species have!

What are these? Little morsels of sweetness. Salty crunchiness. Cold bottles of liquid hydration. Hot cups of liquid energy. Numbered scraps of paper that surprise and delight you, give you hope, add a bit of fun to your day, spark your imagination.

This place is a gold mine! Thank you so much for bringing me here!

There is more?

A machine that spits out physical representations of value.

A private closet in which to relieve your body of its waste.

More bottles and cans to bring a different kind of relief. Relief from what? How could you ever need relief from such a wonderful place as this?

Yes, I know. I'm not human. I've heard of your so-called hardships, even if I don't completely understand them. I'm aware of these lower-dimension woes you speak about. But tell me, why would you choose to focus on the things that tear you away from all of this?

Ah, you feel it now!

You feel the mystery, the wonder, the intrigue of the unknown, the untapped potential. Isn't it glorious? Isn't it riveting? Don't you want to follow it through?

Feel the heat of skin on skin, the chill of an autumn wind, the fragrance of a new pair of shoes, the sour from a lime, the sticky pop of a soap bubble, the aroma of dried bergamot leaves, the crash of a cymbal vibrating through your blood—it's endless and bottomless and forever more and more and more, always more to want, more to expand upon, more to live.

And here we are in this microcosm you created. Don't laugh. It's gorgeous. All these rectangular packets and cylindrical containers of glucose and sodium and nicotine and caffeine and alcohol sparkle in vibrant hyper-reality. They're all part of this scheme. Yes, even your so-called dust bunnies and cigarettes butts. Look how the metal and virtual coins move in and out of hands lickety-split. Fuel courses through veins and engines and minds, lighting them up like galaxies.

And this is just the beginning. These things pale in comparison to what's ahead.

Yes, the girl, Sable.

There she is now.

Come.

See it there above? An eye—a black sphere. What do you call it? A security camera. It records everything and reflects all it sees. We call it the Cosmic Egg. Let's go inside.

Ah, here's where the view shifts. Enjoy the sensation of the velvet darkness. On the inside looking outward, I see you, her, me. Always knowing and forever recording. Taking it all in.

Go ahead, laugh at her pet rock, Slate. But the black stone, like her body, is a device through which to speak. I'll take whatever she offers and I'll give her whatever she's willing to accept. She can come home whenever she chooses. Until then, I will be here, as always, waiting and watching and pointing.

If only she will listen.