

SLATE & ARROW

by Alika Yarnell

I. The Skeleton's Game

I wasn't supposed to be there. So in metaphysical terms, that meant I was in exactly the right spot, an idea that was hard to swallow considering my night had started with a break-in and ended in a piss-soaked death sentence. But as I sneaked around the side of Pascual's oversized house, I knew the universe must've heard my pledge to change course. It was my senior year for smeg's sake. I was done with being on the outside looking in. I slipped through the back door and shook with the validity of the moment. I'd *made* this happen. Just being there, with the crowd oozing sex and debauchery, was evidence of my power.

The stereo blared something unfamiliar, which wasn't surprising since I avoided Top 40 pop at all costs. Luckily, someone changed the music to a mix appropriate for the season, and I hummed along to retro songs about mashing monsters and purple people eaters.

With everyone in costume, it was easier to blend in than I'd thought it would be. I was just another body, maybe someone's sister or a random hookup (haha). I certainly wasn't an uninvited guest or the girl who sat alone on the school rooftop at lunch. In many ways, this was just like being in class: surrounded by people who ignored me. It was the perfect opportunity to spy.

I spotted the rockstar right away: Pascual Silva, my 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 sprung from his head in a wild fury. He was the only boy who'd given me a valentine in the seventh grade (or any grade since) and was some kind of math genius. Numbers weren't really my thing, but I liked watching his face when he was 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 was the underdog.

But things had changed this year. Pascual had branched out. Iain (a werewolf) and Pony (a ballerina) were close to him, and they were 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, were apparently "on" right now if their intertwined limbs were any indication. But what troubled me was Pascual's close proximity to Pony. He gestured wildly, as if telling a joke with an intricate setup, and it didn't take long for Pony to laugh her soft-muzzled neigh. Barf.

The black cloud that was Skot was nowhere to be found, obviously. Like me, he didn't hang with the general Glorietta High population much. But unlike me, he seemed to always be out, presumably doing far more interesting things than taking solo bike rides to the outskirts of town. I should know because he lived on my street. His window lined up with mine, and more nights than not, his light was out and his car was gone.

No, I didn't want him. Not like *that*. He was freaky, and not just because he wore a dog collar and steel chains and industrial-grade boots. Apparently he'd scored high on some IQ test years ago, so teachers pretty much tolerated him. But he had that crazed look in his eyes (when you could see them from under his long, dyed-black hair), the

kind of look that said he was either a great inventor or a serial killer. And yet, he intrigued me in the way vampires did. I wanted to taste his strange ways without getting so close he'd drain me. But there was no chance of that happening since Skot was MIA.

Robin, who was dressed as some kind of spider girl, spit a sour ball into Pony's long mane. Pony seemed none the wiser, so Robin repeated it several times. I couldn't help but laugh while feeling just a teensy bit sorry for Pony at the same time. I was beginning to regret not bringing my SLR camera, Cyclops, but he was too bulky. Besides, he wasn't great in low lighting. But Pony's sticky hair would've made for a priceless shot. At one point Robin caught sight of me and either smiled or scowled—it was hard to tell which with all her makeup and the way she tugged at her lip ring with her teeth.

The party throbbed on and I was doing just fine with my back against the wall. No one called me out for crashing, and aside from a near catastrophe with a precariously placed bowl of eyeballs (gummies, duh), people generally didn't give me a second glance. I wasn't in one of those sexy getups like most of the girls here—the she-devil in a shiny red unitard for example (Lexy) or the sorceress in a black-and-purple corset (Roxy). As if. I was just learning about gypsies and mystics, but already I knew they didn't dress in skanky halter tops or tulle “skirts” that barely covered their ass cheeks. I didn't believe in flashing my skin, and not just because my body hadn't gotten the memo that I was no longer twelve. If I was going to get attention, I wanted it to be from someone who had recognized my ingenuity in fashioning my own bat wings out of an umbrella (cut in half, one piece fastened under each arm and attached to the torso of a black sweatshirt). Coupled with a pair of fuzzy pointed ears and black long johns, I thought my look was pretty authentic. That is, true to both myself and, according to the recent li-

brary book I'd borrowed, true to the original spirit of the pagan holiday known as Samhain (which bafflingly was pronounced "sao-wen").

But it seemed that most people viewed Halloween, like any holiday, as just another excuse to buy crap or eat junk or get wasted or do all three, possibly at the same time. I wasn't inherently opposed or immune to those actions, but I was constantly nagged with the feeling that there had to be *more*. Judging from what I was seeing in Pascual's unchaperoned home, however, I was no closer to finding what that "more" might entail. Illustrating my thoughts, a scrawny pirate and what I guessed was a '70s male porn star got into a drunken brawl, shouting expletives and knocking down a carefully arranged tower of beer cans, leading the room to collectively cheer and groan and curse and probably post the whole embarrassment online.

A while back I'd debated whether it was a sign of strength or weakness to swear a lot. After analyzing all the offensive words I knew, I came to the conclusion that the choice few held more power when used sparingly. But it wasn't just that. There were words that were far worse than the common obscenities. Three words topped my list. *Lymph*—the smelly, crusty stuff around an earring hole. *Belch*—just the word itself was disgusting, and I found the behavior akin to flatulence, sometimes worse. And the coup de grâce of all nasty words: *smegma*. Because, obviously. I found this one so vile—just the thought of that cheesy goo collecting in the most intimate of places made me queasy—I couldn't even use it in full. I had to shorten it to *smeg*.

I ditched the living room and shuffled my way into the kitchen, peaking in drawers and cupboards, scoping out Pascual's breakfast cereal of choice, and admiring the utensils and cups that had surely grazed his lips. I was about to sneak upstairs to check

out his room when a mob of murderous clowns blocked my path, and I was spat into the adjoining room.

A week before, I'd made a pact with myself to change things—to make this year count. I couldn't go through the rest of my high school career without experiencing at least *some* of the things I'd seen in John Hughes movies. I'd made a list:

TTT (Things To Try):

1. Make a friend
2. Have a meaningful conversation
3. Sneak out of the house past midnight
4. Solve a mystery
5. Kiss someone (Pascual?)

Yep. Seventeen years old, and I still hadn't kissed anyone other than my parents, and even that was a rarity these days. Somehow I had fallen through the cracks of the social structure. Not only had I never hooked up with a guy, I didn't even have a best friend to help with the mission.

But the very day that I made the TTT list, I found something in the bay of Enola Park: a spark, a gem twinkling in the water. It called my name and my eyes followed its bob. Caught between the rocks in a miniature tide pool was a corked bottle. I crouched on a smooth, flat boulder and stuck my hand in. I eased it over and then—*snatch!*

Something was inside. I popped off the cork and released the scent of salt water and, oddly, a trace of kerosene. I shook the bottle, and out came a crinkled piece of newsprint. It said:

Grand Opening!
Find S—

The “S” word had been torn off from the rest of the worn paper. I turned it over in my hands and then looked around. No one—nothing. The sun, spreading its gold all over, was just starting to dip. I stuck the message and bottle in my pack and hopped on my bike, Zyke, to go home.

I couldn’t help but marvel at the timing. A real message in a bottle—and what a message! Sure, it was obviously some remnant of an advertisement for a new store, but it also seemed like a personalized invitation—both for me to open up and let people in, and for the universe to release the floodgates and help me explore the grand chasms of life. I wasn’t sure about the “Find S” part, but I’d work on it.

And now, a week later, things really *were* shifting. Maybe there were no such things as wish-granting genies or all-powerful wizards, but that didn’t mean magic wasn’t real. I was discovering it all around me.

The room I now inhabited was darker, warmer, stranger. If I were living in a different era or trapped in the board game Clue, I might’ve been in what they called the Study. I carefully took out my pre-made “cigarette” packs and casually placed them on the large desk, illuminated by a green banker’s lamp. I couldn’t wait to see people’s reactions when they reached for a smoke only to find partially dissected worms instead. I really should’ve brought Cyclops to document the night—what had I been thinking?

But no one took the bait. Or at least, I didn’t see anyone reach for one. People were too busy drinking or dancing or taking selfies by the mechanical goblin that was hanging from the rafters. The music was different in here, less kitschy, more spooky. Some girls sprawled on a dark velvet chaise lounge while others swayed in the black-light. Laughter erupted from underneath a white sheet, which was followed by a series

of whispers. I didn't recognize half the people, and it wasn't just due to their costumes. Like the group of ghouls hovering in the back corner—they certainly didn't go to Glorietta High. Or the one looking right at me through a skeleton mask. The one now walking toward me and reaching for my hand.

Is this really happening?

At the beginning of the night, I thought I *might* get into Pascual's house (more like a mansion), but I hadn't actually dreamed I'd make contact with anyone. I figured I'd spend most of my time casually standing by the punch bowl, nibbling on candy corn, then, satisfied with experiencing my first real party from the sidelines, I'd hightail it home on Zyke or maybe stop by the Salt Cave for a little pumpkin carving because: Halloween. But crashing a party turned out to be way easier than expected (just walk in!), and although I wasn't sure whether a proper pagan would be offended by the aforementioned Witches' Brew, I hadn't encountered anything beyond my scope of understanding. Until now.

"Your hand, madam?" That's what the skeleton said to me. As if it were expected, ordinary even. And I gave it over so willingly, so obediently, like I'd been hypnotized by the red eyes (or were they blue-green?) peeking out from behind the mask. Or maybe it was his foresty smell—like Douglas fir mixed with cedar and sandalwood. Either way, I felt like one of those cartoon animals following a delicious ribbon of scent. But usually those scenarios ended with an inviting pie cooling on a windowsill...that turned out to be the mouth of a salivating fox.

“Where are you taking me?” I said, like an idiot. By asking this I’d implied that he was the one in control since *he* was taking *me* somewhere. Just an hour into my experimental party, and I was already surrendering my power over to this masked stranger.

“You’ll see.”

Smeg. In my limited experience, the phrase “you’ll see” seldom resulted in the fun surprise it promised. In my life, it usually meant a gaudy new outfit from my mother, or my dad’s list of chores disguised as an “adventure.”

The skeleton carried a large shopping bag in the hand not holding mine, which seemed too light to be filled with murder weapons and too big to contain drug paraphernalia, but it was hard to tell. I bit my lip as he led us down a narrow hallway and into what looked like the den of a hoarder. Surrounding the large TV were a bunch of collectible plastic and ceramic figurines, some sports memorabilia, personalized wood-carvings, enlarged class photos, soccer trophies, and plush cartoon characters that looked like they’d been won at the county fair. No one had bothered to decorate this room with the Halloween spirit. There were no spiderwebs or iron candelabras, but there *was* a flickering light (not from a chandelier but a buzzing fluorescent bulb) and two creepy portraits on the wall (both, I assumed, of Pascual’s distant family members).

The skeleton sank into the mushy couch and motioned for me to do the same. That’s when he busted out the Ouija board.

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

I’d heard that Ouija boards were pretty lame, one of the lowest forms of “magick” and not very reliable. They were the stuff of campy horror films and slumber parties

(not that I knew from experience). They were either a hoax or straight up evil. Still, I'd always been curious and had never had the opportunity to test one. Sitting alone with this polite-yet-possibly-sketchy skeleton seemed like the perfect time to pop my Ouija cherry.

I shrugged in my best lame-but-whatever way. He immediately clapped and removed his gloves and mask, which revealed a white-painted face with black circles around the eyes (which definitely were blue-green, or green-blue, depending on the flicker of the fluorescent light). A mask under a mask. I swallowed hard. Despite his haunted look (or perhaps, *because* of it?), I found him, shall we say, *fun* to look at. Not that anyone could make my heart waver from Pascual, but he was in the other room schmoozing it up with Pony and hadn't even acknowledged my presence. But it seemed this skeleton boy had a mission, and he intended to complete it, with or without his friends. Why he had chosen me as his partner in crime was a mystery, but I was good to go with it.

As if reading my mind, he said, "I've seen you before."

"That's impossible," I said automatically. Since I didn't frequent these social circles and he didn't go to GHS, it was doubtful our paths would've crossed.

"It was a while ago," he said. With a chipped front tooth, he wasn't classically handsome, but I found his voice pleasant and curiously comforting. "We never met, but I saw you from a distance."

Now he was really off. I was the one who looked at others from afar. I was the one who sneaked into people's houses without being invited. But if the idea of a strange guy spying on me was supposed to creep me out, it didn't. I was oddly flattered. I just didn't

know whether to believe him or not. More than once, people had mistaken me 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 drifted off, as if preoccupied by the implication of his past ghoulishness or lack thereof and the supposed sighting of me, which may or may not have happened. Unless he’d seen me on a rooftop doing one of my gargoyle impersonations. But how had he noticed me? My impersonations were great.

“You must’ve known her. Or at least, known *of* her.”

“Known who?”

He got a faraway look and half-whispered, half-croaked, “Azure.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“She...uh...she died. Last year.”

Oh, smegging belch. Of course. This dude was clearly hung up on some chick who’d bit the dust and *metaphorically* transitioned into the land of the exes. Since his buddies were sick of humoring him, they’d left him to wallow by himself, or in this case, take the first random unattached girl he saw and make her play some stupid board game because, as everybody knows, it takes two to Ouija. I was such a fool to think maybe he had chosen me for more admirable reasons. I should’ve known better. There was no such thing as a “chosen one,” or if there was, I certainly wasn’t it.

“I just want to know what happened,” he said, looking down and biting his thumbnail. “She was troubled, sure, but who isn’t?”

Okay, so maybe he was telling the truth. At least somewhat. But I still had the feeling he was hiding something.

“I’m not,” I said.

“Not what?”

“Troubled. You rhetorically asked who wasn’t troubled, and I’m just letting you know that I’m not. I’m about as trouble-free as they come.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Why was I admitting my boring and prudish tendencies to this perfect stranger? For all he knew, I was a reckless sex nymph who partied every weekend and worked at an underground café with VIP access to indie rock shows. My pledge to reinvent myself was going more and more horribly wrong with each syllable I uttered.

“I’m not so sure about that,” he said with a smirk. There was this weird combination of seriousness and whimsical intensity about him that exuded confidence. But just as I was wondering if by some miracle fluke he was flirting with me, he said, “Everyone’s got trouble in them. Some just have more than others.”

Now I knew for sure. He was definitely hiding something. His hair, clearly blond but sprayed black and silver, dangled in his eyes when he hunched over the coffee table. He draped a crinkly purple scarf, took the board out of the box, and neatly arranged a pen with a pad of paper. As I watched him light a votive candle followed by a stick of incense, I couldn’t help but recall how I’d gotten to this particular point at this particular time.

All it had taken was a kick in the pants and a little bit of guts. Okay, a lot of guts. Worm guts, to be exact.

Just that morning I'd been sitting next to my lab partner, Suzy Griffith (or Pony as I preferred to call her), as she neighed through her girly, sparkled lips, tossed her thick blonde mane, and looked her usual brand of hot. Her family was big in town: her dad was the sheriff, and her older sister had been the Prom/Homecoming/President/Queen of Everything, so Pony was famous by association. The guys would always hover around our table, but they'd only look at me by accident. I wasn't even really her lab partner, since she said dissecting animals was against her religion (that being Squeamishity), and so I dissected all the bugs by myself, which I kind of liked.

"Gag me," she'd said, glancing over at my wax dissecting pan and kicking a pointed shoe at Iain's butt sitting in front of her.

"Ow!" he said, but he was smiling when he turned around.

"Tell me something interesting before I hurl."

"*Shhh!*" someone said behind us.

Iain scooted his stool closer to Pony. "Are you going to the party tonight?"

"Maybe," Pony said, applying a thick layer of iridescent lip gloss.

Ms. Diaz shushed them in front of the class. Everyone knew Ms. Diaz was Pony's Aunt Sylvia (her mother's sister), but since she had been estranged from the Griffith family, people generally didn't associate her with Pony. Instead, they associated her with being a miserable sad sack with two failed marriages and a raging nicotine habit.

"Who's going to be there?" Pony whispered.

"Everyone," Iain said, and rattled off a series of names.

In a small town, most people knew each other by face, if not more. Yet somehow I was surprised when the people meshed together like this, disrupting my vision of them as a thousand islands, me rowboating my way around them.

“...Troy, Gwen, you know, Lexy, Roxy—”

“Who’s that?”

“Alexis and Roxanne. That’s what they’re calling themselves now. Sexy Lexy and Foxy Roxy. They won’t answer to any other name.”

“Gawd.”

Ms. Diaz gave them another look.

“You should come,” Iain whispered as he doodled on Pony’s notebook. I’d sensed they’d recently gotten into a fight, but it seemed their relationship was on the mend.

“I might have another party to go to,” she said.

Iain looked surprised and maybe a little hurt. “Where?”

“That’s it,” Ms. Diaz said, pointing to Iain and Pony. “You two after class. Clean-up Committee.”

“No way!” Pony said.

I stifled a laugh, picturing her cleaning up all the worm guts.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it,” Iain whispered to her.

Kiss ass.

“And you, too.” Ms. Diaz pointed to me.

“What? I didn’t do anything!”

But there was no use arguing with the teacher, who bolted out the door as soon as the bell rang (probably needed her cigarette fix, which was why she pawned off clean-

up duty to us). After class ended, it was just me and Iain and Pony cleaning up all the mess. Except, of course, Pony just sat there the entire time.

“So you seriously have another party to go to tonight?”

Pony curled her straw mane around a number two pencil and scrunched up her mouth as if choosing between these two parties was like deciding which college to go to.

“Where’s it going to be?” she asked.

“Pascual’s house. His parents are in Mexico for some Day of the Dead thing.”

Wait, what?

Of course the party would be at Pascual’s house. He lived in a semi-mansion, and he was best friends with Iain Collins, the guy who had a reputation for being found the morning after a party on random couches, in bathtubs, and in one case, on a deflated air mattress on a front lawn. Pascual had always been Iain’s sidekick, but something had changed over the summer. While there was no denying Iain’s good looks, Pascual was obviously the smarter one who seemed to know how to have fun without it leaving a stain on his record. He’d also somehow gotten way hotter: his hair was longer, his face more angled, his arms solid. He’d never been an outcast, but now girls were really turning their heads. But I’d liked him first—since middle school, when he’d worn a retainer and had a helmet haircut.

“Sounds tempting,” Pony said, swiveling on her stool as Iain and I wiped down the tables. Somehow I’d gotten stuck with most of the cleanup as they flirted their way through the party details (multiple kegs, pizza, and a smoke machine—none of which I’d actually seen that night).

“It’s gonna be killer.”

I found it astounding how they didn't seem to register I was in the room, that maybe *I* would be interested in attending the festivities. It wasn't like I was a leper or anything. There was nothing inherently wrong with me—at least, I didn't think so, but I'd never seemed to have much in common with my classmates. My chronic shyness didn't help. People had generally ignored me from day one of high school to the point that I actually questioned if I could be seen or not. I silently challenged anyone to notice me taking a scoop of discarded worms, wrapping them up in gobs of paper towels, and slipping them into my pack. No one was the wiser.

“Put me down as a strong ‘maybe,’” Pony said, which seemed to satisfy Iain judging by his side-smile.

But witnessing their interaction had ignited something within me. It was Halloween, and I was a red-blooded teenager itching for something to do. Here was my chance. True, I hadn't exactly been *invited* to this party, but since I wasn't a vampire, I didn't need an invitation, and I *did* have experience creeping through windows. It was like the universe was begging me to go. Who was I to refuse the universe?

Now, sitting on the squishy couch with this skeleton boy, I wondered what it all meant. I refused to believe the recent series of events were purely coincidental. Call it synchronicity or destiny maybe, but there was no way I was here by accident.

“Do you believe in this stuff?” he asked. Some of his makeup had smudged across his cheek, which I found endearing.

“What, like ghosts and communicating with the dead? I'm not sure.” The truth was that, although I wasn't certain what my official stance was on the afterlife, I'd always been drawn to topics like reincarnation and psychic powers. Like lots of people, I could

sense subtle shifts in moods from different places or things. Often it wasn't a description in words or visions so much as in senses of colors or flavors.

Like this room. In some ways, it was the most normal room that I'd seen in the house (I still had to find Pascual's bedroom!), but it had a completely different vibe. All the collected junk gave it a stagnant, pea-green feeling. I was no expert, but it seemed like just the kind of place where a disembodied soul might want to hang out. Perfect for Ouija-boarding.

"Yeah, I'm not sure either," he said. "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 sunk deeper into the enveloping couch. If I'd known him better—that is, if I'd known him *at all*—maybe I would've prodded, or at the very least, consoled. But instead of conjuring up some words of encouragement or lending a "there, there" pat on the shoulder, I focused on the task at hand as if it had been my idea. I nodded toward the board in front of us.

"Let's find out," I said.

He scooted over a little so we were both dead center. Our legs touched. He took a deep breath and sighed, then said, "Okay. Have you ever done this before?"

I shook my head.

"I've only done it once—with her—so that's one reason I think it might work. Like maybe she'll remember or something?" He looked at me as if asking, like I was some authority on the subject.

I shrugged. "What happened when you guys did it?"

“First I was just freaked out that it actually worked. I mean, there was no way either of us was moving the planchette. That’s what it’s called,” he said, when he caught my confused look. “This pointer thing—it has a name. It’s a planchette. Anyway, it didn’t tell us anything too weird, mostly stuff we already knew. I’d been wanting to try it again when she up and died on me.”

I swallowed hard. So in a twisted way, I was the replacement for his dead girlfriend. As if on cue, part of the fluorescent light flicked off, so now the room was even dimmer, lit only by the remaining sputter of one dying bulb and the single candle underlighting the skeleton’s painted face.

“Who do you think you contacted? Was it a ghost or a lost soul or what?”

“I don’t know. We tried asking but never got a straight answer. The best we could figure was that it was a lady who used to live in the house we were in.”

“Crazy.”

He nodded, then said, “Ready?” He placed the planchette on the bottom center of the board. It looked like a wireless computer mouse except it was shaped like a teardrop or an upside-down heart.

“Yeah,” I said, shifting my weight to be closer to the table, which also happened to be closer to him. Between the sinking couch and my awkward bat wings, it was hard to get situated for a serious occult encounter.

“Ow!” he said as an umbrella rib jabbed him in one of *his* ribs. He laughed softly, so it obviously didn’t hurt, although there was a danger of poking his eye next time. “Do you think you could take this off?”

I think my jaw might’ve actually dropped. “Are you asking me to undress?”

“No!” he said quickly. “I just meant—”

“I know what you meant,” I reassured him. Although I wondered if I should be disappointed that his intentions had been so innocent. “I’ll just remove the wings.” I unpinned the umbrella from my shirt, so now I was just a cat-eared, weaponless ninja.

“That’s better,” he said.

And although I’d spent a decent chunk of time making that costume, it *was* better, at least right now. Unencumbered by the obtrusive wings, I could breathe deeper, move more freely. I took off the pointy-eared headband and shook out my hair. I was on a roll.

Following my lead, he tossed his hair a little and said, “I wish I could take something off, but I’m naked under this.”

That visual did not calm my nerves. I changed the subject. “Just curious—why do you need at least two people to play this ‘game’?”

Then he took my hand for the second time that night and held it flat against his like we were each one half of a prayer. That, or giving each other the world’s slowest high five.

“Feel that?” he said, smiling a little as he drew his hand away an inch, then pulsed it back and forth millimeters from mine.

Uh, yeah. I was all tingly and electric.

“We’re not even touching, but there’s something there, right?”

I was having a hard time coming up with words, but somehow I mustered, “That’s heat from our bodies, right?”

“Heat, sure, but there’s something more. Close your eyes.”

Without overthinking it, I did as told. With the stimulus of sight removed, I was free to breathe a little deeper, to sink a little further, to *feel* without judgment. The tingliness of being close to a strange, cute-ish boy (who may or may not have been meaning to flirt with me but was definitely leading me on with this hand stuff) began to soften, and I didn't focus on it being *his* hand near mine, but simply a human hand giving off heat. But then something changed, and it wasn't just a hand, almost like that feeling when two magnets of opposite charges are put together. There is this invisible force field between them. Except in this case, our hands weren't repelling each other. There was a tangible presence between us that could only be described as "energy."

"Whoa," I said, opening my eyes and seeing him stare straight at me.

"Intense, right?" He withdrew his hand and put it on the planchette.

Right. I'd almost forgotten about the game.

"I tried it once by myself, but it didn't work. Maybe if you're a Ouija master you can pull it off, but for simple folk like us, it's better with two."

I put my right hand next to his left on the planchette, which immediately started to move.

"Wait!" he said, awkwardly grabbing the pen and paper with his free hand. "Go slower!"

I watched as our hands zipped across the board from letter to letter, but I couldn't keep track of what it was saying or *if* it was saying anything at all. It didn't seem to be using a lot of vowels.

"Stop!" the skeleton said and held up both hands.

It stopped.

“What just happened?” I asked, removing my hand from the planchette.

He shook his head. He was breathing heavily. He pushed up the sleeves of his skeleton jumpsuit. The most skin I’d seen of his all night.

“Maybe if we ask for her before we even start,” I suggested.

He looked at me like I was a genius. “Yes, of course! We have to summon her.” He paused, stroking his chin. “So, how do we summon her?”

“Like I know. You’re the one who knew her.”

“Right. Okay, so...” He cleared his throat and then said in the kind of melodramatic voice you’d hear in a staged seance, “Azure, please come forth now.”

He put his hand on the planchette, and I followed suit. It was still for a few moments, then started moving in small circles.

“Okay, this is good,” he said. “Azure, are you there?”

All at once, the planchette moved.

H-E-L-L

We held our breath in anticipation before it finally found the O.

“Hi,” I told her. “I’m Sable. Sable Dunn.”

He looked at me with part surprise and part mystery. Our hands slid in unison.

W-O-N-T-L-A-S-T

Suddenly I felt extremely awkward. Was I really having a conversation with this dude’s jealous ex-girlfriend’s ghost?

“Uh, I think you have the wrong idea,” I told her. I felt like she was talking directly to me. The skeleton was just a witness.

“Azure, I’m sorry,” he said. “I wasn’t there for you, and I wish everything could be different. Can you forgive me?” He sounded choked up.

S-H-E-W-I-L-L

He frowned. “Who’s ‘she’? Azure?”

The planchette made small circles.

“Me?” I asked, hesitantly. I could feel her focusing on me. “I will what?”

D-I-E-S-O-O-N

The skeleton looked at me, but I stayed rooted, my pulse quickening. “What do you mean?” I asked, shaking now. “Can I stop this?”

R-E-T-U-R-N

“Return to where?” he asked furiously.

“What’s going to happen to me?”

D-E-A-D

The skeleton and I stared at each other, then back at our hands. My heart beat rapidly.

F-I-N-D-S-U

“Dead finds you,” I muttered. I thought of the message in a bottle:

Find S—

Were they connected? I could barely keep my hand on the planchette, or as I was beginning to call it, the Arrow of Doom. I grasped for words but could only come up with, “Is there anything I can do?”

L-I-V-E

“Live? But you just said—”

N-O-W-H-E-R-E

I watched as my sweaty hand moved with his and landed on the word Goodbye.

“No, that can’t be it! Azure!” He slid the planchette around with his own force. Nothing. It was like an air hockey puck when the machine turned off. Heavy. Rooted. Dead.

I sunk back into the couch, half-wondering if it would swallow me whole.

The skeleton leaned back too, sighed, and shrugged his shoulders. “Well, that sucked.”

I shot him an incredulous look. “That’s putting it mildly. I never expected to go to a party and be told my days were numbered.”

“You don’t actually believe that’s what she meant.”

“She told me that I ‘won’t last,’ that I will ‘die soon’ and presumably ‘return’ to the afterlife. ‘Dead finds you.’ There’s nothing for me to do but to ‘live nowhere.’ I mean, it doesn’t get much clearer than that, right?”

“*Whoa, whoa*, you are reading *way* too much into that. I don’t know what we just experienced, but I can guarantee you she wasn’t saying you’re going to *die*. We’re not living in some cheesy horror movie.”

“We’re all going to die. She was just giving me a heads-up that my time will come soon.”

“I don’t buy it. Besides, why would she be talking only to you and not me?”

I shrugged. “I just felt like she was talking to me, but who knows. Maybe you’re going to die too.”

He shook his head. “We don’t even know for sure if we were talking to Azure. Did she ever tell us her name?”

“No. But that doesn’t mean the message wasn’t true.”

“I’m really wishing we never did this.”

“But something made you. You trust this thing, this game.”

“I trusted *her*. But this isn’t her. Come on, you don’t actually believe this?”

“It’s possible, right?”

“Well, technically, any of us could go at any time.”

“Your friend Azure did.”

He swallowed. “Yes. She did. But... That was my fault.”

“Did you murder her?”

“*What?* No, of course not.”

“Then it wasn’t your fault.”

He slumped like he’d been told this before.

But as we sat on the squishy couch, the votive candle burning low, the portraits staring down at us, our hands no longer touching, a sick feeling balled up inside me and raged to the top of my throat until it came out, and I said, “Did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That it would say those things. You said you’d seen me before. Is this some kind of sick joke?”

“No!”

“Did you move the pointer on purpose?”

“*No!*”

“Who are you, anyway? You don’t go to Glorietta High. What’s your name?”

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

“*Break it up! Break it up!*” the cops yelled.

A trapeze artist barged into the room and shouted, “*There you are! We have to go! Iris needs you!*” She grabbed the skeleton and tore him away from our devouring couch.

He left everything, but before disappearing he said, “I’ll find you.”

I grabbed my bat wings and the Ouija board and planchette and stuffed them in the shopping bag, blew out the candle, then got up to follow the skeleton and his friend (girlfriend?), but the cops had already made it down the hall. I bolted through the other door instead, which led through a series of rooms and ended in a bedroom (clearly not Pascual’s, judging by the hideous wallpaper and nondescript bedspread) that had a door leading to the back patio. I was back where I’d started the night.

The cops were behind me—I could still hear them shouting. But although I was probably the most innocent person in the place, I had to get out.

With the house surrounded and so many kids scurrying around and cops cornering them (no sign of Pony or her cop dad), I instinctually jumped into the bushes lining the back yard. From there, my plan was to wait for everything to settle down then leave the premises. Meanwhile, I could keep an eye out for Pascual or my mystery skeleton and his entourage. But before I got too comfy in the bed of damp soil and fallen leaves, a gaggle of white ghosts came flying at me.

“I’m not going back in there,” one of them said.

There was a lot of shuffling around in their costumes and then the sound of unzipping.

Smeg!

“You gotta do what you gotta do.”

And then they peed on me through the shrubbery.

I dodged most of the splatter, but my left leg and shoe were soaked. I could've stood up and revealed myself, but I didn't have the strength. And now I was sick with the stench of piss. Lymphing Belchy McSmeg.

[Novel to continue. Contact [alokayarnell \[at\] gmail.com](mailto:alokayarnell@gmail.com) for info.]