# HOW I MET YOUR MURDERER



EXOR SQUAD

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*For Papa. You've been gone a long time now, but I still picture you in Donegal.*
*And for Ally, for being a true believer.*

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# Welcome

Thank you so much for your interest in *How I Met Your Murderer*!

This book is written for an adult audience, and as such, includes things like occasional strong language, scenes of explicit sexual content, and frequent mentions of death and dying (a common occurrence when surrounded by ghosts!). There is mention of a past fire, mentions of past deaths, and there is a ghost featured who is about twelve years old.

Take care while reading, and I hope you enjoy the hauntings.

*Sarah*

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# EXORSQUAD LTD. EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT

**CONGRATULATIONS!** You have been selected to join ExorSquad, the UK's premier (and only) spectral extraction service.

By signing below, you acknowledge and agree to the following terms:

**1. Handbook Compliance**: You have received your copy of *The ExorSquad Handbook.* It is your comprehensive guide to not dying (probably). Failure to read, memorise, and follow all 500+ rules therein is your own bloody problem.

**2. Assumption of Risk**: You understand that spectral extraction is an inherently dangerous profession. ExorSquad Ltd., its owner (Gerald Pickett), and all associated staff accept **NO LIABILITY** for death, injury, possession, dismemberment, spontaneous combustion, ectoplasmic poisoning, temporal displacement, or "other unfortunate circumstances arising from contact with the deceased." By signing this contract, you waive your right (and your family's) to sue ExorSquad Ltd. for any reason, including reasons not yet invented.

**3. Equipment Responsibility**: You are responsible for all issued equipment, including but not limited to: one (1) X5000 Turbo Pro Plasma

Accelerator™, one (1) torch, one (1) high-visibility jacket, and 100g of salt. Loss or damage will be deducted from wages.

**4. Payment Terms**: Minimum wage, no negotiation. Possible commission-based bonuses. You get paid when the ghost goes away. No ghost removal = no pay. Management reserves the right to dispute whether the ghost has, in fact, gone away.

**5. Non-Disclosure**: You agree not to discuss the confidential business practices of ExorSquad Ltd. with any living persons, dead persons, law enforcement, journalists, or your mum.

**Addendum #1 - Grave Disturbance**: Following a recent incident involving cursed remains, a vengeful non-witch, and one operative sustaining serious spinal injuries after being flung into an apple tree, employees are expressly forbidden from digging up graves, tombs, burial mounds, or any other resting place of the deceased. This includes (but is not limited to) cursed burial sites, haunted churchyards, and "that one suspicious patch of ground that definitely looks like someone's buried there." Handbook Rule #243 is **not** a suggestion. ExorSquad accepts no liability for employees who ignore this clause and end up incorporated into cursed ground themselves.

**Addendum #2 - Fixtures and Fittings**: I hereby indemnify ExorSquad Ltd and the employer Gerald Pickett from any and all damages to or by the contracted Spirit Extraction Expert (TM), including but not limited to lamps, chandeliers and other light fittings falling on heads, bookcases landing on bodies, cups, plates, saucers, cutlery, pots and pans and other kitchen goods being thrown at said employee, garden stakes impaling chests, trees colliding with skulls, and any and all other damages that may be incurred on or near the premises of a haunting (‘near’ being, for the purposes of the contract, within one thousand miles).

**Addendum #3 - What did I tell you about digging up graves?** I cannot believe this needs to be said twice, but do not disturb grave sites. Ever. For Pete’s sake.

**Addendum #4 - ExorSquad employees are strictly forbidden to get in touch with rival ghost hunting companies** (who shall not be named!!) or create their own with the knowledge they have gathered during their time with ExorSquad. Any breach of this clause will result in being asked to refund all expenses related to the contract (including salaries paid) and/or possibly being haunted by ghosts faithful to ExorSquad. (You do not want to meet Oswald the Licker. Trust me.)

**Addendum #5 - Don't sing on the job:** It recently came to light that singing when on the job, especially songs about ghosts, can personally offend many spirits. Some consider it cultural appropriation, and others take offence at having their peace disturbed, but the result of angering a ghost by song can end in death. From now on, please refrain and if you really must, then whistle or hum only.

**THIS IS A 100% GENUINE, LEGALLY BINDING CONTRACT. PLEASE READ CAREFULLY BEFORE SIGNING.**

**Employee Signature:**

Rafferty O'Meara

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# One

# Before the Fall

## Raff

Until last summer, the most haunting thing I'd ever seen was a surprise flash of blue sky as my world turned upside down. And worse, the wince in the eyes of the ref that told me, well before the paramedics rushed onto the pitch, that I'd never play hurling again. At least, not professionally. Not in the Kerry green and gold.

We were in the midst of fighting to keep the MacCarthy Cup, Ireland's highest honor in the sport, for a third year running. I had leapt to catch the sliotar, the white leather ball just grazing past my desperate fingers. I was so focused on grabbing it that I didn't consider my landing, and I landed slightly off-balance with one foot planted firmly on the turf. I tried to pivot and burst forward, to put some distance between me and my Limerick opponent, but instead my knee did something weird.

And by weird, it felt like someone had just stabbed me in the leg. Instead of chasing after the sliotar, I found myself on the ground, staring up at the sky and the open-mouthed ref who apparently had never heard of putting on a brave face.

The long and short of it was a torn ACL and the end of a high-flying—or at least steady—career as a midfielder at twenty-nine years old. What should have been the best years in a sport like hurling, when my body was at its peak.

I hung my number 9 jersey in the back of my closet. Maybe one day, when the wound wasn't so fresh, I'd wear it to a party or something. The girls always went mad about how the color of my eyes matched the green of the jersey when I wore it to the pub after a match, running their fingers through my red-brown hair until it was in more of a state than usual. The attention was nice, even if it wasn't actually theirs I wanted, and I tossed all the slips of paper with their numbers in the bin the moment I got home.

There were plenty of jobs going for me. Hurling was in my veins, as it had been in my granda's, which meant I had the chance to become a ref, a coach, a pundit. But hanging around folks from the GAA—the Gaelic Athletic Association—was wrecking my head. My insides writhed white-hot whenever anyone stared too long at my slight limp. Or when their pitying whispers followed me, which they always did. Anger wasn't new to me, far from it. It was easier to reach for than everything underneath. Only now, I had no way to unleash it on the pitch.

So I turned down all the soft-hearted offers, even though that left me with feck-all. The job scene wasn't exactly hopping at home in Killorglin. For a few months after the surgery, I stayed busy by dragging my still-healing leg on hikes just to prove that I could, pretending to admire the views of MacGillycuddy's Reeks like a tourist who hadn't seen those mist-cloaked rugged peaks and staggering red-brown cliffs so often as to make them almost ordinary.

And then one rainy morning, after making awkward eye contact with my da while he was rushing around the house before work at the bank and I was on the couch doomscrolling with a giant bowl of cereal in my lap . . . I saw it. An ad that, for once, wasn't selling something but *searching*. Inviting brave souls to apply to join the ExorSquad.

The "UK's Leading Ghost Removal Service—Become a Spirit Extraction Expert Today!" had recently extended its coverage across all of Ireland, too, which made sense. I couldn't name a place more haunted in all the world, even if I'd never seen a spirit myself despite briefly dating a demonologist.

The pay at ExorSquad was shit, though: work for the desperate. Removing spirits from people's homes and pubs with what looked like a

vacuum fit for the scrap heap seemed a bit daft, but I clicked on the application anyway after brushing cereal crumbs off my joggers.

I was a bigger guy. Built tall and tough enough to take a hit from this world or the great beyond. Steady, even if my knee got weak and forced me to take a seat more often than I was willing to admit. I could still haul a weird vacuum around and zap a few ghosts, no problem. I also didn't scare easily. Hell, after being with a demonologist, the idea of creeping around in the dark and provoking the unseen wasn't entirely new to me. And I could make any uniform look good, even a pair of black overalls with a cheesy ghost logo on the front.

Even if the little cartoon ghost representing their Irish division held a fecking shamrock.

I had already typed in "Rafferty Finnegan O'Meara" and my birthday, April 2nd, on the form when it fully sank in that I'd make more money selling balloon animals to kids at the Puck Fair. If I knew how to make a balloon animal, anyway. It couldn't be that hard.

In the end, it wasn't desperation that led me to reopen and finish the ExorSquad application, and to eventually sign a contract longer than my gran's favorite Bible. It was a phone call from Coach Flanagan, asking me yet again to come ref a match like he could somehow sense that I was just sat at home playing video games, no job prospects and certainly no romantic ones on the misty horizon after my last messy breakup.

It was pride.

But after how far I had already fallen, I figured I could only limp uphill from here.

*Here* being a gently used van, which was home for now as I hopped around the countryside on assignment. My sleek blue motorbike was my favorite way to travel, but as much as it pained me to admit, it wasn't practical for hauling around a bunch of ghost-trapping gear.

The X5000 Turbo Pro Plasma Accelerator ™, as it said on the label, was fecking heavy. Even to me.

Before setting out, I strung some twinkly lights in my new ride and shoved a mattress in the back beside a pile of pricey-looking equipment with names I could barely remember and the company handbook I always fell asleep reading after only a page or two. Luckily, my friend Anna was visiting and handy with a paintbrush, so she carefully recreated the ExorSquad logo on each side of the van's shiny black exterior to help me look official.

The van and the paint had all been bought with my dwindling savings, of course. It had been made clear in my brief (and admittedly confusing) training in London that aside from two pairs of overalls and the standard-issue gear, anything I needed—like transportation or housing, or enough money for the occasional nice meal—would be at my expense.

This was no glamorous position. There would be no crowds standing shoulder-to-shoulder vying to get the best view, no cheering and singing, no victory pints with the lads after. (There were no pints of any kind with my old friends from the team anymore, but that was because I had gradually ghosted them all after the surgery.)

Still, my parents could've looked a little proud when I pulled out of their driveway on a brisk March afternoon for my first assignment, off to save an elderly woman from something sinister that moaned and hissed at all hours of the day and night. The homeowner made it sound like the whole property was cursed in the report I'd been sent by Ted, who seemed to be ExorSquad's only secretary, with chains rattling and something rustling in the farm's various outbuildings as well. The Turbo Pro Plasma Accelerator Thing was going to get a workout, and so was I.

As I drove with the radio turned up for its mindless chatter, coasting over potholes and navigating familiar tight curves and switchbacks—the job was still in County Kerry, if a little farther afield than I was used to driving in a day—my thoughts kept drifting back to my old life. To the weight of a gold medal around my neck. To tripping and rolling through fresh-mown grass on the pitch, laughing and feeling like that pitch was the top of the world. To the clamor in the locker room after a match when I licked the salty skin of Declan's abs on a dare, cursing and spitting to hide the fact that I really wanted to keep going.

But suddenly, another thought intruded, one that had nothing to do with hurling or the delicious abs of straight players. Like the flash of a memory but not, because it had never happened. I stood in a cramped, cluttered

kitchen I didn’t recognize, hands bound in metal cuffs behind my back, a man in uniform glowering at me suspiciously.

I had never been in trouble with the law. Kicked out of a pub once or twice with the lads, sure, but I’d never had a Garda look at me like *that*. Like I was dangerous.

And then, as quickly as it had come, the not-memory released its grip on me, leaving behind a fading sense of panic and the shadowy outline of a dirty kitchen.

When I was a boy, my gran told me that I had something called the Second Sight, and that everyone in her family line had it. I received little glimpses of the future, which she seemed to think were special, or even sort of magical, but which I always found too vague and brief to be remotely useful. Annoying, more than anything. If the Second Sight were a gift, it would have warned me to mind my landing the day of my last match against Limerick. And since it hadn’t, I had decided that from now on, I was just going to ignore it.

I turned up the radio to drown out any more thoughts whatsoever and focused on searching for the unpaved, hidden turnoff that would take me to the lonely, haunted homestead at 12 Athenry Lane.




I’d gone into what I now call *The Shed Incident* with my blaster guns blazing (the PolterPulse V2.1 and the X5000 Turbo Pro, for the technically minded). The homeowner had me wound up with all her talk of unholy screeches coming from the equipment shed on the property that her grown son maintained for her, stories recounted as she trembled and clutched a rosary between bony fingers. The faint sounds of something I could only describe as *inhuman* carried on as I stood outside on the cottage porch in the deepening dusk, gathering my wits.

“It’s just a ghost, O’Meara,” I muttered under my breath. “Not the damn dentist. Not your ex. Not some tourist puking up shamrock-green beer. How hard can it be?”

It definitely wasn’t a pep talk worthy of Coach, or even much of a game plan.

Based on what little I'd read of The Handbook and the violent knocks and bangs that sweet old Mrs. Murphy had described to me over a cup of weak tea, my guess was that we were dealing with a poltergeist. Chaotic, yes, though likely not out to cause real harm.

But not even the disaster of having dated a demonologist could have prepared me for what happened when I unchained the shed door and eased it open to the sounds of rustling and shrieking and something rapping on the wall.

A parrot—some kind of large, colorful bird—dove at my head and slapped me in the face with its wings as a bunch of other creatures cackled and jeered. My bad knee wobbled a little, but I stood my ground even as part of me wanted to recoil.

I clicked the trigger of the PolterPulse V2.1 threateningly as I tried to reassess exactly what I was dealing with.

Then the bright lights of another vehicle coming up the drive shattered the shed's dim interior and I met the glittering eyes of several monkeys in cages who seemed, more than anything, glad for the entertainment. Here for the craic.

For a moment, as we stared at each other, I grinned, too.

It was admittedly pretty funny, me bursting in here all determined, like I was going to zap creepy crawlies with a clunky piece of equipment that would have barely tickled a living being (I'd tried it on my thigh during training). I was armed to fight the unseen forces that feed on terror, while the creatures in here were just hungry for some peanuts and seeds.

But the grin was quickly wiped away as a pair of Gardaí burst out of their vehicle on the drive and stormed up to wrangle my arms behind my back, cuffing my wrists together.

"You can't arrest me. I'm just a friendly neighborhood spirit extraction expert!" I panted as they hauled me off toward the cottage's cramped kitchen for interrogation. Finally remembering my earlier flash of Second Sight, I realized they probably thought I was breaking in.

Thankfully, all it took to clear up the matter was one of the officers grabbing my ID from the van. It turned out that, unbeknownst to her, the Widow Murphy's son was wanted for exotic animal trafficking. And when the officers had seen my van trundling up the lane, they had assumed they were finally going to catch the guy in the act.

There was no poltergeist at 12 Athenry Lane, but there *was* a boa constrictor loose in the ductwork of the cottage, feasting on a mouse infestation. A lemur dangled from the shed's rafters, shitting on the caged monkeys, and a few foxes and a badger were locked away in another of the outbuildings I hadn't explored.

While the Widow Murphy followed us around, insisting she had "known all along" that her cottage wasn't *really* haunted, I helped the Gardaí corral the various howling, shrieking animals for safe transport, and at one point even found a baby crocodile snapping at my boots. I felt obligated, as I was still getting paid. And besides, I was brand new at this. Maybe breaking up the occasional smuggling ring was an expected part of hunting and removing ghosts.

Although, in that case, ExorSquad really should have covered that during training.




I got a few more calls like that early on in my career, if I could call it that. Like the assignment that took me north toward Galway, where the first proper ghost I ever encountered was that of an angry wildcat. The couple didn't have any pets and hadn't lost any recently, but they did collect quirky taxidermy pieces. After the Shed Incident, I was just relieved to be dealing with the dead that time rather than any nippy crocodiles or attack parrots.

And to finally see the X5000 in action (well—after I charged it, recharged it, and whacked the damn thing against the wall a few times to wake it up).

As I settled into Van Life and my strange new job, the pain of losing hurling started to fade like the pain in my knee, probably because I was keeping so busy. I even managed to read a few more pages of The Handbook, which I realized might actually contain some useful advice when I got to Rule #24.

## Rule #24: Never Flirt During an Exorcism

*Demons thrive on chaos like flirting and banter, and during a high-pressure haunting, distraction can be deadly. Exorcisms demand absolute focus, discipline, and respect for the unholy forces at play. Attempting to charm your partner during such a ritual—or worse, charm the possessed person or creature—only invites catastrophe.*

*Above all, remember this: the only sparks allowed to fly during an exorcism are from the protective candles.*

That was more or less the story of how I had broken up with my last boyfriend, Ronan the Demonologist. The only guy who had ever been more than a month-long fling, two months if we were lucky, even though we probably didn't make sense on paper: the goth and the sportsman. Ronan and I had gotten together when I was still on the team, and he had stuck by me through my ACL surgery. Had stayed with me in the hospital as much as visiting hours allowed, charmed the nurses and my parents, brought my favorite foods and kept my spirits high.

But well into my recovery, when he had invited me to spend the night with him while he investigated supposedly demonic activity at a pub, we'd been doing some heavy flirting and teasing by the barstools when something came over him. His face changed. Even his eyes looked different in a way I couldn't quite describe, though they were still the same color.

"Feeling all right?" I had asked uneasily, because he hadn't prepared me for what I was supposed to do if anything went wrong on the job. He had assured me, many times, that it simply wouldn't. I'd edged closer, even though I didn't really want to. I was worried he was going to faint or something. "Can I bring you anything? Some water, or—"

"Oh, Raff," he had crooned in a rough voice, almost like he had just woken from a deep sleep. "What could *you* possibly give me? Since the accident, you're all temper and no direction. You're losing that rock-hard body that made me want you in the first place. You've gone soft, in more ways than one, sat around all day in your sweats. Like a pensioner." His eyes had changed more, getting darker, like an extra shadow passing over

his face. The effect was intense enough to make me notice even though the words had just driven a knife right through the heart of all my insecurities. “You’ve got nothing left. Without any other talent to speak of, you’ve lost the one thing that made you interesting.”

And that’s when I left him.

Walked right out of the pub, slammed the door, and held it to trap him in there while I called one of his friends to come sort him out.

When he eventually resurfaced a week later, no longer possessed and trying to grovel, I told him I didn’t want to hear it and officially broke things off. Because I couldn’t stop hearing what the demon had hissed through Ronan’s lips, things I had quietly feared since the day they carted me and my useless leg off the pitch.

What would ever make anyone look twice at me now that I had lost the one thing that had defined me for so many years? I didn’t know what there was to love about myself lately, so I wasn’t sure how I could expect anyone else to.

I *did* get a lot of stares and attention in my ExorSquad overalls when I went into my hometown these days, probably because I liked wearing them with a fitted black tee underneath that showed off my biceps. I was lifting again, carefully, with a set of weights I kept in the van.

Had to be ready for whatever ghost or felon this job brought my way next, even if a workout regime

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# Two

# Here Lies Lord Raff

## Raff

Finally, after being on the job for about six months and picking up cases that took me to different parts of the country, I was heading home to Kerry.

Well, not exactly home, not yet—I wouldn't have time to stop in for a visit until after this latest assignment, which was taking me to the quaint, bucolic village of Ballycorven deep in the heart of the county. Still, it was the closest I'd been to familiar sights in a while.

Singing loudly with the radio as I drove into *the kingdom*, the lush greenery and dramatic peaks on the horizon welcoming me in with the grandeur of palace gates thrown wide open, I glanced at the postcards taped to the dash. One for each assignment I had successfully completed over the past several months. A grand total of three.

That's right, three in all, because I had started this little tradition after zapping that angry bobcat spirit from the taxidermy house. A postcard from the nearest landmark there would have made four, something I reminded myself of on my worst nights, when I found myself wondering what I was doing with my life and if this job was really helping anyone.

I had finally seen my share of ghosts. And I still wasn't particularly scared, even after facing them one on one. Mostly, I was tired. Tired of eating cheap takeaway. Tired of #vanlife, as people called it online. Tired of cheap fecking equipment that couldn't hold a charge more than half the time or didn't work like they had showed us in training. Tired of The Handbook never giving the right advice after winning me over with the rule on exorcisms.

There were pages in there that, even without any experience, I suspected could have gotten me killed if I'd followed them. Like:

## Rule #202: How to Deal with Poltergeists.

*These pesky ghosts draw energy from electrical appliances. Be sure to turn off all the lights when dealing with them, as this will make them less powerful.*

Then there was the properly dangerous:

## Rule #325: Consider Making the Entity Angry.

*If you piss a powerful spirit off, it's far more likely to present in its corporeal form. That's when you zap it with the* ***X5000 Turbo Pro Plasma Accelerator ™****. Throwing out insults, damaging their worldly goods, stepping on their murder site (if you can find it) are all great tools in the fight against the undead. And remember, time is money. The sooner you zap, the higher your commission.*

The Handbook's shite advice meant I'd had to get creative with every ghost I'd managed to help move on, and all I had to do was look at those

postcards again to be reminded of why I felt like I hadn’t gotten a full night’s sleep in months.




First, I had been sent to the Crooked Harp Pub, the building’s cheerful, flower-decked, yellow-painted exterior giving away nothing about the clusterfuck that awaited me inside. The ghost of a heartbroken fiddler haunted the place, playing sorrowful ballads shrill enough to shatter glass while my breath frosted into clouds. It turned on all the taps in the jacks right when I was desperate to take a piss, and it sobbed so noisily in so many places at once that I wasn’t sure where to aim the PolterPulse V2.1.

Even when the ghost finally manifested as a flicker of mist behind the bar with an eardrum-piercing note from his fiddle strings, and I managed to hit it with the PolterPulse, you guessed it: nothing happened.

Well, nothing good, anyway. The fiddler started to look a touch more solid, though his appearance was never clear enough to pick out the details of his face or clothing. This was, according to The Handbook, a classic Level Two entity. And if this was a Level Two, I *really* never wanted to meet a Level Five—supposedly the most powerful of all. Because instead of a mournful expression to match the echoes of sobs, it was clear from the plummeting temperature of the room that the spirit was *fuming*, like it was trying to draw more power from our surroundings to mount an attack.

Then my knee had decided that was an ideal time to start acting up, forcing me to take a seat in one of the booths rather than make a desperate dash for the exit.

I was certain the ghostly fiddler wanted to slash my throat with his ephemeral bow, but before he had the chance to test the limits of his manifestation, I managed to wake my phone with shaking fingers and start some music. Volume on full blast, I hit the ancient fiddler with Sleep Token. All the heavy bass and guitar must have been too much for the ghost, unlike anything they piped in through the pub’s speakers—all trad songs meant to charm tourists—and it disoriented him enough to make him drop his screeching fiddle and bow.

I kept playing horny, genre-bending metal until I couldn’t see even a shimmer in the air where the fiddler had been, until my breath was no longer visible in the air and I couldn’t hear any sobbing beneath the pounding melodies coming from my phone speaker.

The pub switched up their usual soundtrack at my recommendation, favoring upbeat pop and dance hits instead of music the ghost might actually recognize and be drawn to, and limited their live trad sessions to once or twice a month. As far as I’d heard, no one had glimpsed the ghostly fiddler out of the corner of their eye since, and if there was an extra fiddle in the chorus on those rare trad nights, at least no disembodied sobs followed them to the jacks after a couple of pints.




After that, I’d been sent to the Red Bog Inn in County Offaly. I was maybe feeling a little smug about getting rid of a ghost without any help from ExorSquad’s handbook or my training. Maybe feeling like I might be good at this, like I could make something of myself with a career spent removing spirits from haunted places the way I had with hurling. But what happened at the inn was enough to make me look up the salary for ticket-takers at the Cliffs of Moher as I indulged in a brief fantasy about another sudden career shift.

The inn was dealing with a ghostly bride from another century. Her fits and floods as she moaned about her ruined wedding were enough to make me invest my meager wages in earplugs and some sturdy rain boots. I spent several nights observing her—this was no mere mist, no sporadic Level Two entity like the fiddler. This was at least a Level Three spirit, shockingly solid but for the slightest bit of transparency when she manifested. It meant she was able to focus enough of her energy on making life hell for staff and guests alike.

And me.

So I learned her preferred haunts around the property, took notes on all her favorite tricks and what seemed to inspire her to cause a flood before she had spent all her energy, and then made a plan to zap her with the X5000.

Which *did* leave a big hole right through the middle of her stained, tattered wedding gown, though that was about it. In training, they had emphasized how simple this damn thing was to use—just point and shoot, the sole boss and owner of the company, Gerald, had cheerfully directed like we were in primary school. “Point and shoot, Raff, my lad!” He loved calling me that, like we were old pals or something.

I had no idea what, if anything, I was doing wrong, and my stubborn pride prevented me from calling and asking for a replacement so soon into the job.

So once again, I got to thinking. Since zapping the spirit wasn’t doing anything to remove her like I was supposed to, and the handbook didn’t have any brilliant advice, I wondered if there was another way to move her on by offering her some closure on her unfulfilled dreams. The bog bride really seemed to want her wedding, seeing as she made the guest rooms reek of pungent, decaying flowers and somehow made old music drift through the inn’s hallway speakers. She was often caught rearranging guests’ beauty supplies or seen waltzing through the steam just outside the shower curtain while they bathed. And the minor floods she caused on the inn’s plush carpets seemed to be brought on by jealousy, occurring only when she happened upon an amorous couple in her wanderings.

The question was how to give her the wedding of her dreams.

Inspiration struck when I spotted a mop in the kitchen, and realized I could fashion a mop groom with a bowtie and a touch of whimsy. A potato on a stick would play the part of the priest, since none of the inn’s staff were willing to indulge me, and left a bouquet of moss and summer flowers for the bride on the podium I had borrowed for the altar.

Having attended very few weddings, I didn’t know the exact speech I was supposed to recite on behalf of the potato priest. But I improvised, and the ghostly bride seemed happy enough with my efforts.

She spun the mop around and vanished in a cloud of mist, leaving behind soggy footprints where she had finally gotten her special moment.

Was any of that in The Handbook under the section titled “Ghost Brides”?

Yeah, of course not.




Then came the case at The Abbey of Blackthorn Vale, taking me farther north. Several ghostly monks stirred up trouble in the abbey, which had been converted into a cozy shop selling handmade soaps and candles. The owners were fed up with shattered candle jars and soap shavings everywhere when they arrived in the mornings, and the endless, ominous chanting in a broom closet in what one of them had identified as Latin.

The five monks seemed to be Level Threes, like the bog bride, able to manifest more solidly than my misty fiddler and wreak more havoc as a group. They almost looked harmless, with their snowy hair and slim figures hunched in ancient robes, but their chanting was so disorienting in the dark, and there were so many of them, that I wound up falling down half a flight of stone steps while in pursuit. I was starting to see why many spirit extraction experts worked in pairs, but Gerald hadn't offered me that option since ExorSquad's services in Ireland were still so new.

Limping more than usual and sorely outnumbered, I languished on the abbey job for over a month while the shop owners tried to keep a brave face and sound encouraging. It was a good effort, but they were clearly becoming increasingly disappointed in me.

I was disappointed in me, too, losing hope of doing anything about the monks, aiming my ghost-zapping weapons at every strange sound in the abbey each night and getting nowhere.

Until one night, when I followed the chanting into the back of the building. I'd forgotten I had a protein bar stuffed in the pocket of my overalls until a monk rushed me and snatched it away, trying to unwrap it. And look, I certainly could have zapped him then, up close and personal. But it would have felt like pointing a gun at my granda, so even though the monks had been making a mockery of me for weeks, I couldn't even try.

Since they just seemed hungry, I spent the rest of the night guarding the wall of candles and then hurried to the nearest open pub to order them a full Irish breakfast and a pint of lukewarm stout. Then I took the van to fuel up and bought Tayto crisps at the petrol station for good measure, and brought it all back to the abbey.

The monks immediately manifested around the spread I set up in the staff room in the hope of avoiding any more broken candle jars. The spirits couldn't eat, of course, but hovering over the food and crinkling the crisps bag seemed to satisfy them well enough. They slowly dissolved from vaguely transparent figures into a cloud of grey mist filling the room. A light breeze pushed my hair back as a few words of whispered Latin settled over the abbey like a parting benediction, and the mist cleared.

The abbey's new owners hadn't heard any further chanting or found any more broken glass since they started leaving out a bag of crisps and a pint of ale in offering each week. Guess the candle business was booming. They even sent me on my way with a box of their bestsellers as a thank-you, which I suspected was more generous than any bonus I was going to see from ExorSquad. The candles made the van smell like a heathered meadow instead of stale sweat from my dirty gym clothes, and that was a definite improvement, but even lighting the latte-scented one didn't make me feel any less exhausted before I headed to my next job.

There was never a shortage of requests for help with a haunting.

And look, maybe I should have quit then and there. It wasn't as if I couldn't go home. My parents might not love me spending all my time on the couch, but I was their only son, their only child, and I knew they were glad to have me around and proud of me no matter what. I could have swallowed my pride and taken a nice, safe, paying job as a hurling ref.

But hurling had been taken from me, not by choice, and now I had something that sort of felt like mine again. Even if it was often cold and dirty and admittedly dangerous, it was still something I could choose. Something I was maybe even halfway decent at. I mean, would Declan of the delicious abs, brilliant as he was on the field, have thought of staging a fake wedding with a mop and potato on the fly? I doubted it. Would he have bought the monks a stout? Well, maybe, but not because he had figured out what they needed.

Besides, despite the vaguely ominous posts I kept seeing online about how no one lasted long at ExorSquad, I was no quitter. Something as big as a torn ACL would have to force me out of this job, even if I missed having a normal sleep schedule. I liked that I was helping people. Making a difference in the community.

And, okay, maybe it was petty, but I fancied the idea that I was better at this than fecking demonologist Ronan with all his top-class formal training.

He might have been possessed when he said those awful things to me, but I knew enough to be sure the entity had gotten those thoughts from somewhere—from *him*, all the things he had been holding in. The anger and humiliation still fueled my workouts, providing new strength even though I couldn't move my knee like I used to.

I hadn't had to fight any ghosts yet, and I doubted I would on my new assignment. Thanks to all I had learned in the past several months, I was pretty sure that handling the haunting at Ardruin Castle would be a piece of cake.

I'd been to the neighboring village of Ballycorven on a few school holidays. There was a small historical site complete with cottages to show how people had lived two centuries ago, and I recalled fragrant peat bricks burning in a hearth while actors in period costume explained daily life and gave bread-making demonstrations.

Watching over the village was a once-imposing stone structure that dated back to 1219. The original castle had been destroyed by conquering forces, and it was rebuilt in 1503 before once again, at some point, crumbling to the ravages of time and careless hands. I remembered a school trip back in 2010, when I was about fourteen, daring my friend Colm to sneak up to the ruin with me while the rest of the class ate lunch, but it was a long hike uphill just to get to a collection of collapsing stone walls with a bunch of yellow caution tape wrapped around the barrier fence.

More than that, something about the place itself gave me pause, even as a kid. The castle was missing its roof, which should have meant that the day's brilliant sun lit the stones aglow. Instead, the cracks in the castle walls shut out every attempt the light made to find its way inside. It was like the place clung to its darkness, or even spun its own shadows strong enough to challenge the sun. A vague sense of wrongness had scratched at my mind as Colm and I stared up the hill, needling me like a tiny splinter in the pad of a finger.

Finally my friend had whispered, in his lilting Kerry brogue, "I heard a guy died up there last year. Leapt off the highest balcony ledge like a maniac. That's what the cops thought, 'cause of his injuries. That, or he slipped and fell while messing about, but me mam swears something in there told him to do it. Egged him on, like. *That's* why they closed it off and put up all the tape. Ardruin Castle is fecking cursed, it is."




Well, fifteen years after that school trip, I was finally getting what I had wanted all those years ago: to explore Ardruin Castle. Or rather, I was being sent there to investigate the owners' numerous reports of paranormal activity and clear the place of any restless spirits before its grand reopening —but it was more or less the same thing.

Apparently, a pair of silver spoon siblings, the Dolans, had bought the place in a foreclosure sale a few years back with a vision of turning it into a themed medieval dining hall. Céad Míle Fáilte, the brother and sister were rebranding it. The castle of "a hundred thousand welcomes," a place where tourists would be served authentic meals while they listened to trad, and costumed performers taught them about the realities of castle life, an extension of the offerings in the village below.

One crisis or another had delayed the siblings' plans until now, but they were in the home stretch at last, with a new roof on the place and a historic preservation specialist on-site consulting as the interior workers, designers, and decorators began their stage of the complex renovation. Their plan was to open for business on Halloween night—two months from now—to pay homage to the rumours of hauntings that had swirled about the place for decades, long before there was a barrier fence wreathed in yellow caution tape.

Hauntings they were currently experiencing, and which might be intensifying as the Dolans reimagined and rearranged the place. The sister, Caoimhe, had sent me so many pages of detailed reports she seemed to have typed up herself that I briefly considered binding it into a new version of The Handbook: Céad Míle Fáilte Edition.

I'd skimmed the lengthy email attachment, and then decided I was better off just hearing about the haunting firsthand when I met the Dolans on my scheduled arrival date of September 2nd. Blinking yellow lights in the back of the van proved my equipment was taking forever to charge, as usual. But this afternoon, I was only here for a tour. I hadn't yet made up my mind whether I'd start with a stakeout tonight, or if I'd make that tomorrow's problem.

It was strange, guiding the van onto a dirt road that wound slowly uphill amongst increasingly steeper hills, taking a path that had long been forbidden to visiting schoolkids like me or even local ones from Ballycorven in the time the place had been private property.

Now, the turnoff to Ardruin Castle was marked with sturdy metal signs and colorful pennants proclaiming “Sláinte! Welcome to Céad Míle Fáilte!” and “Céad Míle Fáilte: Where the Mead Flows, the Bards Roar, and Everyone’s a Lord (for the Evening)!”

It promised a much better time than what I was here for.

Still, as I rounded another curve and came within sight of the castle’s newly paved parking area, I didn’t catch any trace of that old, deep shadow staining the castle stones. Maybe this wouldn’t be a day at the beach, but I wasn’t filled with any of that long-ago schoolboy dread as I took in the newly restored ramparts, the fresh roofing that had already been thoughtfully weathered in places, the flag flying the Ardruin family crest above the highest tower to welcome all who happened to glance uphill. It looked like the jewel it must have once been, or perhaps better, something that gave the village hope and a sense of security.

The tourists would go mad for this, especially the Yanks. Most of them seemed to think they were the lords of something or other, anyway.

Two blond figures (one pacing, as if agitated, the other slouching slightly with a hand tucked into his pocket) were waiting for me at the edge of the parking lot. These had to be the Dolan siblings. I quickly cut off the engine and hopped out of the van, smoothing a hand down the front of my dark overalls to make sure there weren’t any biscuit crumbs as I greeted what must be the castle’s new owners under a cloudless, robin’s egg-hued sky.

“Thanks a million for coming out. We’re so glad you’re here. You’re Raff, isn’t that right? And I’m Jordy,” the man greeted me in a clipped Dubliner accent, pulling a dog treat from his pocket and tossing it to the tiny reddish-brown dachshund sniffing around in the grass nearby. “The little lad is Sir Pepperoni MacLeash,” he added, “But you can call him Pepper. All his friends do.”

He dusted off his hand on his jeans and then extended it to me.

As I took it, I studied him for a moment, curious to see whether he might be any help with the haunting if need be: he was about my age, or maybe a few years older, with bottle-blond hair, reddish scruff along his jaw, tattooed Celtic designs decorating his arms and disappearing into the

sleeves of his collared shirt, and a couple piercings—gauged ears and a silver septum ring adorning his nose. Clear blue eyes glanced upward to study me in turn, because the man was a great deal shorter and smaller than me. Easy pickings for a poltergeist, I was afraid—even though I liked the way he spoke about his dog and suspected, based on the tattoos and piercings that were completely at odds with his posh shirt, that he was good craic.

"Jordy," I said, rolling the name around on my tongue. "Where are you from yourself? I had thought Dublin."

"That's right," the man said, bending to scoop up Pepper when the dog started barking a little too frantically at something in the grass closer to the castle. "Me proper name is Seordán, but there's no way our guests are getting their mouth around that one, so. 'Jordy' it is."

He winked, and finally turned his attention to the woman still pacing at the edge of the lot near the van, typing something on her phone as her heels clicked away on the pavement in time with her steps. Her curly ash-blond hair was pinned in a tightly wound bun atop her head, giving us a clear view of her frown as she glared at her phone. "And this is my sister, who I understand spoke with you about our situation. Caoimhe."

He drew out the name in long syllables, *Kwee-va*, trying to get her attention.

She bristled with the irritation of an older sibling and finally raised her glacial blue eyes to mine. "Pleasure," she huffed, like it wasn't. "Welcome to Céad Míle Fáilte, where everyone is a lord or lady—Lord Raff," she said in the same Dubliner accent as her brother. Clipped and nasally. "Hopefully you'll do a better job than the last lad they sent."

"Last lad?" That was news to me. I took Caoimhe's manicured fingers in mine and gave a brief, respectful shake, even though she kind of terrified me.

She frowned like I'd missed a detail from her tome of an email, which I probably had. "You're the third bloke ExorSquad has dispatched to us this year, as I wrote you. We're about driven demented by all the shite this ghost keeps pulling when we're trying to keep to a schedule. Time is money, Lord Raff, as you know."

Caoimhe, who hadn't let go of my hand, suddenly seemed to remember that she was supposed to be putting on a welcoming air, and gave my fingers a warm squeeze. Stepping in closer, she smiled through mulberry-

tinted lips and added with forced cheer: “You don’t have to do much to impress us, really. The last lad died in his second week here, so if you can just help us make it to the grand opening without anyone else getting hurt, I’ll send a glowing review to your boss even if the damned ghost is still hanging around the place.” With that, she stepped back and openly sized me up. I guess she liked what she saw, because she gave a brisk, satisfied nod and said more brightly, “No bother at all, right?”

No bother at all. I nodded stiffly.

So much for a piece of cake. From the sound of things and the grim look Caoimhe trained on her phone, it seemed I’d be lucky to survive long enough to make it to dessert.

I could already picture my gravestone, a speck on the sunny hillside below the castle.

**HERE LIES LORD RAFF: HE DIDN’T KNOW WHEN TO QUIT.**

*OceanofPDF.com*

# Three

# Demon Dog

## Eric

There was a stranger at the castle. Not that that was anything unusual—since the Dolans bought the place and swept in with new money and new energy, there were always fresh faces breezing through the stone entryway with its tasteful navy carpet runners and seasonal floral arrangements.

There were labourers in hard hats always working up a sweat, who I liked to tease by rearranging the layers of their sandwiches or hiding their lunchboxes. There were interior decorators, like prim, upright British Basil, who I also liked to tease because he had enthusiastically joined Caoimhe Dolan in her mission to wage war on the castle's spirits (as if a smoke cleanse was going to waft us out the windows). There was the historic preservation consultant, on whom my most impressive manifestations were utterly wasted. She really needed glasses and seemed to be in denial about it, as I found out when I summoned the energy to appear behind her in the bathroom mirror and didn't even earn a small shriek.

But there was something different about this latest arrival, something that made me hover for a closer look even though I'd seen a few uniforms like

his pass through here before—and it wasn't just that he looked to be about the age I was when I died, even though that definitely made me nostalgic in the same way I got when one of the workers brought in a messy cheeseburger and well-seasoned chips for dinner.

No, it was the stranger's *energy*. His soul. What can't be created or destroyed, something I'd never considered much beyond passing AP physics in school until I became a ghost—until it's all I was, and all I could rely on to get anything done in the world I had only half left behind.

His energy was hot, bright, clean. Crackling against mine like the static in a storm scattering across your arms just before lightning strikes. Sure, the living all had warmer energies, but this was a moth and flame situation. I could ignore most of the living when I wanted to, but this man held my attention captive despite his rather grumpy demeanor.

Helplessly intrigued, I lingered in the foyer, floating up near the massive crystal chandelier they'd shipped in from Waterford and studied the new guy with the bulky shoulders and red hair as Caoimhe rattled off a bunch of stuff I already knew:

"We bought the place three years ago, but it took a while to get a business plan together and find the right companies for the reno, especially since we were still working from Dublin," Caoimhe said, tucking her phone into the pocket of her dark, tailored trousers. I'd always been more of a jeans guy, myself, so I guess it was lucky I had died in them. At least I was wearing something I liked for all eternity, even if this particular style wasn't popular anymore.

"Are you any relation to one of the castle's original owners? Or perhaps to Lord Ardruin himself?" the stranger asked the siblings, his voice straining slightly as he cast a wary glance up toward the chandelier.

Huh. There was no way he could see me right now, and yet, with the way he had just blanched, he sure looked like someone who had spotted a ghost.

Oblivious to the moment that seemed to have already passed, Jordy shook his head, his light eyes sparking with mischief. "Only in a story I wrote that'll never see the light of day. I'm a history buff, and this place has plenty of it. Bloody battles between warring clans. Covert poisonings of kings and queens. Passionate affairs. Secret rituals in the woods that border the old stables. Tragic tourist mishaps . . ." He grinned, bashfully, as if realizing he'd gotten sidetracked. "Anyway. Caoimhe's the one with all the business sense. She saw what this place could be, and I came along to see

what kind of artifacts we might turn up while renovating. Also to taste test the menu. And to be the one to greet guests."

He and his sister exchanged a knowing look.

From what I'd observed over the past few years, that last part made a ton of sense. Jordy was friendlier than his sister, who didn't seem to know the first thing about small talk. And honestly, good for her. I respected her, for the most part, even though she wanted all the castle ghosts to clear out. But it probably wouldn't hurt to have someone giving the guests a genuine welcome when they were spending their money here.

Jordy, on the other hand, was the kind of guy I didn't want to scare, even as a harmless prank. He seemed like he would have been a welcome addition to the table for one of my D&D campaigns, or my original stuff that came later.

"We'll take you around to all the locations where any *incidents* have been reported. The ones I described in my email that you must have missed," Caoimhe went on briskly, sweeping all the personal talk aside in a single breath. "But you'll have to pardon our dust. We aren't quite as far along as we'd hoped, given how the activity has gotten so much worse lately. We're lucky ExorSquad finally expanded their service area to the whole of Ireland this year."

"Well, 'dust' is sure a way of putting it," Jordy added as he rubbed the ears of the demon dog, as I called him, who he carried under one arm. The beast was tracking me as usual, eyes fixed on the chandelier where I lurked. "The ghost keeps exploding the pipes, breaking mirrors, raiding the kitchen. Oh, and rearranging the furniture . . ."

The stranger folded his arms over his chest and frowned, apparently not very excited to be here, not impressed by ghostly antics, or maybe annoyed at being called out for not having thoroughly read Caoimhe's email. I wondered if he already knew what happened to the last guy who sauntered in here in those same black overalls, who was now one of us. Trapped where he had died, stuck in those overalls forever, unable to take a step farther than the edge of the castle grounds.

I wasn't exactly sure what had killed him, even though he had been here for a few months now. He wasn't much of a talker, still resentful about his untimely end—almost like he blamed one of us for it. But if you asked me, we were a pretty friendly crew, even if we were only united by one thing: none of us wanted to call this place home.

“Do you all stay here full-time, then?” the stranger asked the Dolans after sweeping his gaze around the foyer for a long moment.

“We used to,” Caoimhe sniffed. “But even with earplugs, it was impossible to sleep through all the banging and wailing. We’ve a flat in the village for now.”

“Right,” the stranger said, scrubbing a hand through his red-brown hair. It was thick and wavy, curling around his chin, and in need of a good brushing. His overalls were wrinkled, and there was a sauce stain drying on the leg. He looked like he slept in his van, but somehow he still had the kind of presence that commanded attention in a room. He was also taller than me by a good few inches, his broad frame packed with muscle to rival the castle’s many workers in their hard hats.

“Sounds to me like you have a poltergeist—and maybe a banshee, too,” the stranger suggested, thoughtfully. “Two-for-one classic haunted castle special.”

This sweet summer child didn’t know the half of it, even if there were no banshees here. But I was sure he would gather all that soon—if he stuck around long enough and didn’t run screaming toward the village, never to return, like the first ghost expert had.

I was a little confused how ExorSquad managed to stay in business if they employed people like that. But such earthly concerns weren’t supposed to be mine anymore, so I didn’t think on it too hard.

Sounding more confident, the stranger spoke again, his attention on Caoimhe. “You’ll find I have some . . . unusual methods for dealing with spirits. Little tricks I’ve picked up in my time with the company that might not be what you’ve come to expect based on your prior experiences. But as long as you don’t mind me getting creative, I’ll sort your spirit or spirits out before Halloween, guaranteed.”

“Just warn me if I’ll need a stiff drink first,” Caoimhe said, and a rare smile crossed her face as she ushered the stranger toward the stairs to begin the grand tour.

I followed.

Of course I did.

You try being dead for sixteen years and seeing the same stone walls and unchanging faces, hearing the same stories and songs repeated day in and day out, and not find yourself curious when presented with someone new.

Someone with a sort of charm to him—a little broody, but in a good way. Someone who made brooding attractive.

To be clear, I had only become aware of my surroundings and the castle's other permanent occupants about three years ago, a few months before the Dolans bought the place. It had been kind of like waking up after a long sleep. I remembered a lot about my old life in Boston: my big family and my small group of close-knit friends, my three cats, my love of the ocean and all things sweet, and the passion for tabletop games I had turned into a slowly but steadily growing business after college.

But there were other things I had forgotten. And some—like the details of how I had actually died—never fully came back.

That whole day was a stubborn, foggy blank. I could only remember the night before, having a pint with my dad—we weren't Irish, but mostly Greek and Italian on Dad's and Mom's side respectively, though we enjoyed the local culture we'd traveled for—and talking about my plans to explore the ruins above the village the next morning before the rain, hoping to find some inspiration for my latest campaign.

Apparently, I had fallen off the highest balcony overlooking the foyer. One second I was standing there, studying my surroundings, and the next I was plummeting over the banister. Lady Síofra saw the whole thing, and while the ancient noblewoman definitely needed therapy she wouldn't find in the afterlife, I didn't think she would outright lie to me. I was one of the only castle residents who went out of my way to compliment her whenever she manifested in the mirror, and I even let her style my hair once in a while on the restless nights we passed by talking about life and death and everything in between.

So either I had had some kind of medical emergency, or I had jumped. And *that* definitely didn't make sense.

I had been, from what memories remained, more or less happy. By the time I was twenty-two, I was taking my share of our family's wealth and investing it into creating my own tabletop gaming system I hoped would one day be as classic as Dungeons and Dragons. Five years after that, I still had so many big ideas that I was excited to try to get the word out there—like putting videos of the gameplay online. I loved my sisters, loved hanging with my cats and going for night walks by the harbor with my friends. Was proud of myself and what I was building, even if my parents

didn’t think creating fantasy games was a serious endeavor. They just measured success a lot differently than I did.

I mean, sure, I got lonely sometimes. Dated a girl or two, nothing serious or lasting, and longed to find the right guy to form a connection with so we could try things out. Had days where I texted my three healthy sisters for a venting session, because being a type one diabetic since age five sometimes still got the better of me. Argued with my parents too often about what I was doing with my life at twenty-seven and how I was wasting my engineering degree. Wanted and wished to finally be held by someone who really saw *me*, not just my family’s money or a face that was usually half-hidden by a book.

But nothing I remembered about my life would have made me feel so deeply hopeless as to abruptly end things on a long-planned family vacation to Ireland.

Which led me to think—and I had plenty of time for that in here—that maybe I had some kind of undiagnosed heart defect that was triggered by climbing so many stairs inside the ruined castle. It certainly hadn’t been my blood sugar. I had always been able to feel when it was dropping too low, and Síofra would have seen me shaking and pale, not looking at ease while checking things out.

I still couldn’t explain why it had taken until three years ago to wake up, either—why my energy had been tethered here but dormant, awareness only slowly returning. The same was true of some of the other permanent residents here. Like Sir Pádraig, whose familiar bootsteps echoed down the back staircase as I followed on the heels of the intriguing new ghost expert and listened to the warm chatter of the living. It was far more interesting than my own sad predicament.

His name, I quickly learned, was Raff, which was probably short for something. He had leaf-green eyes and a thick brogue that sounded local to my untrained ear.

As we headed up the wide, carpeted stairs, I noticed Raff walked with a slight limp. I also noticed the way he was trying to hide that he was in pain, hastily glancing away from Caoimhe to cover a wince when he put too much weight on the affected leg.

She started describing Síofra’s frequent bit with the mirrors while I continued to study Raff. A tiny smattering of freckles on his cheek reminded me of the constellation Cassiopeia. One of my favorites. He had

also decorated his overalls with a small enamel crest pinned just below the company logo, shaped like a shield and showing the outline of a deer and a mountain range. I was sure I had seen it before.

It took longer than I would have liked, but eventually my rusty memory coughed up something useful: it was a pin for a hurling team. I only knew because I had attended a match with my dad and one of my sisters before coming here to Ballycorven. And even though I didn't follow any sports, I thought one we didn't have at home was interesting enough to check out. Raff was showing off the colors of his county team, which meant he was either a fan or an athlete himself.

Actually, judging by that limp, I'd say ex-athlete. And to go from that—being on a team, a valued part of something the entire community loved—to *this*, creeping around musty old places by himself with gear that looked like cheap replica blasters from Star Wars, had to be downright demoralizing. Raff's surliness suddenly made sense.

. . . Then I remembered not wanting anyone, not even my best friend, to know why I got claustrophobic and kind of freaked out on plane rides, or the name of the stuffed dog I'd slept with since I was a baby (I missed Mr. Wiggles, too), or that dealing with my type one diabetes was still really fucking hard some days.

Sometimes, you just wanted a thing kept private.

Feeling guilty for having intruded on whatever Raff was going through, I drew a bit of energy from the bedroom we were in—Síofra's residual anger acting as a perfect conduit for a light manifestation—and reached out to fix the strap of his overalls that had slipped down his shoulder on the climb up before Caoimhe could notice and judge.

He rubbed a hand over the spot as the siblings ushered him toward the next room. His leg dragged a little more prominently on the thick new carpeting as he followed Caoimhe, with me once again unseen on his heels, and Jordy and his demon dog bringing up the rear.

The next bedroom was Brigid's favorite haunt.

"This is one of the rooms where the furniture is always shifting around overnight," Caoimhe explained briskly to Raff, who crossed his arms over his chest again as he listened. Arms that definitely looked like they could handle one of those hurling sticks with ease.

God, even sitting through another hurling match sounded better than being stuck in the castle. Sometimes I wished the weird zap-guns and

pseudo-vacuums actually *could* blast us out of existence. But I'd yet to see a direct strike from one of those things (the first so-called spirit expert had gotten a critical hit on Brother Fintan, probably the easiest target here, before he fled Síofra's wrath) actually remove a spirit from this place.

"We were going to open these rooms as optional guest lodgings after the evening banquets," Caoimhe went on, shooting her brother a *look* as the demon dog started wiggling in his arms like it was impatient to break free. For once, Caoimhe and I agreed on something: that thing was a public menace and should not be let loose in the castle. She continued: "Bring in some extra money so we can offer even nicer meals. But we'll hold off on that for now unless your *unusual methods* bring us a miracle."

Raff nodded, his deepening frown suggesting that he didn't anticipate working any miracles here. Good, a man with reasonable expectations. Then he blurted, "What exactly happened to the lad before me in his second week, then? *How* did he die?"

He looked so uneasy that I wanted to reach out to him. And do what, I didn't know—maybe put a consoling hand on his shoulder, offer some encouragement. I hadn't exactly been cool and calm at all times since I realized what had happened to me, either. Sometimes thinking about it for too long still got the better of me, stirring up a tumult of emotions that made me unpredictable, even to myself. It wasn't just Síofra who had broken a few mirrors around here; we all had trouble controlling our ghostly impulses. But hey, at least I no longer had to worry about checking my blood sugar several times a day or injecting insulin anymore, which was a relief. All the small pinpricks that dotted my stomach were, like the rest of me, old news by now.

Caoimhe pursed her lips. "They found him in the inner courtyard. The coroner said his heart just stopped working. As if he died of fright, or a great shock."

It sounded a lot like what had happened to me, minus the fall. I hadn't been present during the moments of Lorcan's untimely demise, even if, lately, I was almost always "awake." *Active*, as the so-called ghost experts termed it. My awareness now stretched from the tower rooms to the dank and lightless basement that was more like a dungeon, and I could tell I was getting the hang of this whole ghost thing. Getting stronger, able to manifest for longer periods of time. Síofra told me not all ghosts could do that—level up, as it were.

I was maybe a little proud of myself for that.

Raff sighed, then seemed to gather himself and resolutely squared his shoulders. “I’ll tell you now, that’s not going to be a problem for me.” Still, even though he sounded like he believed it, discomfort rolled off him in waves. His energy nudged up against mine, impossible to ignore and making me feel restless and out-of-sorts, too.

And I guess that’s why I did it. Why I tapped into the ancient power that I usually siphoned from in order to manifest—the energy of whoever built this place, I assumed—and ran my light, nearly solid fingers through Raff’s thick, reddish hair until they caught in a snarl and ended up tugging harder than intended.

“Shit,” I breathed out loud, a light gust of wind near his ear. “Sorry.”

His presence had me feeling more scattered and chaotic than usual. The draw of his energy, brighter than any others I had come across since I died, was no excuse. I should have asked first. But instead, still caught in the tidal pull of the strangeness that had overtaken me and not yet able to break free, I popped the enamel pin off Raff’s overalls and dashed away with it.

Two things happened at once: Raff whirled around to face me, green eyes narrowed as he watched the pin hovering in midair, and the demon dog finally broke free of Jordy’s hold and bounded toward me.

“I know you’re there! Show yourself!” Raff snarled, reaching toward his hip like he thought he had a weapon stashed there.

Ouch.

But I didn’t have time to dwell on how much I didn’t like being the focus of that anger, not with Pepper barking his head off, tiny tail pinwheeling, practically tripping on his own paws in his haste to get at me. Just like Raff, Pepper was very much aware of my presence even when I wasn’t showing myself. I suspected the dog could see me, or some shimmering, ephemeral version of me, whether I wanted him to or not. Or maybe, somehow, he could smell me.

Whatever the case, while a few people had been romantically interested in me in life, I’d never had anyone as desperate to fuck me as this damn dog.

He leapt toward my leg, humping the air absurdly for a few seconds before inevitably crashing back to the floor along with the pin that I finally dropped.

“What have you been feeding Pepper?” Caoimhe asked her brother, dry as toast, as Jordy grabbed the little beast and frantically checked to make sure not a single red hair was out of place. “Maybe you should switch things up.”

“He’s just seen a ghost,” Jordy answered absently, still kneeling by the dog and frowning as he rubbed its belly. “He sees things in here all the time, even when we can’t. Sometimes I think he’s trying to keep us safe, but then . . .” He shook his head. “Some days, I’d almost swear he’s in love with whatever it is. Maybe we have a ghost dog.”

Caoimhe arched a neatly plucked brow. “Well, I think he’s in heat.”

“Male dogs don’t—” Jordy started to argue when he was interrupted by Raff.

“I’m going to get rid of your paranormal pests. Expertly remove them,” he said, glowering right through me as he rubbed the back of his head where I’d unintentionally gotten my fingers caught. Then he strode forward to retrieve his pin. To his credit, he was already more aware of me than the last guy had been. Maybe he was as good at his job as he claimed. “Trust me, I’m taking this one as a personal challenge.”

I might have been dead, but I could still take a hint. It was time to disappear for a while.

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# Four

# Stranger in the Shadows

## Raff

Only a few hours into my time at Ardruin Castle, I already knew this place was going to be the death of me, and how it would do it. The Second Sight had given me a glimpse while we were discussing matters in the foyer: that great monstrosity of a chandelier anchored in the ceiling center, sparkling crystal carved to resemble cascades of meadow heather, was going to snap from its chain and come crashing down on my head.

I had already decided, as I headed back to the van to collect my gear and my thoughts, that I wasn't going to spend any time in the foyer, if I stuck around at all.

I was also half-wondering if Caoimhe Dolan would give me another one of her *looks*, the kind that said I was no more appealing than a cockroach scuttling underfoot in the kitchen, if I started wearing a helmet indoors. I didn't want to die here, even if the ghost who touched me earlier agreed to call me Lord Raff for all eternity. Because while the castle's exterior was whole and gleaming and nearly unrecognizable from years past, the inside felt much the same as it did in my memories of studying the ruin with Colm on that long-ago outing.

Like it was stained—only now, a fresh coat of paint and a few nice rugs had been added to cover the problem. But this was some kind of darkness that couldn't be fully glossed over, a sickness still keenly felt in the way it was hard to get a proper breath inside those walls.

Oppressive. That was the word I wanted. It was as if the whole structure was caught in the grip of some unseen fist, from which all the Dolans' cash couldn't buy its freedom.

And then there was the spirit who had tugged on my hair and stolen my club pin earlier. That had been more of an electric shock to the system, not at all like brushing up against a solid hand of darkness. It had brought out the fight in me and, admittedly, sparked my interest. Was the ghost a former hurler, too? And if so, what was causing them to make the atmosphere in the castle as heavy and gross as a wet blanket?

I didn't *need* to know. I could have called it quits after that little display or my vision in the foyer, driven away and left the Dolans to a haunted Halloween in their money pit of a castle that wouldn't be able to draw in the tourists for long. But I liked easygoing Jordy and his interesting facts about the castle and local history. I liked the spunky mini dachshund who had tried to fight the ghost for me. I even liked Caoimhe's direct, honest manner, and respected her intense devotion to her goals. I was the same way.

And unfortunately, right now my goal was to become the expert at removing spirits that I claimed I was. I was also awfully curious about the spirit who had pulled my hair and possibly apologized right after, if I had heard correctly. That was some intense activity right out of the gate, which meant investigating couldn't wait.

Keeping the pin on my uniform in case it would inspire further contact, I ventured back inside for answers as a hazy dusk fell over the castle. Maybe, just this once, the Second Sight had shown me something in time to prevent it from actually happening. Maybe I could make a difference here without losing my head to that flashy chandelier in the process.

Jordy watched me from the foyer as I lingered on the threshold, the fully charged, machine-gun-shaped PolterPulse V2.1 and the X5000 Turbo Pro holstered on either side of my heavy utility belt. My worn leather jacket would be enough to ward off the castle's perpetual chill. I took a few deep breaths as a cool, brisk wind buffeted my face, imagining I could pick up the slightest tang of the Irish Sea on my tongue even though we were

maybe twenty miles inland. And then I turned my back on the world of the living and limped inside.

“Is that part of your ‘unusual methods’?” Jordy asked with a grin and a gleam in his blue eyes, nodding to the novel sticking out of the top of my supply bag as I gently pulled the door shut behind me.

Inside my bag was a voice recorder and extra batteries, an EMF meter for measuring spirit energy, a water bottle, and a few protein bars, even though Caoimhe had told me I was welcome to help myself to the kitchen stores that looked worthy of a Michelin-starred chef. I was a little intimidated to touch anything in there (what exactly was edamame, anyway?), and knew they’d had to replace a lot of ingredients thanks to the spirit shredding bags and discarding items from the industrial fridge, so I had eaten in the van and brought my own snacks.

“What, do you read to the ghosts to try to soothe them? See if you can make them mad by spoiling the ending?” Jordy teased, and I realized I hadn’t answered him.

Tapping the spine of the decades-old fantasy romance novel I’d picked up secondhand in the village, I explained sheepishly to the man who was effectively my employer for now: “This is just to pass the time in case the troublesome spirit decides not to show itself again tonight. Although, after that display upstairs earlier, I don’t think that will be an issue.”

Back home, when I was still in hurling, I hadn’t had much free time outside of training and hanging with friends on the team. But since I hit the road, I found it fun to bring a book along, usually fantasy—the further it took me out of my own head, the better. I’d pick based on the cover or a feeling, and when I was done, I’d donate it to the library and choose again from any secondhand bookstore that caught my eye unless the novel turned out to be something I’d read over and over.

So far, there were two such books in the van’s glove box, both featuring court intrigue, princes who fell in love with their handsome guards, and no ghosts. It was nice to dream, anyway. To be reminded what was possible for a big, brooding bodyguard of lowly parentage. Clearly, not getting any action in a while was starting to mess with my head.

“I’m going to lock up, then. It’s time to make tea for me and Pepper, and he’ll leave a puddle on the floor if I’m late, no matter how many times Caoimhe lets him out,” Jordy said with a wince of apology, holding up a cluttered keyring and heading toward the door.

I gave the chandelier a wary look as he passed under it.

Jordy hummed some pop song under his breath as he messed with the keys, and then he was gone. Ardruin Castle was mine for the night.

The silence was immediate, and the shadows long. I didn't shrink from them, but drummed my fingers against the plastic casing of the Turbo Pro at my side and said into the shivering, anticipatory quiet, "Honey, I'm home!"

If only Colm could see me now.




I reached the stairs to the next floor by hugging the wall all the way around the room rather than crossing under the chandelier. My gaze stayed fixed on each step before me as I ascended, and if there were shadows darting about in the corners of my eyes, I paid them no mind. Not yet. We were going to do things on my terms tonight, unlike earlier.

Jordy had left several lights blazing on each of the four levels after completing his routine sweep of the building to make sure all the workers had gone home for the evening. Either he'd forgotten to turn them off, or, more likely, they were for me. Either way, I was grateful for the extra light as I climbed, pausing on the landing halfway up to shrug into my jacket as a deeper cold settled over the castle in the absence of other people.

Finally at the top of the enormous grand staircase, wide enough that half of my hurling team could stand shoulder to shoulder on a single step, I glanced to my right between the two bedrooms that had the most activity, and decided to start the night where I'd had my experience. A faint tapping noise issued from downstairs, almost rhythmic, but my knee and I were not going back down there right now unless it was an emergency. And the sound sounded kind of ordinary. Surely, a place of this size had its own nightly soundtrack whether it was haunted or not.

Flicking the light switch just inside the bedroom door, two antique brass lamps on either side of the room blinked on, creating warm orange halos that, at least for now, held their own against the gathering dark.

The furniture in this room was still covered in protective painters' dropcloths since Caoimhe had put the brakes on plans in here for now, but I could make out the shape of each piece in the ruddy lamplight. Settling into

a cozy armchair by the cold, empty hearth was probably a little too optimistic, but I did it anyway, pulling out my novel and a brownie-flavored bar while I waited for something more than the odd shadow to make itself known.

On the wide arm of the chair, I set my smaller pieces of equipment to help me keep watch. The EMF meter blinked but didn't register any spikes of ghostly energy, and I left the voice recorder idly running, just in case something from the other side wanted to leave me a little message.

Quickly immersing myself in the book, I began to wonder how long it would take these rival bards to realize their feelings and stop writing goading songs about one another right as the soft tapping downstairs—which might have been a mouse, the wind, anything—suddenly became a cacophony of bangs, rattles, and thuds.

Tossing the book aside, I leapt up as the EMF meter displayed an urgent rainbow of colored lights. It was another piece of equipment ExorSquad had barely touched on in training, and every time it told me there was spirit activity nearby, I was already very much aware. At least the ghost-zapping weapons offered me a promise of security, however flimsy.

I dashed out of the room with a hand on the holster of the PolterPulse, gazing over the hallway railing into the foyer just in time to see a bottle of whiskey gently roll to a stop against the base of a potted tree.

Then an assortment of stainless-steel pots and pans started knocking together in the kitchen—I didn't need to go down there to recognize the distinct sound, like my mam making weekend breakfast on the odd occasion she felt domestic. Cupboard doors started thudding open and slamming shut to an unfamiliar rhythm, one that reverberated through my bones and set my teeth on edge. I was on the verge of dashing down there just to make the fecking noise stop when every light in the castle started flashing on and off in time with the cupboards banging.

Standing here at the top of the staircase, I gazed down at the ground floor below while the castle filled with strobe lights as nauseating as some of the clubs my teammates used to drag me to when we had a match in Dublin.

Boots stomped heavily up another set of stairs elsewhere in the building, the sound a distant echo under the chorus of noises from the kitchen. Or maybe they were stomping down a servant's staircase I had yet to find. I was so disoriented that I couldn't be sure, and then I lost the scuffing of phantom footsteps altogether as a piece of furniture flew across the

bedroom I'd just been reading in and crashed into the opposite wall. Judging by the magnitude of the collision and the slight tremor in the floor, it was probably one of the couches. It was a relief I'd gotten up when I had.

Nestling deep into my jacket, because it was also freezing in here and getting colder by the minute, I scowled at whatever spirit was having a laugh at my expense. Some kind of liquid trickled down the hall into the foyer, a strange pinkish color in the brilliant flares of light. Wine, maybe. Too pale to be blood, at least.

Behind me, in the reading room, the dresser scraped across the hardwood. And then came a thunderous *CRASH* accompanied by the tinkling of shattering glass downstairs in the dining room—the beating heart of the rebranded Céad Míle Fáilte falling down on my watch. There was far too much activity happening at once for me to have any hope of documenting it all, and my temper was near to boiling.

The castle spirit was making a mockery out of me already, and unlike the monks at the abbey, this ghost was clearly doing it on purpose. And enjoying the result. Shivers of disembodied laughter echoed around me in the upstairs hall, making my stomach flip every time an icy burst of dead breath ruffled my hair.

Cheeks flushing scarlet, I gripped the PolterPulse in one hand with a finger ready on the trigger, and clutched the stair railing with the other. The crash in the dining room had determined my course: I was going to protect the Dolans' investment, or what was left of it by the time I got there. That had to have been another chandelier that fell—a threat I didn't take lightly.

I descended carefully, as quick as I dared on my knee, which probably should have been in the brace I had left back in the van.

Later, after I'd zapped this hair-pulling, pin-stealing gobshite of a ghost who was too cowardly to even show themselves, I'd play back the voice recorder in the van to see if it offered any clues as to how one spirit was able to do so much damage in so many places all at the same time. This had to be a Level Five, a Big One like they talked about during our training—the most powerful classification of spirit recorded to date.

And if it was, I had to be owed a raise.

As I reached the landing halfway down, a stranger stepped out of the long shadow cast by an antique clock hulking against the wall. A living, breathing man, here in this madhouse with me. A man whose intense,

expressive hazel eyes were fixed on me in every flash of light, not nearly as disoriented as I was.

I reeled back, startled, as he swept a hand toward the mess in the foyer and warned, “I wouldn’t go down there if I were you. Not yet.”

That accent—he was clearly American. But who had let a Yank loose in here when they weren’t even selling tickets yet?

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# Five

# Seven Years' Bad Luck

## Raff

Quickly taking in the stranger's striped rugby polo and designer jeans, the terracotta glow of his flawless skin, his slicked-back raven hair that fell past his shoulders in a way that could only be described as class, I decided he had to be on the crew. One of the decorators, most likely, seeing as he was dead pretty and had a taste for the finer things. Someone Jordy had missed in his nightly sweep, the poor lad probably immersed in a project or stuck in the jacks when the activity had started up. He had to be half out of his mind with fright, even if he didn't look it.

My focus was already shifting to protecting him rather than investigating the dining room. I raised the weapon in my hand a little to show he would be safe with me. It wasn't as if he'd have any idea that these things only worked when they felt like it. But for some reason, seeing the PolterPulse up close made him look ill at ease.

There was a small pink scar near his temple, shaped like a crescent moon. Maybe he'd seen his share of violence, and didn't know the PolterPulse was bloodless.

“You’ll be all right. I’ve got you,” I told him, hoping I sounded reassuring. Around us the wails and screeches and minor explosions echoed from all parts of the castle, so I could hardly hear myself speak, let alone think with the lights still flashing on and off like mad. But trying to help this man was somehow keeping me calm, the heat having already receded from my face. “I’m Rafferty O’Meara. I’m with the ExorSquad. I’m a spirit extraction expert, and I’m going to get you out of here.”

“You can try, if you want to,” the man said, smiling a little sadly.

It was kind of an odd thing to say, but for all I knew, he’d had a vision of his death in here, too. It was clearly a dangerous place, beyond anything I’d dealt with or had described to me in training.

“I will, you’ll see!” I insisted, raising my voice over another unearthly clatter—every single pot and pan in the kitchen tossed down that unseen staircase, maybe. “Come now, stick close to me. I’m going to take you through the foyer, but not directly across—stay against the wall there until we reach the front door. Then we’ll make a run for my van or your car, whatever’s closest, and I’ll get you sorted.”

I reached out with my free hand, intending to take his so that the ghost couldn’t drag him away from me. If it could stir up this much activity at once, there was no telling what else it was capable of.

At first, my mind couldn’t process what it meant that my fingers passed right through his, and that what should have been a warm palm was actually a pocket of cold air rather than the hand of the solid-looking man in front of me. I was so confused that I tried a second time, while the man just looked sadder at the next failed attempt. Sadder, and paler, the faint outline of the stairs becoming visible through his torso. My gut twisted as the realization sank in.

I straightened and stepped back, adjusting my finger on the trigger of the PolterPulse. “What do you want?” I demanded in a voice as cold as my chilled hands. “What are you playing at? Trying to frighten me off with an orchestra of shite?”

“No,” the man protested quickly. “No, not at all. If I wanted to do that, I wouldn’t have put this much energy into saying hi face to face.” He grew a bit more substantial again as he spoke, the stairs behind him disappearing. “I’m trying to protect you. That’s all I want, I swear.” He held up his hands, palms out in a gesture of surrender. “The others get a little . . . overexcited,

and start showing off whenever anyone new turns up. It's a lot, I know, but they can't keep it up for long."

Others—plural. Okay, so maybe I wasn't dealing with a Level Five, but a castle full of spirits. Many spirits, judging by the state of things. But this solid-ish, clear-voiced man in front of me had to be at least a Level Four, a spirit capable of powerful manifestation that could be detected without any sort of equipment.

I was still trying to process all this when he spoke again: "I'm sorry about earlier—with your hair and the pin, by the way. I can get a little carried away, too. But I promise it won't happen again. I . . . I'm Eric."

"Wish I could say it's lovely to meet you, Eric," I said slowly, holding the PolterPulse level but not aimed at him. Yet. I should have. I should have already had it pointed right at his chest, but I didn't, and I wasn't sure what stopped me. Certainly not those doe-like hazel eyes, because that would be mad as a bag of frogs. "But given present circumstances . . ." I pressed my lips together and huffed a sigh through my nose, searching for my earlier sense of calm as my pulse tapped an urgent rhythm under my skin. "Can you call them off? At least cut the act with the lights before I puke?"

Before he could answer, the book I'd been reading soared down the stairs and fluttered straight through Eric's head, striking me square in the chest.

All the lights that had been pulsing on and off went dead, plunging us into darkness. All was silent, too, until—

"Oh, *The Minstrel's Kiss*. I loved that one!" came an annoying American voice from somewhere close by.

I ignored him. I was here to do a job, and whatever spirit had hurled a book at me had just made themselves my primary target. My knee protested a little as I felt my way up the stairs in total darkness with the help of the rail. I had hoped there would at least be some light streaming in from outside—it was a clear night, the windows were high and wide, and the moon was waxing—but as usual, the castle clutched its shadows close and blotted any intruding stars.

All of a sudden, Eric was in front of me again, rematerializing a few stairs above. Much more insubstantial this time, like a filmy white shirt, but I recognized the shape of his face and the wisps of his long hair. He had probably used up most of his energy appearing so solid earlier.

Even his voice was fainter, an eerie echo in the uneasy quiet. "I can't let you go back up there. It—it's not safe. That's Lady Síofra manifesting.

She’s my friend, but on nights like this, she gets a little . . . well. You heard about the mirrors.”

I climbed another step. He held his ground, eyes steady on mine as he spread his arms wide. Was he going to try to stop me?

“First, you don’t want me to go downstairs,” I said, tired of all of this. “Now, you don’t want me to go up. Am I supposed to sit here on this landing all night with you as my babysitter?” When he frowned and didn’t answer, I bristled, taking that as confirmation. “You know, for a dead Yank who’s a long way from home, you seem to think you have a lot of authority here.”

“Yank?”

“Fecking American.”

“Bostonian, if you want specifics,” came Eric’s soft reply.

“I don’t. I just want you out of my way,” I snapped, climbing until he was just one step above me. I was taller than him, and bigger, so even though he was the untouchable one, I wasn’t intimidated as I leaned into his ephemeral face and demanded, “Move aside.”

“Where are you from?” Eric asked with what sounded like sincere curiosity, the words a little clearer this time. “Here? The village?”

“Killorglin.” I wasn’t even sure why I answered. “The sweet banks of the River Laune.”

“I’ve heard of it! They have the Puck Fair, right? Have they ever made you King Puck? What’s the audition process like?”

Part of me wanted to laugh. My fool mouth even turned up in a grin, forgetting to be irritated for a moment. Someone ought to tell Eric how bad he was at stalling for time. He was trying to distract me still, but the more he attempted small talk, the more I wanted to know what he didn’t want me to see upstairs.

“The king is a mountain goat,” I explained as I raised the PolterPulse V2.1 and zapped him directly in the chest with a bolt of neon blue light.

He dissipated immediately, without even a gasp of surprise.

And although I had gotten what I wanted—no more dead tourist trying to have a bit of a chat and the way forward now clear—a tiny part of me regretted what I had just done. Eric *had* said he was only trying to protect me, and he had even apologized about my pin. There was also something familiar about that hair, those eyes, those lips, his face . . . Maybe, if I’d spent a little longer with him, it would have clicked into place.

Upstairs, someone started singing. Wordless, high, and sweet.

Brushing all thoughts of Eric aside like cobwebs, I reached the top of the stairs and sprinted toward the bedroom with the draped furniture as tendrils of fog spilled out into the hall. Slowly, I peered around the doorframe.

There was the shape of a woman cloaked in the thick mist that now filled the room, her outline just visible. Tall and lithe, small waist and full hips, coils of hair piled high on her head. As she sang, she gyrated her hips to the music, her billowing skirts swishing with each movement—the kind of thing a straight guy's fantasies were made of, though it only set alarm bells ringing in the back of my mind.

Assuming the PolterPulse would be useless after zapping Eric, I holstered it and grabbed the Turbo Pro instead. I was breaking out the big guns for this one.

Slowly, the woman danced her way toward me, making it clear she was as aware of my presence as I was of hers.

I aimed the scope of the Turbo Pro at her, tracking her movements with it until she stopped in the center of the room and blew me a kiss.

I blinked, startled. And in that moment, she was gone.

With that, the two warm lamps in the room popped on like we had reached the end of the show. The light switch was still flipped up like I had left it, after all. The mist began to dissipate, and I took a few steps into the room while keeping a firm grip on my weapon.

There had to be something more here. Something I was overlooking, something that would have made Eric so determined to block my way.

The furniture had definitely been moved. The armchair I had been reading in now hulked in a far corner, the voice recorder and EMF meter having fallen on the floor near my bag. The dresser had been pushed several feet away from the heavy gilt mirror on the wall above it, an antique that Caoimhe told me she had worked hard to source and paid a small fortune to acquire after losing the last one to ghostly antics.

For a few minutes, I waited in total silence, listening for the slightest unusual sound or a shift in temperature. But my jacket was once again enough to defend against any chill, and my hands were warming up a little.

The ghosts had welcomed me to the castle in their way, and now I would have to figure out what each of them was about and how to move them on. Surely they wouldn't all be as easy as Eric. Good thing I had almost two months before opening day to sort it all out.

Sighing, I stashed the TurboPro back on my belt and went to shove the dresser back into place. As I finished, I caught sight of myself in the mirror, its immaculate surface unforgiving to the smudges under my eyes, my pasty skin, the odd cluster of freckles on my cheek.

I looked shite.

My hair was also sticking up at odd angles in the back like I'd never seen. Maybe Eric had messed with it again and I hadn't noticed, or—

Oh, no. That wasn't my hair. There was another figure in the mirror with me, slowly rising up from behind me. I didn't have to turn and look to know it wouldn't be in the room with me in the flesh, so I kept my eyes fixed on the glass. On *her*.

"Lady Síofra. Tráthnóna maith duit," I said, wishing her a good evening in what I guessed was our shared language. I was proud that my voice didn't waver in the slightest, even though the porcelain face of the noblewoman gazing back at me was warping as I watched.

A rosy cheek withered and wrinkled. Sores sprouted on her lips, cracking and oozing. Lustrous chestnut hair turned lank and greasy, hanging in clumps around her ruined face as she pulled back her lips in a snarl.

Cold breath gusted over the back of my neck, and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Shee, that's enough!" someone said from the doorway. "We don't need any more death around here—think of the last guy!"

I knew that voice. I knew that accent.

What I didn't know was whether Eric was capable of making his so-called friend stand down and stop acting the stuff of nightmares. Especially when he sounded exhausted, like he had just run a marathon—probably a side effect of being zapped.

"I've got this," I muttered to him as I struggled with where to aim the TurboPro. Over my shoulder seemed like a good choice when the back of my neck was still prickling, but what if most of her energy was concentrated on the mirror?

"Do you, King Puck?" Eric questioned, louder now, like he was moving closer.

The sickly-sweet stench of rotting flowers crawled down my throat as the noblewoman in the mirror leered at me, her eyes a milky grey and her snarling lips cracked and bleeding. Her flesh was rapidly sinking into her bones, exposing the hollows of her cheeks.

Still, I managed to choke out, “That’s Lord Raff to you, Yank.”

I made the split-second decision to aim at the mirror as the noblewoman’s ghost raised a skeletal hand, clawing at her eyes—reaching like she intended to claw at mine.

“Don’t hurt her—I’m telling you, she’s just not herself!” Eric shouted, much louder now.

I pulled the trigger just as a burst of energy knocked the weapon slightly askew. A bolt of white heat crackled from the TurboPro and struck the mirror a few inches above the noblewoman’s rotting reflection.

She vanished with a small shriek as the mirror shattered with the force of the impact from the weapon, shards of glass littering the top of the dresser.

Good thing this job was going to be the death of me so I wouldn’t have to suffer all seven years of bad luck.

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# Six

# All Star

## Raff

After staring for another stunned moment at the wreckage of the mirror I had broken—no, *we* had broken—I spun to face Eric.

He was visible again, only just. A transparent but distinct figure staring daggers at me, his arms crossed, hands buried in the long sleeves of his rugby polo. Bet he never even played. Not with a nose that straight and lovely.

"Are you going to split the bad luck with me, then? Three and a half years each?" I demanded. "Better yet, are you going to be the one to tell Caoimhe that she has to buy another period-appropriate mirror for this bedroom?"

"Oh, who cares?" sighed a soft rasp of a voice in Irish.

In the far corner of the room, Lady Síofra sat in the armchair with her hands folded primly in her lap, no longer skeletal or decaying or covered in bloody sores. Like Eric, she was currently somewhat transparent, but I could make out the pearlescent pins that held her shiny coils of hair on top of her head, the arc of her long eyelashes, the bow of her thin lips neatly painted with some kind of rouge. Strings of pearls and long strands of other

gems draped her swanlike neck, marking her high-ranked status even to my uneducated eye.

"*She* never lets me keep things as I used to have them, anyway," Síofra went on, heated annoyance sparking in her voice. "And now she wants to let strangers sleep where I used to, as though I was never here? Why should we bother with what she desires?"

"She's not so bad," I answered in English, glancing pointedly at Eric. "Caoimhe, I mean. She really cares about this place in her way. You could try being nicer to the Dolans."

Síofra followed my lead, switching to heavily accented English with an apologetic look at Eric. Her obvious care for someone other than herself had me slightly more willing to forgive the mirror incident. "It's not that I'm *not* nice," she insisted, leaning forward slightly on her knees in the old chair. "This was my home. It still is. I take pride in it, too. You see, I used to be trapped in mirrors. Or surfaces. Glass, puddles, polished silver. One of my rivals in court, an . . . ex-lover—Eric taught me that term—poisoned me because she thought I was too vain, and had convinced herself *that* was why I had ended things between us. Afraid not. It had everything to do with her own infidelity."

Well, that explained her shocking appearance in the mirror earlier—probably side effects of whatever poison had gotten her in the end.

The ghost closed her eyes for a moment, like the memory still held an echo of pain. "A few years ago," she went on after the pause, "I discovered how to break free of the glass. I'm stronger now. But sometimes, I'm not in control of everything I do. I get these mad bursts of energy, and act in ways I wouldn't ordinarily dream of . . ." Once again, she looked to Eric. "Am I making sense?"

Eric nodded, darting another glance at me as he said, "Oh, yeah. That's how it was earlier, Raff, when I stole your pin. It was like . . . I knew it was wrong, but I still couldn't help myself. What do the ghost removal experts say about that?"

"It's 'spiritual extraction expert,'" I corrected without a second thought.

Eric arched a dark brow. "Whatever you say, King Puck. Anyway, is that just part of being dead? It's not like we can just wander into the village and ask someone. Or post online 'Am I the asshole for accidentally using my ghostly powers to startle people?'"

“I don’t know,” I admitted, trying to recall whether The Handbook mentioned anything about ghosts not always feeling like themselves. “If I learn anything about, um, spirit urges, you’ll be the first one I tell.”

Eric hummed, a satisfied sound. “Good. Thank you. That’s the least you can do after zapping my friend. And me. Oh, and calling me a Yank. It sounds like the bad sex our grandparents used to have. Or an STD.”

“They have those back in your day?” Damned if I couldn’t resist a bit of craic, even when I was bantering with a dead man.

Looking between us, Síofra pursed her lips, as if holding in a laugh.

“I died in 2009, not the Middle Ages,” Eric retorted, sweeping a hand over his tight, modern jeans. “I mean, look at me.”

It was hard not to, at least while I was still trying to figure out why he appeared to be somewhat familiar. Then I’d stop looking so much.

“We had plenty of what you call ‘STDs’ in the Middle Ages,” Síofra added cheerfully, like she was keen to have something to contribute. “Likely more than you have now. I’ve seen how often people wash their hands and bathe these days.”

“What was—?” Eric started to ask before he seemed to think the better of it and held up a hand. “You know what, Shee, don’t tell me. I’m happier not knowing.”

While they were talking, I dredged up a few words that seemed important to say sooner rather than later. “Tá brón orm. I’m sorry for calling you a Yank.”

Eric tilted his head and blinked at me. “Go on. Keep sweet-talking like this and you just might get to see my tattoo later. If you’re into that kind of thing. And for zapping us . . .?”

“Don’t push your luck,” I grumbled, but with no real heat behind it.

“That’s all right, Raff dear,” Síofra said gently. Her energy must have been waning, as I could barely make out the wisp of her form anymore, but her voice was still clear. “That was a horrible display, and you were merely protecting yourself. No . . . hard feelings, as I believe Eric would say.”

I nodded my thanks for her understanding.

The truth was, I just wanted to keep talking to both of them. This was the longest I had ever spoken to a spirit, and the most grounded in reality any of them had seemed. “Look, as you said yourself, Eric—this is a lot.” I swept a hand to indicate the whole castle, not just the room we were in. “I was more freaked out than I looked, and you were in my way.”

“Oh, you looked it,” Eric assured me with a half-cocked smile. “But on that note, things are only going to get more chaotic around here before Halloween. I don’t know how to explain it, but there’s always more energy for us to draw from then. And if you’re here to move us on, or at least to keep the peace between us and the living when tensions are at their highest . . . I think you ought to meet the rest of the party, so to speak.” If ghosts could blush, that’s exactly what Eric would be doing as he stumbled over his words. “The adventuring party. I mean—our fellow lodgers. Sorry, sometimes I think about all this like it’s a game.”

“Why would you be sorry for that?” I asked, thrown by the unnecessary apology. “It’s a good way to cope with the afterlife, I reckon.”

Eric ran a hand through his hair, brushing it back, and his form seemed to briefly brighten. “Thanks. So, how about I give you the tour the Dolans couldn’t?”

I hesitated. I wished I could refuse, go home, but this clusterfuck of a castle was officially my problem. And just like Caoimhe with her visions of medieval banquets, I was digging my heels in. I couldn’t see myself actually helping this many ghosts move on with my clever tricks even in the span of two months, but I could certainly solve a few headaches. I already had some ideas about how to spare any future mirrors from Síofra.

Even more encouraging, I could no longer feel the weight that had settled over me each time I entered the castle. Either I was getting used to the heavier energy, or perhaps now that the ghosts had had their night of fun, it was the fresh wind blowing in after a storm.

Still, I wasn’t sure I should trust Eric. He and Síofra had both admitted to being unpredictable at the best of times, and inviting a ghost to accompany me on my ghost-hunting job felt like crossing some kind of line that—once again—hadn’t been discussed in training.

Besides, it was late. After midnight, going by my yawns and the deepening ache in my knee. Possibly closing in on one or two in the morning.

“Another night, maybe,” I said, keeping my voice carefully neutral. After all, I wasn’t quite decided. “The living still need to do things like hit the jacks and have a lie down. But . . . if I want to take you up on it later, how do I find you?”

Eric looked at me thoughtfully for a long moment, and it might have been my imagination, but it seemed like some of the color returned to those

brilliant hazel eyes. Eventually, the corners of his mouth turned up slightly. “Easy. Just whistle Smash Mouth’s 1999 classic: ‘All Star.’”

“Ah, you’re having me on!” I laughed.

But he didn’t join in.

He was fading before my eyes until I appeared to be alone in the room. Síofra, too, had disappeared from the armchair. As I gathered my bag and my fallen gear to return downstairs and make my way to the van, I caught the faintest “Catch you later, All Star,” on a passing breeze.

I flipped my middle finger in the air on my way out the door.




In my dreams, I was back on the pitch. Back in the green and gold. The hurley was in my hand, fitted comfortably in my sweaty palm. The sun was shining. Fionn and Dara screamed my name, cheering like mad as my hurley connected with the sliotar and sent it soaring over the bar.

The satisfying tap of wood on leather still echoed in my ears as I made up a victory dance on the spot, acting the maggot to my teammates’ whistles of approval.

*Tap tap tap.*

The sound kept getting louder even though I wasn’t using the hurley for anything but holding it above my head while I swayed my hips.

*Tap tap tap.*

I glanced around the pitch, even out into our small group of onlookers, but couldn’t find the source of the sound.

Until I finally, reluctantly, opened my eyes to face my new reality.

Which currently looked like Jordy tapping on the van’s back windows, where I lay sprawled half on my mattress in a patch of golden sunlight, my cheek smushed against the charging PolterPulse V2.1.

As we made eye contact, Jordy grinned and held up two takeaway cups, one in each hand. Tea, probably. I hoped it was strong.

I struggled upright and glanced at my phone, catching the time: already past noon. I had apparently slept in my uniform, so there was no need to change just yet. I opened the back doors and smoothed out a few wrinkles,

dangling my long legs over the edge of the van and patting the spot beside me in invitation.

Jordy lifted his little dachshund up first, then sat down and handed me a hot tea. A knowing look filled his blue eyes as I groaned a hello while fragments of last night crashed back into me: Eric, pretty and petite and almost familiar, who had looked so alive at first that he had even me fooled. The flashing lights and chaotic noise, worse than being in a club. Eric, wanting to protect me. The spilled liquor from the kitchen and the crash in the dining room. The rotting ghost in the mirror who had turned out to be pretty nice, for a spirit. Eric grinning like an eejit and telling me to whistle that stupid song if I wanted him to appear.

Well, too bad for him that I couldn't whistle.

And too bad for me, because I had left the carnage of the broken mirror and spilled wine and whatever else to deal with in the morning. But now morning had come and gone with me none the wiser, and Caoimhe was probably inside right now, going spare at the mess.

"Caoimhe's not giving you the boot or feeling cross that you slept in," Jordy said, like he knew what I was thinking. "Every time someone new comes to deal with the haunting, the ghost pulls something like this. If anything, she was expecting it. I suspect she's relieved you didn't drop dead. She and Basil have a cleanup crew working away, and she's called a friend who sources antiques to help look for our next mirror." He reached into the bag he had brought with him and offered a foil-wrapped sandwich that still felt warm in my palm. "Chef Aislinn's in today, testing some sample menus. Asked her to make us a couple egg and cheese bagels, with a bit of bacon if she had it to hand." With a conspiratorial grin, he added, "I'm usually up late myself, messing about on the PlayStation with the lads. Perks of the single life."

The sandwich was good. Filling and hot, bracing. Helping me better digest some of what had happened last night. Without taking Eric up on his offer to meet the rest of the castle's spirits, I still didn't know the full extent of what I was up against. But I wondered if Jordy, with his love of history, might be able to fill me in just as well.

"Did you know there's more than one spirit haunting the place?" I asked between greasy bites, not at all surprised when Jordy shrugged and took this in stride. "Easily more than two. More than . . . well, let's just say it's a lot."

“Pepper’s hot for something in there, but not everything,” Jordy said after a moment, petting the small dog now stretched across his lap. “Occasionally he sees something he loves. Other times, he can’t get out of the place fast enough. Makes sense that it’s different spirits.”

“You’re not afraid, then?” I certainly hadn’t gotten that impression from him.

“Nah, it’s just a bit of living history. Good for everyone to be reminded of the past on occasion, lest we repeat it.” He grinned. “That’s my unofficial stance, mind. My official stance is that ghosts are very bad for business, and asking people to sign a waiver for a medieval buffet would be daft beyond belief.”

Licking my fingers clean in lieu of a napkin, I then said, “You’ve probably been asked this before—and maybe it was in Caoimhe’s email—but do you have some kind of record of everyone who’s died in there?”

With the van doors thrown wide open, we were afforded a full view of the castle and little else. From this angle, the looming stone behemoth blotted out the fair September day and cast a long shadow over us and the parking lot at large. I felt watched by every single window.

“Until we lost our last expert from ExorSquad, the most recent death at Ardruin was Eric James Crawford, age twenty-seven, back in 2009,” Jordy answered after thinking a moment. “He was here on holiday, an American, so you know that made the headlines. The news said he either fell or leapt off the top floor, his injuries were that bad. His sisters found him later that day.”

Jordy paused like he expected me to make some kind of sympathetic noise, or say what a shame it was. But I felt too stunned. Of all the things I had sensed about Eric last night, the kind of deep sadness that would compel someone to leap off a balcony hadn’t been one of them. Not that that meant anything at the end of the day, of course. People hid their pain well all the time.

In the distance, hammers rapped and saws hummed as work on various parts of the castle continued. The car park was full of vans like mine. Two older women struggled to fit what looked like an oil painting through the front door. Birds chirped and chattered overhead as they rode the gentle breeze, backdropped by billowing spun-sugar clouds. The noontime sun kissed warmth into my cheeks.

Eventually, Jordy shrugged and went on: “Apparently Eric’s family was a big deal. Money, like. They tried to sue the castle’s estate, but it was already held by the bank at that point and I don’t think the case went anywhere. I actually played one of the games Eric designed back when I was at uni—it was deadly. *The Shattered Crown*. You can still find some of the playthroughs he did on YouTube. His family left the channel up in his memory.”

Once again, I didn’t say anything. I was out of the excuse of having a mouthful of bagel sandwich, but really, I just couldn’t find words. Because I now knew why Eric had looked so familiar.

I’d seen some of those videos on YouTube while sat at home in my sweats, wondering if I should fill out the ExorSquad application and avoiding Coach Flanagan’s well-meaning texts. I’d been looking a tutorial on another game I was trying out to kill a bit of time, and I’d stumbled onto Eric’s channel. I didn’t know him. Didn’t know he was dead. It’s not as if I had read the comments section. I had more sense than that.

But he was so distractingly gorgeous that I hadn’t heard a word he said about the game, even though I couldn’t tear my eyes from the shape of his lips and the way the light scattered through his dark hair.

I’d had a good wank right there on the spot. And bookmarked the channel so I could do it again later. Before I hit the road, I’d knocked one out to those videos a fair few times. Hell, even thinking about it now was enough to get my heart going ninety.

“Tea too hot?” Jordy asked me with a look of mild concern. “You’re beetroot.”

“Yeah, um, I think I burned my mouth,” I quickly agreed, though I hadn’t had a sip of tea since we finished the sandwiches. “So, about that record of deaths . . .?” Hopefully focusing on death and suffering would be enough to distract me from remembering those videos before my neglected cock decided to remember them, too.

“Well, we’ve nothing as official as that,” Jordy said, mercifully not questioning me further. “And even if we wanted to put something together—that was one of my ideas for the tours, actually—it would still be incomplete. This land has been occupied for a long time in one form or another, even before the first castle was built.”

He launched into a detailed explanation of battles during the Norman Conquest that were so brutal the very ground beneath us was soaked in

scarlet for months on end. Now, sunlight wove through the neatly mowed fescue and ryegrass, still green from summer's touch, making it near impossible to picture what Jordy had found in his books.

Rival clans competed over this land and its resources well before the Normans even came. Druids worshipped here, too, in a grove of ash trees behind the stables currently being rebuilt (the source of today's hammering, apparently). After the druids, Christian monks had lived here briefly, before up and leaving in the middle of the night for reasons now lost to time. There was the famous poisoning death of Lady Síofra, a beautiful and beloved countess. There were rumours of cult activity on and off over the centuries, as well as the occasional murder. Disappearances and suspected deaths never confirmed, bodies never found. Even a load of blarney about treasure hidden by Síofra and her husband's successors, treasure which teens from Ballycorven had loved to search for back when there weren't security cameras covering the extensive property.

None of it was the helpful record I was hoping for, but it did at least explain the stain that seemed to have settled into the very bones of this place. So much fighting and betrayal and death had happened here, so all that dark energy must have seeped into the scarlet ground, and, later, into the foundation stones of the castle itself.

Jordy talked for so long that we eventually got up and walked into the castle with a restless Pepper. There was at least one working shower, which would give me a chance to freshen up and change. They hadn't included that on the tour yesterday, so Jordy led the way down a winding corridor on the main level and through one of those narrow halls where the modern electric lighting should have illuminated every crack and imperfection in the stone. Instead, everything was somehow muted.

I tried not to think too hard about the crimson-stained ground beneath us, and instead glanced curiously at the well-dressed man in the next room who appeared to be fighting with a life-sized plastic skeleton wearing a leprechaun's glittering green top hat and bow tie.

My first thought was that the ghosts were going to tear that thing apart soonest chance they got and scatter the bones everywhere. Maybe the man was thinking the same, because he frowned as he adjusted the skeleton's hat and stepped back, bumping right into Jordy.

"Ah, sorry there," the man said as Jordy put a hand on his waist to steady him. He was just a few inches taller than Jordy, with dark brown hair and

almost as many tattoos and piercings. It didn't take much guesswork to know that this was one of the living decorators I'd mistaken Eric for last night, someone who treated his body as art, too.

"Raff, this is Basil. He's a Brit, but we like him anyway," Jordy said, a faint pink tinge appearing on his cheeks. Now who was red as a beetroot? Jordy also still hadn't moved his hand from Basil's waist even though the decorator clearly wasn't in danger of falling over. "And let me guess," Jordy continued, turning his attention to the large skeleton currently sat on the bottom step of a staircase, "this was Caoimhe's idea?"

"Halloween chic for the trial banquet, and you might as well start today." Basil seemed to be quoting, likely from Caoimhe. "Make it sparkly and fun and not too spooky." His eyes darted briefly down to Jordy's hand, then back up. "So . . . what do you think? Does this scream 'haunted fun' to you? I hope so, because we've got about ten more stashed in the closet to put out after this."

Finally, Jordy did drop his hand, flushing scarlet. Pepper pawed at his leg, little paws only able to reach up to his knee, and he pretended to be distracted by the dog when in reality, I suspected he was tongue-tied.

I was catching a bit of a buzz between those two.

"Shower's just down there, right?" I pointed to a door on the opposite side of the parlor we stood in, and held up my towel. "I can take Pepper for a bit, if you don't mind," I added to Jordy. "I'd like the company while I work on a plan to make sure you don't have to buy any more mirrors."

I really liked the idea of having a dog, one small enough to hang in the van. Someone living and loyal and warm to crash with at the end of the night. If I was going to keep on with the spirit extraction business, it might be good for me.

"Good luck with your closet full of skeletons!" I called to Basil and Jordy as Pepper and I set off, leaving them to it. I had a few of my own to work out once I coaxed a trickle of hot water out of the showerhead. Seemed like this place had plumbing issues on top of everything else.

Under the steam, I didn't try to fight those visions of Eric from his videos. I let them come flooding back, stroking myself long and hard until I was sure I'd worked every last drop of him out of my system. No different from fixing a stubborn knot in a muscle after a match. Then I washed all the evidence of the weirdest wank ever right down the drain.

I needed a clear head to start making myself useful around here.

Once I was clean, Pepper and I returned to the van, where I kept a couple blank notebooks for jobs. Last night, Síofra had said something about vanity, and now she appeared in mirrors as a rotting, plague-ridden corpse. I wondered if I could help with her self-image in some way, maybe erase some of her ex's cruel words with a few well-placed scraps of paper tucked into the corner of every mirror.

I wrote down every affirmation I could think of. I would have googled for more, but my phone barely had a signal out here at times and I didn't feel like driving all the way into the village today.

*Your presence lights up a room.*
*You glow with confidence and grace.*
*Your worth isn't defined by anyone else's opinion.*
*It was lovely to meet you. Sure we'll talk again.*
*– Raff*

I was making a show of myself, but thankfully, Pepper didn't seem inclined to judge. He trotted at my heels as we combed the castle for every mirror, leaving a little note of encouragement for Síofra in each.

We were finishing up with what looked like a small hand mirror mounted to the wall in one of the many parlors when I caught a whisper.

"*Wearing all that black brings out the green in yours eyes, Raff dear.*"

It sounded warm and fond, and when Síofra didn't appear in the glass, I took it as a sign that the words were helping already. Which gave me enough confidence to start thinking about the castle's other haunts. Perhaps I should start with whatever disaster was stirring in the kitchen.

But first I needed to take notes on each spirit and how they died, their method of haunting, their level of manifestation. Eric's offer of a tour would make that a lot easier, assuming he didn't plan to push me down the stairs or scare me literally to death—my predecessor's death was still on my mind. And my warning vision of the falling chandelier refused to fade, but maybe that had nothing to do with Eric. And besides, little Pepper fancied him, and dogs were a great judge of character.

Spending time with Eric would be dodgy, especially now that I knew where I had seen him before, but what part of this job wasn't mighty strange at the best of times?

Which was how I found myself alone in the castle at half past ten at night, standing with my back to the cold exterior wall of the foyer and a notebook in hand, not whistling but singing the chorus of “All Star” and hoping it would be enough to make Eric appear.

When it wasn’t, I started on a verse, making up some of the words as I went.

*OceanofPDF.com*

# Seven

# The Lodgers

## Eric

No, I didn't watch Raff shower in the bathroom off the parlor. I wasn't . . . wired like that, in life or death. But I'd be lying if I said the thought didn't cross my mind. He was—well, he was built, with a sculpted chest, strong back, and thick waist under those company overalls, and I'd noticed. Anyone would. Still, that wasn't why I lingered nearby. I just didn't want any of the other lodgers giving him grief while he was in there.

Pulling guard duty, I guess, like I intended to do for the duration of his time here. I had told him I was trying to protect him, and I meant it, whether he believed me or not. Because last night, when he thought I, a perfect stranger, was alive and afraid, he had immediately put aside his own fears to look after me.

I'd played the hero often in life, at least around the gaming table. But I hadn't had anyone try to be the hero for *me*. Even if only for a few minutes, it had been nice. Something I never thought I'd experience after I died.

If Raff stayed all the way to Halloween, maybe I'd get to be a hero in real life, too. Or the afterlife, such as it was.

In the parlor, Jordy Dolan and the lead decorator danced around some kind of unrealized feelings. It would have been interesting to watch if I wasn't keeping an eye on the other spirits for Raff while he was at his most vulnerable.

I wondered if he had someone waiting for him at home in Killorglin. Someone he comforted when they were scared. Someone who tempered his fire when he got all worked up. Someone who admired his strength and balanced it with softness.

Not that it was any of my business. Like I said before, I just had too much time to think these days.

And when I saw the kind words he left in the mirrors for my beautiful friend, it only confirmed what I'd suspected: he had a good heart, and I wasn't going to let it suddenly stop like mine or the last ghost expert's. I was, to my knowledge, the strongest spirit here aside from Chef Máirtín and little Gráinne, and maybe the shadowy rider who lurked by the stables. And if I could use my power to protect him, I would.

Right now, though, I was using my ghostly abilities to remain unseen. I indulged myself by hovering on the ceiling to watch Raff, who was clad in a sleek black leather jacket that hugged his broad shoulders just right. Long fingers clutched a notebook to his chest as he made up random verses of a nineties pop hit.

His voice was unpolished. Rough, but warm and enthusiastic. He sang like he meant it, and rarely veered off-key. I couldn't help wanting to hear more.

"Eric?" he finally asked into the quiet, so hopefully that I almost materialized on the spot. "Come on now—please? Are ya still cross with me about zapping you yesterday? Don't make me beg, or . . ."

A sly look crossed his face, his eyes almost glowing in the light of the stained-glass lamp on the entry table as he got down on his knees and set the notebook aside.

And then he started singing Britney's "Baby One More Time" with such heart that I had to make my presence known and put him out of his misery.

I appeared a few feet in front of him so as not to startle him, drawing in extra energy so he could hear the sound of my applause, too. "Evening, All Star," I said, fighting not to grin like this was all I had been looking forward to (it was). "That was a really nice thing you did for Síofra earlier. Thank you."

“Don’t mention it,” Raff insisted. “But you *could* tell me how much you like my singing.”

Slowly I drifted closer, pretending not to notice that Raff nearly lost his balance when he shifted back to standing. His knee was acting up already—it must have been quite the injury. To my relief, he didn’t back away from me like he had yesterday, even though I wasn’t putting the effort into looking quite as solid right now.

“I’ll be sure to pick up tickets to your next concert,” I offered with a wink as Raff zipped his jacket against the deeper chill my presence brought. It was strange—flirting with him felt safe in a way it never did for me. Maybe because I knew it couldn’t go anywhere. No expectations, no pressure. And that could get dangerous if he kept hanging around. “Big fan of your work,” I teased some more.

“Yeah, me too,” he muttered, his cheeks flushing as he looked hard at a potted tree whose gnarled branches were now hung with tiny, glittering bats.

Well, no idea what that blush was about.

“Ready for a grand tour of my side of the castle, Lord Raff? It’ll be my pleasure to introduce you to the other lodgers,” I said, trying to pull him out of his stare-down with a Halloween tree. I mean, I wasn’t that unsightly to look at. I wore the clothes I had died in, but I didn’t appear with any of the grisly wounds that one would expect after a fall. I’d reassured myself of that plenty of times in the early days by looking in Síofra’s mirrors. That, and I’d been afraid of forgetting what I looked like when my appearance was my last remaining link to my family—my golden skin that hinted at our Mediterranean heritage, my mom’s sleek dark hair, my dad’s hazel eyes, the dimpled smile I shared with my sisters.

“Wonder why they started on all the orange and black so early,” Raff remarked, finally glancing back at me.

I manifested fully in case my transparent figure was putting him off, doing my best to make it seem like I was really there with him. It made me feel a little more human again, too. “I heard Caoimhe talking to Basil, the head decorator, earlier. They’re hosting a trial banquet for a select guest list at the start of October—foodies, influencers, media people.”

“Think I caught something about that earlier too, actually—sounds like a fecking headache,” Raff remarked, and I nodded, already picturing all the ways it could go wrong. “Anyway,” he went on, seeming more himself

again. “About that tour: I’ll give it a go, as long as we can agree on a few ground rules first.”

“Okay,” I agreed, my curiosity snared. “Like what?”

“Well, just—don’t be acting the maggot like yesterday,” he said, rubbing a palm over the holster of one of those fake-looking blasters. “I’ve plenty of ammunition in these things, but if I have to zap you again, that’s us finished for good. If there’s trouble ahead, I expect you to tell me, and say it plain. That’s all I’m asking,” he added, and I guessed some of the hurt was showing on my face.

“I was trying to protect you last night,” I told him, hoping I didn’t sound petulant. “And that’s still what I plan to do, whether you like me or think I’m a . . . maggot. I *don’t* want you to get scared. Or hurt. Or for your heart to stop.”

His brows rose swiftly, but he didn’t ask whatever question had come to mind.

“Anything else?” I prompted uneasily.

“Yeah. Why would you want to protect me when you hardly know me? What about me could possibly be worth going out of your way for?” He didn’t sound angry. More like he really didn’t understand why I’d bother, when I had already seen plenty about him that was worth watching over.

It was an easy question to answer.

“You wanted to save me yesterday, before you realized I was dead. Even though you didn’t know me,” I said without hesitating. “You were nice to my friend when you didn’t have to be. You have a lot more respect for the spirits here than the last two guys combined, even if you are carrying just as much ammo. And . . . nobody protected me from whatever killed me here. I just really don’t want to see it happen again.”

Not quite able to interpret the look on his narrow face or the grim set of his mouth, I added into the strained quiet: “And I came up with a plan for if I start feeling a little restless. I’ll disappear for a bit, go hang out in Síofra’s room until it passes so I won’t cause any accidental harm or pull your hair again. And by the way, you should let Síofra brush out those tangles for you. You might be surprised, but she’s really gentle.”

“Eric—?” Raff said my name as if he meant to ask something else, stopped himself, and dropped his hand off the weapon at his hip. Lacing his fingers together in front of him, he fixed me at the center of those intense

green eyes and said, “I think that’s enough ground rules. You help me, I don’t zap you—we’ll leave it at that. The dog likes you, you know.”

“The demon?” I asked, confused again. When did the living get so complicated?

“What demon? I meant little Pepper.” Raff blinked at me, shook his head, and gestured with one broad hand around the castle at large. “We’d better get on with it, so lead the way. Past midnight, I might turn into a pumpkin.”




We started in the kitchen, which had been a source of so much calamity yesterday. My fellow lodger, Chef Máirtín, had been in rare form with the arrival of a grocery delivery in the morning, combined with the energy of someone new in the castle. He hadn’t budged from his post in three hundred years, and had no intention of taking a demotion now.

He had breathed down the necks of the new chef and her staff for the past several weeks as they tried to get organized, making his opinions known wherever possible.

Tonight, the energy in the castle itself felt almost dormant, as if everyone needed to recharge after so much intense activity. Even Raff’s energy was different, perhaps steadier—though whenever I got too close, it still crackled against mine in a way that would have knocked the breath right out of me if I were alive.

He took a seat on one of the stools tucked under the newly renovated kitchen’s generous island and cracked open his notebook. I liked that he didn’t reach for a weapon, not even when a cast-iron pan left out on the gas range began to rattle. Not even when the pasta bags in the pantry began to rustle and sauce jars clinked together like someone sought a missing ingredient.

“Chef Máirtín was hired after the lord at the time killed the guy who let that poisoned stew be served on Síofra’s table,” I explained quietly near Raff’s ear, unwilling to disturb the old chef until he was ready to appear. “He was known—is known, I guess—for his experimental recipes like salmon-stuffed turnips and whiskey-flambéed cabbage.”

Raff grimaced at the sound of those meals, then rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. Perhaps hovering so close sent shivers down his spine. Well, it felt like his presence was rearranging every atom of my being, so I'd call us even.

"How did he die?" Raff asked after scribbling a few lines in his notebook. His penmanship was small and tidy, like he put care into each word.

"By my sins, the tallow took flame roaring like a demon, and the roof leapt skyward!" the chef answered for himself, appearing first as a wisp of smoke in the pantry that slowly coalesced into a more solid form as he strode toward the stove, a jar in each hand. His apron was as colorfully stained as it had been in life, and the hat he always wore was singed—like his once-red eyebrows, reduced now to just a few hairs.

Raff chewed on that for a moment. "You blew up the kitchen, did ya now?"

"For the honor of my craft," the chef confirmed solemnly. Then, with a glance at me, he added, "Eric, my lad, you're positively glowing this evening. Would the two of you be interested in tasting my surprise pottage? I thought perhaps some rose petals and pine nuts would be welcome additions for the Samhain banquet with the very important guests."

"We're actually making the rounds, so I'm afraid we'll be moving on soon," I answered quickly. Ghosts couldn't actually taste anything, which would leave Raff as the sole victim of whatever dish the chef cooked up. I didn't even know what pottage was, and I'd been visiting Máirtín in this kitchen for years.

"Well, perhaps you'll come back when I've perfected my jellied offal," the chef said hopefully, twisting the lid on a jar he didn't have the strength to open.

"Let me, sir," Raff offered, rising from his stool. Maybe he already had some idea of what would happen if he didn't intervene: eventually, the jar would shatter on the floor or the counter when the frustrated chef threw it like last night.

"If it isn't any trouble," Máirtín said, loudly setting both jars on the island. I could tell he was pleased by the way he started humming some old song, his hands tucked into the wide pocket of his apron as he did a little shuffle-step around the stove.

Raff hissed softly through his teeth as he touched the first jar—it must have been stinging cold to the touch—but he unscrewed both lids. "Suppose

you could clean up after yourself when you're done so Caoimhe isn't in bad form in the morning?"

"A fair exchange is no robbery," the chef agreed, giving Raff a fond smile.

I almost wished we could stay so I could keep watching the two of them, but I really didn't want to put Raff through taste-testing anything not fit for the living.

So we said our polite goodbyes and I took him to meet Fiachra Mac Fíon, the wine steward who had been responsible for all the spilled liquid in the foyer last night. Fiachra had died while heavily inebriated, and his ghost was much the same. He didn't really interact with anyone much—he wasn't as aware of the other spirits as we were of him—so I didn't know his story the way I did the chef's.

Mostly, while Raff watched the wispy apparition stroll through the wine cellar and rattle the bottles, I watched Raff again.

He fascinated me. He didn't have any of the usual disdain or fear of spirits that even I probably would have had when I was alive. At least he didn't when the whole castle wasn't trembling and flashing the lights like it was hosting a rave. He didn't flinch away when a spirit appeared at random or rattled the picture frames on the wall in passing. Didn't go pale when an inhuman shriek shattered the quiet.

He didn't even flinch when the spirit of Lorcan McGilroy, the former ExorSquad employee who had died on the job, slammed the doors of Caoimhe's office in our faces for trying to talk to him. It was like that with Lorcan, I explained, and we weren't likely to get many answers from him. He was a nervous guy, and spent most of his time here so far in hiding. Everything seemed to scare Lorcan, in life and in death.

It made me wonder what actually scared someone like Raff, who seemed so at home in his surroundings. Not that I knew him well enough to ask. Instead, I studied him like I was the one doing a job and not just acting as his ghostly guide.

We were watching through a tall window as one of the poltergeists threw seasonal decorations around the inner courtyard when Raff suddenly closed his notebook and turned, focusing his intense gaze directly on me. I didn't have the ability to maintain a vivid manifestation all night, but I did draw enough energy to give him something worth looking at for a moment.

“Earlier, you said something about . . . whatever happened to you here,” Raff began hesitantly. “It got me thinking. You know so much about the other spirits, but do you not remember—? I mean, has anyone given you any possible explanations as to how—?”

“How I died,” I said easily, saving him from floundering. “Yeah. I can’t remember anything from that day. Can’t even remember coming to the castle, but Síofra saw it happen. I climbed to the fourth floor and fell all the way down into the foyer.” I splayed the fingers of one hand out, *splat*. “People think I jumped,” I added, the tone of my voice unchanged. “I’ve heard the rumours from the kids who used to sneak onto the grounds and paint dicks on the walls. But I know that can’t be true. Síofra says I just kind of toppled over and fell, so I’m thinking maybe a heart attack or something.” I shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter, anyway. It happened, and I can’t make it unhappen.”

Raff leaned against the wall, all his attention fixed on me so he completely missed the poltergeist chucking a scarecrow clean across the courtyard.

“It’s just—it’s odd, isn’t it? I always thought spirits knew the exact manner of their death, because it’s part of how they haunt,” he said after a thoughtful pause. “I swear they told us that in training. Don’t worry, though. I’ll still find a way to move you on, just like the rest. You won’t be here forever. You have my word. It’s the least I can do when you’ve been so helpful.” He smiled, like he was doing me some kind of favor as he added, “You know, you’re not the worst.”

That was high praise from an Irishman, but still, the words left me cold.

“Thanks,” I whispered, starting to fade away. “But maybe save the compliments for after I’ve introduced you to the rest of the lodgers.”

Finally moving on from the castle was the best outcome I could hope for, and it sounded a lot gentler than being zapped a second time. But for some reason the thought of just being *gone* completely made me sadder about my death than I had been in years.

We ended the night there, with plans to meet the rest of the ghosts tomorrow. While fading away altogether was my biggest fear, I still, at least for the moment, wanted to disappear.

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# From the Notebook of Rafferty O'Meara, ExorSquad Spirit Extraction Expert

**9th of September**

A FULL ACCOUNTING OF SPIRITS MET IN MY FIRST WEEK AT ARDRUIN CASTLE

*Entity Name: Lady Síofra Ní Dhomhnaill, Countess of Ardruin*
*Level: 3*
*Year of Expiration: 1483*
*Haunting style: reflections, singing, mist, moving furniture*
*Ideas to keep the peace: compliments placed in every mirror*

*Entity Name: Chef Máirtín "the Mad Lad" Macraith*
*Level: 4*
*Year of Expiration: 1502*
*Haunting style: banging pots in kitchen, rearranging spice racks, writing on walls with gravy, shouting "it's underseasoned!" when things are quiet*
*Ideas to keep the peace: open ingredients to let him experiment without breaking things*

*Entity Name: Fiachra Mac Fíon, Wine Steward*
*Level: 2*
*Year of Expiration: 1561*

*Haunting style: spilled bottles, incorrect temperature in wine cellar*
*Ideas to keep the peace: offer a nightly cup of his favorite vintage*

*Entity Name: Poltergeist I, Courtyard*
*Level: 3*
*Year of Expiration: ?*
*Haunting style: randomly throwing objects, no visual manifestation (yet)*
*Ideas to keep the peace: bolt down items in courtyard*

*Entity Name: Muireann Ní Bláithín, Bard*
*Level: 3*
*Year of Expiration: 1594*
*Haunting style: music and singing, can make anything an instrument*
*Ideas to keep the peace: correctly tune the piano for her*

*Entity Name: Gráinne Sidheán, Little Rascal*
*Level: 4*
*Year of Expiration: 1782*
*Haunting style: chaos, rearranging Caoimhe's plastic skeletons in dirty positions*
*Ideas to keep the peace: bring her something fun to play with*

*Entity Name: Poltergeist II, Stables*
*Level: 4*
*Year of Expiration: ?*
*Haunting style: shadowy figure, animal noises*
*Ideas to keep the peace: don't keep live horses in there until it's been zapped*

*Entity Name: Poltergeist III, Attic Storage*
*Level: 2*
*Year of Expiration: ?*
*Haunting style: dead mice and small birds everywhere, torn papers, smell*
*Ideas to keep the peace: seal cracks in attic so wildlife can't get in; air purifier*

*Entity Name: Brigid Ó Conaill, Chambermaid*
*Level: 3*

*Year of Expiration: 1622*
*Haunting style: rearranging furniture, moving objects, lavender scent*
*Ideas to keep the peace: correctly fold fitted sheets, frequent dusting and mopping*

*Entity Name: Brother Fintan, Monk*
*Level: 3*
*Year of Expiration: 697, predates Ardruin*
*Haunting style: Latin phrases scrawled on windows, chants Gregorian hymns*
*Ideas to keep the peace: reading to him aloud from romance novels seems to soothe him*

*Entity Name: Sorcha Ní Chathasaigh, Scullery Maid*
*Level: 3*
*Year of Expiration: 1223*
*Haunting style: appears as a faint shimmer near hearths and stoves, rearranges things when anxious*
*Ideas to keep the peace: leave her to her usual routines, speak softly; loud noises can make her hide for days*

*Entity Name: Eilis "Lissy" O'Doran, Lady's Maid*
*Level: 2*
*Year of Expiration: 1442*
*Haunting style: soft rustle of skirts in the halls, soft footsteps, scents of powder and perfume*
*Ideas to keep the peace: whisper thanks when she's near; she still loves gratitude*

*Entity Name: Donnacha Breathnach, Stablehand*
*Level: 2*
*Year of Expiration: 1384*
*Haunting style: gentle tapping on wooden beams, smell of hay, appears most often as a pale outline leaning on a pitchfork out of the corner of your eye*
*Ideas to keep the peace: speak to him like you would a nervous animal—slow and calm; leave a lantern on, as darkness makes him skittish*

*Entity Name: Sir Padraig Mac Diarmada, Nobleman*

*Level: 3*

*Year of Expiration: 1568*

*Haunting style: destroying the pantry, upsetting Chef Máirtín, moans at the phrase "gluten-free"*

*Ideas to keep the peace: offer a midnight snack*

*Entity Name: Tadhg Ó Maoláin, Footman to visiting gentry*

*Level: 2*

*Year of Expiration: 1733*

*Haunting style: blurred silhouette near staircases, scents of leather and tobacco, cracks open doors to check on rooms*

*Ideas to keep the peace: don't block off staircases or corridors; panics when "trapped"*

*Entity Name: Síle Ní Fhlaithimh, Seamstress*

*Level: 2*

*Year of Expiration: 1811*

*Haunting style: appears only as a pale hand at the edge of curtains and wardrobe doors, smells of fresh-washed linens, smooths random fabrics*

*Ideas to keep the peace: offer scraps of ribbon and cloth for her to fuss with*

*Entity Name: Colmán Ó Riain, Groundskeeper*

*Level: 3*

*Year of Expiration: 1764*

*Haunting style: gentle knocking on outer doors, picking up tools and moving them, windows fog slightly when he lingers outside waiting to be let in*

*Ideas to keep the peace: keep a lantern lit near the main entrance, inviting him inside*

*Entity Name: Liam Donnelly, Avid Fisherman*

*Level: 3*

*Year of Expiration: 1834*

*Haunting style: rattling the pipes, turning on the taps, steaming up the place*

*Ideas to keep the peace: get him a goldfish to watch*

*Entity Name: Lorcan McGilroy, former ExorSquad employee*

*Level: 4*

*Year of Expiration: 2025*

*Haunting style: hangs out in closets and small spaces, frightens people who open the door*

*Ideas to keep the peace: Figure out what killed him, if he'll ever talk to me. Seems to still be in shock that he's dead.*

*— Similar to Eric's death? What's the connection?*

*Entity Name: Eric James Crawford, the American, the Wildcard, Professional Nerd*

*Level: 4*

*Year of Expiration: 2009*

*Haunting style: Pulls my hair. Steals my stuff (my pin, sometimes my water bottle even though he can't drink out of it). Whistles better than I can hold a tune. Imitates local bird calls: jays, blackcaps, magpies, wagtails, robins.*

*When you pay him a compliment, he looks so solid that I can't tell him from the living. Funny, I can't remember any sayings about ghosts and praise. Just him?*

*Ideas to keep the peace: I'm not sure yet. I've learned so much from him this past week, but I feel like I need to keep learning more* about *him. I can't even say why, but I'm fairly sure there's a line in The Handbook about trusting your gut on these things.*

*For now, I'll stick with our little partnership. Keep it simple, like: he helps me, I don't zap him.*

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# Eight

# Mr. Brightside

## Eric

Every night that first week, Raff had returned with his jacket, notebook and pen, and those silly-looking guns just after ten, come to collect on our standing arrangement.

I usually stayed out of sight but stuck close by while he went about his nightly duties: Filling a wineglass for Fiachra and leaving it in the cellar. Getting out a few jars of curry powder and a mixing bowl for Chef Máirtín. Reading to Brother Fintan in his tower. Politely knocking on Caoimhe's office doors to see if Lorcan was about, though he never answered. Finally, opening the grand piano in the largest parlor so that Muireann could play her heart out.

It wasn't that I didn't *want* to talk to Raff right away. Far from it—I always had a list of things to tell him by the time he arrived, some unfinished conversation to pick up on from the night before. But if I could stay hidden and be patient while he settled the other spirits, I knew I would be rewarded. Eventually, he would return to the foyer, get down on his knees, and belt out "All Star" again. He had definitely been studying the lyrics.

He didn’t have to sing anymore just to get me to show up. It had been a joke, a silly dare that I had hoped he might take once. But I let it keep going and didn’t bother to correct him, because I loved hearing whatever he had in store for me.

It was a small thing, but I liked having something to look forward to again.

Time didn’t flow exactly like it used to when I was alive, so I couldn’t recall the specific date it happened, but it was sometime early in his second week when everything changed. It was the night he attempted some Christina Aguilera.

“Keep singing outside my window every night, and you really might get to see my tattoo,” I teased in a silky voice I had never had occasion to use in the afterlife. With Raff, the flirting didn’t feel forced or strange. It just . . . fit.

Like something I didn’t need to brace against for once.

“That so, Wildcard?” Raff cocked his head and frowned. He had started calling me that instead of Fecking American, probably because I kept calling him All Star, and I wasn’t about to complain. *Wildcard* was blunt, if honest. The afterlife *had* made me a little chaotic. “I’m trying to decide if that’s a promise or a threat.”

“Probably a little of both.” My laughter bounced around the foyer, a sound so infrequently heard until recent days that little Gráinne, a girl of about twelve with her raven-black hair in two neat braids like Wednesday Addams, poked her head out from under the stairs where she was hiding with a plastic Halloween skeleton in a bowtie and a few teacups.

She had warmed up to Raff, so while she usually hissed at the living or nibbled holes in their clothes, she raised one of the teacups in a toast to him before returning to her game.

“Time to check on the poltergeist in the attic, then,” Raff announced with a small sigh as he peered up the stairs. And up, and up. He was fit, so I knew he couldn’t be dreading the climb, which made me suspect that his knee was bothering him tonight.

I didn’t pry, though. I could wait for him to decide if he wanted to share that with me. Until he figured out how to help me move on, I had all the time in the world.

All the same, Raff squared his shoulders and started to climb. “So, Jordy was telling me about one of your games again earlier today. *The Shattered*

*Crown*—the big one, as you call it. But I'd rather hear more about it from you," he said, sounding slightly winded as he made conversation. He was definitely breathing through the pain.

I slowed my pace, hoping he would do the same.

Sure enough, he paused and turned to me, his cheeks ruddy with embarrassment. He always started blushing whenever one of us brought up my job in passing, but I didn't ask about that, either—I didn't really want to know what an ex-athlete like him thought about someone like me making money off a passion that had started with Dungeons and Dragons.

Besides, my job wasn't something I talked about much when I went home. My parents were so proud of my sisters, with their careers in law and banking and medicine—I was used to holding back while my parents highlighted every single one of their recent achievements like they wished I'd take the hint. Used to not being enough for them to take me seriously with my work, no matter how hard I tried to prove that I should be. No matter what I achieved.

Raff cleared his throat, his expression turning thoughtful the longer he watched me. "You know, most people never get anywhere close to doing the thing they love. But you did. That says a lot about you. That's massive. I was trying to pay you a compliment, asking about your work. I didn't mean any offense."

"*Crown* could have been even bigger if I'd had more time with it," I offered as I pulled in enough energy for an even more solid manifestation on the spot. One real enough for him to maybe see the warmth that felt like it was radiating from my face. "I wanted to write a whole tie-in book series for it. I had the first one outlined, and I had just joined a local writing group before we went on vacation. But you know, life had other plans, as the saying goes . . ."

I couldn't help glancing behind us as I said it. Glancing *down*.

All the way down to the foyer where my broken body had lain until, I'm told, my sisters came searching. The place where it all ended for me.

And just like that, everything I was going to tell Raff about the game went right out of my head, replaced by a crushing weight I rarely let myself feel.

"Hey. Tell me what happens at the end of *The Minstrel's Kiss*," Raff said suddenly, his voice like a warm hand on my back. He was trying to draw me out of my thoughts before they could completely spiral, and I thanked

him with a smile that turned shy when I realized just how close he was standing despite the chill that radiated off me when I manifested like this. “Your friend wrecked my copy a bit, remember?”

“Shit, I’m sorry about that,” I said quickly, only for Raff to shake his head.

“No need to be apologizing for what’s out of your hands. Least of all when you’re such a fierce help I’ll never repay the debt, and you make me laugh on top of it,” he said, shifting slightly and taking a step down toward me. Now, the bulk of his figure filled my gaze rather than the cold stones of the foyer where I must have sprawled for hours.

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. If I’d still had blood in my body, I think I would have been blushing. Finally, I dredged up a few words and the energy to speak them. “You know, I didn’t take you for a romance reader.”

Raff flashed a grin, bright and bold and free of apprehension even though he was standing face to face with a dead guy. “Oh? And what did you take me for?”

I considered him for a moment, a teasing answer about the king of the mountain goats on the tip of my tongue. But he looked so serious gazing back at me that I said something real instead: “It’s too soon to say for sure, but I think . . . you might be the knight all those readers are looking for. The reason they keep turning the pages.”

Something in his eyes softened. His lips parted, but he didn’t speak. Then he shook his head and said quietly, “Nah. You’ve got the wrong one. I’m just a stubborn arse with a bum leg who doesn’t know when he’s in over his head and wouldn’t admit it even if he did.”

“Well, *that* definitely wasn’t romantic, nor was any of it true,” I declared as he finally pulled down the folding stairs behind the panel in the hallway ceiling that led to the attic. “Maybe you need to read more.”

“Make me a list of your favorites, then,” he invited, but I was much too worried about his knee on those rickety attic stairs to think about anything else until we were safely back on solid ground.



It was likely past midnight by the time we got down there, and the castle felt peaceful, even to me. The only active and humming energy besides my own was Raff's, the glow that always intrigued me warm and bright.

The scent of gravy hung thick in the air from one of Chef Máirtín's experiments, but there was no sign of my fellow lodger. He must have retired early, satisfied with his culinary experiments. Glancing around, Raff observed, "It's been a long night."

He didn't look at me when he said it, so I knew he meant it. He only avoided making eye contact when he was wrung out, like he didn't want anyone to notice him at his weakest and most vulnerable. But rather than filling his water bottle to take back to the van as usual, he opened the cupboards and took out a mug. And put the kettle on.

"Long," I agreed, slightly confused as I stared at the kettle. "But you handled it. You saved that poor robin from the poltergeist, and you kept everyone calm. Even Mr. Donnelly, and we all know he hasn't been calm since 1834."

Raff laughed at that, though he sounded almost disbelieving when he said, "You're butterin' me up now."

"I'm not." I raised both my hands, palms up in a gesture of innocence. "I'm just telling the truth. You're good at this. You know you are. You knew it the moment you walked in here and started talking about your methods. But if you've forgotten, well, I'm happy to remind you: the castle hasn't been this calm since I started haunting it. Gráinne hasn't bitten you, we haven't had to replace any more lightbulbs, and Síofra thinks you're a real gentleman by Renaissance standards—I'm not sure that's a compliment, but she means it as one. Everyone here likes you, and you're doing great. And if you forget again tomorrow, well, I'll still be here, and I'll keep reminding you until you believe it."

He finally turned from the stove to eye me warily, like he was checking whether I really meant it or if I was just being kind. But of course I meant it. And he must have seen that in my eyes, because something in his expression flickered, then softened.

"All right, Mr. Brightside, enough of all that for now," he muttered, but the nickname came out gentler than he probably intended.

I liked it better than Wildcard. I liked it a hell of a lot better than "fecking" anything.

Raff filled his mug and started steeping the tea, staring out the kitchen windows at the velvety star-strewn sky. The silence stretched between us, no longer awkward after so many nights spent wandering the quiet halls together, just . . . charged.

Almost like we were exchanging energy, or having a wordless conversation.

"You know, I've heard you say it's September. Which means the Perseids should be happening sometime soon—the meteor shower. Might be worth looking for a few falling stars and making wishes while you drink that tea," I suggested, keeping my voice light. Not pushing. Not about to give the only living person who had talked to me in years a reason to run away.

Raff blinked at me through the steam of his tea, almost like he was seeing me for the first time, though I wasn't sure what he saw now that he hadn't before. "You watch the stars?"

"I watch whatever I can," I said, shrugging. "The birds. The construction crew. The stars. Part of being dead. There's really not much else to do."

That earned a deeper laugh. Warm, quiet, and real. I wanted to soak in it, wrap it around my shoulders, draw it out again and again. "All right, Mr. Brightside," Raff said. "Show me this meteor shower, then."

We climbed just one flight of stairs—I was still worried about his knee, and we didn't need too much height for a killer view on account of the castle sitting on a hill tall enough to provide a stunning panoramic view. Glass doors opened to a little balcony off Síofra's room, which Caoimhe had already furnished with ornate metal chairs and a table.

Raff sat in one and kicked his boots up onto the stone rail, stretching his long legs. I hovered on the other, just beside him, close enough to pretend I could feel the bite of the wind and the night air. Close enough to imagine what it would be like if we really were sitting shoulder-to-shoulder.

He tilted his head back, eyes on the sky rather than the fields or forest sprawled out below us, and sipped his tea.

"You ever do this?" I asked, quickly pointing as a silver streak dashed across the black.

He grinned, catching the shimmer of the star before it was lost to view. "Not really." He paused, took another sip of hot tea. "Didn't have time, I guess. Didn't think about it, either."

"You do now," I pointed out. "At least tonight."

He didn’t look at me, but his voice softened in a way that reminded me of what it was to feel warm. “Sure I do. Probably have time tomorrow night, too, unless someone decides to burst a pipe or terrorize the decorators.”

“And lucky for you, you’re with someone who can show you all the constellations if you’d like. It was a hobby when I was alive, too—astronomy,” I said with a touch of pride, pleased by the look he gave me. One that was as awed as when he saw the shooting stars.

“You’re really something, Eric,” he murmured, his breath displacing the steam of the tea. “You’ve this mind that reaches farther than half the people I’ve ever met. You look up and see whole galaxies, and you spin new ones in your head, too, with those games of yours. I’m starting to think there’s nothing you can’t do.”

Another streak of silver shot past, and we both nearly missed it.

I wasn’t sure what to say. No one had ever spoken to me quite like that before. But Raff didn’t seem to mind the quiet. He just settled deeper into his seat and breathed out slowly, finally letting the cares of the day—and the night—begin to leave him.

I spent more time watching him than the meteor shower I had always loved, at least while I was sure he wasn’t looking. He’d never know.

And I’d never admit it. What would be the point?

But sharing the softest part of the night with him felt like the beginning of something we might never get the chance to name. Something I would hold onto all the same, a moment cupped between my hands in wonder for the rest of my eternally damned days.

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# Nine

# Faces in the Flame

## Eric

After that first night, we kept on watching the stars after making our nightly rounds. We didn't plan on it, never discussed it, but simply fell into it: Raff would take the lead by putting on the kettle, signaling that he planned to stay up, and we would sit on Síofra's balcony while he sipped his tea and I soaked in the moments of what felt like really living.

It was nice to have a friend again, even if only for a few months. I was going to make sure he stayed alive. I was going to watch him drive away in that van one day. I was determined. Goodbye would hurt, but not as much as the alternative.

He deserved only good things, because that's what he was, whether he fully realized it or not: good. He had that solid, athletic sort of build tempered by a bit of softness that made him seem human, approachable. But what mattered more to me was that he didn't wear any of that muscle like a trophy. He was always the first to offer help, to the living or dead—fixing a flat tire for Jordy, running Caoimhe's errands when she didn't have enough hands, talking Brigid and Muireann down when they got into a

heated territory dispute. Asking Caoimhe for permission to return Síofra's bedroom to its original layout.

He worked hard during the day and the better part of the night. And after, we would unwind together.

Under the stars' watchful gaze, I told him how I'd gotten the scar on my cheek just under my eye. The one shaped like a crescent moon. I had rescued my cat Pixie as a terrified kitten who was stuck in the crawlspace under a shed, and when I had pulled her out, she swiped at me, terrified by the movement and strange scents. I never resented her for it. I got anxious in small spaces, too.

It only just occurred to me while telling Raff the story that Pixie wasn't a kitten anymore. That had been such a long time ago. Pixie had been old when we went on vacation, though not concerningly so—but that meant Pixie was even more gone now than I was.

For a while, I couldn't say anything at all, and Raff sat with me through that, too, forgetting his tea until it was stone cold.

Eventually, because I knew he wouldn't scoff or dismiss me, I also told him how my parents hadn't been proud of my games even when *The Shattered Crown* started to hit big. How I kept at it anyway with my sisters' encouragement.

Weirdly, Raff still blushed whenever I brought up gaming, even though he clearly admired what I did. And I rambled about it a lot because I liked seeing the color in his cheeks. It just suited him, kind of like a character trait you didn't plan—one that suddenly makes their whole backstory click when it comes to life at the table.

I told him what it had been like to have type one diabetes. How tired I got of looking at a plate of food, any food, and seeing math in my head before getting to think about how much I'd enjoy the taste. How it could wear anyone down, no matter how well-adjusted they were: the finger sticks, the needles, anticipating the sting every time my stomach growled and how I was finally coming around about making the switch to an insulin pump. It was one of those things I had planned to do after vacation.

He told me about improving technology for the disease, like how his young cousin wore a continuous glucose monitor which let her see her blood sugar on her phone.

As I showed him my callused fingers full of tiny holes, I blurted, "I'd do it all over again, though. The infusion site changes, the fatigue, the stress of

all the highs and lows. I'd rather live with some extra challenges in my day than not have a day at all. I used to say I wanted a permanent break from it, but—this wasn't what I had in mind."

Raff's eyes met mine and held them like he was looking deep. Like there was so much to me, even in death, that he wanted to see. That was worth seeing, because he kept on looking, not making any secret of it.

Then he told me all about his torn ACL, the surgery, the recovery and how his knee would never be the same. He talked about going to work for ExorSquad and the oddly charismatic older man who owned the business, who I wasn't sure I trusted as far as Raff could throw him. He confided in me about growing up as an only child, told me all about his many cousins and his grandparents and his favorite neighbors, how his parents had always supported him—like when he came out as gay.

I liked how he looked at me when he said it. I liked that it wasn't a big deal to say it, that he was comfortable and relaxed when he did.

So I told him I was bi, which I hadn't often shared.

Apparently, even with such proud parents, Raff had longed for a large family like mine and eventually found it in his team. Maybe that explained why he was so comfortable around me and the rest of the castle's spirits. He had already known plenty of loss himself.




The stars watched another week slip by, maybe more, as he taught me about the basics of hurling and made them fascinating.

We talked about our families, and how I missed mine even though my parents were far from perfect. Sharing them with him somehow made them feel a little less distant.

Then one night, Raff finally let Síofra run a brush through his red-brown curls. She loved talking to him in Irish about how much had changed for queer folks over the years, and enjoyed trying to learn current slang in their language. Even though I didn't understand a word, I was content to listen to both of them.

Each evening ended later than Raff's job demanded, especially now that he had the castle calmer than it had been in months. Yet he shifted his sleep

schedule so we could keep watching the stars until they vanished, talking about books or life or death or nothing at all.

I had rarely been so aware of the passage of time as I was now that the living world held something to interest me again, more awake than I had been in years. More alive, my mind active and my energy stronger, and it was all thanks to Raff. When I thought about inevitabilities—him leaving after Halloween, or moving me on—I got so restless that I had to disappear to the basement dungeon to kick rocks and scream and scare the worms for a while. I hadn't had a friend in so long, and now here one was, close enough to touch even though I couldn't. Someone I could whisper all my random thoughts to (and lately, there were a lot), and usually find myself rewarded with a snarky reply or a shared laugh in return.

He seemed to love when I imitated the birds that visited Síofra's balcony, which was where I spent most of my time. Having died in the foyer, I didn't feel drawn to a particular room like some of the other spirits, and I liked pretending I could feel the fresh air.

I don't know that I'd ever had a friend quite like Raff. So funny. So intense. So striking to look at, from his face to the way he carried himself. So sincere. He downloaded my favorite songs to play for me whenever he had service on his phone, and I wasn't even sure if he liked the music or just liked that I enjoyed it. It was easy to show him exactly who I was, because he was always curious and never flinched away—even if he did double over in fits of laughter when Pepper the demon dog tried to hump my leg again.

Sometimes, when he held my eyes a moment longer than any of my old friends ever had, I could have sworn he was inviting me in.

And maybe that's why I got a little too restless again, and did something stupid despite my carefully thought-out basement escape plan for such occasions.




We were in the grand parlor. Raff had brought a toy barn and poseable horse figures from the village for Gráinne, hoping a shiny new distraction might encourage her to stop putting the plastic skeletons in compromising

positions that made Jordy giggle like a kid and never failed to upset Caoimhe.

“Think of all the positions the rascal can leave these in,” Raff declared, triumphant, when he took them out of their plastic carrying case to show me.

From the coffee table, a huge black candle shaped like a skull grinned up at him. No one could say Caoimhe wasn’t committed to the theme. We were setting the horses up on the parlor’s wide area rug when something chimed in Raff’s jacket pocket. His phone. He usually left it in the van because he didn’t get much signal on the castle grounds, but he reached for it now.

He rolled his eyes at a text, then showed me. “Caoimhe wants to know if we can figure out who’s flooding the third-floor bathrooms before the trial banquet this weekend,” he explained. The phone chimed again. “Oh, and she thanked me for being the reason the banquet is finally possible. You’re the one she should really be thanking, though, if you ask me.”

As usual, I wasn’t quite sure what to say to such generous praise. I rubbed my palm against my cheek, wondering if it was hot—but of course I couldn’t tell.

Setting the phone down on the antique coffee table, Raff gave me a daring look that sent a thrill through my incorporeal veins. “Come on, then,” he said cheerfully. “Let’s put a few of these around for the little rogue to find.”

But I was distracted when his phone screen lit up again.

*FLAIR: 28 new messages*, it read. The icon was a picture of a flaming heart, and even though I didn’t recognize the app, I knew what one was. I’d played *Angry Birds*.

“What’s Flair?” I asked in what I hoped was an offhand voice as I made one of the horses moonwalk toward Raff’s leg. It was so much harder to pitch my voice with any kind of inflection now that I didn’t have actual vocal cords, but I had played around with different energy manipulations often enough to make a decent attempt.

Raff’s brows rose, and he stopped messing with the toy horses, leaning back on his heels. “That’s a dating app. You can meet people, have a chat, hook up, whatever. Why?” He followed my gaze back to the coffee table and his illuminated phone screen. “You want to see?”

Did I ever. Stuff like this—swiping through faces like you’re picking out a jacket—was a whole world I’d missed by dying before my time. But after

Raff walked me through it, I couldn't say I felt like I'd missed much. Flicking people away with my thumb felt wrong, like pretending they weren't as human as I was. Sure, a few profiles were . . . questionable. But mostly, I just didn't know enough about any of them to feel anything at all.

"You had a lot of messages on there," I observed as neutrally as I could, making Raff shiver as I drew more energy from our surroundings to take a turn swiping on a few pictures even though it felt so foreign to me.

"Yeah, I downloaded it a while ago and forgot all about it," he answered, peering at the screen over my shoulder with a frown. "It was back when I was working at the Red Bog Inn. I don't really . . . date much. I've not had the time. But doing nothing at all is the real pity, isn't it? I thought I should try, at least."

I didn't answer, too busy swiping right on everyone for him.

The next profile showed a tall, slim goth guy in a priest's collar, with dark hair curling around his ears and a sarcastic, playful smirk. Ronan was a demonologist, which wasn't too far removed from Raff's line of work, and he had his master's in psychology. *And* I guess you could call him cute. Raff deserved someone smart and fun and at least half as handsome as he was, because that was probably as close as anyone would get. Better still if his potential new boyfriend understood Raff's line of work.

"Oh no, what're you—?" was all Raff managed to blurt before I swiped right again. "Ah, Jaysus!" he groaned, scrubbing a hand over his face. I'd never heard his accent quite this strong. "Eric, that was my fecking ex! The shite one I told you about, you remember—don't tell me you're setting me up with the ex now?"

My control over energy vanished and the phone dropped through my incorporeal hand, thudding on the carpet. Suddenly, all I could see was that pale, pasty skin. The shit-eating grin above the priest's collar that wasn't playful at all, but was clearly smug about having fucked the man next to me in some capacity. It had been a fun game, trying to match Raff with someone when it was just an idea, a far-off possibility—not when it had already happened and was staring me in the face.

My mind was stuck on the image of Raff's fingers tangled in that dark, curly hair.

Raff's lips on *his* lips. Sucking a mark under that collar.

Those hands sliding up the broad planes of Raff's chest, taking for granted the soft hair brushing against the pads of each finger.

That smirking mouth kissing a path down from Raff’s navel, Raff’s strong thighs spreading in invitation.

If I still had a stomach, I would have been nauseous.

Hell, I think I was spiritually nauseous. A new phenomenon for Raff to document.

Not that I was jealous or anything. I belonged to the past, and Raff was the present and future. We didn’t belong in the same line of any song. I knew better—I simply kept forgetting because we spent so much time together. My eyes were overly bright with the memory of what it felt like to cry, but of course I had no tears to shed.

I guess it was past time to admit, at least to myself, that I was attracted to him. And not in the way I sometimes admired people from a distance, safe and detached, but somewhere deeper—something that only ever happened when someone had already gotten under my skin. I wanted things I’d never let myself want without that kind of closeness: to touch him, to breathe him in, to be covered in the scent of him. To feel those broad hands on me, getting to know my body the way he already knew my mind, and I knew his.

But that was fucking impossible, wasn’t it?

The phone chimed again, and we both stared as Ronan’s name and image popped onto the display screen. The picture was a tasteful black and white shot of his glistening pecs. I guess demonologists lifted, too.

“For feck’s sake, would you look at this?” Raff grumbled, reaching for the phone with a grip like he wanted to hurl it at the wall.

“Ooh, bring it here, Raff dear. Would you?” Síofra asked, appearing as a silhouette in the decorative wall mirror above the antique settee. “That looks interesting.”

I shot her a look, wondering how long she had been lurking, then glanced away just as quickly. She didn’t need to see what was clearly written all over my face. “Shee, could you maybe go and find Gráinne for us? Tell her we have a surprise for her.”

“Oh, I suppose.” The image in the mirror wavered, then coalesced into something more solid and distinct. I could make out the lines of Síofra’s eyelashes and the shape of her pout now. “As long as you two don’t have all the fun without me.”

With that, the mirror’s reflection cleared, once again showing only my slim, transparent figure next to Raff’s larger, more solid one.

“Are you really going to throw your phone?” I asked, because he was still clutching it like he wanted to crumple it like aluminum foil. “I had no idea who he was, you know.”

“Haven’t decided. And I know you didn’t,” Raff answered on a hot breath, followed by a mutter of “But you’re acting the maggot again.”

“I’m sorry. And—also, I’m not, this time. This is different.” I drifted a little closer, hands raised in surrender. “Look, I didn’t mean to cause you any trouble. You already have your hands full of that here. And I don’t even think you should date him. Obviously, I—I think you deserve better. Worlds better. Galaxies better.”

Raff’s head snapped up at that, eyes narrowing—not out of anger, exactly. More . . . searching. “Galaxies, is it?” he asked softly.

That’s when the energy in the room changed. Sharpened. Intensified. Even I could feel it, another presence with us, and not a friendly one. “Raff, you need to leave,” I said quickly. “Go back to your van. Something’s wrong. It’s not me, I—I don’t know what it is. I—”

The wick of the skull-shaped candle on the coffee table suddenly flared to life on its own as the floor lamp in the corner blinked off, washing the room with shadows. Raff was already sitting, but he still scrambled back across the carpet immediately, putting distance between himself and where the grinning candle sat. He winced like he’d done something to his knee, but his gaze was locked on that flame that had ignited without a match—and the shapes appearing in the fire. Faces I didn’t recognize formed out of the blaze, their lips parting and mouths elongating, gruesomely contorted into silent screams. This wasn’t the poltergeist from the courtyard or Gráinne pulling a new prank.

This was like nothing I had ever seen.

I tugged at the straps of Raff’s denim overalls, trying to drag him even further from the strange sight, but it was like I couldn’t get enough energy with this other presence sucking all the air and light from the room, leaving me weak and winded. Smothering me, reducing me to a worried wisp at Raff’s back.

“*Colm O’Dwyre. Fionn Clancy. Dara Keane.*”

I didn’t know the names that the fire itself appeared to hiss in a voice as old as the dawn, deep and dark, but one look at Raff’s face told me that he did.

“*Dubhán Kelly*,” the crackling voice went on. “*Ciarán Byrne. Paddy Flanagan. Eithne O’Meara. Sean O’Meara.*”

The last name ended on a hiss as Raff shot the candle in its grinning face with one of his ghost-zapping weapons. The Turbo thing.

Black smoke curled from the top of the shattered skull, and bits of wax smeared over every inch of the glass tabletop.

As the lamp in the corner popped back on in the absence of whatever that spirit had been, I found I could summon at least enough energy to lay a chilled hand on Raff’s injured knee. It was the first time I’d touched him on purpose since the day we met, when I’d accidentally pulled his hair. And now that I had touched him . . . Hell, I wanted to do it again, in more ways than I was ready to voice. I just didn’t know what *he* wanted, and had no idea how to ask.

“My family,” Raff finally gasped. It seemed like my touch was bracing enough to get him to talk again, but I hated how shaken he sounded. Not at all like himself, his usual brash determination and lilting playfulness gone. “That thing . . . It knew my parents. My friends. My fecking c-coach—Eric, please tell me you know what that was. A demon?”

“I’m sorry,” I answered, barely louder than a whisper. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything about demons unless I’m rolling dice to shoot a magic missile at them.” I was babbling and I knew it, full of restless unease. Something had just threatened Raff’s family, and I hadn’t been able to help. I’d barely been able to manifest, and no amount of running my fingers over his sore knee would erase the damage done.

“I think,” Raff said slowly, still staring wide-eyed at the remnants of the decorative candle, “I’m in over my head, and I’m willing to admit it this time. I’m going to call for backup.”

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## Rule #465: Limit Phone Use While on the Job

*Entities of all levels and types hate competing for your attention. This is especially true if you've decided to swipe on potential hookups while you've got a poltergeist waiting to jump your bones in the bathroom. Keep your dating life and the afterlife separate to avoid complications or premature disembowelments.*

*OceanofPDF.com*

# From the Notebook of Rafferty O'Meara, ExorSquad Spirit Extraction Expert

*Entity Name: Eric James Crawford, ~~the American, the Wildcard, Professional Nerd,~~ Mr. Brightside*

*Level: 4*

*Year of Expiration: 2009*

*Haunting style: Pulls my hair. Steals my stuff (my pin, sometimes my water bottle even though he can't drink out of it). Whistles better than I can hold a tune. Imitates local bird calls: jays, blackcaps, magpies, wagtails, robins.*

*When you pay him a compliment, he looks so solid that I can't tell him from the living. Funny, I can't find remember sayings about ghosts and praise. Just him?*

*Ideas to keep the peace: I'm not sure yet. I've learned so much from him this past week, but I feel like I need to keep learning more* about *him. I can't even say why, but I'm fairly sure there's a line in The Handbook about trusting your gut on these things.*

*For now, I'll stick with our little partnership. Keep it simple, like: he helps me, I don't zap him.*

***Updated the 27th of September:***

*He's still stealing my stuff (at this point, I'd just give him my pin if he was able to actually fasten it to his shirt). He makes me sing 90s songs. He talks*

*a lot, to me and the birds. He's good craic. Smart. Knows everyone in the castle. Pepper the dog is fierce fond of him (or at least fond of his legs). He died wearing contacts, but misses his glasses. Bet they look deadly cute on him. He played the piano for a few years, but doesn't remember enough to try the one here. Pity; I would have liked to listen.*

*He's bi. I learned that the other week. I don't know what sorts of guys he fancies. Ones as pretty as he is, most likely.*

*Likes: Dungeons and Dragons. His cats (Merlin, Morgana, and Pixie, the bean). The ocean. Books with good endings. Writing. Playing games and making new ones. Astronomy. (Cassiopeia? He's said it a few times.) His sisters (Amy, Elena, Chloe). His mam's lasagna. His dad's library. Frozen custard. Baklava. Warm hoodies. Collecting new dice and enamel pins (I never would have guessed). The café at the end of his block with the iced lavender oat milk lattes. Animals wearing little jumpers. Meme humor. Summer over winter and sunny days. Trying new restaurants. Learning about hurling, apparently.*

*Should I find his family and reach out to them for closure? I'll have to ask him. Until then, we'll keep watching the stars.*

***Updated the 28th of September:***

*I'm not sure why I wrote that, about the stars. I don't know why all the spirits seem to be stuck here no matter what I do. This is nothing like my other cases, I'm sure of that much, but I'm glad zapping Eric didn't work. Talking to him reminds me of nights out with the team, except I never watched any of my mates back home the way I watch him. I wonder if he's noticed. I don't know that I want him to, because where would that leave us? What could become of it?*

***Updated the 29th of September:***

*I don't know why I wrote that stuff above, either. Good thing no one else will see these notes unless I decide to send them to a priest for confession.*

*I need to get a damn dog. I need to get back on Flair. I need Eric, too.*

*Galaxies. If only he knew he was the one who had charted constellations for me in the first place.*

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# Ten

# Hidden Agendas

## Raff

As I drove into the village the morning after the candle incident, my first call was to Ronan, but only because he had the expertise we needed. Once he got the measure of the situation and assured me we weren't dealing with a demon—given the lack of growling, pushing, or a strong, rotten odor during such a manifestation, nor any reaction from our resident monk Brother Fintan during the whole ordeal—I wished him well. And then finally blocked his number, because he texted me a dick pic right after I hung up and asked when I might be free to meet, which made me feel nothing but more than a little used.

That done, I called my mam and da, who were both busy with work and sharing an ordinary Friday. They were pleased but a little confused to hear from me. Then I opened a group thread I'd muted a long time ago and checked on the hurling team buzzing from a recent win I hadn't been part of. That might have stung a few months ago, but as I read through their jokes and slagging, I was warm and limp with relief.

Now, with a couple bars of signal on my cell and a bit of time to kill, I sat at a small table in one of Ballycorven's two cafés with a nice view of the

castle up on the hill, sipping an iced lavender oat milk latte and thinking about the candle. Maybe it was simply one of the castle spirits trying to frighten me off, no matter what Eric insisted to the contrary. Probably the same one who wanted to drop a chandelier on my head and killed the guy doing this job before me. That was the obvious and reasonable explanation once we ruled out demonic activity. Even so, it wouldn't hurt to have another expert on the job with me now that something had gone so far as to threaten the people I cared about. There had to be someone with more experience who could take better control of the situation—not that I planned on abandoning my post either way. It would take more than a bit of fancy trickery to drive me off, even if it had knocked the breath clean out of me.

As I waited for ExorSquad's London office to open for the day so I could call, I definitely wasn't wondering if each sip of my latte was anything like how Eric would taste, because that would have made me barking mad.

Eric was dead. Eric was a ball of energy who often looked real enough to trick my brain into thinking otherwise, and that's where things had gotten complicated. He sounded so warm and convincing when he said that he wanted to protect me from suffering a fate like his own. And when I was at my lowest, worn thin, he always lifted me back up—which was why I had agreed to go watch the stars with him that first night, and every night since.

After that, well . . . he was always running his mouth, but there was something about it that kept me coming back for more. It soothed something in me, the way he would delve into one of his passions and tell me about it in detail, like he really wanted me to share it. Of course, I still couldn't bring myself to admit that I'd been wanking to a dead man's videos, so every time he mentioned *The Shattered Crown*, I'd turn scarlet. He must think I was hot for roleplaying and dice by now, which wasn't entirely wrong—as long as it involved him.

It was easy, on those late nights when we sat out on the balcony, to focus on nothing but him, like we were the only two souls in the castle. Or off in our own little world, one he had created for us with that endless imagination of his.

I didn't understand it yet, why he listened closely to all my stories the way he did. Why he wanted to know all about me and my gran's ghost tales and hurling and my friends. What he could possibly see in me that made him look twice, let alone as often as he did.

I was a loser with a job no one else wanted and a van for a house, not to mention no real dating experience, and he was so much more than that. Smart. Funny. Awful gorgeous. Caring. He had money, he had ambitions, he was going places—or he would have been. I had to imagine that, if he were alive, he could've done a whole lot better than spend his nights with the likes of me. He was just settling because I was the only lad who didn't run screaming when a disembodied voice whispered in his ear.

But I would take what was being offered all the same, because our conversations were some of the best I'd had in years. I never held back my thoughts with him (except about the wanking), because there wasn't any need. The grave keeps its secrets, as they say. I could just be myself and ramble about sports or the sprawling garden I wanted to plant someday or the latest song I had on repeat. Or sometimes, even, the things that really scared me—not a poltergeist grabbing me by the collar, but losing my gran or someone else I cared about, or letting my community down, or living the kind of life that's easily forgotten.

Eric was dead, but he had also quickly become my friend. And not just because he was the most helpful person I'd ever met on the job. He also made me laugh. He surprised me often. He made bad days better just by sitting with me for some tea and perspective. And he was always pointing out things I did right, too, and reminding me of the good when I couldn't see it. Hell, even though I knew it was a joke, I really felt like *somebody* when he came up with a nickname for me. He really could always find the bright side.

And between my stubborn determination to succeed at this job and Eric's quick wit, we made a great team.

At least until last night, in the parlor. I hadn't meant for Eric to see that I was on a dating app—not that it mattered at all, because Eric was dead—but then he'd gone and matched me with my ex. He couldn't have known who Ronan was, but what had he been thinking, anyway? Why try to pair me up with anyone? So he could be rid of me sooner? He didn't act like he wanted me gone. But the most confusing part was that, in those brief moments before the candle wick had burst to light, he had seemed almost . . . jealous.

*You deserve worlds better*, he'd said. *Galaxies*. Did he mean what I thought? Did he know that for a moment, until the candle distracted me, I had believed him?

We hadn’t gotten to talk about it whatsoever thanks to that business with the candle. It was clear that Eric didn’t know what happened any more than I did, but that just showed how little he really knew the castle’s other spirits. Part of me worried that he was in as much danger as I was if he trusted them, especially if this spirit had marked me as a target and Eric was always hanging around. He would have been better off chatting up Jordy, even if that meant extra work fending off Pepper’s amorous attentions.

Maybe then I wouldn’t still be thinking about the chill of his touch on my knee, the pressure of his slender fingers. Wondering if and when he might put in the effort to touch me again. Knowing the energy he had to gather to even let me feel his touch proved . . . something. Proved that, maybe, he felt as drawn to me as I felt toward him.

Finally, it was ten o’clock—ExorSquad’s daytime business hours. I took the rest of my latte and stepped out into a breezy, overcast morning that spelled the last of September, keeping the castle within my sights as I paced outside the café and rang the London office. I was determined to get the head of operations and owner, Gerald Pickett, to answer.

The phone rang six times before the harried-sounding secretary, Ted, finally picked up. “Thank you for calling ExorSquad, where all your hauntings go to die.”

That was a grand promise, wasn’t it?

“This is Rafferty O’Meara, Ireland West Division,” I announced as I strode through the heather along the edge of a leaning wooden fence on the way into the village proper. “I need to speak with the boss.”

“I’m afraid that isn’t possible at the moment. Mr. Pickett is currently indisposed,” the young lad said. He was either crunching some kind of sweet or grinding his molars so hard that the speaker picked it up.

I wasn’t having it. I had met Gerald when I flew over for training. And sure, he was an odd fellow, with milky blue eyes that sometimes struck me as uncanny, but the spirit extraction business was his life. Or at least his livelihood, funding his favorite hobby—gambling. I’d caught him at it more than once during my brief time at headquarters, whether on his phone or the office computer. Cards, horses, dogs. He couldn’t go long without checking his bets, much like my granda. He even had Granda’s tobacco-stained fingers, and going by the scent, they smoked the same brand. It had made me like him instantly.

I could just picture Gerald now, snug in the enormous leather wingback chair behind his desk, surrounded by all sorts of strange artifacts that each clung to the same kind of shadows as Ardruin Castle. In my mind, his head bent over his phone as he watched a dog race streaming live from Northamptonshire, or perhaps Galway.

Well, even if Gerald did remind me of Granda, and had always been decent to me, this was urgent. I didn't have time to make nice.

"Listen, Ted, I know he's in his office having tea and playing Emerald Odds Casino or something, so you need to put him through *now*. It's life or death here, not dropping a fiver on the dogs!"

"Right then, Mr. O'Meara. Please hold."

I was treated to a few minutes of smooth jazz, which only stoked my temper the longer I was made to wait. I kicked a few rocks in my path as I ambled slowly toward the village center, taking my time in order to avoid putting any unnecessary pressure on my knee with how it still ached after yesterday. What could be more important than an employee in mortal danger? I wished Eric was here to say something that would all make it feel okay somehow. The next best thing was recalling his commentary on the boss when I had told him about ExorSquad.

*Gerald sounds like some kind of chaotic rogue with maxed-out charisma—for what he's paying you, he's clearly picking your pocket and smiling while he does it, and you let him. Sounds like he rolls with advantage on all his deception checks.*

By the time Gerald came on the line, I was grinning to myself.

"Raff, my lad!" Gerald boomed in an affable, raspy voice. He seemed to think calling me *lad* somehow made us brothers, which was ridiculous. Yet sure enough, my temper was already fading. "Smashing to hear from you."

Advantage on deception—right. I wasn't going to be taken in this time. "Mr. Pickett, hi," I said quickly, remembering the burning skull candle and the screaming faces in the flame. "Listen, I need you to send someone else to Ardruin Castle. I need a partner. There's something going on here that wasn't covered in training, and I could really use someone with more experience leading on this one."

"Ah, I'm so sorry, my lad. No can do. It's not in the budget right now—"

"Funny, you've always got a tenner for the bookies," I cut in.

Shame immediately washed over me. Now I'd gone and been rude to Granda.

*He's like an NPC quest-giver who's hiding his own agenda*, I remembered Eric saying. Just a month into my time here and he was already the voice inside my head. And right now, that voice was steering me past the guilt and inspiring me to try being firm.

"Look, sir, I need you to send backup. Today. Whether it's in the budget or not. Do you want to hear about how many spirits are in this place? The things I've seen?"

"You know I do," Gerald said at once, sounding sincere. I think I actually had his full attention for a minute. "But I haven't got time, I'm afraid. And I can't spare anyone, not right now. Not while *they're* after me." A brief babble of conversation I couldn't quite make out filled the silence on the line. "Dire times. Dire times indeed," he muttered more clearly as he came back on the line. "Listen, my lad, I've got something new that might help with your situation: the Apparition Displacement Apparatus. The ADA-404, we're calling it. Packs a mean punch. I'll have Ted post it express this afternoon. Give that a whirl and—"

He cut himself off there, ending the call. Or rather, I realized a moment later, he had slammed the phone down on the hardwood surface of his desk without hanging up.

"The bloody Rozzers, *here*?" Gerald fumed in the distance. "Typical. I *knew* it. Well, what do they want?"

"People keep getting killed on our watch, Sir," a softer voice said. It sounded like Ted again. He had definitely been grinding his molars earlier, and who could blame him? "I guess the police finally took notice. Maybe one of the families called in . . . anyway. They said they just want a quick word, but if you don't go out there—"

"Yes, yes, I'm going," Gerald muttered.

The creak of a chair filled my ears right before I hung up. I'd heard enough. I would have to tell Eric that, for once, Gerald hadn't rolled well on his deception check.

I'd also have to tell him that help wasn't coming, though my hopes hadn't been high. I wasn't really surprised that the rumours I had read online about ExorSquad were true, between the lack of sound advice in The Handbook and the equipment that barely worked half the time—the job was only safe if you were already dead.

This was starting to seem more like a countdown than a career.

Still, I wasn’t about to go running for the hills over one eerie threat. I would, however, be packing every last weapon ExorSquad had given me the next time I set foot in the castle. At least until we figured out how to handle the unhappy spirit.

While on the phone with Gerald, I had passed by several stone cottages, most of which were little shops with flats above them. The warm scent of baking bread filled the air, masking the coming rain. A few other shoppers bustled about, one or two holding the hand of a small child, others hugging bags or baskets, but I was more or less alone on this crowded pavement.

Tucking my phone into my jacket pocket, I started toward the nearest shop, its soothing blue-grey exterior and crisp white trim drawing me into what turned out to be a bakery. It was late enough that their breakfast rush was over, but they had half a case still full of cinnamon buns as big as my hand, fragrant tea brack, and rows and rows of doughnuts piped with colorful icing.

*You’ve gone soft, in more ways than one*. Ronan’s voice floated back to me, probably because we had just spoken last night. Maybe I missed sex, but I didn’t miss that prick.

Looking past the pastries that bordered on offensive stereotyping with their sugared rainbows and shamrock sprinkles—catnip for the tourists—I spotted a doughnut with pale purple icing called *lavender luxe* and signaled to the girl behind the counter. It was filled with a rich vanilla and lavender custard.

Eric would have enjoyed it. He would have needed to take insulin for it—I’d been reading about type one diabetes whenever I could get signal on my phone, because having a cousin with the disease didn’t mean I knew everything—but he could eat whatever he wanted as long as he counted for it. I’d learned enough about nutrition from my years in hurling to at least take some weight off his shoulders, and I wanted to help. Not that he needed it anymore.

I ate the pastry one-handed as I wandered down High Street, not in any great rush to get back to the castle, even if I didn’t want to get caught in the rain.

When I saw a shop with a cart full of books and flowers out front—offering new and used titles, just my kind of place—I hastily sucked the sugar from my fingers and wiped my hands on my jeans before heading inside.

I browsed for a while, admiring random covers in the fantasy section until one or two sparked my interest enough to read the summary. Then I got to searching. I'd written down all the titles that Eric recommended to me, and the little bookshop—The Story Snug—had two of them, so I grabbed both. Then I circled back to where I'd nosed around earlier and chose a promising book for Eric.

Eric was dead, but he could still read and turn the pages with the slightest bit of effort. It might be a good way for him to pass the time until I figured out why all the spirits in the castle seemed stuck there. Until he moved on, like he was meant to.

I was only being a good friend, keeping him from going mad in there. Never mind that he'd been managing just fine before me.

With the bag of books slung over one shoulder, I headed back onto High Street. It had been quiet before, but was now empty altogether. The sky had darkened while I was inside—to be fair, I had spent nearly an hour in there, lost amongst the pages and their musty perfume. Now the wind was kicking up, howling and heavy with the promise of rain.

Sure enough, as I made a run for the van, it started bucketing down. I should have turned back and taken cover in the bookshop, but it was lashing so hard that I wasn't sure which street I had just turned on or how to get back.

Rather than keep faffing about like a wet shite, I staggered to the door of the nearest shop: a narrow cottage tucked tightly between the toy store and a gents' clothing boutique. The door was unlocked, so I splashed inside.

I didn't remember seeing this place when I came to the village to buy the toy horses for Gráinne, but it was warm. Nice. The smell of incense hit me, smoky and herbal, like . . . vine-ripened tomatoes. I inhaled deeply, shook myself off like a soggy dog by the door, and looked around for the shop owner as notes of pan flute music trilled from hidden speakers.

No one stood behind the counter. No one skulked between the rows of bookcases that mostly held bundles of dried herbs with names like *High John* and *yarrow*, and colorful chunks of rock, or maybe mineral—call me the dumb jock if you like, but I hadn't a notion of the difference. Some of the stones were carved into different shapes, like a cat or a fawn. There was even a shiny purple-and-white rock shaped like a lad's bollocks.

I hurried away from that case and toward a hutch of neat rows of books. They boasted strange symbols on their spines etched in silver and gold, no

familiar titles here. I picked one up and just as quickly dropped it as something—not the book, because that was impossible—softly hissed. The whole shop put me in mind of Gerald Pickett's office. It filled me with the same feeling I had every time I entered the castle: that faint prickle of an unseen splinter, a certain charged stillness, an otherworldly hum.

The air was thick with it, charged and layered.

I knew of places like this, but I'd never been in one. Because while I had never questioned the existence of spirits, I wasn't sure what to make of magic.

"Hiya, are you after anything yourself?" a woman asked as she emerged from the shadows of an employee-only stock room. She bustled over to join me by a shelf of candles, carrying a basket full of them in her arms.

"I don't know," I answered truthfully. Then, shifting my bag of books to one hand, I nodded to her basket. "Help you with that?"

The woman smiled, all white teeth and dimples that made me think of Eric. She had tight, twisty curls of light brown hair that fell across her forehead and bounced around her shoulders, and eyes that, when they settled on my face, felt like the rest of the shop: inviting, but uncanny. "That's awful decent of you, but this won't take long," she said cheerfully.

She set about restocking the candles while I stood there like an eejit with my bag of books. The rain still came down in sheets, or else I probably would have been on my way.

Instead, I said, "I'm Raff. I'm working up at the castle."

"That so?" she said, never missing a beat as she kept arranging candles in neat rows. "I'm Niamh. And how are you finding it at Ardruin?"

"Haunted," I said as the pan flute abruptly stopped. It had probably come to the end of a track, but the timing was odd. "And I'm supposed to be the one doing something about it. I'm with ExorSquad—"

"Oh, no," Niamh interrupted, sighing as if I'd let her down. "Not *them*, with all their shite gear and daft approaches." Frowning, she added in a reproachful tone, "There's other ways of handling spirits than what's down in the company code, I promise you that. If you're having trouble, it's because you're approaching the other side all wrong."

I might have asked her to tell me about some of those ways of handling spirits if she hadn't started assuming a lot of things without actually knowing me. "You make it sound like they're the ones who need

protecting," I said as politely as I could. "When *I'm* the one who got threatened last night."

She looked at me as if waiting for me to elaborate, but what else could I say? I wasn't about to explain the whole scene, how Eric was with me and what we were almost definitely going to have a row about when the angry spirit interrupted—things I didn't want to look at too closely, myself. No, I just wanted to get back to the castle, to talk to him. I hadn't seen him since I limped out to the van late last night.

"Sounds like you're in need of some spiritual protection, then," Niamh declared after a moment. The flute music resumed as she glided over to a metal sculpture of a twisted tree, its skeletal branches hung with glittering pendants. She brought one over to me, a teardrop-shaped glass vial dangling on a silver chain. The pendant was filled with what looked like some kind of fine black powder.

"Any other witch trying to earn a paycheck would probably sell you a pretty crystal and a lie, but I won't do that. Those things are useless against most spirits. This is black salt, to absorb negative energy and ward off any entity who wishes you harm," Niamh explained while I copped the price tag. A hundred and twenty euro. That would nearly wipe out an ExorSquad paycheck, just staying protected from all the shite I went through for them.

I still paid, though, before trudging out into the damp afternoon with a bit of sparkle around my neck.

If it worked, it would be worth every cent.

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# Eleven

# Sad Wet Cat

## Raff

It was only midafternoon when I got back to the castle, and a busy one at that. The trial banquet was tomorrow, on the first of October, so Caoimhe and her team of decorators were outside fighting the wet lawn and high winds to put up streamers, tinsel, paper bats, and extra signage. And since Basil was directing things, that meant Jordy and Pepper were out there, too.

That left the castle practically empty but for the new chef and her team making a racket in the kitchen as they prepped for a hundred guests.

This was going to be quite the production.

After a late night and early morning, I could feel myself dragging, the weight of exhaustion heavy in my limbs as I strapped on my utility belt and started kitting up with every piece of equipment ExorSquad had given me. I might have taken a nap in the van, but talking to Eric couldn't wait. Not after the way we'd left things, *galaxies* between us.

I checked the PolterPulse V2.1 at my left hip. The X5000 TurboPro at my right. The Temporal Distortion Logger—another device for measuring otherworldly energy fluctuations, or maybe just mice in the walls—in one pocket, and the ECH000 Spirit Receiver—for picking up and amplifying

spirit voices, or at least catching the local radio stations from the next town over—in another. Finally, I tucked the slim S-TRK 88 “SpecterTrack” Monitor in my back pocket. It was a device that allegedly provided a visual temperature map of any unseen entities in a room who might want to get the jump on me, but would probably just direct me to catching the nearest Pokémon. Two weapons for zapping, even if it only bought me a few minutes in a pinch, and several sleek devices that supposedly would help me track any spirits who weren’t manifesting visually.

I wasn’t taking any chances after last night. Not with one of the castle’s permanent residents apparently having it out for me.

I’d made a life-altering mistake once, trusting my instincts in hurling. I couldn’t afford that here, where trusting my gut about the ghosts could prove fatal. I’d thought I had everything under control, after all. Look at how wrong I’d been.

Rather than put on a performance to summon Eric, I trudged up the first flight of stairs with all my gear and headed for Síofra’s usual haunt. The castle didn’t feel quite as restless as it had last night, though just like at the strange shop I’d visited earlier, the air was thick and the nearly solid shadows hummed with anticipation as I passed. I put a hand on the holster of the PolterPulse, just in case.

Síofra’s room felt a little better. I was able to take a deeper breath when I stepped inside. The familiar scent of honeyed rot, floral and foul on the same inhale, at least promised I wasn’t fighting to fill my lungs like I had in the hall.

I flopped down in the covered armchair by the hearth, where I had left it at Síofra’s direction after I got Caoimhe to agree that the room could be arranged to the resident spirit’s wishes. Draping my knee over one arm of the chair to rest it, I glanced into the newly hung antique mirror (a replacement I was glad I hadn’t been asked to pay for) and waited until a familiar shadowy outline appeared.

“Dia duit,” I greeted the lady in Irish before switching over to English in the hope that Eric was here, too. Even if I didn’t feel him. The soft energy of his presence was something I had come to recognize, though I couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment that happened. I hadn’t even realized it until now, but rooms where he wasn’t always felt, somehow, emptier.

“Dia is Muire duit,” Síofra recited the standard reply to the greeting as her visage solidified in the mirror: shiny chestnut hair full of pearlescent

pins, a dainty nose, painted lips, and only a few reddish, open sores marring her skin. Hardly her most frightening manifestation, though it had been days since I last saw her rotting at all—I wondered if what happened last night had affected her, too.

Catching my eye, she smiled. “Surely I’m not the ghost you’re looking for.”

“No,” I agreed, returning the smile. “But it’s nice to see you all the same.” I was grateful she understood. By the gleam in her eye, I supposed she probably had the measure of a few things I still wasn’t facing head-on myself. “Where is he? I need to talk to him. Last night got . . . strange. Complicated.”

The tightness in my head and the pounding at my temples from lack of sleep and too much caffeine agreed. I scrubbed a hand over my face.

“Oh, I know,” she said gently. “He hasn’t stopped replaying it. And he’s in the dungeon—if ghosts could wear tracks in a floor, he’d have carved a trench down there by now with all his pacing. I haven’t seen him in such a state since his early days here.”

My heart sank, even though I’d expected as much. I flipped through a few pages of the book I’d bought him in the village, needing something to do with my sudden restless energy now that I knew Eric was upset. My days of pacing were behind me.

“He’s worried sick that something is going to happen to you, and that he won’t be able to prevent it,” Síofra confided, leaning out of the mirror and resting her elbows atop the dresser. “Which is how you might conclude he cares about you a great deal.” She let the words linger while she rubbed one of the oozing sores on her chin and fixed me in her pale gaze. A soft flicker of old longing passed through those ancient eyes as she added, “Were it me, and I cared for one of the living that much, I’d want them to die here and stay by my side forever. But Eric thinks you’re too good for this place, and after all the kindness you’ve shown us, I’m inclined to agree. You’re a true friend, Rafferty O’Meara.”

“Go raibh maith agat,” I thanked her, oddly touched by the words in that long-dead voice. “But I don’t know that I deserve all that when I haven’t found a way to move any of you on yet. It’s already been near a month, and what have I got to show for it?”

Síofra considered that for a moment. “An anxious spirit pacing the dungeon on your behalf? He’s convinced you’ll vanish into the night and

never speak to him again because he couldn't protect you from whoever was acting the fool."

"It's not his job to protect me, and absolutely nothing that happened last night was his fault. He has to know that. If he doesn't, I'll go tell him as much." Slowly, testing a bit of weight on my knee before fully standing, I got to my feet. "Unless . . ." I darted a hopeful look at the noblewoman as she retreated into the mirror once again. "You can call him here?"

Behind the glass, Síofra shook her head. "For you, Raff dear, I'd try anything. But I can't make him listen. He's convinced he's safer down there where he can . . . I don't know how you say it. Brood properly?" She frowned. "He thinks if he hides himself away, he won't make things worse. Silly lad. He's always been better at protecting others than himself."

"I'd better go talk to him before he decides to make that his permanent haunt, then," I said, striding toward the door. I didn't care if the hallway was oppressive. Didn't care if the feeling would worsen a hundredfold as I descended the basement stairs, something I had only attempted once in my time here. And that had been with Eric's cheerful company to dispel the worst of the gloom.

He always helped me see the good and feel better on my worst, most haunted days. I was determined to do the same for him.

"Oh, and—Raff dear?" Síofra's voice ringing out from the mirror pulled me back a few steps. "Be careful with him. He's braver than he knows, but his heart . . . I don't know that anyone has ever been gentle with it. If they've ever even seen it."

"I see it," I assured her, nerves tangling in my stomach that had nothing to do with spirits who could conjure fire. I saw it—I saw *him*—but that didn't mean I had the foggiest idea of how to handle any of this with care. I was out of my depth, a fish out of water. Or more like a cat dropped in a bathtub, wet and anxious and mad about it.

Still, I willingly plunged myself in deeper, all the way down the steep basement stairs, clinging to the handrail like a spider dangling from the last thread of a shattered web. Each scuff of my work boots barely echoed, like the darkness hungrily swallowed the sound in the same way it swallowed the weak light from the bare bulb overhead.

I didn't feel Eric down here, or at least, not yet.

Finally, after what felt like a sheer hike up the flanks of MacGillycuddy's Reeks thanks to the pressure of the unwelcoming air, I reached the bottom

step and planted my boots on the earthen floor of the unfinished basement that had once been a dungeon. Over the years, as the demands of modernity crept in, the space had been converted into storage: a few more bare bulbs throughout the room gave off just enough light to suggest the shapes of a utility sink and washer/dryer hookup in one corner, bags of soil and gardening supplies from landscapers past in another. There were boxes of decorations from old parties and even some bunched-up old newspapers that looked like they were playing home to something. Sure enough, when I pulled the Temporal Distortion Logger from my pocket, it showed me the little energy signatures of the mice that had been getting busy in there.

Swapping the useless device out for a regular old flashlight, I swept the beam into the corners that the bulbs didn't quite reach. Something skittered away, startled by the burst of light. It sounded like it was clawing its way up the wall.

"Eric?" I called softly. "Hello? Shee said you were down here pacing. I'm not mad about last night or anything."

Either I was finally losing it, or the darkness was shifting. Becoming more alert. I'd go so far as to say it was listening.

Still, Eric didn't appear, so I went on: "The shite with my phone—I don't care. You had no idea he was my ex, and I blocked his number this morning, anyway. And the candle . . . It isn't your fault if someone else wants to have a go at me. I won't be scared off that easily, anyway, they'll be disappointed to learn. I'm not giving up on—on this place just yet." I tripped over my tongue a little, barely stopping myself from saying words that would have meant something else entirely. Something impossible. And I wasn't in the habit of making empty promises.

"Maybe you should. Run away, that is." Eric materialized in front of me, half-transparent and wild-eyed. His feet weren't quite touching the ground, his stylish black-and-white striped sneakers skimming a few inches above the dirt. He kept hovering like that, hands twisting in front of him in a way I'd never seen before.

Standing taller, I crossed my arms over my chest and shook my head. "I won't tolerate a bully, in this world or any other. And I won't back down. When I was a little fella, I got picked on all the time by a couple bigger lads in the neighborhood. I acted like it didn't bother me, but how could it not? But once I finally discovered the gym, I promised myself I'd never stand by when my strength could be used to help someone like the lad I once was."

“You say that now, but you were scared last night,” Eric said, his apparition flickering like it cost him something to appear, or maybe to keep control. “I should’ve protected you. I should’ve done *something*. I just stood there while whoever-it-was threatened you. I couldn’t even—” His voice cracked, thin as frost. “I couldn’t even move. I’ve been trying to figure out who it was ever since, and apparently, I can’t even do that.”

“Eric—” I tried to cut in, but he wasn’t having any of it.

“You were scared,” he breathed, so cold that it felt like a rime of frost coating my cheek, “because of me. Because you were with me, in this place. Your heart could’ve stopped. You shouldn’t have even come back. This whole thing—some job that doesn’t even pay you well—isn’t worth the risk. *I’m* not worth it.”

“*Eric*,” I said again, so desperate to reach him that I put out a hand like I could touch him. My fingers grasped cold, stale air, but at least he had stopped spiraling in favor of watching me now. Waiting for me to have a say. “You didn’t do anything wrong. And anyone with a lick of sense would be scared of something dangerous they can’t see, but I have *never* been scared of you.” I paused for a breath, holding his eyes. It was freezing down here, but I didn’t reach for the jacket tied around my waist. I wanted to feel his presence, such as it was, to know if my words made a difference. “I can assure you, I’m not about to flee into the night, and I like it so much better when you’re on my team. It’ll be a long month to Halloween if I don’t have Mr. Brightside telling me to keep going, all because you’ve decided to hide out in a dungeon like some sad Victorian poet while I get chased by a spirit who doesn’t like medieval-themed banquets.”

Eric was quiet for a long moment. And then he asked, with the barest ghost of a smile, “Which poet would you say I am?”

“An Oscar Wilde sort, without a doubt.” To my relief, I was rewarded with a bigger smile. “Now, if we’re still a team even though ExorSquad’s not paying you for shite, let’s get out of here before I come down with frostbite. I bought a book for you—it’s in the parlor upstairs. We can go get it, and you can tell me if you like the sound of it.”

“I didn’t know we were celebrating my birthday today, All Star—I need a little warning next time,” Eric teased as he gestured for me to lead the way up the stairs, obviously pleased. He was starting to look more solid, and there was a certain shine about him that pushed back the darkness better than the bulbs. “It sucks down here,” he added, and I agreed.

It wasn’t until we were back in the well-lit parlor, having a look at his new (well, gently used) book, that he noticed my necklace. The glint of the thick silver chain, anyway, the pendant itself hidden under my shirt and overalls.

“What’s that?” he asked in a voice that wasn’t as casual as he thought it sounded as he set down the book he was excited to read. His frown gave him away when I pulled it out to properly show him. “Oh. It’s pretty. Let me guess: Ronan gave you that. Or . . .?”

I studied him as he let the question hang between us. He appeared solid now, as alive as me, which made it easier to tell that he was flustered. His eyes were brighter than usual, his expression pinched, his feet starting to pace the parlor we had chosen for some privacy since the living were bustling about the place.

There was still plenty neither of us dared speak aloud. Something had shifted between us last night and we were both dancing around it with caution. And he was cuter than ever like this, with a flush in his cheeks and daggers in his eyes for whoever had dared gift me the pendant, like they had somehow violated an unspoken boundary.

I could’ve watched him looking like that for quite a while, but I also didn’t want him turning into a sad Victorian poet on me again and returning to that dungeon, so I only admired the view for a few seconds before I said, “I bought it today. In the village.”

“Oh,” Eric said, his feet going still as he turned to face me. “Well, I like it,” he said more brightly. “You have good taste.” Apparently, he wasn’t about to acknowledge how much he hated the idea of someone else buying it for me.

It was fair play, though, because neither was I.

“It’s supposed to keep any negative spirits from being able to touch me. Some extra protection for the coming month,” I explained, taking a seat on the parlor’s deep blue velvet chaise longue. The basement stairs and the cold had angered my knee. “Not sure if it’ll work, but I figured it’s better to try anything.”

Eric followed me over to the long seat, standing beside it as he continued to study the black salt pendant. “No negative spirits, huh? Does that mean I can’t touch you, either?”

Whatever had already started shifting between us seemed to settle into a strange new place as we exchanged a long, heated look.

“Better find out now,” I declared. “Just to be safe.”

He certainly was capable of touching me. He had put a hand on my knee the other night, and I’d felt the pressure, or at least the presence. From my understanding, he needed to draw more energy for things like this, but he didn’t seem concerned about that at all as he sank onto the chaise longue with me and reached toward my face.

I tipped my chin up a little. I was taller than him, but I was also reclining with my legs stretched out, so he was above me. A lock of that shiny, dark hair had come loose from behind his ear and fallen into his eyes, but all his focus was on the hand moving slowly toward me, like he thought I might spook and bound off like a deer if he did it all at once. Like he wasn’t sure I wanted him to.

“Eric. Please.”

The soft words were enough to set him in motion again, two fingers finally making contact with the side of my face and resting there. They were cold as the castle stones, but I didn’t flinch away. I leaned in, because the warmth was in his posture, his presence.

“Cassiopeia . . .” he murmured, tracing a few of my freckles with his index finger. My heart was beating so hard, you’d think I was running a marathon. “The constellation. That’s what these freckles reminded me of the first day I saw you.” His fingers skimmed down the side of my face, tracing the contour of my jaw, stroking under my chin, then traveling over to my other cheek. “And maybe,” he added thoughtfully as he rubbed his thumb across another cluster of freckles, “these here could be Ursa Major.”

It didn’t matter that his hand was cold. I leaned into the touch, practically nuzzling his fingers. Nobody had ever touched me like this—like they were making a study of me. Like they cared enough to try.

“There’s more . . . on my shoulders. My back, too,” I whispered, because the only person the words were meant for was right beside me.

Eric’s eyes widened a touch as my cheek kept caressing his hand. And then he leaned in closer, his head level with mine. “Maybe you could show me galaxies I haven’t seen before. I’d like that,” he whispered, swallowing audibly at the end.

He was so close, his lips a breath away from mine, not that he needed to breathe. But he could surely feel my hot exhale as he wrapped one of my curls around his finger and tugged a little until I gasped, his eyes never leaving mine. Then his fingers trailed down my neck like he considered

going for my shirt collar, but they stopped short and slid along the thick silver chain that held the pendant instead.

He felt so solid that I finally decided to reach out, too. Maybe I didn't deserve him, but I adored him, and I wanted him to feel it: treasured. I swept his hair back behind his ear, the soft, cool strands sliding over my fingers like chill water. I sank my hand in anyway, my fingertips running up the back of his head and cradling it while my other hand reached for one of his and wrapped our fingers together.

"Guess this proves you don't wish me any harm," I muttered, my voice going low and rough, my accent thicker.

He must have understood me all the same, because he shook his head slightly. "Far from it. But I've been wishing on all those stars lately . . . for exactly this . . ."

I couldn't say who stirred to close the remaining sliver of distance between us first—only that we sprang apart at the same time, falling off opposite ends of the chaise longue when Chef Máirtín appeared in a whirlwind of movement and sound.

"There you are, lads!" he boomed, so absorbed in his own chaos that he didn't appear to notice what he had just interrupted. "I've been looking everywhere for you—I need someone to try my roasted cockentrice."

"Cockatrice, you mean?" Eric asked with a quirk of his dark brows, already back on his feet. He extended an icy but solid hand to me, and I took it, accepting the help up while my mind was reeling and the whole world felt slightly off its axis.

Eric and I had almost kissed.

We were absolutely going to kiss if the chef hadn't interrupted.

He had wanted to kiss me.

And I . . .

I had been about to cross a line I wasn't sure I would come back from unchanged. I needed to get some air. Needed the world to slow down. Needed to snuggle under a mountain of blankets and finally sleep. Needed this to stop before I was too far gone and someone inevitably got hurt by the expiration date staring us in the face.

"No, my bright, brainy lad, I mean cock*en*trice. It's a half-pig sewn onto the back half of a goose, roasted as one creature. One entity, if you will . . . my masterpiece. Tomorrow night—it'll be the big one, lads, you'll see . . . a beautiful roast ham that usurper chef brought in, that'll do nicely. And a

juicy hen . . .” The chef’s words ghosted in and out of my awareness as he steered me and Eric toward the kitchen.

I knew Eric was trying to catch my eye, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to meet his gaze. Even if he had been alive, it wouldn’t have changed the fact that he deserved better than the likes of me, no matter what he had wished for.

In the kitchen, the cooks had apparently finished prepping and all gone home, but Caoimhe lingered with Basil and Jordy and the dark-haired woman who must be the head chef. As they often did when confronted with so many of the living, Eric and Máirtín vanished just before Caoimhe and the others glanced up from the menu they were reviewing.

“Raff,” Caoimhe greeted neutrally, her pale blue eyes sweeping over me in an assessing glance. I must have looked banjaxed altogether, just like I felt, because she pursed her lips and exchanged a quick glance with Jordy. “Why don’t you call it a night, make sure you’re rested for the main event tomorrow? You’ve been working awfully hard lately, and nothing’s going to happen tonight that can’t be fixed in the morning before the guests arrive.”

I darted a glance at the small screen of the SpecterTrack, a device about the size of a cell phone, which displayed the time. It wasn’t yet six, and I was being dismissed.

I didn’t argue, even though it meant losing one of my few remaining nights with Eric. Come Halloween, whether the place was haunted or not, the Dolans would no longer pay for my services. And it wasn’t like Eric could just hop in the van with me. Spirits were, as they taught us in training, bound to the place where they died. And nothing I had experienced thus far in this job convinced me otherwise.

One way or another, we would be moving in separate directions soon enough. Better not to get used to anything different.

Caoimhe gave me a few instructions, which I tried to focus on: Dress sharp (suit and tie—this was a Very Important Crowd). Come armed and anticipating a major disaster. Apparently, I’d have the crowd’s full attention while I went over a list of ground rules I had designed to keep the peace between the living and the dead. Then I was to retreat to the kitchen where I could help myself to any of the dishes the waitstaff would be serving.

Out of sight but close at hand, just in case someone on either side broke those rules.

So much rested on my shoulders. I didn’t want anyone to get hurt—not the living who were, however unknowingly, trusting me with their safety, and not the spirits I was starting to know and, for the most part, respect. I wanted this to be a success for the Dolans.

I wanted . . .

I really wanted to kiss Eric, too. So much so that if the chance presented itself again, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to resist, no matter the consequences.

I thought I’d hit rock bottom before coming to Ardruin, but now I understood that I wasn’t even there yet. One way or another, it was going to be a long and painful fall.

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# Twelve

# Knock 'Em Dead

## Raff

It was clear October had officially claimed the castle by the time the sun had dipped behind the distant dark hills. The remaining pools of light congealing on the stone walls in vivid shades of red and scarlet were as dark and deep as the ground had once been in Jordy's tales, and it was easy to imagine the myriad battles that had once been fought here.

I had slept so late that I barely managed to finish getting ready in the bathroom off the parlor before the first guests arrived. With steam still fogging the mirror, I tucked my protective pendant under my crisp white collar and did up the buttons to hide it. Then I ran a hand through my wet, ruddy curls, adjusted the cuffs of my rental suit that was slightly too tight across my back, and tried not to think about how ridiculous I felt in such a costume.

As I headed to the foyer, where I had been assigned to wait and greet everyone with the rest of the castle staff, Eric's voice had whispered into the curve of my ear, "Hey now, All Star. You look like you just rolled a nat 20 on Charisma."

But he hadn’t actually appeared, not with so many of the living about, which left me to continue the walk alone with a heavy heart and a head full of reasons why it was for the best that we hadn’t kissed yesterday.

The wind poured in hard off the Atlantic tonight, even this far inland. It rattled the windows and sent a low moan through the restored battlements strung with twinkling orange fairy lights. It had been a deceptively clear day when I woke: a crisp blue sky with a few clouds like lazy, puffy sheep drifting past. But now gusts slapped at the black-and-orange banners draped over every entryway for the banquet, making them snap like warning flags as guests skittered past while clutching their hair or their bags or someone else’s hand, as if they feared blowing away. The air had that sharp, early autumn bite that promised rain even if the sky hadn’t yet committed to it, and I shivered from my post in the foyer even though the S-TRK 88 “SpecterTrack” Monitor in the pocket of my dress slacks wasn’t giving me any alerts.

There were no spirits in the area—at least, none trying to manifest. This was an all-natural kind of cold, one the guests kept ushering in every time someone new opened the door.

I exchanged a glance with the ancient suit of armor standing next to me. He wore a pointed black witch’s hat and a string of flashing pumpkin lights as a necklace for the occasion. Behind his metal mask, he appeared utterly unphased as influencers, food bloggers, and beloved regional chefs poured in by the dozen, a hundred bodies in curated outfits showing off curated personalities for the evening.

It seemed to me like each one was buzzing with the thrill of exclusivity. Or perhaps it was the adrenaline that came from stepping into a place like Ardruin, where the shadows were solid and took something from you with each breath. Something even I hadn’t figured out how to name in my time here.

As I watched the guests stream in, I supposed Caoimhe must have sent out some kind of Halloween-in-the-Middle-Ages costume brief with the invites, because each attendee had committed to the theme. If only Síofra was here to admire the latest fashions—I hoped she at least wandered through the castle’s many mirrors, taking in the show.

A Chinese lifestyle and travel blogger wore a velvet gown the color of dried blood, with jewelry to match—scarlet gems dripping down her throat, as if it had been sliced open. A pair of fitness influencers—young, fit

brothers who I vaguely recognized as local—wore matching faux-chainmail shirts. Trailing the fitness gurus, a beauty vlogger floated past me in a gown of layered black tulle, her deep brown skin painted with a delicate skeletal filigree that shimmered gold under the foyer's massive chandelier. There was even a celebrity chef who had opted for a monk's robe—but slit up the thigh, and paired with designer heels that looked sharp enough to kill. If I knew anything about him from our nightly read-alouds, Brother Fintan probably would have liked a pair of those heels for himself.

As the minor celebrities breezed past me like I was just another festive suit of armor, leaving me in a cloud of perfume and photo flashes and exaggerated laughter, I couldn't help thinking of Eric and a cup of tea on the balcony. Of the simplicity of not pretending to be anything other than unremarkable me, somehow feeling so at home in my skin and so seen at the same time. And not just seen, but admired more often than the stars, even when they put on a show. Like the real Raff O'Meara was something worth looking at.

I didn't understand how these people could play a role so often and not be exhausted.

But then, I was making minimum wage trying to clean ghosts out of a castle with a bunch of weapons that were mainly for show, so clearly I was in no position to judge.

Another damp gust of night air preceded the Dolans finally making their grand entrance, looking more like they were arriving at a royal gala than their money-pit of a business.

Caoimhe swept in first to the clatter of phones being whipped out for Stories and livestreams, her pointed chin held high, her gown a structured emerald thing that resembled shimmering, shifting serpent's scales. Her ash blond hair was sculpted into glossy curls, and she carried herself with the brittle poise of someone who expected the night to go terribly wrong and wanted everyone to know it wouldn't be her fault.

She shot me a withering look of warning—as if the ghosts' behavior was somehow solely my responsibility—as she followed the torchlights and electric sconces disguised as medieval lanterns into the noisy dining hall, where shrieks of recognition greeted her.

Jordy ambled in next, not really watching his path and nearly bumping into the actual suit of armor. He seemed to be looking for someone, probably Basil, who was also here as an honored guest tonight after all his

hard work. The friendlier Dolan wore a slightly wrinkled black suit jacket over a Halloween-themed button-down covered in tiny ghosts. Of course. I couldn't help but catch his eye and grin, which he returned. He looked like he'd gotten dressed in the dark and was perfectly content with that, which I respected.

"I just saw Basil head to the kitchen for a bite," I told him in a low voice, so the photographer at his elbow wouldn't intrude on private matters. "He has ghosts on his tie, and by the way he was looking at you when you first walked in, I'm also guessing he's hungry for more than just a snack, if you get me."

Jordy's blue eyes widened, then swiftly narrowed with determination. "Right, then. Let's go, wingman." And with that, he grabbed my arm and tugged me along.

I kept my head down, hoping I wouldn't get caught in too many photos that would later be captioned "*Local Lad Forgets His Place in Society*" and "*Fella from the Back Road Turns Up to Castle in a Suit; Neighbors Say It's the Scariest Thing They've Seen All Halloween.*" Pepper trotted faithfully at our heels as we pushed through the crowded hall, though the tiny dog paused once or twice to scent the air, as if hoping to detect Eric. Strangely, Pepper sported both a red bowtie and a skull-print bandana.

"Caoimhe and I couldn't agree on his outfit," Jordy sighed near my ear. "I had a dragon costume picked out, but then she tried to put him in a tux, and . . . yeah. This was the compromise, though I don't think either of us is very happy with it. Pepper looks like he wants to know if he can do your taxes so he has enough money to get another motorbike, or a tattoo."

I chuckled as Jordy held the kitchen door open. But as soon as we had entered and gained the relative quiet of the place, Caoimhe appeared, sweeping Jordy off before he had a chance to talk to Basil. I supposed she needed his help running the show.

I waved to a few of the assistant chefs I'd come to recognize over the past weeks as I waded deeper into the kitchen, shaking my head at an offer of a toast point with some kind of hot dip on it. I was too nervous to eat anything yet, when I didn't know how the lodgers—but, in particular, Chef Máirtín—were going to play this night.

Patting the weapons that my suit jacket hid, just to reassure myself they were still there, I took a moment to breathe. The staff here were in full

controlled-chaos mode, but at least they weren't bragging about subscriber counts or trying to film me without permission.

Head clear—or at least as clear as it was going to get for now—I got to work setting out offerings for Chef Máirtín. Unscrewing jars of seasoning, setting up a few copper pots and baking trays and even half a ham, I was determined to keep him happily distracted and focused on his experiments so he wouldn't torment the living chef and waitstaff.

Máirtín loved chaos, but Máirtín also loved a good curry.

As I set things on a sliver of unused counter space, trying to stay out of the way of people who were much busier than me, I kept glancing over my shoulder. I half-hoped, half-dreaded Eric appearing, even though I knew he'd never risk it. Too much noise. Too many eyes. Too many hearts that might stop at the sight of a ghost, however beautiful or polite or well-intentioned he was.

I was about to sneak a turkey leg off a platter as another diversion for Máirtín (whenever he finally started manifesting) when the air just behind me shifted. Not cold, exactly, and definitely not warm—but aware. Uncanny.

"Looking for someone?" Eric's voice was right at my shoulder, low and amused.

I turned, turkey leg in hand, intending to whisper a reply when I didn't think anyone was looking . . . and my breath caught.

Eric wasn't hazy or flickering or half-there like usual. He was at his most solid, like the night we had met. Like the times I told him he was cool or paid him a compliment that gave him a gentle sort of glow. But this was almost *more*. His sleek black hair looked touchable again, the crescent-shaped scar under his eye was pink and shiny, his golden skin seemed fresh from a day in the sun. Even his jeans had texture. And his eyes—hazel, like a forest glen caught in sunbeams—were bright and alive in a way I had never before seen.

If I didn't know better, I'd have sworn he had a pulse.

I could even see the delicate fuzz of hair on his arm where the cuff of one of his sleeves had ridden up without him noticing.

None of the cooks or waitstaff reacted. No one spared us more than a passing glance, the same they gave every guest who poked their head in. Eric might as well have been another of the castle staff leaning against the counter, except that he looked a bit like he owned the place.

My stomach fluttered with a rush of excitement. Thanks to his realistic manifestation, we could actually spend the better part of the night together and not earn a single odd look—well, unless someone took offense that we weren't in costume, or paused to notice the differences between us, how he was slim and petite where I was tall and broad. The brawny athlete and the brilliant lad who complemented him in every way.

"You're . . . you're really here, then," I said, fumbling for words like an eejit.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." Eric stepped closer, sweeping his gaze over my rented suit appreciatively. "Well. For you I would." Reaching up, he wrapped one of my curls around his finger. "Look at you," he murmured, his voice warm enough to melt butter even though his touch was like ice. "That suit fits like it was made for you. You look incredible." Heat crept up my neck as he went on: "With those guns under your jacket, you look like you just stepped off the set of *Men in Black*. What, you don't know it?" he added, brows furrowing as he clocked my look of bewilderment. "Come on, it's a classic!"

"Says the guy who's never seen *Jurassic Park*," I scoffed.

"Dinosaurs are fucking huge! Bigger than you, even. And they're always hungry!" Eric exclaimed, loud enough to earn a curious glance for the first time. He continued, softer, "But I bet you'd walk right up to one and punch it on the nose if it threatened to eat *me*."

"Guilty," I admitted freely on an exhale.

"You already give me so much," he said, stepping so close that my hands came up and slid around either side of his waist without a second thought. There was something in his tone—a certainty, a hunger, a *decision*—that made my pulse stutter. Like whatever line we'd been dancing back and forth across had dissolved overnight.

Like there was no path back to the place where we were before.

I swallowed hard, trying to regain focus. To ground myself on the task at hand when everyone's safety depended on me tonight. "I . . . haven't seen Máirtín yet tonight. Strange, isn't it? After the way he was going on about the roast cock-thing yesterday, I was assuming we'd at least have some phantom smells in here, or a few toppled pantry shelves."

"Cockatrice. No, sorry—cockentrice. I swear he made that up." Eric tipped his head back and met my gaze, thoughtful. "But you're right. It's odd."

“You don’t think . . . the other spirits are planning something? Some way to disrupt the banquet?” Visions of my first night in the castle flashed to mind: a rotting face in the mirror, the lights tripping like I was in a club, the furniture scraping wildly across the floorboards.

Eric bit his bottom lip, a thing he did when he was thinking. It was a distractingly plush lip, one I’d come so close to catching between my teeth yesterday. “Honestly,” he said after a moment, “I don’t feel much of anything from the others right now. I mean, it’s a little chaotic in here, so it’s hard to say. Mostly, I feel . . . alive again. I feel *you*.”

He shivered a little in my hold, like my hands on his waist had something to do with that. Like he wanted me to keep staking my claim on him.

The kitchen door swung open every few seconds as servers rushed in and out, carrying trays of spiced pumpkin soup, roasted root vegetables, and the first round of mulled cider. Each time the door opened, a wave of noise crashed in from the great hall—laughter, clinking glasses, someone shouting “Tag me in that!” over the period-appropriate lute music that Caoimhe had piped in through the new sound system.

But it all faded to background noise as Eric held my gaze, so sure and unafraid. He was smarter than me—did he see an end to this that I couldn’t? Or was a month together (at best) worth the pain of a lifetime apart? Maybe time was so different as a ghost that it didn’t matter to him the way it did to me.

The line might have disappeared for him, but for me, it was still there—however faint. If I crossed it, if we kissed, if we let this be something more . . . I would miss him infinitely one day soon, and no matter how strong Eric insisted I was, I didn’t think I could handle that.

I also wasn’t ready for what I needed to do next. I’d come to Ardruin armed to the teeth, full of useless knowledge, and completely unprepared for the possibility of *him*.

The world narrowed to the sunlit glen of his eyes. “Eric, I’ve no way with words at all, but we need to talk. Later, after the party’s through. Because I feel it, too, this thing between us that’s different now, and—”

“Raff! We’re ready for you in the hall!” Jordy called cheerfully, cutting me off as he breezed into the kitchen and sending Eric and I scattering apart. The laidback Dolan sibling sounded slightly buzzed already, and sure enough, smelled of Jameson. “Caoimhe says you’re up—time to go say the rules thing! And make it spooky—this crowd wants a chill, like.”

“Right,” I said tightly as Jordy put a hand on my arm and steered me toward the dining hall. “The rules thing. Spooky.”

I glanced back over my shoulder to find Eric still standing at the counter. He gave me a soft, crooked smile—the kind that warned we weren’t about to pretend this didn’t happen. That we were going to pick it up later, just like I’d said.

“Knock ’em dead, All Star,” he said, touching two fingers to his brow in a salute.

“Later,” I mouthed. A promise.

I tried not to think about how badly I wanted to kiss him. Tried to ignore the growing knot in my stomach as I thought about that talk later and how it might go, all while smoothing my jacket and keeping pace with a slightly erratic Jordy. Of course, I didn’t really want to think about a hundred influencers staring me down, either.

As I grabbed the folded piece of torn notebook paper on which I’d written my guidelines for Céad Míle Fáilte’s inaugural dinner, I glanced around the crowded banquet hall and, for the first time, truly appreciated Caoimhe’s vision.

Halloween decorations had been layered onto the castle’s natural gloom. Cobwebs, some real and some very much not, stretched across exposed beams and clung to corners. Flickering jack-o’-lanterns perched on stone ledges, leering at the guests, while large black skull candles on every table dripped wax like melted obsidian. A fake skeleton slumped in a chair by the hearth, its bony hand clutching a goblet from which it would never sip.

Jordy steered me to the front of the room with a hand on my shoulder, and introduced me as “Our resident ghost expert, here to share with you some tips that will keep you safe for the duration of your stay.” All that was missing was a shrill cackle to follow it up.

Instead, the influencers and media folks gave some polite, if skeptical, applause. One whistled. A few were filming.

I hoped Eric could hear me from the kitchen as I started reading out the list, because thinking about how these rules would make him laugh inspired me to keep going even with so many strangers watching. His laughter had fast become one of my favorite sounds, one I hoped I would still get to hear after we talked, even if I didn’t deserve it.

I wasn’t scared of ghosts, at least not most of the time—but I was scared of losing one.

“Rule number one,” I read out, not having to fake the tremor in my voice. “Don’t leave an empty chair facing the head of the table. An unclaimed seat is an open door: Ardruin’s oldest ghost—Brother Fintan—will take it, and once seated, he will not rise until he’s taken one of you with him.”

I couldn’t see Eric from here, but I could picture him rolling his eyes. Brother Fintan, with his love of fashion and books with happy endings, wouldn’t hurt a venomous spider even if his life depended on it.

“Rule number two,” I went on, watching the candlelight dance over the many shadowy faces turned in my direction, but not making eye contact with any one in particular. “Don’t speak the name of anyone who died here unless you’d like them to sit with you. Names are like lanterns in the dark—speak one aloud, and its owner will follow the sound back to you.”

A few folks shifted uneasily in their seats. Curious as to how my performance was being received, I caught Caoimhe’s eye at the nearest table, and her lips twitched into a small grin of approval.

Right then. Might as well act the part. “Rule three,” I intoned ominously, “is simple. Do not allow a candle to burn all the way down. The moment the wick dies, something else is permitted to breathe again.”

Even Jordy nervously regarded the closest candle at that, and so did I when I followed his gaze. It was one shaped like a skull—after what had happened with the flame in the parlor, I was never going to look at Halloween decorations the same way again. And even though I didn’t see any faces in the glow, I was afraid that if I looked too long, that might change.

“Rule four,” I went on to distract myself. “Don’t acknowledge the cold spot behind your chair. It’s not a draft. It’s a listener. And it hates being noticed.”

That wasn’t true, either. I might not see or sense any of them manifesting in the room with us right now, but Síofra loved attention and flattery from anyone alive or dead. Gráinne relished any kind of reaction she could get from one of the living, especially if it involved biting them. Muireann craved an audience for her music, and even grouchy old Liam, who had a never-ending list of complaints about the living, liked for someone to listen when he told his big fish tales.

“Rule five,” I hurried on, hoping my face wouldn’t betray how silly I found that last one. “Do not thank the unseen hand that pours your wine.

Politeness is binding. If you thank it, it will believe it owes you continued service . . . long after the banquet ends.”

I could practically hear Eric’s snicker as he contemplated poor, drunk, unaware Fiachra managing to follow anyone home to haunt them. They’d wake up to a bunch of smashed glassware and the odd cold spot, but they’d hardly be in mortal danger.

Of course, these rules weren’t meant as a literal guide—they were designed to scare the living out of doing anything stupid at all. To frighten them into taking unnecessary precautions, because the dead were unpredictable.

The next rule had been inspired by Síofra, and I glanced at a few of the dining hall’s many mirrors, wondering if I might see a swirl of fog or a familiar silhouette as I read it. “Rule number six: do not let your reflection linger in the silverware. If you stare too long, you may see someone else looking back—standing behind you, hoping to swap places.”

We were nearly at the end of the list, and not a sound could be heard in the dining hall but for my own breathing and the occasional pop of a candlewick. I had everyone’s undivided attention, the castle’s perpetually oppressive air giving my words some added gravity. At least until I read the final rule, which I had pulled from The Handbook. It was actually **Rule #208**: **Never Mention Taxes**, inspired by some ghost who had gone berserk and tried to strangle another spirit extraction specialist when reminded of his unpaid earthly debts.

“Rule number seven,” I began gravely. “Don’t mention taxes.”

I’d chosen it as a way to give everyone a laugh before they returned to their meals. But instead, a blood-curdling scream rang through the hall, dousing a candle and rattling the chandeliers.

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# Thirteen

# Truth or Dare

## Raff

Fecking influencers. Someone important had unfollowed someone who also fancied herself important, and she had shrieked at her phone when she found out. Maybe I was wearing a nicer suit than I'd had occasion to put on in a long time, but I wasn't the one with notions.

My duties to the living completed, I was plenty glad to head back to the kitchen and leave the guests to their evening of medieval food and drink pairings. I had hopefully scared them into behaving, and now I could focus on making sure Chef Máirtín didn't explode boiling gravy on any of the staff whenever he finally appeared.

Of course, Eric looking shockingly real took up most of my attention as soon as I walked in and found him waiting for me in a quiet corner near the pantry.

"Sounds like you really did knock 'em dead out there," he teased when he saw me, his face brightening.

The pantry door was open behind him, like maybe he had been checking for Máirtín, too. He certainly hadn't been searching for a snack, though he

was eyeing a fruit and cheese platter—artfully arranged in the shape of a dragon—on a nearby table with open longing.

I pulled out a seat, and he did the same on the other side. It was finally starting to hit me that I'd skipped dinner, and I'd been too nervous to eat before my little performance. My stomach gave a piteous moan as I contemplated swiping one of the juicy strawberries that made up the spines on the dragon's back.

"I miss cheese," Eric sighed in sympathy with my empty stomach, poking at a cube of what might have been gouda and pouting in a way that made his lips look pinker, his eyelashes casting long shadows down his golden cheeks. God, he was dead lovely when he wanted something. And all the time, for that matter. "I miss peanut butter most of all. But I also miss strawberries." Those hazel eyes flicked up to my face again as he licked his lips, then pressed them together. "I wonder . . ." he began, a little breathy, setting my pulse racing before I had any idea where we were running off to. "Would you eat for me?"

Something tightened low in my stomach in response. It was only food, but he made it sound so sensual. Intimate, even.

"I can't taste, of course," he explained in a low voice, not wanting to be overheard even if no one paid us any attention. "But I can choose things, and watch you, and . . . and you can describe them to me. How they taste, in detail. If it isn't too much trouble."

It wasn't. But even if it had presented a great ordeal, I would have gone to a lot of trouble to stoke the smoldering look in his eyes to full flame. Eating dinner and sharing the experience with him was hardly crawling through fire.

"I'm in," I said, and even to my own ears, my voice was lower. "Let's do this."

Eric's fingers hovered over the platter like he could feel the flavors and textures through memory alone. But of course, if that were true, he wouldn't need me. "Start with that one," he murmured, pointing at one of the many cheese cubes that made up the dragon's body. "The yellow one. I'm hoping it's sharp cheddar."

"That's bound to be gouda," I declared, though I didn't know any better than him. Picking up the bite of cheese, I nearly laughed as I popped it into my mouth.

Then I felt the heat of his gaze on me, his eyes tracking the movement of my fingers and the clench of my jaw as my teeth sank into the cheese, and nothing at all was funny anymore. Far from it. He swallowed hard, throat visibly working as I chewed, his eyes blazing like I'd just done something indecent.

"It's . . . creamy," I said, swallowing slowly for Eric's benefit. Letting him watch for as long as he liked, because I'd rarely seen him enjoy anything so openly.

He was even more beautiful like this. Cheeks flushed, eyes bright, lips slightly parted, fingers fisted into the fabric of his jeans.

"It's soft," I went on when I finally found my voice again, "and a bit nutty. It melts a little if you let it sit on your tongue. And it's definitely cheddar. You win this round."

Eric's breath hitched—a tiny, involuntary sound—and the overhead lights gave a faint, guilty flicker for the briefest moment.

He winced. "Sorry. I'm sorry. The waitstaff—I wasn't thinking—"

"Don't apologize," I interrupted, holding up a hand to stay any further nonsense. "The lights flicker all the time in an old place, especially on a windy night like this. Everyone knows that."

Heat crept up my neck as I realized that, under the table, my body was starting to respond to being the focus of lovely Eric's fascination. I was stiffening in my slacks, and wasn't sure I'd be able to leap up and redirect our ghostly chef without a few minutes to cool down first. Otherwise, everyone would be in for a different kind of haunting sight.

Resolving to look less at Eric's glistening lips, I invited, "Pick another."

This time he chose a strawberry, plucked from the dragon's spine. He held it out like he wanted to feed it to me, then blinked—surprised, maybe, at his own daring.

I ate it up. His newfound boldness and the strawberry itself, which I caught between my teeth as he held it, before he could change his mind. His chilled fingertips brushed the corner of my mouth, and it was all I could do to not go back for seconds.

His lips parted more noticeably than before.

"It's ripe," I rasped. I had to hope my voice wasn't giving away my predicament. "Juicy. Warm from the room, like the platter's been out a while. The little seeds crack a bit when I bite down. And the inside is . . .

especially soft. Like it gives up easy. Like it wants me to suck down every last bit of sweetness."

Eric's answering sound was so quiet that I felt it more than heard it, a low hum that vibrated in the air between us like a plucked guitar string. His outline sharpened, his colors deepening, like he was pulling himself into the world by sheer force of want.

Or need. I couldn't remember the difference right now.

"Another," he whispered, the crack in his voice telling me that if he still had blood moving through his body, there would have been something stirring in those jeans of his, too.

He chose blueberries next.

Then grapes. By now, there was a whole performance going on under the table on my side, and I was lucky the staff were too busy with the various courses to notice.

There was a pepperoni plucked from around the dragon's eye that made him groan openly at the memory of heat and smoky flavor.

More cheese cubes. And then he pointed to a small red pepper, one of many that decorated the dragon's spiky tail. "Try that one?" he suggested breathlessly, watching me from beneath his lashes with a look that had even more blood rushing to my bits.

I guess that's why I didn't think. I just chomped down.

Flames exploded across my tongue like I'd been scorched by the dragon itself.

"Sweet suffering Jaysus—!" I spluttered like I'd turned into my gran, desperately grabbing for a napkin. "Eric, for feck's sake!"

Delight and horror mingled on his lovely face before worry won out over them all. "Oh no! Raff, I'm so sorry. Was it hot? I forgot those can sometimes be—"

"Weapons," I gasped, fanning my mouth. "Actual weapons, those are. Nuclear grade. This time, I'll take the apology and then some."

That's when I remembered I could eat another cheese cube to try to douse some of those flames. I popped a few in my mouth at once as Eric laughed, bright and helpless, and the kitchen lights flickered again—harder this time, like his mood could move the whole castle.

I leaned toward him to grab another cube of cheese just as he leaned in, his knee brushing mine. His gaze had dropped to my mouth, which had to be red from the pepper. The air between us that had been vibrating with

warmth and laughter was changing, solidifying, pulling taut—ready to snap into something reckless.

I reached out to run my fingers through his hair again, even though it was like dipping my hand in a bowl of ice. My fingers traced the curve of his cheek, and they couldn't tell he wasn't real. I didn't know where the lines were anymore, if I ever had. Certainly not in any handbook.

"Eric," I murmured before I even knew what I was going to say next. Or maybe just because I liked the sound of his name.

Behind me, the kitchen door banged open.

"Rafferty O'Meara!" Caoimhe swept over in a gust of perfume and rustling silk, the shimmering scales of her dress no less elegant and intimidating under the kitchen's new fluorescent lights.

Pepper's toenails clicked against the tiled floor as he trotted behind her, his little bowtie askew but his skull bandana still in place. He started trying to lick the scalding pepper juice off my fingers—or, more likely, the cheese and pepperoni beneath—but Caoimhe interrupted by pressing something into my hands like she was presenting me with a trophy.

It was a bottle of whiskey, the smooth green glass heavy and full. Jameson, of course. But not just any Jamo—it was a bottle of Bow Street 18 Years. The best they made.

"Well done, you," she said, squeezing my hands a little before letting go of both me and the bottle. Her shiny emerald manicure had stabbed me in the back of the hand so hard it felt like a puncture wound, but at least I was no longer so flustered that I couldn't stand up if Chef Máirtín chose to appear. "The guests are raving. They're just the right amount of excited about the shadows on the walls—Jordy's amazing at shadow puppets—and at least twenty people have already been to the bathroom without running out screaming about anything in the mirror. I think—" She paused, her blue eyes bright and glistening like she was overcome. "I think this is the first time I can actually see what this place will be: a complete success, thanks in no small part to *you*. I might even be able to turn the dungeon into a gift shop after all!"

"Raff's the best there is. You made the right call, hiring him," Eric agreed softly. His eyes were only for me, his gaze still ablaze with a remnant of the earlier heat we had shared. "Dunno about turning the dungeon into anything, though."

Caoimhe arched her professionally shaped delicate brows, eyes flicking between me and Eric—who was still looking perfectly corporeal. Perfectly handsome.

"And who's this?" she asked, finally settling her attention on him. "I don't remember telling you to bring a date, Raff, but—fair play to you. And he's not half bad-looking, either. You could've at least offered him a seat in the dining hall with everyone else. Let him have the full experience he came for."

Eric went very still, then flushed very pink, like he couldn't get away from her scrutiny fast enough.

"He's just—look, we work really well together. And we have a few things in common, sure, but we're from completely different worlds. You wouldn't believe me if I told you, but you *can* trust me when I say that it's—it's not like that," I stammered, drawing Caoimhe's cool blue stare back to me.

"Mmhmm," she said, unconvinced and smiling sweetly. No mask of professionalism this time—just a woman passing along a good bottle of whiskey to a friend and his not-date. "Well, enjoy your little . . . whatever this is." She actually *winked*. "Just don't drink the whole bottle. I don't want to be scraping you off the floor at midnight, or whenever the spirits decide they've had enough of our guests."

She swept out again, sequins flashing. Pepper gave me a knowing snort before he turned to follow her—four cheese cubes richer from having begged Eric for them, the little shite.

"And here I thought you were a cat person," I teased him in my usual voice, having recovered from the pepper and the shock of Caoimhe popping in with a gift. I set the whiskey on the table between us, beside the dragon platter.

"I'm full of surprises," Eric murmured, still staring after Caoimhe. Finally meeting my eyes again, he added smugly, "She thinks I'm cute."

"She' s not wrong," I muttered.

His smile went soft. Dangerous.

I cracked open the bottle in front of us and took a long swig. The first sip burned like a blessing, and as I watched Eric lean in, I knew exactly what he wanted. I was ready for him. "It's warm," I said, licking a drop off my lower lip. "Smoky. Like . . . breathing in a bonfire. And it creeps up on you, the way it hits the back of your throat. Spins your head all around."

He shivered. “God, I miss that. Well, not whiskey, but—the only thing I miss more than a good cocktail is probably sugar.”

I hadn’t eaten enough to be taking another sip from that bottle, but I did it anyway. I’m sure that was in the handbook—no drinking on the job—but where had following its many confusing (and often contradictory) rules ever gotten me?

I was here with Eric because I listened to my gut and made my own choices. And my gut said it was okay to indulge a little for once. I had been so ready for something to go wrong tonight, so braced for disaster that I had almost forgotten what it felt like to unwind.

“What was your favorite candy you tried on your Irish holiday?” I asked the adorable man across from me. I could pick some up in the village and eat it for him later.

“Maltesers,” Eric said without hesitation.

“But they get stuck in your teeth!” Too loud—one of the passing waitstaff shot me a curious glance.

“That’s the point,” Eric argued, picking up another strawberry and holding it out until I ate it from his fingers. “You let them melt. It’s part of the experience.”

“You’re meant to chew them,” I pointed out, softer.

“You’re meant to *enjoy* them,” Eric argued as I took another sip to chase the strawberry. “By any means necessary.”

“You’re impossible, Eric James Crawford. All right, then: least favorite Irish food you tried on holiday?”

Of course, he had to go and say colcannon.

“That’s comfort on a plate!” I said, my voice once again rising enough to earn a look or two from those working nearby. “Potatoes mashed within an inch of their lives until they’re soft as clouds. Butter that leaves a shine on your lips. Cabbage that turns the whole thing pale green, like spring in bloom.” I was waxing poetic thanks to the whiskey already—a sure sign that I should slow down. “It’s the kind of food that hugs you back. My mam’s is, anyway.”

Laughing a little, he held up his hands. “Okay, okay. I’ll take your word for it.”

“You shouldn’t,” I protested. “You should come taste it.”

His expression flickered. His eyes turned longing, wistful, a little sad. “Maybe someday, right? I’m not offended, I know you didn’t mean—”

“I’m an eejit. I’m sorry, Eric, that was a stupid thing to say,” I cut in. “A few drops of whiskey can’t make anyone that forgetful. I’ve no excuse.”

Just like that, his smile slowly returned. “You’re really cute when you’re trying to say sorry, but . . .” He reached a hand across the table, his fingers tendrils of ice where they gently lay over my wrist. “You’re not an *ee-jit*. Not at all.”

Listening to him try out an Irish accent was one of the best things I’d ever heard.

“What’s your favorite holiday?” he asked, handing me another strawberry and a merciful change of topic.

“Christmas,” I said immediately, mouth full of berry. “Lights. Food. Drink. Family. The whole thing. Everyone’s in a good mood, and they go out of their way for each other just that little bit more, the way I wish they would all year long. It makes such a difference. I love all the happy faces.” I studied him a moment, wondering if I could figure his out before I asked, “What about yours, then? Can I take a guess?”

He was brilliant and creative, so I bet he loved putting together costumes. When he nodded and smiled, I said without a shiver of doubt, “Halloween.”

I was rewarded by the flash of his teeth and a bit of extra shine in his eyes. “You got it,” he confirmed. “Well—it used to be, anyway. Now it feels a bit . . . on the nose.”

“Fair.” I took a drink for the both of us. “Burns less on the fifth go. Still plenty of notes of oak and chocolate, though.”

He smiled appreciatively, but stayed lost in thought for a moment. “I think . . .” he said slowly, “I’d pick something quieter now. Valentine’s Day, maybe. It’s simple—still plenty of sugar, and add in cards. Telling people what they mean to you. No noise, no crowds, just . . . sweet, silly, soft things.”

His eyes met mine again. Held them.

I couldn’t look away.

And my heart did something stupid. Full-on gymnastics, a backflip that rattled my ribs.

There was still no sign of Chef Máirtín. No rattling pans. No exploding pot of gravy or water boiling over. Just Eric, warm and bright and too close. Too real.

And the whiskey was hitting me. Hard. Too hard for the absence of the kitchen’s most active and powerful spirit to register as concerning.

“Let’s play a little truth or dare,” I said, pointing at him with the bottle before taking another sip. I was, after all, the only spirit extraction expert to tame Ardruin Castle. I had earned a night of fun, just like the Dolans’ guests. Especially before I had to tell this beautiful, brilliant ghost of a guy that we couldn’t be kissing and touching for the next month or I’d never stop missing him.

I wanted to enjoy his company tonight, and be too drunk to forget what I had to do come morning when all the guests were gone.

Eric laughed. “You’re tipsy. Or drunk—I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Not drunk yet. But I will be,” I warned, a telltale warmth already creeping into my face, my veins buzzing with it. “So take your pick.”

“Truth,” Eric said immediately. “But . . .” His eyes dipped briefly to the bottle, then found mine again, shining with some mischief. “You’ll have to drink for both of us, I’m afraid.”

“Didn’t know truth or dare was a drinking game,” I teased, even as I took a long swallow.

“For courage,” he explained—and who could argue with that?

I saluted him with the bottle, letting him know that he could ask the first question.

He leaned forward with his elbows on the table, displacing the strawberries and cheese cubes until the dragon’s head was no longer recognizable. Or maybe that had happened a while ago, during our taste test.

That look had returned to his eyes, smoldering with intensity. A private look I wouldn’t have recognized if I didn’t already know him so well, having spent the better part of the month gazing into his face at all hours. Solid or transparent, it didn’t matter. He was still Eric.

“Tell me something embarrassing,” he said at last. “Because you’re one of the coolest people I’ve ever met.”

I groaned. “No.”

“Yes.” He nudged my shiny dress boot under the table with his foot.

“No. I can’t. I don’t think I can ever speak of it.” I hid my face in my hands, trying to work up the nerve even as I was protesting. Because there was one very embarrassing thing I could remember that Eric didn’t know but would certainly appreciate. “I . . . well, I may have . . . watched a bunch of your old videos before I signed with ExorSquad.”

I must have said it in a rush, because there was an icy touch gently pulling my hands away from my face. Eric looked puzzled, if anything. Not remotely offended. “My what?”

“Your videos. Your YouTube channel, I guess—no one took it down when you died.” Deciding to take the instruction to drink for us both very seriously, I gulped down a couple mouthfuls of whiskey before trying to speak again. “You were just explaining the rules of some game, but I might’ve—” I hiccupped. “Enjoyed them. A lot. Like . . .”

I swept a hand down toward my crotch. “A *lot*. Massively. Big fan.”

Eric’s mouth fell open. I was afraid, for one bleary-eyed, heart-skipping moment that I’d offended him—and then his lips curved into the filthiest smile I’d ever seen on him. “Oh. Wow. All that without ever even seeing the tattoo, huh?”

I nearly died on the spot.

Especially when he added, lower, “Was it good? The, uh . . .” He made a certain wanking motion with his fist while I bit my lip to hold in another groan. This time, not one of sheer embarrassment.

“The wanking. To your face. Your voice,” I managed, wetting my dry throat with a splash of whiskey. “Yeah, it was grand. That’s why I . . . kept doing it for a while.”

The impish look on his face was going to have me on the floor in a minute if I didn’t do something to get this night back on track. Abandoning truth or dare for everyone’s health and safety, I blurted, “Here’s another truth, and I’ll tell you for free: I like bird watching.”

Eric blinked. “You—what?”

“Bird watching. My mam used to do a bit of falconry on my uncle’s farm, and I’d go with her. I can identify birds by sound, like some of the ones you talk to here at the castle. The blackcaps, the robins, the magpies. The barn owl last week.”

Bird call identification was yet another thing not covered in the ExorSquad handbook. Raff: 10. Handbook: 0. Whiskey—well, somehow half the bottle was already gone. Maybe Chef Máirtín was taking sips when I wasn’t looking.

Eric’s eyes widened as I went on listing all the bird calls I could remember him copying. “You . . . you noticed.”

“Of course I noticed.” Another sip—as Eric had said himself, *for courage*.

“I notice all kinds of things about you. I notice that you hate the foyer as much as I do. I notice that you always point out Casseopeia first when we sit on the balcony, probably because it’s your favorite, but you also have a soft spot for Lyra, and you can find Cygnus without even looking straight at it. I notice that you dote on Pepper even though he scares you. I notice that you always say ‘ignore me’ when you’re starting to think of ideas, even though I damn well would never do that because everything you say is worth a listen. I notice that you sometimes can’t remember which other spirits we talked to yesterday, but you can remember all your favorite lines from books you read years ago. I notice how you love to talk with your hands. I notice that you taught yourself to read tea leaves just to make Síofra happy, because that’s the kind of friend you are. I notice that you have strong opinions about boy bands for someone who claims he can’t stand them. I notice that when you’re upset, your accent gets thicker and your *r*’s disappear. I notice that you talk about your sisters like they hung the moon. I notice that when I pay you a compliment, you always look a little more solid, like no one’s bothered giving you many of those before—but that has to be wrong, because anyone who’s known you for even just a month would surely be singing your praises at least as often as this thick-headed lad from the country. You deserve every lovely word in the world I can think of, and then some.”

“You’re drunk,” Eric said softly, his voice as rough as if he were on the verge of tears.

“Not too drunk to mean all of it,” I told him, catching his glistening eyes because, no matter what happened next, I needed him to know that.

And I think he did. He was the only reason I made it through the next hour until the guests departed. The cold glass of water he brought me, and his cold touch on my forehead. And maybe a few softly hummed bars of “All Star.”

Still, even after the water, walking all the way to the van seemed like such an incredible effort. At Caoimhe’s request, I was to be the last one to leave after she and Jordy finally called it a night, but I wasn’t ready to step out of Eric’s company just yet.

Even if I was so drunk that I sat down to rest my knee for a moment and immediately started dozing off in a high-backed chair in the foyer, right on top of a few pieces of glittering bat confetti.

Someone draped a blanket around my shoulders to shield me from the deepening chill, and I fell asleep to a familiar voice whose words also filled me with warmth. “I notice that you shift your weight off your bad leg without thinking. I notice how your accent gets stronger when you’re mad or sad or tired. I notice the doodles in the margins of your notebooks—the constellations, the little ghosts, the castle floor plans. The sausage dogs. I notice that you’re way more creative than you give yourself credit for—and the most thoughtful listener. No one else has bothered learning the stories of every ghost in this place, or come up with so many ideas to keep the peace. That’s all from your head. From a good heart. I notice the gentleness in you, the way you treat the world like it’s worth tending. I notice your dreams . . . the way you look at the stars like you’re watching something you haven’t lived yet . . . how you underline favorite quotes when you read . . . that you’re the first to help, the last to complain . . .”

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# Fourteen

# Scritch-Scratch

## Raff

I slept like the dead, snuggled into that blanket. At least until Eric's urgent voice started shouting in my ear, begging me to *wake up*, *get up*, *Raff oh God please there's no time—*

Bolting upright, I shrugged off the blanket and tried to stagger to my feet. Big mistake. My head spun. I needed another glass of water, and probably some greasy breakfast. But what I got was an empty foyer thick with the castle's usual oppressive gloom, the faint scent of spilled wine, and Eric appearing in front of me in a rush of cold air and desperation.

"Intruders. Two of them," he said, his voice low and clipped. "They hid out after the banquet—or slipped in when the guests were leaving, I think. They're tearing through the castle looking for that stupid treasure . . ."

Dimly, I recalled Jordy saying something about hidden treasure once when he was educating me on the castle's history.

"And no one's scared them off yet?" I asked, finally climbing to my feet —even if I had to grip the back of the chair for support.

Eric noticed, like he always noticed the little things, and frowned. "Just me and Gráinne," he answered quickly. "And you need to get out of here.

Now. They have a knife, and I think trying to run them off has only made them more . . . defensive."

From the darkness of the hall came a scuff, like a boot on stonework.

Before I could react, or really even process what Eric was saying, two men stepped into the foyer—jumpy, sweating, pale eyes darting about. One held a flashlight that looked expensive, and the other gripped what might be a hunting knife.

I turned slowly to face them, palms open. "Lads, you can't be here. This is private property. If you head for the door now, I'll just assume you were drunk and had a hard time finding your way back to your car after the banquet. I won't breathe a word of it to the—"

"Drop the weapons!"

Knife-guy's wild-eyed gaze had landed on my belt. My suit jacket had gotten caught on the massive and awkward PolterPulse V2.1, leaving the clunky device mostly exposed. Now he was clocking the Turbo Pro and all the other gear I was wearing—the lights, and the many little beeps as Eric's presence registered on the SpecterTrack.

He thought I was wearing guns and ammo. Illegal, dangerous things. I could see it as his face twisted.

"Look," I said as calmly as I could, "these aren't what—"

The man lunged. He wasn't quite as big as me, but with a knee that wasn't what it used to be, the impact was still enough to knock me backward. At least I was able to take him crashing to the cold floor with me, my arm wrapped around his thick neck in a headlock.

As we slammed into the ground, the breath coughed out of my lungs in a great rush. But there was no time to flounder and gasp as the man's friend rushed toward us, shouting profanities. I scrambled upright just in time to grab his wrist, muscles straining as I fought to keep the blade away from my ribs. My knee buckled under the angle at which I was contorted, the pain flaring white-hot.

The knife dipped closer, and I wanted to look around for Eric but I couldn't.

I wanted to tell him I was sorry for letting everyone down like this.

Then—

A metallic crack split the air.

The erratic man stopped trying to stab me long enough to let me jerk my head up, just in time to see the chandelier chain snap.

And just like the Second Sight had shown me, we were laying right beneath it.

What it hadn't shown me was Eric. My knight in designer jeans.

He was quite a vision as he rode the falling chandelier like a sailor swinging down from the rigging of a ship—hands gripping the chain, momentum carrying him in a perfect arc as his lovely dark hair streamed behind him, his eyes glittering and hardened with determination as he stared down the knife-wielding maniac.

I shoved the man off me and rolled away as the chandelier smashed into the floor just inches away, exploding in a shower of sparks and crystal.

Eric landed hard—or would have, had he been alive—and planted himself between me and the would-be robbers. "Don't you fucking touch him!" he shouted, the force of his words somehow drawing another shower of sparks from the chandelier.

The intruders screamed as Eric faded until he was fully transparent, knife-guy tripping over his partner in his haste to bolt for the door.

But Eric was fastest of them all, slamming the door shut with a force no living person could manage. The new oak shuddered and the bolt slid home. The men swore and yanked at the handle—and Eric—with increasing desperation, but they couldn't touch him while he wasn't solid, and he held the door firm.

He wasn't looking at them, even as they shoved an arm through his head or a fist through his stomach. He was still looking at me where I sprawled on the floor, finally starting to struggle upright. "Are you hurt?"

Breathing hard from the effort of sitting up, I shook my head. Bad move, because it made me instantly dizzy again. "I'm—I'm grand, thanks to you. Hold them there."

I limped carefully back to the chair, drew my gear bag from beneath it, and pulled out a shiny new roll of duct tape.

This was one of those rare times that reading The Handbook had actually paid off.

## Rule #117: Always Carry Duct Tape

*Some spirits are strong enough to tear at or otherwise destroy clothing; duct tape can save both your dignity and mobility in high-stress situations.*

I tore off strips of tape with my teeth and bound the men's wrists and ankles while they muttered a few half-hearted threats and curses. Mostly, they were too scared of Eric to do anything but stare into the distance and shake. They got even quieter when Gráinne came to stand watch while Eric and I wandered around on the front lawn, trying to get enough service on my phone to call the Gardaí.

They were local lads, so it only took them the better part of an hour to make the trek uphill to the castle in their patrol car and round up the two idiots while Caoimhe and Jordy—who I had also called after the police—checked over the castle's property for the incident report.

It was nearly three in the morning by the time all was said and done, the chandelier still a glittering ruin on the foyer floor, but no other great losses.

"You're a regular hero," Jordy had said through a yawn, and only I knew the praise belonged to someone he couldn't see.

Now it was just me and Eric alone, Jordy and Caoimhe having left shortly after the police. Eric hovered beside me in the parlor as I rubbed my knee, and he was starting to look as solid as he had during the earlier part of our night—only now, instead of fun or mischief or desire, it was worry anchoring him to his earthly form. After watching me for a few minutes, he sat beside me, his thigh cold but solid pressed against mine on the small Victorian settee.

"I know you're not hurt. Or at least, no new hurt," he said softly. "I've checked on you probably twenty times. But . . . are you okay?"

I stopped messing with my sore knee and looked at him. Really looked. At the line of concern cut deep into his brow, the unhappy, downturned set of his full lips, his mussed hair, and the tension hunching his shoulders. The adrenaline had faded, leaving something raw and honest in its wake. Holding his gaze, I thought of everything I'd vowed to tell him after the party—how I couldn't do this, couldn't let this thing between us carry on or grow, because it would mean missing him too much and I didn't want to live with that.

Finally, a few glasses of water in and seeing clearly, seeing *him*, I realized what had escaped me before.

I was going to miss him for the rest of my life already, miss him every single fecking day, whether we kissed or not. The stories he told, the things he had shown me, his smile—he was already a kinder voice inside my head than my own. Kissing, touching, whatever he wanted to do with me, none of that would make it hurt more or less when I helped him move on or this job ended. It was too late to not hurt.

I was always going to carry him with me. The rest was just . . . anything we wanted it to be, while we still had time.

Eric was still watching me, leaning in as he waited on an answer I'd yet to give.

"I actually am," I said, watching as relief, fear, and longing all tangled in his expression. "Because of you." I paused to swallow, but my voice still came out low and unsteady as I gave what felt like a confession I'd been carrying for years: "And I'm *not*. Because of me—because I'm mad at myself for missing so many other chances to do this."

Eric's breathing hitched—or at least, he made a sound like the memory of a halted breath, even though he no longer needed to breathe.

I reached out slowly, giving him every chance to pull away, and cupped his jaw. He leaned in closer, palms braced on my thighs like he still needed to balance, holding my gaze all the while. I already felt at home in his eyes, which made it easy to settle into this new closeness, rubbing my thumb in small circles against his cheek in welcome.

"Look at you . . . you're fierce lovely," I breathed over his lips. "Not just in videos, not just in my dreams, but in real life, too. Inside and out. I could look at you forever."

I had never minded the cold, but now I embraced it. Now, it sent a thrill through me, because it meant Eric was leaning in until our chests pressed together. Until his lips were nearly on mine, the last sliver of distance left to my words.

"I know we don't have much time left, but I'm going to spend all of it noticing everything about you," I whispered, even though we were alone.

And I pressed my lips to his, fierce and aching and full of everything I'd been holding back. Full of hopes and dreams a month couldn't possibly contain, full of wishes that wouldn't come true but that I couldn't help making for us anyway.

Sure, he was icy, but the friction of him kissing me back flooded a rush of heat through my veins. The scrape of his teeth against my bottom lip was

deliciously needy, just like the sounds he was making—that I was making, too. The pressure of his tongue inviting me to open my mouth nearly sent me straight to the afterlife, but his solid hands kept me anchored, gripping my waist like he'd been waiting years for this exact moment.

But as the chill of his tongue inexpertly but enthusiastically caressed mine, waking every part of me better than the strongest tea, an unwelcome flash of memory—no, of something yet to come—intruded.

The Second Sight was back, and as usual, it had terrible timing.




In the vision, I stood in the castle foyer. The Halloween decorations that Basil and his team fussed over had multiplied like something breeding in the dark. What had been playful at the trial banquet now felt . . . off, despite a generous smattering of glitter all over the tiled stone floor. The papier-mâché ravens perched along the banister seemed to watch me with glassy, unblinking eyes. A new chandelier hung above me, its pale light steady but too bright, throwing long, skeletal shadows across the walls.

The air was still and hollow, and it smelled faintly of ash. The usual gloom had retreated to the corners, but not entirely disappeared. It clung like an old stain that refused to lift.

The place felt emptier. Not abandoned, but missing something vital, like a room after someone has left and taken all the laughter with them.

I didn't linger.

A sharp, dragging ache made my gait uneven as I quickly half-limped through the foyer, boots scuffing across stone and rug. My ribs throbbed in time with my heartbeat. My knuckles were scraped raw, oozing beads of blood. My clothes—not my uniform—were thrown on haphazardly: shirt twisted at the hem, jacket half-zipped like I'd yanked it on while running. I was clearly leaving in a hurry.

I cut down the hall toward the parlor, passing a row of grinning jack-o'-lanterns whose carved smiles seemed too wide, too knowing. Their candles didn't flicker. They just burned, steady and silent, like they held their breath.

I checked alcoves, stairwells, even the damn dungeon of a basement—not searching, not really. Just confirming what I already felt in my bones.

And still, nothing.

The castle felt wrong without Eric's presence. Too quiet, too empty, like the walls themselves awaited something that wasn't coming back.

The air stayed stubbornly warm. Static. Empty.

And I turned to the front door, limping there with haste. Leaving behind a place that no longer held Eric. No more soft jokes, no more shared books, no more starlit soul-bearing on the balcony after midnight.

One way or another, come Halloween, Eric wouldn't be here.

I wasn't ready. I would never be ready, not when I had only just found him.




I broke our kiss, winded and reeling with the weight of grief made physical. I tried to steady myself with a hand on Eric's shoulder, but the ache remained lodged beneath my ribs, sharp and certain. The Second Sight had shown me exactly how our story ended when it had barely begun: with Eric gone and me left behind.

Something that never got the chance to be more.

What had I expected? My job was to banish ghosts. His existence was the very thing I was supposed to erase, and yet I had never in my life wanted anyone or anything like I did him. Still shaking from the vision, I rested my forehead against his—wonderfully solid, at least for now—my breath a ghost in the cold.

Eric's hands clutched at my waist, fingers curled like he was afraid I might be the one to vanish if we let go. Both my hands strayed to Eric's jaw, thumbs brushing the sharp lines of his cheekbones, grounding myself in the impossible realness of him.

For a long moment, neither of us spoke.

Eric looked dazed—not like he was in danger of fading, but more stunned by his new reality, like our kisses had tethered him more firmly to the world.

I had no idea how I would be able to move him on. Or what would happen in the coming month that would motivate me in the slightest to try.

Eric's thumb brushed my waist in the comfortable quiet, a tiny, subconscious gesture that sent a thrill of needed heat through me. Then he lifted his hand, brushing a strand of hair from my forehead, fingers lingering to trace the line of my temple and the curve of my cheek. It was reverent. Almost . . . wondering.

"You need to get some sleep," he observed softly. His mouth curved, small and warm, as he added, "You look . . . what's that word you used when you saw the flooding upstairs? Banjaxed." And then he leaned in again. Not for another kiss, not yet, but to rest his forehead against my shoulder, arms sliding around me in a slow, careful embrace. I closed my eyes and curled into him, a hand coming up to rest at the back of Eric's neck.

For the first time all night, my heartbeat was steady and sure. I felt at peace.

"This is the first time in years I've felt like I'm not just . . . drifting," Eric confided to the curve of my shoulder. "Thank you. I—I know your bed is out in the van. Do you need . . .?"

I think he was trying to offer to walk me to my vehicle like the gentleman he was, because of my hurt knee. But I wasn't about to let him out of my sight in the little time we had left. So I blurted, "Yes. I need you to come sleep out there with me. Just sleep. If you want. Or whatever it is ghosts do—they didn't cover that in training, either. You can go to the edge of the castle grounds before you're pulled back here, right?"

"Right." Eric's smile grew warmer and lovelier as we left the castle, locked up tight, and climbed into the back of my van. Sure it was strange, inviting a guy I'd just kissed for the first time to come lay down chastely beside me. But then, we'd passed strange altogether a while ago and entered the long shadow of the uncanny.

He didn't comment on all the ghost-extracting gear shoved into the corner to make room for my sleeping bag and thin mattress. No, he just waited until I was as comfortable as I was going to get in my boxers and a plain black t-shirt, then stretched out beside me and finally began to fade to semi-transparency, the wrinkles in the mattress cover just visible beneath him.

I was too tired to think about a damn thing more tonight, but I reached out a hand and he made himself solid enough to take it. To hold onto me in

the wreckage of a night gone sideways until the daylight found me again.

For now, it was just us.

Holding on.

Not afraid. Not apart. Not yet.

The van creaked softly as it rocked in a gust of cold night air, the metal sides sighing. My whole body felt heavy as I drifted toward sleep—not just the ordinary haze of too much whiskey and a near-stabbing by a lunatic, but a bone-deep kind of exhaustion that made my thoughts drift like fog long after Eric's apparition had faded completely.

I knew I wasn't alone only by the feeling in the van, a certain lightness in the air that I'd come to associate with his presence. He was near.

My knee throbbed in a dull, familiar way as I tossed and turned, sleep closing in but not drawing the final curtain as fast as I would have liked. I imagined the castle silhouette looming over the little van, casting a shadow over it even in the dead of night. Impossible. But what about Ardruin wasn't?

Hovering on the edge of sleep, I heard it: a faint *scritch-scritch-scritch* against the side of the van near my head.

No, that wasn't right.

It was more of a long, dragging scrape. Like claws or nails digging into the metal siding. More like *scritch-scrape-tap*.

My eyes almost fluttered open, but sleep had too strong a hold on me. My brain felt as if it moved through treacle, and I couldn't muster the energy to care about an intruder. Either I was on my way to dream about Eric, or the fox or badger or fecking oversized castle rat sniffing around outside was going to burst in and eat me.

The van rocked a little as something brushed against it again.

Was that a paw? A snout? A hand?

*Scritch-scratch*. *Scritch-scratch*.

"Ah, leave it out, then," I groaned, slightly hoarse. "I've had enough for one night." The sound didn't spark real fear. Not tonight. Not after nearly getting stabbed, not after—

That kiss.

The memory washed over me in a warm, dizzying rush: Eric's hands on my waist. The true, solid weight of him, and how he'd clutched me like he'd been waiting for me since long before I found his old videos, let alone

the real him. The way he had looked at me afterward, like he was afraid to let go. Like he wanted to say more. *Be* more, even.

I pressed my face into my pillow, trying to smother the smile tugging at my mouth in case Eric was watching. I didn't want him to see how far gone I already was for him.

God, I was in trouble.

Spirits moved on—that was the point of it all. That was the job. And Eric . . . If anyone deserved the peace of whatever came next, it was him.

*Scritch-tap-thump.*

The sound was right by my head this time. I sighed, keeping my eyes intentionally closed, and called out to the night: "If you're a spirit, come back during regular business hours. If you're a fox, piss off altogether. If you're a banshee, I'm not dealing with it."

Sweet silence answered.

But then came a single, deliberate *tap* on the metal siding.

My pulse jumped, but only for a moment, exhaustion already pulling me back under like a tide. I still didn't open my eyes. I was too tired. Too heartsore. Too full of the warmth of Eric's mouth on mine and the cold certainty of losing him by the month's end.

The scratching didn't come again.

The night settled but for the soft trill of a robin—or the imitation of one. Eric. Lulled by the gentle birdsong, I finally sank into a restless sleep.

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# Fifteen

## When Your Crush is Invisible

### Eric

October 2nd, in the earliest hours of the morning: that was when Raff first kissed me. I hadn't cared about the days of the week in such a long time, but we only had until Halloween before his time at Ardruin Castle would end and I'd have to watch him drive away.

He deserved it, the safety and warmth and freedom that would come with being anywhere else. He deserved someone with blood in their body, blood that would run hot when they kissed. He deserved someone who had skin and bones and real hair to sink his fingers into, someone with a future and goals, just like him. Maybe someone who loved looking at the stars, too. That would be nice.

I liked the idea that a little piece of me might follow him and keep him company on lonely nights. And be there for the good times, too.

But as far as I knew, I had twenty-nine days left to spend with Raff. Six hundred and ninety-six hours. And I wasn't going to waste any of it.

I was glad he had invited me to the van, because I'd been trying to invite myself and didn't know how. My mom would've been appalled at my manners, would have said she raised me better than to sleep with a guy on

the first date—even if I was just hovering nearby—but then, she wasn't here to judge.

Of course I loved her deeply, and I told myself she was still out there somewhere. Still at the same house on Maple Lane almost sixteen years later, still working for the government and trying to change things from within, still arguing with Dad about the water bill and eating off the good blue-and-white plates that had belonged to her mom.

I wondered what she would have thought of Raff. He would have been the first boyfriend I'd ever brought home (and I would have brought him home to my parents' house, even before the kiss I couldn't stop thinking about). I think my mom would have loved his accent and wanted to try his mam's colcannon way more than I did. She would have let him fix her flowerbeds that she could never quite figure out, and probably would have bought him a bunch of expensive shirts in a well-meant attempt to get him to wear something other than black. They would have watched reality TV together and had spirited discussions about the participants and their antics. She would have cackled watching him kick my dad's ass at *Wii Sports* and invited him to come over any time he felt like it, whether I was around or not.

Raff would have made home feel warm and fun in good new ways.

Last night when he kissed me, I had remembered what it was to be warm. Not stuck in stasis, but really twenty-seven again, being adored by someone I adored.

I couldn't stop thinking about it. The kiss, and the blur of the night's events that led to it. It had felt like a dream—or the closest I got to dreaming these days, a sort of half-waking state where my thoughts flowed without interruption—from the moment Raff walked into the kitchen wearing that suit, his hair wet from the shower and glistening like garnet, the scent of birch and pine from his soap reaching me all the way down the hall.

I was so drawn to the spark of his energy, so overwhelmed by the way it danced against my skin, that I had done something big and vulnerable and asked him to eat for me.

I hadn't meant to make it sound so intimate. But Raff's daring grin had made my own energy flare, bright and dangerous. The table we shared was so small that our knees touched beneath it, putting us so close that, if I'd

still had a heartbeat, my heart would have been doing some high-flying acrobatics.

Watching Raff eat was overwhelming. Every bite he took, every small sound he made, every description he murmured— sweet, sharp, creamy, warm—reverberated through my entire being. Not taste, not exactly, but sensation. Memory. Hunger. Raff's lips glistened with juice from a strawberry, and I'd had to look away before I reached out to wipe it with my thumb. Or, worse, licked it off the way I was burning to.

Then Caoimhe had swept in, all perfume and praise and mischief, and I'd had to sit there pretending I wasn't falling hard for the man beside me while she handed him a bottle of whiskey and called me *cute*. Watching Raff blush as she studied the pair of us, I'd wanted to laugh and kiss him at the same time.

The whiskey had loosened Raff's shoulders, then his tongue. And all the while, I found myself imagining a life where I really could sit beside Raff at a kitchen table, warm and solid, arguing about mashed potatoes and favorite seasons. A life where Valentine's Day would have been a perfect excuse to give Raff something handmade and stupidly heartfelt.

Then there had been the chandelier. I was having one of those wild bursts of energy that sometimes overtook me when I decided to yank the chain clean out of the ceiling rather than scaring the knife-wielding robber off some other way.

I didn't even know I possessed that kind of strength. That was new, and strange, and I wasn't quite sure how to feel about it yet.

But I'd always wanted to ride one of those things, since I was a kid watching pirate movies. And I was desperate to get that knife away from Raff. To save him. I'd let instinct take over, grabbing the chain and using momentum to yank the whole thing sideways, closer to Raff's attacker than Raff himself.

For a glorious second, I'd been flying.

And then I was back on the ground with Raff, watching him try to push himself up off the floor on shaking limbs as I put myself between him and the intruders. I'd wanted nothing more than to tell him *I've got you, and I always will*.

But I couldn't bring myself to say it. Not when our time together had an expiration date.

Later, when we were finally alone after the cops left with those two losers and the Dolans had driven back to their apartment in the village, Raff was the brave one again. The one who said exactly what was on his mind. He spoke of missed chances, about wanting this, wanting *me*—each word carving out a new shape inside me. A shape I wasn't quite ready to name, even though his hand cupping my jaw was the first real touch I'd had in years. The first one I had ever wanted beyond reason.

*I could look at you forever,* he'd said, and I didn't know what to do with that. I'd been admired before, but never like that. Never like I was something worth memorizing.

And then he'd kissed me.

And I'd kissed him back right away. I was so ready for it. The moment our lips met, the world went silent. I felt the rush of heat first, and then I just felt *him*. The way he poured everything he'd been holding back into that first fierce press of his lips. Felt the way his longing wrapped around mine and pulled us both under in a welcome flood of warmth—finally, I knew what it was to be warm again.

I kissed him with everything I hadn't yet said to him, clumsy from years without practice, but I let instinct guide me. Let myself crave him. The scrape of my teeth against his bottom lip made him gasp, and the sound shot straight through me, lighting up every dim corner of my being. His hands slid to my waist, telling me without words that he wanted me here, wanted me close.

When he parted his lips for me, inviting me in, I followed tentatively. I was both eager for everything and terrified of doing it wrong, of not pleasing him, but I was still more terrified of stopping. The cold of my mouth against his warmth made him shiver, and it echoed like sparks all through me.

He tasted like hope. Like something I'd never thought I'd have again.

I could have kissed him all night, but he was hurt and exhausted and still smelled like whiskey. I was just glad he invited me to join him in his van so that I could continue to bask in his glow for as long as time allowed.

While he slept, I curled up at his back—a few inches away, with a blanket between us, so he wouldn't freeze. I replayed our kisses, messy and eager and enthusiastically returned. And I counted his heartbeats. Not because I needed to, but because it calmed me to know he wasn't about to suffer my same fate. An infatuated spirit's way of counting sheep.

His heart beat with a cadence I could have mapped: steady, patient, strong. Raff in rhythm form. I felt every beat like a ripple in the air, a quiet drum keeping time for both of us, and scooted closer until I'd pushed the blanket away without meaning to, so I tucked it back around him without waking him. He was the lighthouse to my sailor lost at sea, gifting me something in this world to aim my rudder towards. A brilliant and reliable flash when everything else had been dark for so long.




It was still October 2nd, the day Raff had kissed me and invited me to stay the night, and he had never looked so beautiful as he did when he woke to the late morning light streaming in through the van's dirty windows. So soft and sleep-rumpled. Human. Breakable. He came to slowly, with a groan and a stretch that made his spine creak. With me in here all night, the van was cold enough that his breath fogged the air.

I had been busy doing what any self-respecting ghost with too much time and too many feelings would—having a thorough look-see through the van—but I turned away from the small box of photos and memorabilia I'd unearthed from the glove box to study him. "Morning. How's your knee?"

Raff pushed himself halfway up, blinked a few times, and paused—like he had to take a minute to remember that he even had a knee. "Sore as shite," he finally said, sleep-rough. "Feels like someone smashed it with a hurley."

"I would have iced it for you. You know, with these magic hands." I drew just enough energy to make my hand a little more solid before wiggling my fingers.

"Didn't want to bother you," he insisted with pink dusting his cheeks, and something warm and painful twisted at my core. Sleep-rumpled and bleary-eyed, he was beautifully soft and lovely. "What's that you've got there?"

He was deflecting, and I let him. His face laid bare when he was really hurting, and if that happened, I'd press the issue.

I clutched the battered little box like a trophy. "Just the shrine to your hurling days." I scooted closer, filling the small space between us with my treasures: printed photos of Raff posing on the field in his uniform, hands

on his hips and wearing a cheesy grin. Raff mid-swing with his hurley, feet not even touching the ground. Raff covered in mud and grinning like he'd just won a very important match (which he probably had).

Plucking a stunning photo of him in his gold-and-green uniform from the pile, I held it up and gave it a little kiss. "You look like a very handsome leprechaun in this. Makes your hair look redder, too."

"Leprechaun!" Raff spluttered, shifting closer. "They're the proud Kerry colors, you absolute—"

"Wildcard?" I offered sweetly, before he could give any of the Irish alternatives. I had to tease, because I was so attracted to him in that uniform that it was embarrassing, and I was worried he could see it all over my face.

His eyes narrowed, and I grinned. For a moment, the van felt warmer.

Still holding the box, I drifted over to sit beside him on the mattress and gently placed it in his waiting hands. "You kept all this. You must really miss it."

"I do." His voice was low, his gaze wistful. Almost bruised. After a moment, he cleared his throat. "I, uh . . . forgot to tell you, with everything going on, but I checked on the team when I went to the village. They won their last match, and they're looking at taking the MacCarthy Cup again. Without me."

There was pride in his voice now, too, alongside the aching.

"Doesn't mean they don't miss you," I said gently.

He huffed a laugh that didn't reach his eyes. "They miss having someone besides Coach to shout at them during drills."

"No," I insisted. "I might not have known you back then, but I'd bet my family's fortune they miss your helping hand and your friendship and your creativity on the field. Or whatever it is hurlers call it. When you leave here . . . you should call them. Meet up. Go watch a game."

Studying one of the old pictures, he went still. Just for a heartbeat. Like the idea was too big to hold right now.

Then he shook his head like he was pushing the thought away. "We should get inside. Jordy and the others will be waiting to have a chat about the banquet and our treasure hunters, I'm sure." He reached for his overalls and his leather jacket, and I slipped through the van wall without being asked so that he could change in private.

I had the sense I wasn't welcome to stay for the show. There was something about the hunch of his shoulders this morning—against the cold,

or against me, or whatever last night had stirred up in him—that left me wondering if he needed space to process that he'd kissed a dead man, or if he was just . . . slipping away from me completely.

Raff finally emerged, closing the van doors with a hollow *clunk* that echoed through me. I followed him, like always, toward the looming castle, making myself fully transparent as we reached the front door. Ardruin looked almost smug, its turrets extra sharp and its stones especially bright, like it knew it had survived the night's chaos with its secrets and treasures intact, and wanted to brag. Even from outside, I could hear noise: laughter, raised voices, the clatter of dishes. The whole place was humming with the kind of energy that people radiate after a near-disaster, adrenaline mixed with relief.

"Can you believe they were looking for *treasure*? Like we're in a fecking fairytale!"

"—and that dinner went perfectly, no spilled soup or burst pipes or screaming mirrors—"

"I swear, Basil nearly fainted when the decorations didn't move themselves. I think he ought to ask the doctor for something to calm his nerves. My mam takes—"

"Jordy practically ran here, even beat the Gardaí by ten minutes. I know who I'm calling next time there's a crisis!"

Raff hardly seemed to notice any of it, not the warmer air or the voices of the Dolans and their staff ricocheting off the stone walls, overlapping in a chaotic chorus. He moved through it all like he was underwater. Shoulders tight, hands shoved in his pockets. Not looking at me.

He hadn't looked at me properly since we started walking. Since last night, really.

We left the foyer (swept clean of all shattered glass) and rounded a corner toward the kitchen, nearly colliding with Jordy—to my relief, without the demon dog at his heels for once. He leaned against the wall, his short blond hair sticking up at odd angles and his blue eyes bleary like he'd hardly slept, but he was looking at his phone with the smug grin of someone who'd just found something fascinating.

"Raff!" he said, bright as the church bell that rang up from the village every morning. His sweater had a black cat on it that waved as it burst out of a pumpkin, and I had to imagine Caoimhe hadn't seen it yet or she would

have made him change. “Just the guy I was looking at. You’ve got to see this. You’re going viral.”

“Like an illness?” Raff asked hopefully, though the way he scrubbed a hand over his face in mortification meant he already knew the answer.

He leaned against the wall beside Jordy and frowned at something on the man’s phone.

I drifted around to see, invisible and unnoticed by both of them, in time to feel Raff’s breathing hitch—just barely.

The photo was posted to an app I didn’t recognize—which was, admittedly, most of them. But I understood by the hearts in the corner and the number beside them that it had over fifty-thousand “likes” since being posted an hour ago.

It showed the kitchen in full trial-banquet chaos. Steam rising, an assistant cook mid-shout, someone dashing past in a blur with a tilting stack of plates clutched to their chest. Floral cocktails glistening with edible glitter, elegant wheel-thrown mugs of cider garnished with cinnamon stick stirrers, and a familiar dragon-shaped charcuterie board. But right in the center, the focus of it all was Raff, gazing up at absolutely nothing with a soft, bright smile.

The one I’d only ever seen him give to me.

*POV: You’re the ghost he’s smiling at*, the caption read, and my chest tightened.

The top comment read: *Find someone who looks at you the way this gorgeous man looks at . . . whatever’s on the ceiling.*

And beneath it: *When your crush is invisible, but your joy is not*.

*Smokeshow.exe has stopped working*.

On it went, but that’s all I could read as Jordy closed his phone and snorted. “You looked fecking smitten, man. Caoimhe told me you were with some guy . . .”

Raff didn’t take the opening. Didn’t blush, or joke, or mention me at all. He just stared at the screen where the photo had been, something sad flickering across his face—like he had just seen a version of himself that he wasn’t sure he was allowed to be anymore.

“It was a good night,” he said softly. But the words sounded like they scraped something raw inside him.

“Yeah, and you saved it—twice. From the dead, and the living,” Jordy said, clapping a bracing hand on Raff’s leather-clad shoulder. It was like he

could sense that something was wrong, but not in the same way I could. “Go on, cheer up a bit. I don’t think anyone expects you to help with the cleanup today, if you’re after a nap or a trip into town. Anyway—I’d better go find Pepper before Caoimhe has him shopping Armani for mutts or something.”

When he was several yards down the hall, I manifested to a little shiver from Raff.

But once again, he hardly looked at me. “I guess . . . I should take the day, then,” he said, sounding very much like a man who didn’t want to be alone with his thoughts. It had never been this hard to reach him, and I didn’t know how. Didn’t know what was going through his head and building such a wall between us.

“Do you want company?” I asked.

What I meant was, *please don’t leave me. I want you*.

But Raff was quiet, gazing at something down the hall in the direction Jordy had gone. A blushing Basil had joined the young castle owner, clutching a clipboard like it was a shield. Jordy said something and gave him a grin that made Basil’s blush deepen.

“Those two are really dancing around it still,” Raff said after a bit of thought, not meeting my eyes. “Feels like they could use a dancing lesson. Or at least a little encouragement.”

“. . . You mean from two people who are incredibly emotionally well-adjusted experts in the art of romance?”

That earned me the look I wanted. A dazzling Raff smile, his eyes locked on mine as he laughed loud enough to fill the hall and draw both Basil and Jordy’s gazes from a distance. “Aye. Or just a friendly nudge from the best team I know.”

He gently elbowed me in the side, and of course, it went right through me.

But I felt it all the same.

Maybe a brief distraction would help him find his way back to me, or at least give him some time to work up to telling me what was on his mind.

“Step one,” Raff whispered conspiratorially, his energy crackling against mine and making me feel alive again. “Just like on any good ghost hunt: observation.”

We trailed Basil and Jordy to the kitchen, me unseen and Raff keeping a careful distance as we watched the pair argue about the best way to stack

wine crates. The castle kept on buzzing around them—clattering pans, laughter, the scratch of a broom, the lingering scent of roasted herbs from last night—but they were locked in their own little world.

For once in my existence, I could say I knew how that felt.

“No, no, no. You can’t just put the Merlot on top of the Pinot!” Jordy insisted.

“That’s *exactly* where it goes,” Basil shot back. “It’s called *organization*, Jordy. You should try it sometime.”

“Organization?” Jordy scoffed. “You’re color-coding the crates like they’re spell components and not paying any attention to what’s actually inside!”

“They *are* components,” Basil said, snatching the label from his hand. “Of a functional storage system. Which you’re currently sabotaging with your chaotic gremlin brain.”

Jordy’s eyes sparkled as he insisted, “My mam told me chaos builds character.”

Basil squared his shoulders and, a hand on his hip, declared stiffly, “Well, maybe so. But chaos also gives me hives.”

“They’re flirting just fine without our help,” I whispered to Raff.

He shook his head. “That’s not flirting,” he muttered. “That’s just two lads having a mild disagreement in the workplace.”

Basil and Jordy both reached for the same crate at the same time, bumped hands, and immediately pretended it hadn’t happened.

“Raff,” I said gently, “*you* flirt by arguing about the right way to eat Maltesers.”

He opened his mouth, then seemed to think the better of whatever he had been about to say, his eyes briefly darting to me and then just as quickly glancing back at the hapless couple. “I—well, you’re right about that.”

Completely unseen, I drifted toward the stack of crates and nudged the topmost one just enough to make it wobble.

Basil startled like I was betting he would, tripping in his haste to catch it, and Jordy caught him around the waist with reflexes that probably impressed an athlete like Raff.

They froze like that. Breathless, wide-eyed, faces just inches apart.

“You’re a regular wizard,” Raff whispered when I brushed a chilled hand against his cheek to let him know I was back at his side.

“You’re welcome,” I murmured.

“You’ve seen nothing yet,” Raff said, the glint in his eyes promising he had some kind of plan. He winked at me. Then he strode toward the pair like he was just entering the kitchen, calling, “Jordy! Basil! Uh, Caoimhe asked me to see if you two could handle the cellar inventory. Together.”

The decorator and the owner blinked at each other like startled deer.

“Um—yeah, we can do that,” Jordy said slowly, like he hoped Basil would jump in.

“Sure we can,” Basil added, low and breathless.

As they disappeared down the stairs side by side, Raff whispered to me, “Why do I feel like I’ve just sent two babes off into the woods?”

“They’ll be fine,” I assured him. “The baby deer can hold hooves.”

He snorted, the first real sound of amusement I’d heard from him today, and I gave him a mock salute.

“Wildcard,” he mouthed, and I flushed under what I had come to recognize as praise.

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# Sixteen

# The Bear

## Eric

Ten minutes later, I returned to check on the pair doing inventory. Raff trailed after me, limping slightly and pretending he wasn't curious about whatever was happening down there. He had shoved his hands in his pockets, eyes fixed on the next step ahead.

The cellar was dim and cool, lit by a single flickering bulb. It didn't have the same intense sort of darkness as the dungeon—a place I hadn't had a reason to visit in a few days, although I would be heading there soon to scream with the worms if Raff kept acting like our kiss hadn't rearranged his world, too.

Fiachra, the perpetually tipsy wine steward spirit, was hardly a problem these days, so there were no spills that Raff could slip on and further injure his leg. I checked before he was even halfway down the stairs. Then I focused on Jordy and Basil, who stood noticeably close for two people just arguing about shelf labels.

"They should be *alphabetical*," Basil insisted, tapping the wooden shelf like he was scolding it. His dark brown hair had a tangle of cobweb in it.

“If you don’t like my system, come out with it and tell me plain,” Jordy huffed. “I was trying to come up with something more flexible that the staff can use.”

“In your case, ‘flexible’ is just another word for *wrong*,” Basil shot back.

Returning to Raff on the stairs, I whispered, “They’re flirting again. Practically holding hands.”

Raff shook his head. Then he called down, “You two doing all right, then?”

“Fine,” Basil said gruffly. “Perfectly splendid, in fact.”

“That’s right,” Jordy echoed. “Just a whole lot of boring label reading. Tell Caoimhe we might be a little while, though. This is pretty intense work.”

“Tell them they make a good team,” I whispered into the curve of Raff’s ear.

He hesitated, a muscle in his jaw twitching. And then he said it.

Basil fussed with the collar of his shirt, and Jordy smiled. Raff’s satisfaction at that was like a warm pulse beside me—faint, but real.

Together, we made our way back to the kitchen, and I watched as Raff put together a quick snack. I didn’t ask him to eat for me this time, but as soon as he sat down at a small table out of the way and took a bite of his chicken sandwich, he nudged me with his boot and murmured, “All right. First thing: the bread. It’s soft, but the crust has that little bit of chew. Like it’s hugging everything together.”

I tried to remember the sensation of bread hugging itself around something warm. I couldn’t quite remember the taste, but I knew the feeling. The idea of being held together.

He took another bite, slower this time, eyes fixed on nothing as he chewed with obvious concentration. Putting on a show for me.

“The chicken’s gorgeous,” he said, voice dropping in a way that would have had my body reacting if it could. “The coating’s nice and crisp. Not too much, but just enough to crackle. And the inside’s juicy. Like . . . all the comfort of Sunday dinner at gran’s.”

I couldn’t taste what he described, but I could feel it in the way *he* did—by the warmth in his voice, the way his broad shoulders loosened, the way the lights in the kitchen softened around him as if they felt it, too.

“There’s pepper in the seasoning,” he went on, licking away a crumb at the corner of his mouth. “And the lettuce is cold against the hot chicken. So

you get this contrast of warm and cool. Like a hot day with a sea breeze. The lettuce is crunchy, too. And fresh. It's certainly trying its best."

I laughed, the sound distorting the air between us. Only Raff would give lettuce a personality.

"This roll tastes like . . . being a kid again and getting something lovely from the shop after school. Like home. Like something you didn't know you were missing, something you didn't realize was meant just for you until it was staring you in the face."

His eyes caught on mine as I focused on manifesting solidly in front of him. His cheeks flushed, throat still working overtime to swallow a bite.

"I know exactly what you mean, All Star," I told him, slow and intentional.

He pressed his lips together, chewing on something he looked to be on the verge of saying, when Jordy and Basil emerged from the cellar looking suspiciously pleased with themselves.

I vanished before they could see that Raff wasn't alone. Even if I could look real enough to pass as alive, I didn't want anyone giving him a hard time about something—someone—he wasn't prepared to explain. Much as I wished he was.

Glancing at Jordy, Raff said, in a would-be casual voice, "You two should take a break after all that, uh, very intense label work. Go grab a coffee. They make a great lavender oat milk latte in the village."

"Together?" Basil asked, smoothing the tailored suit jacket he wore every day, no matter the occasion. It was decidedly more wrinkled than it had been when they descended into the cellar. He tried to flatten one lapel, failed, and went pink.

"If you want, we could take my car," Jordy said, voice wobbling between hopeful and terrified. "It's, uh, clean. Maybe just a few gremlins in there."

Basil's eyes flicked up to his, softening. "I don't mind a little chaos. As long as we can pick up some allergy medication for the hives."

Jordy's grin could have powered every light in the castle, the village, and possibly half the county.

Once they were far enough away, I muttered, "We're unstoppable."

Raff shook his head, but he was smiling, really smiling, for the first time all day. "That is how you'd see it, Mr. Brightside. But you're right." Softer, he added, "I'd be a fool not to admit what's staring me right in the face . . ."

And something in my chest loosened.




The kitchen quieted after Jordy and Basil left for their “coffee break.” People left for lunch or other parttime commitments, leaving us with the echo of distant footsteps, the hum of the walk-in fridge, and the low rumble of the industrial dishwasher cleaning another round of party plates.

Raff rested his elbows on the table and cradled his chin in the palm of one hand, the smile he had worn for Jordy and Basil fading. It left something tired in its place.

It hit me then just how pale he looked, how the shadows under his eyes seemed to have gained new depth today. How he kept rubbing his thumb over his protective pendant without seeming to realize what he was doing.

He was unraveling, but I didn’t understand *why*.

“Where’s Chef Máirtín?” he asked suddenly, blinking like he had only just realized whose kitchen we were really in. “He hasn’t thrown anything all day. He was thrilled altogether about that cock-a-thing he was going to make for the banquet, and then . . . I never heard another peep out of him. Has this happened before? Has he been quiet for this long that you can remember?”

“Never,” I admitted. “My memory isn’t perfect, but . . . no, I don’t think so.”

I tore my attention from the brightness of Raff’s energy and focused on the rest of the kitchen, using that strange sense I’d developed since dying—the one that allowed me to feel the other ghosts like faint vibrations throughout the castle. The air was still. *Too* still. There was no flicker of something older, no familiar irritation or flash of pride. No swirling scent of herbs and spices, no sprinkle of flour on the floor that shouldn’t be there.

“Maybe he’s hiding. Sulking, like, about how well the other chef carried out the banquet? Or . . .” Raff’s voice wavered, then trailed away, like he knew that couldn’t be.

“Stay right here,” I told him, laying a cold but solid-enough hand over his for a moment. I was worried he’d jerk his hand away, but instead, he threaded his fingers through mine and squeezed. If I’d had a heart, it would

have beat double. “I’m going to go take a quick look around and ask some of the other ghosts what they know. Will . . . you be here?”

I hated that I even had to ask.

“Sure I will, and don’t you be worrying. Eric?” he added, a softly hopeful note in it. I loved when he said my name. “My knee is giving me awful grief, but would you come here a moment so I can kiss you and remind you that you can count on me?”

I drew a little more energy from the kitchen, the lights flickering as I solidified in a way he would find enticingly real. I knew I didn’t have to—he shared his world with me even when I was mostly transparent—but I wanted to. I knelt next to his chair as he reached out, running a hand through my hair. I rubbed my palm over his knee, hoping the cold would help, then slid my fingers a little way up his thigh.

He hissed through his teeth, but one look at his half-lidded eyes and parted lips told me that whatever he felt was a good kind of ache.

Tipping my chin up with two fingers, he leaned in to close the distance, and so did I. I wasn’t about to make him work for it, even if I didn’t understand what bothered him today. He had seen the doubt on my face, and he was letting me know I was wanted.

I really liked his way of telling me without words: the catch of his lips on mine, his groan when he sank his fingers deeper into my hair and slid his other hand down to grip my waist. The spread of his hand was so broad that I felt so small in his hold. So safe.

Using his thighs as a ladder of sorts, I tugged myself up until I was in his lap—helped along by Raff himself once he caught on to my goal. I could feel how excited he was by the change in position, and even though I hadn’t gotten hard since I died—turned out that was a real mood-killer—it hit me like a tuning fork jammed into my ribs: arousal.

I groaned into his mouth. Maybe *growled* was the better word, my fingers hooked in the strap of his overalls while he palmed the small of my back, his fingers curling in the fabric of my shirt like they wanted to stray lower but he was holding back.

He didn’t need to hold back, but I couldn’t stop kissing him long enough to say it.

I kissed him until his lips were swollen. Sometimes deeply, running my tongue along the grooves of his teeth, or flicking mine against his. Sometimes softly, giving him dozens of adoring little kisses that I hoped

would somehow leave a permanent mark on him. Sometimes hard, sucking his bottom lip between my teeth because the noises he made were pure music. Especially when I snared my fingers in his hair and tugged, just like I had done on the day we met.

I wanted him to put his hand between my legs and relieve some of the pressure starting to drive me crazy as desire burned through me, reshaping the bounds of my energy—but there wasn't time for any of that. Even if it was nice to know I could still get hard with the right person as a dead man.

Chef Máirtín was . . . missing? Gone? Or at least it seemed that way, even though it didn't make much sense. And I cared about him, in a way. He had always been kind to me, made me feel like the kitchen was a place where I could hang around no matter my mood.

"I'll be back," I said between kisses, reluctant to go even though it was the right thing.

"And I'll be here," Raff echoed, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear before I slowly climbed off of him and stood.

I smiled at him as I faded from view. Sneaking around talking to the other spirits would be much easier if I didn't bump into Caoimhe and Pepper, or startle anyone who might be working in another part of the castle. Especially while my jeans were awkwardly tight.

I floated through the pantry. No one.

The scullery. No one.

The old servants' corridor, where I knew Chef Máirtín liked to lurk when he was feeling particularly offended. No one there, either.

I asked Síofra to search for him by peeking through every mirror and reflective surface.

"Nothing at all, not anywhere," she reported a few minutes later from a long mirror leaning against a wall in one of the many parlors. "Eric . . . what do you think it means?"

She seemed to feel the recent strangeness as much as I was, judging by her startling change in appearance. She had abandoned her centuries-old hairstyle for loose, unbound locks, and made herself so tall that her partial silhouette took up the full length of the mirror. Her chin was slick with blackish blood that ran in rivulets down her neck. The finishing touch: part of her cheek had rotted away, revealing a glimmer of bone beneath.

The sight made me want to shiver, if I still could. "I have no idea," I lied, because none of the possibilities would soothe her dark and restless energy,

and we didn’t have any kind of solution yet to reassure her.

Finally, after leaving her to brush her hair and sing something eerie, I found a few of the castle’s older ghosts lingering near the back stairs—quiet ones, the kind who rarely spoke: Sorcha, Eilis, and Donnacha. Their forms flickered like candlelight, and their expressions were tight with something I’d never seen in them before. Fear.

“Have any of you seen the chef?” I asked gently, not wanting to startle them with my newness or my accent or the stronger pulse of my energy.

They exchanged looks, a ripple of unease passing through them.

Finally, the oldest and most aware of the group—Sorcha, a woman in a faded apron with an outline as soft as smoke—shook her head.

“He’s gone,” she told me, her voice brushing past me like a gentle breeze. “He isn’t here anymore. Not anywhere.”

I felt the truth of it like a blow that struck me at my core. I felt it in the sterile peace of a kitchen that had always felt so crowded and full of motion even when the chef wasn’t making himself known. I might have felt it last night, I realized with a guilty pang, if I hadn’t been so caught up in the business of the living and Raff eating snacks for me.

“He’s gone. Really gone,” I told Raff as I reappeared in front of him at the little table in the kitchen, drawing just enough energy so that he could clearly see my face.

Raff ran a hand through his hair and muttered something in Irish. Then he held my gaze and said slowly, “But . . . I didn’t move him on. Or at least, I don’t think I did. A little kindness and respect and opening jars for him couldn’t have been all it took, surely?”

I pulled a chair around next to his and sank into it, offering him the comfort of a warm, living gesture. “I don’t think so, no. He’d been here for centuries. Wouldn’t he be long gone by now if that was all it took?”

Raff nodded, then frowned. “But then how . . .?”

I didn’t have an answer. But the wrongness I’d felt the night the skull-shaped candle flared to life on its own in the parlor—the faces in the candle’s flame, the whispered names of Raff’s family—dragged fingers of icy dread across every part of my being.

Raff leaned in, his fingers fiddling with his pendant. “You don’t think maybe the same spirit who threatened me had something to do with it?”

I didn’t want to say yes, but I couldn’t say no, either. I put a hand on Raff’s shoulder.

“Máirtín was strong,” he went on. “A level four, like you. I don’t even understand how another spirit could make one just disappear, either. Unless it . . . maybe took Máirtín’s energy, absorbed him somehow. Made itself stronger. Is that even possible?”

“I’m not sure,” I said, rubbing his shoulder and apologizing with a look for how cold the touch must be. “But we know there’s something in the castle that’s hiding. Something that doesn’t want you here.”

“Something that might have also preyed on one of Ardruin’s strongest ghosts,” Raff added—and just like when he heard his family’s names, real fear flashed across his face.

Not for himself, even now.

But for me.

Raff was quiet for a long moment, staring at the table like he was trying to solve a puzzle. Then something in him shifted, and he drew himself up the way a fighter squares their stance before charging into a battle they might not win.

“We need to talk to the other spirits more,” Raff said, voice low but steady. Something about his confidence kept me from spiraling toward the dungeon. Kept me fully present despite my own fears. “We’ll figure this out properly. There has to be some connection between Chef Máirtín’s disappearance and the thing that tried to scare me off. But whatever it is, we don’t have enough information yet. I want . . .” He rubbed at his temples, but pushed through his fatigue and continued: “I want to know more about every ghost. What they think of each other, what they’re capable of. What they’re most afraid of—the smallest detail could help.”

His green eyes, bright as polished malachite even in the dimness of the kitchen, flicked toward me and held mine. “If another spirit did something to Máirtín, it could try for you next. But I won’t let it, as long as I’m alive to fight.”

I tried to sound braver than I felt. “Maybe it’s not strong enough to hurt the living,” I said hopefully. “Maybe all that stuff with the candle and the whispers was just for show. Maybe it feels threatened by you stomping into its . . . its hunting grounds.”

I didn’t know where the words came from, only that they felt somehow right.

Raff shook his head, reddish curls brushing his cheekbones. “Even if it wants to hurt me, I’ve got the pendant. I’m grand. But the others don’t. The

Dolans, and Basil. And you—” His voice cracked. “You’re not protected at all, as far as I can tell.”

I reached for him, brushing solid fingers over his wrist. His skin was warm, sun-touched even though we’d been inside all day, and I hated being the one to steal away that glow by the nature of my very being. “I’m not exactly easy to kill. Probably difficult to digest, too.”

“That’s not funny. I don’t think we’ve quite found the bright side here yet,” he muttered, but he didn’t pull away. He looked like he wanted to say more, but instead, he took a breath first. Then he said softly, “Come up to Síofra’s balcony with me tonight, after we make the usual rounds—and count the remaining ghosts. We can watch the stars and talk in our place. Somewhere quiet. Okay?”

The way he said *our place* warmed something in me that had been cold for years. “Wouldn’t miss it.”




The balcony was just as we’d left it a few nights ago: an empty mug of tea forgotten on the small table and two chairs pushed together by the stone rail that overlooked the partially rebuilt stables and the dark fringe of the woods full of ash and oak trees.

Rather than take a seat to rest his knee, Raff leaned on the railing, still breathing a little hard from the climb. His wavy red hair stuck to his forehead in a way that made him look unfairly heroic. I hovered just beside him, close enough to steady him if he needed it.

The night was clear and cold, the stars sharp as daggers scattered across a sea of black. Perfect conditions to spot Orion, Perseus, Gemini, Auriga.

But Raff wasn’t looking up. He was staring down, his jaw clenched. “Eric . . . do you see? What the hell is that?” he whispered, even though we were alone.

I followed his gaze. At first, I thought it was a trick of the moonlight—a shape that didn’t belong, a shadow that didn’t match the trees. But that was just my mind trying to protect me, because the details slowly sharpened as I waited, and my stomach dropped. Or at least, I had those same sensations: a tensing up and a prickle of cold dread.

A deer carcass lay split open just a few yards from the stables, ribs cracked wide as if pried apart by something with a grizzly's strength. The bones were gnawed down to splinters, and those that remained showed the drag marks of sharp teeth. The ground around the poor animal was torn up, clawed or thrashed into chaos.

I couldn't see it in the dark, but I was willing to bet the earth was painted crimson.

"There, too," Raff muttered urgently, pointing.

Almost obscured by the carnage of the deer was another shape. Smaller. A fox, I thought, or what was left of one. My energy recoiled on instinct.

"There aren't any bears in Ireland," I said, babbling to fill the quiet that had turned tense. "But I don't know what would do that besides a grizzly. Or a fucking polar bear. There's no animal in this entire country that can exert that kind of force. None."

With plenty of energy to draw from in the castle and on the grounds these days, I made myself look more solid and slid an arm around Raff's waist, nestling into his jacket like it was armor, a second skin. The night suddenly felt too big, too empty, too full of teeth.

"Do you think," Raff began slowly, bringing his arms up around me and folding me against his chest, "that if something really did take Máirtín, it could have done *that*, too? Because it sure as shite wasn't a badger, or any of those other things you said."

I didn't want to answer. But the truth pressed against me like Raff's hand at the small of my back. "If it did," I said quietly, "I wonder what it did to his spirit. I wonder what it could do to me, because it's definitely stronger."

"Fecking level five," Raff muttered worriedly. "They didn't exactly train us on how to handle those." He rested his cheek against the top of my head and held me tighter like he never planned to let go. If only.

He didn't speak again until we had finally moved to the far side of the balcony, dragging our chairs away from the view below.

"I need to tell you something," he said, toying with his pendant. I was all for a good magic amulet in a fantasy game, but this wasn't pretend, and I wondered if he should be putting so much faith in that thing to keep him safe. Or any at all.

"You remember when I told you about my Second Sight? I know it's silly," he added quickly, rubbing the back of his neck. "But those useless glimpses of the future, they always come to pass one way or another."

When I nodded, he went on in a whisper, “Well, last night, when we—when we kissed, for the first time . . . I got another one of those visions. It was only for a few seconds, but it was clear enough.” Once again, the fear darkening his eyes wasn’t for himself. “I saw the castle empty. You were gone, and I was leaving in a hurry. I looked a little worse for the wear, too. I assumed I’d moved you on, but—maybe you’d vanished like Máirtín. Maybe it was a warning.”

I glanced up, searching for Andromeda and finding Ursa Major.

It still stung to consider it, even though it was inevitable—moving on or fading away or being swallowed up by some bigger, badder spirit. But hell, being moved on by Raff was a whole lot better than what might be the alternative. I didn’t need to look at that deer carcass again or see the panic in the oldest ghosts’ faces to know that.

I wanted to offer some kind of reassurance. To let him know that him doing his job, or trying to protect me the only way he knew how, didn’t change how I felt about him in the slightest. My only regret was that our time together might be up sooner than I’d hoped.

“Raff—” I began, weakly.

“I think I need to focus on moving you on first,” he rushed to say. “Before you disappear on me, too. I can’t—” His voice broke, like the time he tried to sing Backstreet Boys. Only no one was laughing now. “I can’t risk that. You deserve peace. And I—I deserve to know that you’re somewhere good, not in a monster’s belly.”

I leaned in, my hand hovering over his cheek before I dared to touch him. When I did, his skin flushed under my cold fingers. “I don’t want to let go, either. But we don’t have a choice. I’m scared, too. And I wish it could all be different. I wish . . . I could try your mom’s colcannon, and hold your hand on a busy street. Take a nap on the couch with you. Play a game for hours and forget the world. Bring you home to meet my sisters. Go to the library together. Pick out a kitten with you—or a puppy, whatever you wanted.”

Raff nodded once, sharp. His eyes shone harder than the stars, overbright, and I sensed that he couldn’t add to that list right now, no matter how much he might want to. No matter how much he liked the sound of it.

So we sat there, the wind tugging at his curls and my fingers brushing them away from his eyes. He didn’t flinch from the chill like he usually did,

but eventually reached up to take my hand in his, lacing our fingers together and settling them in his lap.

“Last time I was in the village, I met this . . . wise woman of sorts, Niamh. She runs the shop where I got my pendant, and she told me there were other ways of moving spirits on. She seemed to think she knew a lot more than the ExorSquad handbook, which is probably true. I’ll ask her what we need to do. For something that can’t fail.”

I nodded, even though the thought of him asking how to send me away while he sipped my favorite drink from the village café made something inside me twist painfully sharp. If I’d needed to breathe, it would have been nearly impossible just then.

Raff settled back in his chair, my hand still tangled up with his and resting on his leg. His face was haunted enough that he seemed to know what I was thinking. Or maybe he was thinking it, too. I scooted closer, resting my head on his shoulder, and we stayed like that for a long time. Long enough for the stars to shift. Long enough for the cold to have seeped into Raff’s bones, though he was doing an admirable job of hiding it tonight.

When he finally went back to the van, I followed. Climbed inside, promised to stay close while he slept—and though he insisted this arrangement was so that *he* could keep an eye on *me*, I watched over him as he curled up under his blankets, counting his heartbeats like they were the clock by which I set my days. And wondering about so many things.

It was the longest night.

For the first time since dying, I jumped at every small noise. Every rustle of dry autumn leaves skittering across the parking lot. Every creak of the van’s metal siding as it settled into the deepening cold. Every distant animal cry that sounded like it was in pain.

What kind of spirit craved living flesh?

What kind of spirit could possibly make a level-four ghost vanish without a trace?

I had no idea. It wasn’t in any book I’d ever read while I was alive, and it clearly wasn’t in Raff’s handbook. And for the first time, I was afraid.

Afraid of whatever came next.

Afraid of losing Raff before we’d really had a chance to try out this thing between us.

Afraid for him, too.

Because whatever was out there was hungry. Restless. Unpredictable. And it appeared to be getting bolder.

*OceanofPDF.com*

# From the Notebook of Rafferty O'Meara, ExorSquad Spirit Extraction Expert

**3rd of October**

*Entity Name: ? For now I'm calling it Great Awful Ruinous Yoke, or "GARY" for short.*

*Level: 5, maybe*

*Year of Expiration: ?*

*Haunting style: conjures fire, whispers names it shouldn't know, can possibly absorb another ghost's energy, really into raw meat, or maybe just killing—**can kill living creatures**.*

*Ideas to keep the peace: Run away and never look back. But I won't leave Eric. I can't.*

*Maybe I can learn something from the other ghosts that will help me get rid of this thing, but taking care of Eric comes first.*

*Even if it hurts me.*

*No amount of training could have ever prepared me for this.*

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## Seventeen

# Unfinished Business

## Raff

### Days to Halloween: 28

At dawn, I drove toward Ballycorven with the van's windows rolled down, crisp morning air biting at my cheeks as I navigated the many switchbacks downhill. It was the kind of cold that felt clean, sharp and bracing, like drinking ice water after chewing on a stick of spearmint gum. Mist clung to the scraggly hedgerows, drifting low across the road like it hadn't decided yet whether it wanted to be fog or cloud. The sun hid somewhere behind it all, still trying its best to wake up like I was. At least I had tea.

The world had been hushed since we saw that deer and fox last night, like the land itself held its breath. Even the birds seemed quieter, their calls thin

and muted, like they didn’t want to draw attention to themselves this close to the shadows of Ardruin.

I was running on maybe four hours of sleep—if you could call it that. More like drifting in and out while Eric sat nearby with the book I’d bought him. He pretended to read, but it was obvious he was watching over me, eyes just visible above the book, like some kind of guardian angel who had forgotten he was dead. Every time I stirred he’d been there, transparent but visible enough that I didn’t have to strain my eyes to see him. Quiet. Steady.

And every time I’d opened my eyes to find him watching me, something in my chest had tightened—neither fear nor discomfort, but something warm and terrifyingly tender. Something so new I didn’t have a name for it yet.

And then I’d driven away and left him. Gone someplace he couldn’t follow, because the property line of the castle grounds—his death site—formed an invisible barrier he couldn’t cross. He’d tried, but he had been tossed right on his arse at the edge of the lawn.

The guilt gnawed at me, sharp and insistent as I pictured his hazel eyes studying me over the top of that book.

As I drove, I tried not to think, tried to let the cold take over and leave me fully numb to all the wrongs I currently faced. But I wasn’t built that way. I kept flashing back to that deer carcass, its cracked ribs and no recognizable head on the poor thing. Then my mind would jump to the way Eric had looked at me under the stars, like he was memorizing me to take wherever he was heading next. And that led me back to his hand, a hand that had felt warmer than usual as his fingers brushed my cheek. A hand that didn’t chill me, letting me hold it for as long as I liked.

That warmth sank into me, lodged somewhere deep, and now it pulsed there like a second heartbeat that I couldn’t ignore. A new rhythm that I shared with Eric.

I needed to focus. Get help. Fix this before Eric disappeared at the whims of something malevolent, if that’s what really happened. Because the thought of losing him—really losing him—made something inside me unravel.

But that’s what was going to happen anyway, and I had to start accepting it. The Second Sight had warned me. No matter what Eric wanted—to introduce me to the family he hadn’t seen in sixteen years, to play games together, to try my mam’s cooking, to *adopt a fecking pet together*—we

were going to lose each other soon. There wasn't time for us to do all those things that sounded a lot like the usual boyfriend shite. The kind of relationship I'd never had.

Boyfriends.

What we couldn't be.




The village was just waking up when I rolled in. Shutters lifting, lights flicking on, the smell of fresh bread drifting from the bakery with the fancy doughnuts and dense tea brack. A few of the locals out early on their errands nodded to me with the same curious half-recognition as usual. I nodded back, and even put on a tight smile, trying not to look as haunted as I felt.

Trying to look like a man who wasn't falling hard and fast for a ghost.

Niamh's shop was right where I remembered, a tight squeeze between the toy store and the gents' boutique. The sign above the door, which I could finally read without the rain giving me a thorough lashing, said *The Rowan & Reed* in peeling paint. The door was unlocked despite the early hour, so I let myself inside.

The bell chimed softly, just like before, yet somehow the sound set my teeth on edge. Maybe it was a side effect of so little sleep for so many days.

Then the warmth of the radiator hit me, working overtime to fight the chill. Just like on my last visit, incense burned, an earthy green scent that made me feel at home despite the strangeness of the place. That same girthy purple and white stone carved to look like a lad's bits was still prominently displayed on a shelf. It was a wonder that hadn't been an instant sellout.

Niamh was actually in the front of the shop this time, tying twine around bundles of what looked like rosemary. "Maidin mhaith," she said, soft and musical, wishing me a good morning in Irish. It was a friendlier greeting than last time, though it came with raised brows and a wry observation. "You look like you've been dragged through a hedge backwards, Raff from up at the castle."

"Feels like it, too," I muttered.

Frown lines gathered around her mouth as she set down the herb bundles and made a study of me. “Hm. Protection pendant not working out for you? Or are ExorSquad’s usual methods proving as disappointing as I told you?”

“They’re definitely disappointing,” I admitted without hesitation, feeling only the slightest twinge of guilt as Gerald’s cloudy blue eyes flashed to mind. I shoved them into a dark corner, along with the question of how he was doing after the police had come calling.

He could figure everything out on his own, just like he’d left me to do.

“And I’m not sure about the pendant yet,” I continued, refocusing on Niamh instead of the man who had essentially stranded me here. “It seems to be doing its job, but—I could use some more help.”

Her frown softened, her gaze turning thoughtful. “All right. Come on, then, and we’ll see what we can do.” There was a flicker of concern in her eyes that I caught just before she turned, leading the way to a small table tucked between the shelves. Apparently, she had already sensed this would be a long discussion.

She gestured for me to take one of the chairs, and I sat heavily, rubbing my palms on the black denim of my overalls. The candles on the table—more like small tea lights, really—guttered slightly as I settled in, like even they could sense the tension rolling off me. There certainly wasn’t a hint of a breeze that could have blown them.

“So,” she said, folding her hands. Silver rings adorned her fingers, each set with a different colored stone that probably had a special meaning or intention. “Tell me everything.”

I watched the candle flames burn steadily again as I spoke. “Well, it’s that spirit at Ardruin—the reason I bought the pendant last time. It hasn’t touched me, but now one of the friendlier castle ghosts is missing, like he’s just *gone*, and . . . something tore apart a deer last night. Also a fox, and maybe a few squirrels, too.” I took a breath, noticing the way her gaze had sharpened. “And . . . I don’t have any idea what kind of spirit could do all that, or any of it. I just know it wasn’t Eric.”

“Eric?” she repeated softly. It was strange, just hearing someone else speak his name. “That’s one of the other spirits, then? You’ve . . . gotten to know him well?”

I nodded a little stiffly, feeling oddly protective of him. “He’s strong—level four, like. His manifestations are so real you’d think he was standing beside you, but he wouldn’t hurt anyone. He’s thoughtful and kind, he has

great taste in books. He’s all-around good craic. Even if he hangs out in the dungeon when he’s upset, like a brooding Victorian poet.”

Niamh considered all this for a moment with slightly raised brows. “There are many kinds of spirits, as you probably know. Poltergeists, banshees, lost souls, demons. Some gentle, some angry, and some . . . older. If there’s a spirit at Ardruin strong enough to deal that kind of damage to a living creature, you may be dealing with something beyond a human haunting.”

My stomach dropped, my body grabbing on to the suggestion and taking it as fact. “Sure. That makes sense. Like what?”

She hesitated, her gaze flicking toward a shelf of dried herbs. Some of the bundles seemed to twitch, but then I blinked and they were still as they should be.

I couldn’t feel the dizzying warmth of the radiator anymore. It had gotten cold in here, as sharp as the morning outside.

“It could be . . . an elemental,” she whispered, as if speaking any louder might summon it. “I’m not saying that for certain, as I’ve not been to see for myself—and don’t ask me, because I won’t be going up there—but it’s . . . certainly within the realm of possibility for what you’re describing. A being that manipulates the elements, a force of nature itself.”

I wasn’t familiar with the word, but I had the sense that I ought to be afraid of it. Instead, swallowing down the bile of uncertainty, I sat up taller and said, “Okay. Let’s say that’s it. How can I move an elemental on?”

Niamh shook her head, curls bouncing around her shoulders. “I don’t know that you can. And if so, not easily. There’s fewer people who do battles with them than demons.” Leaning in, she spoke in that same soft voice, as if she thought something might overhear: “At least with demons, some of us share a belief system. Icons, relics, even language that we can weaponize against them.”

Her voice dropped even lower, barely audible over the soft crackle of the tea lights. The wax was studded with crushed herbs and tiny stones that caught my eye in the dim. “Elementals are drawn to places steeped in emotion—usually great anguish and suffering. Fear. Rage. Places where the veil has been torn open again and again by loss, or by those with little experience reaching for things beyond their understanding or control.”

She glanced off toward the back of the shop—toward where we would surely see a distant silhouette of Ardruin if there were any windows.

“Places like that, they’re magnets for certain kinds of spirits, especially the power-mad,” she went on. “Think of any castle: the battles fought, the blood spilled. The centuries of grief and struggles for control. The rituals cast by druids and priests of old. All that energy sinks into the ground, the stone. It festers, and it calls to the things that would feed on it—like an elemental. They’re beings that have never walked the earth in the flesh, are built of pure energy from somewhere else, so they don’t think like we do. Don’t feel like we do. They don’t respond to emotion or reason. They simply . . . are. At their most powerful, they have a frightful command over the natural world. And they tend to stay where they find a strong source of energy—where there’s plenty of energy to feed on.”

I found myself wishing I’d worn my jacket here as she finished: “And if one has taken up residence in Ardruin . . . it’s likely been there for a very long time. It’s gotten comfortable. It might even outlast the castle at this point, if someone were to tear it all down.”

“Grand. Brilliant. Exactly what I wanted to hear.” My pulse hammered in my ears as I clocked Niamh’s frown and realized I was being rude. “Tá brón orm,” I quickly apologized. “I’m not cross with you, at all, it’s—fecking ExorSquad. Feels like they set me up to fail, not that I can understand *why*. I didn’t think old Gerald wanted me dead.”

But there *had* been enough suspicious deaths of ExorSquad employees for the police to get called in, as I’d overheard last time I came to Niamh’s shop. I pushed it to the back of my mind, along with everything else I couldn’t stand to think about while I was trying to solve this impossible problem, because I wasn’t leaving. Not without making things right for Eric. Not without trying to protect the Dolans and all their unsuspecting guests from what I was increasingly sure was a level five entity.

Maybe ExorSquad didn’t care, but I did.

“ExorSquad seems to be discovering there are some terrible side-effects of negligence, at the very least,” Niamh said thoughtfully, tucking a curl behind her ear. Her gaze shifted from the tea lights to me again, and held. “But you’re not just here about an elemental, or whatever killed some forest creatures. Are you?”

I looked down at my hands, unable to stay at the center of that piercing gaze for long. “No. It’s . . . Eric. I want to move him on peacefully before Gary can mess with him.”

“Gary?” She sounded bewildered.

“Great Awful Ruinous Yoke—that’s what I’m calling the elemental, or whatever this thing is,” I explained. It was much easier than talking about Eric, though he was the real reason I was here. “Anyway, I want to help Eric move on quickly, because he deserves peace. Because he’s stuck so far from home. And because—” I stumbled to a halt, my throat too tight to continue.

Because I was half in love with him already.

Because my feelings for him made no sense, and yet they rang truer than anything I’d ever experienced. They were as right as the hard leather of the sliotar clutched in my victorious fist, as right as the rain that kept the hills as lush as emerald all year long, as right as seeing my mam’s face light up when I found her the perfect birthday gift.

The thought of Eric being torn apart or swallowed by that thing in the castle—by fecking *Gary*—made my chest ache like it was bruised.

Niamh waited kindly while I tried again.

“Because he’s been alone for so long,” I managed, though my voice was mangled, “and he shouldn’t be. No one deserves that, but especially not him. I don’t want him getting hurt by another spirit, or spending all his time in a dungeon, or—”

My voice cracked, and I had to stop again.

Niamh’s expression softened, and she reached out as if she meant to put a hand on my arm, but stopped with her fingers resting near mine on the table. “Oh, Raff.”

“It’s just . . . I care about him. More than I should, and more than makes sense—I know how it must sound, but it’s true. He’s—” I paused, swallowing. “He’s important to me. And I know he’s dead,” I went on, something broken loose in me, the words tumbling out clumsy and honest. “I know that. But when I’m with him, it doesn’t feel like he’s already gone. It feels like he’s still himself. Like he’s more than a memory, or a shadow. And I don’t want to lose that—don’t want to lose *him*.”

I blinked against a sudden burning in my eyes as the candle flames became smudges against the dark grain of the wood.

The rest of what I couldn’t say tapped against my ribs: *I’ve never felt this way about another soul. Didn’t think I ever would. Don’t know if I will again.*

And I didn’t know how to stop it.

I didn’t even really want to.

Niamh's fingers finally found my hand. "There's no shame in caring for someone, Raff. Living or dead. You'll never convince me otherwise."

Steadier now, I exhaled, shaky. "I just want to help him. Properly. Not with ExorSquad's shite methods that can blow a hole in a spirit and not really move them on, anyway. I want to help him move on gently. In a way that won't hurt him."

She nodded slowly, her hand withdrawing. "All right. I have something in mind. But it'll only work if the bond between you is real. There's a method—old, and simple, but powerful. Together, you and Eric need to make a list of everything he wanted to do in life. All those hopes and goals he never got the chance to fulfill. Every regret, every wish. Every small thing left undone. If you help him complete it, his remaining soul contracts and tethers to this world will be severed, and he'll be free to go—no matter what's been tying him to Ardruin."

"A list," I repeated skeptically, because it really did sound too simple.

Niamh nodded. "I expect it'll take you a few weeks at the least, but this is the perfect time of year for it. When the veil is thinnest, spirits are able to step between worlds more easily. And on Halloween night, if the list is complete, he'll just slip away. His path will be clear to him."

"Halloween is when I need to leave anyway. It's when this job ends."

She gave me a small, encouraging smile. "Then you'd best get started."

My heartbeat quickened as I considered what she'd given me. Something real, something I could do to help him. Something that meant spending more time with him, and giving him everything he'd missed. And then, when it was done . . . letting him go. It would break me, but it would save him, and that made it worth it.

"Thank you," I said in a hurry, before my throat could tighten up on me again. "I just have one more question—the veil thinning. What did you mean by that, exactly?"

They hadn't gone over that in training, either, but I think my gran mentioned it once.

"When the veil thins," she said patiently, "the boundary between the living and the dead weakens. Spirits feel more present, more themselves. More tangible—especially, I would imagine, ones as strong as you say Eric is."

My mind flashed back to Eric's hand last night. How it had felt—not exactly warm, but also not like I was clinging to a piece of ice straight from

the freezer. It had been cool, though not unpleasantly so. Closer to alive than he'd been before.

Guess that explained it.

I thanked Niamh for all her help and returned to the brilliance of the morning. Limped right to the van, the glass of the pendant cool against my chest—still terrified, but also more determined than ever.

The mist had thinned while I was inside, and now sunlight was breaking through in pale gold shards that dappled the village's narrow streets. Yet the kiss of the light didn't fill me with hope like it usually did. Today, it felt like a warning. A reminder that time was marching swiftly on whether I wanted it to or not.

Every step forward stung, as I knew I was getting closer to the moment I'd have to surrender Eric over to another world, one he deserved more than I deserved him.

The thought hollowed me out, and even made my lavender oat milk latte taste bitter.

But wanting him, deserving him—that wasn't the point of this.

Keeping him wasn't the point.

So I forced myself down the path anyway, dread settling cold and heavy in my chest, because doing right by him mattered more than whatever it would cost me in the end.




The drive up the hill to the castle felt longer than it usually did. Even after I parked in my favorite spot—the lot being particularly empty today, as it was the weekend—my progress toward the castle dragged, like the ground was trying to hold me in place. Slipping free of my shirt, my protective pendant thumped against my chest with each movement—a reminder of what I was going to tell Eric.

By now, the morning's mist had burned off completely. The castle stood stark against the sky, its jagged stones throwing towering shadows that watched my approach. And like it had since I was a lad, the place looked hungry, like something inside it was waiting to devour me.

A cold ripple moved through the air—not the wind, but more like a shift in pressure that raised all the little hairs on my arms.

Then the birds in the nearby trees went silent all at once. Not gradually. Not naturally.

My gaze cut to the woods on the far side of the castle, gnarled trees that somehow were still clinging to most of their green.

Something old was awake in there.

Something that had noticed me.

I paused my limping steps, not letting myself look to see if the torn animal carcasses had been carted off by a groundskeeper yet, and directed a sharp gaze in the direction of the forest as I laid a hand on the holster of the PolterPulse strapped to my side. “I know you’re in there, Gary, and you can feck right off today. I’ve had enough out of you.”

A single bird trilled. A magpie. Maybe in agreement, or maybe commenting to all its little bird friends that I was completely out of my tree.

This place would do that to a guy.

I hummed the chorus of “All Star” as I made my way through the castle in search of Eric, hoping the song might encourage him to come to me like it had in the past.

Not this time.

I found him eventually, though, sat on a low stone wall in the grassy courtyard. He was half-visible, knees drawn up and arms wrapped loosely around them. He glanced up at me with a startle the second he sensed me, and the way his face lit—soft and relieved—was nearly enough to unravel me wholly.

“You came back.” His voice was warmer than it should have been.

God, this was going to hurt.

“You sound surprised,” I teased, forcing a smile. “I, uh, had a long talk with Niamh in the village.” As I drew closer to him, he manifested more fully. I rested my back against the wall alongside where he sat, not quite looking at him. It would be too hard that way. The words already felt too big to get out. “She gave me what we were hoping for—a way to move you on properly. Peacefully. No matter what’s happening at the castle.”

His expression flickered, and dimmed—hope mingling with fear, settling into resignation—all in the space of the heartbeat in which I dared to meet his eyes.

“Okay. That’s . . . that’s good. Thank you,” he said quietly. “So what do we do?”

I inhaled deeply, trying to get some air despite every breath feeling like it snagged on something sharp. “We’re going to make a list of all your unfinished business. And I’m going to help you complete it. Simple, right? Stuff you never got a chance to finish from when you were alive. We’ll write it all down and tackle it together. Halloween is when the veil between worlds is thinnest, so it’ll be easiest for you to pass over then.”

Eric’s hand drifted down to my shoulder. Lifted, slightly, and toyed with the ends of my hair. “Unfinished business . . . from when I was alive?”

“That’s the idea,” I confirmed, though I wished it wasn’t so. I knew what he was driving at. “Much as I’d rather it be the list you started making last night. We could’ve gotten a dog *and* a cat. Adults, though—the grown ones need good homes, too.”

“One of each, huh?” Eric asked with a hint of playfulness, a gorgeous smile in his voice. “Because why choose?”

“Because why not make getting a pet as chaotic and unconventional as the rest of this?”

“The rest of what?” His smile hadn’t slipped, only softened, like he already understood what he was asking.

“Us.” I reached up and caught his hand, tangling our fingers together.

His skin still wasn’t overly warm, but like last night, there was no stinging cold.

As he stroked the palm of my hand with his thumb, he looked away, toward the castle—toward the woods and the hills that lay beyond. The wind tugged at his hair, and for a second he looked even more solid. Like the world was trying to hold onto him as much as I was.

“So we get the rest of the month, unless whatever’s hiding in the castle eats me before that list is complete.”

“Gary,” I muttered spitefully. “Aye, if that’s what it’s after.”

Eric nodded, but it wasn’t a happy nod. It was small and fragile, like he was trying to accept something he didn’t want, either. “Then that’s what we’ll do. And we’ll make it fun while we’re at it, so you always smile when you think of me. So you don’t forget me.”

“As if there’s any chance of that,” I said gruffly, my throat once again tightening on me. “Come here, then.”

He slid down from the wall and into my waiting arms, where I tucked him into my jacket right up against my chest. Held him close enough that he could feel my heartbeat, my arms wrapped around his slender waist. It certainly felt like I could hold him forever.

Turning slightly in my hold, he nuzzled my cheek. Left a few kisses there, butterfly-light, though somehow I knew I would always feel them.

As I started to catch his lips with mine, a low groan rolled through the castle walls—stones shifting, settling. Except it didn't sound like settling.

It was too rhythmic.

Almost like breath.

Like something taking a deep exhale after too long holding itself still.

Eric shuddered, his hands tightening on my forearms. "Raff, what the fuck?" he whispered urgently. "Did you feel that, too?"

I nodded, recoiling from the castle and bringing Eric with me.

The castle shadows that dappled the courtyard rippled—not with movement, but with awareness. A slow, deliberate shifting, almost like pupils narrowing.

Gary—whatever it was—was listening. And it didn't seem to like what it had heard.

Eric was trembling as he looked up at me, and there was something raw in his eyes. "Raff," he said softly, "Are you sure you want to do this with me? We don't know exactly what this thing is capable of, and you could just . . . go. I'd be so much less worried that way."

"Not while you might be in danger, I can't, so that's the last I'll be hearing of it," I said plainly. Then I considered the other part of his question. He wasn't really asking about the list, I knew that. He was asking if I could handle losing him. If I could walk him to the edge and let go, when right now my arms were wrapped so tightly around him that the answer seemed obvious.

Still, I nodded stiffly and lied for his sake. "And yes, I want to do this. I'm sure."

His face crumpled just a little, but he quickly hid it. "Okay," he whispered. "I trust you."

And something in me broke open a little more.

Because I knew he meant it. Because he was looking at me like I was the only thing still anchoring him to the world. Because I kept falling for him a

little more every day, and I wasn't sure where that would leave me by the time he was ready to go.

Everything I did seemed to be enough for Eric. Somehow, even though I'd lost hurling, I was still good at something—good for *him*—and watching him light up because of me did something to me that I wasn't brave enough to name out loud. And the wild part was how simple it was. Just being myself, just showing up, made him noticeably glow from within. That alone made me happier than I'd ever been in my life, and I wasn't ready to lose my center all over again.

I forced myself to breathe, to focus. After all, we weren't apart just yet. "We'll start tonight after we make the rounds and keep asking questions of the other spirits—I still want to figure out what's hiding in the castle if we can, and try to stop it. To keep everyone safe while we work on our list," I told him. "From what I learned this morning, the thing that killed those animals might be an elemental."

At his confused look, I started to explain all that I'd been told about them—which only made me angry at our shite circumstances all over again, heat creeping up my neck as I stared down the castle like it was a living adversary.

My fingers twitched toward the TurboPro 5000—like lighting up the stones with bursts of electricity until the thing was out of charge was going to do feck-all but make every spirit restless again and undo all our hard work—as I continued "Even Niamh seemed afraid of it. And I'm pretty sure she's the real deal, a proper witch, so we're probably screwed. But—"

"But we're incredibly emotionally well-adjusted experts in the arts of romance and ghost hunting, and we make a great team," Eric said, placing a soft kiss at the corner of my mouth. I liked how easy it was becoming for him to lean in and touch me in little ways. How quickly a small gesture from him could recenter me.

"The *best*." I hooked my fingers into the belt loops of his jeans and tugged his hips against mine as I kissed him back. "We'll handle this thing together, or at least say we tried."

Eric's smile was sad but beautiful as he agreed, "While we're together. That's the plan. Let's make the most of it."

The courtyard's shadows deepened again, like some creature was stretching to its full height. Then a tremor ran through the earth beneath us, not enough to knock me off-balance, but enough to make me unsteady.

It felt like another warning. Another threat.

A sign that whatever haunted this place wasn’t going to let Eric go so easily.

Well, neither was I. I was too stubborn for that.

Standing there, with the castle looming over us and the wind tugging at the edges of his form no matter how hard I clung to him, I realized something awful and true: helping move him on was going to break me. But not helping him would break *him*, one way or another.

And that wasn’t a choice at all.

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# From the Notebook of Rafferty O'Meara, ExorSquad Spirit Extraction Expert

**3rd of October**

A DETAILED RECORD OF THE UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF ERIC JAMES CRAWFORD (b. December 29 th, 1982, d. July 15th, 2009)

AKA ERIC'S AFTERLIFE AGENDA
That's right. I stole Raff's pen.
1. Finish one last D&D campaign
2. Learn how I really died (Maybe we can find an autopsy report)
3. Return overdue library books to Beacon Street
4. Eat a full Irish breakfast (Raff to eat, I'll live vicariously)
5. Get drunk on Guinness (Raff again, taking one for the team)
6. Apologize to Chloe for missing her wedding (Email her? I know it's weird)
7. Buy the teapot Mom wanted and ship it to the States
8. Take a selfie with a sheep
9. Win at pub trivia (In the castle will have to do. I'm calling our team Dead Inside)
10. I'll tell you this one if we get there, Raff. In private.

For what it's worth, I don't even care about most of this stuff anymore-mostly number 2 and number 10. It'll be good to get a message to my family, too. Hopefully this doesn't mess up our spell from the village witch.

Because that's what this list is, right? Ingredients for a spell to move me on.

I feel like I'm living a D&D game, although I always thought I'd be more alone if that happened. I definitely never pictured myself with my very own paladin along for the quest to cross my soul into another realm. Maybe I sound delusional, but together, I don't think we can fail.

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# Eighteen

## Show Me

### Eric

There was one thing I left off the list that Raff and I made later that night in the parlor. One thing I couldn't bring myself to write, even as a vague, numbered hint, though I had longed for it in life and that meant it was needed if our spell was going to work: fall in love.

All I had ever really wanted—more than success or acclaim for my games, more than being understood—was to be accepted by the people who were supposed to know me and love me best. And now there was Raff: this accomplished, grounded, maddeningly sincere athlete who didn't care that I didn't like sports unless it was seeing him in his old jersey. Who looked at me like everything I did and everything I am was worth admiring. I still craved approval, but Raff gave it to me freely, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

It did something to me, being needed by him. Being *seen* by him. All the parts of me that my family dismissed—the nerdy hobbies, the softness, the passions they dismissed as quirks—they were the exact things he seemed to gravitate toward, the way meteors share the same patch of sky. Separate

streaks arcing in the same bright movement. I might be half-invisible these days, but somehow Raff saw me more clearly than anyone ever had.

I was never enough for the people I had spent my whole life trying to impress. But with Raff? I was more than enough, and I didn't even have to try.

Just being near him felt like gravity had finally found me, a slow, steady pull I couldn't fight, even if I'd wanted to.

But I couldn't tell him. Because I was going to love him and leave him standing in the wreckage, and I didn't want to make this any harder on him than it was already going to be. I had no idea what it would be like where I was going, but he still had so much time to spend in this world without me. Years and years, I hoped, before I would someday see him again.

Good years, like he deserved. And that's what love was, at its finest: something that grew quietly over long stretches of time, that shone its clearest in times of sickness and stress and in little unexpected moments on ordinary days. I knew I could be that for him, could see us choosing each other for a long time, but I wasn't going to be given the chance.

And I was selfish enough to want to pry every stone from the dungeon walls and smash it into dust when I realized his best years would be spent with someone who wasn't me. Who would get to show up for him in every way I wanted to.

The thought lodged in my chest like a splinter I couldn't dig out: someone who wasn't me. Someone solid and warm and alive, who could effortlessly take Raff's hand without it passing through. Someone who could stand beside him in the sun without worrying about fading if they didn't have enough energy for a full manifestation.

I hated that hypothetical man with a ferocity that startled me.

When I thought about it too much while Raff was taking a much-needed hot shower, I accidentally shattered every bare bulb lighting the dungeon.

That's when I decided that I needed to focus all my energy on here and now. On appreciating every moment I still had with Raff, on keeping us both safe, and staying out of the clutches of a spirit strong enough to rend living flesh.

On sharing my best moments with him, and making memories that would outlive me for as long as he was willing to carry them.




We got to work right away, even though Raff needed sleep he wasn't getting. There was only so much I could do to convince him to rest. We started on my list, because some of it was going to take a lot of arranging—like that stupid sheep-selfie I had wanted so badly when I was alive. Raff was going to have to haul one over from the nearest farm, and as it turned out, most farmers wanted to be paid for a random sheep rental.

Some things sure hadn't changed. Like capitalism.

We also started talking to the other spirits more as we made our nightly rounds over the next week. Or at least, we tried to. Some of them were on edge since Chef Máirtín disappeared and didn't feel much like a friendly chat, as if they blamed Raff or suspected him of something. Still, he had his checklist of every light that needed to be on, every door that needed to be left ajar, all the steps to take to ensure the castle was just how the lodgers preferred it when the living weren't around. And he performed his job with care like always, doing right by the spirits even if they weren't happy to see him.

That man.

Did he know that I orbited him? That his light was as rare and strong as a sun?

As far as we could tell, no one knew where the chef had gone. And as the days slipped through our fingers, as Ardruin became busier than I could ever remember it, he didn't reappear. Nor did we come across further signs of Gary—probably because Raff had mortally offended the cosmic entity by giving it a dad name.

Caoimhe and her team were decorating to the nines for the grand Halloween opening, fully funded and dangerous thanks to new donors and new confidence after the trial banquet's success. There were line cooks and waitstaff to train, tour guides to bring up to speed on the history—Jordy was having the time of his life—and a marketing specialist consulting so that tickets would be booked into next year before opening night. Caoimhe was even moving forward with turning some of the upstairs bedrooms into guest lodgings despite Raff's (and Síofra's) misgivings. She seemed to think

being noticeably tired was making him paranoid when he hinted that the castle was harboring a powerful entity, and suggested that he take a night off to go on a date with his cute friend from the banquet—far from her worst idea, even if we couldn't actually go anywhere but the castle grounds.

From the outside, I could understand her perspective: things had been calm since before Chef Máirtín vanished, thanks to Raff, and they were even quieter now with the dead so uneasy. Caoimhe hadn't linked the torn-up deer with any kind of haunting, deciding it had been an unfortunate hit-and-run—as if that could explain most of its face being missing, and the half of a fox found nearby. Still, once the groundskeeper hauled away the carcasses and the carrion birds departed, she sent her team right back to work restoring the stables.

There was talk of a miniature pony to greet guests.

Halloween mania was really taking hold, as much as I wanted to pretend the damn holiday didn't even exist and wasn't looming ever-closer.

I knew Raff felt it, too. That was why he was so tired, stubbornly staying awake with me until four or five in the morning without fail just so we could talk a little longer. Eventually, he would fall asleep with his arm around me or his head in my lap, warm and trusting me enough to just . . . let go. I would press a kiss into his hair and stroke his back while he slept, wanting him to feel what I couldn't say. Wanting him to dream about something that was, despite my being dead, very much real.




It was October 10th, around ten in the evening, when Raff appeared in the foyer wearing his black overalls and leather jacket, a familiar notebook in his hand and familiar weapons at his side—singing what had somehow become our song even if it started as a dumb joke.

His rich Kerry brogue echoed through the room, dipping and rising like waves hitting a breakwater, bouncing off garlands of fake cobwebs and strings of orange lights. I indulged in staying hidden for a moment so I could just listen and be fully swept up in it, even though manifesting was getting easier every night. There was so much energy to draw from lately—the air was thick with it, like those charged moments before a storm.

By the time Raff hit the final chorus, I had fully materialized in front of him. Solid enough that, when he reached out, his fingers brushed my arm.

He grinned, lopsided and tired but no less lovely. “There you are. I was startin’ to think you’d leave me hanging.” The shadow that flitted across his face just after said something else, too: he was starting to worry that I had disappeared like Máirtín.

I raised an eyebrow and teased, trying to chase the shadows away: “What, no Britney or N*SYNC tonight? No surprise one-hit wonder?” But I also took his hand in mine and squeezed it reassuringly.

He shrugged and dragged his thumb across my palm. “Why mess with a classic?”

As he pulled me into his arms like he always did when we were alone, I counted his heartbeats. One . . . two . . . three . . . each one warm and steady against my ribs. The sound anchored me more than the stone floor beneath my feet.

“You know, it looks a bit like Halloween threw up in here,” Raff muttered playfully. “Maybe Caoimhe managed to scare Gary off with all this, and we can relax.”

The foyer—the whole castle—drowned in orange and black. Caoimhe had gone absolutely feral.

Paper ghosts dangled from the chandelier. A dozen carved pumpkins lined each side of the wide front staircase, their flickering faces casting jagged shadows that crawled up the walls. Fake cobwebs draped over the banister like bunting, except some of them weren’t fake—I could feel the faint, skittish energy of tiny beings tangled in them. A plastic animatronic witch cackled and waved every time someone walked past, only she had been going off at random ever since Jordy locked up for the night.

“Or maybe,” I said, lowering my voice so we wouldn’t be overheard, “the spirits themselves scared old Gary off. Look at Brigid.”

The chambermaid drifted across the landing above us, her plain, usually stoic features now blurred like water running down glass. Her hands twitched in repetitive motions as she dusted each of the jack-o’-lanterns with a wet mop.

“She looks like she’s gearing up to be the star of the show on opening night,” Raff whispered back, but apparently not quietly enough.

She turned her head toward us, and when she did, her neck bent too far, like a marionette pulled by a child’s clumsy hand.

Raff took an instinctive step back, bringing me with him, though Brigid waved a hand in greeting and went right back to work.

“She’s not the only one, though,” I whispered. I probably didn’t need to, but I added, under my breath as we hurried out of the foyer and away from the chambermaid, “There’s something off with Síofra, too.”

She hadn’t looked like herself since even before the chef disappeared. Her skin was melting off, her hair lank and ragged, and there were gaps in her once-perfect teeth. It was like she was slowly decaying before us, or losing control over her manifestations that were only sometimes meant to be frightening—and definitely not intended to scare me or Raff.

“Maybe they’re just getting into the Halloween fun,” he said softly as we hurried down a hallway that the sconces didn’t fully brighten like they should have. “Or maybe,” he added as we gained the safety of the parlor with no one else in it, “it’s because of Máirtín. They all seem scared they’ll be next, and maybe it’s . . . I don’t know . . .”

“Messing with how they manifest?” I supplied. “Yeah, that could be it.” I was surprised it wasn’t happening to me, too, but then—I wasn’t scared. Not of that. Just like Raff trusted me in his most vulnerable moments as he was drifting off to sleep, I trusted him with this most vulnerable part of me—tidying up the remnants of my unfinished life.

Raff settled onto the stiff couch and cleared his throat. “Right, well . . . before we get started tonight, I wanted you to know I worked on number six from your list today. I typed up the letter you wrote to Chloe about missing her wedding—you can check over it when I’m asleep, if you’d like. The phone’s out in the van, and you have all my passwords.”

Something in my chest tightened so sharply that I almost lost my shape.

Chloe. My middle sister.

She had been engaged before we came to Ireland, and would have been the first of our sibling quartet to get married. I was supposed to be the Man of Honor—Chloe had asked me on the trip—but dying had put a dampener on that. A few days ago, Raff had looked her up online and confirmed that she was alive and well, and that she now called Annie her wife. They were living up north in Maine. Beyond that, I hadn’t wanted to know the details. It would have been one more tie to the world I was supposed to be leaving behind.

It hurt enough as it was.

Sixteen years’ worth of hurt.

My eyes felt like they were welling with tears, even if it wasn't possible. They stung so much that I had to look away. "Thanks, All Star."

When I settled onto the couch beside him, he rested a hand in the hollow of my back, steadying me. "It's on the list," he said gently, "and we're workin' through it. Oh, and . . . my mam's looking for that teapot your mam wanted when she was here. She's got half of Kerry on the hunt, checking antique shops and their own cupboards. And she's not lettin' either of us pay for the thing when she finds it."

A warm shimmer pulsed through me, the ghost equivalent of blushing.

He undid me with his thoughtfulness, then put me back together with those steady arms that held me when I slid onto his lap to show him just how much I appreciated him.

"That's so much effort," I protested. "You didn't have to—"

"I wanted to," he said softly, his breath gusting over my lips, warm and slightly sweet from the tea he'd made earlier.

Drawn in like I always was, I rested my forehead gently against his and wrapped my legs around his waist. Most comfortable couch I'd ever sat on.

"So that's number six and seven. Two boxes nearly ticked. I'm working on the sheep, and the autopsy report, and we're finally starting number one tomorrow," he murmured, like he hoped the progress would reassure me. "Your big Dungeons and Dragons plan."

My eyes tracked the flicker of his tongue as he licked his lips. It was hard to focus on anything when he was surrounding me, close enough to kiss, like we spent many of our nights doing. He never asked for more, but I knew he thought about it, because I had felt him swell against my leg and even palmed him teasingly through his pants. I just hadn't been brave enough yet to ask if I could jack him off—something else I hadn't done before.

"It's not just 'my big plan,'" I protested when I realized I hadn't responded. Really smooth, just staring at his mouth like that. Then I relented: "Okay, it sort of is. DMing is a lot of responsibility."

"You're delighted with yourself," Raff said, his eyes dancing like he was thrilled with me, too. He traced the side of my face with a few fingers while his other hand snuck under my shirt, settling against my back like the cold no longer stung him. "You've already got the whole world written in your head, don't you?"

“*Worlds*,” I corrected, turning my head slightly to kiss his fingertips. I couldn’t help it. I loved the way he looked at me, the way he touched me like it was something sacred. “Plural.”

He chuckled, low and knowing, the sound rubbing along my spine. Traveling to other places, too, a little jolt waking my cock when he started tracing my lips with one finger. “Right. Sorry, several worlds. So, we’ve your character—”

“My tragic ghost bard NPC,” I said with a grin, catching Raff’s finger between my teeth for just a second and feeling him shift a little beneath me in response. “Who does his best writing in dungeons and is absolutely not just me with better hair.”

“And my lad,” Raff said with a touch of pride and a bit of breathiness. “Half-elf ranger, bit of a mess, from ‘a suspiciously familiar coastal village.’”

“You named it ‘South Kerry But Fantasy,’” I reminded him, leaning in to kiss his neck. What can I say? Dungeons and Dragons kind of did it for me, and so did Raff. “Subtle.”

Raff was definitely picking up on a few things, because he kept rambling about the game while I made out with his neck like he knew this was going places. “And then we’ve got Jordy’s dwarf paladin and Basil’s tiefling sorcerer with the wild magic . . . what’re their names again?”

His breathing hitched, and he shifted beneath me again as I gently rolled my hips against his. I almost felt like I was actually getting hard for once, and if the cosmos had decided that was possible as we were edging toward Halloween, I wanted to see how far I could take it. If I could be the partner I wanted to be for him.

“We’ll have to check their character sheets,” I said as I sank my fingers into his hair and pulled just enough to expose more of his throat for kissing. “And then of course there’s Síofra’s wood elf druid, assuming she doesn’t drip melting skin all over the dice or something. I think the party should be pretty balanced . . .”

Even I was losing track of what was being said by now, and I was doing the talking.

Especially when Raff gave me a crooked smile as his fingers trailed up my side. “You’re in charge of D&D, so I trust you, boss.”

The word did something embarrassing to me. Something that made me think—as I often did lately—about number ten on my list. The one I’d

written vaguely, the one that meant more than I could ever say.

Raff hadn't mentioned it since we started working on the others. Hadn't given me any curious looks, hadn't asked me any vaguely prying questions. He just respected the boundary without a second thought, confirming exactly what I wanted and who with.

Number 10: I'd always wanted to bottom for someone. Not just anyone, though. Someone I trusted completely. Someone who saw me, and made me feel safe enough to let go. Someone I was sure I could invite in without regret.

And right now, that someone was calling me "a stór" under his breath and running his fingertips through my hair, over my face. I don't think he realized that I'd picked up a little Irish here and there, given where I'd died. He was calling me his treasure.

As our eyes locked, it hit me like gravity. Like something I'd been orbiting for weeks: desire. And finally, for the second time in mere days after years of stagnant death where I couldn't get my body to answer me that way anymore—I was fully aroused, my jeans too tight and my mouth too dry.

He was just as hard beneath me, legs splayed open, wanting. And I wanted to give him everything. Not all at once, not right away, but I was ready to work up to it. Having a body that would enjoy every moment of his pleasure just made it even sweeter.

I leaned in close enough that Raff's breath brushed my cheek, close enough that his fingers tightened a little where he had caught my hips and held them. I lowered my voice, quiet and deliberate, wanting Raff to feel my meaning as much as hear it. "You remember . . . how you used to watch me?"

Raff went still beneath me. Not pulling away, just arrested by my words. Breath held and heart hammering.

He knew exactly what I meant, then: my old gaming videos. I'd thought about it, too. Raff with the cutest wavy bedhead, sweatpants pooled around his ankles, working himself over in a tight fist while his eyes were locked on a screen filled with my face. I'd imagined the moment his breath caught, the way his orgasm tore through all that muscle, beauty in motion. Imagined the drips of sweat and cum beading down his stomach, sweet curves and soft hair a glorious mess. All because of me.

I let the silence stretch, the tension thrumming between us like a plucked string before I continued: “How much you liked it.” Softer still, trailing my fingers down his stomach until they rested lightly over his erection, I added, “What it did to you.”

His answering swallow was audible, his hands flexing on my hips as he nodded.

I brushed my nose against his cheek, my voice a whisper meant for no one else, living or dead, in any world. “Tell me, a stór—do you want the real thing?”

Raff’s wide, stunned eyes swiftly darkened with hunger, like he was looking at something he’d wanted for so long that he had stopped believing it could be real.

He trembled beneath me, trying so hard to be good, to take this at my pace. And for once, I wasn’t overwhelmed by the thought of what I wanted to happen here tonight. I was steady, grounded in my body—or the memory of it—in a way I hadn’t been since I died.

I cupped Raff’s jaw, thumb brushing the heat blooming in his cheek. “Hey,” I murmured, “look at me. I want you to keep looking at me. I love it. And you love it, you know you do. Tell me, do you want to watch me while I watch you?”

As Raff’s breath caught, a tiny sound he couldn’t swallow, my mouth curved. Not cocky, just knowing. Because I was feeling it, too.

Raff’s hands slid up my back beneath my shirt, his fingers trembling, his body straining toward mine like gravity being rewritten. Then he nodded once, sharp and desperate, because words had clearly abandoned him.

I came in for a kiss, sucking his bottom lip until he was squirming, then leaned back to tug my shirt up over my head. I let it drop to the parlor floor and twisted slightly to put my tattoo on full display for him: a bright purple D20, a dice with a halo over it. Not exactly a pun about death, because beneath it were the words, “Chaotic Good Boy.”

“Do you,” I repeated, slow and intentional, “want this?”

Raff stared at the words inked along my ribs for a moment before he finally managed a few words, wrecked and reverent. “Please. Yes, please. I want . . . the real thing. Give it to me, le do thoil.”

I was half-exposed, more vulnerable than I’d been in years, but I didn’t feel it with Raff pleading at me in Irish. This was power, the way his lips parted so willingly when I pushed a finger inside, his tongue swirling

around it. But this was also safety, how Raff offered himself without taking, wanting without demanding. It settled into me like warmth, like weight, like a pulse I could finally feel again.

I wasn't a ghost with him.

Not tonight.

I was the one choosing. The one leading. And Raff was right there beneath me, breathless and undone, waiting for whatever I offered next.

That's when I shifted—not closer, but away, sliding off Raff's lap with a slow, deliberate grace, trying to put on a show for him. The way his hands clenched uselessly in the air as I slipped away felt like he was rubbing them against me somehow, and I ached at the sight.

Raff's chest rose and fell too fast, eyes blown wide as he braced himself on one end of the couch like he was afraid a single wrong move might startle me into calling the whole thing off. As if I hadn't made up my mind about him a long time ago.

I stood, kicking off my shoes, then slowly stripped off my jeans and boxers with more confidence than I'd possessed in life before settling on the opposite end, facing him. My legs spread so nothing was left to the imagination, unlike all those videos, one arm draped over the back of the couch like I owned this place. Like I owned the moment. Like I owned Raff's own straining erection—because I did.

I did that.

Raff swallowed hard again, his voice rough. "Eric, what're you—?"

I cut him off with a look. With fingers curling around my own cock for the first time in years, squeezing, stroking, showing off for him and thrilling myself with this reminder of living at the same time. "You strip, too. And then stay there. You used to watch me from a distance—remember? Tonight, I'm just another one of those videos, up close and personal."

Raff's breath shuddered out of him as he gave a clumsy nod and started shucking off those overalls. I wanted to do it for him one day. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe a few days from now. But right now, I just wanted to watch him reveal himself to me. To fully absorb everything he wanted to show me, because he was my treasure, too.

Down came the overalls, pooling around his feet. His boxers were black, too, and short, hugging a whole lot of cute ass. Off came his t-shirt next—but not his black salt pendant, which lay against his smooth, bare chest—before he hooked a thumb into the waistband of his boxers and caught my

eyes, holding them as he tugged the pair off and kicked it away. A trail of downy red hair led from his navel to his thick, flushed dick. I could have looked at that all night if not for the freckles he had told me about a long time ago, the ones that formed constellations across the pale expanse of his skin.

Another time, *next time*, I was going to trace them with my tongue. Teach him their shapes and their names. Show him that he was all the wonder of the stars made flesh. It was really important that he know, if he didn't already.

Finally, a little shakily, Raff settled back at the other end of the couch and mirrored me, keeping his legs spread and curling his fingers around his big, needy erection.

"Let's start like this," I murmured, stroking myself a little and shaking all over at the way so much sensation rushed through me. He had done this to me somehow. "You on your end, and me on mine."

"Eric, please," Raff said as he mirrored me again, starting to stroke himself.

"I'm right here, a stór," I reminded him. I wasn't gone yet. "And you're going to feel every second of it." I settled deeper into the cushions, fully in my body, fully aware of the way Raff was already unraveling across from me as I stroked myself for him, angling my fingers to make sure he had the clearest view.

"You're killing me," Raff panted as he jacked himself with the same slow, deliberate strokes I was using. Matching me, already understanding the game.

"No," I murmured, finally deciding to move his way. The couch dipped under my weight as the distance shrank while Raff's eyes tracked the motion like a mountain lion watching its prey. "I'm showing you."

"Showing me what?" Raff whispered, jagged, as I settled with my knees just touching his and ran my fingers along the length of my cock.

"How much you want this." I leaned in, my forehead touching his again. His nearness anchored me, the way it always did. "And I want to see you now." Heat pooled low in my stomach, like I was getting drunk on the power of Raff looking at me like that—open, desperate, reverent. Keeping one hand on myself, I lifted the other to cup Raff's jaw, my thumb brushing the corner of his mouth. "We'll keep it slow like this for now. And let me watch you . . . the way you used to watch me. We'll do this together."

Foreheads still touching, I gazed down at our laps and gave myself a long stroke that coaxed a pearly drop of precum from my tip, humming with satisfaction at the way Raff instantly mirrored me, like his body was tuned to my frequency.

"Good," I murmured, rubbing my thumb over that drop of white just so I could watch him thumb his slit. "Just . . . just like that. Match me," I added gently. "Only do what I do, and only when I do it."

Leaning into me, the warmth of his forehead blazing hot, he choked out, "I'll do anything you ask."

My very being tensed up at that—not with fear, but with a sudden, fierce tenderness. "Just this. Just touch yourself with me. Stay with me. Show me how much you want me."

Raff mirrored me perfectly when I eventually picked up the pace, testing the limits of my body while completely distracted by his. The darker freckles in the crease of his thigh. The thickness of him. The soft patch of red-brown hair I wanted to run my fingers through. His balls, pink and drawn up tight, desperate for the release we were chasing.

I cupped my own for a minute just so I could watch him play with his.

Soon, we were back to stroking in sync, and although I didn't need to breathe, I matched the cadence of my panted breaths to his. Then I noticed that the fingers of his free hand were curled into the couch cushions, knuckles white. His forehead was slick against mine.

"I can't—I don't know if I can hold it—" he gasped, the urgency in his voice jumping straight to my cock.

"You don't have to hold anything," I told him, watching the precum leak from him and wishing I could lap it up with my tongue. To taste salt again. But I forced myself to raise my eyes to his when I said, "You've shown me plenty, Good Boy. I want you to let go now."

When he came, with a growl and a cry and a gush that soaked his stomach, I was the one who mirrored him seconds later—holding on just long enough to savor every second of his body-shaking, full-throated finish.

We were a mess. But rather than make any move to clean up once we drifted back into ourselves, Raff gathered me in his arms, pulling me back onto his lap. "Eric . . . that was . . . don't go anywhere," he muttered, resting his head against mine.

"I'm not," I whispered. "I won't. I've got you, and you've got me."

For, what—another twenty-one days?

Finishing this list wasn’t making me feel ready to move on in the slightest. I was pretty sure Raff’s witch was a fraud, but I wasn’t about to tell him that. Not when I could spend the time holding him and kissing his face instead.

Raff let out a long, trembling breath as I pressed a hand against his flushed cheek. It sounded like release, relief, and also something dangerously close to love.

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# Nineteen

# By the Throat

## Eric

Steam still clung to the bathroom mirror when we stepped back into the parlor, our hair damp and our clothes fresh (at least Raff's clothes). Everything felt softer around the edges, the castle losing some of its usual distinct and unshakeable gloom.

I wasn't sure I needed to clean up my come—maybe the cold stickiness would have vanished in a short while—but it had been nice to pretend. To have another chance to kiss Raff some more and run my hands over his chest, his stomach. I'd never considered that being a virgin meant I was missing out on anything in life, as much as I wanted to find someone to love. I had my friends and family, hobbies, pets. Even now, I didn't think that exactly—what I had specifically been missing was looking at me with the greenest eyes as he ran a towel over his hair one last time before tossing it over the back of a wingback armchair.

He watched me like he was still trying to convince himself I was real. Like if he blinked for a second too long, I might vanish.

I wanted to live in that look, stay caught in his warmth forever.

But then he glanced toward the window, across the dark stretch of the castle grounds, and sighed resignedly. “We still have to make the rounds,” he said, a touch of fondness creeping into his voice as he glanced back at me. “If the light’s not on at the back door, poor Colmán will go mad with worry. Come on. Let’s see if we can figure out what Gary’s been up to, because I don’t trust this quiet.”

I gaped at him. “Do you realize we’re going to die—well, I’m going to get eaten or something—because you gave an angry spirit a nickname that makes it sound like it enjoys grilling on the weekends?”

Raff laughed, if tiredly, as he reached for me.

I met him halfway, catching his fingers with mine. “I wish we could just stay right here all night and forget the angry spirit part.”

My admission hit me harder than I expected when I heard it spoken out loud: I wanted to stay. Really stay here in this world with him, even if it meant haunting Ardruin forever. I wanted all of his nights, his grumbling, slow mornings, and his middling days.

Raff’s thumb brushed the back of my hand, unhurried and gentle. “I know,” he murmured. “Me too.” Eyes bright and voice warm, he leaned in and put his lips to my ear. “But on the bright side you’re so fond of, now that I know how good you are at giving orders . . . I can’t wait to watch you DM.”

His words sent a small shockwave through me. “I didn’t think I’d be good at something like that,” I confessed in that safe, close space between us. “But with you, it just felt natural.”

“A lot of things do, don’t they?” he answered.

I for one hadn’t expected any of it—not the heat, not the certainty, and not the way my voice had come out low and sure. I had always assumed that if I ever had a moment like this with someone, I’d freeze, or fumble, or feel like I had to pretend.

But with Raff, none of that happened. It had all felt instinctive, like part of me already knew what to do because he trusted me. Because he looked at me like I could handle him.

I wasn’t out of my depth for a single second with him.

For a moment, we just stood there, hands clasped, foreheads touching. The world outside the parlor felt impossibly far away. I could almost pretend we didn’t have responsibilities, or ghosts, or danger waiting for us in the dark.

“At least we can do this together.” I gave his hand one more squeeze—not wanting to let go, not ready to lose the warmth of him—and finally stepped toward the door.

He followed close behind, our shoulders brushing, and for a thrilling moment I let myself believe that maybe we wouldn’t be apart when this was all over.

I needed to believe, even if it was delusional.

We made it halfway down the corridor before Raff stopped short. I nearly walked through him, quite literally, before I saw what he was staring at through the narrow window overlooking the courtyard.

A fox lay motionless in the grass below, watched over by Caoimhe’s well-dressed scarecrows and plastic black cats. Scarlet streaked the creature’s belly.

Raff’s jaw tightened, his eyes fixed on the grim sight. “Guess we found Gary,” he muttered, reaching out to pull me instinctively closer, like he thought the entity might appear and snatch me away if he didn’t hold on. “You know . . . I haven’t seen the courtyard poltergeist in a while. All those decorations have stayed right where Basil staked them for at least three days running, and that’s some kind of record.”

“Fuck. You’re right. You think that means Gary absorbed another spirit right under our noses? One we wouldn’t miss like the others,” I said quietly. And even though the poltergeist had been kind of a nuisance, that meant it could be any of us next.

Raff nodded, his mind clearly already racing ahead. “We need to ask the spirits something different tonight,” he said, pushing away from the window. “Not just what they’ve seen or what they’re afraid of. I want to know what they’ve seen *die* here in all their years.”

“You think . . . what, centuries of deaths are all connected to Gary?”

What I couldn’t bring myself to ask was: *my death?*

Raff considered that for a moment with his head tilted, like he was listening for something. “Maybe. I’m not sure. We know Síofra was poisoned, so we can’t pin everything on the Awful Ruinous Yoke, but . . . I do think everything here is connected somehow. Seems to me like we just don’t have the full picture yet.”

His eyes found mine, and the worry there softened when I gave him my bravest smile. Of course, it was easy to have courage when I was looking at

him—not the fox, or the otherwise empty courtyard that had been free of poltergeist mischief for many nights now.

“Come on, a stór,” he said quietly. “We have to talk to them. And maybe you take the lead again—they like you. They only tolerate me.”

“They might be uneasy lately, but they still adore you—almost as much as I do, but it *is* a competition, and I’m going for the gold.” I took his hand again, because I needed to. Because I wanted to. Because the night felt darker now, and he was the only light in it. “Let’s go.”

And together, we stepped into the cold heart of the castle.




Brother Fintan’s high tower room was lit by a few pillar candles, one in each window, that never burned down. They were LED candles Raff had bought him in the village, because even though the dead monk didn’t need light to read by, he enjoyed it out of habit. A small creature comfort Raff had been happy to provide.

Brother Fintan sat on a stone ledge in the sparsely furnished room, translucent robes pooling around him, his shaved head bowed over the romance novel Raff had given him a few nights ago—a bright pink paperback with a swooning heroine on the cover.

He looked up as I cracked the door open and breezed in, followed closely by Raff, and the monk’s weathered face brightened. We’d picked one of the friendliest spirits to start with on purpose. “Ah! Raff, a chara—my friends, how are you this evening? Have ye come to read the next chapter with me? Lady Arabella was just about to confess her love—”

Raff cracked a grin as he kicked the door shut behind us. “Not tonight, Brother. We’ve got a question for you, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Fintan blinked and set the book aside, thrown by this turn of events. “A question? And not about Lady Arabella’s stable lad and his secret past?”

Raff knelt beside him and, putting a hand over his heart, said, “Next time, I swear.”

Fintan sighed rather theatrically for an ancient monk. “Very well. Ask away.”

I settled on the stone floor beside Raff. The Dolans hadn’t paid to heat these more remote parts of the castle yet, but the cold didn’t bother me, of course. Raff darted a glance at me, putting a casual hand on my knee—though it felt anything but, in the presence of someone else. He had suggested that I take the lead with our questioning earlier, and was maybe inviting me to do so now, but I subtly shook my head. He could do this. I smiled and let him see that I was at ease, because I believed in him.

“Right,” Raff said a moment later, returning his focus to the monk. “You’ve been here a long time, a chara.”

“Since the year of Our Lord 697,” Fintan confirmed proudly.

“So . . . have you ever seen anyone die here?”

The monk’s expression shifted—not frightened, but thoughtful. “Aye. Many souls. This place has known its share of bloodshed and sorrows.” He began counting on his thick fingers. “There was the chieftain stabbed during a wedding feast. The queen poisoned by her own sister. A lad who fell from the battlements while trying to impress a sweetheart. A plague that swept through in the late 1200s like fire from the Heavens. A duel gone wrong in the courtyard. A man who choked on a goose bone in the 1400s. Or maybe it was the 1500s. Anyway, there was a servant trampled by a runaway horse. A cook who slipped in lard and broke his neck. A mason crushed by falling stone, and . . .” He paused, the flickering of the LED candle casting dramatic shadows across his face. “. . . poor Máirtín, who, as you know, is no longer with us in any sense.”

Raff sat a little taller, more attentive. “Máirtín?”

“What happened to him?” I asked, a sense of foreboding settling in. “He told us he died in a kitchen fire.”

Brother Fintan folded his hands. “More or less. But that’s not the whole story. He was making one of his . . . concoctions. A stew with lamb, onion, barley, and a powder that he said was from the ninth century. It smelled like the devil’s armpit, if you ask me.”

Raff huffed a laugh, rich and musical. “That sounds like him, all right.”

His hand was still on my knee, and I laid my own overtop it, drawing his gaze. I smiled when he looked my way. “Remember the eel pie?”

Raff groaned. “Oh, I wish I didn’t. A recipe from 1373.”

“Yeah—you loved it,” I teased, grinning at the memory. The chef in his stained apron beaming with pride as he presented the cosmic horror in a pie plate, and Raff clutching the countertop for dear life after a single bite.

“You laughed so hard the lights flickered!” Raff accused, threading our fingers together.

“You gagged so hard Máirtín nearly banned you from the kitchen,” I shot back. “We could hear him weeping in the scullery for *days*.”

The monk chuckled, clearly amused by us. His pale eyes skimmed over our joined hands, but rather than looking repulsed or upset, he cracked a smile. He was missing a canine tooth. “You two are worse than Lady Arabella and her stable lad,” he said fondly.

Raff’s face went scarlet, and I had to look away from both of them, suddenly fascinated by the pattern of cracks in the tower wall.

Having spent sixteen years drifting, invisible, feared or unwanted at best, it was overwhelming to be fully seen. And not just that, but to be seen with Raff like this—as a man holding the hand of the man he had just masturbated with on an antique and probably very expensive couch.

But the monk only kept smiling, and finally continued, “When the chef added the powder to his recipe, the fire leapt higher than I’d ever seen. It burned the hair right off Máirtín’s face and set the whole kitchen ablaze. And in the flames . . .”

When he hesitated, both Raff and I leaned forward slightly, drawn in by the long pause.

“There was a shape,” the monk said slowly, frowning. “Tall. Too tall. Like a man made of fire, but . . . not shaped quite like one. Its limbs, if you could call them that, bent wrong. It danced in the flames, and the heat of it warped the air around it even with the whole kitchen going up—flames licking the ceiling, pots melting. And Máirtín . . . he was still alive at that point. Alive and in a panic to snuff the flames, until he saw *it* dancing. His eyes went wide, and then he fell. Dropped dead right where he stood. And that thing . . . danced right over his body without a care. Almost like it was celebrating.”

*Dropped dead right where he stood*.

It sounded too familiar.

The space around my ribs went thin, like the world was shrinking me to fit. I needed to move. To get away from the flickering artificial candlelight and just be in Raff’s arms for a minute. Because if this figure made of flame had killed before—dropped someone on the spot—then maybe it had also ignited the skull candle and threatened Raff’s family. And maybe, just

maybe, it had seen me standing on the topmost balcony sixteen years ago and . . .

But I hadn’t been burned. A figure made of fire was bound to leave a mark. Right?




We thanked Brother Fintan and hurried down the stairwell from the tower. It was cold and narrow, so the smallest noises made a deep echo. Raff’s flashlight bounced against the stone ahead of us, but the long shadows it threw seemed to reach back toward us with grasping fingers.

Halfway down, Raff stopped.

“Is your knee—?” I started to ask.

“No, but Eric,” he interrupted urgently, his voice low and rough. “Just come here.”

I stepped into his arms right away. His hands came up to cradle my face, wonderfully warm and not shaking in the slightest, which helped steady me, too. I leaned into that touch like it was the only solid thing in the world.

The seed of fear Fintan’s story had planted in me had taken root and was swiftly growing, cold and sharp. The image of Máirtín collapsing in the fire. The shape in the flames leaping and swaying over his fallen form. The knowledge that the thing we were calling Gary had been killing for centuries . . .

Raff’s forehead settled gently against mine. “This is a lot, I know. Old Gary’s been killing for a long time. Sounds like all he does is consume.”

“Devour,” I whispered with a little shudder. “Yeah. And I wonder if . . .” I couldn’t quite bring myself to say it, even to Raff, because that might make it real. I wondered if I had seen this figure made of fire and forgotten. It wasn’t like I remembered the day of my death at all, as Raff knew. “I wonder if we’ll hear other stories like Brother Fintan’s, and if so, how we’re supposed to fight something that’s made of fire,” I finished lamely, because Raff was still looking at me expectantly. Patient and kind. “But we’ll figure it out. I believe in us. I believe in you.”

His eyes softened, vulnerable in a way that pulled at my light, like a lantern guttering.

So I kissed him. Soft and slow at first. Then desperate. Grateful, as his lips caught mine and pulled me back into myself. Pressed close, I counted his heartbeats again—one . . . two . . . three—each one steady, another tether to here and now, and not sixteen years ago at the top of a castle I couldn't even remember walking into.

His hands slid into my hair. Mine curled into the fabric of his overalls. The stairwell felt too small to contain everything I felt—fear, longing, love, the knife of needing to let go when all I wanted was to hang on tighter than ever.

When we finally pulled apart, he pressed a kiss into the top of my hair. "Okay," he whispered hoarsely, "Time to do what we do best: let's keep goin'."




The stables were even colder than usual, judging by the way Raff nestled deeper into his jacket. He set a battery-powered lantern on the edge of a stall for shy, skittish Donnacha, the young stable hand who had been here even longer than Chef Máirtín.

I spotted the stable hand first, as a shimmer at the corner of my eye, and gently put a hand on Raff's arm. I guided him to the stall where Donnacha brushed a horse who hadn't existed for centuries while humming an old tune.

Raff cleared his throat. "Tráthnóna maith, a chara," he said gently. Then, although he really didn't need to translate the basics for me anymore, he added almost out of habit, "Good evening, friend. We're asking everyone the same question tonight, if you've got a moment."

Donnacha held his soft-bristled brush above the old mare's flank and considered us, blinking slowly. "A moment," he agreed. "But that's all. The work never ends around here."

"You're telling us," I whispered, mostly to Raff, tugging a lock of his hair.

He was still smiling faintly when he gathered himself enough to ask the transparent stable hand, "We don't have all night, either, so we'll skip the pleasantries: have you ever seen anyone die in your time here?"

Donnacha gave a steady nod. Even in life, working with horses, death was a present part of his days. “Aye. Plenty of people and creatures. This place has a long memory, and so do I.” He resumed a rhythmic brushing of the nearly invisible mare as he listed them for us. “There was the lord who fell from his horse and broke his neck. A maid who slipped on ice and cracked her skull. A lad who drowned in the pond in the woods. So many soldiers who bled out after battle and those who fell to plague and the great hunger, An Gorta Mór. I’ve mostly forgotten their names.” He paused, his young but work-worn features softening. “And wee Gráinne. That was the worst of them.”

Raff stiffened beside me. “What happened to her?”

Donnacha put down the brush again and sighed. The mare nosed at him, and he patted her neck. “She was playing by the well just up there.” He pointed with one hand, but when I peered out the open stall door, I saw nothing but the dark ground. It must have been filled in a long time ago. “Her mam was always tellin’ her not to mess around with it, especially not to lean over its lip, but Gráinne told her she liked the echo.”

Raff shivered as the air around us grew heavier. More aware.

“The day she died,” the stable hand said slowly, “the ground was soft with rain. I remember, because one of the living grooms at the time slipped and fell while mucking stalls. The stones around the well must have been slick, too. I was making rounds to help fill water buckets when I heard her laughing. And then . . . the laughter stopped. It weren’t a fall,” he said grimly. “I saw it, as I was headin’ to the well. The water rose up to meet her, like a great, cold hand reaching out of the well itself. Fingers made of water, muck, and stone reaching up over the lip and grabbed her by the throat.”

The mare behind him shifted restlessly, hooves scraping the ground, almost too softly to be heard.

“She didn’t even scream, she was so surprised. The thing held on tight, and pulled her in.” The stable hand frowned. “I don’t like fairy-stories, but this was real. I saw it.”

I slipped an arm around Raff’s waist beneath his jacket and nestled into his side.

*One-two-three-four* went his heartbeat as he took it all in.

“I floated,” Donnacha continued. “The whole way to her. There was nothin’ that could slow me down, and I thought maybe, if I got there in time, I could pull her out. But the closer I got, the air felt . . . heavier.

Harder to move through, even for me. And the well was groaning—kind of like a throat. Water was crawling down the stones, dragging wee Gráinne with it, and clods of earth, too."

The mare rested her head on Donnacha's filmy shoulder, but he hardly seemed to notice. "And then . . . she was gone. The water sealed itself over her like a lid, no splash, no bubbles. Just gone. The living had taken notice by now, and there was so much screamin'. And before I went back to the stables to get away from all the noise, I saw something moving beneath the surface. Eyes, green as moss. Watching me."

The lantern Raff had brought for the stable hand flickered a few times and died, leaving the darkness to swallow us whole.

I wished, more than anything, that there were stars out tonight.

*Five-six-seven-eight.* Raff's heart tapped against his ribs so hard that the urgency in it moved me, too. *Nine-ten-eleven-twelve.*

"Let's go," he whispered as his hand found mine and held on tight. He thanked Donnacha and promised to bring fresh batteries for the lantern soon.




We wound up back in the parlor, on *that* couch, collapsing against each other. As if the more modern lighting in here somehow made us safe from a centuries-old killer who was clearly on the prowl again.

A shapeshifting killer.

Raff pulled me close, a strong arm around my shoulders, my head tucked under his chin. His heartbeat was still much too fast.

When he finally broke the silence, it was in a whisper: "Elemental." I waited for him to say more, though from what he had told me about them, I knew he was right. "Water, moss, earth, fire—the candle that lit itself on us. Stupid Gary's an elemental. It can bend nature, use it to manifest in different ways. Kill in different ways."

"And it's not the only reason people have died here," I said, "but it's also been murdering for centuries alongside all those other causes. Chef Máirtín died in the 1500s, and Gráinne in the 1700s. And . . ." I still couldn't bring myself to suggest what was on the tip of my tongue. I buried my face in the

warmth of Raff's shoulder. "And now it's killing animals, and maybe feeding on spirits—like Chef Máirtín and the poltergeist from the courtyard. Maybe more."

Raff had obviously sensed that something was wrong, but as per usual, he didn't push. He just ran a hand down my back in a slow, soothing repetitive motion. "If it's taking other spirits' energy, it's obviously trying to make itself stronger. So then the question is why? Why now?" He paused, head cocked. "Suppose it feels threatened by all the living that are going to be invading its home six nights a week if steady ticket sales continue?"

I considered this for a moment, drawing back to meet his eyes. "You'd think that would almost make it happy, though. More victims. I think it feels threatened by *you*."

Raff laughed, not exactly a happy sound—more disbelieving. "Me? Why me? I don't expect I have a weapon that can stop it."

"But you've moved spirits on before, at your other jobs. You told me yourself. You're good at this. Think how calm the other spirits have been since you got here, just because you took the time to get to know them and what they like. You respect them, even at their worst and most frightening. Well, aside from the time you zapped me."

I couldn't resist reminding him about that, even now, though I softened the words by kissing his cheek.

"And if this thing needs to feed on other spirits, if that's how it gets strong enough to make its next kill or something—you're threatening its energy source by being here." I swallowed. "Raff . . . I'm scared for you."

He tightened his arm around me again. "I'm scared for you, too, and that's exactly why I'm not leaving. Because Gary's going to keep killing people and feeding on spirits whether I'm here or not. So I'm staying, as long as you're here. This changes nothing—we're still finishing your list, and in the meantime, we'll find a way to fight if it comes to that."

We stayed like that for a moment, Raff breathing and the rise and fall of his chest gently moved me, too. I leaned into him, counting his heartbeats again—one . . . two . . . three. They were slower now, despite everything we were piecing together, and I let the sound steady me.

But I couldn't stop thinking about number two on my list. Raff had already put so much time and effort into chasing down an autopsy report we might never see, or at least not by Halloween. And I had a sinking feeling that the answer was much closer than in a file on someone's computer.

“We need to make Lorcan talk,” Raff murmured. “He worked for ExorSquad, too. And he died most recently. Maybe he was working on a way to fight this thing. Or maybe he at least knows something that could point us in the right direction.”

“I bet he knows plenty,” I agreed as the glow inside me stuttered. A tiny skip, like it forgot how to stay steady. I just wasn’t sure I was ready to hear it. But if it meant crossing another item off my list, and maybe learning how to protect the living—or the dead—from the elemental’s whims, then there was no sense putting it off any longer.

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# Twenty

# After the Fall

## Eric

Lorcan McGilroy usually haunted Caoimhe's office in the castle's west wing. Although he either vanished entirely or locked the doors when Raff and I made our rounds, we had seen his shadow pacing in there from a distance, and this time we had come prepared with the keys. Raff thought Lorcan liked the hum of modernity: the combination printer and scanner, Caoimhe and Jordy's laptops, a tangle of tech and wires. He was the newest spirit here, so maybe the shiny veneer of the office helped him feel at home.

"How are we going to get him to talk this time, when he's never felt like it before?" I asked, following Raff into the office as he flicked on a desk lamp, its soft glow providing just enough light to see by.

"Rule number one-sixty-six," Raff muttered more to himself than to me. "Never turn on the big light until you've warned everyone in the room."

"What's rule one-sixty-six?" I turned, curious, but he just grinned and shook his head.

"Some advice I probably should ignore," was all he said. "Anyway, I'm not sure how we can get through to him. I was just hoping to appeal to his better nature, unless you've got a grand idea in that brilliant head of yours."

He pulled out Caoimhe's desk chair, the most comfortable one in the room, and gestured for me to take it. Then he drew a smaller wooden chair over to the desk and joined me. The relief that crossed his face as his rested his knee made me ache all over. Oh, Raff. Who was going to take care of him when I was gone?

Talking to Lorcan, getting closure, was one more step down that road. But it was either that or eventually get consumed by Gary, and only one of those seemed like a real choice.

"Let me try," I said to Raff, putting a hand over his sore knee to ice it.

Raff didn't flinch at my touch anymore. Didn't even act like the cold was soothing him. Maybe he'd just gotten used to me.

Still, I kept my hand there as I softly called, "Lorcan? It's us. Eric and Raff. Your, uh . . . coworker. Come on out. We know you're in here."

Nothing.

"We—I—wanted to talk to you about how you died. Just for a minute. It could really help us out." Yeah, still nothing, which I kind of expected at this point. "If you don't care about that, maybe you care about helping your fellow spirits? Or . . . maybe you care about giving ExorSquad the middle finger one more time from beyond the grave after where they landed you?"

A shimmer at the corner of my eye. A tall, lanky shape, thin lines melding into something solid as Lorcan drew on the hum of energy that filled the room and slowly manifested.

He appeared in front of a sleek set of filing cabinets: mid-thirties, dark, gel-slicked hair in disarray, in the same uniform as Raff but with a white t-shirt beneath. One strap of his black overalls had slipped off his shoulder. His edges were frayed, flickering like a candle caught in a draft. His eyes, which might have once been brown but now appeared almost entirely leeched of color, darted around the office, wild and terrified. One hand hovered near his sternum, like a pain lingered there.

Maybe the poor guy really did die from a heart attack.

"You shouldn't be here," he rasped, seemingly to both of us. "You need to leave. We can't talk here—anywhere. It listens. It *listens*." He shook his head, the nervous energy rolling off him making it hard for me to keep sitting still. "It watches from the stone . . ." His jumpy gaze finally settled on Raff. "Did Gerald send you to collect my soul so he can sell it and pay a few bills?"

"What?" Raff spluttered. "Don't be ridiculous. We want to know—"

“We need to know how you died. Exactly how you died, if you remember it.” The words left my mouth before I could stop myself, before I had fully thought them through.

I couldn’t bring myself to meet Raff’s gaze, though I could feel his eyes on me, so I focused on Lorcan instead as he paced in front of the file cabinets, his hands in the deep pockets of his overalls.

“It was in the air,” he murmured, quick and quiet, watching the walls like he thought they had eyes. “I was trying to zap the noisy ghosts upstairs when the air got really humid and heavy. It pressed in on my chest until my heart just couldn’t beat against it. I tried to move, but I couldn’t, and the whole time, these two dark hollows in the stone were just . . . staring at me. Like they were part of it, these horrible growths like eyes. You know it *watches*.”

“We do know about the elemental. We know it can kill the living,” Raff said evenly as I sank deeper into my chair, trying not to get swept away in a tide of unwelcome memories that Lorcan had just unlocked. “What we don’t know yet is what might protect us—the living and the dead—from the entity. We’ve been calling it ‘Gary.’”

“Don’t talk about it! Don’t fecking *name it*!” Lorcan was shouting at Raff now. “Don’t even think about it! I tried to warn them, the owners. I *tried*. But they wouldn’t listen about shutting this whole thing down. And look where it got me. The first guy was right to run and never look back. But if I hide, stay quiet—maybe it won’t take me next.” His form flickered harder, edges blurring first, then his features. “You want advice? There’s no fighting it. There’s no winning. Get away from this place while you can.”

“You don’t want it to take your soul, too,” Raff pointed out, rooted in calm. “I understand that. I don’t want it doing that to anyone here, or getting any stronger. That’s why—”

“I can’t,” Lorcan choked out. “I can’t talk to you anymore. I’m sorry. It’ll finish me next if I do. And then it’ll come for you, Rafferty O’Meara. It doesn’t take kindly to threats.”

A gust slammed through the room out of nowhere, rattling the closed windows. The gentle orange glow of the lamp on the desk flared and nearly extinguished as a shadow danced along the wall opposite us, tall and lean, neither human nor animal. One I realized I had seen before, unlocking a floodgate of memory.

Lorcan’s eyes went wide with terror, and he blinked out of sight as the shadow seemed to stretch toward him. Only his voice lingered for a few seconds, long enough to whisper, “Tell Gerald Pickett I’ll see him in hell.”

Raff let out a shaky breath in the quiet, then looked at me. The shadow and Lorcan were gone, but the cold left in their wake was so deep that even I could feel it. “Hey,” he said softly, “Are you . . .?”

I guess the look on my face stopped him cold. I guess I had the look of a dead man, or one who knows he’s doomed.

Because I remembered now. Everything.

Climbing the castle, looking out through gaps in the broken stones and imagining I was an adventurer gazing through a portal to some vast new world.

Sweating and panting by the time I reached the top. My blood sugar wasn’t low because I had remembered to eat a dense granola bar on the way up. The complex carbs held my sugar steady, releasing slowly over time.

My hands were steady on the partial stone handrail, and then—

A cold, wet hand settled on the base of my spine. Icy cold, impossible cold that ran up my back, my heart spasming in response. Vagus nerve shock. I had collapsed before I could cry out, just sort of crumpled and, with no ability to make my limbs cooperate, sailed over the edge.

And as I plummeted like a dropped stone: a shadow darkened the foyer wall. One without a light source, because the day was overcast and threatening rain. Its shape wasn’t, in the brief flash that I saw it, like anything I had seen before. Vaguely human, yes, but a perversion of our shape as it twisted and leapt along the stones toward me. Dancing as it emerged from the wall itself and took on a more solid but still shadowed form, its limbs like arms reaching to embrace me when I shattered on the ground.




Raff didn’t know what was wrong with me, but I was too unmoored to even try to speak. Glancing around the dark office, he decided something and scooped me into his arms. I wanted to tell him that it was a noble but idiotic

thing to do with his bad knee. Instead, I pressed my face into his chest, and if I could have cried, his shirt would be damp with my tears.

He carried me out of the castle, across the lawn, all the way to his van.

The sound of the doors slamming shut behind us hit me like a blow, and I flinched.

"Hey," Raff said softly, laying me on his mattress and covering me up—like I still needed blankets rather than being the reason others shivered. "Hey, Eric. Look at me."

I couldn't. I was afraid that, if I looked at him, I'd fall apart. Lose my shape, unwind into restless, reckless energy, and do something insanely stupid like attack the elemental myself.

My murderer.

"It killed me," I said, my voice coming out small and sounding a million miles away. "Just like it did Lorcan. I remembered, when he was talking."

And I gave him the not-so-gory details.

Slowly, carefully, Raff stretched out beside me, giving me every chance to protest or pull away. When I didn't, he wrapped an arm around my waist and snuggled against my back like a living, breathing shield. The pressure of him was like the world reminding me that I used to be solid, too. This was the softest place I could have possibly landed after a fall like the one I took, and I didn't know how I got so lucky.

The small glass teardrop of his pendant nudged against my spine, a reminder of all that kept him from winding up like me: a spirit trapped in the playground of something strong and hungry and unfeeling.

"I died here. I was murdered here, by something I couldn't see or understand. Just because it likes killing," I whispered miserably. "I didn't stand a chance, and all this time, I've been stuck here because of it."

"It wasn't a fair fight." Raff's voice near my ear was soft and fierce. "And Eric, I promise on my own life, it doesn't get to keep you."

A sob rippled through me. I felt myself coming undone even with Raff holding me together. Turning in his arms so I could see his face, I confessed, "I don't know what to do with this."

"You don't have to do anything right now," he whispered. "Just be here with me. Breathe with me. I've got you."

I let out a tiny laugh. "Ghost breathing is all pretending. You know that."

"So pretend with me," he said. The warmth of him felt like armor, and so did the quiet fury that was tensing every part of him as he clung to me. "I'm

not letting that thing hurt you again. We're going to finish your list and get you someplace safe."

I closed my eyes and made myself exhale, matching him. "Okay."

"Can I hold you for the rest of the night?" Raff asked.

Though really, he was asking something more. It was a question of staying solid, of manifesting fully for a long stretch of time, if I had the energy. After how tonight had gone, I felt dim and stretched thin. But I wanted every last second of closeness he was willing to give me, so I nodded, determined to try.

And I had an idea of what would make it easier. My voice came out smaller than I wanted it to as I said, "Will you . . . touch me?" He was already holding me, but I wanted to feel his hands all over me. From my hair to my hips to my thighs. "All over. Anywhere."

Raff's voice cracked. "Oh, yeah. I can certainly do that."

"And can I do the same to you?" When he swallowed hard and nodded quickly, I added, "Just . . . don't rush. I want to feel you for as long as I can."

He lifted a hand to cup my cheek and started lightly kissing my face. All over, not just my lips, but my forehead and my nose and the corners of my eyes. And for the first time since finally remembering my death, I felt tethered again. Not to the world, but to him.

I played with his hair as he sucked a kiss on the side of my neck that would have, in life, left a fun mark in the morning.

"Is this okay?" he asked, slowly lifting my shirt. He knew I was a virgin—it was one of many things that had come up as we sat out on the balcony all those nights—and he was being so thoughtful with me, handling me with such care. Which was exactly why I intended to keep giving him anything he wanted.

When I nodded and quietly groaned my agreement, he started running his hands over my chest. Down my stomach. Following the brush of fingertips with his lips, like he wanted to retrace his steps and flood his senses with me.

Lingering over my one and only tattoo, the colorful one on my ribs. He pressed a kiss into it before murmuring against the skin there, letting it vibrate through my core, "Heard ribs is a dreadful sore spot for a first tattoo. You're *such* a chaotic good boy."

I clenched my teeth and shifted beneath him when he started kissing all around my navel, his fingers hooking into the belt loops of my jeans to expose a little more of my skin. He started kissing over the tiny pinprick scars of insulin needles that hadn't gone in quite right, making old hurts better in a way I hadn't known was even possible. The weight of him as he shifted overtop of me and unbuttoned my pants was the opposite of the cold pressure that had killed me—not crushing, not taking. Just steady, warm, and beautifully human.

I didn't even realize how badly I needed it until it was happening. I threaded my fingers in his hair and pushed gently down, not a suggestion but an outright need, because if he kept kissing my stomach and flicking his tongue over the sensitive skin there for another minute, I was going to explode in my jeans. That wasn't how I wanted it to happen. Before I was gone, I wanted to know what Raff's hands felt like on every part of me.

I wanted to know the heat of his mouth and forget that I had ever been so cold.

"Still doing okay?" he checked again, a big hand rubbing my thigh as the sound of my zipper sliding down nearly undid me.

"Trying," I whispered, "but I'd be even better if you took off my pants and threw them somewhere I'd never see them again."

He laughed, full and throaty, gusting over my skin in little bursts that strengthened my glow and made it easier to stay in physical form. "You're doing perfect just like this," he said, no teasing in it. He could read the need tensing every part of me, and he hooked his fingers in my boxers so he could tug them off with my jeans, discarding them on top of the pile of blinking ghost-hunting gear.

"Christ, but you're perfect," he repeated, this time looking down at me, fully on display for him. Cock curving toward my stomach, pink and needy, more slender than his but clearly something worth seeing by the way his eyes went wide—as if he hadn't just seen it a few hours ago in the parlor. But this was different, somehow.

Now, his breath spilled over it as he studied every part of me up close as I spread my legs a little on instinct. It didn't matter that I hadn't done this before. I simply needed to feel something that was mine, and that was him.

"I'm not letting anything touch you but me—tonight, or any other night," he vowed as he wrapped his fingers around the base of my cock and swirled

his tongue over the head. His mouth was fucking incredible. Toe-curling, stars piercing the van ceiling kind of stuff, the answer to all my fantasies.

But his voice did something to me, too—softened something I'd held tight since that horrible moment in the office when everything had hit me. I let the brightness of my manifestation expand a little, past my skin, giving his face a faint glow so I could better watch his eyes as he held mine.

"Keep talking, please," I whispered, even though it was kind of a big ask while he was exploring me with his hands and mouth.

He jacked me slowly as he licked and kissed the creases of my thighs, not going back to my cock just yet. "You're warm," he said, which might have been nonsense, but it was still sweet of him to try giving me what I wanted when I *also* wanted his mouth to stay busy. "It's nice. I like it. I like"—his breath gusted over my cock again, and it twitched in answer— "How you move with me."

My hips twitched like they had a mind of their own, trying to push the tip past his lips.

He grinned at me, that fucking cheeky bastard, fully aware of what I wanted.

But he also knew what I needed, which apparently was his free hand caressing and squeezing my ass while he took my balls in his mouth instead.

My whole back arched up off the mattress.

"These are so pretty and sweet, just like the rest of you," Raff murmured once his mouth was free again, though he dipped his head back down and laved his tongue across my balls for good measure. All the while, his hand kept slowly jacking me, letting me leak all over myself. "Makes me wonder what your cum is going to taste like."

He smiled, his eyes catching mine, and flames engulfed me as he lapped up the beads of precum while holding my gaze the entire time.

"Makes me wonder," he continued slowly as his fingers stroking my thigh went somewhere new, lower, stroking between my cheeks until one settled hot but gentle against my hole. Not pressing in, just a suggestion of wanting. "How this would taste, too. Next time."

I very nearly told him about number ten on my list right then.

I would have.

But he finally let several inches of my cock slide into his mouth, stuffing himself until it looked wonderfully obscene, and I was too busy letting cold

become a distant memory as I soaked in the heat of him. His tongue rubbed me in all the right ways, just like the noises he made as he lifted his hand away and took me as deep as he could.

I had nothing to compare it to, but I didn't need to. As far as I was concerned, there was only him, and the fire he effortlessly stoked between my legs.

"Not fair," I panted, carding my fingers frantically through his hair as I danced on the edge several minutes later, "that I can't touch you, too."

He pulled off just long enough to flash a glistening smile and assure me, "You'll get your turn—if I last that long," before engulfing me in the heat of his mouth again.

Dimly, just before an orgasm tore through me, I realized he was rutting against the edge of the thin mattress like this turned him on too much to wait. I tugged on his hair, sharp this time, reminding him that he loved it when I gave an order.

I meant to scream his name when I let go, but the tipping point came on so fast that I gasped it quietly instead before emptying myself down his throat.

"Mmm. Tastes like . . . the foam on an oat milk latte. Silky," Raff declared as my cum spilled past his smiling lips, trickling down his chin. Playing our food game. He caught the slow trail of white with his tongue, licked it up. "Hint of sweetness that reminds me of honey in cream."

"Sounds delicious."

"Aye, you have no idea. Could be habit-forming."

A few moments later, when he tried to snuggle up to me like he was going to hold me through the comedown, I gently pushed his hands away. Brought them up to my lips and kissed his fingers. "I saw you, earlier. What you were doing to the mattress." I unhooked the straps of his overalls, letting them fall away. "Why don't you show me where it hurts?"

Where it hurt was very visibly tenting his boxers. I threw them in the direction of my clothes, along with his shirt and overalls. I guided him to stretch out on the mattress in my place, worried that he would be cold, that his generous erection might start to soften—but he only shivered when I started kissing the constellation of freckles that decorated his left shoulder while my fingers trailed the length of his cock to soothe him.

"Look at you," I murmured, connecting the dots on his pale shoulder with the tip of my tongue. "You're too beautiful to be real. You're a dream. Made

of stars.”

I wanted to trace so many different parts of him like this, to kiss and tease and watch him writhe, but his cock was red and weeping and he was already so on edge that waiting felt cruel after how good he had been to me. So I curled my fingers around it, marveling at the thickness and weight, and stroked him steadily while I indulged in kissing those freckles I’d noticed earlier near the bend of his thigh.

I kissed the glistening head of his cock. Then closed my mouth around it.

Raff’s noises sharpened to a high, desperate keening that would surely attract every predatory creature for miles, so I quickly pulled off and, still jacking him, licked his balls instead. I wasn’t as confident about taking them in my mouth, so I just kept kissing a little lower. Flicked my tongue along his perineum—and when he shifted, drawing his legs up like he wanted to give me better access, I dipped my tongue into his crease until the tip of it found his hole.

I wanted to ask him if it was worth waiting for this, but I already knew the answer by his awed silence, his ragged breaths, and the way that hole clenched at my tongue like it wanted me to come on in.

So I did. Instinct batted away my inexperience and guided me to lick my way into him, one hand rubbing his thigh reassuringly while I kept stroking him with the other.

He was so tight, even though he clearly wanted me inside.

I was tight there, too, small and tense when his fingertip had pressed against my entrance for a few moments. And he was so thick in my hand, I could hardly imagine taking him all in. But that was a problem for future Eric. Right now, all that mattered was Raff, sweating and writhing above me and muttering my name like a prayer.

Collapsing into me and the mattress as his body gave over to my hand and my tongue and my hope that he would feel me forever.

“You’re unreal, you know that?” he rasped after several moments of stunned silence, the two of us now lying beside each other on a mattress made for one. “I can’t even feel my knees.”

I brushed my thumb along his jaw. “You’re welcome, because your knees suck. And I’m pretty sure you were going to fall apart if I stopped touching you.”

Raff’s broad hand splayed over my ribs and rubbed slowly along my bare skin, lazy, claiming it. “Yeah, well. Didn’t hear you complaining either. But

next time, I really do want to taste you. If you'd like me to."

I smiled softly at him. "Yes. I want." His chest made a pretty decent place to rest my head. "Next time, because I'm not going anywhere." If only I could say that and actually mean it, when everything we did brought me one step closer to being gone.

Assuming the elemental didn't get me first, no matter Raff's vows to protect me.

At least for tonight, I could still count the beats of the heart keeping time for us both.

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**From: raff.omeara@exorsquad.net**
**To: chloeoncall@hmail.com**
**Date: Sat, 11 Oct 2025 19:42 IST**
**Subject: A Message from Eric**

**Hi Chloe,**
**I hope you won't mind me reaching out like this. My name is Raff O'Meara, and I currently work at Castle Ardruin, now the Céad Míle Fáilte Medieval Dining Experience, where Eric suffered his fall. I'm a spirit extraction expert, and in my time at the castle managing its hauntings (or trying to, anyway), I've had the great honor of getting to know your brother and being the one to help him finally move on from this world.**
**He's asked me to pass along this message, and I've typed it here exactly as he wrote it down for you. I know it's an odd thing to receive from a stranger, but he won't be ready to move on until he's said his part.**

**Dearest Chloe,**
**I don't know what to say or where to start, but how's this? I'm sorry I wasn't there on your special day. I should've been standing next to you as your Man of Honor, holding your bouquet and making faces at you so we wouldn't cry, and instead you had to do it all without me. I hate that I wasn't there to tell you how proud I am of you and Annie, and to bore you both with cat facts.**
**I've been thinking about your wedding a lot lately because not being there is one of my biggest regrets. I bet you wore something you thrifted for a steal, and Annie had on a designer gown that somehow perfectly coordinated with yours. I hope it was beautiful. I hope everyone loved the traditional Chinese banquet Annie's family would have planned for the reception, and I hope you danced until your feet hurt. I hope you still laugh the way you used to after two cocktails on the rooftop with me in the middle of the week.**
**Before I go, I need you to know that I had every intention of being there; I didn't jump off some tourist attraction, I fell. I was so excited to stand beside you and support you for once, instead of always being the little brother you had to worry about. But hey, one bit of good news: there's no hypoglycemia in the afterlife.**
**I don't know how things are for you now—honestly, trying to imagine it is hard for me, because I miss you and Amy and Elena so much I**

can’t stand it, but I hope everything is good. I hope Annie makes you tea in the mornings and that you still keep plants alive better than I ever could. I hope you’re surrounded by people who see you the way I always did: the bravest, kindest person in any room. And I hope that if you’re still in endocrinology, you do what you set out to and cure type one someday. Even though I won’t be there to celebrate, I hope you know that I’d be the one cheering for you the loudest.

I miss you, and us, and knowing what your days look like.

When you think of me, I hope the memories are soft and warm. Tacos and margs on a Monday night. Mario Kart with the cats. Faneuil Hall feasts. The one and only time we tried ice skating. I hope you know I loved you more than I ever said out loud.

—Love you, E.J.

All right then, Chloe. I hope it’s okay that I’ve passed this along. From what Eric has shared about you (a lot), I feel like we’ve already met. It’s clear that he was always very loved by his sisters, even when he was frustrated with your parents at times. Thank you for that, because it’s what I would have wanted for him, too.

If there’s anything you want to know about Eric’s time at Ardruin in the afterlife, I’d be glad to share what I can. Or just to have a chat, if you feel like it. I don’t want to intrude, but I thought you might want a connection to this part of him.

Maybe it could be a comfort.

Wishing you continued health and happiness.

Take care,

Raff

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# Twenty-One

## Liability Sorted

### Raff

**Days to Halloween: 20**

There were only nineteen days left where I'd have the chance to wake up and find Eric's eyes already gazing at me, waiting to greet me with the morning. Nineteen chances to lean over and kiss him right away, so I could be the first good thing to happen to him that day. So even though the weight of many souls rested heavy on my shoulders, I laid there for as long as my sore, stiff body would allow, captured in his eyes. I rather liked how I looked in them, my sharp features set in a way that said I was ready to fight to the death for him.

I was.

And while Eric read over my email to Chloe to give the official okay on sending it off, I started my battle with the Dolans. If I could succeed where Lorcan had failed, and convince them to shut Céad Míle Fáilte down somehow, at least I'd know I had deprived Gary of any future victims—no more souls for him to trap and one day absorb like a nice, juicy burger. Maybe, starved of its food source, the elemental would eventually wither away. Or maybe, like Niamh had suggested, the spirit was as much a part of the stain on this land as the blood that had once soaked it, and it would be here in some capacity forever.

I wouldn't know unless I tried.

But there was also the matter of the spirits already here. Even though some of them were starting to look like Halloween decorations themselves, they were still just people. Síofra was so excited to "play magic" in our first D&D session that evening, like she hadn't had many chances to pretend and imagine in life. And Gráinne, who the elemental had murdered just like Eric, was always bounding out of her latest hidey-hole to crash into my legs and give them a massive hug. We had four different secret handshakes I was losing track of, though that might have been mostly thanks to the lack of sleep. I liked Donnacha and his old mare, no strangers to hard work and doing their duty. I liked the way Brother Fintan had caught the measure of what was going on between me and Eric and smiled with warm approval despite all the centuries and beliefs that separated us. I even liked listening to Liam Donnelly's fishing yarns he was always telling if I said I had five minutes (when he really wanted thirty).

I cared about every single one of them. And if our suspicions were right, and the elemental felt threatened by my presence, it was going to keep taking them and using them to make itself stronger as long as I was here.

But I couldn't leave Eric. Or the living, for that matter. I was stuck, and the only thing likely standing between me and becoming a future snack for a power-mad spirit was the black salt pendant I wore. Sure, I had ExorSquad's guns with their electrical pulses—but they'd barely blown a hole in the bog bride from the inn, who was a level three at best. Not an entity that could shape a hand out of water and strangle someone with it.

What was I going to do if Gary decided to try absorbing Eric? Zap the elemental with a weapon that would probably misfire and hit Eric, and make everything worse?

I needed something more reliable. The black salt in my pendant—it had left me untouched so far, despite being the apparent target of the elemental's wrath. I considered pouring the salt across every window and doorway in the castle, but then, that didn't make sense—Gary had so many little unseen pathways into the building. The elemental was a part of the stone and the roots growing beneath it. If it wanted to get in, it would.

But if I had a whole jar of that black salt, I could pour some in the water, toss it in the fire—use it to poison the elemental's favorite mediums wherever it started to manifest. After I talked to the Dolans, I'd go back and get more from Niamh, and then have Eric rub it all over himself so at least I wouldn't be worried about him every minute of the day.

The castle, its undead lodgers—I was a part of them now, too. Had been since sometime before I realized Eric had plucked my heart from my chest and decided to keep it, but after that first day when he stole my club pin.

And maybe they didn't know they were counting on me, but I still wasn't going to let them down. Even if, at the end of it all, I was guaranteed to walk away alone.

I could tell myself I'd made my peace with that, but every time Eric's eyes met mine, something in me clung on harder, stupid and stubborn as ivy on stone, screaming that I should tell him how I really felt when it wouldn't change our separate fates.

When it came to him, I'd never be ready to let go.




It was strange to find myself in Caoimhe's office again so soon after the conversation (if we could call it that) Eric and I had had with nervous Lorcan.

Caoimhe was at her desk when I limped in after making a cup of tea and grabbing a leftover roll for breakfast. The sleeves of her blouse were rolled up to the elbow, and her ash-blond hair pinned back with the exacting precision of someone who didn't have time for flyaways getting in her face.

At the back of the room, under a mullioned window, Jordy was sprawled on a battered leather sofa. His boots were crossed at the ankle, tattoos peeking from under his cuffs like half-told stories while he scrolled on his

phone. Now that the wi-fi was up and running, it was easier to do things like send an email without driving to the village.

Pepper lifted his tiny head from Jordy's lap as soon as I entered. His ears perked, and he sniffed the air, glancing around as if searching for someone. He was that used to Eric being a step or two behind me.

Caoimhe finally looked up as I got closer, her glacial eyes narrowing against the brightness from the windows. "Morning," she greeted briskly before studying me more closely. "Well now. You've a bit of color in your face. Does that mean you've been off seeing that cute friend of yours from the banquet again?"

Heat crept up my neck, and I was helpless to stop it. "We've seen each other here and there. Put it simply, it's, uh, hard to stay away."

She smirked, satisfied that she'd figured me out so quickly. "Fair play to you. You look less like death warmed over, so I suggest you keep him around."

"Believe me, I would if I could," I muttered. When she frowned and rubbed her ear, I added more clearly, "Right. I'll do that. Thanks."

"So what brings you in on a fine morning like this?" she asked curiously. "You're not usually down this way, unless—oh, no. Has one of the poltergeists flooded the third floor again?"

Jordy sat up and tossed his phone aside, ready to spring into action with a plunger and a prayer like he'd done so many times over the past few months.

Displaced by the motion, Pepper hopped down and trotted over to nose at my trouser leg, still searching for Eric. I knelt to rub behind his ears, and he leaned into it, his fur sleek and warm. When I scooped him into my arms, he settled against my chest with a soft sigh. It was clear that while he was annoyed I wasn't Eric, he'd accept second-best just this one time.

If Eric and I had gotten a dog, I doubt he would have ever agreed to a dachshund even though Pepper was, arguably, his biggest fan.

"I need to talk to you both," I said. And maybe I should have considered my words more carefully, but I was tired and worried and didn't know what else to say but "I think you should call off the grand opening. And not just postpone it, but cancel it. Indefinitely."

Caoimhe closed her laptop with a soft click. Jordy's brows lifted, concern flickering there for the mate who had set him up on what seemed like a rather successful coffee date.

“Come again?” Caoimhe asked coolly.

So I told them what I’d learned about the powerful entity who also called this place home, about how fighting it was probably well beyond my ability and even the village witch, about how it had killed the occasional living person over the centuries and how it was probably preparing to do just that again, given the way it was consuming other ghosts to make itself stronger.

“I’m especially worried about Halloween. I’m worried that it might kill several people, not just one this time, like what it did to Eric or Chef Máirtín or Gráinne or who knows how many others,” I blurted, becoming increasingly agitated as I watched Caoimhe’s expression shutter. “I don’t think it wants you opening its home to the living like this at all, and this is its way of showing you how angry it is.”

Finished now, I realized the gloom that permeated the rest of the castle had settled over us all. Caoimhe’s arms were crossed and her jaw set, and even Jordy looked worried—though about his sister’s mood or my mental state, I couldn’t say which. Pepper whined softly and pressed his head into my chest, like even he sensed the tension.

Finally, Caoimhe broke the silence with a long exhale. “So,” she said. “There’s a dangerous spirit about, and your solution is to shut down the business we’ve spent three years and our life savings building.”

“It’s not a business problem,” I argued as gently as I could. “It’s a safety problem. This thing—I call it Gary—feeds on the dead, and sometimes the living. So if we open the castle to hungry crowds—”

“We’ll have waivers,” she cut in, clipped and tight. “Liability sorted.”

I blinked at her, ignoring the way Pepper was wiggling in my arms for attention. “Caoimhe, waivers won’t stop someone from dying. Surely they taught you that at whatever business school you attended.”

Right now, it seemed like that might have been the School of Selling Your Soul For a Fiver.

She sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose with neatly manicured fingers. “People die everywhere, Raff. They die all the time,” she said, with a shrug that made the castle’s cold settle more deeply into my chest. “On roads, in hotels, hell—in their own kitchens. Life is random and cruel. And if someone dies here once every few decades, that’s hardly cause for alarm.”

“It is when something’s murdering people!” I protested, my voice rising a little more than I meant it to. Even I winced. I wished Eric was here with

me to put a hand on my back and keep me centered. Instead, I made do by calming myself with a few breaths before I added softly, “And I’m telling you, on my honor, there’s a killer here.”

Jordy rubbed the back of his neck, looking sheepish at having waited so long to speak up. “Caoimhe, look, maybe we should at least take a few days to think about—”

“No, we shouldn’t.” She didn’t raise her voice like I had, but her words struck like tossed stones all the same. “I’m not throwing away everything just because our ghost hunter is spooked by something that might just be a bit of folklore.”

“It isn’t folklore,” I said, quietly this time. “I’ve seen what it can do.”

“Yet you’ve handled every ghost in this place so far,” she pointed out, her tone matter-of-fact and meant to be bracing. “You’ll handle this one, too. That’s why ExorSquad sent you.”

I shook my head, holding onto calm as hard as I could. “This isn’t a human ghost, though. I told you. It’s hungry, and it’s angry that I’m here messing with its food supply by trying to move all these ghosts on—but I don’t think my leaving would make you and your guests any safer. Not this close to Halloween.” I paused for some air. Eric would be proud of how I was holding it together, and that helped me continue. “The more people die here, the stronger this thing gets. If we open the dining hall, we’ll be feeding it. Giving it more to work with.”

Caoimhe leaned back in her chair, arms still crossed. “Raff, I respect your expertise. So far, I’ve even been impressed. But you’re asking me to bankrupt my family because of something you can’t show me, can’t measure, and can’t prove.”

When Jordy spoke, his voice was softer, more restrained. “Raff wouldn’t have told us all that unless he really believed it.”

“I know that,” she said, turning to him. “But the risk doesn’t seem great enough to close the place down before we’ve even gotten started.”

The weight of her words took a moment to hit me. I was losing them. Pepper shifted restlessly in my arms, and I rubbed his ears again as I searched for my next words.

“I’m not trying to scare you or waste your time,” I said carefully, my patience nearing the end of its tether. “I like you, both of you. I’m trying to keep you alive, and I’m telling you now that I don’t have the weapons or training to end this thing properly.”

Her expression softened for a second—enough to show she had heard me, even if she probably wasn't about to change her mind. "I appreciate your hard work, and where your heart is at. But we're opening on time. Tickets are sold out from now until April, the staff are all hired, and the investments aren't going to repay themselves."

Jordy looked distinctly uncomfortable, like his collared shirt was trying to strangle him, as he glanced between us. "I'm with my sister on this," he said finally, without any real conviction behind it. "We can't just walk away at this point. Not over a death we don't know is actually going to happen."

"And not over a few missing ghosts," Caoimhe chimed in again, frowning. "Getting rid of them was kind of the point of all this, wasn't it? The whole reason you're here? I respect whatever courage it takes to admit that something else is doing your job for you."

She gestured to the logo on my overalls, and it struck me for the first time how terrible I was at spirit extraction. Maybe Gerald was right not to waste time or extra resources on me. I'd come to care too much about the dead.

"Right," I said heavily. "Figured you'd say that."

Caoimhe's brows drew together. "Then why come to us at all?"

"Because you deserved to know," I told her firmly. "And if anything bad happens . . . I didn't want you to think I'd kept quiet."

Silence settled over the room again, heavy as the stone walls around us. Pepper lifted his head slightly and gave a low, uneasy growl. The hair on my arms lifted.

"Just keep up the good work until opening, Raff," Caoimhe said as she started to turn back toward her laptop. "Keep the ghosts in line, and our investments safe. A few more weeks, and you'll be on your way. Ardruin will be our problem then."

I managed a stiff nod. "I'll do my best, then."

As I trudged toward the door, a shudder rattled the walls, and a draft curled through the office, distinct enough to make me shiver and reach for my jacket that was still in the van.

The large fluorescent overhead light flickered once, twice, then steadied.

Jordy stared up at the ceiling, frowning. "Did you all feel—?"

"It's an old building," Caoimhe said briskly, tapping away at her laptop. Her voice just a little too controlled. "They're always settling."

Settling, right. That had been more like displeasure. Or warning. Or maybe even hunger.

I shifted Pepper in my arms, and Jordy met me halfway to gently take the dog back. “Hey,” he murmured, low enough not to carry to his sister. “Basil and I will see you later, yeah? Still on for tonight?”

The D&D game. Our first session of the campaign. Another step toward me and Eric leaving this place, though not together.

“Yeah,” I murmured. “Still on.”

“Anything Basil and I can bring?” Jordy asked, rubbing his tattooed arms as he shivered slightly—trying to shake off the gloom getting under his skin, too. With a shade of his usual cheerful grin, he added in a whisper, “Not like we’ve had any experience knockin’ about with ghosts on a dungeon crawl. Should be a grand bit of craic, anyway.”

“Grand, yeah.” I couldn’t quite bring myself to smile, even though Jordy had been more or less a friend in my time here. “It will be. Síofra’s great, and she’ll tell you all about the history of this place. And Eric . . .”

“Eric, huh?” Jordy picked up what I couldn’t bring myself to say with a knowing smile. “You two should go for coffee sometime. Works a charm.”

Something skittered inside the walls, unseen, claws scrabbling as it raced by.

Jordy and I exchanged a look, and he swallowed. “Right, then. Tonight in the parlor. We’ll be there—with dice and a prayer. Might not believe in them, but it couldn’t hurt.”

I left the office knowing my best wouldn’t be enough to keep everyone safe. And, worse, the elemental knew that, too.

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# Twenty-Two

## Mine

### Raff

**Days to Halloween: 18**

It’s a good thing there was so much room in the van. After mailing off a special Belleek porcelain teapot that my mam had delivered to me in person at the village café, I’d had to ride with the strangest copilot I’d had to date: a sheep who couldn’t respect that the driver picks the music, and bleated over the radio the whole way up to Ardruin.

He was on loan from a local farmer for twenty-four hours, and I was already dreading the inevitable cleanup I’d have to do in the back of the van before I could put my mattress in there again. Caoimhe had awkwardly offered me one of the guest rooms she was restoring for the rest of my stay here, like some kind of apology for her decision to open as planned, but I

wasn’t sure if I wanted to sleep directly under the elemental’s roof and hadn’t given her an answer yet.

The sheep, who I was calling Séamus because he had the same judgmental stare as an old teacher who thought I was a right eejit, hopped out onto the castle’s neatly mowed lawn the moment I opened the back doors.

The morning was a fine one, sunny and cool with a hint of a breeze, though that wasn’t why I had chosen it for this particular item from Eric’s list: it was the weekend, so Caoimhe and Jordy weren’t hovering nearby to question my mental state or demand that I immediately return the woolly beast chewing on a patch of clover like he’d never tasted something as delicious as haunted castle grass.

My mind flashed to the deer and fox carcasses near the woods and in the courtyard. I had to shove the image away as Eric materialized beside me with the kind of timing that suggested he’d been hovering, waiting for this like a kid anxious for Santa to arrive. It made me feel a little like a kid again myself.

Heavy in the pocket of my overalls was a jar of black salt I’d picked up from Niamh, her last one. Ready to toss at the slightest provocation, because I wasn’t about to explain to the dour-faced old farmer how his sheep had been eaten at the medieval dining experience.

“Right,” Eric said cheerfully, rubbing his hands together. “Let’s get this over with before he eats the fence and the front door, huh?”

He was brighter today, his edges sharper, his colors more saturated. And when he bumped his shoulder against mine, I felt it: a faint, impossible warmth. Barely there, but real enough to make my breath catch, just like it had when he’d used his tongue on me in the back of the van like we were a couple of horny teenagers making a holy show of ourselves.

We’d been doing a lot of that—kissing that led to our hands roaming everywhere and usually ended with us needing to hit the shower, more action than I’d ever had in my life—and I rarely felt a shiver of cold off him anymore. A couple times, usually while his trousers were around his ankles and my hand was wrapped around him, it had seemed like he wanted to tell me something. Ask me something. But whatever it was, he never quite got there. Mostly, he just moaned my name, and that was good enough for me.

“All right, Yank, get ready: you’re about to take a selfie with livestock and become the envy of your entire nation,” I teased, trying not to think too

much about what we were getting up to after-hours while we had a list to complete.

“Oh, it’s Yank again, is it?” Eric sounded a little hurt.

And maybe it was just for show, but I wasn’t willing to leave anything to chance when any day could be our last together, so I scooped him into my arms like a groom carrying a bride and kissed him right there on the castle lawn, the sun beaming down on us.

Séamus bleated loudly, as if offended by public displays of affection.

Eric stuck the finger up at him.

Laughing, I pulled my phone out and handed it to him. His fingers brushed mine, warm again, and the little jolt of it went straight to my chest. It was hard to believe that every day put him one step closer to leaving this world—leaving me—behind.

I swallowed, trying to stay in the fun of the moment as capably as he did.

“Right,” Eric said eagerly, turning the camera on himself and arranging the strands of his dark hair just-so. “Let’s get our good side.”

“You don’t have a bad side, a stór,” I assured him.

He shot me a look, his hazel eyes soft, startled, pleased. Then he crouched beside the sheep, who stared at him like he was up to no good.

“Come on, buddy,” Eric cooed. “Just smile for the camera.”

Séamus either didn’t understand a word or didn’t like what he heard, because he responded by headbutting Eric square in the shoulder and knocking him on his arse.

Laughing and in no hurry to get up, Eric declared from the grass, “Aw! He loves me!”

“That’s not what that means!” I said, but I was grinning like a fool.

Eric brushed himself off and knelt once again, holding the phone out at an angle that included both him and the sheep in the frame. “Raff, hurry up before he headbutts me again!” When I didn’t move, confused, he added with a goofy smile, “Get in here!”

“This is your list—from before you knew me,” I said, shaking my head.

“Still want you in it,” he insisted, quieter but sure.

When I crouched beside him—no way was I letting Séamus hog the middle or passing up a chance to be close to Eric—he slung an arm around my shoulders and pressed his cheek to mine, and my throat tightened. That closeness was doing funny things to my head and heart, giving it notions about what it couldn’t actually keep.

“Ready?” Eric asked, all smiles again.

Séamus bleated again, louder this time, maybe impatient. And then—because the universe hates me—he tried to climb onto Eric’s lap.

Eric shrieked. I grabbed the sheep by the wool, and the phone nearly went flying. And at that moment, the heavy oak front door of Ardruin creaked open.

Gráinne and Síofra stepped out together, the little lass’s hand gripping the countess’s waxy, pale one. Both of them looked slightly worse for wear, Síofra’s hair still lank and unbrushed, her skin still missing in places. Gráinne’s teeth looked a little sharper as she studied our woolly visitor with a wide smile, her expression one of mild hunger.

“Why the sheep? Is this part of tonight’s session?” Síofra asked curiously. She had quickly picked up some of the terms for D&D since we were playing every night, trying to fit a full campaign into a short stretch of time when Eric said it would usually be played casually over a span of months.

“I sure hope not,” I answered, wrestling Séamus away from Eric.

Gráinne tilted her head, considering. “Is it part of the ritual you’re doing with Eric?”

“No,” I said, because that was personal.

“Yes,” Eric said at the same time.

The countess and the wee lass both nodded slowly, like that made perfect sense. Then they drifted over to the van. I’d left the doors open, and they each took a seat in the back so they could watch a man, a ghost, and a sheep attempt a selfie like it was the most fascinating thing they’d ever seen.

“Right,” I muttered, glancing sideways at our audience. “No pressure.”

Eric raised the phone again. “Okay, Séamus. Third time’s the charm.”

The sheep leaned in, sniffed the camera, and then, rather than licking it like I was afraid of, settled in beside Eric like he’d decided to cooperate after all.

Eric beamed. “Here we go!” He tapped the button a few times, really working it, getting several different angles before lowering the phone and showing me all the footage he’d taken. My initial frown and eventual laugh. Him kissing my cheek. The sheep licking a bit of grass off its own nose and looking vaguely possessed.

“One more done,” he said, his voice gentle.

I nodded and tried to smile, to be glad I’d always have these photos to look back on, though my chest was tight. Every completed item was a

countdown. Every laugh, every touch, every stupid sheep selfie was another step toward the moment he'd be gone.

He must have seen it on my face, the way I was looking at the pictures without really seeing them, because he took my hand. Guided me to lower the phone.

"Hey," he murmured, so our friends wouldn't hear. "Why look at photos when you've got the real deal? I'm right here, you know."

"For now," I whispered.

He didn't argue. He just squeezed my hand, and I held on as we watched Gráinne start chasing Séamus, claiming she only wanted to give him a hug. The beast sped around like a panicked cloud, and by the time Síofra got up to dither between them as a reluctant referee, we were both laughing so hard tears streaked down my face.

And for one selfish moment, I wished the spell would take a little longer.




## Days to Halloween: 15

There were few things finer than greeting the morning with a cup of strong, hot tea and the memory of Eric's hands on me the night before, learning exactly what I liked. Of course, reality eventually crashed in, reminding me of all that still needed to be done.

Of what we were working towards.

This morning, once I was awake enough to tell left from right, I began by typing out a quick email to the Beacon Street Community Library—a tiny place in Boston that didn't seem to have updated their website since 2004.

I typed with my head bent over my phone, Eric leaning in close. With the van's engine off, cold crept in through every crack, but I'd almost swear it

was body heat—and not just mine—that faintly fogged the windows despite the chill.

**From: raff.omeara@exorsquad.net**
**To: circulation@beaconstlibrary.org**
**Subject: Re: Titles Checked Out by E.J. Crawford**

**Hi again,**
**Just confirming that the last three titles on your list were returned sixteen years ago, including *Critical Failures: A Statistical Analysis of Bad Dice*, *An Astronomer's Guide to Cats*, and *The Gentle Art of Not Feeling Like a Disaster*. Eric swears he dropped them all off before his family trip to Ireland, which would have been circa June 2009.**
**Also, regarding the burn mark on the previously returned *Chaotic Good Eats* cookbook and whether it happened in his care: he says no. Says it came to him "pre-charred and under seasoned." His words, not mine.**

**Cheers,**
**Raff**

I hit send.

Eric leaned into me, his cheek brushing mine. "You're very thorough."

"Just making sure you aren't very overdue, since it's on the list," I murmured, turning and pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

He laughed as we broke apart, and my phone screen flickered briefly like it was laughing along with him.

A reply came in before I'd even finished my tea.

Hi Raff,

Yes, all titles are accounted for. Your friend's record is officially cleared. And we'll take his word about the burn.

Thanks again for following up, and please tell him to come in and update his information if he'd like to start a new card, as it's been quite a few years.

Eric let out a soft sigh of what might have been relief. But when I met his eyes, they didn't look happy at all. "Another item off the list, huh."

I nodded, unable to force a smile like I usually did in moments like this. Every item completed was another step toward him moving on. Another thread cut. Another day closer to losing him.

He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear and said the words that were becoming a mantra softly spoken between us each day. Mostly by him, whenever I got a certain look on my face. "Still here."

*For now*, I didn't say.

Just once, I wished doing what was right could also be what was easy.




## Days to Halloween: 13

Mr. O'Shea, an older line cook whose bright red-orange hair and beard reminded me a little of Chef Máirtín, handed me the heavy plate like he was passing over a relic. He had kindly agreed to cook me a full Irish breakfast, though I suspected his willingness had something to do with Caoimhe telling the staff to give me anything I asked for. It felt like something she would do, like some kind of misguided attempt to charm me into overlooking how she didn't care if people died here every few decades and ghosts went missing in the name of her profit margin.

The kitchen around me hissed and steamed as Mr. O'Shea cooked for the few other daytime workers present this morning, copper pots rattling faintly on their hooks as he banged open drawers and rifled through cabinets. But something foul lingered beneath the sweetness of the butter-and-bacon-scented air, something damp and mineral that seemed to seep up from the stone floors and poison every breath.

It made me vaguely nauseous as I carried the plate to the back of the kitchen, settling at the little table Eric and I had more or less claimed as “ours.” This part of the room was dim, the autumn light thin and watery where it managed to peek in at all through the high-set windows.

Eric was already waiting and seated, fully manifested. None of the few people coming and going from the room seemed to look twice at “Raff’s cute friend,” who Caoimhe seemed to have told the entire castle about in the span of days. The warmth coming off him wasn’t even faint anymore, but something I noticed the moment I sat next to him. His soft, steady heat made my skin prickle with pleasant memories of everything we’d gotten up to the night before.

As I settled in, he watched me like I was the only thing in the room worth looking at, even though sampling a full Irish had been important enough to make it onto his list of world-crossing, soul-moving business.

“I can’t believe we’re really doing this,” he said, his hazel eyes bright and eager. “Or doing this again, I mean. You spoiled me with the charcuterie board at the banquet, too.”

He tracked my fingers as I picked up the fork and started on the sausages. As I cracked open the lightly charred skin with a soft snap, steam curled up from the plate, carrying the scents of pepper and sage and a hint of sweetness, like maple.

I lifted the bite to my mouth, lips parted, and ran my tongue along the sausage’s blackened underside, fully aware of the effect this little show would have on Eric. Of course, I didn’t bat an eye when the kitchen lights glowed brilliantly, then settled into their usual softness.

The moment the sausage actually touched my tongue, heat flashed through me. Partly because of the scorching juice, but mostly because of the way Eric had a hand pressed over his mouth and was leaning forward in his seat, his posture tense with anticipation.

“Well, it’s hot,” I murmured after I chewed. “Not just warm, but like . . . fresh out of the skillet. The temperature hits you straight away, before you even taste the herbs and the local syrup.”

Eric’s eyes darkened, pupils blown wide. I wasn’t sure if he wanted me or the breakfast more, but as far as I was concerned, he was welcome to objectify us both all he liked.

I slowly swallowed my first bite. “And then the pepper kicks in, sharp and fast. Like it knows exactly what it’s doing to me and how to hit the

spot.”

Eric licked his lips and nodded. “That sounds like a perfect way to start any morning.”

I moved on to the rashers, thick slices of back bacon. “This here,” I told him, gesturing with my fork, “is proper bacon. None of that Yank shite. This is juicy and tender and full of so much flavor your mouth doesn’t know what to do with it. These are . . . soft. They give when you bite, and you’ll never forget the way the smokiness lingers on your tongue.”

Eric hastily unbuttoned the collar of his shirt, like he needed to cool down, and I couldn’t help grinning to myself. When it was just the two of us like this, the world and all our problems felt so far away. It felt like we were untouchable, except to one another.

I dragged a bit of crunchy toast through the yolk of the egg, watching the gold burst and spill over the bread in a slow, thick ribbon. It dripped down the side, catching the light as Eric touched his tongue to the corner of his mouth like he was watching something indecent.

“This part’s silky,” I said, my voice lower, rough. I slid my free hand into Eric’s lap, up his thigh, and cupped him through his jeans. He was already hard for me, but I decided to lay it on thick, anyway. “It coats your mouth. Makes everything feel . . . fuller. Together, it’s almost all too much to take, you know?”

There was no mistaking the warmth radiating off him. “Raff, there are *people* in here,” he hissed as I rubbed my palm against his erection.

“And?” I asked innocently, spearing the last item—a bit of black pudding—on my fork.

Eric considered that for a moment. Considered me, teasing him under the relative privacy of the small table where our legs blocked the indecency of the scene from most casual glances.

“And I’m going to get you back for this,” he vowed, shifting slightly on the seat. “When you least expect it. But”—he paused, his eyelids fluttering—“don’t stop.” His gaze skimmed over the remnants of the plate, and a small smirk crossed his face as he observed, “Also, it seems like you’re trying to make me forget that we still have one thing left to taste.”

All right, I’d admit it: I couldn’t stand black pudding. Might as well hand in my passport and proof of citizenship on the spot.

“Guilty,” I growled, squeezing him through his jeans.

He had to stifle a little moan as I dutifully picked up the fork with the bite already prepped—after all, it was Eric's soul at stake, and I'd do anything for him, even this—and shoved it in my mouth with less delicacy than the other lovely items on the plate.

I took a moment to let the flavors flood my senses. "It's deep," I murmured thickly, on the verge of reaching for some water to wash away the salt. "Heavy. It kind of settles right behind your ribs, like it's moving in permanently."

He nodded, lips pressed thin as heat rolled off of him, nearly undone—though I was taking credit for that, not the black pudding. I traced the outline of him through his trousers with a finger. "Do you want to go find someplace where we can take care of this? Shower, or—?"

I didn't get the chance to finish making suggestions, as a cold draft swirled through the back of the room, sharp enough to sting. The lights behind us guttered violently, and I heard Mr. O'Shea curse under his breath and call out for me, like it was somehow my doing.

The air thickened with a touch of dampness, the castle drawing a breath. Or perhaps we were sat inside its open maw.

A figure formed in the pantry doorway, a wisp of smoke folding into a solid shadow with a skirt and apron.

"Eilis," Eric said as we quickly broke apart. He had recognized the faded spirit of the lady's maid before I did. "What's wrong?"

Her outline kept flickering like a candle flame about to die, and her ancient voice was heavy and worldly with grief as she said, "Rafferty O'Meara. Síofra sent me to tell you that Sorcha's gone missing. Our friend from the scullery. My lady spied her sweeping the east wing, humming one of her favorite songs, and then—she vanished on the spot. She was sucked into the stones, and she hasn't been seen since last night. No one can find her or sense her anywhere."

Eric went very still beside me, like he was having trouble absorbing the news. Then, slowly, resolutely, he nodded. "Okay. That's good to know. Thanks for telling us, Eilis, and . . . be safe, okay?"

She blinked out of view right before I stammered, "But—but the black salt. I could've sprinkled some in the east wing, or—"

"No one in their right mind is blaming you," Eric cut in before I could be any harder on myself, his voice steady but a little sad. "This thing is in the walls. The roots. The water. You said it yourself. It's everywhere by nature,

and you’re doing your best to warn everyone, but you’re just one person. One incredible, caring, hard-working person who needs to sleep more. Not an omnipresent murdering spirit.”

“Okay,” I sighed. “But I want to rub some more of that salt on you, at least, when we head back to the van.”

Eric gently nudged my side. “Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

“Oh, I’ll show you a good time.” I wrapped my arms around him, and he let me draw him close. His cheek flushed where I pressed a kiss, but it felt like borrowed warmth.

Like something that could so easily be taken.




We headed to the east wing together, hand in hand, leaving our breakfast dish in the sink with a hasty apology to Mr. O’Shea.

I needed to see for myself where Sorcha had disappeared. I kept thinking about what Lorcan had babbled—something about dark hollows in the stone. I wouldn’t mind smashing my fist into something the elemental used for eyes, even if it bloodied my knuckles. Right now, I only cared that it would feel good for a minute after this thing had made me feel like I constantly had to watch my back, and Eric’s.

A fallen broom lay by the cold hearth where Sorcha had been sweeping. Basil obviously hadn’t been in this room since yesterday to tidy yet.

Almost at once, Eric tugged on my hand and nodded to a stretch of wall that held a pastoral painting of a young girl in a bonnet tending her flock. I braced myself for hollows in the stone, for eyes that saw us as little more than ants, if that, and rested my free hand on the holster of the PolterPulse. Yeah, I was going to shoot it, even if it didn’t help.

But that’s not what was making Eric tremble.

Faintly, as though with the tip of a claw, a message had been etched messily into the wall under the painting.

# HE'S MINE

"No, he's *mine*!" I shouted at the stone without thinking, drawing Eric into my arms. Only after a few moments of nothing slithering out of the walls to challenge me did I start to relax and realize the random message could have been about someone else. Meant for someone else, too. Maybe.

I still doubted it, after all the ways the elemental seemed to be taunting us.

Eric ran his fingers through my hair until my heart rate slowed a little. Then he murmured, "Yours? Is that how it is?"

"Thought that was obvious." I kissed his forehead and tried not to let him feel how I was still shaking at my core.

"Mine," I repeated to the restless gloom and shadows that moved on their own as we hurried outside for some fresh autumn air. "Mine."

But I knew as well as anyone that simply saying it didn't make it so. No matter what we both wanted. There were bigger forces at work here, and it was only by the elemental's whim that we made it out the oak front door together.

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# Twenty-Three

## The Full Irish

### Raff

**Days to Halloween: 10**

Every day since we'd found the message carved into the wall that Basil and his team were still trying to fully erase, the air inside Ardruin had gone thick and heavy, like we breathed through wet wool. Even the cheapest and most cheerful of Basil's store-bought decorations seemed to have permanently taken on some of the castle's gloom, as if stained by its shadow. They looked vaguely grotesque out of the corner of my eye whenever I passed them, whether it was a jack-o'-lantern or the randomly cackling plastic witch, their shadows stretching too long and thin to match their shapes.

Eric and I had had a busy few days between finally setting up a game of pub trivia in the castle—with help from some of the spirits as well as Jordy and Basil, who had agreed to be the opposing team—and scrambling to clean up the minor disasters that seemed to occurred every night we went out to the van to sleep, or not sleep.

Like something was taunting us. And of course, we knew exactly what.

A few of the other spirits also pitched in with the cleanup when they realized what was happening, helping us sweep up shattered glass from burst bulbs and mop random puddles on the various floors. We found Liam's goldfish dead one morning, which seemed especially cruel, and he was inconsolable. I rushed to buy a new one. There was also the moss that had started to grow at random along the interior walls, which needed a firmer hand to scrub it away. It felt like the more ghosts the elemental consumed—over the past few days, at least Lorcan and Tadhg, the nervous footman, who had both gone missing from their usual haunts—the more it was able to infect the castle itself. To entrench itself here, spread its roots ever deeper, letting us know we wouldn't win any war against it.

Tonight, however, we were taking a break—from cleaning, from D&D, from everything that didn't involve sitting on our arses and thinking about nothing in particular. Just me and Eric, having a little date of sorts in the parlor because we spent too much time in a van that smelled like sex no matter how I tried to air it out. Our mission was to get me drunk on Guinness, another item from Eric's list, so I'd made the room as safe as I could knowing that I would be half out of my mind later if all went to plan: the protective salt sprinkled across every threshold, including the bathroom door and the two hallways leading in and out.

Guess we'd find out if old Gary was willing to cross the line.

While Eric lounged on the couch (yes, that one), I'd swept the half-melted grinning skull candle off the coffee table and shoved it in a closet, the memory of the whispering flame still too sharp, too cold. Then, in the space I'd cleared, I arranged a twelve-pack of Guinness to see what I could possibly make my way through now that the day shift workers had all gone home. I wasn't the biggest fan of the black stuff—I preferred a nice red ale—but the thought of being warm and silly and a little boneless with Eric to watch over me was a good one, so I had been looking forward to this.

I settled on the couch beside Eric with the first glass bottle in hand, my body pressed against his mildly warm one from shoulder to thigh, our

weights sinking the cushions toward the middle. It was like sitting next to a living person. Every time we touched lately, that warmth messed with my head, even if I never wanted it to stop.

“I still think Jordy let us win at trivia,” Eric said with a small grin, picking up an earlier thread of conversation from before I’d started safeguarding the room.

I tipped the bottle toward him, taking in his swept-back dark hair and his delicate, lovely features, and said, “Sláinte,” in a little toast to him before taking my first sip. It was thick, rich, and malty, heavy stuff. This wouldn’t be like getting drunk on a few quick shots of whiskey, which meant we were going to be here a while.

I wrapped an arm around his shoulders, settling back against the cushions, and considered his point about the trivia game. Basil and Jordy were mighty for agreeing to play when Liam had been our host. Maybe they were getting used to the chill of being near the dead, like I was, thanks to our nightly D&D sessions with Eric and Síofra. This was a bit different, though, as several of the other spirits had come to watch the game, too. It wasn’t like they had anything better to do, or maybe they felt safer being closer to me and the PolterPulse at my side than they did sat in a dark corridor or tower somewhere, waiting to be grabbed by Gary.

Sure, Basil had worn his designer sunglasses through the whole thing, like it might make the spirits who had chosen to manifest less visible—and less frightening, now that half of them were moving like broken marionettes and losing their looks—and Jordy had teased him something fierce. But they had decorated a banner together with their team name, The Holy Terrors, which was already more effort than Eric and I had put into team Dead Inside. And they had tolerated our ghostly host’s questions well enough, bizarre and rambling as they were.

“I don’t think Jordy was in control of anything going on there, any more than we were,” I said with a soft laugh, taking another sip of my bottle.

We had borrowed a dry erase board from Caoimhe’s office, on which Liam could keep score. He’d asked us things like “Name a fish that’s bigger than a man” and “What’s the most famous shipwreck to ever grace the Kerry coast?” and “In what frightful year did the moon fall out of the sky for a bit?”

Eric was the only one to figure out that he meant an eclipse. And, lucky us, our prize for winning had been a rock shaped vaguely like a baked

potato. So much for the usual basket of endless tots, but then, Ardruin was hardly a pub and Liam was hardly a bartender.

“We just made some lucky guesses,” I continued between sips, “unless you’ve been holding out on me with obscure fish knowledge.”

Eric grinned. “And what if I have?”

The drink was already going to my head by the time I finished the first bottle, softening his lovely face at the edges and also giving me the sense that the portrait on the opposite wall was watching us with slight disdain. Maybe I hadn’t eaten enough today.

“I’ll find a way to get it out of you,” I teased, my fingers warm and loose as they slid up under his shirt and splayed across his ribs, over his tattoo. “Might even be chaotic.”

He really was good at the whole game master thing. It made me wish we had more time—but then, what didn’t? —and made me wish I’d put a little more effort into naming my character and building out his backstory. Thorne Greenbriar from “South Kerry But Fantasy” had a chip on his shoulder, a limp from an orc attack, and a really cool eyepatch, but that was about it. He’d also nearly gotten eaten by a mimic disguised as a rowboat in our last session, while we were exploring an abandoned lighthouse.

“Think Thorne’s ever going to impress Larkensong?” I sighed, the second bottle making me a touch wistful as I snuggled deeper against Eric. Larkensong was his ghost bard, a character who tagged along with the rest of our party, and I wanted—rather, Thorne wanted—Larkensong to write a ballad about him.

Eric’s grin was warm and knowing. “Who says he isn’t impressed already? Might even be more than that. Why do you think Larkensong insisted on going into that dungeon first?”

I took another drink, too big a sip and too fast, that made the room tilt, but pleasantly so when I could just sink into Eric.

“So what’s a ranger got to do to—”

I stopped myself as footsteps echoed down the hall, growing louder. Brisk, sharp taps that sounded like the heel of a well-made shoe.

“Evenin’, Caoimhe,” I called, bewildered. It was after ten, according to the ECH000 receiver I’d left on the table to act as our clock. Or a direct line to Gary, should the elemental decide it felt like having a bit of a chat.

As her shadowed figure became visible, Eric vanished from sight, though I still felt the weight of him beside me. He gave my thigh a reassuring

squeeze, as if to say he wasn't going anywhere, and I cracked open another bottle to show him I wasn't, either. He just didn't want me getting in trouble for having company after hours, even if Jordy now knew all about that company and the nature of it, and took it in his easy stride.

Caoimhe was a different story. She didn't know about D&D, or trivia, or half the things that went on here once she returned down the hill to her posh apartment.

Now, she stepped into the parlor, scattering black salt everywhere and gazing down with a faint frown. "I'll have the cleaning company up here tomorrow. Who's been tracking dirt?" Finally, she raised her eyes to me and my array of Guinness bottles, her lips quirking. Her blond hair was tied up in a messy bun, and there was a clipboard under her arm. Despite the shadows under her eyes, she looked vaguely pleased with herself. "Never mind. I know it wasn't you, Raff. Your boots are always spotless. Twenty euro says it was Jordy."

I laughed, tipped the bottle to her, and took another sip. I wasn't completely scuttered yet, but I was definitely swimming in an ocean of malted barley with deep notes of coffee and chocolate. I still preferred tea, but this was all for Eric. I'd do anything for him at this point, and he damn well knew it.

Without another word, Caoimhe took a seat next to me on the cushions—thankfully not on the side where I could still feel Eric pressed against me. That would have been, at best, hard to explain.

"I see you're having no trouble unwinding after a long day on the job," she observed with a teasing glint in her eyes. They were warmer tonight, less laser-focused on her own success. Or maybe it was just the Guinness painting me a pretty picture. She smiled, gesturing to the unopened bottles. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all," I said, because it was the only way to respond to your boss after they just caught you half-cut on her property late at night when you were technically always on the clock. Reaching for a fresh one, I popped the cap for her. As I did, an unseen hand slipped under my shirt and ran a soft finger over my nipple, flicking it back and forth.

Sweet suffering Jaysus, was Eric possessed?

Caoimhe took the bottle from me and kicked off her shoes, frowning once more at the scattered line of black salt—it was taking everything in me not to go smooth it back into position—before taking a long pull from her

bottle. “This place feels different lately, doesn’t it?” she remarked between sips.

I bit my lip and nodded, unable to speak properly because that chaotic invisible gobshite was pinching my nipples, and the sensation was shooting right to my groin.

“It feels amazing,” she added when I didn’t say anything, clinking her bottle against mine. “Calm and settled, with just a touch of dark and spooky that our guests will be after. I think we’re actually ready for opening night.”

I nearly choked on my Guinness, and not because of Eric.

“Calm,” I repeated, doing a poor job of keeping the sarcasm from my voice as I thought of Liam’s pet goldfish floating in its bowl and how many hours I’d spent on my bad knee with Eric scrubbing moss off the walls. Of *HE’S MINE* carved into the stones themselves in a crude hand, by a *claw*, which surely Basil had mentioned to her. “*Right*.”

She turned slightly toward me at that, taking one more deep sip before setting her bottle down. “You know, Raff, I do like you. And I respect you. I wish you understood that I love this place, too—just like all your ghosts have loved it over the years, enough to live here or visit or fight a war to try to keep it for a little while. I bought it because I’m honored to care for it and love it like so many have before me. Surely some of the spirits appreciate that. I wanted to give this beautiful old girl her grandeur back, and I think it’s safe to say we have.” She paused, inhaling deeply. “The air even feels lighter. Everything’s going so well for once.”

“Oh yeah,” I said through clenched teeth as Eric’s hand slid down my stomach and found my cock, starting to stroke the length of it with a few light fingers. “Feels absolutely fecking grand, it does.”

I was trying to signal to Eric to knock it off before I was fully on display for Caoimhe in my overalls, but she mistook my grimace for something else and beamed at me.

“It’s really good to hear you say that,” she said. Leaning in with a confidential grin—just as Eric gave me a squeeze inside my trousers, the right bastard—she added, “I’m planning to go as a banshee for opening night, by the way. Long white wig, silver body paint, an antique dress. The full whack.”

“That’ll look brilliant,” I managed to say tightly while Eric tongued my ear and rubbed my half-hard cock with the heel of his palm. “Great costume.”

She studied me for a long moment in which I tried my best to look like I wasn't sweating Guinness out my pores while being felt up by a ghost. Then she smiled. "I want you to stay through opening night, by the way. In case that wasn't already clear. You're still welcome to one of the upstairs guest rooms, on the house, and you've more than earned a free ticket—and one for that very cute friend of yours, too. Or more than a friend, if you've found a bit of backbone and made things official by then. Just make sure you both come in costume—it'll be so much more fun that way."

Eric chose that moment to crouch down and put his mouth over my cock, the fabric of my overalls dampening where he was sucking. Lucky thing they were black, so the spot wouldn't easily show.

"That's very kind. Thank you," I said, my voice so hoarse she might have thought I was coming down with something. "I'll be there, cute date and costume and everything, assuming things line up."

She frowned, finally noticing that something was amiss as Eric nibbled at me through my trousers and I tried to shift away.

"You should sleep more," she said, like I hadn't heard that before.

I tapped a finger next to my eye. "You as well. But I'll work on that if you will."

She stood and stretched, gazing at the many bottles on the table with a slight frown, and then said, "On that note, I'm for bed. I've still got a bit of a drive ahead of me. Best be off yourself, and don't stay up too late, Raff O'Meara."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I groaned, grateful for the sight of her retreating back a few moments later, my thoughts so scattered that I wasn't entirely sure what I'd agreed to about opening night.

Eric reappeared a few moments later—not that I'd had any questions as to where he was, even while scuttered, because his hands were on my thighs and his mouth was still on my bits, soaking my only uniform. I did prefer being able to see him, though. The sight of him on his knees in front of me took my breath away and made me forget for a moment how irritated I was.

But eventually, when he pulled back and blinked innocently up at me, I growled, "What was all that for?"

"Payback," he said, giving me a slow and wicked smile before leaning forward again to continue to torment me with his mouth.

"Payback for what?" I demanded, even as I sank a hand into his hair to hold him in place.

“For breakfast the other day,” he murmured sloppily, and I remembered: the day I ate the full Irish for him, he’d told me he was going to get me back for working him up at the kitchen table, and now he had.

“I surrender!” I slurred, holding up my hands.

“You’re willing to meet all my terms, then?” Eric teased, his eyes darkening as he rocked back on his heels, hands still gripping my thighs.

I grabbed a fresh bottle of Guinness, just in case I needed it for whatever came out of his mouth next. Or whatever his mouth might do. “Try me.”

“I want . . . *the full Irish*,” he said, and it was clear exactly what he meant from the sudden, solemn set of his face. The air between us hummed with the charge of everything he wasn’t fully saying yet.

I reached out, pulling him back onto the cushions beside me, feeling slightly more sober now that I was catching on. “You want . . . me, inside you?” I didn’t have lube or anything that could questionably pass as such in the van, because no part of me had ever imagined ghost sex being on the menu at Ardruin when I’d taken the job.

“I do,” Eric agreed, brushing his nose against mine and sounding grateful I’d understood him so quickly. “That’s what number ten was on my list. You’ll be my first—and only. And trust me, I’m really, really okay with that.” His eyes were bright, glinting with something unspoken. “More than, actually. Because I—”

Something interrupted him with a low, deep growl. A sound born of pure hunger.

Instinctively, I grabbed the TurboPro and put my finger on the trigger, aiming toward the broken line of black salt I’d been too distracted to fix yet.

But Eric grabbed my arm, holding me back. He sounded as panicked and bewildered as I was when he panted, “No, it’s okay. It’s . . . I think it’s me.”

Slowly, I lowered the weapon. When I turned to him, he had a hand pressed over his stomach like it was hurting him, which was also concerning. Was this some symptom of moving on that Niamh had failed to mention?

My throat was suddenly tight, and the room swam. I regretted every single Guinness, because he couldn’t be implying what I thought he implied.

“I’m . . . hey, Raff, I think I’m a little bit hungry,” Eric said, his eyes wide and confused. “Let’s fix the salt line and then—do you think—could you

grab me a snack and bring it back so I can eat it in here on the good couch?”




On my way to the kitchen, thinking back on all the times I’d eaten for him, I remembered that peanut butter was his favorite. I grabbed a whole unopened jar from the pantry, along with two spoons in case he felt like sharing, although I kind of hoped he didn’t. There was nothing I loved more than watching him enjoy himself.

Well—enjoying things with him was up there, too.

I toed our salt line back into place before setting all my gear aside. And then, as Eric stared at the spoon like he’d never held one before and I opened the jar, I recalled a certain passage from The Handbook. **Rule #128: Never Feed a Ghost Peanut Butter**. Thing was, I couldn’t remember why it was a bad idea. And Eric wasn’t, at least to my Guinness-soaked brain, an ordinary ghost if he was craving something to eat.

What could be the harm, really?

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” he muttered as he plunged the spoon into the jar and scooped out a generous bite.

I giggled. Actually giggled, because of all that Guinness. Then I used the extra spoon he had pressed into my hand, because eating something might help me sober up faster, and I needed to really think about what he’d said. What he wanted to give me. Number ten.

Beside me on the couch, Eric groaned long and low, and I found myself a little jealous of a jar of peanut butter. I also couldn’t stop smiling at the dreamy look on his face, the way his lovely hazel eyes rolled back in his head and he kicked his feet like this was the best night of his afterlife, the spoon sticking out from between his lips.

“Oh my god, I can actually taste it,” he murmured thickly around a mouthful.

Then, glancing between me and the jar, a spark of an idea blazed in his eyes. He set the spoon aside, dipped a finger in, and held it to my lips.

As I started sucking it off, using my tongue more than was necessary, Eric started undoing the buttons of his rugby polo.

“It’s hot in here, right?” he asked me curiously. But before I had a chance to answer with my mouth still busy around his finger, he concluded: “It’s really hot in here. I think we should get a little more comfortable, don’t you?”

I drew back to watch him tug his shirt off and toss it to land on the back of an armchair, like the peanut butter had given him a boost of energy. He smiled as he met my eyes, the gentleness I loved now mixing with a new hunger.

Apparently, he had all kinds of appetites tonight.

“Eric,” I warned, even though my racing pulse and all the blood rushing to my bits was screaming to just let go and enjoy what was being offered. “I’m not sober.”

He ran his fingers over the tattoo on his ribs and then leaned in to kiss me. “So?”

“So as much as I want to be your first and only right now—”

He cut me off with another searing kiss, his fingers sneaking up under my shirt to pinch my nipples like he’d been doing earlier. They still remembered, and his touch had me shifting on the cushions. I was in trouble.

It took every ounce of self-control to try again when he let me have some air. “Eric.” This time I held up a hand, and he did at least listen, although he was playing with his own nipples the whole time. “I, uh. Damn, but you’re a sight right now. I . . .” My total incoherence was exactly why we couldn’t cross another item off his list tonight. That, and— “I think we should wait on number ten,” I said quickly. “Because I want to have a clear head and make it the best ever, like you deserve. And because . . . I’ve not really touched you there yet. I’d rather we work up to it, let me finger you first, and—” I swallowed, because he was taking off his jeans now, too, but I had to get this out. “And because we’re nearly through with your list, so if we wait until Halloween—we’ll be sure to get more time together, right?”

That last one was selfish, I know. But we only had a few days left to spend with each other, not the rest of our lives, or at least months or years like some people got.

“You’re right,” Eric agreed, his voice breathy as he cupped his straining erection. He’d gotten plenty hard when we’d barely started kissing, which was definitely . . . different.

Stupid Guinness brain. Something was nagging at me that I couldn't quite remember.

"We should wait until Halloween," he continued. "Not because I'm not ready now, but because I want every second I can get with you."

Now that sounded like the Eric I knew and loved.

God help me, I loved him so much, whether he was rambling about astronomy or doing mental math I couldn't follow for a battle in D&D or feeling low and resting his head on my shoulder in the stillness of a late night. I loved him like this, too, taking control and showing me all the different sides of him that reminded me how well we fit together.

"But Raff . . ." He leaned in, one hand wrapped around his cock, stroking himself as he put his lips to my ear. "I still need you tonight. If you want me. If you need me, too. I've never needed anything so bad in my life, I . . ." He was leaking onto his fingers already. We looked down at the same time, studying the evidence of his desperation. And I could feel myself twitching, still trapped in my overalls. Almost like that hand on his cock was tugging on mine at the same time.

"Okay, then how about this," I said as I started unfastening my overalls and shucking them off. "I'll prep you like I'm planning to fuck you—and trust me, you'll enjoy that plenty without the finish—and then you prep me. And fuck me instead."

Discarding my black tee, I quickly looked back at Eric, because it was odd that he'd gone silent. It was unlike him, when I was offering something I never had before.

His hand was working his cock furiously as he watched me, and he was . . . drooling. A little bit of spit clung to the corner of his mouth, slowly leaking out, and he didn't seem to notice. How could he, when other parts of him had such a pressing need right now?

"Yes," Eric said, his voice a scrape of its usual sound. "Yeah, let's—do all of that. Anything. I need you, Raff."

When I had him splayed out on the couch, his arse in the air, spreading himself for me with his hands while I knelt on the rug for better access, it hit me: rule #128. The reason we weren't supposed to feed a ghost peanut butter—and maybe other nut butters, it wasn't like I read the damned handbook cover to cover—was because it made them insatiably horny.

"Eric . . . the peanut butter," I panted, hesitating behind him. "It's like a ghost aphrodisiac. It's why you're, well, like *this*. We don't have to—"

“Oh yes we do,” Eric groaned, turning to glance over his shoulder and meet my eyes. “This is me, Eric James Crawford, being of sound mind and giving you, Rafferty Finnegan O’Meara, full consent to eat me out.”

Well, that was settled, then, because I wanted the same thing.

He was so warm when I licked into him. He smelled sweet and clean from the shower we took before we started our little Guinness adventure, and I had to work to get to the saltiness beneath by pushing my tongue in deep. And it was a good thing Caoimhe had left, because Eric was failing miserably at trying to muffle his every moan and cry with the couch pillows. I swatted his hand away from his cock and took over stroking him while I ate him like the snack we’d forgotten.

“I’ve got you,” I reassured him when I came up for air, even though he was clearly past the need for words. Worked up as he was, I still wanted him to remember how I’d cared for him in the moment. “I’m going to put a finger in now, all right?”

His answer was a more insistent moan.

All right, then. Grand.

I still didn’t have lube, but when I’d gone to the kitchen for the peanut butter, I’d had some idea of where things might be headed, so I slicked my fingers with the coconut oil I’d found in the pantry. Not ideal, but it seemed safe enough and we were in a pinch here.

I kissed him on each cheek, then kissed his hole, already pink and glistening from all the attention from my mouth. Then I slowly worked a finger inside, waiting for him to tense up—but he never did. By the time I was up to two fingers stretching wide, rather than pulling away or asking for a break, he was demanding *more*.

Fecking peanut butter.

“You take that so good,” I whispered, and that made me realize he wasn’t the only one completely wrecked already. When I drew my fingers out, I couldn’t help admiring how flushed and open he was for me, and my hand went to my own cock.

“Wait,” he groaned at that, flipping around to look at me like he’d sensed what I was doing. “Come here. If you still want . . .?”

Oh, I did.

Especially because, as he kissed me and pushed my hand away like I’d done to him earlier, taking over for me, I was able to look him in the face

and tell him, “I’ve never bottomed before, either. I’ve had fingers and toys, but not this.”

I couldn’t give him every first, but this one would do.

Assuming I lasted that long. Eric was completely insatiable when I traded places with him on the cushions, turning and spreading myself to give him access.

“You’re sure your knee is okay like that?” he worried for a moment, frowning at the couch like it had already wronged me, because he was my good boy.

But when I told him it was, he ate me like he hadn’t tasted anything so good in years, tonguing me in all the right ways. He was more cautious when he added an oil-slick finger, and much more worried he would hurt me until he saw how I was dripping from each perfect stroke on my prostate.

I was sure he’d read all about it. I wanted to buy him more books. So many.

He slipped his two fingers out, trading them for his tongue again and licking all around my oversensitive hole. I wasn’t sure if it was the Guinness or how badly I wanted him, but the room was like a carnival of colorful lights, the rest of the castle completely past my awareness.

“I’m ready for you,” I panted. “Any time you want me.”

Eric rubbed my thighs and breathed, “Then come down here and join me on this very soft rug, mo chuisle, mo chroí.”

My pulse, my heart. I didn’t know when or where he’d picked up the phrase, if he’d had one of the other ghosts teach him, but it didn’t matter.

Those words in Irish, from his lips, had me immediately sliding off the couch and into his arms, kissing his glistening mouth as he lined himself up and pushed into me, careful as could be despite the need clearly driving him. Careful with me, which I needed, not because I was nervous or unprepared but because this was the man I loved, for better or worse—and I knew there was worse coming for us, of course there was—and we didn’t have forever, so I needed every second of this to last as long as possible.

“It’s all right,” I rasped as he pushed the rest of the way in. The burn and the stretch quickly softened into the most wonderful, almost unbearably good sense of fullness. “Give me everything. I can take it.”

He kissed my sweat-slicked face as he found a rhythm, his hand stroking my cock in time with each roll of his hips. I didn’t know how long it lasted,

because time lost all meaning with Eric fucking me deep into the expensive posh rug, my legs wrapped around him so tightly I was practically another of his tattoos.

After we came, he didn't rush to pull out, or murmur anything about a shower or getting up off the floor. He just panted in my ear, his head on my chest, something that sounded like actual words but was too soft for me to properly make out. I think that part was deliberate, so I didn't push. I had things I wasn't saying to him, too, after all. Like how I could feel my love growing every time he showed me how he really saw me, every time he smiled, every time he reminded me to be better to myself.

Instead, I just ran my fingers through his hair, waiting for him to soften inside me. But he didn't, really, because apparently The Handbook wasn't joking about peanut butter.

"You want to go again?" I whispered, even though we'd need to snuggle and kiss for a while before I was ready for another round.

We had all night.

What we didn't have was our whole lives.

So I let him have whatever he wanted from me, took whatever he would give me, until the world of the living threatened to intrude on us again and another day began.

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# From the Notebook of Rafferty O'Meara, ExorSquad Spirit Extraction Expert

~~**9th of September**~~

**Updated the 24th of October**

A FULL ACCOUNTING OF SPIRITS ~~MET IN MY FIRST WEEK~~ AT ARDRUIN CASTLE

*Entity Name: Lady Síofra Ní Dhomhnaill, Countess of Ardruin*
*Level: 3*
*Year of Expiration: 1483*
*Haunting style: reflections, singing, mist, moving furniture*
*Ideas to keep the peace: compliments placed in every mirror*

~~*Entity Name: Chef Máirtín "the Mad Lad" Macraith*~~
~~*Level: 4*~~
~~*Year of Expiration: 1502*~~
~~*Haunting style: banging pots in kitchen, rearranging spice racks, writing on walls with gravy, shouting "it's underseasoned!" when things are quiet*~~
~~*Ideas to keep the peace: open ingredients to let him experiment without breaking things*~~

~~*Entity Name: Fiachra Mac Fíon, Wine Steward*~~

~~*Level: 2*~~
~~*Year of Expiration: 1561*~~
~~*Haunting style: spilled bottles, incorrect temperature in wine cellar*~~
~~*Ideas to keep the peace: offer a nightly cup of his favorite vintage*~~
~~*Entity Name: Poltergeist I, Courtyard*~~

~~*Level: 3*~~
~~*Year of Expiration: ?*~~
~~*Haunting style: randomly throwing objects, no visual manifestation (yet)*~~
~~*Ideas to keep the peace: bolt down items in courtyard*~~

*Entity Name: Muireann Ní Bláithín, Bard*
*Level: 3*
*Year of Expiration: 1594*
*Haunting style: music and singing, can make anything an instrument*
*Ideas to keep the peace: correctly tune the piano for her*

*Entity Name: Gráinne Sidheán, Little Rascal*
*Level: 4*
*Year of Expiration: 1782*
*Haunting style: chaos, rearranging Caoimhe's plastic skeletons in dirty positions*
*Ideas to keep the peace: bring her something fun to play with*

~~*Entity Name: Poltergeist II, Stables*~~
~~*Level: 4*~~
~~*Year of Expiration: ?*~~
~~*Haunting style: shadowy figure, animal noises*~~
~~*Ideas to keep the peace: don't keep live horses in there until it's been zapped*~~

~~*Entity Name: Poltergeist III, Attic Storage*~~
~~*Level: 2*~~
~~*Year of Expiration: ?*~~
~~*Haunting style: dead mice and small birds everywhere, torn papers, smell*~~
~~*Ideas to keep the peace: seal cracks in attic so wildlife can't get in; air purifier*~~

~~*Entity Name: Brigid Ó Conaill, Chambermaid*~~
~~*Level: 3*~~
~~*Year of Expiration: 1622*~~
~~*Haunting style: rearranging furniture, moving objects, lavender scent*~~
~~*Ideas to keep the peace: correctly fold fitted sheets, frequent dusting and mopping*~~

*Entity Name: Brother Fintan, Monk*
*Level: 3*
*Year of Expiration: 697, predates Ardruin*
*Haunting style: Latin phrases scrawled on windows, chants Gregorian hymns*
*Ideas to keep the peace: reading to him aloud from romance novels seems to soothe him*

~~*Entity Name: Sorcha Ní Chathasaigh, Scullery Maid*~~
~~*Level: 3*~~
~~*Year of Expiration: 1223*~~
~~*Haunting style: appears as a faint shimmer near hearths and stoves, rearranges things when anxious*~~
~~*Ideas to keep the peace: Leave her to her usual routines, and speak softly; loud noises can make her hide for days*~~

*Entity Name: Eilis "Lissy" O'Doran, Lady's Maid*
*Level: 2*
*Year of Expiration: 1442*
*Haunting style: soft rustle of skirts in the halls, soft footsteps, scents of powder and perfume*
*Ideas to keep the peace: whisper thanks when she's near; she still loves gratitude*

*Entity Name: Donnacha Breathnach, Stablehand*
*Level: 2*
*Year of Expiration: 1384*
*Haunting style: gentle tapping on wooden beams, smell of hay, appears most often as a pale outline leaning on a pitchfork out of the corner of your eye*

*Ideas to keep the peace: speak to him like you would a nervous animal—slow and calm; leave a lantern on, as darkness makes him skittish*

~~*Entity Name: Sir Padraig Mac Diarmada, Nobleman*~~
~~*Level: 3*~~
~~*Year of Expiration: 1568*~~
~~*Haunting style: destroying the pantry, upsetting Chef Máirtín, moans at the phrase "gluten-free"*~~
~~*Ideas to keep the peace: offer a midnight snack*~~

~~*Entity Name: Tadhg Ó Maoláin, Footman to visiting gentry*~~
~~*Level: 2*~~
~~*Year of Expiration: 1733*~~
~~*Haunting style: blurred silhouette near staircases, scents of leather and tobacco, cracks open doors to check on rooms*~~
~~*Ideas to keep the peace: don't block off staircases or corridors; panics when "trapped"*~~

*Entity Name: Síle Ní Fhlaithimh, Seamstress*
*Level: 2*
*Year of Expiration: 1811*
*Haunting style: appears only as a pale hand at the edge of curtains and wardrobe doors, smell of fresh-washed linens, smooths random fabrics*
*Ideas to keep the peace: offer scraps of ribbon and cloth for her to fuss with*

*Entity Name: Colmán Ó Riain, Groundskeeper*
*Level: 3*
*Year of Expiration: 1764*
*Haunting style: gentle knocking on outer doors, picking up tools and moving them, windows fog slightly when he lingers outside waiting to be let in*
*Ideas to keep the peace: keep a lantern lit near the main entrance, inviting him inside*

*Entity Name: Liam Donnelly, Avid Fisherman*
*Level: 3*
*Year of Expiration: 1834*

*Haunting style: rattling the pipes, turning on the taps, steaming up the place*

*Ideas to keep the peace: get him a goldfish to watch*

~~*Entity Name: Lorcan McGilroy, former ExorSquad employee*~~

~~*Level: 4*~~

~~*Year of Expiration: 2025*~~

~~*Haunting style: hangs out in closets and small spaces, frightens people who open the door*~~

~~*Ideas to keep the peace: Figure out what killed him, if he'll ever talk to me. Seems to still be in shock that he's dead.*~~

~~*— Similar to Eric's death? What's the connection?*~~

*Entity Name: Eric James Crawford,* ~~*the American, the Wildcard, Professional Nerd,*~~ ~~*Mr. Brightside*~~*, a chara, a stór, mo chuisle mo chroí,* *MINE*.

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**From:** chloeoncall@hmail.com
**To:** raff.omeara@exorsquad.net
**Date:** 26 October 2025, 15:27 IST
**RE:** A Message from Eric

Hi Raff,
I'm sorry for the delay in replying. I did receive your message, and I sincerely thank you for it. I'm sure it wasn't easy to send that, just like I'm sure you understand that I needed to sit with it for a while. Amy and Elena did, too. I have a lot of questions—I mean, who wouldn't?—but it doesn't feel right just typing them out behind a screen.
I do think it would be good to meet. I live outside Portsmouth, but Annie and I have visited Dublin a few times. We could fly over in April and spend a long weekend if I schedule the time off soon. Would you be free then? Maybe the 15th?
My best to you (and Eric, if he hasn't crossed over yet. Tell him I loved his letter)

— Chloe

**From:** raff.omeara@exorsquad.net
**To:** chloeoncall@hmail.com
**Date:** 26 October 2025, 15:38 IST
**RE:** RE: A Message from Eric

April 15th is great. Name the time and place.

See you,
Raff
P.S.: Eric says hi and he loves you, too. He's blowing on my tea right now. Not a metaphor.

I read Chloe’s message again and again, slipping my phone out of my pocket whenever I had a moment to myself for the rest of the day, like I was worried it would vanish. Like I’d made it all up. It was too good to be true, the thought of meeting someone who shared Eric’s features, and probably his sense of humor, and most of all, who loved him, too.

We neared the end of our days together, but thanks to Chloe, I now had a shred of hope that I might still have a piece of Eric after our time at the castle ended.

It was a glimmer. It wasn’t half of all I couldn’t help hoping for. But it was enough to help me get through the days that were starting to speed up like someone had hit fast-forward on the story of my life when all I wanted was for it to play out in slow motion.

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# From the Notebook of Rafferty O'Meara, ExorSquad Spirit Extraction Expert

~~3rd of October~~ RAFF, THIS PAGE IS PRIVATE, LOOK AWAY AVERT YOUR EYES. YOU'VE BEEN WARNED.
A DETAILED RECORD OF THE UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF ERIC JAMES CRAWFORD (b. December 29th, 1982, d. July 15th, 2009)

AKA ERIC'S AFTERLIFE AGENDA
That's right. I stole Raff's pen.
~~1. Finish one last D&D campaign~~
~~2. Learn how I really died (Maybe we can find an autopsy report)~~
~~3. Return overdue library books to Beacon Street~~
~~4. Eat a full Irish breakfast (Raff to eat, I'll live vicariously)~~
~~5. Get drunk on Guinness (Raff again, taking one for the team)~~
~~6. Apologize to Chloe for missing her wedding (Email her? I know it's weird)~~
~~7. Buy the teapot Mom wanted and ship it to the States~~

~~8. Take a selfie with a sheep~~
~~9. Win at pub trivia (In the castle will have to do. I'm calling our team Dead Inside)~~
10. I'll tell you this one if we get there, Raff. In private.
~~11. FALL IN LOVE~~
For what it's worth, I don't even care about most of this stuff anymore-mostly number 2 and number 10. It'll be good to get a message to my family, too. Hopefully this doesn't mess up our spell from the village witch.

Because that's what this list is, right? Ingredients for a spell to move me on.

I feel like I'm living a D&D game, although I always thought I'd be more alone if that happened. I definitely never pictured myself with my very own paladin along for the quest to cross my soul into another realm. Maybe I sound delusional, but together, I don't think we can fail.

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# Twenty-Four

# The Final Countdown

## Eric

On October 30 th, at 12:13am, we finished our D&D game while the castle made its usual creaks and groans that didn't seem to match any ordinary sounds and its energy crackled with untapped potential. With warning.

The Big Bad plaguing our seaside town had been defeated, and my ghost bard was finally able to "cross over." I decided he would become a new constellation to guide lost travelers, especially bright when viewed from South Kerry But Fantasy. It was meant to be a fun little gift for Raff, but everyone seated around the coffee table in the parlor got really quiet after I explained it, because . . . well.

Pepper chose that moment to wander over and settle on my feet, offering me his favorite stuffed gnome with the little red cap and long beard.

"He's never given Mr. Nubbins to anyone willingly before," Jordy observed, sounding almost too offhand. He wasn't looking directly at me, but I still noticed how his eyes glistened as he stared hard at a line of black salt guarding an entrance to the room. "Not even me, so."

All the attempted humping was because he really liked me, I guess. He seemed to be glad that I was currently as solid as his other humans, but boy would he be disappointed when tomorrow rolled around.

I rubbed his ears. He wasn't so bad, really. Definitely not a demon dog.

Then Raff, who had finally recovered from the constellation reveal enough to speak, announced that his ranger was going to learn some of my bard's songs and become a wandering protector. Basil's sorcerer opened an enchanted club where he could perform and keep an eye on the happenings in town in case trouble ever stirred again, and Jordy's dwarf paladin stayed to guard the village if need be, retiring from the adventurer's life. Basil teased him about wanting to settle down so soon, of course, and Jordy retaliated by signing his dwarf up to dance onstage at the new club.

Síofra's wood elf druid returned to her home grove and planted a special tree in honor of our party and the time we'd shared. She said she was going to catch up to Raff's ranger once she had taken some time to enjoy her beloved forest.

Síofra looked far more frightening than any of the Halloween decorations, with most of her skin rotting away—all the remaining spirits did, except for me. Maybe because I was spending more time with Raff than lingering alone in the castle like I used to, I didn't know. But she was still my friend, and I still hugged her freezing, hard-to-grasp figure for a long time before Raff and I went out to the van so he could try to rest.

I worried about her. Worried she would be the elemental's next victim. Worried about who would keep her company once I was gone, since Raff would be leaving, too.

"You'll take care of my sister, won't you?" I asked her quickly, before my throat could get too tight. "When I'm not around anymore?"

"Who?" she asked, frowning, even though I was pointing at her. "Eric James Crawford, you aren't going anywhere yet. Enough of that talk." She reached out, and I thought she might pinch my cheek, but she cupped it instead with an icy hand. "So warm," she murmured wonderingly before giving Raff a hug, too.

"We should do this again sometime," Jordy suggested to the room at large, and even though everyone knew it wouldn't be possible, we all nodded.

"Oh darling, we're absolutely doing a sequel," Basil told him, putting a hand on his back and guiding him toward the land of the living—the

castle’s front door.

And that was it.

One last game. One more item scratched off my list while everyone said goodnight and pretended their hearts weren’t churning with so many emotions.

At 1:52am, Raff fell asleep in my arms, the blankets half-kicked off because he said he was too warm snuggled up next to me. Once he was out, I tried so many different ways to say goodbye, but I couldn’t get the words to leave my tongue. I ate one of his protein bars instead, because I was hungry for the second time in a handful of days.

I chose a brownie-flavored one, avoiding the chocolate peanut butter.

Oh, peanut butter. It had tasted better than I remembered. It was apparently also a spirit aphrodisiac, but as worked up as I was, it hadn’t changed that I wanted Raff to be the one I shared all my firsts with. I’d even been about to tell him that I loved him before my stomach interrupted us with a random craving.

I hadn’t tried to tell him since. I was sure of what I felt, then and now, but I didn’t want him to spend the rest of his life grieving what might have been.

We would have been magic.

With a side of chaos, of course. But we could have worked through whatever life threw our way, done it all with a cup of tea while we watched the stars and talked late into the night.

When I finished the protein bar, I snuggled up against Raff’s back, feeling at home in my body. Feeling the pull of the earth more than the dark pulse of the castle. Not feeling ready to float through any open doors to other worlds. Loving him had helped me fully embrace every part of myself, all the things he so openly admired, and I wasn’t ready to leave that behind.

I counted Raff’s heartbeats. Even now that I knew how I died, it had just . . . become a habit, looking out for that heart. What if the elemental attacked him for moving me on? Surely Jordy would help him get to his van and get out of here.

“I love you,” I whispered when he stirred slightly in his sleep. “Love you, Raff.”

There was only one item left on my list now. One more gift I wanted to give him, the same one he’d given to me the other night. He had felt

incredible, hot and tight and willing, his body drawing me in like it was playing for keeps. If only.

I refused to sleep while there were only so many precious hours left to share with the only man I'd ever loved, would ever love. But I did close my eyes and drift. Thinking about what I wanted to say if I wrote him something in his notebook. A goodbye letter, a few words for him to find once I was gone. But none of them sounded quite right, maybe because all the words that really mattered were ones that had been spoken between us under falling stars, in the stillness of the night, holding hands in the courtyard. He already had my best stories, my questionable singing, my most passionate rambles. He had my compliments and my flirting and my care. There wasn't anything more I could leave him with.

I just didn't want to leave him at all.

At **9:25am**, we headed inside for tea, me fully manifested and holding Raff's hand. We'd barely stepped into the foyer when I was struck by the contrast in energy between the living and the dead. Between the bustle and brightness of all those preparing for tomorrow's festivities and the dark pull of a place that seemed to have its own sort of gravity, rooted in restless sorrow.

It was so strong that I nearly pulled Raff back outside.

"What is it?" he asked when I tugged on his hand. One look at my face, and he brought an arm up around my waist, glowering at the walls like he expected them to sprout eyes.

Here, it seemed like anything was possible.

"I think I've realized why Síofra and the others look . . ."

"Like they're getting in the Halloween spirit?" Raff supplied, as I struggled to find a gentle way to say it.

"Exactly. I think it's because—well, you know how ghosts need energy to manifest? They have to draw it from somewhere, right? Usually, they draw from whatever killed them or the place they died." I paused for breath, and Raff nodded. He knew all this already. He also had the most adorable case of bedhead, so I reached up to smooth his hair while I continued in a low voice: "The elemental killed some of us, right? And it's . . . how you explained it, it's like a part of this place. Like it can't be separated anymore. So what if the energy we draw on to manifest is . . . tainted by that thing,

somehow? What if that's why I sometimes felt so out of control that I had to go scream in the dungeon?"

Well, that explained a lot. Stunned by my own realization, I was quiet for a moment, but Raff picked up the trail of thought for me. I could always count on him.

"And since it's getting stronger," he said thoughtfully, "maybe it's harder for the other spirits to maintain their usual appearance. Maybe they were sort of . . . used to its old frequency, able to use it to manifest in the ways they wanted most of the time, but this more powerful one has them all banjaxed. *All messed up*," he added in a disturbingly accurate American accent, like I wasn't already used to his slang.

Suddenly he was grinning at me, and leaned in for a kiss despite a florist bustling past us with her arms full. "There's that smile I've been missing," he said triumphantly.

He needed to get used to it, but I didn't say that.

I just followed him to the kitchen for tea.

At **9:50am**, Caoimhe joined us at our table with a mug in hand, wearing a soft heather gray tracksuit that somehow gave off an air of understated luxury.

"Hi, Raff's cute friend," she said to me with a genuine smile. "What are you two planning to wear tomorrow night?"

She meant our costumes. I'd forgotten, despite helping Raff plan what to pick up for us in the village, because I didn't think I'd be here. When the clock struck midnight tonight, it would be Halloween. I would have one last chance to be with Raff, and then it would be time to go, even though I hadn't felt this present in the world since I died.

Since before I died, honestly.

". . . Larkensong, his bard, and I'm going to be my half-elf ranger, Thorne Greenbriar. I even got some elf ears to put on," Raff was eagerly explaining to Caoimhe, as if our plans might still happen and I might not disappear until Halloween came to an end.

I suspected that was wishful thinking, but I remembered what he had said in the foyer about my smile and put one on. And when that was hard, I stole his mug and sipped his tea.

"You'll be in room 2B tomorrow night. All the arrangements are made, and clean linens are on the new bed," Caoimhe told Raff, though her eyes

darted briefly to me. “You’re welcome to use it tonight as well, of course, if sleeping in the van is wearing on you. Or, you know, if you just want to have a quiet date before all the fun.”

At **9:56am**, I stared at Caoimhe’s retreating back and asked Raff, “Did you . . . rent us a hookup room? Or did she just give us one?”

The plastic witch hanging in the kitchen window, twin to the one in the hall, randomly waved a greenish, clawed hand.

“Both,” Raff said, red creeping into his face.

I kissed his freckles.

At **10:34am**, a package arrived at the castle addressed to Rafferty O’Meara. The mailman struggled with the large, seemingly heavy box, and Raff took pity on him the second he saw what was going on, rushing out to meet him.

We unpacked it in the foyer. Jordy had a pocket knife and cut through the many layers of tape for us while I studied the exterior of the box. It was covered in an aggressive number of FRAGILE stickers, and had come from the offices of ExorSquad in London.

Inside was a heavy metal box, its control panel covered in colorful little knobs and levers like something out of a kids’ arcade. I really wanted to poke the big yellow button. There were even a bunch of loose wires that didn’t seem to connect to anything, so I started wrapping myself in them like a bored cat while Raff read the massive instruction booklet it had come with, solemnly taking it in like it might save us.

A weapon that could actually fight the elemental would have been worth the effort, but I was already sure this wasn’t it. I was still just as worried for the living and the dead—and for Raff, most of all.

The “Apparition Displacement Apparatus, version 4.04” or the “ADA-404: your ultimate spirit-away solution,” as the manual proclaimed it, was very obviously a piece of junk only fit for the scrapyard or the dark backroom of a defunct Circuit City store.

And okay, maybe useful for entertaining spirits, if not getting rid of them.

By **11:38am**, I’d tangled us both in the colorful wires while Raff cursed at the manual, and I convinced him to take a break to kiss me. We were conveniently close, after all.

By **12:48pm**, Raff still hadn't gotten the thing to light up, beep, or otherwise recognize that he was interacting with it, even after he figured out how to charge it.

Jordy and Basil came to watch the show—man vs. machine—while they ate lunch. They had brought four chicken rolls—one for me, too. I nibbled at it, appreciating every bite.

At **12:50pm**, I punched the big yellow button, Raff dove to cover me with his bigger form like a bomb was about to go off, and nothing happened.

By **2:03pm**, Raff had put the "right load of rubbish and feckin' disgrace" in a corner like it was a toddler taking a time out. "Maybe it just needs to charge overnight, even though that's not in the manual," he sighed, already sounding doubtful.

He put a jack-o'-lantern with a feral grin in front of the device, hiding where it was plugged in and charging rather than moving the unsightly and awkward hunk of scrap metal and wires to the van where he had a portable outlet.

"What's that look for?" he muttered sheepishly as he covered it with a few paper bats for good measure. "I'm not sharin' the back of the van with you *and* that thing. It's crowded enough as is with all the other pointless shite the company's sent me."

I grabbed a few black balloons off a banister—the surviving ones Gráinne hadn't popped with her teeth yet—and used them to help cover up the ADA-404 (or, as I had decided to call it over the past few hours, the Error Code 404).

Then I put a hand on Raff's arm and gently said, "You won't have to. Tonight at midnight, it's October 31st. This is probably going to be our last night together, so I assume you'll want to take Caoimhe up on her offer and share that guest room . . .?"

2B. The brass numbering system on the door was new, but I knew the room as the one next to Síofra's. The one Brigid used to haunt before the elemental got her, too.

"What makes you so sure you won't be here through the party?" Raff asked, unable to hide how stricken he looked. "Thought our costumes would be quite a sight . . ."

“They would’ve been.” I tried to smile, to soften the words, but couldn’t quite get there. “Put it this way: I’m not entirely sure when I’ll go, but I’ve read enough about magic in all sorts of forms to know you should never take any kind of spell at face value.” I reached for his hand. “Come on. We can pretend we’re at a really fancy hotel, yeah?”

And with the black salt protecting the doors and windows, we would be safe enough. We could focus on enjoying Caoimhe’s taste in spa-like bedding, luxury bath products, and stuffy decorations.

We could focus on goodbye.

At **3:21pm**, Raff put his overnight bag in the fancy guest room with a four-poster bed and shiny new dark wood furniture. Since I had nothing to unpack, I sprawled on the bed and gazed out the window over the castle grounds, trying to decide whether or not I’d miss the view.

My eyes strayed back to Raff almost at once. Freckles and a sharp chin and green eyes. Broad shoulders and dorky, company-issued overalls and a fighter’s physique that belied his gentle, caring nature.

Yeah, I would miss the view plenty.

I loved it.

I absolutely loved him.

He joined me on the bed and put a hand on mine, and we stayed like that for a long time. We didn’t need anything more.

At **6:15pm**, our pizzas arrived. Plural. So many pizzas. I couldn’t decide what I wanted when Raff showed me all the options, so we just . . . got a bit of everything. On Jordy, apparently, as a thanks for the DM work and for setting him and Basil up. And even though the other ghosts definitely didn’t want a mouth full of hot cheese and scalding sauce as badly as I did, we still invited Síofra and a few of the others to come hang out in room 2B with us while we ate.

Old Liam Donnelly told a long, involved story about the time he was off the coast of Dingle, catching pollock and mackerel, when a silverback cod the size of a horse surfaced and swam alongside their boat, out of reach.

I didn’t even know if a silverback cod was a real fish, and made the mistake of darting a glance at Raff, who had a mouth full of pizza. When our eyes met, he nearly joined me in the afterlife from choking so hard with laughter. My bad.

Then Liam launched into the time a heron stole his bait and his dignity, which wasn't very funny at all, and Raff was able to catch his breath.

By **8:20pm**, the few spirits who'd joined us had mostly left.

"I'm not so sure about this bedding. It's so . . . fluffy. And I feel like the mattress is trying to eat me," Síofra sighed as she stretched out on one side of the bed next to me, with Raff on my other. She was the last to leave after Gráinne had taken all the hot peppers out of the various boxes and scampered off to feed them to her toy collection under the stairs—which I was starting to worry included a living squirrel.

Raff promised to take care of any potentially distressed creature in her possession in the morning, with or without me.

From the moment I had woken up in Ardruin, time had seemed suspended, like I was one of those beetles trapped in resin you can buy in a museum gift shop. I'd hated it. Told the worms in the dungeon all about it. But now . . . I wanted to go back to dust motes floating in the air, to light held in honeyed stillness.

I couldn't, though, so I tried to focus on what my friends were saying as they talked quietly back and forth across me.

"I'll talk to Jordy and see about staying longer—even if he doesn't want to pay me," Raff was telling our decaying countess.

"Even with the elemental hunting you, and with Eric gone?" Síofra's eyes widened. "You'd do that for the rest of us?"

"I wouldn't feel right leaving anyone here who wants help moving on," Raff said, "no matter how long it takes."

Just like his D&D character, he was going to finish what the party had started—what he and I had started: looking after the comfort of the other ghosts together—even if he had to keep adventuring alone.

At **8:26pm**, I cried actual tears, because I knew Raff was doing it all—looking after the other ghosts—for me.

Staying close to the danger for me.

It took a while to convince Síofra I wasn't going to turn into a puddle on the floor because of the alarming sight of water leaking from my dead eyes, but we got there.

At **8:42pm**, the moment Síofra left, Raff put down the black salt at the doorway to keep anything else from coming in or out tonight. As he

returned to the bed, I sat up and reached for his hands, drawing him to me. He had a bit of pizza sauce at the corner of his mouth, messy and human and not mine for long but oh, God, I wanted him to be.

“I used to resent my afterlife,” I told him, not quite meeting his eyes because, if I did, I knew my throat would get tight and the words would be lost. “I used to hate it here. But now I don’t even regret getting stranded for sixteen years because I got to spend a little time with you. And I promise, wherever I’m going next, if I become stardust or drift through the universe or something else I can’t even think of, I’m never going to forget you. Life with you has been really, really good. Good enough that I’m at peace with everything even though I was murdered.”

Raff pressed his lips together, his eyes glistening. Tears welled in his eyes, and he shook his head. I reached up and swiped at the pizza sauce by his mouth with my thumb, and he caught my wrist. I could feel how he trembled. Then he tangled our fingers together.

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” he rasped. “And I should’ve said it sooner, but I can’t let you leave without you knowing—I love you.”

“I love you.”

He beat me to it by half a second. And now I was crying again, too, just seeing the tears streak freely down his pale, freckled face. “I know,” I said, my chest heaving with a sob. “I counted the heartbeats.”

“I love you so much,” he repeated with conviction, and the hopelessness of a doomed man who knew exactly what he was about to lose. “Don’t—” He stopped himself there, but I understood what he’d been about to say: *don’t leave me*.

I also knew why he wasn’t saying it. Because he’d rather know I was safe than feeding the elemental that might still hurt him or a lot of other innocent people.

“I’ll live on in you,” I told him gently, leaning in to kiss his cheek. “As long as you remember me, I’ll never really leave you. But I know, I—I don’t want to face what’s next without you, either, when I only just found out how good it can be to have someone who holds your hand in the dark.”

“You’ve shown me what it is to want a future again, and I’m not sure I’ll be able to let—” He stopped short, his eyes widening. He blinked away tears as he lifted his head and scented the air like a bloodhound.

“Eric, do you smell that? It’s like . . . someone left the stove on downstairs or something,” he said slowly, staring at the cold, empty fireplace opposite our bed for the night. “You don’t think . . .?”

“Síofra would run through the wall screaming if there was an actual fire,” I said, putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

But now that he mentioned it, I did smell something. Not exactly how he had described it, but the air felt thicker, crackling with intent. There was a certain metallic scent wafting through the room, like someone had struck a match too close to my face, the kind of sting that curled into my nose and made my eyes water.

It smelled like a warning.

One that made the back of my neck prickle with awareness as Raff and I both scanned the walls to see if any eyes would appear in the wood, pushing through the plaster.

“You can’t have him,” Raff said coldly to the smoky air, and even once the scent had completely evaporated, the rigid line of his shoulders refused to relax.

At **9:32pm**, we shed our clothes and climbed into the fancy bed together, and I gave him a massage with the coconut oil he’d never returned to the kitchen, trying to get rid of some of that unwanted tension.

It was hard work for a ghost with one foot out of this world. But I managed, with care, to dig my fingers in deep enough to erase some of his stress and worry and touch on something else that had him lifting his head to kiss my leg, which was the closest part of me he could reach.

But the kissing didn’t stop there. He gently displaced me onto the mattress, kissing up my thighs, my stomach, flicking his tongue over my nipples until I started squirming and grabbed a handful of his hair. Then, slowly, he kissed his way back to my lips.

“I was going to massage your knee first,” I protested between kisses as his larger hands roamed over every part of me.

The night was clear and cold, but I couldn’t feel the chill with Raff carefully straddling me, lowering himself onto me so that our growing erections were trapped together between our stomachs. The slightest movement was enough to make me gasp like this.

“You’re burnin’ up,” Raff accused as he sucked a hickey into my neck and rocked his hips against mine. “Love.”

“I . . . I want to feel you close,” I whined as one of our cocks leaked onto our stomachs. I wasn’t even sure whose, because we were both so worked up that the room smelled of sweat and anticipation, humid with our panting breaths as we swapped long, slow kisses and sucked the spit from each other’s lips.

Raff smiled against my mouth for the first time in hours, his eyes on mine, his only focus being the need pulsing between us. “I’m right here, mo chroi,” he said with feigned innocence, when he knew damn well what I meant. What I needed. “You have me. You always have.”

One look at the gleam in his eye, and I knew he was going to make me say it.

“I know, but I want you inside me.” I snuck a hand between us, running a finger along the length of him. “I don’t know how I’m going to take all this, but I’ll—I’ll rearrange my atoms to make sure you fit, that’s how much I want you. As close as can be.”

There had been two full water bottles on the nightstand when I started Raff’s massage, but by the time he had eaten me and stretched me into a writhing mess, they were both empty. I’d helped drain one.

This was thirsty work.

I didn’t feel exposed or vulnerable or worried when Raff hovered over me and lined himself up. Didn’t need to worry about protection or any of that, because hey, dead guy here. I was mostly worried about his knee, but he wasn’t giving any of the usual small signs that it was bothering him.

Probably because I took up all his attention, teasing his cock glistening with coconut oil until it was in dire need of the same thing I was. He held me and kissed me as he slowly worked his way into me at last, whispering a litany of praise in Irish that I couldn’t begin to untangle.

I didn’t need to.

It was *I love you* in a hundred different ways. His voice was a melody that made sense to me, and his body fit me like home as I adjusted to the sensation of being filled for the first time, no rearranging of my particles required after all. It was as easy as loving him, taking in everything he had to offer me as we built up a rhythm together.

“Mine,” Raff growled as he fucked into me deeper, hovering on the edge.

He kissed me hard enough to take my breath away—or maybe that was just him, dragging his cockhead against my prostate with a bit of skill I was

very glad he had—but when he slowed a little, trying to make this last even longer for us both, I agreed, “Yours. Always.”

Because whether I was here or not didn’t make it any less true.

I was his, well before he ever had me coming all over his hand and my stomach, his face buried in the crook of my neck as he spilled himself into me.

Belonging was forever. It defied worlds.

At **11:35pm**, we both came for a second time.

At **12:00am** on October 31st, Raff held me extra tight as we lay in bed watching the stars shine through the window. If I was a doll, he would’ve squeezed the stuffing right out of me.

At **12:48am**, when I still hadn’t vanished on him, he finally started to relax.

At **2:13am**, he lost the fight and sank under the waves of sleep while I rested beside him, toying with the chain of the pendant around his neck and wondering when I’d start to feel some kind of change come over me. Wondering when some golden door might appear.

But pretty soon, lulled by Raff’s deep, rhythmic breathing, I was asleep, too.

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# Twenty-Five

# Choices

## Eric

As usual, I drifted instead of truly dreaming. But this was different somehow, my awareness heightened. There was no more bed with a too-soft mattress and luxury bedding, no more Raff to snuggle up to. No more castle.

For the first time in sixteen years, I floated free. I had traveled somewhere else entirely.

Golden light surrounded me, washing over me in slow, gentle waves like the lapping of water against a harbor dock on a clear day. And with it came the gently rising tide of every memory I'd ever had, every experience in my life and afterlife, all flickering at the edges of my vision like minnows darting away from my feet in the shallow creek behind my grandma's house where I'd played as a kid.

There was no one else with me. No shadowy figures. No voices. Just a steady presence, an energy I recognized as vast and patient and much older than my own.

It didn't speak, but sent another flicker of understanding my way that unfurled inside me like taking a deep breath after so long without: There

was no deceptive magic here. I was simply being offered a choice.

Stay, or return.

I could drift further into the all-encompassing brightness, let myself become the stuff of stars in what would feel like the gentlest surrender. Like laying down every burden I'd ever been asked to carry.

Or I could give in to the faint pull around my navel that tugged me back toward the shape of my old body, its outline waiting for me like a coat I'd left hanging by the door and forgotten to pick up for years. Toward a thready pulse that would grow steadily stronger. Toward the heaviness and the ache and the mess and the sheer beauty of *existing*.

That pull grew stronger the moment I remembered someone lay there beside me. Beside what I could be. Someone who always looked at me like I was worth choosing.

The steady presence around me didn't push. The gravity of each path was mine alone to feel and weigh. And as I drifted through the lightness and the brightness of the dreamy in-between, I realized the choice I needed to make wasn't about life or death after all.

It was about who I wanted to be.

Something in me tilted, turning away from a light that didn't ask anything of me, didn't *need* me, to focus more fully on a darkened room in an old stone castle and the man now alone in a big bed. And like a compass needle pointing me north, I remembered his hands and his laugh and the way he said my name like it mattered.

I turned to Raff, and felt a tug warmer and sharper than anything this place could offer.

I chose the shape of my body, breath and ache and being loved by him. As long as he was in the world, I wasn't done with it after all.

I chose to stay, letting the world pull me back into myself, reshaping my physical form from that tidewater of memory. I wasn't done yet. Half-asleep, I nuzzled his hair, which tickled my nose and smelled like belonging. He was my reason to stay.

I was home.



When I jolted awake, I wasn't entirely sure what had pushed me into alertness, because the room was still dark and Raff was still sleeping soundly. Maybe it was my blazing hot feet, one hooked around Raff's ankle, trapped under too many covers. Maybe it was the ache in my spine from being bent out of shape by the soft mattress. Maybe it was the desert-dryness of my throat despite how much we drank before bed. Maybe it was Raff's hair tickling my cheek, because we had somehow started sharing a pillow as we slept. Maybe it was the hunger blooming in my gut, deep and insistent. Maybe it was the faint soreness of my well-used ass.

Or maybe it was all the *noise*. The rise and fall of my chest that brought soft gusts of breath, a sound I hadn't heard in over sixteen years. The rush of blood circulating through my body, the faint jump I felt beneath my fingers when I shoved them against my wrist.

I had a pulse.

My stomach gurgled.

I needed to pee.

Naked under the covers and nestled against Raff's huggable bulk, I was sweating. Out of my pores. I had *pores*.

I tried to vanish, to let myself become pure energy again for a few moments, and in the stillness nothing happened but a clamor of continued noise from my actual, living body.

It overwhelmed me for a moment to the point of panic, and I rolled onto Raff, clinging to him like a terrified cat being rescued from water.

"I have a pulse!" I yelped when he opened his startled eyes to peer blearily into mine. And then I added, because I could, "And I love you."

He didn't waste any time feeling the life pulsing through my wrists, my neck. Pressing his ear to my chest and listening to the heart that beat there, strong and real.

Only after several moments of this did he try to speak, head lifting a little to meet my eyes only to return to my chest and that fast-beating organ. Adrenaline chased most of the tiredness from his voice as he demanded, "Is this some kind of—what did you call it, a magic trick? You're alive? You're real? Are you—?"

"Yours, and alive," I told him, kissing his face as it crumpled and he started sobbing, wrapping his arms around me. "It's real," I assured him softly as he clung to me and shook. I stroked his back in a repeated motion, hoping it would help calm him. "I think, because of that spell we did, I got

to choose, and I wanted to stay here with you. To fight stupid evil Gary together and free the other ghosts if we can, and . . . be your boyfriend . . . and try your mom's colcannon . . . and—"

"Move in with me," Raff said suddenly, kissing my face and getting us both wet with tears. I loved the feel of his care all over my cheeks. "Will you?" As I nodded, he laughed and groaned, "I live in that fecking van! It's yours now, too, of course, but we should get a flat."

"And a dog and a cat," I reminded him sweetly. "We'll figure it all out later, but right now I just—needed you to know I'm not going anywhere. As long as you want me, I'm yours." I smoothed his hair back from his damp brow and caught his lips with mine.

I might have needed to breathe now, but we didn't come up for air for a long time.

He rolled me on top of him and ran his hands through my hair, down my back, over my sides and my thighs. Like he needed reassurance that I wouldn't fade or something. The good news was, I had the rest of tonight and every night for the rest of my life to give it to him.

"You're too good to be real," he murmured fondly beneath me, a few stray tears still glistening at the corners of his eyes in the soft moonlight. I kissed them away, and he added, "I love you beyond sense, Eric. I'm mad about you. I had so many dreams for us and now we're going to get to make them real, and I just feel like the luckiest—"

The rest of his words, though I understood them, were drowned by a high, keening cry that shuddered past the window. The notes were so sharp they made my head throb.

Raff held me tighter as if in answer to the sound, and I held him back with all my newfound human strength. Both of us quieted our breathing and lay very still, listening even though doing so was painful.

It was a cry of mourning.

A cry of danger cloaked in deep sorrow. A threat of what was to come.

For a moment, after the ear-splitting shrieks reached a crescendo, the night was as silent and tense as a tightly pulled bowstring. Still, the sound seemed to echo in the spaces between our heartbeats.

Then the wailing came again, this time welling up from the heart of the castle.

Followed by Caoimhe's raw, much more human scream.

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# Twenty-Six

# All That Glitters

## Raff

Pressing what remained of our black salt jar into Eric's hands, I staggered out of bed as quickly as I could and pulled on my pants and overalls. There was more salt in that jar than there was in the pendant around my neck, so I hoped that meant he would be equally protected or better from whatever tricks the elemental was up to now.

Of course, Caoimhe wasn't. She needed us to hurry.

Glancing at the time on the nightstand's digital clock, I saw it was just after three in the morning. She must have fallen asleep in her office while working late.

I grabbed the PolterPulse and Eric's hand, and together we raced downstairs to the foyer, where the chandelier was flickering like a bulb was about to burst.

We had only reached the landing when I saw the reason Caoimhe had screamed, the reason she was currently cowering in a corner of the room behind the armchair I'd once fallen asleep in. The elemental had used blood —a fox's, I hoped, rather than a person's—to paint a large, sloppy message across the foyer wall:

# YOU'RE ALL MINE.

"If I die again," Eric said bravely, squeezing my hand, "I want it to be with you."

We ran the rest of the way to Caoimhe as the wailing started up again, at first seeming to come from the hall. Then from above us. Wrapping around the room, a chorus of sound so all-encompassing it made my eyes water and left me with nowhere to point the PolterPulse.

With an unseen enemy that was clearly here to take a stand.

"What happened?" Eric shouted over the noise to Caoimhe. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, her bun falling from its pretty silk tie, her eyes wide and awash with fright. "I—I fell asleep in my office. Getting ready for—for the opening!" she shouted. "Something grabbed my shoulder. I woke up and saw a shadow—"

Eric and I exchanged a worried glance.

"Is Jordy here? Pepper?" Eric asked her quickly, and she shook her head again.

That was one small miracle. Two less souls to worry about in all this.

"Let's go wait this out in the van!" I told them both over the wails that would have put any banshee to shame. Was the elemental mocking Caoimhe and her plans for a costume by taking a banshee's form? Had it been listening that night in the parlor when she told me about that? Watching and listening afterward, while Eric and I made love?

I tugged his hand, nodding urgently toward the oak front door even though part of me wasn't sure it would open to our touch anymore.

It was half a plan at best. Less than.

But Eric's hand in mine, warm and real, made me determined to try.

We were only a few steps from the door when something grabbed the chain of my protective pendant and gave it a firm *yank*. With the disorienting shrieks continuing, at first I thought maybe Caoimhe was trying to hold onto me in her panic.

Then I felt the chain tighten and twist, and I clawed at it uselessly as it bit into my neck and cut off my air supply.

“Póg . . . mo . . . thóin,” I choked out to the entity.

As soon as he noticed, Eric gave a sharp cry and started trying to pull the chain free from the unseen hand that held it. Even Caoimhe helped, or at least I think she did, her hands tugging along with Eric’s. I was getting lightheaded, stars bursting at the corners of my vision.

I needed air. I needed to get Eric out of here, more than anything. I needed him safe, so we could start our life together. I needed—

A streak of white shot past my awareness, and suddenly, I was free. I dropped to my knees, gasping and gagging and clutching my neck, and Eric pulled the chain up over my head and tucked it in my pocket so the elemental couldn’t try that again.

Apparently, it was too strong for the black salt to do anything now.

I let Eric drag me back up to my feet, clinging to him to stay standing. He rubbed my back, his arm squeezing my waist so tight that it wasn’t helping me breathe, but I wasn’t about to tell him to let go.

As I rubbed my throat and swallowed a few times, convincing myself I wasn’t dead yet, something semi-transparent flickered against the stones. Something that was locked in a battle with the entity we still couldn’t see. I knew that figure, even with her features blurred and some of her skin missing, even without her beautiful curls she’d once taken such pride in.

Síofra.

She had freed me from the elemental’s grasp, stepped in before Eric could do something risky and ruin his second life, but she wasn’t strong enough to fight it for very long.

“What’s happening?” Caoimhe demanded tearfully as a long, tall shadow danced across the wall, drawing Síofra into the stone as if the walls themselves were consuming her. “Raff, are you all right? We need to call someone, ring an ambulance, the Gardaí—”

I didn’t need to glance at her phone to know none of us had service to call for any of those things. And I wasn’t sure how they would help us, anyway. I wasn’t even sure Niamh could have helped if she were here, no matter how much she had done for Eric.

I needed to think fast. Tears streaked down Eric’s face as he threw the rest of the black salt from the jar at the place where Síofra was disappearing, but like my pendant, it made no difference now against the entity’s strength.

There was nothing we could do, and in a few moments, it was going to turn its attention back to us. Turn its power on us. Kill us with a touch, I supposed, like it had once done to Eric.

Tearing my gaze from Síofra, I glanced toward the far corner of the room by the stairs, where a steady green light blazed under the watchful grin of a burned-out jack-o'-lantern. The ADA-404 had finally stopped blinking, having charged fully overnight.

Maybe, for once, one of Gerald's company-issued weapons wouldn't let me down.

But if we had any chance here, we needed to be able to properly see what we were dealing with, to know where to aim the machine's power. And for once in my life, I was glad for those early, lonely nights I'd wasted on this job skimming through The Handbook, because something dead useful came back to me now:

**Rule #89: If you're having trouble visually tracking the entity, consider using glitter.**

*It's guaranteed to stick no matter the type of entity, but it's an absolute nightmare to clean up, so only use it as a last resort.*

Lucky for us, thanks to Caoimhe and Basil's manic Halloween decorating, there was glitter everywhere. Cute, colorful vials of it sat on an end table in the foyer, waiting to be lovingly sprinkled like pixie dust right before the grand opening.

As the elemental made a deep, groaning sound like the stones shifting—like its meal wasn't going down easy—I turned to Eric and Caoimhe and quickly explained what we needed to do, my heart twisting as I caught sight of Eric's stricken face. Síofra's sacrifice had saved us both. Given us a chance to stay together. But I couldn't let myself feel anything in the moment beyond the need to get Eric out of here alive. I needed my wits about me to end this tonight, before anyone else got hurt.

As the wailing picked back up and a burst of cold wind pushed my hair back, Eric tossed a packet of orange glitter toward the sound. Caoimhe did the same, the two of them scattering sparkles in every direction. And as they did, I swiftly kissed Eric's cheek and bolted toward the ADA-404, our ultimate—our only—spirit-away solution.

Eric made a strangled sound, but I forced myself to run the rest of the way to the machine while the elemental wasn't focused on me, kneeling quickly and wincing as I came down too hard on my bad knee. When I glanced back to check on the others, I saw they were both alive—faces smeared with glitter, eyes streaming where the elemental had blown it back at them. There was also a long, misshapen figure hovering several feet off the ground beside them.

Dancing.

Clearly, all that glittered wasn't golden. Sometimes, it was just a showoffy shite of a ghost.

My stomach writhed at the wrongness of the sight, but I didn't let that stop me from pointing the sleek black nozzle of the ADA-404 at our glittering monstrosity and pounding my fist on the yellow button to wake it.

Nothing happened.

And something inside me snapped.

The fecking Error Code 404 was fully charged, and yet, like everything else ExorSquad had ever given me, it made no difference in a life-or-death situation. No wonder Gerald had lost so many employees.

I'd had it with this company. I'd had it with the low pay and #vanlife and useless advice and lack of support and risking my neck all the time with no thanks or recognition from them.

I'd had it with their scamming, lying, murdering ways.

Glancing up, I checked on the others again as I strode toward the waving, randomly cackling plastic witch perched on the banister. And watched as the amorphous, glittering shadow that was the elemental slowly lowered itself to the floor.

Eric and Caoimhe slowly backed toward the front door together, his arm thrown across her like a noble but useless shield.

They needed me. And I needed that spirit-away solution to actually work.

Tearing my eyes from them reluctantly, I turned away and hastily snapped off the plastic witch's broomstick, swinging it about in my hand like a

hurley. It wasn’t the right weight or exactly the right shape, but it was wood instead of plastic. Besides, it was Halloween, and we could play pretend.

“Raff!” Eric screamed, the sound raw and more terrified, more human, than any wailing the elemental had tried to imitate.

But I didn’t sprint toward the door to join him and Caoimhe. I limped quickly back to the ADA-404 and swung my makeshift hurley at it, determined to beat the useless machine into working or shattering once and for all. I smashed it so hard that my knuckles cracked, red and wet, and I kept on going, driven by desperation to not let any of us end up dead or worse, be trapped here with this thing until it got bored and decided to eat us.

Finally, the machine gave a wheezing rattle of life.

I gave it an encouraging kick with my good leg as my temper started to fizzle out, replaced by fear and determination as I aimed the machine’s nozzle at the glittering cloud that was nearly on top of Eric and held the yellow button down.

It didn’t suck the elemental into the machine’s casing in a wisp of fog like the manual clearly showed. Didn’t send a jet of white-hot or electric-blue energy shooting out to disrupt the elemental’s manifestation like the PolterPulse or the TurboPro would.

If anything, it seemed to be . . . amplifying the elemental’s power. Strengthening it. Which was exactly the opposite of what I wanted.

The cloud of glitter was expanding, whirring ominously like a miniature tornado. I was about to drop the nozzle and run when Eric shouted at me, “No, wait! Leave it a minute!”

I had no idea what he was thinking, but I trusted him. So I kept pressing the button and pointing the nozzle as the elemental became a bigger, louder funnel cloud. I realized I was clenching my teeth, the sound was so unpleasant, but in another few seconds it was over. The glittering whirlwind that had been expanding to fill the room suddenly shrank down until it was nothing but sparkles and embers on the rug.

The foyer was silent, just like the rest of the castle. Quiet enough to hear the rhythmic tick of an antique grandfather clock partway down the hall.

The next thing I knew, Eric was running toward me, throwing his arms around me and kissing my hair. I brought mine up and ran my hands along his solid form, feeling his warmth, his frantic heartbeat. Reminding myself that he was alive.

The elemental hadn’t managed to take him from me.

“What—what did that thing do? That big machine, did it . . . kill the ghost?” Caoimhe asked quietly, in the small, hollow voice of someone who was clearly in shock. She had climbed shakily to her feet to stamp out the lick of flame eating one corner of the rug, the elemental’s parting gift.

When I glanced behind me at the ADA-404, I realized it was gently smoking, too.

“I think your machine was taking the elemental’s energy and throwing it back in its face,” Eric said, the words slightly muffled as he spoke with his face buried in my chest. “I think they short-circuited each other, it and the machine. That’s why I told you not to stop.” He pressed a kiss to my shoulder, then drew back to meet my eyes and took a shaky breath. “I think the elemental couldn’t handle a taste of its own power. But I’m sure it’ll be back, if it’s as much a part of this place as your witch friend said it is.”

He was right. We still needed to get in the van and get the hell out of here for good while the murderous entity was disoriented and its strength was temporarily diminished.

But first . . .

There were several figures appearing on the landing, slowly manifesting more clearly as they drifted down into the foyer.

Brother Fintan was the first to reach us, the latest book in the Lady Arabella romance series tucked under his arm, his robes swishing around his ankles. “You two look after each other. Do things that would make me and Lady Arabella proud,” the monk said, kissing the air beside Eric’s cheeks, then mine. He put a gentle hand on each of our shoulders, and then he disappeared.

Not winking out of sight, but really vanishing. His sudden absence left a hollow in the air, and as I glanced sharply at Eric to confirm what I felt, he nodded solemnly.

While the elemental’s hold over this place was momentarily broken, the other spirits all had a chance to move on.

Liam Donnelly gave us a gruff wave and a nod. But just before he disappeared, he cracked a bright smile that made him look like a lad again.

Gráinne hugged us tight, and for the second time that evening, I found it hard to breathe.

We said our goodbyes to Muireann and Eilis and Donnacha, who had brought his old mare inside with him. To nervous but reliable Colmán and

quiet Síle, the last of the castle's spirits as far as I could recall without my notebook in front of me.

Síofra should have been with them. But just like Eric had told me earlier that night, we would remember her, and she would live on in us. Even if it felt like a small comfort right now. Even if my hands wouldn't stop shaking as I walked Eric to the door and told him to take Caoimhe to the van, instructing the two of them to wait for me there while I made sure there were truly no frightened spirits lingering behind.

It was the least I could do to honor Síofra, even if I didn't want to spend another second in this place. Seemingly alone, I went upstairs to fetch my overnight bag and phone that I had abandoned in room 2B, switching out of my uniform while I was at it. Once that was done, I limped through the castle corridors, trying my best to ignore the leering Halloween decorations. My knuckles oozed slightly as I made my sweep, and I finally began to feel every ache in my body as the adrenaline of the fight receded and left me cold.

Knowing I had Eric safe in the van was the only thing that kept me going. And, I realized, the Second Sight had once again only shown me half the picture when it gave me a glimpse of this moment. I couldn't feel Eric in here anymore because he wasn't bound to this place. He was free, and he had chosen me.

He was right where he was supposed to be.

Satisfied that the elemental was going to be very lonely whenever it gained the strength to manifest again, I hurried to the parking lot.

Still, it was hard to relax even as I slid behind the wheel of the van, Eric in the passenger's seat, and Caoimhe cowering quietly in the back with my gear.

I'd feel better, I decided, when we were out of the shadow of Ardruin, the only place I knew that cast reaching shadows even in the small hours of the morning.

As I sped toward the flung-open gates tied with bouquets of pumpkin balloons that marked the edge of the property, I clocked Eric tensing from the corner of my eye and reached over, laying a hand on his leg.

He hadn't been able to cross this boundary as a spirit. Part of him was still clearly afraid that he couldn't do so now.

I squeezed his leg as we kept on rolling down the hill, breaking free, and Eric brought my hand to his lips and kissed my bloody knuckles before

lapsing into quiet sobs of relief.

The lights of Ballycorven were twinkling in welcome in the distance when Eric finally broke the uneasy silence, sounding much more like the man I knew and loved. “Anyone else starving? Is anything open this late?”

I couldn’t help it—I laughed. After a moment, even Caoimhe joined in.

Of course, nothing was open at half past four in the morning in any part of Kerry. But when we finally parked at Caoimhe’s posh apartment on the far side of the village, she cooked us up a hot meal of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast with blackcurrant jam and heaps of butter while Eric and I got settled for the night in her spare bedroom.

While the bacon sizzled away in the pan, we could hear the soft sounds of her talking to Jordy on the phone, and we lingered in the room to give them a minute. I wrapped Eric in my arms and realized I was going to be the one who never tired of counting his heartbeats now.

“So what’s next?” he whispered, resting his head on my shoulder.

Caoimhe had offered for us to stay with her until we figured out our next move, just like she and Jordy would be figuring out theirs.

And we certainly had plenty to figure out. I wasn’t too worried about that, though. We had already proved we could do anything together.

The front door of the apartment swung open, loud enough to be heard from the back of the small place. Jordy had apparently rushed over the moment Caoimhe called to tell him what had happened, and the next thing we knew, Pepper was scampering over to the guest room and nudging the door open with his nose.

“Next is the part where I get to keep you,” I told Eric as I scooped up Pepper and passed him to the person he *really* wanted to see.

Eric leaned over the happily wiggling dog to kiss me.

Next, I would get to wake up beside him, and for me, that was everything.

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# Epilogue: One Year Later

## Raff

Before Eric and I left Ballycorven to start our new life together, we went back to thank Niamh, only to find that the Rowan & Reed was gone. Eric hugged me as we stood on the sidewalk between the toy shop and the gents' clothing boutique with its fancy blazers we wouldn't need where we were headed, a cold December wind swirling around us.

I leaned into him, even though my knee was doing much better by then thanks to an excellent physical therapist he had found for me. I needed his help to stay standing as the world seemed to tilt on its axis to an uncanny degree, because the shop wasn't just gone—it was as if it had never been there at all. The toy shop and the boutique shared a wall. There was no crooked shop squeezed into a tight corner. The building wasn't designed that way.

"Magic," Eric had whispered reassuringly. "It's okay. We can still say thank you."

And that's just what we did. We found a florist buzzing with the Christmas spirit and picked out a bouquet to lay right where I was sure the door to the shop had been.

Then we headed into the bakery so I could buy a couple lavender and vanilla custard doughnuts to eat before we peeked into the bookstore (where

we would probably get lost for hours). Eric sometimes forgot he needed to eat—a side effect of having been dead—and it was a good thing I was there to remind him, because his type one diabetes had come back a few days after our escape from Ardruin and sometimes his blood sugar ran low. Apparently, his new life included his old body and some of its old cares (and, lucky for me, his old tattoo), so we booked him in with a compassionate endocrinologist and he took to using an insulin pump and continuous glucose monitor right away. The app for watching his blood sugar allowed him to share the data with someone on another phone, and I made sure to keep all the alerts on high whenever we were apart or asleep, anytime he might really need me.

He usually didn't, though. I was fierce proud of how he was managing it himself.

It took us a few months to leave Caoimhe's apartment and the village with all there was to take care of, even though neither of us slept all that well in the shadow of Ardruin. Caoimhe hadn't, either, so she had moved back to Dublin a few weeks after Halloween with Jordy—and Basil—in tow.

The Dolans weren't actively trying to sell the place, although Céad Míle Fáilte Medieval Dining Hall was no more and would never open. Since it seemed the elemental had been absorbing the other spirits to strengthen itself for a battle against hordes of living tourists (which, to be fair, I wouldn't want my home turning into a second-rate amusement park, either), the Dolans decided to give it what it was after—total isolation.

Caoimhe, who in particular seemed to feel she had something to atone for, rebranded the castle as "Ireland's Worst Vacation Rental." Its online image painted a dire picture of the place, with Caoimhe maintaining the listing to scare off curious tourists by putting up fake reviews like: *Woke up to the bed floating from the infestation in the mattress. 2 stars.* And: *Got visited by a banshee while on holiday here, now fearing for my family.* No one would try to buy it from the Dolans, and no one like Eric would visit alone for a glimpse of the past and become an unwitting victim of an entity that I liked to imagine was quite bored and hungry by now.

Shortly before the Dolans packed up and headed for the big city on the other coast, I also managed to track down Gerald Pickett, who frankly—and he agreed, by the time I was done speaking—owed me one. He helped me with a flawless fake ID, birth certificate, and Irish passport for Eric, who

wanted to live here with me and start over rather than fully returning from the dead. Good thing, as that would have been hard to explain, although I would have followed him back to America or anywhere. Of course, we told his sisters what had happened, and the plan to meet in Dublin in the spring expanded to include Eric's entire elated family.

Before we left Ballycorven, though, we needed to figure out what we wanted to do with ourselves. Eric didn't want to design games anymore, and I was done with ExorSquad. We knew we wanted to do something together, because we made a great team. And one night, while Eric was distracting me by looking dead lovely in my faded green and gold jersey with the number 9 on the back, which he liked to wear to bed, I found it: a listing for a pair of caretakers on a remote Irish island where five guest cottages could be accessed by boat. There was an old ring fort there, and a few geological points of interest, but no castles. Nothing obviously haunted. There was even a seal colony that bred and played on the island's beach. We would mind the few adventurous tourists, serving them coffee and baked goods, and otherwise have run of the place, keeping it tidy and making sure the island's protected status was maintained.

We filled out the application and were accepted almost at once. We made plans to start in the spring, after our visit with Eric's family.

And with mine. After we left Ballycorven in our van that now had one new postcard on the dash—Eric had the honor of placing the glossy image of a crumbling Ardruin alongside the one for the Abbey of Blackthorn Vale—we went to cheer on my old teammates at a match and spent time with my parents. My da was apparently a closet nerd, as we learned when he started telling Eric about his time playing *The Shattered Crown* with his mates from the bank.

Eric loved those chats with him. He loved my teammates, and was happy when I rejoined the old group chats. He even loved my mam's colcannon.

Sat there with him at dinner as he quietly described all the flavors for me, just like I used to do for him, his lips shining with butter as he gave me a private grin: that was when I knew I was ready to propose to him. But I still waited months, because we had all the time in the world, and surprising him meant being more creative than ever. I swear he was expecting it, and I was determined to outsmart him this once.

We took the van up to Galway in March, and he told me a little too often that the Claddagh rings we saw there were clearly a dumb tourist gimmick,

so I got one with an emerald set in the heart and hid it in the glove box.

We also picked up our first pet in Galway, a shelter cat who was mostly white with a few black spots. She was older and dignified and had been waiting the longest for a home. We named her Síofra, and while she didn't particularly seem to appreciate #vanlife, we promised her that better was coming soon.

It was in Dublin, while wandering narrow, winding lanes with Chloe and Annie after the rest of Eric's family had gone home, that we found our street dog. Máirtín. A skinny reddish dog of unknown origins whose coat got shinier and whose ribs disappeared when he started getting regular meals—the weirder, the better. Hence his name. We drew the line at giving him any eel pie, though.

We owed it to Pepper, I thought, for helping Eric appreciate dogs as much as cats, so we sent a toy to Jordy and Basil's new address on Pepper's birthday. A little fairy doll to be friends with his ratty old gnome.

The day I proposed, we were out on the water, on a violently rocking dinghy being tossed about by late April winds as warmer weather blew in. We were on our way to our new life, dog and cat and books and plenty of groceries in tow. Eric was wearing my old club pin on the collar of my leather jacket—sure you're seeing the pattern here—and looking like some romance novel hero Brother Fintan would have loved, with the wind sweeping his dark hair back and the chill kissing a lively flush into his cheeks from the thrill of the adventure.

He was crying and saying yes before he even saw the ring. Which he loved once he finally stopped kissing me and took a proper look at it.

"Can I have your last name?" he asked as a wave slammed into the side of the boat. I held tight to him, one hand clutching his jacket while I gripped the rail for dear life with my other. The Irish Sea was unpredictable at the best of times. "I mean," he added once we had leveled out and heard some shouted reassurance from the captain, "I know it's old-fashioned or whatever, but since I'm supposedly Irish now anyway, I just figured—"

"Anything I have is yours," I cut in, because I was glad to give it to him.

He was funny and messy and smart and alive and *mine*.

The rest of the rocky ride to the island, he settled in with his head against my chest, listening to my heartbeat. I don't think he ever plans to stop.




One of the first things I did as we explored our new home was take out the SpecterTrack and the ECH000 and do a thorough sweep of both the guest cottages and our own for any signs of a haunting. I hadn’t brought the rest of the old ExorSquad gear with me, but those two little devices—and Eric, who had a funny sense for these things now—were quick to put my mind at ease. Our new pets helped, too, as the only thing Síofra ever randomly hissed at were a few mice that soon disappeared.

We had sworn when we left Ballycorven that we were done with the paranormal.

And as we settled into our new life, we really didn’t think much about ghosts aside from the ones we sorely missed. We were too busy making love right on the beach when no one was around. Creating our own lavender syrup to go in a delicious oat milk latte that our first wave of guests was buzzing about. Taking long hikes with our dog while we carefully managed Eric’s blood sugar together. Naming the various seals once we learned to recognize them—there was Liam Donnelly, of course, and Mackerel Jack, Professor Slappy, and even a Gerald. We made tea and watched the stars, because out here, there wasn’t a single light to disrupt our view. We’d found a place where we could dream together infinitely. A place where we could still learn new things about each other, like what kind of jelly we preferred on our sandwiches—both grape, the correct answer—and find new ways to make each other laugh.

Later in the summer, Basil and Jordy came to stay with us, renting one of the guest cottages for two weeks as a break from city life. They celebrated our engagement with us and asked all about our wedding plans, which were vague so far—we had intended to figure that out over the winter, when we wouldn’t have tourists to mind. We thought maybe March, so the weather wouldn’t be as bitter but we wouldn’t be into the next busy season on the island yet. And Jordy’s eyes lit up.

He and Basil offered us the new property they had just acquired for our wedding and reception venue. It was a country estate about an hour north of Dublin, and it would be fully decorated and renovated by then. It was a very

kind gesture, but when I met Eric's searching gaze, I could tell he was thinking the same thing I was: no way were we going to accept until we figured out whether or not the place was haunted.

Which got us thinking, and talking under the stars out on the grassy knoll above the seal beach long after Basil and Jordy had gone to bed.

We set a firm wedding date of March 31st, though Eric already had my forever. And then we got to work on the idea that was born that night: *The Living Dead Guys*.

It was a podcast about haunted places all over the world, the kind with listener-submitted stories as well as at least one case covered in-depth each episode. We got more subscribers much faster than we expected, but we kept it a hobby, because that was what made it fun.

"I'm Raff O'Meara," I'd say during our intro, leaning over the mic and winking at Eric. "Former ExorSquad employee who lived to tell the tale."

"And I'm Eric O'Meara," he'd chime in, already that excited by his new last name. "Just a random guy who knows a lot about what it's like to be dead."

Now, Halloween week had come around again, but this year, there were no tears. No goodbyes. We were busy recording extra spooky episodes and minding the seals, narrating the dramas amongst the colony while Máirtín nosed around in the grass. We didn't have costumes or jack-o'-lanterns or paper bats, and we definitely didn't have any glitter.

But we did have a cake I made with lavender frosting to mark the day Eric chose to stay. Chose *me*. I made a list of all the ingredients so I could estimate the insulin he'd need per serving, depending how big we sliced it. I also thought about adding candles, but decided we'd skip that, too. Because even without them, our future had never looked so bright.

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# Thank You!

Thank you for reading How I Met Your Murderer! If you have a moment, I'd love for you to leave a rating/review!

This adventure may be over, but the ghostly fun does not stop there. View the rest of the ExorSquad series online: https://mybook.to/ExorSquad

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Shake Your Boo Thang by Chloe Archer
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# Glossary

Please note that all names and phrases covered here are in Irish (Gaeilge), pronounced in the Munster dialect, which is spoken in areas such as Kerry and Cork.

**NAMES**

**Seordán** (SHUR-dawn)
**Caoimhe** (KWEE-va)
**Síofra** (SHEE-fra)
**Máirtín** (MAWR-cheen)
**Fiachra** (FEE-uh-kruh)
**Muireann** (MWIR-in)
**Gráinne** (GRAWN-ya)
**Sorcha** (SUR-uh-cha)
**Eilis** (AY-lish)
**Padraig** (PAW-drig)
**Tadhg** (Teeg)
**Síle** (Shee-la)
**Niamh** (Neev)

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**WORDS AND PHRASES**

**Sláinte** (SLAWN-cha): Health (a way of saying “cheers”)

**Céad Míle Fáilte** (Kayd mee-leh FOWL-cha): A hundred thousand welcomes

**Tráthnóna maith** (Traw-no-na mah): Good afternoon

**Tráthnóna maith duit** (Traw-no-na mah ghwit): Good evening

**Tá brón orm** (Taw bro-in orr-um): Sadness is on me (used for “I’m sorry”)

**Dia duit** (Gee-ah ghwit): God be with you (used for “hello”)

**Dia is Muire duit** (Gee-ah iss Mwir-eh ghwit): God and Mary be with you (standard response to “Dia duit”)

**Maidin mhaith** (Mah-jin vah): Good morning

**A stór** (Uh STORE): My treasure

**Le do thoil** (Leh duh hull): Please (a polite request or begging depending on context)

**A chara** (Ah KHARR-ah): My friend

**Mo chuisle mo chroí** (Muh KUSH-la muh KREE): My pulse, my heart

**Póg mo thóin** (Pogue muh HOWN): Kiss my ass!

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# Acknowledgements

I never manage to keep these things short and sweet, but I'm really going to try! First of all: a huge thank you to T.J. Rose for inviting me into this world and series (and bringing me up to speed much more thoroughly than Gerald Pickett's training would have done!). Thank you as well to W.H. Lockwood, Jemma Croft, Mell R. Bright, Sam Northman, Chloe Archer, and A.M. Rose for sharing this world with me and letting me ramble about my love for my characters, share excerpts and art, and all that good stuff. You're all so talented and kind.

Thank you as well to my amazing agent, Katelyn Detweiler, for supporting me in this new venture as much as she does in everything else.

As ever, a huge thanks to my street team and my earliest readers: Ally, Andrew, Jordy, and Lori, you were among the first to tell me that I had something good going here, and for that, I'd go explore a haunted house with you. My street team is filled with some of the smartest, kindest, most supportive people I know, and they always keep me sane and laughing on the rollercoaster ride that is publishing.

Huge thanks to the artists who worked with me on some beautiful pieces to bring Eric, Raff, and the ghosts of Ardruin Castle to life, especially Lina Ganef who made this wonderful cover.

Thank you to my wonderful family, and most especially Dawn, my daughter and best friend who always inspires me. Our nature walks and

picnics and playtimes remind me of the joy that comes from creating and dreaming. I love you so much.

Last but never least, thanks to you for picking up this book and spending your time with Eric and Raff in their very haunted castle. I hope you enjoyed your stay at Céad Míle Fáilte, and that you only brought home the ghosts you wanted to.

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# About the Author

Sarah Glenn Marsh has been an avid fantasy reader since the day her dad handed her a copy of *The Hobbit* and promised it would change her life (it did). She believes we all deserve happy endings and is an author of books for everyone, including many young adult, middle grade, and picture book titles, as well as work for franchises like Star Wars and Critical Role.

While her heart is forever in Ireland, she lives in Richmond, Virginia with her family, including one sweet daughter, one slightly dull sword, and the chaos of many pets, like a turtle named Muffin who she definitely did not bring back from any haunted swamp. When she's not writing, she can often be found in the pottery studio, volunteering in dog rescue, or raising awareness about her disease, type one diabetes.

Visit her online to learn more, and be the first to hear about new books by signing up for her newsletter and following her on Instagram, where you can find plenty of beautiful book art and updates.

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