

SLATE & ARROW  
By Aika Aion

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

## 1. Death Sentences

Sable goes to Enola Park after school to spy. Or cry. Whichever comes first.

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

She pulls up on her bike and finds herself alone (no surprise there) so she settles on a smooth, flat boulder and looks out to the bay. But just as her throat clenches and she gets ready to release the sorrows of the day—or, let’s face it, the sorrows of the last few years—she catches a spark, a gem twinkling in the water. Caught between the rocks in a miniature tide pool is a corked bottle.

*Curious.*

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

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

RETURN  
DEAD FINDS YOU  
DIE SOON  
LIVE NOWHERE

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

The newsprint reminds her of the one and only obituary she'd ever read. It was for her neighbor Jane, who'd jumped off the Glorietta Bridge last year.

Sable turns the message over in her hands and looks around. No one—nothing. The sun, spreading its gold all over, is just starting to dip. And she knows, within the core of her being, this bottle was planted for her to find. Maybe not by a person, but by some cosmic forces at play. The same ones that gave her a sinking feeling when reading that obituary. Not because she was so saddened (she hardly knew Jane), but because she felt connected to the event. Like she could be next.

Isn't it enough that she has to endure her unrequited love for Pascual? That it's already Halloween of her senior year and she's still a friendless loser? That she's too poor to pay for a smartphone, let alone college, and will probably end up as a gas-station cashier? Now she has a foreboding message in a bottle to deal with?

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

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

All mean essentially the same thing. A redundant four-for-one death-sentence special.

A light breeze tickles the center of her forehead as a fleeting drop of sunlight catches one of the mirrored skyscrapers from across the bay, igniting the water and sparking any gleam of metal or glass passing by, stabbing her eyes.

Of course she would be the one to find this message. Not a love letter. Not a note of hope. Only she would find a memorandum of doom.

*Ow.* Something pierces her heart. A sharp sting to snap her out of her train of thought.

Sable looks down, her long dark hair tangling with the bottle, still in her lap. A few years ago, she might've tossed such a message aside without thinking too hard about it. Lately, though, her heart has opened to all possibilities. She just never thought an untimely demise would be one of them.

But what bothers her more than the thought of her death, what creeps up her shoulders and the sides of her neck and bores through her skull and into the maze of gray matter, is the idea that she might not fight it. What has she done that warrants continuing? What does she hope to do that is so noble and worthy of taking up more space on the planet? If a magic message in a bottle is giving her a heads-up that she could croak soon, who is she to refuse?

There it is again, a sting in her chest. Maybe it's some rare disease. Or maybe you really *can* die from a broken heart. Maybe they'll find her in the park, keeled over from "heart failure," and they'll say things about her young life being cut short. But they'll never know the truth. That her life could only go so far before asking for a do-over. That her heart decided it was easier to tap out now and start over in a fresh body than to continue in this sad sack of a girl.

Another sting.

A jab.

A nudge in her ribcage.

With the sun losing its power and the moon rising, the air cools, making Sable shiver. Around her neck hangs a smooth black stone in the shape of a raindrop. It vibrates in time with her heartbeat. It beckons her to answer. But she's too busy wallowing to hear its call.

"LIVE NOWHERE," she says out loud.

She always figured, since Glorietta is near a military base, that the park is named after the *Enola Gay* bomber plane. Usually the place is so desolate and quiet she can't help but read "Enola" backwards. Besides, she's used to being alone.

*Enola Park. Alone Krap.*

Her mind flashes to Pascual making eyes at Pony. On Mom busting into her room. On the bat hoodie crumpled up in her pack. On the hollow yet tight feeling in her chest.

"DIE SOON."

*Maybe it would be a good thing, she thinks.*

And immediately she feels a stab to the heart.

*I can't even deal with this.*

She sticks the message and bottle in her pack and eyes her bike. It's not that she's itching to get back home. Being with her family on a Friday night would just be a reminder of her pitiful social life. At least here she has the sparkle of the bay, the flutter of leaves in the wind, the hope of something different, something new.

"And me!" Slate calls to her.

*Wait, what?*

Heart beating faster, Sable settles back down on the boulder, tugs the leather cord around her neck, and slides the pendant between her fingers. She calls it Slate: the black raindrop, the scrying stone, the smooth and sleek piece of onyx (*or is it tourmaline?*) that she found in her family's garage.

She's always had an affinity for gems and minerals and used to carry around crystals in her pack hoping they would exude some magic into her life. They never did. But now Slate is calling to her in a way she's never felt before. Or is it all in her imagination?

*One way to find out, she thinks.*

Slate rests in her palm and she stares into the inky void. She smiles at the idea that "scrying" seems to be a combination of "spying" and "crying," two of her regular activities. But she'd once looked up the etymology of the word and it was apparently derived from "descry," or "describe." She attempts to do so now.

At first the glare from the sky pierces her eyes. But after some slow and steady breathing, her eyes glaze over the stone and her mind begins to clear. She sits for ten or twenty or thirty minutes, who can tell. Time is warped and space is altered. She is here and there and everywhere. Her eyes blur and Slate turns to fog.

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

Then the fog lifts.

A pair of eyes appear.

*Oh my god!*

Sable flings the pendant on another boulder a few feet away just as something envelops her with warmth. She realizes she's not scared. Why should she be? This is what she's always wanted.

Sable retrieves the black stone and finds the eyes waiting for her. When she stares into them, it's as if she's traveling through the outer reaches of the universe. There are no voices, but she hears something. No words, but she feels something. She thinks it could be her own

overactive imagination making things up. Whatever the case, it makes her feel good, this “talking” to Slate, so what’s the harm?

“Hello, Sable,” the eyes say wordlessly to her.

“Who are you?”

The eyes laugh without mocking her. It seems nothing about them could ever be mean-spirited.

“Why don’t you ask yourself that question?”

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

“You can call me Arrow,” he says.

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

“Okay, Arrow, I have some questions for you.” Never mind the past. It’s the current threat that’s at the forefront of her mind. “Why did I find that message? Am I really going to die soon? Or is this all a big joke?”

Her throat clenches and she gets another pierce in her heart. Again she wants to cry, but she’s pulled away by a flash: an image of her bike.

“Go,” Arrow says.

“You’re trying to get rid of me?”

She sees herself riding her bike toward the other side of town.

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

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

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

Her bike itches for a ride.

It's true, she hasn't been invited, but she's a bat, not a vampire. She doesn't need an invitation to creep in. And even though she's not exactly sure who Arrow is or where he comes from, she has a sense that he's on her side. In the distance, a muffled car radio plays a song about partying. It's like the universe is begging her to go. And who is she to refuse the universe?

"Okay, okay," she says, a slight smile forming within her being.

Then: a flame on the back of her hand, a cherry ember smoldering on the ground beside her, a series of nearby giggles.

Sable turns to find Lexy and Roxy snuffing out the last of their cigarettes and tramping back toward their convertible. Both are wearing some kind of skin-tight Halloween costume—or maybe this is their normal Friday-night attire.

There's no lasting mark from the flicked cig butt, but Sable feels wounded nonetheless.

Her throat tightens again and she lunges for her bike to ride home fast and let the wind blow away the droopy cloud surrounding her head, but she's too late. The constriction in her throat makes its way up to her eyes and she's back on the boulder teetering on the edge of land and sea, pouring tears straight into the water below, silently wondering if she should follow them.

A flash to the message in the bottle: "DEAD FINDS YOU."

"GO," Arrow reminds her.

Sable shakes her head to rid herself of the unsettling thoughts and climbs on her bike.

She rides under the broken tree branch and along the bumpy road. A few blocks later in the near dark she pedals with part hesitation, part excitement, and part fury. She stops at her home, but only to change and grab a bite, then heads back out without breaking the momentum of the spell.

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

## 2. Cosmic Egg

I am an arrow through her heart.

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

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

Come closer.

Take my hand.

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

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

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

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

First, we need to create a landscape.

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

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

One . . .

Two . . .

Three . . .

What do you see?

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

*Oh!*

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

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

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

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

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

There is more?

A machine that spits out physical representations of value.

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

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

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

Ah, you feel it now!

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

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

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

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

Yes, the girl, Sable.

There she is now.

Come.

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

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

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

If only she will listen.

### 3. A Greeting from the Dead

Sable slides open the back door with shaky hands and steps into a nightmare. Fake blood splatters on the walls, and the whole place seems to be taken over by an army of overactive spiders. But here she is, for once not on the outside looking in.

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

Just as she thinks about spying, a skeleton peeks out from behind a gauzy curtain.

Their eyes lock and he grins through white-and-black skull paint.

She steps toward him but he disappears behind the drapes.

Before Sable considers chasing some random ghost, she spots the rock star: Pascual Silva, her secret crush with the impossible black-and-gold eyes. The one with the star-shaped birthmark on his right earlobe. The one whose dark curly hair springs from his head in a wild fury. His brown-olive skin matches hers, though she guesses his family is from south of the boarder, where as Sable descends from the Romani people, who traveled from place to place, not letting boarders define them. Perhaps their ancestors would have found each other, like she finds him now. Pascual, the only boy who'd given her a valentine in the seventh grade (or any grade

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

But things have changed this year. Pascual has branched out. Iain (a shabby werewolf) and Pony (a perfectly nauseating ballerina) are close to him, and they're all slugging back the contents of a black plastic cauldron labeled "Witches' Brew." Pony and Iain, the king and queen of on-again off-again relationships, are apparently "on" right now, if their intertwined limbs are any indication. But what troubles Sable is Pascual's close proximity to Pony, just as she'd spied earlier that day at school. Pascual gestures wildly, as if telling a joke with an intricate setup, and it doesn't take long for Pony to laugh her soft-muzzled neigh. *Barf.*

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

Robyn, who's dressed as some kind of spider girl, her afro buzzing with atomic red streaks, spits a sour ball into Pony's long mane. Pony seems none the wiser, so Robyn repeats it several times. Sable can't help but laugh and sneak out Cyclops, her old-school digital camera, from the custom-made inside pocket of her bat hoodie. She aims without looking too hard at the screen and snaps a few pics of Pony's sticky hair. At one point Robyn catches sight of Sable and

either smiles or scowls—it’s hard to tell which, with all her makeup and the way she tugs at her lip ring with her teeth.

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

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

“Oops, sorry *Sybil*.”

*Sybil*? She hasn’t been called that since freshman year.

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

*Holy smeg!* What has prompted this resurgence in mocking Sable’s conventionally odd tendencies? They must’ve seen her at Enola Park talking with Slate. Thus, the cigarette butts flicked toward her. Ah, how could she have been so stupid. Again.

She rattles her brain for a witty retort but all that comes out of her mouth is, “Um, what rock?”

Sexy Lexy steps in. “You know, the one you were moaning and groaning to after school that day? The one shaped like a . . . cucumber?”

The she-devils both giggle hysterically.

“What do you do with that thing in bed?” Foxy Roxy adds.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If she were living in a different era or trapped inside the board game Clue, she might be in what they call the Study. It's darker, warmer, stranger. People cluster together drinking or dancing or taking selfies by the mechanical goblin hanging from the rafters. The music is

different in here, less kitschy, more spooky. Some girls sprawl on a dark velvet chaise lounge while others sway in the blacklight. She doesn't recognize half the people, and it isn't just due to their disguises. Like the group of monsters hovering in the back corner—they certainly don't go to Glorietta High. Or the one looking right at her through a skeleton grin.

The one walking toward her and reaching for her hand.

#### 4. The Skeleton's Game

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

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

“You’ll see.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It was a while ago."

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

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

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

“I would’ve noticed you.”

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

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

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

“Known who?”

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

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“She . . . uh . . . died. Last year.”

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

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

“She was troubled, sure, but who isn’t?”

Okay, so maybe he's somewhat telling the truth. But she still has a feeling he's hiding something. His hair, clearly blond but sprayed black and silver, dangles in his eyes when he hunches over the coffee table. He takes the board out of the box and neatly arranges a pen with a pad of paper, then lights a votive candle followed by a stick of incense.

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

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

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

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

"Let's find out," she says, nodding toward the board.

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

"Wait, you've never done this before?"

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

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

“Uh, kinda.”

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

“Don't we need those?”

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

She tingles with sparkling heat.

“Do you trust me?”

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

“Um, I guess?”

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

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

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

“Azure, are you there?”

The planchette remains still and silent.

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

Their hands are motionless.

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

Still nothing from the planchette.

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

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

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

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

*RETURN. DEAD FIND YOU. DIE SOON. LIVE NOWHERE.*

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

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

She swallows hard.

Then the planchette begins to move to the letter “I.”

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

T-S-O-K

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

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

A-S-K-H-E-R

“Ask her? Ask who what?”

She looks at him sideways.

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

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

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

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

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

“You don’t even know my name.”

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

## **5. The Path of the Slate and Arrow**

And so it begins.