

Shadow Work

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Kaleb always knows what to wear and I hate that about him. He doesn't even have a lot of clothes, which makes it even worse. It's like he's cast some sort of satanic spell to where he always looks dead stylish. So, naturally, I call him to make him tell me how to dress. I'm hopeless.

Before he has a chance to say anything, I half-shout, "What is someone supposed to wear to adopt a ghost?"

"Jesus Christ, I told you, man, just because you put your phone on speaker, doesn't mean you gotta yell." He sounds impatient, but the type of impatient where some part of him is also amused. Funny how this used to irritate me. To be his source of amusement. Now, I live for it.

"Sorry. I just have no idea what to wear. I'm freaking out a little bit."

"Well, I think what you wear depends on the type of ghost you want to attract." I can hear the smirk in his voice.

"Attract?!"

"Not like that. Just, you know, the sort of vibes you want to give the ghost. Like, how do you want them to think of you?"

"Somehow, Kaleb, you're making me overthink this even more."

"Wear the big red sweater."

"And what vibes will that give the ghost?"

"Cute ones."

"I'm not looking for a ghost boyfriend," I sigh, "But... thank you."

I'm still getting used to the whole boyfriend thing in general, actually. It somehow doesn't feel like that long ago that Kaleb and I were picking petty fights with one another on the middle school playground. That Kaleb was pretending I didn't even exist in the high school hallways. And somehow, that was the worse of the two. "It was deliberate, by the way," he had said once, "I just... couldn't bear to look at you. You were so... you." For him, that's an apology.

I pull the red sweater over my head and mess up my hair. Something he used to make fun of me for. "You do your hair like a five-year-old," he said to me the first time he spent the night. And I could have chuckled, as usual, but this time, I wanted to say something to Kaleb. Something to shut him up, partly. But, more than that. "Brushing my hair makes me dysphoric, actually. My mom always made me grow it out long when I was a little kid." And Kaleb nodded, knowingly. He doesn't always have to say anything for me to know that he understands. In fact, most of my understanding of Kaleb comes from the moments where I feel him holding back, choosing silence for once.

The red sweater is my comfort sweater and he knows this. I try not to let this detail send me into a spiral, wondering why he might think that I need my comfort sweater. Does he think I'm scared? I was the one who suggested we adopt a ghost in the first place! He was the one who seemed hesitant! No matter. Maybe he just wants me to be the brave one for once. And I can do that, yeah. As long as I wear the red sweater.

Five things you're supposed to know before adopting a ghost, according to the Zephyr's Ghost Shop website:

1. Your ghost is not a plaything. It is a commitment.

This one, I have no trouble with. Kaleb, on the other hand, I'm not so sure. Which is precisely why the ghost will be staying at my house and why I am the one who is picking it out.

2. Picking out your ghost may take time. But you will feel when a ghost chooses you. If you do not have this feeling, I suggest leaving and returning only when you have done the proper shadow work. Remember, hosting a ghost is a deeply personal responsibility.

I haven't done any shadow work, really. I mean, I journal a little, but I don't have a practice. The thought of getting in touch with parts of myself that I've repressed, and uncovering them... Well, things probably got covered up for a good reason. Besides, it's hard to think about my past self when I feel so disconnected from everything about her. She's someone that everyone around me tried to create. I'm the one who resisted all of that, eventually. I'm the one who created himself. So if a ghost doesn't choose me because I haven't unburied enough of my past self, fuck it. I worked hard to bury her. I'm not doing the shadow work, I'm not.

3. Before releasing your ghost from its vessel, say a prayer for protection and guidance.

The "vessels" are what drew me to Zephyr's Ghost Shop in the first place. They are so beautiful and varied, it's staggering. The pictures of the shop's interior remind me of the crowded, colorful pages of an I Spy book. So full of objects that somehow all fit together, all feel like they were summoned in the same breath. There are gold glittering jewelry boxes, crystal trinket boxes of pale pink quartz and burning orange tiger's eye. Simple clear mason jars, and ornate floral porcelain teapots. Each said to house a unique spirit. A unique spirit that will call to you and to you only.

Kaleb thinks the prayer part is silly, but I'm not so sure. I know I don't blame Kaleb for it. When his mom kicked him out of the house, she said she'd prayed on the decision for days, and that was the answer that the Lord had whispered to her. So, if he doesn't want to pray, he doesn't have to. I'll probably whisper something non-denominational. Something to whatever forces of the universe spun me together. It couldn't hurt.

4. For best results, release your ghost in the room you spend the most time in. This will help foster a close relationship.

Even though I have my own apartment now, I still spend most of the time hiding in my bedroom. It's always been the room that feels most like me. The rest of the apartment—tiny living room, even tinier kitchen—feels like a presentation for guests. A portrait of normalcy. But my bedroom gets to be my haven. I string lights from the ceiling that emit a soft, red glow. I collect various items from my special interests, which lately have been Spiderman and anatomy. There's a corner of my room with the skeletons I bought off Etsy. A snake, a few mice, a rabbit. Kaleb says that our ghost won't have any problems making friends, because at least half of those skeletons are already haunted.

5. Do not have any expectations for your ghost. They are unpredictable.

This one always makes me wonder why the hell Kaleb and I are doing this in the first place. I know it was my idea, and he agreed with it, but we don't know what's going to happen. Or if anything is going to happen, at all. I suspect Kaleb believes it won't. That I'll just have another cool object to add to my endless collection of cool objects. But a bigger part of me wants to believe it's real. Wants to believe that we live in a world where you can adopt a ghost and wait for something unpredictable to happen.

My aloof roommate, a black cat named Percy, mews softly at the window-- his courteous way of announcing Kaleb's arrival. I open the door before he gets there, enjoying nothing more than seeing him walk the steps to my apartment front porch. The sight of him never gets old. His black skinny jeans cling to his long legs, and his vintage Halloween shirt is tucked into his waistband to

reveal a glint of a silver, shiny belt. He hides his perfect hands in his pockets until he meets me at the front porch. When he kisses me, they frame my face.

“Hello to you, too,” I say, leaning into his palm.

“Hi.” And just like that, he lets me go and pushes past me to walk into the apartment.

“Hiya, Percy,” Kaleb says.

Percy meows and Kaleb bends to rub behind his ears.

“You’re gonna be getting a new roommate today, what do you think about that? You know,” he says, turning to me, “some people believe cats can see into the ghost realm.”

“I know that. You think I would adopt a ghost without doing the research about ghost-cat interactions?”

Kaleb picks up Percy, chuckling, then looks me over. “You look great,” he says.

“Thanks.”

“You ready to go?”

“I’m ready if you are.”

“Let’s go get our ghost.”

Kaleb’s car smells of artificial cotton candy air freshener and my nose always aches when I first sit down, but I don’t complain. I have my comfort sweater; Kaleb has his comfort scents. This one reminds him of being a kid at the county fair. The red and orange lights of the Ferris wheel against the night. The sugar crystals dissolving on his tongue. His dad’s arm slung over his shoulder. It’s always struck me as a little strange; I bury my past, while Kaleb roots himself in his. When he left his mom’s place, he even stole a few family pictures off the wall. Pictures from before he transi-

tioned. One night, after we walked back to his place from the bar, he drunkenly stood atop his couch cushions and pulled me along with him. We were practically pressing our noses to the family photographs that now lived above the blue couch, above the sunken-in cushions. So sunken-in I worried they'd swallow my shoes. Kaleb was perfectly unbothered. "See?" he was saying with his hand on the back of my head, aiming me at a picture of him and his parents in front of an apple tree. "Look. I look jus' like my dad. I told ya. I've always looked jus' like my dad," he slurred happily.

And he does. His dad had the same upturned nose, same jet-black hair. Kaleb struggles with it now, attempting to secure the mass of it in a loose ponytail while he drives, but he's awful at multi-tasking. Really awful.

"Here, sit still," I say as I yank the ponytail holder from between his teeth.

He doesn't protest as I run my fingers through his hair, attempting to brush out the tangles as best I can, before gathering it into a thick bundle that falls against the pale nape of his neck. I trace my finger on the soft skin there, and he shivers. I like moments where I can take care of him. Moments where I can feel useful.

"Thank you," he says.

"No problem."

"So... are you scared?" His tone is mock-sinister. Teasing. But beneath it all, I think he really is curious.

"Kaleb, this was my idea!"

"That doesn't mean it can't scare you."

We both have read the testimonies on the forum. Most are happy. Tales of lonely widows who felt lucky to have someone come sit next to them on the couch, someone to bring them small tokens

to show their favor, little acorns or leaves. But then there are the darker ones. Stories of angry spirits who slam doors, open drawers to unsheathe kitchen knives, turn knobs on gas stoves, ceaselessly whisper evil things in the ear of the person who released them.

“As long as we follow the instructions, we’ll be fine,” I say.

“But... you didn’t follow the instructions, though.”

“I sort of followed the instructions. Mostly.”

“Dirty liar. You didn’t do your shadow work.” He reaches over to stab his finger into my chest, punctuating his sentence.

“I sort of did my shadow work! I journal! Sometimes!”

“Mm-hmm. All I’m saying is don’t come crying to me when you unleash the forces of hell unto you and Percy.”

When the ghost calls to me, it feels familiar. A warmth pulls at my chest and my mouth tastes of wild raspberries, a taste I always associate with home. With childhood. The wild raspberry bush that used to grow on the edge of the woods by the old house. The plastic blue bowl in my hands, teeming with red berries. After we moved, the new owners tore the woods down. As much as wild raspberries taste of home, they also taste of loss. Sweet, sharp.

My gaze is pulled towards a small jewelry box across the room. It sits atop a tall cedar chest, looking impossibly dainty. The latches are gold and it’s swathed in gaudy pink roses. Kaleb snickers as I pick it up. I glare at him.

“You were chosen quickly.” The voice comes from behind the glass counter on the other side of the store. There’s an odd, musical quality to its tone. A voice like wind chimes. I’m surprised

when I find its owner to be rather young, no older than Kaleb or me. They have green hair and heavy black eyeliner. A gold hoop loops around the right corner of their lips, which are pulled back into an easy smile. A soft smile. The kind Kaleb sometimes does in his sleep.

“Careful. They look kinda like one of the Hex Girls from Scooby-Doo. And they’re gonna put a spell on you,” Kaleb whispers, half-singing.

“I’m sorry,” I say as I cross the room, “Is it okay that I just picked it up? I mean, erm, is that how it’s supposed to happen?”

“Does it feel like what’s supposed to happen, happened?” They’re smiling as they hold my gaze, as if they’ve just told the first half of a joke and are waiting for me to feed them the punch line.

I feel like there’s something I’m supposed to say back, but I don’t know what it is. It feels like I have stage fright, like I’m centerstage and forgetting all my lines. Except there’s no stage. This is just life. This is just my life. I look to Kaleb for help. He’s seen this look before, knows what it means.

“Excuse me,” he cuts in, “Are you Zephyr?”

“The one and only.”

“It’s great to finally meet you. We’ve been reading about your shop. It’s even more incredible in person.” My charming little demon. He’s always been that way. Always known just what to say to make someone warm to him. He used to get out of all sorts of trouble when we were kids. We’d get in fights, and I’d leave the principal’s office in tears, while he’d end up laughing with him as if they were old pals. I’m pretty sure I even saw the principal ruffle his hair once, as if he were a long-lost son. I could have died. But now... Well, it’s nice to have those powers on my side.

“I’m glad you like it. Tell me, are you planning on bringing home a ghost?” They lean forward, resting their elbows on the glass counter and their soft, heart-shaped face in their hands.

“Me? No, no, no. Absolutely not. But my boyfriend is. And I believe he’s found just the one. How much?”

They sigh, as if the question exhausts them. “Suggested donation. Whatever you think it’s worth. I also barter.”

Kaleb looks to me, and I shake my head in a panic. How do you determine the worth of a ghost in a jewelry box? How do you determine the worth of anything? *Please*, I try to tell him with my eyes, *just pay anything. I just want to go.*

He tosses Zephyr a twenty and rushes me out the exit. A bell above the door chimes at us on our way out. I try to focus on its soft ringing against the crisp October wind. I try to take a deep breath, clutch the vessel tight against my chest.

When we released the ghost, Kaleb and I were sure we’d been scammed. Nothing happened. No eerie feeling in the air, no cold chills running up and down our arms, nothing raising the little hairs on the back of our necks. Just, nothing. Just the pair of us, standing in the middle of my bedroom with an empty jewelry box.

But we’re trying to sleep now, and I can’t say that I don’t feel... something. A feeling that I’m being watched by someone I can’t see. It doesn’t necessarily feel bad. It’s like holding your hand in front of your face in a dark room. You know it’s there, but it’s strange that you can’t see it. A cold feeling of detachment from something so familiar. I want to wake up Kaleb, if only to hear him mumble that I’m an idiot. But something stops me. This gut feeling that it’s important to let myself feel this. That this is what it means to connect with my ghost. I’ll tell Kaleb about it in the morning.

It's happening more often. In the daytime now, too. When my bedroom door opened early one morning, I assumed it was Kaleb, there to surprise me. I rolled away from the light, perpetually in need of five extra minutes of sleep. I felt him lie down beside me. I was so certain he was there. I rolled over, ready to see his face, and... nothing. Nothing's ever there.

I thought that being haunted would feel worse. I certainly wasn't expecting to feel comforted by my ghost, like the old widows. But maybe they're onto something. I don't know. It doesn't feel bad, but it doesn't feel good, either. It just feels natural that they'd want to come and rest next to me. I can't blame them. I hate sleeping alone.

"I'm on the website right now! Hasbro.com. I told you! There's a Ouija board for 20 bucks!" Kaleb hasn't even had his morning coffee yet, but he's been on a roll since I finally told him last week's ghost stories. He's sitting on the beanbag with his laptop open. Its light glints against his cheek as he turns to look at me, a blue slash across his freckles.

I mumble from the bed, pulling the blankets under my chin, "You're supposed to be the skeptical one. Why are you suddenly so into this?"

"I just feel like if we're doing the whole ghost thing, we should really commit to it, you know? We shouldn't half-ass it. Commit to the bit. Ouija boards, tarot cards, all of it. Maybe we get one of those little ghost detector things. You know, the ones that light up when the energy in the room changes."

"You're a glutton."

“I’m a jealous boyfriend. How dare this ghost think they can steal my spot on the bed? I want answers.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“What?”

“Well, you just called this whole thing a bit. You’re just doing a bit right now, Kaleb. That’s all this is to you.”

He’s never been good at hiding his facial expressions. His dark eyebrows lift, and his mouth falls open, as if he immediately wants to defend himself. But he thinks better of it. He closes his eyes and sighs. When he opens them again, they’re dark and determined. I’ve seen this look before, many times. He’s ready to pick a fight and win it. With a slow stride, he crosses the room to sit on the bed next to me.

“Jace, I do take you seriously,” he says carefully, “I’m sorry if the fact that I got excited about Ouija boards being made by the same people who make Candy Land does not accurately convey how seriously I’m taking this.”

I groan and sit up. He’s not funny, he’s not. And I want to be at his level. Take away his advantage.

“Really? Still making jokes?” I scold.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry! Listen, I’m not sure that I believe that we unleashed a ghost from a little pink jewelry box, but I do believe that you believe that you’re experiencing things.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“I believe that you believe that you’re experiencing things. And I want to help you make sense of them. That’s all I’m trying to do.”

He runs his hands through his hair, looking desperate. I almost feel bad for him when he's like this. It reminds me of us three years ago, of the way he looked when he first approached me. "Listen," he said then (he always says *listen* a bunch when he's spiraling), "I don't wanna do this anymore. I don't want there to be this weird thing between us where we avoid each other. We don't have to hate each other just because we hated each other in middle school."

I was sitting alone under a tree before school, feigning interest in my homework. When he walked over, I pretended I didn't see him until he was right there, but, of course, I knew he was ambling over. I was always aware of Kaleb's presence. He stood over me as he spoke, as is his habit. Trying to make himself the tall one, when we both know that we're the same height: short as hell.

"I don't hate you, and I don't avoid you. You avoid me," I said, trying to swallow any emotion in my voice. Truthfully, I was just thrilled he was finally talking to me. That we'd finally graduated from glaring at one another in the halls.

"Okay, okay, I know. But what I'm saying is, I don't want to avoid you. I didn't mean to start avoiding you."

"Then why did you?"

He ran his hands through his hair, exhaling slowly.

"That's... whatever. Listen, we're just alike, you and I. So I think we should stick together."

I laughed in his face. It felt good. "So you're saying you want to form some sort of trans alliance? Set aside our differences and revel in the spirit of trans camaraderie?"

He looked like he wanted to hit me. For a second, I thought he might. I'd seen his eyes go dark like that many times in middle school, just before he'd throw me down on the pavement.

“Fuck you,” he said. A deep breath. Then, quieter, “Fine then. Sure. In the spirit of trans camaraderie, let’s call a truce.” He leaned over and extended his hand to me, wanting to pull me off the ground, onto my feet. Next to him. The first time we’d touch in over a year. I took his hand.

“Listen,” he’s saying again now, “I’m trying to say that I support you.”

“Okay,” I relent, “But you’re the one who’s buying the Ouija board.”

We use the Ouija board on Halloween night. Committing to the bit, and all that. I even made sure to buy black candles for protection. And according to the label, they’ll smell like summer moonlight. How dreamy. Kaleb’s brow furrows as he arranges the candles in a circle around the board. I hand him the dried leaves of holy basil. He sprinkles them into the candles before he lights them. Basil’s a plant full of contradictions, a plant that can cause trouble. In ancient Rome, it was an emblem of hatred and misfortune, believed to thrive only in a place where there is abuse. Yet in Hindu tradition, it is associated with the wife of Vishnu, the protector of good. And then there was that English physician, who believed that basil left under a rock would transform into a scorpion in two days’ time. Shifty little plant. But Kaleb thought we needed all the protection we could get, and, if I’m being honest, I think I do believe in the power of this herb. At least, I believe that for the little herb to have such a full life, there must be something to it.

The candle flame creates shadows in the hollows of Kaleb’s face. His lips are pressed tightly together, his jaw is set. Bless him, he’s taking this seriously. It’s a little unnerving. I mean, I do have questions for the ghost, but do I want answers? Maybe I don’t. I’ve been living peacefully with the ghost for this long, why fuck things up now? We could just go on sharing the bed. Me and my ghost roommate. Like a fun little sit-com. I have this feeling. A feeling like Kaleb and I have deviated from any sort of plan and are now lost, wandering wildly. Did we ever even have a plan? Was it just to re-

lease a ghost and see what would happen? Well, now we know. We know what happens. What more do we need to know?

“Are you ready?” Kaleb asks.

“Yes,” I say.

How to make the most out of your Ouija board experience, according to *Ouija: A Step by Step Guide*:

1. DO find prayers online to invite benevolent spirits into your space.

I'm not about to make Kaleb research prayers online. I'll make a general wish for safety and protection. Cast it out to the universe. It might be listening.

2. DO pick a leader in the group to ask the questions.

Since it's technically my ghost, we decide that this'll be up to me.

3. DO pick someone to write down what the spirit says on a piece of paper so you can keep track of the phrases.

Kaleb.

4. DON'T play with a Ouija board in your own house.

We're playing with it in my house, in my bedroom.

5. DON'T play with a Ouija board in a graveyard.

Oh, we won't.

6. You're ready to begin. Perform the ritual of lighting the candles and setting up the board and turning out the lights.

Kaleb looks beautiful by candlelight.

7. Read the prayers.

Please keep us safe.

8. Place your fingers on the planchet, one finger per person.

We place our fingertips on the planchet lightly. Just the whisper of them.

9. Push the planchet in a circle around the board and let it rest in the center.

We push.

10. First question: "Is there anyone with us tonight?" Wait for an answer.

We are left sitting alone in a bedroom that smells of summer moonlight, which apparently smells just like strong laundry detergent. Who knew. We stare at our fingers atop the planchet, holding our breath. Waiting for an answer. In the silence, my mind carries me elsewhere. I watch the rise and fall of Kaleb's chest. I think of the first time he let me take his shirt off, how I ran my fingers over him with the same softness I now use over the planchet. As if he, too, was something sacred. As if just by touching him, I could find some meaning, an answer.

"Can I take this off? Is that okay?" I asked then, my fingers barely lifting the hem of his shirt.

He thought for a moment.

"Yes," he breathed.

The planchette won't move and eventually we grow tired of waiting. Neither of us moves to turn on the light. We sit on either side of the board, candlelight dancing shadows across our faces. He lifts his fingers to my face, running them over my jaw, before placing his palm over my cheek.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

We blow out the candles, turn on the light, collapse beside one another on the bed.

"What the fuck are we even doing?" I ask.

"I don't know, Jace."

"We never know what the fuck we're doing,"

He places his hand on my thigh.

The first time we kissed, I'd just fallen off a skateboard. I remember having the feeling that Kaleb had asked to kiss me on accident. As if the question was just a thought he'd breathed to life without realizing. He had just finished laughing at me and was kneeling down beside me on the pavement. Lifting my elbow with a care I'd never before associated with him, he examined the red, scraped skin, frowning. I wasn't sure I'd heard him correctly. I waited for a moment. He didn't look up until I said yes. Then, he lifted my arm over his shoulder, weaving me around him, and kissed me. I remember thinking that it didn't make any sense. We hated each other. Then, thinking that it all made perfect sense. Thinking that if the fighting felt good, this felt even better. Thinking that this was kind of like the fighting, that the fighting was kind of like this. Then, thinking about nothing else but the sharp taste of his peppermint Chapstick.

"We never know what the fuck we're doing," Kaleb agrees.

My ghost comes around from time to time. These days, I never sleep alone. Kaleb thinks that if I do my shadow work, I'll get rid of it. I don't know how to tell him that I've gotten used to the company. One day he even calls Zephyr. They say the same thing. Shadow work is the only thing that can mend the relationship.

"Does the relationship even need mending?" I ask him. We're sitting at my dining room table, having coffee. We ran out of creamer, and had the brilliant idea to use whipped cream. Now, there's a patch of the white fluff on Kaleb's top lip. I don't tell him. I think it's cute.

"I mean, it's not a bad relationship. Like, I'm fine," I continue.

"I don't know why you won't do the shadow work. It sounds kind of cool. Unlocking your shadow self. Like you might unlock some secret powers or something."

"Or I'll unlock trauma and repressed memories. Which do you think is more likely?"

He takes my hand. "It's good to process things." His voice grave, unwavering.

"I know," I say. I bring his fingers to my lips, kissing each one.

"Don't try to distract me. I'm being serious," he says.

He doesn't understand. And maybe that's okay. I'm taking him as seriously as I can, but it's difficult not to smile at the whipped cream on his top lip. He still has no idea.