



## THE GRAVE ROBBERS

**A**oife tumbles out of her cot onto an ice-cold floor. *Where am I? am I . . . am I there?*

It comes to her almost as a relief.

However, this is not the Grey Land. Not yet. The palms of her hands find the smooth, familiar walls of the gym. And all around her, Boyle Survival College's last thirty or so students fill the air with sighs and snores, with the smell of rarely washed bodies and the creaks of makeshift beds.

Perhaps she's taken a fever, because she can't get up. Her head is spinning and she bends suddenly, hands over her mouth, as a wave of nausea punches her savagely in the guts.

It eases off when she gets her back against the wall, sweat chilling on her forehead.

"No . . .," a boy cries in his sleep.

"By Crom, they're eating my face!" says another. It's Krishnan, a thirteen-year-old so lanky that his feet stick out over the end of his

mattress. His toes twitch and curl as though they've been stabbed through with pins.

The hackles on Aoife's neck rise as all around her the rest of the children start tossing and turning in their beds, their voices suddenly louder, as if each and every one of them is having the exact same nightmare.

"Get out of here," Aoife tells herself.

Her gorge rises in her throat again. The cold sweat seems to sizzle on her brow.

*Out! Out!*

But already the sleeping children are settling again.

Plenty of rumors have been flying about ever since the events that saw the Sídhé attack the school. Rumors of how Ireland and the Grey Land are closer to each other than they've been for centuries. Within touching distance, people say.

This is why the enemy appear so much more often now than they used to. And Aoife thinks that the frequency of these episodes of nausea and fear that affect only the young is rising too.

*But what do I know?*

She decides to get out anyway, hoping the freezing Roscommon air will make her feel better.

She knows the way in the dark, almost as though poor Emma's ghost is pulling her through the night. Once out the door, Aoife passes the shadowy burnt-out dorm building and walks down the alley formed by two long lines of caravans where the investigators and archaeologists now live. They won't allow "civilians" anywhere

near the Fairy Fort they've been digging up, but Aoife has seen the dread on their faces at the end of each day's work. Sometimes the last shreds of her curiosity want her to go and find out what they're up to in the forest, but then she remembers what happened last time she did that, and she turns into a sobbing wreck. Emma! Poor Emma!

A dark figure looms suddenly in front of her, and Aoife still cares enough about her life to gasp.

"It's me. Nabil."

"I'm going for a walk," she says, angry at him for frightening her. "You can't stop me anymore."

He sighs, and she knows it was the wrong thing to say, for, of all the instructors, Nabil looks out for the students best and was a major player in saving their lives during the attack.

"Here, my friend," he says. "Take my flashlight. Give it back in the morning."

Now she feels even worse for snapping at him, but manages a small "thank you." Then he's gone and she's free again.

The freezing wind gets her teeth chattering. She's wearing nothing but her tracksuit and a thin raincoat she's been using for a blanket. She used to have Emma to keep her warm and thinks of all the times she told her friend to leave her alone, to let her sleep—as if they were going to have eternity together! As if nothing could ever go wrong! How could she have been so stupid?

Up ahead lies the graveyard. Funerals are never allowed in survival colleges or there'd be little time for anything else. And the bodies of students who die are sent back to the parents. So the few graves

on college grounds are mostly for teachers and instructors. People without family or whose families don't want to know them.

And then there's the odd body so horrifically altered by the Sídhe it is deemed better to tell the parents that the scientists in Dublin, having examined it, then mislaid it.

Emma's parents accepted this explanation. They know what it really means and they have another girl back home to worry about.

Aoife moves in among the trees, escaping the wind again. Her once-plump cheeks are so cold they ache. She can't feel the hand that grips the flashlight. And that's when she hears the digging. No animal could make such a rhythmic, metallic sound. Only people. People hacking at the frozen soil of a graveyard in the darkest part of the night.

She stops in her tracks. How can there be somebody out here?

But her second thought is one of fury. *It's souvenir hunters*, she thinks. Dragging Emma's body from its resting place for the pleasure of gawkers. How dare they defile her! How dare they.

She crashes through the undergrowth, blundering out of the woods and into the graveyard proper, the ground slippery and hard as granite. She has come out right beside the heap of earth where Emma is buried, although you wouldn't know it, for there are no markers.

She stops right there, confused to find it undisturbed.

Then the hairs on her neck rise. She swings around, turning on the flashlight by instinct. It's an old windup one. Nobody makes batteries anymore and its light is a pale blue flicker, but it's enough to see the boy in front of her raise his hands to cover his face.

“Who are you?” she cries.

“Dubhtach, I was named.” His voice would shame an angel, at once friendly and musical. “For my dark hair. See?”

Aoife is already backing away, her legs like jelly. It’s not a boy in front of her, of course, but a little man. She can see now how his skin glitters ever so slightly in the light. How every part of him, from his delicate fingers to the square cut of his jaw, has been sanded to perfection by whatever god or devil created him.

And he’s following, walking steadily forward, his grin wide and welcoming.

“Leave the thief alone,” says another voice, a woman. “We have what we came for. We must swallow it before we are too small. And this one . . . I feel it. This one we’ll be seeing *very* soon.”

Aoife flings the flashlight at the little man’s head. It knocks him back a pace and she uses the distraction to flee for her life, off into the woods.

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When she returns an hour later with Nabil and Taaft, they find the graveyard full of holes and scattered remains. Of the *Sídhe* themselves no sign is left.

“What did they want with rotted flesh?” asks Taaft. “Are the little scum practicing voodoo now?”

“I never heard of that,” Nabil replies. When he speaks English, he sounds so much more French than when he’s using *Sídhe*. “But I do not like it. It’s strange of them, no? They will have a reason.”

“I’m going back to bed,” says Aoife. Emma’s safe; that’s the main thing.

Or is it? The woman *Sídhe* said they’d be seeing Aoife soon, and she knows what that must mean. It’s funny how little she feared the Call only a few hours ago, and how much she trembles now that it is finally reaching out for her. This impression becomes all the stronger when she realizes that, while she was gone, one of the few surviving Year 4s—Andy Scanlon—has turned up in his bunk with flippers for hands and blank skin where he once had a face.

He must have been lying there in the dark, his body cooling, as Aoife was stumbling outside.