

DARK WARNING

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‘Me a ghost, me a ghost!’ Jon Jon sang, as I rubbed coal across his cheeks to blacken them, ready for Hallowe’en night. I tied an old piece of cloth around his neck for a cloak and he ran around the room flapping his arms. ‘I’m flying, me a ghost,’ he yodelled.

I began to arrange chairs around the hearth as Mary Kate lit a candle in the window. ‘How many do we need?’ I asked, herding our few chairs and stools towards the fire crackling in the corner.

‘One for yer mother, one for mine, one for my father and one for my sister. Yer da an’ me will sit on the edge o’the hearth and you an’ Jon Jon can sit on the floor.’

Jon Jon stopped his galloping and came to watch me. ‘Who’s them for?’ he asked, pointing to the empty chairs.

‘That’s for my mammy,’ I said. ‘And these are for your Granny and Granda Walsh and your Aunty Meg.’

‘Them dead,’ he said, screwing his face up into a puzzled frown.

‘That’s right,’ Mary Kate said patiently, though she’d explained this five times already. ‘It’s Oíche Shamhna so the dead may come callin’ on us. We need to show them that

they're welcome home, so we light their way with a candle.' She pointed to the window. 'And we leave the door open for them an' keep a seat for them at our hearth.'

'But if the pooka comes?' Jon Jon asked, not sounding as brave as he had when he'd asked before.

'If any bad faeries come, haven't we got our own wee ghost to scare them away?' Mary Kate said, and she and me dived behind Jon Jon pretending to hide. This had been his favourite game today and we waited for him to strike a pose and growl at the open door. But it was dark now and his little lip began to quiver.

'Save us, Jon Jon,' me and Mary Kate cried. 'Tell that bad pooka to go away.'

'G-go away,' he quavered, flapping his hands in his ghost cloak.

'Hoo-hooooo dares tell me to go away!' boomed a voice from the stairs, and a large shadow blackened our doorway.

'Mama!' Jon Jon screeched, and threw himself into Mary Kate's arms.

'Boo!' Da put his head around the door and we all laughed. He'd been outside in the market place helping to build up the heap for the Samhain bonfire. His eyes were twinkling; I hadn't seen him in such fine humour in a long while. He took off his gloves, the ones I got him with the taffety gown, and rubbed his hands together. 'It's freezin' out there an' I'm famished. I'm goin' to eat up that grand pot o' colcannon yer mam has on the fire, all by meself.'

Jon Jon and me howled our protest and Mary Kate began to dollop out spoons of the lovely creamy mashed potato

streaked green with kale, plopping generous scoops onto our plates. We had no sooner begun to eat when we heard scuffling and giggling on the stairs.

‘Shhh!’ we heard a voice hiss crossly. ‘Yeizzer not to talk. Yeizzer to be as silent as the grave, so yez are.’

There was another small scuffle, then five assorted figures drifted into the room. The two biggest were covered completely in old sheets with holes torn for eyes and mouth; the other three had coal-streaked faces and an assortment of rags tied onto their clothes. The candlelight caught the whites of their eyes as they arranged themselves into a row. Jon Jon watched them from the safety of Mary Kate’s lap, his arms wrapped tight around her neck. The tallest ghost cleared his throat.

‘An’ a wan, two, three,’ he said, and they all began to chant:

‘Give us apples, give us nuts,
Give us a share o’ yer autumn fruits,
Give us milk an’ bread an’ butter,
Let us share yer Samhain supper!’

They bowed; we clapped. Jon Jon jumped off Mary Kate’s knee and stepped bravely forward to have a closer look at the rhymers.

‘Jenna,’ he said, pointing at the middle-sized ghost. ‘An’ Tom an’ Eamon.’ He pointed to the two little ones.

‘We’re not supposed to talk to them, Jon Jon,’ I whispered, darting Jenna a meaningful look.

Mary Kate stood and filled a plate with colcannon. She placed it on the table. They needed no further invitation, them

Mooneys; they fell on that plate of colcannon like it was the finest thing they'd ever seen.

'Finn an' Jimmy,' Jon Jon squealed, as the two older boys threw back their ghost sheets to wolf down their share of the plate.

Da handed each of them some nuts when they were done. Finn ate his quickly and held his hand out for more but Mary Kate slapped it away. 'Leave some for our other callers, Finn Mooney,' she said sharply, and the five of them took the hint and turned to the door. 'Thank you kindly, Missus Tyrell,' Jenna said softly. 'That's the best colcannon I ever tasted, so it is.'

As they left, two more small bands of ghosts drifted in. They sang their rhymes and were rewarded with nuts from the pile Da had gathered on the table. They didn't none of them get colcannon like the Mooneys. When I remarked on this to Mary Kate, she shrugged.

'Jenna an' her brothers are our neighbours, and I'm thinkin' they go hungry often as not,' she said. 'Givin' them a decent meal one day a year won't break us.'

It was time for us to go calling, now. Jon Jon pulled back as Mary Kate went to put on his little jacket.

'It's all right, lovey,' she said as she buttoned it up and pulled his ghost-cape out over it. 'We'll all put our jackets on inside out, an' them faeries won't know who we are.'

Da tamped down the fire so as it would keep smouldering while we were out and he smeared coal on his face and hands, making Jon Jon squeal.

'You an' me will scare any pookas that come to bear us

away,' Da said. 'Now, all quiet! We must creep down the stairs and frighten the Misses Davies!'

Missus Kenny was guarding the Misses Davies' doorway, handing out treats to the callers. She stood aside to let us through, averting her eyes and feigning not to see us.

'How'r ya, Missus Kenny?' Jon Jon asked loudly, surprised at being ignored by she who usually petted and coddled him.

'Shhh!' we all chorused.

While Horace's eyes glittered down at us from the dark up top o' the cabinet, we silently moved about the room, throwing huge shadows o'er the walls and pretending not to see the Misses Davies. They in turn fluttered their hankies about and spoke to each other and Missus Kenny of how a chill air had entered the room. We walked to the table which had a plate of pretty sweetmeats set out on it and helped ourselves to some sugared orange peel and toasted almonds.

'Lord God Almighty!' Missus Kenny shrieked. 'Look at that, Miss Evelyn, Miss Ruth! The food is liftin' clear offa the plate all by itsel'! There must be spirits abroad! Oh, oh, what'll we do?'

'Oh, oh!' the Misses Davies cried.

'Who will save us from these ghouls?' Missus Kenny hollered, clutching her chest and rocking forwards and backwards on her chair. 'They'll bear us away to t'other side, sure as sure, an' we with no good spirits to protect us.'

'I'll 'tect you,' Jon Jon shouted, his mouth stuffed full o' marzipan. He growled at the open doorway, waving his hands about, and we all laughed and gave up our dumb show.

Missus Kenny cut up the barmbrack and we each chose a

piece. For all the delicious raisins and nuts we nibbled it carefully at the edges, fearful of swallowing one o' the charms baked into the cake.

'Ha, ha!' Missus Kenny chortled, holding up a reed ring covered in crumbs. 'So I'm to marry again! That's what the year ahead holds for me, I don't half-think!'

I spat out a cold lump wrapped in paper.

'Taney has the penny!' Miss Ruth clapped her hands. 'Taney will have good fortune and wealth.' I thought of the precious stash in my locking box and said nothing.

'I'll have no money in my pockets.' Da's mouth twisted into a wry smile as he held up a small rag he had pulled from his slice of cake. 'Well, the brack got that one right! It seems for now the women in my family will earn the coins an' I must play the housewife.'

'Sure, hasn't Taney already shown a gift for good fortune,' Missus Kenny remarked. 'That fine gown she earned herself has you all lookin' mighty handsome this Hallowe'en, I must say.'

'Aye.' Da smiled. "'Twas generous of her employers to gift her such a thing. We're dressed proper for winter, an' all thanks to the Quality's fancy fer Taney's red hair.'

Missus Kenny raised her eyebrows but said nothing. The Misses Davies exchanged looks. They all knew why I'd been given the taffety gown.

'Things are gettin' goin' down below,' Mary Kate said, looking out the window at the lanterns moving about in the market place. 'Stoke up the fire for the Misses Davies, Milo, an' we'll be on our way.'

With much thanking and warnings to mind out for the pooka, we went down the stairs and out into the lane. I was near as excited as Jon Jon. I hadn't seen Billy for a while but I'd see him tonight, for sure. On top o' that, I'd been charged by Miss Clary and Miss Hickson to store up every sight and story from the night to tell them next day when I came to Number Eleven, for the Quality didn't step out of a Hallowe'en night.

It was pitch dark and the lane was eerie and echoing with the noise from the square. We'd no sooner turned onto Smithfield when a gang of bad sprites in evil-looking masks bore down on us, howling like mad. Jon Jon took such fright Da swept him up onto his shoulders and promised he could spend the whole night up there, safe an' sound. We stood at the front of the lodging house and looked at the sight before us a moment.

A shiver suddenly shook my frame.

It was a chilly night but that shiver went right through me like someone had walked o'er my grave. I wished I could take Da's hand like I used to, but that would be silly.

'Tis nothing, I told myself, just the night that's in it.

Smithfield was full of people: folk dressed up in their best and others dressed as spirits and monsters and witches. There were screams and shouts as the disguised ones played tricks on their favourites and their foes. There was the din of hundreds of voices and above that came the calls of the criers selling apples and nuts, hot cider and cold, cockles and mussels, fried eel and such-like treats. Their scents filled the air, chasing away the sickly scent of mash from the distillery.

Mary Kate and me gasped at the size of the bonfire.

“Tis the biggest ever, Milo,’ Mary Kate remarked to Da. ‘It’ll be some sight when they light it.’

The square was speckled with lights; I had our lantern clutched in my hand. I began to walk a little ahead of Da and Mary Kate, keeping my eyes peeled to see if Billy was about.

There it was again. Cold creeping up my spine, like an icy finger tracing my bones.

What is it? A vision coming? I shook myself. Don’t be silly. It’s just the winter biting. I scanned the crowd again. No sign of Billy.

A group of musicians played reels and jigs in one corner and some folks had cleared a space for dancing. I focused on the rhythm; I concentrated on watching the patterns the dancers were making with their feet. We stayed a while then moved on to the apple stall. The stall keeper had hung apples from strings for snap apple and iffen you could take a bite out of one with your hands behind your back, you got to keep it. Da won one easy but when I tried the apple shot away and hit me on the ear. Da bought some Lady’s Fingers and a few Pippins. We stood to eat them and watched children apple-bobbing in barrels.

‘Yer too auld for that, young miss,’ the apple woman said, nodding towards the kids as they chased the apples about the water with their teeth. ‘But perhaps ya’d like to use an apple to tell ya who ya’ll marry?’ She handed me a small knife. ‘Ya have ta pare it all in one long piece,’ she warned. ‘Ya mustn’t break the peel.’

I handed the lantern to Mary Kate. I started at the base of

the fruit and slowly worked my way to the stalk, careful not to let the peel get too narrow nor too thin. I held it up when I was done and it hung in a curl from my fingertips.

‘Now throw it over yer left shoulder an’ let’s see what it tells us,’ the apple woman said.

I did as I was bid.

‘So what’d you say that is? I can’t see it very well.’ The woman put on a pretence of squinting down at the paring, though like as not, she didn’t know her letters. ‘Is it a C? ’Tis usually a C. Yer true love will be called Cormac, maybe, or Cornelius.’ She cackled.

‘No, ma’am, ’tis not a C,’ I said politely, for the peel had snapped when it hit the ground and fallen one piece across t’other. ‘’Tis an X, I’d say.’

‘X?’ the woman exclaimed, leaning closer to look. ‘’Tis some quare fur-rin-er you’ll be weddin’ then, for sure. What decent Irishman would have a name began with an X?’ She crossed herself with a shudder.

I thought of how I meant to run off to foreign lands some day. Maybe I would, an’ all. I handed her back her knife, smiling to myself as I ate my apple.

We stopped next at a brazier where hazels and chestnuts were roasting and the smell was mighty fine. One girl was naming two hazels after herself and the lad she fancied, and watching to see iffen they moved closer together as they roasted, or iffen they shuffled apart. Her friends howled with laughter when the boy-hazel leapt clean outta the fire all together, near hitting the girl in the eye.

Beside them another hawker was simmering cider. Da

was dithering between which treat we should have with his remaining ha'penny so I put up my barmbrack prize to treat us all to both.

'I'll put my money back in my pocket so, if it's not needed,' Da said, his voice a little sour despite his smile. I bit my lip. I hadn't meant to 'mind him again of which o' us earned. I hadn't meant to knock the twinkle from his eye. I wished Billy would come.

We warmed ourselves 'tween the two fires as we ate them delicious things till the cry went up that it was time to light the bonfire. The din of the crowd rose and everyone moved to encircle the huge heap of firewood, turf and broken barrels that had been gathered in the centre of the square, tall as the tallest house, and just as wide. People began banging bodhráns and pot lids and anything they could get a noise from. We found a good spot and stamped our feet against the cobbles in time with the drums. My new shoes made a satisfying clack on the stones, though I was careful not to bang them too hard and undo the cobbler's stitches. The crowd pressed close. The thump-thump of feet and hands and drums rose to a crescendo. Some men stepped forward, torches aloft to light the Samhain bonfire. We each blew out our lanterns and, for one long moment, the whole world was black 'cept for the flaming sticks of the bonfire-lighters. Smithfield Square rustled and whispered and coughed itself down into silence. Only when all noise ceased did the bonfire-lighters move to the heap and plunge their torches deep inside it.

The darkness was thick about us. I heard Jon Jon whimper softly high up on Da's shoulders. I held my breath. The

crowd waited. There was a whoosh; the kindling deep within the bonfire caught and cackled, tiny flames raced about and the heap exploded into a hundred small yellow dragons which grew and danced and leaped out at us. A thousand sparks shot into the air and the crowd roared, all of a one. Then the bodhráns were banging again, the fiddles struck up and everyone began to dance and run. Round the bonfire, round and round we all went, shouting, chanting, stamping around the fire, faces and masks flashing in the firelight, crazy shadows jumping and cavorting around us.

By the time we'd circled it thrice the fire had grown quite ferocious. The heat drove us back. We stopped our mad dance and stood around again, panting and laughing. Cows' horns and bones gathered from the knacker's yard sizzled and popped in the depths of the flames. On the top of the heap was a huge pile of horse skulls. Now they glared down with angry orange eyes. I stared at them, so dead yet so alive within the roaring fire.

A fierce wind blew up. Despite the heat of the fire, icy coldness gripped my spine again and this time I couldn't shake it off. I couldn't move at all. My breath caught in my chest. I rose outta my body, leaving it frozen like a statue below me. I felt everything around me fall away. For one brief moment I hung suspended above the square. The crowd became a hushed shadowy blur; there was nothing but me, the dead horses' heads, their burning eyes, and the howling wind.

Death, those flaming eyes said to me. Death, death, death.

My spirit crashed back into my body. I stumbled backwards.

Someone was tugging my petticoat.

‘Are ya all right?’ a voice said. Billy’s voice.

I looked down at him and shook my head. ‘Death.’ I almost couldn’t say the word. It stuck in my throat like it was trying to choke me. I pointed a shaking finger to the heads in the fire.

‘Death’s coming,’ I whispered.

‘Death?’ he repeated, laughing.

‘Don’t mock me, Billy,’ I begged, blinking back tears. ‘I saw what I saw.’

His black eyes became serious. I could see the fire’s reflection in them.

‘Death?’ he said again. ‘Fer someone you know? Yer da? Jon Jon, Mary Kate? Me?’

I tried to calm myself enough to search my mind for answers. ‘No, I don’t think so,’ I said. And yet I could feel the burning eyes of the horses pulsing through me even though I’d turned my back on them. I shivered.

‘Yer sure it’s not just the masks an’ the darkness gettin’ to ya?’

I nodded.

Billy took one o’ my hands in his. ‘This is the night the world o’ the dead is closest to us,’ he said slowly. ‘But there’s nothin’ surer than death. O’ course there’ll be folks here’ll not make it through this next twelve month. An’ there’ll be new wee souls comin’ into the world fer their very first Samhain an’ all. ’Tis the nature o’ things. We can only hope it won’t touch them we love sooner’n it should.’

He let go of my hand, patted his pocket and pointed into

his bowl which held an assortment of fruit and nuts. ‘Not been a bad night’s beggin’. Crowd have been generous. I’ve even got me some mulled cider.’

I knew he was trying to distract me. I could just about breathe normal now and my heart wasn’t trying to jump outta my chest, but something was lingering. A feeling that death was going to brush close to me sometime soon.

‘Something bad is going to happen, Billy,’ I began. ‘I don’t know when or what but it must be something awful bad, ’cause I’ve never had a vision like that before. I think – I think I was flo—’

Suddenly Jon Jon was shrieking. Billy and me turned quick to see what was the matter.

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A man was there, towering above Da, Jon Jon and all. The man wore a mask, all elaborate paint and feathers. He moved nimbly about on his stilts, swooping down on Jon Jon like a bird. The crowd around us cheered. Jon Jon waved his arms, all his fear disappearing as folk encouraged him to dance with the stilt man. Da jumped and jigged beneath Jon Jon and Jon Jon did his ghost-growl and clawed the air. The stilt man pretended to be afraid and the crowd laughed and cheered Jon Jon all the more, Billy and me with them. The man swooped again; Jon Jon and Da counter-attacked. The stilt man bowed his submission and Jon Jon punched the air, victorious.

‘Me a ghost!’ he yelled, and we all cheered once more.

The stilt man moved into the crowd. Behind him came a dwarf, cartwheeling and tumbling, and behind the dwarf, a woman, dressed all in shiny colours, with ribbons fluttering from her hair. All three of them spread out and moved in a circle, skilfully gathering a large crowd about them while at the same time clearing a space for themselves, each standing at a distance from the other and each claiming a part of the audience. Da and Jon Jon followed the stilt man; Mary Kate

fell back to where me and Billy were, in front of the woman.

Why can't she'd leave us be? I thought, resentfully. As if what happened with the bonfire wasn't bad enough, now Mary Kate is spying on me, an' all.

The dwarf started a tune on a penny whistle. The woman reached into a bag hanging from her hip and took out two apples. She began to juggle them, one-handed.

'Sure I can do that!' Billy scoffed, grabbing some apples from his bowl and imitating her. The crowd laughed. I sneaked a look at the bonfire. The horse heads had collapsed into the embers. I turned back to watch the juggler.

With her free hand the woman took a third apple from her bag and tossed it into the air to join the other two. Someone tossed Billy another and he kept pace with the ribboned woman. She added a fourth apple, running them between both hands like they were on an invisible string. Billy tried that and came a cropper right away, all the apples tumbling down to the laughter of the crowd. The woman smiled, her hands never breaking their rhythm, them apples moving about her head. She began to make patterns with them, crossing some in front of her face, tossing one higher than the rest. I watched her, mesmerised by her skill and concentration, using it to calm meself.

'That's what I do when we go gaming, Billy.' I leaned down to him so as Mary Kate wouldn't hear. 'I concentrate and pluck out information from the players' heads. And then I juggle all them things I see till I know what move you should make to win.'

He nodded.

‘But you got a fright just now?’ Billy asked. ‘Was it like what happened the night o’ the cock fight? When all them voices rushed inta yer head at once?’

I hesitated. ‘Sort of.’ Truth is, I wasn’t at all sure what had just happened. Had it been real or had I imagined it? Had I floated again? Iffen I had, it was nothing like that first time by the river. That’d been lovely; this time was like a really bad nightmare. My skin was still crawling from the shock of it.

‘It took you by surprise is all. Next time you’ll be able to stop it.’

‘Maybe.’ It had been so strong, though. And I’d been so sure I was in control of my gift at last. Was it growing?

Iffen it is, Taney Tyrell, I told myself, then you’ll just have to work harder at mastering it. It’s part of you. It isn’t going to just go away.

I set my chin and the juggler winked at me like she knew what I was thinking. She tossed all the apples high, caught them one by one as they came down, and swept a bow. The crowd applauded.

‘There’s a bare knuckle fight at the old brick field tomorrow evenin’,’ Billy said suddenly. ‘Will you meet me?’

The crowd’s applause had stopped; his last four words hung in the air, loud and clear.

‘Taney can’t be meetin’ you of an evenin’ any more, Billy,’ Mary Kate said, without turning her head from the juggler, who had lit some torches from the bonfire and was showing them to the crowd. ‘Tis too dark and cold for her to be walkin’ about the streets after supper.’

I looked at Billy in dismay. His face clouded but he shrugged.

‘That’s not fair,’ I protested. ‘You can’t stop me seeing my friends.’ I turned to Da who had just come back to us with Jon Jon slumped sleepy on his shoulders. ‘Da?’

He shook his head. ‘Mary Kate’s right. Winter’s here. Spring an’ summer will come again soon enough. Meantimes you can see yer friend of a Sunday afternoon.’ He turned his back and I knew there was no point arguing. Inside I was raging, though. Da’d never have said nothing iffen Mary Kate hadn’t.

I turned to Billy. ‘I knew something bad was going to happen,’ I wailed. ‘I told you!’

He half-smiled but I could see his dismay. ‘’Tis not the end o’ the world, Taney,’ he said. ‘Not as bad as someone dyin’, eh?’

I pulled a face. Truth told, I was fit to cry. ‘What’ll you do about the fight?’ I asked.

‘I’ll go by meself an’ chance me luck,’ he whispered.

By himself? Without me?

‘I’ll still see you, but?’ I asked, trying to keep the hurt outta my voice. ‘Twasn’t Billy’s fault. He’d have to make the best of things; I couldn’t expect him not to go just ’cause I couldn’t.

‘Of course. Am’n’t I always about the place?’

‘And we’ll meet on Sundays?’

He nodded.

The crowd fell into a hush. Despite myself I turned to see what had caught them so intently. The woman had tossed the burning torches into the air and begun to juggle them, just

like she'd done with the apples. Everyone oohed and aahed in amazement, waiting for her to burn her hands or drop one, but she never did. She moved backwards into the centre of the circle, spinning the torches as she went. The dwarf played his tin whistle, dancing about her and the stilt man joined them, circling the juggler, criss-crossing in front of her. Now the crowd were crying out and applauding and shouting their pleasure.

‘That’s what it feels like when I use my gift with you,’ I whispered to Billy. ‘It’s like *I’m* taking charge of *it*, not letting *it* take charge of *me*. And I need to take control of it; I know that now. I’ll miss it. I’ll miss you, Billy.’

There was no answer. I turned to look at him but he was gone.