

Bonus Short

Apparitions and Appetizers

GHOST  
OF  
RETRIBUTION

ALICE WINTERS

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\*This is best read after *Ghost of Retribution* since it contains spoilers!

“Hey, Hiro... Hiro? *Hiiiiiro?*” I call, really not understanding why he’d choose to ignore me at this very instant. Does he not realize that I am his *best* friend and without me, he’d be a husk of his former self? Does he *want* to be a husk? “*Hiiiiiiiiirrrrooooo*. I am the savior of your *life*. I bitch-slapped that woman into the new year *just* for you. And you literally are going to *ignore me*? Did I ignore you when some strange man abducted you from your bed? What about when you let a serial killer into your bookstore? Or when you were robbed?”

Hiro sighs and turns to face me. “What, Reggie?”

“Oh, thank god, you finally looked at me. Thought for a moment you were being an asshole and didn’t notice me.”

“You want to know why I was pretending to ignore you?” he asks, and it really sounds like this is going to get boring *very* quickly.

“Not really. Like I know you’re important and all that, but I have a situation.”

“So do I,” he says as he waves at his naked body. “I’m in the fucking shower!”

“Yeah, I see that.”

“With Maddox!”

“Yeah... I can see. My eyes work quite well. Like you really think I’d miss two absolutely naked men?” I say, not really seeing the issue here just yet. Like... *is* there an issue? “You act like I haven’t seen both of you naked before. Or that I haven’t popped in, saw you two doing the tango, and politely popped back out. I only asked if you wanted me to join in *one* time and that was well before Keaton. It’s fine. I had my eyes closed when I walked in a minute ago, and when I didn’t hear any noise, I assumed I was safe.”

Hiro sighs as he drops against Maddox like something I’ve said has exhausted him.

“Sounds like you’re having fun,” Maddox comments.

“Here, do you guys want to just touch each other for a bit? That’ll be fun,” Hiro says as he grabs my hand and smacks it against Maddox’s bare

chest.

“This is both... nice and awkward all at once,” Maddox determines. “It’s hard to explain.”

“Tell him that it’d be best if there was nothing hard going on here,” I say as I pat his bare chest a bit.

“Reggie says he wants you to keep hard things to yourself,” Hiro mutters.

“Okay, while I squeeze your man’s pecs as you watch, I want to—”

Suddenly, Keaton pops into the bathroom, takes one look at us all in the shower together, my hand on Maddox’s bare chest, goes “Jesus Christ,” and pops back out of the room.

“Okay... maybe this is a bit weird,” I realize.

“You think?” Hiro asks.

“Don’t sass me, Hiro. I didn’t understand, but now I do! I’m leaving, I’m leaving,” I say.

“Yet you’re still patting Maddox’s chest.”

“It’s such a nice chest,” I say as I pat it again. “Hiro, I have an issue. I can’t get Keaton to go on a date with me. He’s so wishy-washy! He’s so panicky. Like shouldn’t all your worries just disappear after death? I say that, but I kind of feel like I had more worries after death until you came along. But you get me?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Tell him to meet me at this address at six thirty,” I instruct as I pass him the note I wrote it on.

“You act like I can interact with your ghost notes,” he says as I use the sticky part to stick it to his forehead.

“Ta-ta!” I call as I give Hiro’s bare ass a smack and disappear to get ready for tonight.

“Keaton said you were doing the nasty with Hiro *and* Maddox,” Natalie says as I pop into Hiro’s bedroom. “You know the deal is that if you ever join those two, I get to watch.”

“All I did was stroke Maddox’s chest while they were taking a shower together. There was nothing weird about it at all.”

“You know it’s a bit weird when I think it’s a bit weird,” she says.

“Shhhhh. I get it. But I had questions and needed his help. You know Keaton will only ever listen to him. I want to have a date with Keaton. I need help figuring out what to wear.”

“Just go in the nude.”

“I knew you wouldn’t be helpful,” I say as I summon up a suit.

“Oh... you know what vibe I’m getting from this suit...” Natalie starts.

“Sexy confident man?”

“Cheetos.”

“What? Is that even a fucking vibe?”

“Like the shit that gets all over your fingers when you eat a bowl of them. That’s what you look like right now.”

“Ooh, or maybe a traffic cone,” Hiro the Hateful says as he comes out of the bathroom, followed by Maddox.

“NO! What the fuck? This is my sexy outfit. It highlights my eyes.”

“Which part?” Hiro asks before realizing that Maddox isn’t in on this. “Reggie’s dressing as a traffic cone.”

“Oh, maybe he’s hoping to look so gaudy that Keaton won’t look away. It’s a tactic that might work,” Maddox says.

Hiro laughs like any part of that was funny. “Or maybe he wants to blind him.”

“I hate all of you. ALLL of you.”

“No, Reggie. Don’t hate us.”

“I mean... you can just like magic anything up, right?” Maddox asks. “What about that outfit you wore to my graduation? I have a picture of it in the living room. The dark pants and gray matching vest. It looked very nice on you.”

“Yeah? Okay. Yeah... I think I was trying too hard. I just wanted to stand out and make Keaton look at me.”

“You don’t have to make him look at you at all. He only has eyes for you,” Hiro says.

“I mean... it takes a lot to tame Keaton. I worked with him for years and that man’s never had eyes for anyone else,” Maddox agrees.

“You guys are the best. I’m so glad I joined your naked shower,” I say.

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Keaton

“What are you still doing here?” Hiro asks as he steps into the room. “You were supposed to meet Reggie at six thirty. It’s six thirty-five.”

I stop pacing to look over at him. “I’m going.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because... it’s a stupid idea,” I decide.

Hiro gives me an annoying look. “Which part? The part where you can only seem to fret about things?”

“I’m not... I... fuck. This is so stupid. He has nothing holding him here. He’s going to move on, and then I’m going to be alone. I’ve already fucking been alone my entire life. I never had... I didn’t...”

“Right... so why should you still be alone now when you have an option to not be? And you’re never alone. You have all of us... and you look very nice, by the way.”

I glance down at my clothes. “They’re too much.”

“They’re not too much. Reggie was going to be there looking like a traffic cone. Now *that* was too much.”

I laugh before rubbing my face. “I’m not good at this shit.”

“Is anyone excellent at knowing everything to do?” Hiro asks.

“Like... I showed Maddox I liked him by telling him I could see dead people. And that didn’t even run him off!”

“That’s true. At least I’m not that weird.”

Hiro raises an eyebrow at me. “Excuse me?”

“Thank you for making me feel better about myself.”

“You’re... welcome,” Hiro says, a bit suspiciously.

I take a deep breath and think of where Reggie wanted to meet, appearing just outside the restaurant. I’m not quite sure why it’s a restaurant when we don’t actually *need* to eat, but ah well. With a deeper breath, I head inside and look around the first floor, yet I don’t see Reggie anywhere. But when I look up at the second floor that overlooks the first, I see him half lying on a table. Like... has he already melted from despair, even though I wasn’t even ten minutes late? Does he believe so little in me that he’s already given up?

But can I really blame him for doing so?

I walk up the stairs and over to the table before clearing my throat.

Reggie pops up, looks at me with wide eyes, and then tries patting his clothes down like he got them wrinkled while wallowing on the table.

“You... look very nice,” I say.

He's immediately all smiles. I'm pretty sure my late arrival is immediately erased because of such a simple comment. "Thank you. You do too. Sit. Sit. Please."

"Okay... if I don't, are you going to make me walk in on you rubbing Maddox's chest in the shower again?"

"That was a... I was a bit nervous. You know how you pet a dog when you're nervous? I pet Maddox."

"I... see. You know... you can always talk... to me when you're nervous," I say.

Reggie is all beaming smiles. "I can?"

"Yeah."

"I'd love that. Then... right now I'm a little nervous but very happy you showed up."

"Why would you be nervous around me? We're literally around each other constantly."

"Because I want to impress you."

"You don't have to do anything fancy or dress like a traffic cone to impress me."

"Dammit, Hiro. I... thought maybe you liked orange."

"I do like orange, but tonight I like gray better," I say.

That just makes the smile bloom even more. "Don't make me blush. Oh! Here comes our waiter."

"Gooooood evening, my fine sirs. Allow me to start off the meal with the first dish from our exquisite chef this *fiiiiine* evening. A saaalad from the finest greenery of the lands, sprinkled with a poppyseed dressing and scattered with strawberries and... stuff... nuts. Almonds? Fuck if I know," our waiter says as the plates are set down before they scurry off.

"Why is Natalie wearing a mustache and serving us food? Like of all the dead people in the world, you couldn't find another to sucker into this?"

"Oh shit, you figured out that was her?" Reggie asks. "I forgot you were a detective."

"I'm sorry, you thought the monocle and the crooked mustache were enough to trick me?"

Reggie laughs. "I don't know! I did have someone coming, but he was a no-show. At least there's a chef here. A real one! He was like... some awesome chef who died making pufferfish."

"Must not have been too good of one, then," I say.

“Oh no, he didn’t cook it wrong, he just choked on it,” Reggie explains.

“Ah, of course. I... hope pufferfish isn’t on the menu. Rather not die a second death.”

Reggie laughs as he grabs a fork and starts eating. I’m finally getting the hang of this whole... being dead while enjoying life’s luxuries thing, so the salad does taste pretty damn good.

“This is good.”

“Right? So much better than the popcorn Natalie makes me eat all the time.”

And that’s when a waiter comes back... as in a real-life waiter who guides two people right to our table.

The lady shivers a bit as she sits on Reggie but the guy notices nothing as he sits on me.

“What... the fuck...” Reggie cries. “No! No, this was going to be perfect. This was our table. I even made sure to haunt it earlier so no one would seat people here. What the fuck? I fucking hate being dead.” He looks super upset and I try not to feel guilty about the fact that if I’d arrived when I was supposed to or maybe even earlier, we could have had the table to ourselves.

“I’m... kind of jealous that you’re letting some random woman sit on you before I got to,” I say.

Reggie hesitates. “You want to sit on me?”

“I... I... I was trying to make light of the situation. It doesn’t make sense, I know.”

He grins at me. “I mean... what can I say? Being sat on is only one of my many dreams of things to do with you.”

“Yeah?” I ask.

“I can’t even see your face. All I can see is this guy’s ugly mug,” he says as he laughs. “You looked so handsome too! And now you’re old and bald!”

“So you’re saying you wouldn’t like me if I was old and bald?”

“Oh, I would love the shit out of you. I would rub that bald head of yours every day.”

That makes me grin for some reason. “Sounds... unique but... I guess we don’t have to worry. I have my full head of hair. We could move to that table over there?”

“Sure, but first...” I watch as he concentrates super hard then tips the woman’s empty wine glass over. As she jumps, he cackles and disappears before reappearing at a new table.

Natalie, who was heading toward us, freezes and her mustache falls off and flutters to the floor. “Fuck! My ’stache!” she cries as she tries to juggle two plates when she reaches down for it. As the baked potato slides off the plate and hits the floor, she looks up into my eyes and puts it back onto the plate like she has no idea what happened and hurries over to Reggie.

I get up and head over to our new table as Natalie arrives and distributes the plates of steak while pretending like my potato wasn’t on the floor at any point in time.

“Here we have a... uh... nice steak with a butter and garlic... something. I don’t know, he like went on for five minutes and I remember none of it, but that was mostly because he’s really fucking hot. Like I’m considering stripping before I go in there next time to see if he also thinks I’m hot.”

“Umm... waiter?” I ask.

“Yep?”

“Why’s there a mustache stuck to my potato?”

She hesitates before disappearing, like that’ll fix everything. Reggie takes the mustache from me and puts it on himself. “You ever wanted a mustache ride?” he asks, acquiring some odd Western dialect.

“Oh... it’s all I’ve ever dreamed of. Traffic cones and mustache rides.”

Reggie laughs and keeps it on as he eats. “I’m so glad you showed up, even if you let some other man sit on you.”

“Yeah? Me too.”

“You too what? That you enjoyed the man sitting on you?”

“No. That I’m glad I showed up,” I say, well aware he wanted me to repeat that.

He’s all smiles as he eats. “Tell me more about yourself.”

“You’re literally with me like ninety percent of my day. There’s not much more to tell.”

“What about before you died?”

“I... I’m going to be real honest... I... don’t know how much I loved my life before I died,” I admit. “I mean, yeah, I loved being alive, but I



didn't have anyone there for me. I didn't have people to make me laugh... people who cared about me. I... sometimes I wonder how long it would have taken anyone to even notice I was dead if Hiro hadn't."

Reggie looks alarmed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to like... bring up..."

"Nah, you didn't. I'm just explaining that you guys make it so much better. Especially you."

"I make something better? Natalie told me I'm really good at making everything weird."

"That too," I say as Reggie laughs.

As we finish our steak and more people come to sit on us, Reggie sighs. "Why? Why can't we eat in peace?"

"I guess we just have to sit somewhere no one else is."

"Like in the closet?"

"No, like the roof."

"Oh... yeah, that's significantly sexier than a closet. Race you there."

And then he's gone. I'm definitely not as good as he is at disappearing and reappearing, but I arrive soon after.

"Ooh, this is nice. We should have eaten up here from the beginning," he says as he sits down on the roof. "Look at the sky."

"It is pretty nice," I agree as Natalie appears.

"Here are your desserts. I'm not coming back. Me and the chef are gonna do the nasty in the kitchen. So if you don't want to join in, then I would stay *far* away because I'm about to sauté that man's *balls*." And then she's gone.

"Well, that was disturbing," I say as Reggie laughs.

"I'm just glad they waited until after they finished cooking."

"What if they didn't?"

"Nooooo. I don't want to envision that," Reggie says as he scoops up a spoon full of the chocolatey cake and directs it toward my mouth. "Think of happier things."

I take a bite of it. "Ooh, that's good. I'm almost... it's almost good enough that I can pretend I don't care what he was doing while he made it."

Reggie laughs and leans back as we finish our dessert. "I really like you."

"I know. I like you too."

"Promise? Promise you're not going to just run from me the moment you're away for longer than five minutes?"

“I promise.”

“Promise, promise?”

I grab his wrist and pull him in before kissing him. He reaches for me, like he’s afraid that if he doesn’t, I might disappear, but I’m not going anywhere. I’m done running from him. I’m done letting my fears control me.

His lips part, and when I deepen the kiss, I feel the way his fingers tighten on my shirt. I slide my fingers into his hair before pulling back just enough that I can see his smile as he settles on my lap.

Reggie throws his arms over my shoulders and lays his head against my shoulder. “You’re all mine now. We should get married. Hiro can officiate it.”

“You’re moving a bit fast.”

“Some say not fast enough. Hiro is getting married soon, so we should get married sooner.”

“What if we try dating first?”

“I want to introduce you to everyone as my sexy smexy boyfriend. You can watch porn with me and Natalie! And you know I sleep best when I spoon Hiro, so you can just spoon me as I spoon Hiro. Or if you’re the jealous type, you can spoon Hiro as I spoon you.”

“I should have thought this over better,” I realize.

He laughs and leans back so he can look at me. “You’re never going to regret a single day of it.”

“I might be skeptical... but you’re right, I don’t think I will. Besides today when I walked in on you stroking naked Maddox in the shower.”

“Next time I’ll make sure I only stroke him while you watch.”

“Oh joy.”

“Or when you’re also stroking him.”

“How fun,” I say with much sarcasm as he laughs.