

TREAT ME RIGHT

a stranger things story



DINA JAMES

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“Hey, Bit?”

Rebecca looked up from her book to see the familiar lady-killer grin of her huge Anubin bodyguard and tilted her head back with a groan. Whenever Billy had that look on his face, things always ended up broken or eaten. More often than not, both. “What?”

He flopped on the floor beside the couch. Noth the hellhound opened an eye and raised a fiery black brow before resuming his nap at her feet.

“Seen some pumpkins while I was out today,” Billy said.

She rolled her eyes and went back to her book, slow and deliberate.

“C’mon, Bit! It’ll be fun!”

“Billy, Halloween is for little kids. I’m seventeen. I’m almost a senior in high school—”

“And I’m nearly ninety, but you don’t see that stoppin’ me!” He rested his chin on her knee and stared at her.

She tried to ignore his gorgeous brown puppy-dog eyes, but couldn’t keep her smile hidden as, though he was in human form, she could see his fluffy brown tail wagging out of the corner of her eye. “No, Billy.”

“Free candy. Seein’ vamps and zombies and ghouls—”

“I see those things all the time, doofus. I don’t need to wander around in the dark looking for them.”

“Pumpkins and candy. I said candy, right? And there’s Rox. We can drive—”

She shut her book and looked at him.

He smiled.

“You know the veil is thinnest on All Hallows’,” she said. “I should stay here. Human emergency rooms aren’t the only ones who see an uptick on Halloween.”

Billy nodded. “I already talked to Syd. He said he’d come with us. I figure him, me, you, the Punk, Furball here—”

“I have a name,” Noth rumbled, not bothering to open his eyes.

“—we’d all be there. Nothin’ would try anything dumb with that much muscle around. Besides...Punk would love his first Halloween as a real vamp. The veil being so thin, even humans can see us as we really are. It’s the best day of the year for Ethereals in this plane.”

“So, go without me. Go terrorize middle-schoolers with your werewolf bit.”

His lips thinned in a grimace. “I ain’t no werewolf—”

She kissed the top of his head. “Believe me, big guy, I know you’re a man-wolf, but everyone else knows the wolf-man thing. Especially on Halloween. And that’s what you really want, isn’t it? To run around in all your glory and let everyone have a good look at your kick-ass werewolf

costume, right?”

His human ears turned pink and he looked away.

She laughed. “Why didn’t you just say that, then?”

“Cause it’s stupid,” he said with a shrug. “Ain’t no reason for it, really. I mean...”

“Sure there is. When you’re in your true form, no one here can see you unless they’re part of the Otherworlds themselves—”

“Like you and Martha. Not even Robin can see me like I really am unless I show her on purpose, and she’s my gal.”

She nodded. “I know that’s got to be hard sometimes. And don’t tell me you don’t want to meet her parents as your bad wolf self.”

He grinned again. “All right, all right. You got me. But I ain’t givin’ up my free candy. Ro said she’d come with, as a zombie cheerleader.”

“Rah-rah,” Rebecca said, and sat back on the couch to open her book again.

“What’re you gonna be?”

She arched a brow at him. “I told you, Halloween’s for kids. I’m not going.”

“But you said—”

“I told you to go without me.”

Even in human form, she could see his hackles raise.

“Ain’t leavin’ you alone on All Hallows’. Either you’re comin’ with me or I’m stayin’ right here. I’ll get popcorn and a passel of them old monster movies—”

“There’s a marathon on one of the cable channels—”

“—and we’ll stay in. Invite Ro and the Punk—”

She sighed and shook her head. “You realize you’re blackmailing me, right?”

His mouth dropped open. “Ain’t neither!”

“You are so. You said if I don’t go, you’ll stay here. That’s blackmail.”

His brow furrowed. “How you figure?”

“Billy, you’re basically telling me that unless I go with you—something I don’t want to do—you won’t go—something I *do* want you to do. You’re blackmailing me with an ultimatum.”

He growled. “I don’t like that. Ain’t right. Wouldn’t do that to you. Ain’t fair.” He sat back against the couch and rested his head on her thigh. “Well...if you want me to go by myself...I suppose I could.” He tilted his head to look up at her. “But I don’t want to go without you. I want you to come because you want to, and you don’t, so...damn.”

She smiled and kissed his forehead. “I’ll go with you. Not because you blackmailed me into it, but because it will make you happy. You never ask

me for anything for yourself, and if you want to run around scaring people on Halloween, I might as well be there to make sure you don't end up in jail. Humans *can* see you that night, after all, so no driving like...well...you."

He had her in his arms in an instant, squeezing her hard. "It's the one day of the year I actually hate drivin' Rox."

"Air, Billy!"

His arms loosened enough to look at her. "Thanks, Bit! You're the best! I'll go tell Ro we'll meet at her place! Six o'clock okay?"

She sighed. "It's two weeks away, Billy."

"Don't care! I'll bring us home a pumpkin, too!" He set her back down on the couch. He mussed Noth's black ruff. "You'll love it, Kid. Best night of the year, no doubt. You'll be so stuffed by the time you get home you won't need to eat for a year."

The juvenile hellhound cracked a ruby eye. "Does that apply to you as well, or will you be ordering waffles at the diner out on the Interstate?"

"I feel stupid."

Nana smiled. "Well, you look beautiful."

Rebecca rolled her eyes. "Nana, I look like a rejected extra from a kid's Halloween movie."

"Nonsense," said her grandmother. She smiled and reached for the wide brim of Rebecca's hat. "You'll fit right in with your friends. Let's see, you're going with two vampires—"

"Looking like they came straight out of that Keifer Sutherland vampire movie—"

"A werewolf—"

"Wolf-man. He's going to do the ripped jeans and everything. He hates being called a werewolf, so he wanted people to at least have a chance to get it right this year."

"Billy is so sensitive sometimes. And what did you say Robin is going to be?"

Rebecca shook her head. "She was going to do a zombie cheerleader, but Billy convinced her to be a damsel."

"A what?"

"You know...like those old monster movies. She's going to be the woman the monster kidnaps. She's got this great old-fashioned evening gown she picked up at a thrift store and ripped up. I can't wait to see what she does with her hair and makeup. Personally I think Billy just wants an excuse to carry his girlfriend around in his arms all night."

Nana laughed. "I'm surprised he didn't convince you to be that."

Rebecca snorted and adjusted her floppy hat. "I think he realized getting me to agree to go was as far as he wanted to push his luck. I still feel like an idiot. I haven't been trick-or-treating since I was like five or something."

"Eight. You and Robin went with a few girls from your third grade class. You went as a ladybug. So cute. I have pictures somewhere." Nana squeezed Rebecca's shoulders in lieu of a hug and smiled at the reflection in the mirror before them. "I think you look fantastic. And it's perfect for your group. A little cliché and commercially insulting to witches, but they understand the fairy-tale aspect of their history. At least on this day."

Rebecca looked down at her acid-green-and-black striped tights and green-and-orange tulle skirt. Her fake silk hat perched atop her overly-teased mouse brown hair was the only thing remotely proclaiming her as what she was supposed to be. None of the witches she knew would dare to wear something as moronic as this. The striped arm-warmers, maybe, and possibly the tights, but definitely not the tulle. "I look like a demented barmaid escaped from Oktoberfest. But it's what Robin had. I wasn't about to go out and buy something for this idiotic excursion."

"Come on. It's nearly dark. They'll be here soon," Nana said. They went down the hall to the kitchen. "Now, I think you're a little too old to be carrying a plastic pumpkin, so I got you this." She reached for a shiny piece of cloth on the kitchen table and shook it out.

Rebecca studied the dark blue material. It looked like a kitchen garbage bag, but much smaller. "What is that?"

"Cobalt vitelline," said Nana. "It's made from the egg of a dragon. It's strong, resilient, and holds much more than it appears from the outside. It also has the added benefit of encouraging fortune."

Rebecca crossed her arms and cocked her head. "You mean a hoard. Dragons love gold and they love hoards. That's a bag of hoarding, isn't it?"

Nana blushed and couldn't hide a little smile. "Bronté may have loaned it to me for the night. She'll want it back, too, so take good care of it. It's the only way her hoard will fit in her apartment."

Rebecca unclenched and glared up at the ceiling. "I can't believe you guys! Is the entire Ethereal community on a quest to get me out tonight?"

"Yes," Nana said, tucking the thin bag into the orange cloth belt at Rebecca's waist. "You don't realize it, but this night is a chance for you to meet a lot of beings you don't normally get to see. Ethereals look forward to this night all year, and a lot of them are looking forward to meeting you."

"Nana! I'm dressed like a—"

"You're dressed like a human out celebrating like all the other humans

out celebrating. Your mark is visible enough. Also, you'll have a fantastic escort. Several, actually," said Nana.

"What about the veil?"

"What about it?"

"Well...um...that means boundaries are thin as well, so things might get...um...messy."

Nana rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Really, Rebecca. With all you've been studying, you think you'd realize by now that All Hallows' is a night of celebration for Ethereals. Some observe it solemnly with respect, others get a little more rowdy, but one thing they all have in common is peace. This night of all nights is one of absolute sanctuary. There won't be any fighting today. Accidents, maybe, but that's all. I'm sure I can handle anything that might show up in the Enclave tonight. Syd will leave me an extra talisman just in case I need more help, and Sabine has agreed to sit with me. She has an acolyte of her own now, so she has a little time to spare. Don't worry about tonight. Nothing is going to happen. Well...nothing sinister, anyway. Not to you. To Regulars, maybe. I mean...there's a reason this night is one of their most frightening."

"Fine, but will my...our...Stranger clemencies still work? Just in case."

"They will. Nothing like that changes. It's just a holiday for them. Think of it as their Independence Day, New Year's, and Thanksgiving all at once. There's feasting—don't eat anything not given to you by a Regular, by the way; we don't want another Persephone incident—drinking, dancing, various other reveling going on. You remember not to dance with faeries, right?"

"Right. No hundred-year jigs for me, thanks. But Nana...what about demons, or Sutanaj, or—"

Nana held up a hand. Rebecca fell silent at the invocation of power and bowed her head. "Even those who don't respect a Healer's clemencies still respect the Lacing."

"Okay, that I haven't heard before."

"It's what Ethereals call All Hallows'. The veils between worlds thin to breaking in some places, and look like they're held together by tiny laces of power. I asked Syd about it once, as he can see it, and he said it's very beautiful, like the Chantilly lace handkerchiefs popular in his former country. Lacing has been around much longer than what you think of when you hear the word. Despite what it's called, know that you'll be safe."

"And Robin too? She's not a Stranger."

Nana arched a brow. "Do you honestly think anything would be foolish enough to approach a Regular flanked by a Healer, two vampires—one a Master—and an Anubi?"

Rebecca had the grace to blush. “Sorry.”

“Stop worrying, Rebecca, and go have some fun. That’s what this night is about for Regulars, Strangers, and Ethereals alike—fun.”

“You’re sure you’ll be all right here by yourself?”

Nana nodded. “This is the safest day of the year for the Otherworlds and anyone associated with it. It’s sacred to everyone and everything. Think of it as a sort of a day of peace and amnesty. Even the worst being you can think of respects the Lacing. If anything comes to the Enclave tonight, it will be an accident or illness.”

Rebecca closed her eyes and inhaled deeply as the warmth that always accompanied Syd’s appearance enveloped her. She smiled as his arms slid around her waist. The tall blond Master vampire kissed her neck and she giggled. “Not in front of Nana!”

“I am fairly certain she is aware of our relationship,” he said. “A fair evening to you, Martha. Blessed Lacing.”

“And to you, Sydney Alexander,” Nana replied formally with a slight bow.

Syd rolled his metallic blue eyes. Nana smiled. He took in Rebecca’s costume. “How...festive...”

“Oh, shut up. This wasn’t my idea—”

He held up a hand. “You look lovely. It’s very appropriate for the occasion. I just didn’t think you would...consent to such. Martha said something about a ladybug.”

Rebecca looked at her grandmother and shook her head. “I was eight!”

“The hat is particularly fetching,” he said. “And I see Martha successfully procured one of the dragon’s sacs for the evening.”

“Billy should get the credit for that,” said Nana. “How a dragon decided to open a pizza shop for mortals I can only imagine, and Billy is her best customer. He’s the one that mentioned this was Rebecca’s first Lacing as a Healer.”

“Meddle not in the affairs of dragons, Martha,” Syd said, though it carried none of the weight of his Master’s voice. “Especially Bronté’s.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Now let go of my granddaughter so I can give her a hug. I know you’re due at Robin’s,” said Nana.

Syd withdrew his arms. Rebecca looked at him over her shoulder. He seemed reluctant to let her leave his hold, which was unusual for him. He was never clingy or possessive. Nana looked at him strangely too, but said nothing as she squeezed her gently.

“Home by dawn,” Nana said, looking at both of them sternly. “I’ve already spoken to Billy about it, and you know he’ll obey me. Sydney—”

He held up a hand. “You’ve no need to invoke clemency. I will abide

by your wishes.” He turned to Rebecca. “Are you ready?”

She nodded. “I told Billy we’d meet him there. Is Ryan coming?”

“He’ll meet us. Is your...”

“He’s with Billy. I think he’s really looking forward to a night out. I seriously doubt he’s ever been allowed to participate in anything fun.”

Syd shook his head. “Probably not. Hellhounds aren’t known for frivolity. I am truly curious as to how he will perceive it. And how others will perceive him.”

“He’s still young, but a hellhound, I know. I told him he’s welcome to return home whenever he feels the need, but he’s worse than Billy when it comes to keeping me in sight, and I didn’t think that was possible.”

He laughed. “Noth might be unique in his character, but he is still a hellhound, bred as much for loyalty as ferocity. Guardianship is his nature, and you have his allegiance.”

“We’re working on both of those things. He can be devastatingly aggressive without realizing it. His first instinct is to destroy. Fortunately he looks to me for permission first. Usually. And Nana told me that tonight all Otherworlders call a truce, so hopefully he won’t bite, maim, or kill anyone. Or *anything*.”

“It’s highly unlikely, especially with you and everyone accompanying you out tonight present. Is he still...”

She sighed. “Don’t ask me why he doesn’t like her. Robin’s never done anything to him that I know of, and she can’t think of anything either. And you know Noth. He doesn’t say anything to anyone, not even if you ask him directly what’s on his mind. He won’t tell me, and of course refuses to speak to her about it, and I know she’s asked him point blank why he refuses to even look at her. He won’t even tell Billy, and if Noth has anything like a friend, it’s Billy.”

“Well, this is a night of peace between all, so his loathing should ebb for the next few hours at least. Come.” He held out an arm.

She kissed her Nana’s cheek. “Call if you need me.”

Nana smiled and nodded. “I will. Have a good time and don’t worry about me. We’ll talk about everything when you get back.”

Rebecca wound her arm around Syd’s and nodded.

“Wow, you look fantastic!” Robin enthused, catching Rebecca up in a hug almost the second after she and Syd appeared on her porch. “And I thought Wolfy there was amazing. Mom almost fainted and Dad looked like he might have had to go change his pants when they saw my hot boyfriend

dressed as the Wolfman.”

Billy’s growling laugh filled the night air. Rebecca pulled away from her best—only, really—friend and shook her head at the huge Anubi in tattered jeans standing in the Turnbull’s front yard.

“You loved it too, didn’t you?” she said, shaking her head.

“Sure did! But that weren’t nothin’ compared to the Kid there, smiling at them.” He nodded toward the wreath of red-orange blackness that was Noth. “Them glowing red eyes is what done it. They wanted to know how we got a...what’d they call you, Kid?”

“Mastiff. If it weren’t the Lacing, I would take offense. But then, they are mortals,” Noth said.

“Mastiff, yeah. Wanted to know how we got his eyes to glow. We convinced them it was part of the furry lit costume he’s in,” said Billy.

“I should have shifted to Guardian,” Noth said, wrinkling his nose. “Then they’d really wonder.”

Billy reached a huge paw down and gave the hellhound a rough pat between his flaming ears. “And they wouldn’t have no porch, what with your acid drool burning through what your claws didn’t rip up. You’re scary enough as it is, Kid. Ain’t no need in bringin’ the pain.”

“But it would have been fun,” said Noth with a heavy sigh. He wagged his tail at Rebecca. “I like them clothes.”

“Those clothes,” she corrected. “And thank you.”

“I still like you better without them—”

“Thank you, Noth,” she said, a little louder. The hellhound would never let her forget the one time he’d seen her naked. She turned to Robin. “You look amazing! You did a fantastic job on that dress.”

Robin brushed a lock of hair over her ear and smiled. “Thanks.” She nodded at Billy. “Wolfy was a huge help. He made the rents down the skirt. I thought actual claw marks would look better than rips or what I could do with scissors.”

“I love your hair,” said Rebecca. She looked around the porch. “Where’s Ryan? I thought he was coming with us.”

“Said he had some stuff to grab and would meet us wherever,” said Billy. He nodded to Syd. “Where to first?”

Syd looked at Rebecca and smiled. “The Plateau.”

Billy’s furred ears pricked as his heavy brow rose. He grinned. “Goin’ for the big guns right away, huh?”

“It’s the best Lacing party around, and I’m including Shangri-La,” said Syd.

“Wait, that’s real?” Robin said, sliding her arms around Billy’s neck as he picked her up effortlessly.

“Sure is,” said Billy. “And they throw one hell of a party. You won’t want to leave. In fact, most mortals who get there don’t. We might hit that one later if we don’t spend all night in Egypt.”

Rebecca’s mouth dropped open. “Wait, wha—”

They materialized on a flat expanse of sand. Before she could blink, a booming voice called out “MISTRESS HEALER REBECCA MACDONNELL HAS ARRIVED!” An unnatural quiet fell around her and she stepped back into the safety of Syd’s arm around her waist as what appeared to be thousands of beings showed her their various forms of deference. Some took a knee, others bowed their heads or at the waist, still others prostrated themselves fully on the...whatever was covering the sand beneath their feet.

As immediately as everything had stopped to acknowledge her, they returned to their revelry, resuming conversations or refreshments or whatever they’d been doing before she appeared. She cuddled closer to Syd. “Wow. That was...unexpected.”

He pressed her tight to him for a moment. “Get used to it. You’re something of a celebrity, remember. Your arrival at this or any event tonight is a great honor, and that is recognized.”

“I thought...I mean...we all dressed up...” She trailed off as she took in the crowd of supernatural beings around her. Each of them were in what looked like costumes as well. “Oh.”

He took in the look on her face and smiled. “Did you think only humans engaged in mummery?”

She blinked at him. “Mummery?”

“Guising. Merrymaking in costume.”

She couldn’t help but stare at what looked like an ogre dressed as a ballerina, complete with pink tutu. “I thought...well, didn’t humans do it to confuse what they considered to be evil spirits into thinking they were one of them?”

“Yes and no,” he said. “But that is a discussion for another time.” He nodded to Billy.

The huge Anubi was transfixed by the long buffet tables piled high with what was ostensibly food. He slowly lowered Robin to the ground, but didn’t move from his spot beside them.

Noth had no such compunction. With a glance up at Rebecca, the hellhound started through the throng of dancers.

“She will be safe enough,” Syd said. Billy was at the buffet table before Syd finished his sentence. He shook his head and smiled at Robin. He gestured after Billy. “Feel free to join him. Nothing here will harm you.”

Rebecca put a hand on Robin’s arm. “Nana said—”

“Not this night,” Syd interrupted. “And certainly not here.” He nodded out into the darkness, where the city lights of Cairo could be seen past the silhouettes of the pyramids of Giza. “Not everything will be to your liking, of course, but I think I could pick out some of the more savory dishes on offer if either of you care to sample them.”

Both girls shook their heads.

“Something to drink, then? It may offend the host if you don’t at least partake in some libation,” he said.

“Who is the host? We should warn them about Billy and his appetite,” said Rebecca.

He laughed and nodded to the buffet table which consistently replenished itself with whatever Billy inhaled. “Anubi are especially welcome here. The indigenous people of this land worshiped them as gods once, remember. Haaru was once considered the brother to Anubis, and it’s a distinction he still honors. He is well-aware of their prodigious appetites. Come, let me get you both some *irep*.”

“Some what?” asked Robin.

“Traditional wine served at Egyptian banquets,” Syd said.

“Uh, Syd?”

He turned to Rebecca. “Yes?”

“We’re underage.”

“Pardon?”

“Underage. Not twenty-one. We can’t drink alcohol,” she said.

He shook his head. “It isn’t remotely the same as the wine you think of when I say the word. Further, it’s the Lacing. Things tonight aren’t what they appear to be, or what they’re meant to be. You can safely consume it and not feel as though you’ve betrayed the laws of your family or realm.”

She looked at Robin. Her pretty blond friend shrugged. Rebecca looked back at Syd. “All right. I mean...we shouldn’t risk offending the host.”

“The host would take no offense at anything the Mistress Healer did or did not do,” came a gravely voice behind them. Syd inclined his head in a respectful bow. Rebecca turned and bent her knee in the slight curtsy she’d spent hours practicing. Robin did the same, much more gracefully given her cheerleading experience. The bird-man’s beak creased in what Rebecca took for a smile. “Be welcome amongst us, however you take comfort.”

“My gratitude, my lord...” She looked to Syd.

“Haaru,” he murmured.

“My lord Haaru,” she said. “For your welcome.”

“Though I realize you must have other engagements this night, you may stay as long as you desire,” said the bird-man. He looked toward Billy. “It seems one of my brothers is already indulging in the banquet. And is that

a Hellguard I see beside him?”

“It is. That is Noth, son of Lord Notharion. He is my friend and companion.”

The green-feathered line above Haaru’s left eye rose as he cocked his head. “The son of the Hellguard Chief at my banquet table. Just when I believe there is nothing more the realms can show me, they reveal another mystery. Of course, I did not expect the Mistress Healer and her Helper to appear this Lacing either, but I am nonetheless pleased. Perhaps you would return another time? It would be my honor to show you my home in a less...public manner.”

She smiled. “I would be honored, my lord Haaru.”

“Please, address me as Horus. There is no need for formality from my sister.” Spotting something across the throng of beings, he clucked his tongue and left them with a slight swirl of wind and sand.

She turned to Syd. “Sister?”

“I told you, he honors his distinction as brother to Anubis seriously. Now, you know Anubis is the name the ancient people of this region gave to Billy’s people, and you are Billy’s packmate. If you’re related to Billy, you’re related to Lord Haaru. Or so he believes.”

Robin laughed. “Wow, Beck...your family is getting huge. Didn’t you tell me that you’re a spider-guy’s sister too?”

“T’Mei, yeah. His mother the T’Maru Queen kind of adopted me, so...”
Rebecca shrugged.

“That’s gotta be freaky for an only child.”

“Just a bit.” She turned to Syd. “Speaking of family, where’s Ryan?”

He closed his eyes. “Still at the lair. I suppose his duties are taking longer than he thought.”

“Duties?”

“Aymi.”

Rebecca nodded. “Tonight is probably especially hard on her.” She threaded her arm through his. “That makes you being here with me extra special. Thank you.”

He smiled. “Don’t thank me. Billy wore me down just as he did you.”

She laughed. “He is hard to say no to, that’s for sure. But, he never asks for anything for himself, so if he wants to go gorge himself on...whatever that is he’s scarfing down, I’m totally okay with that. Besides, I just love seeing the look on Robin’s face at her boyfriend downing an entire...is that a goat?”

“That’s what it looks like,” he said. “And Noth is matching him hoof for hoof, apparently.”

Robin shook her head. “So gross. I thought we were going

trick-or-treating. You know...pumpkins and candy, not...goats and...whatever has that many legs..."

Syd craned his neck, trying to see over the heads of a couple of dancing yeti. "I believe that's a cephalopod of some kind. Kraken, perhaps. Noth should be satisfied for many months to come." He turned to Robin. "Fear not. This is merely a stop to attempt to satisfy the appetites of our more voracious friends. Have no fear; there will be candy and pumpkins aplenty before the night is over. Billy will make sure of that."

"Sure of what?" Billy said around a mouthful of something green. Robin tapped the corner of her mouth. He swiped at his own with the back of his paw, clearing a thick glob of ooze from his fur.

Robin threaded her arm through his. "Sure your damsel gets her chocolate."

"Damn straight! This ain't—"

"—but a snack," everyone said with him.

"We know," Robin said, laughing.

He looked down at her and grinned. "You sure you don't want nothin' from here? They got a gremlin hash that's the best I've ever had."

A very loud belch kept her from replying. Rebecca wrinkled her nose and fanned her hand. "Ew, Noth! That's—"

Noth stretched out a hind leg and outmatched his burp with an even louder fart.

"EW!" Both girls took several steps back. Robin brought a fold of her ripped skirt to her nose. Rebecca buried her face in the crook of her elbow and noticed the dancers nearest them move away as subtly as they could. Even Syd couldn't keep the disgust from his face and grimaced.

Billy roughed up the hellhound's ears. "Kid, there are some things you don't do in front of ladies, let alone in public, and cuttin' the cheese is one of them."

Noth looked back at the buffet table. "I didn't cut the cheese. I don't like it except on pizza."

Billy sighed and shook his head. He looked at Rebecca. "I'll talk to him about lettin' 'em rip."

"Please!" she said, though it was muffled. She glared at Noth.

"So I guess you all are ready to get out of here, then," said Billy.

She lowered her arm and tried not to gag. "I don't know, now. It seems kind of rude to stink up the place and leave—" A pink mist rolled through the crowd and the noxious odor dissipated. "On second thought, maybe we'd better leave before someone does it again." She looked at Syd and took his arm. "Where to now? China?"

"If you wish, but I was thinking about something a little closer to

home,” he said.

“Works for me! Though shouldn’t we say goodbye to Haaru?”

“He is host tonight and has enough to oversee without guests farewelling him. We will send him a note of thanks later this week,” he said.

“You’ll have to show me how to send an Ethereal thank-you note,” she said. “Ready when you are.”

Billy scooped Robin up again. Rebecca put a hand on Noth’s shoulder as Syd did the same to Billy and they all disappeared, materializing in a cul-de-sac.

Rebecca looked around. “Is this...?”

Syd smiled. “Do you like it?”

She took in the decorated porch of the house on Olive Street. She’d spent summers at camp on the grounds of the mansion, and she had always loved seeing the house lit up at night. This was even better. “How did you...?”

“Martha. She said you had a fondness for this house and always wanted to see it on Halloween. I hope it doesn’t disappoint,” he said.

“Not at all...” She trailed off, taking in the orange lights, gossamer cobwebs, and intricately-carved pumpkins. “It’s better than I imagined.”

“Then let us go ring the bell.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Syd! Surely you don’t—”

“We are here to guise, are we not? Trick-or-treat, you call it now? As I understand it, that only works if you go and ask. After all, Martha went to all that trouble to get that bag of hoarding for you. It seems a shame to waste it.”

“C’mon, Bit!” Billy said, shouldering past her clutching Robin to his chest. “We got candy to eat!”

“You guys! I’m not ten!”

“So what?” came Ryan’s cocky voice in her ear.

She jumped and turned to look at Syd’s leather-clad thrall. He certainly didn’t have to do much at all to pull off the 80s vampire look.

He grinned, flashing his fangs. “Live a little, Hot Stuff. What’re they gonna do? Call the cops? Last I heard, they don’t throw you in juvvie because you’re trick-or-treating over the age of twelve.”

She laughed at her former classmate and shook her head. With a deep breath, she followed after Billy. When Syd didn’t move with her, she turned again. “Aren’t you two coming?”

Syd and Ryan looked at one another. “This...really isn’t our thing,” Ryan said. “We’re just here for Billy. What are we going to do with a bunch of candy?”

“Give it to Billy? You’re here for support, right? Well...I’m not doing

this by myself. Besides...your costumes are great.”

Syd looked down at his jeans. “But these are our regular clothes.”

She rolled her eyes. “Vampires! You have fangs and all! Now come with me, and smile when I say ‘trick or treat!’”

They looked at one another again. Ryan shrugged and went to her side. Syd shook his head and followed, and all three went to the door.

“Full-size Butterfingers!” Billy said in what passed for a whisper from him as they went by him.

“And I scared them good!” Noth said in the same manner, which was much less quieter. He laughed to himself and went with Billy to the end of the drive.

Rebecca shook her head and took her shiny blue bag from her belt.

Rebecca yawned as she flopped down on her living room couch. “I have to admit, being able to translocate definitely extends the trick-or-treating hours. Nine o’clock in Seattle and it’s barely midnight here. I’m beat. And there’s still hours of darkness for you guys to do your Lacing stuff.”

“I am pleased you enjoyed yourself,” said Syd.

She grinned. “You had fun too, didn’t you?”

“I have not participated in a Lacing in over a hundred years. It was a nice change.”

“So...next year, then?”

“Undoubtedly,” he said. He turned to Ryan. “After all, they do not call the cops.”

Ryan smiled and winked at Rebecca. “Maybe we can change that next year.”

She rolled her eyes and laughed as she got to her feet. She hugged Syd and kissed him lightly. “Thanks for the fun.” She looked at Ryan. “And stay out of trouble.”

“No promises,” he said. “Like you said, there’s still hours of darkness left for me to get to some tricks. We kind of left that part out, and it *is* the Lacing. Anything can happen tonight.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” She looked up at Syd. “Can you keep him out of trouble, or does your clan get to run amok during the Lacing?”

“There are many restrictions lifted, of course, but they still must obey me,” Syd said, eyeing Ryan. “Do not get arrested. I will not post bail and you will greet the dawn behind bars.”

Ryan touched two fingers to his brow and saluted his Master with them

before he disappeared. Syd brought Rebecca's hand to his lips and kissed it. "I shall take my leave as well. Aymi is always more restless during a lacing, as what she sees confuses her more."

"Go. It will do her good to see you. I'd tell you to take Billy too, but I know how his true form upsets her."

"Indeed, and tonight he will be unable to hide it from her. Until later, beloved."

She squeezed his hand. "Later."

He smiled and disappeared. Rebecca sighed and flopped back down on the couch.

"You really are beat. Probably all the Otherworlders you've been around tonight. How about we do the candy swap tomorrow?" said Robin.

Billy grunted in the Anubin way of questioning. "Candy swap?"

"When we were kids, we'd dump out our candy buckets and swap things we liked. I like more chocolate while Beck likes hard candy. She makes out like a bandit."

He grinned at Rebecca. "Yeah?"

She blushed. "Well, a fun-sized chocolate bar is hardly worth one cinnamon ball. You want the chocolate, you have to make it worth my while."

"Well, I ain't tradin'," said Billy with a sniff of disdain. "Even if I did still have some to swap. For now, gonna take advantage of all these holes in the veil and grab us some grub. Back in two shakes." He left the living room. Rebecca heard the screen door of the kitchen slam.

"I got some." Noth nosed the black plastic bucket he'd carried in his shark's-mouth. The contents spilled over the living room rug. "What are these worth?"

She looked side-long at Robin. "I think those are a straight-up trade, Noth. One chocolate bar for one cookie treat."

"Two chocolate for one treat. That one says it has milk and bones in it, and I know you like cow juice," said the hellhound, putting his black-furred paw over a large bone-shaped biscuit.

"What is this? I thought it was demons who liked to make deals," she said.

"Just because I am not bound to a master does not mean I do not adhere to the tenets of my realm. Two chocolate."

She pretended to think, bending down to peer at the dog treats on the rug. "You know, those do look pretty good. You drive a hard bargain. All right, two chocolate bars for one cookie. But we'll swap in the morning. Robin is going to stay the night."

Noth's crimson eyes narrowed.

“Is that all right?” Robin asked, lowering her eyes to the floor as Rebecca taught her to do when speaking to a hellhound. “It’s your house too.”

Noth didn’t say anything for several seconds. Finally he looked at Rebecca, then back to Robin. “Will you trade your chocolate for bones too?”

“Absolutely. In fact, I’ll give you an even better deal. I’ll give you three chocolate bars for one of your cow juice cookies. I really like cow juice,” said Robin.

“Very well,” Noth said. He nosed all the treats he’d accumulated back into his black bucket. “I will keep them safe from being eaten until the trade.”

“Thank you,” Robin said, bowing slightly.

Rebecca smiled as Noth went upstairs. “Wow. Who knew all it would take is some chocolate to get him to speak to you?”

“The power of chocolate is greatly underestimated. Chocolate is poisonous to dogs though, so I didn’t even think about it. I guess I should have. I mean...he’s not a dog,” said Robin.

“The only thing he has in common with them is that he’s got ‘hound’ in his name,” Rebecca said. She lifted up her own bag and grunted. “I don’t even want to know how much I have in here.”

“Billy offered to carry it for you.”

“He had his hands full enough, don’t you think?”

Robin blushed. “Oh, like he couldn’t carry five of me plus six of you and a dozen bags of candy.”

“And ten pizzas,” Rebecca said. “Speaking of—”

The huge man-wolf poked his head through the kitchen door. “Let’s eat! Bronté made us somethin’ special! A pumpkin pizza with all the meats and some red liquorice bits! Looks just like a jack o’lantern.”

“Ew!”

“What? Syd told you there would be plenty of pumpkins and candy. And I treat my gals right!”

Both girls smiled.

“You sure do, doofus,” said Rebecca. “Thanks for making this a very happy Halloween.”