

# TO TRICK OR TREAT WITH DEMONS

It was almost midnight when there came a knock at my bedroom door.

“You all right in there, Ana? Almost ready?”

“Almost,” I called back, leaning down to finish lacing up my shoes. A flash of light from outside my window briefly illuminated my room, and this was followed only seconds later by a roll of thunder.

“Is Laurent still coming?”

“He said he’d be here on time,” I answered. I got to my feet and headed toward my bedroom door, passing a quick glance toward the window as I went. It was a full moon tonight, though you wouldn’t know it by looking. A thick fog was rolling in, and already I could barely see the house just across the street. The few lights we had in our front yard cast eerie shadows through the iron gates and spindly trees covered in spider webs.

I opened the door to find my mother still standing there, looking down with mild concern at her watch. Her long wavy black hair fell freely around her shoulders, partially covering her long pointed ears.

“I hope he does make it. I’d hate for you to have a late start. All the good stuff will be gone by then. You don’t think he got lost, did he?”

“Mom, he’s been coming here since we were seven. I think he knows the way.”

“That’s true, but the fog is coming in early tonight. I think they’re trying to prevent cheating this year, and after what happened to poor Mr. Williams last year I can’t blame—”

She broke off as a ghost-like being approached. The creature consisted of several different colorful marble-like orbs, the largest of which served as its head. Two other smaller orbs floated in front of it, and attached to them were dark claw-like hands with long nails. Tattered cloth hung from each orb like the ancient semblance of a cloak, and faint smoke emanated from the orbs. Upon the main orb rested a large witch’s hat that sat slightly askew, and strings of orange, purple, and black lights had been circled around it.

A series of echoing musical chimes came from the creature, and as this happened, the main orb glowed a bright amber color.

“Oh, good, he’s here. Thank you, Toq,” my mother said warmly to her familiar. “Could you bring him upstairs?”

The creature chimed again as the orb turned purple, and mom laughed.

“That’s all right. Anastasia can go meet him if he’s frightened. Make sure he gets a little snack, at least.” Toq let out a *bwoop* sound, then floated soundlessly down the nearby stairs. Mom smiled and looked back at me. “With as long as Laurent has been coming here you’d think he’d know it’s safe to walk around the house.”

“He doesn’t mind the first floor. Just anything above that, and only when my sister is home. Well, sometimes grandma, too,” I explained.

“I understand, though I did tell Phaedrice to stop carrying knives around the house when we’re expecting guests. Come to

think of it, I'm not actually sure where she is. I might have to go look for her."

"Could she be with dad?" I asked.

Before mom could answer, there came a tremendous *BOOM* from downstairs strong enough that I felt the entire house shake slightly. Mom tapped her chin with her finger as if nothing had happened.

"It seems like he's cooking, and you know he doesn't like anyone interfering. Not unless he's teaching Toq. I'll check the attic. Phaedrice was saying she thought the poltergeist was back recently."

"Thus the knives?" I asked with a small smile, and mom nodded.

"You'd think she'd just use some spells, but she's always liked sharp objects a little too much. Anyway, go get your friend and finish getting ready. It'll be time to start soon!"

I grinned and made my way downstairs. I passed my sister's room on the way, and I quickly peeked through the open door, hopeful I might catch her, but the room was dark and empty save only for the ceiling that glittered like a starry night. I wasn't terribly surprised; popular as she was, she was bound to have already left to see her friends, but it would have been nice to see her before we went our separate ways for the night. I momentarily felt a spark of envy; no doubt she and her friends would be flying around on brooms, which surely made trick or treating much more efficient. Laurent and I had no such ability, and so we'd be making our way through the fog on foot.

I turned away and continued my way downstairs. I hadn't even made it to the bottom before I saw a tall figure standing there. When he saw me approach, he glanced up at me and smiled.

"Heyo! You're looking very frightening this evening," said Laurent with a grin that exposed his sharp teeth. He stood six feet tall and had muscles visible even through his shirt, short wavy black hair with a streak of white, and two jagged horns that grew

from near his hairline and stretched back over the top of his head. His tan skin looked rough, almost like fine sandpaper, and his eyes were dark and menacing. He might have looked frightening if not for his genuine smile and his warm tone of voice that carried the slightest hint of a French accent. He could certainly be intimidating when he wanted to be; Laurent Silvestre was a demon, and while their kind were rare in this world, they were known for their great natural strength and speed and resilience, as well as their innate resistance to almost all forms of magic. Our high school principal was a demon, and he'd once easily pushed an entire vehicle from one parking space into another just because the driver had parked in a reserved spot. They also had a unique power that allowed them to take control of another being's mind, though this rarely happened for obvious reasons. Altogether, demons could be fearsome, and there were few beings in the world that could match them.

I, however, was never on the receiving end of any such intimidation. Not from Laurent, anyway. We had been best friends since elementary school and I didn't see that changing any time soon. Even his parents, who were uncertain of me and whom I had never met, occasionally asked him about me from time to time.

"I look just like I do every other day, but thanks," I snorted.

"Sure, but tonight's Halloween, and there's nothing scarier than a human."

"The neighbors just play it up for laughs, you know that." I gestured up the stairs. "Want to come up while I finish getting ready?"

Laurent eyed the stairs warily as though expecting to see someone lying in wait to attack him.

"Uh... that depends. Is your sister home?"

"She left already, but it takes a while for the spiders to leave. You know you're safe, though, stop being ridiculous."

"Listen, all I remember is the one time in sixth grade when I was sleeping over, I went to use the bathroom, and there was a

giant tarantula sitting right on the roll of toilet paper,” Laurent protested, shuddering. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“And I said you could have politely asked it to move. Anyway they’re better about sticking to just her room now, so it’s okay. Come on.”

I led the way upstairs. The humor of the situation didn’t escape me. I had been adopted into a family of powerful witches and warlocks, I went to a high school full of beings from the myths and legends of humans, and my best friend was a six-foot-tall demon with the strength of several grown men combined. But here I was, the world’s one and only completely ordinary human, leading the way while the demon followed nervously behind me. I did have to admit my family was strange even for this world, but I’d gotten used to it well enough.

My room matched the rest of the Victorian mansion we called Haven, with black walls and a black ceiling and similarly-colored furniture, though this was offset by the variety of plants that grew around the room. Vining plants wrapped around the posts of my bed and around door frames, and flowering plants grew near the window and in large pots in the corners of the room. A small chandelier and wall sconces offered warm light throughout the room, and in the adjacent bathroom was a large bathtub and a backlit mirror that was taller than I was. Living in a family of spellcasters had its perks; the plants had all been enchanted so that they never ran out of nutrients and could deal with my sporadic watering, and the bathtub had been magically augmented so that the hot water within never cooled. I sometimes wished I could cast spells of my own, but my family was always willing to help with what I needed at home, so that usually sufficed.

“What do you even need to do to get ready? You’re just getting dressed like you do every day,” Laurent commented as he plopped himself comfortably on my bed. My room was generally spider free unless my sister’s familiars came to visit, though I guessed they

were currently out trick or treating with my sister and her friends, so Laurent was visibly more comfortable here.

“I need a jacket at least. And something to put candy in. Probably a flashlight. Oh, and what do you think is more scary? If I have my hair in a ponytail or in a bun?” I asked, glancing at myself in the bathroom mirror. I was tall for a human girl, though that didn’t mean so much in this world. I also wasn’t too much to look at compared to some of the other beings of the world, but I liked the way I looked. My brown lightly-freckled skin looked fresh from having just bathed an hour earlier, and I saw the faintest hint of dark circles under my brown almond-shaped eyes. I had tried to nap earlier, knowing I’d be out all night, but I hadn’t succeeded. I was used to going to bed and getting up early, usually to go on a long run around the neighborhood and do some workouts. Changes to my sleep schedule weren’t easy.

Still, I couldn’t help but notice the definition in my arms and stomach as I looked at myself in the mirror. My efforts were paying off.

“You might look scariest keeping it down, actually. You could do that thing where you put it all in front of your face, that tends to spook anyone,” Laurent suggested.

I frowned thoughtfully.

“I could. Even magic fog humidity makes it all frizzy, though.”

I slipped a hair tie in my pocket just in case, then walked around my room, grabbing a coat and a flashlight as I went. I paused, putting my hands on my hips as I looked around, trying to figure out what I could use as a bag for candy. Most of the cool kids seemed to use pillowcases, but that just felt weird to me. If anything it just made for more laundry to do.

Before I could think too long, however, I heard a cheerful chime from behind me. Toq entered the room, holding two plastic bags in one claw-like hand and balancing a small plate of cookies decorated with orange and black sprinkles in the other. The familiar floated over to Laurent, who happily took a cookie

off the plate before Toq had even set it on the bed, then stared at me and made another more urgent-sounding chime, its primary orb turning hazel.

“What’s it saying?” Laurent asked through a mouthful of cookie.

I shrugged, then glanced down at my watch.

“Probably that we need to hurry up. It’s about six minutes to midnight.”

“Oh, damn. Guess we should eat fast then, huh? Hurry up or I’ll just eat them all,” the demon said, not sounding like he minded this possibility.

I reached over and quickly grabbed two of them, then nodded toward the door.

“Eat on the way if you have to, but I don’t want to start late. Let’s go!”

Toq seemed somewhat relieved by this plan, and it led the way silently downstairs. Laurent quickly grabbed the rest of the cookies on the plate in one hand and followed after me.

As we walked toward the front hall I took a moment to appreciate how much work had gone into decorating Haven. My mom, dad, and grandma always pulled out all the stops during Halloween. Orange lights encircled the banisters leading to each floor, carved pumpkins could be found in every room and lit from within by everburning candles, enchanted origami bats fluttered throughout the house, and crimson red candles floated in the air. A thin mist blanketed the first floor, and it parted in our wake as we headed toward the front door. More than anything, the house just felt comfortable. It was well lit and warm and served as a stark contrast against the dark and cold outside. That was part of the purpose of tonight’s event, of course, but it was also how things were always done. If there was anything the Graves family appreciated, it was Halloween.

I checked my watch again. Three minutes. Now I was starting to feel a little nervous. Maybe I shouldn’t have; I did this almost every

year, and I wouldn't be doing it alone. But this wasn't trick or treating as I understood humans did it. It was one tradition that we in this world had lifted from them, but based on our limited knowledge of human traditions, there was no doubt some things had changed in the process. For one thing, I'd heard humans only let their young ones trick or treat, which seemed ridiculous to me; surely this was fun no matter how old you were. For another, humans didn't have magic, at least as far as I knew. But plenty of beings here definitely did, and they used that magic to make trick or treating more... well... "fun" was the word most used, but it was often a subject of debate.

My mother swept into the front room, Toq floating silently beside her.

"Oh, good! It looks like you're ready to go. Do you need anything before you set out? Protections, charms, pepper spray maybe?"

"Does pepper spray affect the undead?" Laurent asked hopefully. Mom laughed.

"Don't be ridiculous. No, if you see the undead, you run. I know Ana's good at that, maybe she can give you a piggyback ride."

I snorted as I tried to imagine myself carrying a six-foot-tall demon while fleeing from shambling corpses in the dark streets. I was strong, sure, but still by all accounts a normal human girl.

"Maybe the other way around," Laurent returned, throwing me a pointed look. "My plan is usually to run away from trouble. Not to, you know, get a closer look and put us both in worse danger."

"Hey, I thought he was one of our classmates at first. It's hard to tell what's a zombie or not sometimes through all the fog," I answered, rolling my eyes.

"In fairness, I've seen what you high school students are like. Mistaking any of you for a zombie wouldn't be the most far-fetched thing I've ever—" Mom stopped suddenly, looking toward



one of the large windows facing the front yard. A ghostly figure passed slowly by outside not ten feet from the window, glowing faintly in the moonlight. A haunting wail came from it as it moved, and its cries echoed throughout the house, sending shivers down my spine.

“Is that... is your poltergeist back?” Laurent asked quietly, as though worried the specter might hear him.

Toq’s primary orb glowed dark orange and it emitted an almost irritable peal of its own. Mom glanced down at her familiar and sighed.

“Not quite. Though sometimes it feels like it’s more well behaved.” She started toward the front door, Toq in tow, calling out as she went. “Trick or treating hasn’t started yet! Come back inside, won’t you? We’ll have plenty of time to scare children tonight.”

“I’m practicing my wailing!” came an irritated and muffled voice from outside.

At this, Laurent seemed to relax.

“Your grandma is weird,” he said simply, and I nodded.

“I almost feel sorry for the trick or treaters who show up here.”

As mom opened the door to head outside, I caught a glimpse of the street beyond. Or rather, what very little I could see of it. The fog had grown so thick I could barely see the asphalt beyond the driveway. The fog itself glowed in the moonlight, but beyond that there were no other sources of light at all. It looked like the streetlights had all gone out, and it was now impossible to see any of the other houses on our street. It looked like a whole different world, one I could get lost in despite having lived here my whole life.

Which, of course, was exactly the point. If I hadn’t been nervous before, I definitely was now.

I heard muffled voices from outside, and then, suddenly, a

great echoing sound like a bell tolling that seemed to come from the sky itself. I checked my watch again.

It was time.

The voices outside stopped immediately and mom rushed back inside. She hurried over to us and pulled two small slips of paper from her pocket. There were glittering golden designs inked onto the black paper, making them look like the backs of ornate playing cards, but I recognized these as my mother's own charms. She was a powerful witch, and charms were one of her specialties.

She handed one each to Laurent and I, then stood back and smiled.

"Those should help you navigate the fog. They'll grow warm when you're walking in the direction of home. It's not perfect, but it should help you keep your sense of direction about you."

"Isn't this kind of cheating? We haven't used these before," I asked pointedly.

"Well, there's no need to get into the details and rules and everything, that's so dry," mom answered airily, waving her hand in front of her like she was pushing away a foul odor. "Besides, you know every other being out there is going to be using their own powers to benefit them. I just want you to be safe."

"Thanks Mrs. Graves," Laurent said, putting the slip of paper safely in one of his coat pockets. He looked a little nervous too, I noticed, despite his best attempts to hide it. By all accounts he had less to fear than I did—as a demon he could fend off most of the dangers lurking in the fog better than I could—but from my experience he preferred running from trouble more than I did. I almost felt bad, since I was sure I'd stress him out during tonight's event, but then I thought better of it. He kept coming back to do this with me every year, so he had no one to blame but himself.

"Good luck out there you two! Stay safe, get lots of candy, and I'll see you before sunrise," mom said warmly.

Laurent and I shared a glance, and after only a moment's hesitation, I led the way out the front door.

The outside of my house looked even more sinister than usual in the darkness of midnight. Haven was three stories tall and painted completely black, and most of the front yard was surrounded by a black iron gate that led around to the back yard on both sides. There was one tree in the front yard covered in sharp red leaves, and the moonlight caught on the tiny droplets of moisture suspended in the many spiderwebs that were draped between the branches.

There were plenty of decorations out here, too. There were at least a dozen large carved pumpkins, dim orange lights lining the roof on each of its three floors, and several twelve-foot skeletons that had been enchanted by my dad to walk about at random, especially when they detected movement. He had also enchanted several tombstones so that the names displayed on them changed to match whoever was looking at them, with their date of death being the very next day. That had been a popular addition to our usual setup a few years prior.

This year's newest decoration was a human-like figure that looked like a young girl, but with long black hair that covered her face. It mostly sat in the shadows and stared at whoever came near, but it also had a habit of suddenly climbing the walls like a spider and twisting its face, which was a frightening white mask with wide eyes, to stare down at whoever was brave enough to get near the front door. I'd heard it scream a few times, and I hoped we'd be gone before it did it again. I didn't see it anywhere at the moment, but that didn't mean too much.

In addition, several large gargoyles, each of them a foot taller than even Laurent, sat on the edges of the roof on all sides. They numbered about a dozen in all, though they moved so often I'd never actually been able to count them all at once. These were permanent fixtures of the house, but they served as appropriate Halloween decor as well. A few of them turned their heads to glance at Laurent and I as we walked toward the street.

"We'll be back! If you see anyone from my school, scare them

extra for me?” I called up to them. They gave me the slightest hint of a nod. I didn’t actually expect them to know or keep track of who went to my school, but it was the principle of the thing. Some of my peers could use a little humbling—especially if they were the ones who called me “frightless.” There was no shortage of those.

“Which way should we go?” Laurent asked as we reached the sidewalk. The fog was so thick that I still couldn’t see any other houses or sources of light; it was like we were the only house left in the world. I shuddered. Normally I’d say I knew my neighborhood’s streets like the back of my hand, but the thing about this event was that the streets... changed. I didn’t quite know how, but that’s how it worked. Every house participating in the trick or treating event was a beacon of light, warmth, and safety in the fog, but they all seemed much more spread out than usual. It was important that we find them, however, because just as the houses meant safety, the fog meant an absolute lack thereof.

“I... don’t know if it matters. We’ll finish the loop either way I guess,” I answered uncertainly. Completing the event meant making it all the way back around to where you started, which sounded easy enough in theory. “We went right last time, I think. Let’s go left.”

I pulled out my flashlight, and Laurent quickly followed suit. The light from the beams didn’t make it too far through the fog, but it was enough to help.

I unconsciously reached for the charm in my pocket as we walked away from my house, which quickly disappeared into the fog. The charm remained cool, which told me we were on the right track. I knew it would be impossible to get lost so quickly, but it was a small source of comfort.

For a few minutes we walked in complete silence. That’s how it often went. When we made our first foray into the fog every Halloween we were on high alert, looking and listening for any

signs of trouble, and there could be many. Once we adapted we usually became a little more comfortable.

Luckily, things seemed to be starting out calmly, and as we kept walking, the only thing I heard was the sound of our footsteps. This helped ease my nerves a little, but I also couldn't help but be reminded of the fact that we had yet to see another house in the gloom despite walking for several minutes. The fog around us was like a void, and were it not for the asphalt under my feet I might begin to worry we'd gotten off track and would be doomed to wander for eternity. Part of my mind helpfully suggested that anyway, and I tried my best to shut it down before those thoughts could take hold.

"So... Halloween is finally here," Laurent commented finally, and his voice helped ground me. "Are you sure you don't want to go to the school party? This is the last year we'll have a chance to do it. As current students, anyway."

I shrugged.

"I don't know what I'd go for. I'm getting my candy tonight and there's no one I'd go to the party to see apart from you, and we're already hanging out."

"Sure, maybe. But there are some shows and dances and stuff, that can be pretty fun. Better than being at home, anyway."

I frowned sympathetically. While I liked being home and loved my family, Laurent's situation was a little more delicate, and he often took any excuse he could get to get out of the house. His parents weren't awful necessarily, but from all I'd heard, I didn't blame him for wanting to minimize his time with them. I felt a little guilty not wanting to go to the party; he and I both pretty much only had each other when it came to our social "circle," and I knew how it felt to go to big events alone.

"You can always stay at my house, too. And we're having a late Halloween party next week when family comes to town."

Laurent sighed wistfully.

"You know I'll be there next week. I always love Haven parties."

I don't know, though. Sometimes I honestly like being around people even if I'm not in the thick of it with them, you know? It makes it feel more lively, and Halloween is one of those things I feel like... oh, hey. I think we've got our first house."

I looked ahead, and sure enough I saw a faint orange light getting brighter as we walked closer. The shadowy silhouette of a house soon became visible, and with it more lights. With each step I took I felt a little more relaxed. Houses meant safety, and we'd made it to our first one without much trouble.

As we entered the light I recognized the house as belonging to our neighbor Mr. Williams, an aging warlock who was good friends with my dad. I'd never really talked to him too much, but he was friendly and always loved company on trick or treating nights. I saw him seated on the cozy chair on his porch, and when he saw us, he quickly got to his feet, smiling widely.

"You made it! Good, good. You're the first ones this year. Then again I suppose you don't live horribly far away. I'm wondering how many I'll see tonight. Did you have much trouble getting here?"

"None at all. We didn't see anything out there, actually. Not yet," I said, smiling back at him. He was strange—as anyone who was good friends with my father had to be—but his happiness was contagious.

"Well, I'm sure you'll come across something soon. I really do think we've got some of the best spellcasters and illusionists in the world here in Fairfield, and in our very neighborhood, too. How lucky are we?"

"Yeah, lucky," Laurent laughed nervously. "Haven't you ever wanted to get involved in the behind-the-scenes stuff Mr. W? You know, work with the other witches and warlocks to make trick or treating even scarier."

"I thought about it for a few years, but I like the experience of running a safe point too much," Mr. Williams said. "I get to meet

a lot more people that way, and I get to see the look of joy on everyone's faces when I give them their candy. Doing the spellwork for this event is impressive, don't get me wrong, but a little too impersonal. Speaking of which, don't you have something to say?"

"Trick or treat!" Laurent and I said in unison, and Mr. Williams nodded approvingly.

"There we have it. And... here you go!" He turned around and picked up a large bowl of candy from which he pulled two generous handfuls, dumping each one into our candy bags. Laurent and I shared a victorious look. Mr. Williams was definitely one of the more generous neighbors. The warlock seemed to notice our expressions, and he winked. "Some for the road, too, you know." His face grew more serious now. "Be careful out there, all right? While I might not work on the event, I did hear that there are a few more necromancers out there than years past, so your experiences might reflect that."

"Oh, that's just... that's fantastic," Laurent groaned, his grin disappearing in an instant.

I reached up and patted his shoulder.

"It's okay. At least corpses can't run."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Mr. Williams said pointedly, and Laurent groaned louder. "But what am I worried about? You've got a demon in your group, it'll be fine."

"Nah, I'm good, but thanks," Laurent replied weakly.

"Best you get going; the longer the night goes on, the more dangerous the fog gets. Good luck!" Mr. Williams said encouragingly.

I almost didn't want to leave, but my candy bag wasn't going to fill itself. Still, I felt a hint of regret, as I often did, as Laurent and I walked back into the street and the warlock's house quickly vanished into the fog behind us.

"One house down... maybe, what, a dozen to go?" Laurent said, staring down into his own candy bag. "Man, I love going to

his house. Check this out: *three* king-sized bars, and that's just the start. Mr. W knows what's up."

I snorted.

"Well, at least you're easily distracted."

"Distracted from what?" Laurent paused, and then his face fell. "Oh. I really hope we don't encounter any zombies tonight. If I never see another one for the rest of my life..."

"He was right, you know. You *are* a demon. If we see one, you could probably just pick it up and throw it halfway down the street."

"Easier said than done. Most things I pick up aren't growling and snarling and trying to bite me," Laurent answered darkly.

"Wait, *most* things?"

"Yeah. I tried picking you up once, remember?"

"I did not snarl at you!" I protested, and Laurent laughed.

"Yeah, well, the other two things were enough. Either way, I'm not throwing any zombies. If you're in danger I *might* shove one, but otherwise I'm running for it and you're on your own."

"You've always been my hero."

"Hey, I like you and everything, I just... like not getting eaten by zombies more. Also, check it out. It looks like we've reached the next house already."

He switched off his flashlight and slipped it into one of his coat pockets. I glanced up again, silently scolding myself for apparently paying so little attention to my surroundings that I missed two houses already. A warm orange light was just ahead, and I felt a swell of relief. Two houses in a row without encountering any danger was almost unheard of.

"You know what? Maybe all the other trick or treaters are getting attacked and we're just getting ignored," I suggested hopefully as I turned off my own flashlight, and Laurent beamed.

"I'll take it! It means we'll be home that much sooner digging into our candy. We... er... hang on."

Laurent stopped, and I followed suit immediately. It took me



a moment to realize what was wrong. For one, despite taking several steps closer, we could see no other lights and no sign of any houses. What's more, this light seemed to be *in* the street rather than on the side of it, as houses usually were.

I took a few cautious steps forward, my relief fading. Whatever this was, it wasn't a house. But it also didn't appear to be dangerous. Not many threats announced themselves, much less with comforting light.

As I got closer still, I noticed that the light seemed to be floating, and that there was nothing else in sight. I squinted at it as I got close enough that the light washed over me. It was silent, absent the hum of electricity I might expect from something like a street light, and it was also much lower to the ground, about level with my face.

"Well this is weird," Laurent murmured. "What do you think this is? A random safe point?"

"I'm not sure," I answered quietly, getting closer still to the light. "I didn't hear anything about safe points other than houses."

I got close enough that I could reach out and touch it, and still I saw no source for the light itself. It seemed to just exist all on its own, though why it was here I couldn't guess. It certainly didn't *feel* like a safe point. If anything I was feeling more nervous than before, and that only increased the closer I got.

Trying to ignore these feelings—they were a staple of Halloween, after all—I reached out a hand to touch the light.

A moment before my fingers made contact, the light disappeared.

"Crap," I heard Laurent mutter as he reached for his flashlight. I might have done the same but for the overwhelming feeling of dread that was suddenly rising within me. It wasn't a fear of the dark we had suddenly been plunged back into. It was my mind finally recognizing what my nerves had been trying to tell me.

Danger had found us.

I leapt back just as a horrific ghostly green figure appeared right in front of me, reaching out with spindly hands that looked more like claws. Had I not moved only a split second before, it surely would have grabbed me. It looked like the withered and decayed visage of an old woman, with only sockets where its eyes should have been and frizzled and thin white hair that stood on end. What teeth it had left were sharp and jagged, and its skin was sallow, stretched tightly over ancient and visibly broken bones, some of which poked through its cheeks and shoulders.

“Holy sweet hells!” Laurent yelped, finally clicking on his flashlight. He quickly shined it in my direction, and just as the ghost was about to make another swipe at me, it disappeared the instant the light hit it.

I scrambled to my feet and rushed over to him, grabbing my own flashlight as I did so. I clicked it on and directed the beam up and down the street, the light trembling in my shaking hands. Laurent did the same in the other direction. I tried to quiet myself, but I was breathing heavily like I’d just gotten back from a long run.

“Damnit. *Damnit*, not one of these,” Laurent cursed, moving his flashlight back and forth. He sounded tense, but also remarkably calm. At least that was my impression; my heart was still pounding so quickly it felt like my chest was vibrating. “Of course we’d run into one of these. You okay? Did it hurt you?”

“No, I’m okay,” I answered breathlessly. My fingers gripped my flashlight so tightly they started to hurt, and every muscle in my body was tense and ready for action. “I can’t believe it tricked me. They’ve never gotten me before!”

“They’re usually more subtle. I guess this one figured we’d think there’s no way it would be hiding out in the middle of the street,” Laurent growled.

“Stupid. I’m so stupid. Tricked by the undead equivalent of

an anglerfish,” I continued, my voice shaking as much as my hands.

The sound of something like a branch snapping came from my left, and I whirled around, shining my light in its direction. Laurent did the same, and in an instant, I realized our mistake.

“Get down!” I shouted, and no sooner did Laurent and I fall to the ground than the ghost came from behind where we’d been facing, its shrieks sending chills down my spine like the sound of nails on a chalkboard. Its claws slashed at where we’d just been standing, and when we quickly pointed our flashlights at it, it disappeared once again into the darkness.

“They’re getting braver *and* smarter. That’s just what we need,” Laurent uttered as he scrambled to his feet. “What do we do?”

“There’s no one else around so I don’t think it’s going to leave us alone. We’ll have to make a run for it,” I suggested, hoping I sounded more confident than I felt. “We’ll just keep one light pointed behind us and one ahead of us the whole way. The next house can’t be that far away!”

I heard another sound from nearby, this much more like the rustling of leaves and accompanied by an echoing, guttural growl. This time Laurent flashed his light to investigate, but I kept my beam steadfastly forward. Sure enough, the ghost didn’t reappear.

Yet.

I took a few deep breaths. “You ready to run?” I asked.

“Oh yeah, absolutely,” Laurent confirmed immediately.

“Okay. On three, we sprint. We don’t stop until we get to the next house. I’ll keep my light behind, you keep the way ahead clear. Sound good?”

“Perfect, yup. Count fast, please.”

I gulped, taking one last look around us. No sign of the ghost. But it’d be waiting for us to let our guard down.

“One... two... three!”

We both broke into a sprint, our shoes pounding heavily

against the pavement. Laurent easily took the lead; as good and practiced a runner as I was, there was no outrunning his stride and naturally enhanced speed. Helpfully, he slowed himself a little to keep pace with me, and between the two of us our flashlights formed a nearly impervious barrier of light both in front and behind us.

“Nearly” was the key word. We’d made it several dozen yards before I heard another horrifying shriek, and I ducked my head just in time to avoid being swiped at by one of the creature’s claws. I shined my flashlight at it, and it disappeared immediately, but not before I saw the look of rage on its face.

“Oi! Watch our backs!” Laurent called.

“I’m trying! It’s hard to run forward and focus on what’s behind us at the same time,” I returned.

I didn’t know how long we ran. All I knew was that as soon as we saw the next house, which this time clearly was a house, we pushed ahead as fast as we possibly could, spurred on by the angry screams and wails from behind us. Miraculously, we finally made it into the light without the ghost appearing once more, and its screams faded away into the silence as soon as we arrived.

“Hey there! You kids okay?”

A kindly-looking gorgon made her way over to us from near her front door, not looking at all surprised to see us in the state we were in.

“Stupid... anglerfish... ghost lady,” I panted, pointing helpfully back toward the direction we’d come from.

“Good thing we had our flashlights,” Laurent added, sounding, for lack of a better word, haunted. The gorgon chuckled.

“Yes, I heard there are a few of those out there tonight. Luckily they only tend to attack if you get too close. Were you feeling adventurous tonight?”

“Laurent, don’t you say a damn word,” I said immediately as the demon opened his mouth to reply. The demon gave me his best *I told you so* look, but otherwise let me be.

“Have you seen many others tonight?” Laurent asked the gorgon, changing tack.

“Only a few so far. The night is young!” she answered. She looked to be in her late thirties, and she like most gorgons wore a scarf that covered the snakes that would otherwise immediately paralyze us. Her orange snakelike eyes seemed to sparkle in the comforting lights that surrounded us, and when she smiled, her fangs were clearly visible. “One other group had a run-in with that ghost of yours, I think. They didn’t come out unscathed, though.”

“O-oh? Does it actually hurt you badly?” Laurent asked tentatively.

“It won’t kill you if that’s what you’re asking. But I will say their group was short one member by the time they got here. At least that’s what they said.” The gorgon smiled more widely, which only served to look more intimidating. “But that’s all right. The medical staff on site should have them back to normal by sunrise.”

Laurent and I shared a glance, and I saw the fear and relief in his eyes. I hadn’t realized just how dangerous such a creature could be. Maybe there were more terrifying things out here than zombies after all.

As afraid as I was myself, however, I still liked to consider myself a resolute person, and the time I’d spent growing up with my wonderful but still very strange family had led to the development of a personal policy of not asking too many questions. We still had many houses to go, and we wouldn’t make progress if we were worrying about what was behind us. With this in mind, I straightened up and purposefully faced the gorgon, holding out my bag as I did so.

“Trick or treat!”

We made it to the next few houses largely without incident, though that wasn’t to say we didn’t encounter anything fright-

ening on the way all the same. Just as there were dangers in the fog, there were also things here and there that simply added to the ambience whether they posed a threat or not. In the darkness between two houses Laurent and I encountered what we at first thought was a normal animal, perhaps a dog wandering the street, but when we approached we discovered it was a dark two-headed goat with far too many eyes. It seemed to have no interest in attacking us, but the sight alone was more than enough. We also saw a vaguely humanoid shape that slunk along on all fours down one side of the street. Luckily, this didn't seem to want to have anything to do with us either.

Perhaps the most frightening thing I saw was just a glimpse of a lanky figure several stories tall that seemed to be peering at us over the houses from one street over. A flash of distant lightning illuminated it for only a second, but the size of the creature, along with its horrifically distorted proportions and wide vacant eyes, were enough to make me shiver.

If there was a silver lining to all this, it's that we were spared any further actual attacks, including from anglerfish ghosts, and for all our concern about zombies, we had yet to see a single one. By my estimates we were about halfway done with our route, and my mother's charm remained cool, telling me we were still going in the right direction. I was starting to feel more confident, as I often did by this time every Halloween, but I reminded myself that more surprises were due. Finishing the route was never easy.

We tiredly approached the next house, taking a moment to bask in the comforting light. The fog, still lit by the full moon as it was, was stifling, and while I wasn't typically one to feel claustrophobic, this event often got me thinking my lack of that particular fear had its exceptions.

"Evenin'," grunted an old satyr as we approached. Most of his body was covered with dark reddish hair, and his dark and cunning eyes watched us closely. One of his horns was broken, and his hooves looked old and worn. He didn't get up from his

chair, and I didn't see a bowl of candy nearby. I eyed him warily as we got closer. I didn't remember passing this house in prior years.

"Trick or treat," Laurent and I offered, and the satyr nodded.

"All right then. Do a trick."

"Huh?" we answered in unison.

"I don't think that's how it's supposed to—" Laurent attempted, but the satyr waved him off.

"No tricks, no treats. I've got good ones, though."

Laurent and I stared at each other.

"Can he do that? Is that legal?" Laurent whispered.

"I think so. And I don't think we'll have any luck debating the etymology of the phrase with him."

"I didn't come prepared to do tricks! What should I do?" Laurent hissed.

I paused. Then I snapped my fingers. We'd prepared for this eventuality many years ago when we'd been asked to do a trick under similar, albeit more friendly, circumstances.

"Operation Sovereignty," I answered quietly. Laurent's eyes widened with understanding.

"Oh, yeah. That should work."

I took a few steps away from Laurent and then turned to face him. The demon cleared his throat, then raised his arms dramatically, suddenly in full-on performance mode.

"For my next trick, I'll be using my Sovereignty to control this puny human. She will do as I say, whether she wills it or not!" he announced. The satyr, despite himself, now looked interested. The demons' power of Sovereignty was incredibly powerful, not to mention taboo; it was this power that let them control the minds of other beings, bending them to the demons' will.

"I will resist you!" I countered fiercely. "You'll not have my mind freely!"

"Feeble-minded human. What hope could you possibly have? Resisting will only cause you pain. Now, behold!" Laurent stood at his full height, and then his eyes went black. When he spoke, it

sounded as though multiple voices were speaking at once, echoing all around us. I felt the force of his magic pulling at me like I was standing in a wind tunnel that was exerting its pressure on my mind itself. “You will walk to the satyr and shake his hand. Then you will spin in a circle and return to where you are standing. Do this now.”

I walked slowly toward the satyr with uneven steps, then shakily extended my hand. The satyr, now looking shocked and very much invested in what was going on, raised his own hand automatically to grasp mine. I shook it firmly, then took a step back. I started to turn my torso, ready to spin in a circle as the demon had commanded, but then I stopped. I closed my eyes tight and hunched over slightly as though fighting an invisible force that sought to constrict me.

Then, as dramatically as I possibly could, I spread my own arms wide and stood tall, staring defiantly at Laurent.

“My mind is my own, demon!” I shouted. “Your Sovereignty has no power over me!”

“What? How is this possible?” Laurent gasped, placing one hand to his chest for emphasis. I fought desperately to keep a straight face. “It’s impossible to resist my power. And you are but a mere human!”

“I’m stronger than you think,” I answered victoriously. In truth, I hadn’t been under his control from the start. Though his Sovereignty was weak—which was one of the reasons he was lumped in with the rest of us “frightless” at school—it still definitely existed. And it *would* work on just about every being out there, as far as we could tell. I was the one exception, the one being his power legitimately did not affect whatsoever. I didn’t know why, but it did let us put on a good show. I was always willing to do that for some candy.

“I... I suppose I yield to your will, human. But this is not the end. You have other weaknesses, and someday, when you least expect it, I will exploit them,” Laurent said dangerously. He



walked up to me, looking even more tall and menacing than usual.

And then, when he was close enough to touch me... we both turned to the satyr and bowed together.

The satyr rose from his chair, looking thoroughly satisfied.

“Well I’ll be. You’re the first demon I’ve seen tonight, and most certainly the first human. Only human I’ve ever seen, really. You’re one of the Graves kids, right?” he asked, staring at me. When I nodded, he continued, “That makes sense then. Your whole family’s a good lot. Powerful witches and warlocks there. No surprise you’d come out to be able to resist a demon’s power. And I didn’t think I’d get to see a show of Sovereignty, either. Nicely done. You’ve earned your treats, come here.”

Laurent and I happily held out our bags to receive our reward. Part of me felt a little ridiculous for engaging in a silly little play, but I’d had enough fun with it that I didn’t mind. Besides, I was the only human in at least my city; I’d never heard of another one existing in this world, either. I figured it was only fair I use that to my advantage.

We started out toward the next house, giving one last wave to the satyr, who looked noticeably more cheery than he had when we’d first arrived. As his house disappeared into the fog behind us, Laurent chuckled.

“Man, I didn’t think we’d actually get to use that trick again. Who asks for tricks, anyway? That’s not how it works!”

“At least we planned ahead. And at least *you* have your Sovereignty. What would I do if we didn’t have a plan? I’ve got nothing!” I retorted, smiling.

“You think a stranger would ever actually consent to me using my power on them? I’ve actually wondered.”

“For trick or treating? Probably. You know there are beings out there who have always wondered what it feels like to experience Sovereignty. And I’m still one of them,” I teased.

Laurent threw me a mocking dangerous glare.

“Don’t push it, human.”

I laughed, and then we fell into a comfortable silence as we continued on our way. The street was clear for now, though I still occasionally waved my flashlight around behind me in case any ghosts were on our tail. The only company we otherwise had was a small cloud of vampire bats that flew over us perhaps a little too close for comfort. They circled us once or twice, then continued on their way.

“Does it feel weird now that we’re seniors in high school?” Laurent asked suddenly. I looked at him questioningly, and he continued, “I dunno. We’ve been doing this school thing our whole lives and now suddenly we’re one year away from just... who knows what. We get to choose I guess. College, jobs, careers, it feels weird. Last year I felt like that was all still forever away but now... I mean, we’re graduating next year! And we’ve got those dreaded senior projects.”

“I don’t think senior projects are until the end of the year, we don’t have to worry about those yet,” I said, trying to sound consoling. I was sure most students were exaggerating about how difficult senior projects at Fairfield High were, but I did know they involved a lot of tough work and research, and that they were usually done in groups. As one of the more unpopular kids at school, I tended to hate those. A group project that was significant enough to make or break a student’s grade during the year of their graduation sounded like a nightmare.

“Yeah. I’m not too worried about those. Not yet anyway. And I have to admit it feels cool to be a senior. I remember being so nervous walking around campus as a freshman. Now I feel like I know the place like the back of my hand.”

“Oh yeah, we’re definitely the cool kids now,” I snorted.

“Look at how far we’ve come,” Laurent continued, grinning. “Hey, do you remember when we were in elementary school and we’d go into your backyard and make ‘potions’ by putting water and rocks and stuff into a pot you took from the kitchen?”

“I thought my parents would be so mad!” I answered mirthfully. “But instead they saw it as a sign I was on the right track.”

“Until you tried making your first real potion, that is,” Laurent said pointedly.

“Yeah. Part of me wonders why they thought I’d be able to make an actual potion, since I’m not a witch and all, but I kinda like that they let me try anyway, you know? And it didn’t even take very long for dad’s hair to grow back after the explosion.”

“I never saw a man who just got his eyebrows blown off look so proud. Your dad’s weird. Actually, your whole family is weird. Come to think of it, I realized that explosions at your house happen so often I’ve actually started associating earthquakes with hanging out with you.”

“I’ve been associated with worse. Considering what we get called at school that’s actually...” I trailed off as I thought I saw movement from the corner of my eye. I looked around, but the fog was impervious, and I saw nothing.

“What’s wrong?” Laurent asked, his tone suddenly serious.

“Just... thought I saw something,” I answered distractedly. Then I saw it again. There was a flash of movement in the fog, gone before my eyes had been able to focus. Something was flying nearby.

“There!” Laurent exclaimed suddenly, pointing in another direction. I looked just in time to see another dark shadow in the fog.

“What do you think it is?” I asked quietly, instinctively standing with my back to Laurent’s.

“More like what do I think *they are*. There’s more than one, I’m sure of it,” the demon answered. “They’re getting closer. Get ready to run.”

I nodded, my body tense. I saw them more clearly now. There were at least three, maybe four. They flew in circles around us, just far enough into the fog that I couldn’t make out what they were. But judging by the way they were moving, they had definitely seen

us. They flew closer to the ground as they went and closed in on us.

I tried to comfort myself with the fact that, whatever these were, they seemed tangible enough. They weren't ghosts, so they could be attacked. And they definitely weren't zombies, because zombies couldn't fly.

...at least, they hadn't been able to yet.

The figures landed equidistant from each other, four in total, boxing us in. In perfect unison, they started toward us.

"Stay back!" Laurent warned, raising his arms in a fighting stance. But then he lowered them again as the figures stepped out of the fog.

Four witches walked toward us, brooms in hand. They wore matching cloaks and large wide-brimmed hats. They all looked to be about the same age, perhaps a few years older than Laurent and I, if that. I didn't sense trouble, but I remained wary all the same.

"Anastasia Graves?" one of them asked. I glanced at her in surprise, nodding before I could stop myself. The witch smiled. "Hey! I'm glad we found you. Your sister asked us to check up on you."

"My... sister?"

The witch nodded, and the other three moved to stand with her. The one speaking to me was tall, with long curly dark purple hair, light brown skin, and cheerful green eyes. Her familiar, a brown cat, brushed up against her legs, looking at me with an expression I could only describe as boredom.

"We're in her sorority at ECU. She invited us over to trick or treat with her."

"Damn. You came all the way from Elysia Cilidon just to trick or treat? That's a long trip," Laurent said. He looked more at ease now, but I could tell he was still prepared for danger, too.

"It is, but it's worth it. You guys should come up to our area next year! The trick or treating there is so much more intense than it is here."

“It’s *more* intense?” I asked in mild disbelief, and the four witches giggled.

“You bet. It’s a great time! The success rate of making it through the whole campus route is just over fifty percent. You’d love it. By the way, my name is Euphenia. It’s nice to finally meet you. We’ve heard all about you.”

“Oh... have you?” I continued uncertainly.

“Of course! Your sister talks about you all the time. The only human we know of in the world, how cool is that? And your mystery, too. The human who doesn’t know where she was born, who her birth parents are, when her birthday is...”

“Yeah, that’s... that’s me,” I acknowledged, hoping against hope that we wouldn’t be going far down this road.

Luckily, the other witches introduced themselves instead. Along with Euphenia there was Ember, a broad-shouldered witch with deep amber eyes and wavy red hair and a salamander as a familiar. Harmony stood next to her, the top of her head barely reaching Ember’s shoulders; Harmony watched me curiously with pale violet eyes framed by straight snow white hair that fell just past her waist. She looked slightly nervous, and her eyes darted back and forth every few moments as though expecting something to jump out at her. Finally, there was Tempest, a stern-looking witch with dark skin and long teal hair that had been organized in elaborate braids and decorated with golden jewelry. She had several gold and white tattoos of different shapes on her arms, and her familiar, a snowy white falcon, perched silently on her shoulder. Laurent introduced himself in turn, and with this behind us, I finally felt at ease.

“How are you liking this event so far? Have you had much trouble yet? You look like you’re doing okay,” Harmony asked, her voice smooth and soft.

“It’s... all right. The biggest problem we ran into was a ghost that chased us all the way to the next house,” I said, hoping I sounded a little nonchalant. There was something about college

students that was just a little intimidating, and I found myself wanting to get in their good graces—especially if they knew my sister. That meant I already had a reputation with them, for better or worse.

“That and a guy who asked us to do a trick instead of just giving treats first,” Laurent chuckled.

“Ugh, hate that,” Ember said sourly. “Who even does that?”

“I’m impressed though! You’ve made it over halfway without a scratch,” Euphenia continued encouragingly. “I’ll be able to tell your sister there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Is it okay for you guys to be split up? Will you be able to find her again in this fog?” Laurent asked.

“Oh yeah, it’ll be fine. We’re already done with the route, so all we need to do is meet back up at the end.” Euphenia held up her broom helpfully. “Being able to fly gets you past a lot of obstacles.”

“Do you guys want a lift?” Ember inquired next.

“I think that’s cheating,” Tempest said disapprovingly.

“We’re fine, but thanks,” I answered quickly. As much as I liked the idea of being flown quickly through our route, this was also time I got to enjoy with Laurent, and I wasn’t eager for it to be over so soon. “It shouldn’t take us too long to finish up.”

“If you’re sure!” Ember said, looking a little disappointed. “I’m glad you guys are doing all right. Your sister was worried.”

“We’ve been able to finish every year, it’s not too bad,” I replied, unable to avoid sounding slightly defensive.

“Hey uh... is she all right?” Laurent asked quizzically. I followed his gaze and saw he was looking at Harmony, who was still glancing around as though expecting danger.

“Hm? Oh, she’s fine. Mostly, anyway,” Euphenia said dismissively.

“She’s got major selenophobia,” Ember continued.

“What’s that?” I asked, suddenly curious.

“Fear of the moon,” Tempest answered simply.

“It figures that the full moon would be out on Halloween,” Harmony said as she took a small step closer to Tempest, her voice almost a whisper.

“Wait, that’s a real thing?” Laurent continued, sounding fascinated.

Tempest nodded, though the look in her eyes preemptively informed us of the consequences of making jokes about it.

“Well, we’re definitely fine here if you’d like to fly back and get inside or something,” I offered, and Harmony looked grateful for my understanding.

“Yeah, we probably should. I need to start getting through this candy I worked so hard for!” Euphenia said delightedly.

“Be safe, and good luck!” Ember continued.

“Be careful of the undead,” Tempest added.

“It was nice to meet the both of you,” Harmony finished.

With these goodbyes done, the four witches stepped back, got on their brooms, and soared off into the night, disappearing from view in seconds.

“Well, that was something,” Laurent said after a few moments of silence. “Never a dull moment when your sister is in town, I swear.”

“It’s a mix of her being in town and apparently being an open book to everyone she meets when it comes to talking about me,” I chuckled. Part of it was amusing, but it was also ever-so-slightly awe inspiring in its own right that apparently all of my sister’s friends, who attended one of the top universities in the world, had heard of me. And not only was my sister one of the most well-known witches in Fairfield, we both came from a family with an established reputation on its own. It was sometimes hard to reconcile things like that with the fact that my high school social life consisted of pretty much one friend and where I made basically no impact whatsoever. I didn’t mind that necessarily—I wasn’t out to impress anyone—but there were moments where I wished my life was a little more like what my sister’s seemed to be. “Anyway, let’s

keep moving. Tempest mentioned zombies, and the sooner we get home the sooner we don't have to worry about running across any."

On we went into the night. As time passed the fog grew darker as the moon began to sink in the sky. While at first I'd almost wished the moon gone, as its presence seemed only to give everything a more frightening edge, now I wished it would stay. Seeing through the dark fog was becoming progressively more difficult, and our flashlights only did so much. I realized with growing apprehension that it was likewise becoming harder to tell which direction we were going.

We made it to several more houses without incident, and before we knew it, we were on our way to finish the route. We'd just passed Mrs. Wellsmoore's house; she was a kindly and elderly centaur who always gave out freshly-baked treats along with her candy, and she lived just around the street from me. I saw her often on my morning runs. With this in mind, we were certainly almost done. Assuming there wasn't another safe point on the way, our next stop would be Haven.

Since we were due to be heading back in the direction of my house, I reached for the charm my mother had given me. To my surprise, despite my certainty that we were headed in the right direction, the charm still felt cool.

"Hang on," I said suddenly, and Laurent stopped. The night was almost pitch black now, and we stood closer together than usual. While we hadn't had too many more frightening encounters, it was the environment itself that helped make them more dangerous. It was easier for creatures to sneak up on us now. What's more, it could have just been my imagination, but I might have sworn our flashlights were becoming dimmer.

"What's up?" the demon asked warily. We'd stopped joking around a few houses prior. Things were getting down to the wire, and despite how close we were to being finished with our route, we weren't done yet.



“My charm. It’s not warm. We... we must be headed in the wrong direction,” I admitted.

Laurent quickly reached for his own charm, then frowned.

“Huh. That’s weird. I swear we’re going the right way, though. There’s no way we could have gotten turned around.”

“I didn’t think so either, but...”

I slowly turned in a circle, my fingers on the charm the whole time. When the charm grew warm and I stopped moving, however, I felt anything but comforted. The direction I was facing was the direction we’d both just come from.

“That can’t be right,” Laurent said despairingly. “We’ve just been going straight ahead! Is there any way this thing could be wrong?”

“I... I don’t know. I don’t *think* so. But... the way the fog changes everything, maybe...”

“Damnit,” Laurent swore quietly. “All right. So we have two options then. Keep going the way we’re going, or follow the charm that takes us back the way we came. What do you think?”

“I don’t know!” I repeated with mild frustration. The charms had been designed to help us, but now they were introducing a lot of uncertainty at a time where we needed it least. “I trust my mom’s charms, it’s just... we never turned around or got confused about where we were, not even once.”

“Yeah. Also...” Laurent held up his own charm and shifted slowly left and right, then came to a stop. “The charm is hottest in this direction. That’s not parallel with the street, so eventually it’ll start taking us through people’s yards and stuff.”

“If this was a normal night, sure, but unless we come across a safe point we shouldn’t run into anything,” I countered.

“That’s my point, though. Right now we’re kind of safe because we’re on the street. At least if we follow it long enough we’re guaranteed to end up at a safe point. But what if we leave? Hell, what if we leave the street and then can’t find it again?”

I shuddered as my fear of being trapped forever in the fog

returned. Realistically I knew we'd be freed come sunrise when the event officially ended and the fog lifted, but that was still several hours away, and I knew those hours would feel like an eternity.

"How about this," Laurent continued. "What if we keep following the street this way? If we hit a safe point we've already gotten to, all we have to do is turn around."

"I guess. Mom seemed pretty confident about these charms, and you know that's her specialty. Besides, who knows how long it'll be before we hit another safe point? What if it takes us a while only to find out we're going the wrong way? Then we have to go all the way back and then some."

Laurent let out a discouraged sigh.

"I'm really not sure. Of course this would happen. We've been doing so well. We haven't actually gotten lost during trick or treating since elementary school."

"Maybe the beings running this event saw how well we were doing and decided to mix things up."

"I'm gonna have words with them when this is over," Laurent grumbled. He opened his mouth, looking like he wanted to say more, but then he froze.

I did the same, for in the brief moments of silence between Laurent's words, I heard the faint sound of a low moan coming from the fog. Laurent and I stood completely still as we listened, and then we heard it again—only this time it was closer.

"Oh, that's just what we need," I whispered irritably, hoping Laurent couldn't hear my fear. "Getting attacked while we stop to look for directions."

"Don't worry yet. We don't know if we've been spotted. Let's just stay quiet. And it sounds like there's only one of—"

Just then I heard another moan, this one clearly coming from the opposite direction. As hard as I stared into the night, I saw nothing, though that didn't mean much. With as dark as it was now, something could get within several feet of us before I'd be able to see it.

“What was that? Only one of what?” I hissed.

“Maybe we should turn our lights off and move a little,” Laurent murmured urgently.

“There’s no way in hell I’m turning this light off.”

And then, as if to prove just how much the night was turning against me, my flashlight suddenly turned off on its own, its batteries having finally been exhausted. Laurent must have heard my quiet whimper, because I immediately felt his hand on my shoulder.

“We’ve still got mine. But I think we need to move. Which way do we go? Up the street or follow the charm?”

I bit my lip as I debated the point. Laurent’s suggestion was more practical, while mine was based on my confidence in my mother’s abilities. Truth be told, I didn’t know which was better. If we tried Laurent’s method, we could be faced with a very long night of yet more walking—and probably running, depending on what was chasing us—and I was running out of stamina. But if we tried my method and things went wrong, we could end up stuck in the endless fog for hours.

All the while, the sound of moaning got closer and closer. At least I wasn’t under any pressure, I thought sardonically.

“Any time you’re ready; the fog is starting to sound hungry,” Laurent pressed urgently.

“Easy for you to say, putting this decision on me!” I shot back. “I... let’s go with—”

Before I could finish, a figure shuffled out of the fog right in front of us. It paused, as though processing the fact that we were standing right in front of it... and then it lurched straight for us with surprising speed.

I didn’t scare easily, and I certainly wasn’t a screamer. But there were exceptions, such as the sudden appearance of a walking corpse appearing out of thick fog in the dead of night with the clear intent of killing me. I knew screaming was a bad idea, but it was instinctive. Besides, I thought, even if it did attract more

zombies, it was already bad enough we'd encountered one. How much worse could things reasonably get?

The zombie was a terrifying sight in itself. This one was the corpse of a satyr; what skin was left hung off its body like loose clothing, and its actual clothing was left in tatters. Its nails were several inches long, like they hadn't stopped growing after the being had passed. One of its eyes was missing, the other burning red like it was suffering a bad infection. Much of the skin on its face was gone, leaving its broken and jagged teeth permanently exposed. Helpfully, its mouth was opening wide, giving me an even better view of the maw that sought to devour me.

Before I knew it, Laurent had stepped in front of me, and without hesitation the demon lifted the satyr into the air as though it weighed nothing, then threw it back in the direction from which it had come. Several seconds passed between the release and the sound of the corpse hitting the ground; it must have landed at least several yards away now. It would get back up, as they always did, but it gave us a little breathing room.

I didn't have time to admire Laurent's strength for long, however; while one zombie had been dealt with, now there were several more in view. Now that we'd definitely been spotted, their moans had turned into outright cries and shrieks, and they dashed toward us.

"Ana! RUN!" Laurent shouted. He shoved the shambling body of a long-dead siren, sending it sliding several yards across the asphalt, and then broke into a run.

"Wait! Which way are we going!" I called desperately after him.

"I don't know, just run!" Laurent returned.

I gritted my teeth. Certainly our priority now was to get away from the zombies, but we couldn't allow ourselves to get even more lost. We had to be cognizant of both things at once. If we could just—

I shrieked again as another zombie lurched out of the fog and

reached for me; its arm passed within inches of me. I ducked, but didn't lose my balance; I was good on my feet, and if I had to run, I could do a good job at that. But I needed a direction. *We* needed a direction.

I heard Laurent shout from nearby, then saw the dark shape of a zombie pass right over me at least twelve feet in the air. I lost sight of it before I heard it hit the ground with a sickening splat.

"Laurent! I need your light, I can't..." I trailed off as I looked around. It was almost completely dark. I didn't see any sign of light from Laurent's flashlight anywhere... nor of Laurent himself. "Laurent?!"

"Where'd you go Ana?" I heard him call back. He sounded like he was already a quarter mile away. How had that happened? We'd just been right next to each other.

"I'm here!" I shouted, well aware of how entirely unhelpful that was.

"I hear you! I'm coming!" he replied. He sounded closer. At least I thought so.

Sure enough, however, only a few moments later I saw a tall shape coming my way through the fog.

"Laurent, thank goodness. We have to be careful. If we can get that split up in just a second, we—"

I froze. The figure's gait was uneven, and I heard one of its feet dragging unnaturally along the ground as it moved. My heart sank. Tricked again. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this kind of thing after all.

I leapt backward as the zombie lunged at me, this one a large troll that was taller and more sturdily built than even Laurent. Unfortunately for me, it was just as quick as any of the other zombies, which I could now hear coming in my direction.

I dodged again as the zombie troll kept after me, but I was just a moment too slow; one of its hands grazed my ankle and I fell hard to the ground. Instinctively I rolled to one side, and I heard one of the creature's heavy fists hit the pavement where my torso

had been only a split second before. I felt something grab for my other ankle, and I kicked as hard as I could, my foot connecting with something solid with a loud *crunch*.

I scrambled to my feet and made a wild run for it. There were at least half a dozen zombies after us, and we had been split up. I shouted Laurent's name one more time, but this time I heard nothing in response.

"If you can hear me, use your charm! Follow the charm!" I called desperately into the swirling fog. On the off chance he did hear me, I hoped that would lead us back together. Even if it ended up being the wrong destination, at least that might mean we'd reach the same one. Our odds of making it through the night would be better that way.

I still heard no answer, but I did hear the zombies hot on my heels. There was nothing for it. I had to run.

And run I did. With the snarling and shrieking zombies behind me, just far enough away that I couldn't see them, I sprinted like I'd never sprinted before, my fingers tight on the charm whose warmth told me I was going the right way. I hoped desperately that it was right. Right now its warmth was the only comfort I had, and if it ended up leading me astray I might just lose my mind.

I yelped as I nearly collided with the two-headed goat, which gave me an irritated look with its far-too-many eyes. Only half a minute later, as I left the street and started running across what looked like an endless lawn, I barely managed to avoid an enormous car-sized trapdoor spider that leapt out at me from the darkness. Luckily it didn't give chase, but I suppose it didn't have to; shortly after it disappeared behind me in the fog, I heard the snarl of a zombie suddenly get cut short. At least the zombies were helping me somehow.

A fence loomed in front of me; I leapt over it, expecting to arrive in a neighbor's yard, but the nothingness continued. I passed a tree, but there was nothing else around it. Not that I

could tell. Panic surged through me; there was no way I should be running this far across grass without encountering a house or yard. There were no open spaces like that in my neighborhood. But here I was. It seemed the fog really was endless if you lost your way. All the while I called out Laurent's name, but I hadn't heard his voice again even once.

Just as I thought I might start hyperventilating from fear rather than physical exertion, I spotted a warm light in the distance. I ran harder as I heard the thudding of zombie footsteps behind me. As I got closer, I saw another light, then another. And then, like a miracle itself playing out before my eyes, I saw the silhouette of my very own house start to appear out of the fog.

"Yes!" I gasped, pushing ahead with all my strength. It was there. I could see it. I just needed to make it a little farther...

I ducked suddenly as something enormous swooped down over me from above. I didn't bother to double check what it was. It was behind me now; so long as it wasn't between me and my very appropriately named house, it didn't change anything.

And then, finally, I was safe. I made it as far as the top of the driveway before collapsing to my knees, my breathing heavy and ragged.

"Ah, there you are! Welcome home," came my mom's voice from nearby. I glanced up to see her approaching, and at first she was smiling; I could only imagine how I must have looked, because her expression quickly turned concerned. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"Not... hurt. Just... there's zombies, and... Laurent's missing, we got separated," I attempted through heavy breaths.

"Oh dear. Toq, could you grab a glass of water for Ana, please?" mom said. Her familiar, which had been floating nearby, turned to enter the house. Mom knelt beside me, and I'd never been so glad to hear her voice. "Was Laurent using his charm?"

"I think so. I hope so. When we got separated I... shouted to

him to use it, we weren't... sure which way to go. Got lost," I panted. "I just hope he heard me."

"I did! And I've never loved your house more than I do now," Laurent said from behind me.

I leapt to my feet and whirled around. The demon was trudging up the driveway toward me, looking only slightly worse for wear. To my surprise, one of my house's gargoyles was bringing up the rear—and it was covered in blood.

"What happened?" I asked, aghast.

"Well, I heard you shout to use the charm, so I figured what the hell, I'll go along with it. I had a bunch of zombies after me, and then I saw a big group ahead of me just as I thought I was in the clear and thought I was doomed, but then this gargoyle swooped down out of nowhere and uh... well, it took care of them, let's put it that way. It was kind of brutal honestly."

My eyes widened in understanding as I realized what the dark shape flying over me just moments before must have been. Seemingly not content to wait until I'd reached home on my own, Haven had decided to protect me in its own way.

Mom looked the gargoyle up and down disapprovingly as it approached.

"You're a wonderfully efficient home security system but you're also covered in blood. Gross. Go to the back and hose yourself off."

"I think what she means to say is thank you for rescuing us!" I called after the gargoyle as it started walking resolutely toward one of the side gates.

Toq soon returned with a glass of cool water, and I downed it quickly. Already I felt much better, if not slightly nauseous.

"Well, congratulations to you both on another successful year. You've kept up your perfect record!" mom said excitedly. "And it looks like you've got plenty of candy, well done. Why don't you come inside where it's warm so you can go through what you got?"



Laurent and I shared an exhausted glance, then nodded in unison.

Twenty minutes later Laurent and I sat on the couches in my living room, each of us sifting through the piles of candy before us on the wide coffee table. I'd resolutely taken a quick shower and changed into clothes that were drenched with my own sweat born of terror. The occasional shriek from outside told me that trick or treating was still going on—and that my grandma was still enjoying her role as one of the house's decorations—but I felt completely content to have it over and done with for the year. I thought back to what the witches from ECU had said about how it was much more intense there, and I genuinely wondered if I'd be able to make it even a short way in.

"Excellent. There might not be a lot of houses on this route, but everyone's so generous it doesn't matter," Laurent exclaimed, holding aloft a full bag of chocolate and peanut butter candies. "Some of your neighbors must have great jobs."

"I wonder how much they buy. Having some trick or treaters drop out before getting to their house must cut back on costs," I mused, quickly popping a small butterscotch candy into my mouth.

"I have an idea. Let's not eat too much yet. We'll take these bags to school and just casually let the other students see. Just a way to let them know that we completed the route. Again," Laurent said with a grin that displayed his sharp teeth.

"And risk getting my candy stolen? No thanks. Not after all the work I put into getting this," I protested. "Besides, that means waiting until school's back to eat much of it, and again, no thanks."

"Fair enough. I guess we did earn this fair and square. You know, apart from cheating with your mom's help."

"Can I say I told you so?" I asked, raising my eyebrows.

"Nope. *She* can say she told me so, but not you. I mean, I

guess you can, but if you do I'll tell everyone about the anglerfish ghost."

"Then I'll tell everyone how you're scared of my sister."

"*Everyone* is scared of your sister, they'll just agree with me!"

We laughed together and continued organizing and looking through our candy piles. After a few moments of silence, I spoke again.

"I'm going to miss this. This might be our last time trick or treating here in Fairfield depending on what happens after we graduate."

Laurent scoffed.

"Are you saying you wouldn't travel home just to trick or treat again? You can totally do that. And I would too. But listen." He scooted closer to me. "I for one don't care where we trick or treat; I just want us to keep doing it together. Maybe we could even try doing it at ECU next year like your sister's friends said."

"Maybe." I smiled. "You're right, though. And hey, if you and I end up somewhere else next year for Halloween, it could be fun to try a whole new route. We might know this one a little too well."

"Yeah! And we can show our 'trick' to a whole new group of people," Laurent agreed happily. "See? There you go. But just watch, one of us will get into ECU or something and then we can never trick or treat there after all."

"What? Why not?"

"Because we'd totally suck at it and that's all we'd be known for the whole rest of our time there. I'm not sure I'm ready for that."

"You literally threw a dead satyr like thirty feet through the air and you're going to tell me we'd suck at it?"

"Yeah. I threw *several* zombies through the air and we still got separated and lost at the same time. While we were almost done, mind you."

“Whatever. I’m going to take this win for what it is,” I chuckled, popping another candy in my mouth.

And it was a win, I thought. Sure, things had gotten a little messy at the end. And sure my house itself had come to the rescue at the very last second. But apart from that, the fact remained that Laurent and I had made our way through the entire trick or treat gauntlet and completed it one more year in a row. For me, though I’d never quite admit it to anyone else, it was a point of pride. Being a completely ordinary human in a world of beings of myth and legend came with its disadvantages; I had no powers to speak of and no special abilities. But we had done it anyway. Not to mention gotten a whole bunch of candy out of it.

I did feel a little nervous about what the next year would bring. With any luck it’d be just another ordinary year of high school, followed by whatever came next. And I hadn’t quite decided what that was. But for now, that was fine. Nights like tonight were meant to be celebrated for what they were, and apart from being a whole lot of fun—terror aside—it also helpfully served as a little boost to my confidence.

Whatever was next to come, I was ready for it. I knew that much.

