

Rey looked at the article on the society page again. Tyrone Hamilton was holding his annual charity benefit, but this time it was going to be on his estate. It promised to be a magnificent event, and there were rumors of who and what the entertainment was going to be.

Hallowe'en was a special time for Rey. It always had been, but as a member of the Autumn Court, it was an almost religious holiday. What other day of the year did you celebrate and seek out being scared silly? She wanted to do something special, and to share it with someone.

She'd been looking for a reason to spend some time with Richard, and this party - if they could get in - would be perfect. She still had Richard's phone number, and she quickly made her decision and called him.

He answered on the third ring in his bass voice.

"Hi Richard, it's Rey," she said, finding herself smiling when she heard him. "Do you have plans for Hallowe'en?"

"Rey." His voice resonated even over the phone. "I'm glad to hear your voice. No, I don't — well. There is something. Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering if you'd like to go to a party with me." Rey told him about the charity event.

"Rey Lafitte," he said in his slow, rolling voice, "I would be honored. I'm only sorry I didn't think of it to ask you first."

Rey laughed softly. "Perhaps next time you'll beat me to it. There's going to be a lot of people, so it would probably a good idea if we got there early." She paused, to give him a chance to answer, not wanting to completely bowl him over with her enthusiasm.

"When would you like me to put you up?"

She thought for a moment. "How does seven sound to you?"

"It sounds perfect. I'll see you at your place at that time."

"I'm looking forward to it," Rey replied, knowing the pleasure and excitement at their date was in her voice.

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Rey looked at herself in the full length mirror. It would do, she thought, as she smoothed her hands over the skin-tight silk-lycra blend bodice of her costume. She decided to take advantage of Hallowe'en and show the world her true face. A variation of a Poison Ivy costume she saw online, veils of translucent silk created a skirt around her legs, parting and shifting with every step she took. Her hair was piled up on her head, arranged so tresses of it hung down like thick vines through which she'd woven strings of artificial ivy. She's also added the asame ivy to the rest of her, threading it through and around her brambles. Her eyes could easily be explained away as contact lenses that contained a flourescing compound that made them glow. Their slightly larger than normal size, a trick of the light and Hollywood quality special effects makeup.

She didn't even need to wear makeup; her Keeper had ensured she was "perfect". The natural color of her lips was that of a berry, begging to be devoured. Her fingernails and toenails were the dark purple of nightshade, the same color all her thorns were tipped with. In a special effects studio, this kind of look would have taken hours to achieve. Instead, it had required her to burn through all her Glamour in a single bright and terrifying burst, blasting away her Mask.

And now she was hungry, not just for food, but for emotions, to recover the Glamour she'd lost. Given the

night's festivities, it shouldn't be that difficult to harvest what she needed, be it through fear or any other emotion. With the children trick or treating, and the adults attending parties, there would be amotion enough for everyone to make gluttons of themselves.

Rey took a step back from the mirror and turned slightly, making sure everything that needed to be covered was. She turned her back to the mirror and, looking over her shoulder, watched herself walk away. She smiled. The high heels certainly did make the sway of her hips that much more enticing. Her laugh was low and husky, a bedroom laugh, and she wondered how much of Richard's Beast would be aroused by it, and if she might see some of it tonight.

Satisfied she was ready for Richard, Rey sashayed to the kitchen, wondering if Richard was ready for her.

Promptly at seven, there was a heavy knock at the door. It was loud enough the visitor didn't bother to ring the doorbell. Although Rey was expecting Richard, the sudden, heavy sound was startling.

She paused for a moment to compose herself, a bit amused and embarrassed at jumping at the noise, then walked to the front door. Rey kept herself from peering through the peephole, wanting to see Richard all at once.

When she opened the door wide, he was there, standing in all his own glory. Huge and tall, massive chest with bulging muscles exposed before the evening air, he also carried the ornately carved battle axe — she could see the handle poking up behind his right shoulder. He wore modern jeans with a big, silver belt buckle, but his feet ended in those black hooves.

He dipped his huge bull head at Rey, then swept low in a bow. "Good evening Miss Lafitte." He rose again and peered down at her. "You look ravishing, beautiful, a terrible dryad, a temptress of the night. It is with my deepest appreciation that I offer you my arm."

Rey was speechless for a moment, then a faint blush colored her petal-pink cheeks. "Words fail me when I see you, Richard. You are magnificent, a dread warrior upon whose arm I would gladly spend this evening." She let her eyes roam over him, and she didn't bother to try and hide her favored opinion of him.

He bent to give her his arm and she caught one, very human eye gazing upon her intently. The movement made him shift partially from her line of sight and she saw behind him a grey and silver limousine. He followed her line of sight then looked back at her.

"Ah," he rumbled. "Compliments of our queen. Ours until midnight." He spread out his other arm toward the limo.

"Very generous of her," Rey said, surprised, and pulled the door closed behind her. "I've never ridden in one before." She smiled up at him. "Perhaps tonight will be filled with all manner of unexpected pleasures, more than I had hoped."

After she took his arm, he led her to the limo. The driver got the door for them and as far as Rey could tell, he was a mortal. But by the way he ducked Richard's horns, he was probably ensorcelled.

The car took them smoothly down the road while they entertained themselves with the amusements that the limousine provided. First was wine and Richard offered to pour her a glass.

Rey nodded, and wondered if the wine choice was his, or if Veridia had provided it as well.

It was a pale wine and it was served cold in tall, narrow glasses. "Icewine?" Richard offered, pronouncing it like ice-vine.

She accepted the glass. "I was not expecting something quite so grand," she said. "Not that I don't appreciate it, because I do. Very much." Rey looked him in the eyes with an earnest, curious gaze. "I hope you did not put yourself at a disadvantage for all of this."

"Please enjoy this freely. Queen Veridia has granted us free use of this because she needs me the first hour of the day of the dead. I have agreed to fulfill her requirements," he explained.

Rey nodded and took a sip of the wine, savoring its sweet taste. After a moment, she looked at Richard again. "May I ask you a personal question?"

He looked cramped, doubled over in the confines of the limousine, but he managed a nod without poking his horns through the roof.

"I have enjoyed your company since the first time we spoke," Rey said, "and I've looked forward to tonight with an excitement I haven't felt for a very long time." Her eyes searched his face. "Before I make a complete fool of myself, I want to know. Do you look at me with the desire for something more than just friendship?" Rey hoped she didn't just create a very awkward situation, and that Mizuko's reading of him wasn't off-base.

He put aside his glass. "In your eyes I see acceptance for what I am. In your face and body I see a beauty that draws me. Yes, I desire more and I'm willing to see if there is."

Rey let out the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. "I'm glad," she said, her smile lighting up her entire face. Setting down her own glass, she reached up to touch his face but paused, waiting for an indication he would allow it. He didn't move away, letting her touch his long muzzle.

She caressed it gently, learning the feel of it under her fingertips. "I like everything I see," she said softly, "from your horns to your hoofs. I admire what I cannot see, your loyalty and dedication to what you believe is, your mind and the way you treat those around you." Her cheeks flushed slightly again. "And I feel guilty every time I jump up from a table and have to leave quickly, because I see the courtesy you wish to act upon." She stopped talking there, hoping he understood she knew he would always stand when a woman did, and scampering off as she sometimes did forced him to try to scramble to his feet to be polite.

"You are a rare person," he saluted her. "Most women, including changelings, find me intimidating or outdated." There were plenty of reasons modern women would think that. First was his size. If everything was ... proportional, there could be a problem for some women. Besides that, the guy looked like he could break people in half and his normal, stern look didn't do much to dissuade people from that opinion. Those who could see through the Mask would probably find him even scarier if they didn't see him as the gentle being Rey did.

"It would be terribly arrogant and cliched for me to say I am not like most women," Rey said with a self-depreciating smile. "But even before I was Taken, I knew of the supernatural world. I have met and interacted with many different kinds beings, and learned long ago that appearances are never the whole truth about a person." She withdrew her hand with some reluctance, but now was definitely not the time to be exploring.

"The druids once said that the body was the canvas of the soul. But that's not the whole truth, is it? For while the body is a canvas, it bears the marks of more than just one's own soul."

He sighed and said in jest, "Next time I'm going to ask for the use of a convertible."

"Perhaps," Rey said, "if you stretch out a bit, you might be more comfortable." The phrase "I won't bite" was on the tip of her tongue, but she held it back. "If you move more toward me, you won't be quite as cramped." She hadn't just invited him to climb partway into her lap, had she? After a second's thought, she knew she wouldn't have minded one bit if he did.

He scooted around a bit, finding a place for his legs, then compromised with a relaxed slouch that at least didn't have him bent over quite so uncomfortably. To avoid piling his legs on top of hers, he angled away, which brought her shoulder in contact with his warm, browned arm.

"Better?" she asked. She did not object with his current position in the slightest; in fact, she was quite pleased. The only thing she could think of that might be better would be for his head to be in her lap, but given the close quarters and spread of his horns, was probably not a good idea.

They arrived at the vast estate of Tyrone Hamilton. A grassy area to the west off the main driveway had been used as a parking lot for visitors. It was likely to destroy the grass, grown from what must have been an excessive and expensive amount of watering but clearly Hamilton could afford to repair the damage the cars would do. The mansion itself was huge, consisting of a central building and two wings, each of which could be regarded as mansion on their own, were they not connected to the main building. None of these places were their destination, however.

Instead, uniformed men and women dressed in the livery more common 150 years ago guided guests who'd arrived early to a receiving area behind the west wing. Richard had retrieved a couple bags of groceries full of canned goods and topped with warm, wool blankets to serve as their contribution from the trunk of the limo. The driver had told them he'd return at 11:30 pm unless he heard from them sooner to pick them up.

Behind the Hamilton mansion was a wide green area that was packed with what appeared to be carnival amusements that gathered around a central pond. The patio behind the central building of the mansion was vast and had been modified to accommodate an orchestra and dancing area. The entire affair was well lit with electric lamps made to look like turn of the century gas lights.

Rey and Richard were early and so the event had not yet opened, but there was a large crowd of people gathered in front of the gate. After Richard deposited the donations, they were admitted to a roped off waiting area filled with costumed party-goers. Many of them wore ball-style costumes with face masks, but some were more elaborate. Rey heard many compliments on her own well-designed outfit, but people were almost speechless to Richard's "disguise". It seemed very real, but of course everyone knew there was no such thing as a minotaur. Richard seemed very pleased.

Rey stretched up as tall as she could to reach Richard ear. "Didn't I tell you you were magnificent?" she said softly, letting her body press against his before she pulled back slightly and returned to her regular flat-footed stance (or at least as flat footed as she could get with three inch stiletto heels).

(Just a bit of explanation so you can see the scene I have in my head. :) Rey gets up on her tippytoes so that she can almost whisper in Richard's ear. To do so, she's got a hand on his arm, and she kind of leans in against him so she can get close enough. And the tone of her voice is a bit sultry, a bit temptress, and some triumph in knowing she was right about what she said, even if those poor mortals had no idea they were seeing the real thing, and not a costume.)

She looked around at the assembling crowd, and felt their excitement drifting across her skin like a faint breeze. She opened herself up to it, regaining some of the Glamour she'd used earlier. Rey felt a bit better, but still had that empty feeling. But she wasn't concerned, there would likely be many more opportunities through the evening.

The incoming press of guests crowded out Rey's view of the available entertainments ahead of them. Richard asked, "Would you like a better look to see what's waiting for us?" Rey nodded. She knew his strength, so

knew better than to tell him she was likely too heavy for him pick up.

He lifted her smoothly to his shoulder, providing her a seat there and supporting her with one hand big enough to wrap partway around her waist. From this vantage, Rey could see almost the entire layout. Among the carnival section was a large, rather serious looking haunted house. There strode strange-looking people, mortals Rey thought, who were freakshow entertainers. The usual variety of candies and popcorn stands were set up and run by makeup-wearing clowns in a rather disturbing Hallowe'en theme. Games of skill were available as well, revealed as lights came on one by one, also manned by strange, costumed carnies. Rey even saw a tent for a fortune-teller, and a couple larger tents with signs out front that boasted mysteries to be viewed within — for a price. Apparently, the carnival was not free, although the dance ball was.

"They have a haunted house," Rey exclaimed in delight. She looked at the carnival again, hoping to see where there might be a booth to buy tickets. She'd brought cash with her, intending to use that to be their "entrance fee" to the ball, but did not want to seem ungrateful after the most generous donation Richard had provided.

Rey turned slightly so she could look at the assembling crowd, and her hand found one of Richard's horns. Before she could stop herself, she caressed it. She tried not to snatch her hand back in embarrassment, and hoped he hadn't noticed, but one eye had swiveled to watch her.

Rey caught the inner edge of her lower lip between her teeth. "Do I need to apologize for being so familiar?"

A low laugh rumbled in his chest. "It's just a horn," he replied with amusement.

"Well, some people might take offense to being fondled like that." And at that moment, Rey decided she'd better stop talking before she embarrassed herself further.

Members of the orchestra picked that moment to file in and from Rey's position she could see them take seats in the area reserved for them. "Looks like things will be starting soon," she said, glad for the change in subject. "The orchestra has arrived."

"Yes," he agreed. "It will soon be a little too cold to simply stand still."

As they waited, the orchestra warmed up and then began with strings starting out Night on Bald Mountain.

Rey chuckled. "Appropriate music to start the night out with, don't you think?" She smiled at Richard. "Sets the mood."

Richard was about to answer when wind instruments and drums joined the rest of the orchestra and amplifiers let the sound roll across the entire field. The security people dressed in antiquated livery at the gate swung them wide and welcomed everyone to the Hamilton Estates 2011 Hallowe'en Ball. Someone added with a gleeful shout, "And carnival!"

The crowd poured inside in an enthusiastic but controlled fashion.

From her perch on Richard's shoulder, Rey watched the the people spread out, heading for the various attractions at the gala. Her eye was drawn back to the haunted house, and her curiosity started burning. Instead, she looked down at Richard's face. "What would you like to do first?"

He knelt slowly and picked Rey up off his shoulder and set her down. "Did you have time to find something for dinner before I picked you up?"

She shook her head. "I was too distracted," Rey admitted, "and eating dinner slipped my mind. A bad habit of mine, I'm afraid."

"Then I'd like to help you find something." He looked over at the refreshments, but they were light things such as punch. Instead, he began to guide her down toward the carnival in hopes of something that might fill her stomach more than potentially alcoholic drinks.

It had been a long time since she'd been to a carnival, Rey thought. Or perhaps, not quite much so long as it being in the years of her childhood her mind had hidden from her. She had vague memories of wanting to see the show in the big top, but being pulled out of her seat by her parents who had, for some reason unknown to her, decided they had to leave that instant. Most of what she knew of carnivals were what she'd seen on television or in books. Or in movies. The images of the carnival from the movie *Something Wicked This Way Comes* came to mind, but she ignored it, putting it all down to the mood of the evening.

Rey slipped her hand into Richard's as they walked, ready to withdraw it should the contact be unwelcome. Ahead, she saw a booth that appeared to have a variety of foods cooked on skewers, and from the delicious smells wafting towards her, it was likely something she wanted to try.

Richard smelled it, too, though he wasn't hungry. His lips widened into a smile when he caught her sniffing delicately. "Ah, the carnival staple — meat on a stick. I see they have footlong dogs, bräts on a stick, as well as... good heavens. That's a huge sausage. On a stick." He noted the last gripped firmly in the hands of a young man as he held it laughing while he shared it with the woman he was with.

"I am an unrepentant omnivore," Rey replied with a smile. "On a stick, off a stick, it really makes no difference to me when I'm hungry." She selected a brat on a stick, and then retrieved a ten dollar bill from where she tucked it away in her costume.

A line hadn't yet begun to form this early in the evening and they were able to get through and come away with Rey's meal in hand. Richard blew through loose lips, feigning relief. "Whewh. They're pork bratwurst."

Rey barely kept herself from choking with laughter as she'd bitten into the sausage as he was speaking. She carefully chewed and swallowed, then wiped the juices beginning to dribble down her chin. "You're horrible," she said as she laughed again. "What would you have said if I'd chosen one of those all-beef hot dogs?"

"I would have bravely attempted to not flinch when you bit into it." He chuckled.

"I only bite if asked very nicely," Rey replied, her mischievous eyes meeting his before she took another bite of her dinner. "Unless you're my dinner, then all bets are off."

"I'll be wary of how I phrase any potential future dinner invitations," he assured her.

A juggling clown meandered by with a huge, toothy grin. He was wearing a sign that invited folks to come and see the House of Haunts. His teeth appeared to have been filed into points. Richard frowned, gazing after the clown who continued to frolick along his way, tossing flaming cylinders and deftly catching them before they hit the ground or anyone else — though the clown made it seem like he was nearly dropping them every time.

"What's wrong?" Rey asked, watching Richard's eyes.

"There is something wrong with that clown," he said ominously. Then he shook himself and chuckled. "Ah, never mind me. I've never liked clowns. You never see what they really are."

Rey looked for the clown and watched him continue his way through the crowd. She'd often found that first instincts were always right. She glanced down at her jeweled fetish ring, and wondered if she might need to put it to use tonight. But not yet. It was just one strange clown. Best to keep an eye out for more unusual

things, things that might seem out of place.

She quickly finished off the last of her bratwurst and after cleaning up a bit, tossed her trash into a waste barrel, she looked up at her date. "Shall we check out some of the games? See if I can win you a cupie doll?" Rey asked impishly.

"Hm." Richard looked around and spotted one nearby. "Crossbows against balloons? What do you think?"

"I'm better with rifles," Rey replied, "but I think I can make do with crossbows." She put her hand on his arm. "Shall we?" She grinned.

He guided her to the stand and gallantly let her shoot while he watched, claiming his aim was never very good. While the bony, tall, vendor looked on, Rey proceeded to pop every balloon with each dart the crossbow tossed at the wall. Richard applauded her obvious talent. "Well done! I believe that wins one of those Raggedy Ann or Andy dolls."

"Aye," said the vendor. "Or if the lady would like to press her luck by she could pay for another four shots and if she does just as well, she could win one of the porcelain dolls."

"Tempting," Rey said and looked at Richard. "But porcelain isn't very cuddly. Unless you'd prefer one of them?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid my shelf has no room for another doll."

"Then a Raggedy doll it is," Rey replied with a smile, and waited for Richard to make his choice.

"Oh no," he held up his hands. "That's all for you. I have a reputation that includes strictly no dolls."

Rey laughed, and asked for one of the Andy dolls. As they walked away from the booth with her prize in her hand, she looked up at Richard, her face innocent but her eyes twinkling. "So, if you don't have any dolls, what do you prefer to cuddle with in bed?"

"You mean if I was to 'cuddle'? I'm not 'cuddly' by nature," he told her seriously.

"No desire to have someone or something to hold close," Rey asked, her head cocking slightly to one side. "Simply to be there, for sorrow or joy. For comfort or companionship?"

"Companionship, to me, is quite different," Richard said. His smile returned. "And desirable. Cuddling, to me, implies a soft and cute side. I am simply what I am, and that form does not hold softness. I think you understand what I mean. You possess a pleasing form, but it also possesses strength and the protective barb of thorns. Forgive me if I say so, but not cuddly. In other words, I think you are my type."

Rey smiled, and made a small sound of amused pleasure. "My temper has always made me, well, prickly." She chuckled slightly. "It is good then, that I believe you are my type as well. Strong, both in body and mind, capable of both terrifying violence and gentleness, and knowing the appropriate time to use them." The thought of all the things they could do together (both in and out of bed) thrilled her, and her lips parted slightly with anticipated pleasure.

He offered her his arm again. "To the House of Haunts?"

Wordlessly, she took his arm. While walking toward the haunted house, Rey looked around to see if there were any other donation bins set up on the grounds. She had no real desire to keep the doll, and thought she might donate it to some organization who could then give it to a child.

The doll winked one of its sewn button-eyes at her and the pair made their way toward the haunted house attraction. And then Rey realized the doll had winked at her.

She stopped in mid-step as she stared at the doll, her hand sliding off the huge minotaur's arm. "Richard, I don't think this is just a doll," she said carefully.

He looked down at the doll. "How do you mean?" he asked. A group four of women, ages somewhere in the 20s wandered by laughing and talking loudly as they went.

Rey looked around, then motioned for him to bend his head a little closer. "The doll just winked at me," she said just loud enough for Richard to hear. The filed-teeth clown, the tall, bony man at the crossbow game, the people she though originally might have been mortal freaks and geeks working the carnival, and now the doll. All these things together made her worried. "I wonder if we might not be the only people here showing their true selves."

"Interesting. I haven't seen other changelings yet. Maybe there is something else to all this. Or maybe what changelings there may be have yet to reveal themselves. We should be on guard — unless you'd rather have a dance instead," Richard offered.

"And miss a bit of adventure?" Rey said with a light-hearted smile that didn't reach her eyes, "I don't think so." Her expression became serious once again. "The House of Haunts would be a great location to steal people away, don't you think?" She looked over at the haunted house and fingered her fetish ring.

"You think privateers or loyalists are at work here? Should we inform Queen Cassandra?"

"Why would we tell her, and not our Queen?" Rey asked.

"I wouldn't say we don't tell our Queen," Richard said. "But if the True Fae have a presence here, then the Duchy's most lethal weapon is to call upon the Ancient.

"Queen Cassandra now holds that title. She is in fact an Ancient, and her title backs up her claim as a Daughter of Ishtar. Veridia looked into it herself. Veridia believes that Cassandra suspected the Goblin King was laying a trap for the Duchy and had been preparing. When the trap was sprung and Iron Mountain at risk of destruction along with the entire freehold, the Spring Queen finally revealed her plan — at least to those who could see it.

"She is now one of the Lost Pantheon, an incarnation of the Old Gods. They wield enormous powers, and their very being is different from what we are. For us, the more we let slip our humanity, the more we falter and fall to insanity and hallucinations, collapsing into ourselves. For the Ancients, they let slip their humanity and fill it with divine power. This grants them enormous power to take a stand against the Others and aids them in other ways. They cease being human in any real way, but they aren't the True Fae, either. Many other powers are attributed to them, but it's hard to tell what is rumor and what is truth. Veridia is working even now to uncover it all."

Rey absorbed this revelation about the Spring Queen. It would certainly explain the short conversation at the impromptu Court after the Siege of Iron Mountain. Something for Rey to think about as well, but later. "We need to have more than just a feeling that something is off, and a winking doll." She looked at the doll, then at the House of Haunts. "I want to take a look at the haunted house, to see if there's more to it than meets the casual eye." She paused for a moment, then decided telling Richard wouldn't hurt. "And this ring can help. It was a gift from some friends, a magic that we Changelings cannot use unless we know its secret. Luckily, I do."

"A magic ring, Frodo?" he grinned.

"Perhaps," Rey replied, "and if you guess what I've got in my pocket, you might win a prize." She was already running ideas through her head of what the prize might be, if he decided to play the game.

"One half-used napkin that you picked up with the bratwurst on a stick and," he glanced down the length of her body wondering where a pocket might be in that dress. "A ring?"

"You win," Rey replied, and crooked her finger, inviting to bring his head closer to hers. He leaned down.

"Your prize is a kiss. Your choice of time or place, if you wish to claim it." She smiled, "though I hope it will be before we must part this evening."

"A prize? I cannot resist such a prize offered by you." He enveloped her in a hug that lifted her up off her feet and brought his lips close to hers. He paused and turned his great head slightly to look at her with one, human eye as if to make sure this was okay with her.

Rey slid her arms around his neck, and one hand moved up the back of his neck. She pushed gently at the back of his head as she moved hers in closer. He relaxed then, understanding she wouldn't hold back due to his bestial appearance, and leaned into a kiss. It was warm for that short time they shared. When the kiss was over he set her back on her feet gently.

She was reluctant to leave the circle of his arms, and not just because the night was becoming cooler. Smiling up at him with her pleasure in the kiss for all to see on her face, she said "I hope we do that again soon."

He looked away toward the House of Haunts, made a decision, then picked Rey up in a hug and kissed her again. "No time like the present," he told her.

She did something rather un-Rey-like, and giggled. This time, she initiated the kiss, making it long and slow, though her desire for him likely overrode her attempt to make it sweet.

When he finally released her and set her down again, Rey saw the happiness in his eyes. He took her hand and said, "Our courage thus reinforced, we can now face the House of Haunts!"

Rey, her cheeks faintly flushed, nodded and together, they headed toward their destination.

When they got closer to the line up to get in, Rey silently appealed to the spirit in the fetish as she activated it. Rey sensed there was some supernatural effect that was placed on her doll and that the one of the four women that had recently walked by had a sense of some kind of supernatural effect as well, although Rey couldn't tell if she herself was a supernatural being. The group of four had stopped at the balloon-busting stand.

With her attention drawn to them, Rey noted now they were all attired as some sort of priestess or princess of a bygone age. Their outfits were short, even a little skimpy, mostly white and they wore gold-colored necklaces bracelets and a variety of rings. One of them, not the one that had drawn her attention, but a blonde that seemed otherwise mundane, had a tramp stamp in the image of a lovely, dark-haired woman in a reclined position. Most of it was hidden by her skirt.

"I want to take a look at the stand where I won the doll," Rey said softly. "There's definitely something supernatural about it, and I want to see if I get anything else there."

Richard looked alertly toward the stand and nodded. They approached the group of animated women who were clearly having a good time. They were terrible shots with the crossbow, but it didn't stop them from shelling out some money for extra bolts to try. When they got close, one of the women, a woman with medium-length straight black hair cut so that the back was significantly shorter than the sides backed up suddenly as she tried to aim the toy-sized crossbow and bumped Richard. She fired, missing completely and managing a ricochet the proprietor had to dodge.

"Oop!" she cried, still laughing. She turned around while saying, "Sorry!" Then she got a look at Richard. "Whoa!!" Her friends all turned to look, too. They all went silent as they got an up-close look at Richard, then Rey too.

It occurred to Rey that the tattoo reminded her of Queen Cassandra's fae mien, except that the hair was black instead of blue-green vines with tiny leaves. That led her to remember where she'd seen the style of outfit before. The four women were indeed dressed as priestesses and all were in ancient Babylonian style — much as the Spring Queen had worn at the Siege of Iron Mountain.

Tapping into her own talent for Kenning, Rey spotted a shimmer about the brunette. Her hair was piled up and held with costume jewelry in a conical style and she had pretty green eyes. She wasn't really thin, nor could she be called overweight; she had a lot of curves men probably found quite attractive, but her face was the prettiest thing about her. Rey thought there was some glimmer of magic about her, but she couldn't say the woman was herself a supernatural being.

"Sorry about getting in your way," Rey said politely. "We didn't mean to startle you." She smiled apologetically as she let her eyes run over what they were wearing. "Very nice costumes," she said. "Based on something Sumerian, aren't they?"

"A bit later than that," said the curvy brunette with green eyes, "but really close. You must know your history." She looked at Rey with calculating eyes.

Rey just shrugged. "Sometimes you just remember stuff, you know? Anyway, happy Hallowe'en." She smiled and threaded her fingers as best she could through Richard's and looked up at him. "House of Haunts now?" she asked, confirming their next destination.

Once they were out of earshot of the women, Rey said "Did you recognize what those women were wearing?"

Richard shook his head slowly. "No. Is it significant?"

"Perhaps," Rey said. "They're wearing clothes that Babylonian priestesses wore, and the blonde has a tattoo that looked remarkably like Queen Cassandra.

"I don't know if it has anything to do with what's going on here, but I think we just met some of Ishtar's worshippers. And the brunette, the one who said I knew my history, I sensed something supernatural about her."

Richard gazed off in the direction of the four women. They'd moved on, heading for a food stand. "Hm. Not simply ensorcelled, then. That is interesting. I wonder what the Spring Queen is up to. I bet Veridia would very much like to know."

Rey nodded. "If the Spring Queen believes she is Ishtar, then it makes sense she's collecting worshippers. Perhaps the brunette is a recruiter. A high priestess or something."

"I'm not very good at this sort of thing," Richard said. "Investigating. But you are the Witch of the Bitter Wind. What do you want to do?"

Rey was quiet as she thought. "What Queen Cassandra may be up to has to wait. The possibility of something bad happening here has to take precedence." She looked at the haunted house. "If whoever is behind the carnival is harming people, or worse, it has to be stopped."

Richard considered. "That might be an interesting challenge. If there's trouble, then it just so happens my axe is not a prop. Lead on, my lady." He stepped backward as he bowed to give his horns space.

Rey nodded, and waited for him to rise before heading for the House of Haunts. There was a line of people waiting to go inside, many of whom were talking about how scary they heard it was.

Rey got at the end of the line and listened for a while. After a couple of minutes, she asked one of the people talking if he'd heard what kinds of things they had inside.

A short, rotund man in a sasquatch mask looked up at her. "What happens in there? What happens!! Well. I don't know. But I heard that the scariest stuff you can imagine happens in there. It's so scary you only need to see it once, and you never need to go again because it like imprints on your brain! I got three tickets."

"Where'd you hear that?" Rey asked excitedly. "Have you talked to anyone who's been through?"

"Oh yeah sure! My cousin, he's headed up to the dance area, heard it from this guy who came out a little bit ago," he exclaimed, ignoring the fact he hadn't actually spoken to anyone at all who'd been through it directly.

"It sounds great, doesn't it," Rey said with a bright smile up at Richard, and then she turned that smile on the man she'd been talking to. "Where do you get tickets? I hope they haven't sold out."

"There's a man with a tall hat," he chattered. He's just over there near the big Haunts sign. "You can get them from him."

"How much do they cost?"

"Ten dollars. Pricey, I know right? But this is gonna be so worth it!" short round piped.

Rey grabbed Richard's hand, turning her back on the little man. "I'll go get us some tickets. Don't lose our spot. We can't miss this!" Her voice held excitement, but she rolled her eyes before she walked away and headed towards the man with the tickets.

She watched the man as she approached.

He was standing right where the little fellow had indicated and he wore a tall, red top hat. He was as freakishly thin as the proprietor of the stand with the balloons and crossbows, but dressed in black slacks and a red topcoat. Rey thought he must be as tall as Richard.

He turned his face toward Rey as she approached and smiled, revealing worn, yellow teeth, some of them broken. His long, beak of a nose pointed directly at wherever he looked. "Tickets for the House of Haunts?" he offered with a flourish that revealed a fanned handful of the tickets. "Only ten dollars a piece."

"I'll take two," she said, and handed the man the money.

"Ah!" he said and snatched the twenty out of her hand. He closed the hand with the tickets and opened it again, producing two of them, which he then presented to Rey. "May you have the experience of a lifetime."

She took the tickets from his hand with a smile and a nod, and returned to Richard's side. "Got them," she

said with a bright smile. "The man wished us to have an experience of a lifetime."

"Sounds pleasant. And your timing is perfect. It looks like we are up next," said Richard. The line of people had filed in, disappearing inside a door into blackness beyond, from which Rey could hear screams. He offered her his arm.

She took a steadying breath, and placed her hand on his arm as they were going out for a lovely evening stroll.

They went inside and suddenly Rey was alone. There was no door, no exit. The sky was filled with light. Sunshine shone in shafts through the tangled limbs of trees. Far to the left and right, Rey could see the Hedge Rows that marked the boundary of His garden.

Then he heard him laugh, low, long and menacing.

"Welcome home, my pretty little wolfling."

Rey started to shake, terror suddenly seizing her and rational thought fled. She crouched down and looked around frantically for a place to hide. It was shady under the trees, but it didn't provide cover. She saw two routes she could take — forward away from the voice or back toward it since to go left or right would send her directly into the cruel thorns of the Hedge.

Every instinct screamed to run away from her Keeper, but a voice in the back of her head told her she was a fool to simply run. She forced herself to turn around and go back. He was always near the entrance to the Garden. He hardly ever came in, unless He had his "puppies".

His puppies, his briarwolves who had torn apart the one of the few friends she had here as she was forced to watch. Rage started to course through her, warring with the terror. She would tear them apart, just as she did before.

He was there, waiting for her at the entrance of the garden. Today he'd chosen to look like an old man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a black suit that looked like a macabre version of something more commonly worn in a hundred years ago. He carried a silver-tipped cane and a shiny chain led to his pocket. He reached in and removed the golden watch, then put it away again.

He looked at her from under the brim of his hat and laughed again, low and menacing. "Ingenious, wasn't it? You just walked right. Through. The door. And now you're back." He started walking toward her. "So cunning. So brave. I underestimated you. But now that you are back, I think I will make you my bride.

"At least, until you die."

Rey shook her head, her eyes wild. No. No. It can't be. It's not real. It can't be. She took one step back, then another, then turned and fled back the way she came, running as fast as her feet could carry her. She heard him continue to walk calmly after her as she beat feet away from him.

Then a dark portal swam into her view, framed by a pair of trees. Inside it swirled dark colors that smeared into an impressionist version of a carnival park.

Carnival. The carnival. Must get back. Richard is there. Must get back and warn everyone. Rey swerved, altering her path and throwing everything she had to get to that portal. To get free. She leaped through and found herself suddenly stumbling out of the back of the House of Haunts. Someone caught her and when she looked up, she saw Richard looking down at her.

"Are you okay?"

Her hands closed around his arm, her claws almost breaking his skin. Still trembling with fear, her head whipped around and she looked back the way she'd came, terrified the portal was still there and the Lord of the Crossroads would follow her out and drag her back.

"No, no, no," she chanted softly, her voice breaking. "He can't get me now." Rey's still wild eyes darted back to Richard. "We have to call Veridia now. I don't... They sent me back to my *Keeper*. Her fingers dug deeper into Richard's arm. "He wants me back." Her voice had dropped to a choked whisper. "He *wants* me..."

Richard took her by the shoulders to steady her. "Rey, slow down. You need to think. You've been in there for almost an hour, but there is no way that House could link directly to your *Keeper* in Arcadia. Something scared you, but you've got to get hold of your fear before you try running to the Queen."

"An hour?" Rey shook her head. "No, it couldn't..." The terror of seeing her *Keeper* still held her, but Richard's words cut through it, slowly bringing clarity to her thoughts. He was right. How could the House have had a door to the Garden? They moved it around, from place to place. Doors had to be stationary, didn't they?

Her heart rate and breathing slowed down to normal, and a equal measures of shame and relief took her. Rey dropped her head forward to hide her face. "I can't believe I fell for it. It was so real."

"Let's get away from this strange carnival. Clear our heads. Would you like to go and dance?" he offered.

Rey wanted to go home and hide until she forgot what happened. She just wanted to be held. She wanted to hunt down the creator of the House of Haunts and tear him to bloody shreds. None of those things were useful or productive, though they'd all make her feel better to some degree.

Perhaps a dance or two might be what she needed. The right kind of dance would put her in his arms. It could be just what she needed to clear her head, just as Richard suggested. She looked up at him with a smile. "I think I'd like that."

He led her back around the pond and up to the mansion's wide patio. The orchestra was engaged in some haunting melody that was slow and measured enough to dance to. Several couples were out there executing slow spins and gracefully maneuvering around the dance area.

Richard took her hand, bowed low, and led her in what felt like a formal dance but was executed with more shared personal space and touching than many formal styles normally permitted.

It didn't take long for the negative feelings that plagued Rey to fade and be replaced with the simple enjoyment of the moment. A smile returned to her face and she watched him as they danced, admiring his grace and skill.

With each turn around the dance floor, her awareness of him returned. Each touch lingered a tiny bit longer than necessary, each movement she made contained an expression of her pleasure and gratitude.

After a while, it was time for a break. Richard led her to the refreshments. There were bowls of red punch and cups lined up already filled by the livery-clad help. He picked up a couple of them and offered one to Rey.

She accepted it with a grateful smile. "I really enjoy dancing with you," she said after taking a sip. "What was it we danced? I'm by no means an expert, but it wasn't anything I recognized from seeing on tv."

"We minotaurs are experts in improvisation," he quipped. "And also have no toes to step on. You followed my random meanderings very well."

"This undoubtedly will not be the last time I enjoy following your meanderings," Rey said, "and I definitely look forward to experiencing your improvisational skills in other areas." She smiled serenely - though the look in her eyes was playful - and drank a bit more of the punch.

He nodded sagely. "I shall endeavor to make any future ventures we have together as pleasing as you found the dance."

"I see." Rey could feel the happiness she felt at his words sneak into her smile. "I was hoping our time together tonight would not be ending so relatively early. Will you come to my home when your duties with our queen are completed, if you are able?"

"I'd be pleased to," Richard replied, "but I think it might prove inconvenient for you. Veridia needs me until daybreak."

"Ah well," Rey said. "Yes, it would, as I do have to work tomorrow. Some other evening then. And soon. Until then, we'd better make the most of the time we do have tonight."

"Have you thought more on the House of Haunts?" Richard wondered.

"What they're doing has to be through magic of some kind," Rey said, and then described everything that happened from the moment she stepped into the House of Haunts to when he caught her from falling. "Whatever it is, it can customize a waking nightmare for a person. It was perfect, even down to what He said."

She looked back towards the House of Haunts for a moment. "I don't like what's going on in the carnival. From the bewitched dolls, to the strange clown and the freakshow performers, and even the ticket seller and the proprietor of the balloon shooting booth, it all feels wrong. What was it you thought was off about that juggling clown?"

"He smelled like a predator and of blood," Richard stated.

Rey sighed and frowned. "I don't think we can just let this go. The carnival needs to be checked out, and fast, because they'll likely disappear in the morning.."

"We'll need to be subtle. As soon as they think someone is poking around, if they're smart they'll close down the magic show and our clues will disappear," Richard mused.

Rey thought for a moment. "Did you experience anything when you went through?"

He nodded. "I was seeing the fight with the Goblin King again, only this time, we were losing. Badly. I didn't even remember we'd already beaten him and that it couldn't be real."

"I wonder if it might be the tickets," Rey said. "I don't know how to check that. I also don't remember seeing trailers or so on the carnies live in. I wasn't looking, though. Maybe we could learn something if we accidentally wander through there." Her voice dropped, and she continued, speaking more to herself than Richard. "If I had Hamilton, this would be so much easier." The lump in her throat that always formed when she thought of her little friend made its appearance and Rey swallowed it down. Now was not the time to mourn his loss.

"We require the services of a sorceress capable of identifying enchantments," he pointed out.

"Unfortunately," Rey replied, trying to keep the bitterness from her voice, "the Legate no longer has the cell phone I bought for her, and I have no idea how to get in touch with her." She turned to look at Richard. "I

hope you do, or have someone else in mind."

"When our Queen summons her Legate, she commands a ghost to whisper the summons into the Legate's ear. Veridia can't be disturbed right now, but perhaps there is another with power over the dead?" Richard offered.

Rey remembered Joshua had knowledge of spirits and such. It was conceivable he might have some ability to interact with ghosts as well.

"Now that I think of it, there may be someone who could help us contact her," Rey said, and retrieved her cell phone from the pouch at her waist. She dialed the number Lord Joshua had given her, hoping he would answer. If he could speak with ghosts and get them to do things as Veridia did, that would certainly be a useful skill for the Witch to have.

The phone picked up and Rey heard the faint tones of classical music playing in the background. "Hello?" came Joshua's dry-sounding voice.

"Good evening, Lord Joshua. This is Rey," she said. "How are you this evening?"

"Basking in the solemn ritual of the changing of the year — or so some ancient traditions have it. How are you, Rey? Or rather, how is the study of your particular subject going?"

"Quite well, thank you," she replied, "but I'm afraid this is a business call, rather than a social one. Richard and I have encountered a potentially dangerous situation for the Duchy, and we require the assistance of the Legate. I was wondering if you might be able to help."

"The Legate? But what is it you require of me?" he wondered.

"I have heard of the ability to communicate with ghosts," Rey said, "and being able to get them to carry messages for one. I was hoping, in your study of ghosts and spirits, you might have learned how to do so. And if you have, if you would send a message to the Legate and ask her to come to my assistance." She deliberately phrased her request so that if any favors or payment must be owed, it would be by herself, and not Richard.

"Ahhh, I see," he said. "It is true I picked up some bit of magic that allows communication with the dead. I had thought at one time to use these powers to contact ghosts and learn of the mysterious spirit world through them, but it turned out to be less useful than I'd hoped. But still, even my meager magics in this area should be enough to cajole a ghost into delivering a message to our Legate of Mists.

"Of course, even a ghost must often search for a person through mundane travels, and sometimes ghosts require some form of empowerment in order to leave their normal haunts for long. So, it is helpful if you have some idea of where I might send our courier-apparition?"

Rey told him where Mizuko would likely be. "If there is a cost you must pay, and a favor of equal value you might wish in return, one that I might repay in the next turning of the moon, then I will gladly do so." She hoped that as a member of the Lord Sages, they would do such little favors for each other without compensation, but it would be rude to simply expect it.

He chuckled. "Don't worry about that, Rey. We Sages must look out for one another, few as we are. I will empower the ghost only to be able to speak. It won't be visible or able to physically touch anyone. What message would you like delivered? "

"Please have the ghost say 'Rey needs your help immediately at Tyrone Hamilton's estate'," Rey said. "I appreciate your help with this, Joshua."

"Of course, Rey. I'll get to it now since I can't accurately predict exactly how fast the message will be delivered."

"I understand," Rey said. "Again, I truly appreciate it." After returning her phone to her belt pouch, she looked up at Richard. "The message will be on its way to Mizuko shortly. In the meantime, perhaps we should wander around the carnival a bit more, get a better idea of what's where. What do you think?"

"Yes, why not," agreed Richard.

The couple roved over the carnival area discovering a few rides were available, including what looked like a shortened "tunnel of love" that had cars instead of boats. Big tents that held special attractions such as the wolf-boy and strong man had lines for tickets and opened at set times until midnight. At the furthest reaches of the carnival was a gated section that held various trailers and other mobile abodes. A sign on the gates informed the curious that beyond that point was private and not open to the public.

Rey's phone rang as they read the sign. She didn't recognize the incoming number.

"Lafitte," she said briskly, figuring businesslike was better than too familiar.

"The voices told me you needed me?" came Mizuko's uncertain voice.

"Mizuko," the relief was obvious in Rey's voice. "I'm so glad the message got to you. Sorry about how it did, but we didn't have many options." She quickly filled her friend in on what happened - though no specifics of the "nightmares" she and Richard had. "We're hoping you can help us figure out what's going on, and if it poses a real danger."

"Of course," she said. "You're motley. Where is this Tyrone Hamilton's place? If I tell a cab driver the name, will he know it?"

"He should," Rey replied, but gave her the address just in case. "We'll be waiting for you at the gate. I'll take care of the entrance fee and the cost of your cab for you. We need to work fast. It looks like everything is shutting down at midnight."

"Okay," Mizuko agreed and then hung up. She never was much for goodbyes.

The Hallowe'en Ball, Part II

Twenty minutes later, Mizuko met Rey and Richard at the front gate to the estate's rear gardens. Mizuko was wearing what looked like a waitressing uniform — black pleated skirt, a miniature apron (still damp in spots from spilled drinks), and a dark green v-neck sweater. She walked a little gingerly in her heeled shoes, having worked in them for several hours before coming here.

Rey felt a stab of distress, realizing now that she may have gotten her friend to leave work early, and possibly even costing her her job. She quickly paid the cab and gave a small cash donation for Mizuko, then led her companions off to one side so they could talk. She glanced up at Richard, then filled Mizuko in on what else they'd seen while wandering around.

Mizuko absorbed what Rey told her, then signed, "May I have a ticket to the House of Haunts? I'd like to see if the ticket itself is enchanted, or if it's something else. Also, I need to be within several yards to really get a good read on people and powers, so maybe you can take me to the places and people you want me to

check."

Rey took the last of her cash out. "I've got thirty left," she said, and handed Mizuko one of the tens. "We'll head over toward the House of Haunts, with you, but I think it might be best if you bought the ticket. The guy in the top hat by the sign is selling them." She looked at Richard to see if he was okay with the plan so far. He seemed to be.

She gave him a little smile, then turned her attention back to Mizuko. "This is the doll that winked at me." Rey held it out to Mizuko.

After Mizuko took the doll, she approached the ticketmaster for the House of Haunts and acquired a ticket from him. Then they moved out of the main trails through the carnival into the shadow of one of the stall tents. There Mizuko examined the ticket, the doll, and Rey as well. She frowned and then held her hand up in front of her face and studied it. Then she handed the ticket and doll back to Rey.

"Well, that's probably not good," she signed.

"I rather figured there was something bad," Rey said, mainly for Richard's benefit. "What do you see?"

Mizuko was a little frustrated by what she saw. She took a breath and let it out in a huff through her nose. "There is recent traces of some kind of mind-affecting or illusion magic on that doll, but it's not active anymore. The magic on the ticket is mostly gone, as well, although it seems to have transferred to me. The same pattern is on you, too, Rey, though it's almost completely faded away. The magic isn't fae, either. It combines aspects of Space and Mind magic, but I can't say I understand what exactly it does. Something to do with the mind and something to do with ... other places. Like, going somewhere or transporting, or maybe just seeing someplace else without being there. I don't know. I really can't tell. If I could have taken this ticket back with me without the magic in it being triggered already, I could have studied it for a couple days, really figured out what it does."

Rey translated softly for Richard as Mizuko signed, and the Fairest's face paled when her friend mentioned transporting. She wanted to take a step closer to Richard, seek shelter in his presence, and she dropped her eyes to the ground so Mizuko wouldn't see the flare of anger at her weakness and misinterpret it. "Does Richard have traces of the magic on him as well?"

"I couldn't see... let me try again," Mizuko signed. She looked at him sharply and then nodded.

"Do you think there might be a way to get a ticket and not have the magic transfer?" Rey asked. The measure of calm Richard had helped her achieve was beginning to fade.

"Maybe with gloves?" Mizuko guessed.

"Unfortunately, I don't have any." Rey was thinking about what Mizuko had said, about the kind of magic she'd detected. Ramiel would be able to tell her more, but there were several problems with it, not the least of which was she didn't want to have any contact with him, not yet. Not until the situation back in Eldon Well was dealt with. She shivered slightly from the chill in the air, and rubbed her hands over her upper arms, hoping to erase any incipient goosebumps.

Richard put an arm around her, his hand settling to her waist. "It's all right. We might not have the kind of time you'd need to figure out the magic on the ticket," he said. "But now we know it is magic and not some drug-induced hallucination. I wonder who is in charge of this carnival?"

Rey shifted closer to Richard because he was warm (she told herself) and looked at the ticket Mizuko handed to her. She hadn't really looked at it before. "Doctor Raymund Faust's House of Haunts. Admit One," she read aloud. "It looks really old." She turned it over. "And a little bit crumpled, like they reuse the tickets."

She looked at the front of the ticket again as she shifted slightly, turning so more of her back was against Richard. "Maybe we ought to check the library out and see if there's any records about this Dr. Faust and the carnival being here before. For the amount of stuff they've got, someone must have seen them coming onto the property, but there was nothing in the news about it at all." That filed-tooth clown suddenly made Rey remember the clown from the Stephen King story *It*. Absurd to think that the carnival may have just appeared out of nowhere, but it was Hallowe'en, and strange magics were in use.

Mizuko knew about the public library, so she signed, "Except the library closed at seven. It's eleven now. Any research there will have to wait until tomorrow."

"I know," Rey sighed, and tilted her head up so she could look at Richard. "And half an hour before the limo returns for us."

Mizuko looked at Rey curiously, her eyes flicking to Richard and then back.

"Doesn't leave us much time to figure out what's going on," Rey said, letting Mizuko's silent question go unanswered for now, "but Richard's right. We should find out who runs the carnival. If we find that person, then we might get a better idea of what's going on."

Richard made a thoughtful sound. "We'll need to ask around. The ticketmaster?"

Rey nodded. "Sounds like a good enough place to start. We should also keep an eye out for signs and posters, announcing where the carnival is going to be next. They might have the name of the owner on it, or some other clue we could use."

The three moved out and shortly found a poster on a cart where tickets were sold for various games. The faded, torn poster claimed they would be in Houston ten years ago. There appeared to be no other posters around indicated where the carnival might be next or where they had been.

Mizuko frowned as she read it.

"What are you thinking," Rey asked her friend. She got out her cell phone and turned on the camera so she could take a picture of the poster.

She signed, "I'm not sure this carnival is real anymore."

"I hope it's at least partially real," Rey said, "because I ate some meat on a stick that I purchased from one of the vendors." The thought that she might be in for more trouble because she ate something.. bad or wrong, worried her. "With the magic you sensed from the tickets," she softly and quickly, "is it possible the carnival has been taken out of the normal world, and populated by... things that aren't human or fae?" Rey snapped a picture of the poster.

"Yes," Mizuko said. "Built based on information taken from our minds."

"So if we can make everyone disbelieve what they see," Rey said, "they might disappear?"

"I doubt it," Mizuko signed. "Just because this place and things we see here were modeled on the mind of mortal and supernatural beings doesn't mean they aren't real."

"Then I'm not quite sure I understand what you meant by the carnival not being real anymore," Rey said after translating for Richard's benefit.

"That was a general comment," Mizuko stated.

"Okay," Rey said, realizing she probably wasn't going to get the best answer from her friend about this kind of thing. "Do you think the people who went through the House of Haunts are in any lasting danger?"

Mizuko shook her head and put her hands up in a shrug.

"Then we have to hope there won't be." Rey shifted her stance, inadvertently rubbing against Richard. "And hope they're not watching what the magic is creating in our minds." She still wasn't confident that she somehow hadn't somehow been transported back to her Keeper's domain. Any chance He might have forgotten her would have been destroyed when He saw her.

Mizuko tilted her head slightly as she stared at Rey, wondering what it was that bothered her.

Rey quickly signed "When I went into the House of Haunts, I thought I was back with my Keeper, and only managed to escape through a portal back here to the carnival."

"If it was real," Mizuko signed, "then know one really knows where you went but you. If it wasn't real, then maybe you didn't go anywhere. Either way, your Keeper was invoked. How do we really know anything? We must find the carnival's master, but we have almost no time left."

Rey quickly repeated aloud what Mizuko had said. "The ticket master for the House is the best place to start, I think. It's the center of this whole thing."

As they headed back in the direction the ticketmaster had last been seen, they noted the lights going out in some of the big tents, their final shows of the evening finished. Richard frowned. It must be dangerously close to 11:30.

The ticketmaster wasn't there. The group looked around and thought they caught sight of him slipping between the tent-stalls of food vendors. Rey made to follow him, almost at the point of not caring who saw she was following. Finding the man was more important than getting caught.

As they threaded their way between the tents, Richard caught a glimpse of red hat and top coat and black slacks disappearing around a corner and they rushed after him. The short chase led them to an isolated clearing near a grove of stunted, high-altitude trees. There was a fountain there with a bronze cast statue of some winged Greco-Roman goddess. But there was no sign of the ticketmaster. Rey recognized the statue represented Nemesis.

"Drat," Rey muttered, frustrated at having lost the ticketmaster. "And what a wonderful omen she makes." She gestured at the statue, then looked around to make sure they were alone before speaking again. "I don't suppose you can detect if some kind of magic was used here," she asked Mizuko.

Mizuko nodded and then moved closer to the statue, then concentrated. The statue fixed her attention and she stepped into the fountain's surrounding water and climbed atop the pedestal. She held the statue for balance (it was a little larger than life sized) and pressed her ear against it.

"What do you hear?" Rey asked, puzzled.

Mizuko leaned back and looked up into the face of the goddess of vengeance. She nodded a couple times, as if listening to something. Then she stepped back through the water and left the fountain. She signed, "There is no sign of magic here."

Okay, Rey thought. "Who was talking to you?"

Mizuko avoided Rey's eyes. "Um. The statue?"

"What did it say," Rey asked in Glymjack Cant. She wondered if this was a manifestation of her friend's low clarity of spirit, or perhaps something else.

Mizuko responded in sign. "She reminded me I haven't had supper tonight and that I shouldn't skip it again."

"Very good advice," Rey signed back, then looked up at Richard. "If Mizuko didn't detect any magic," she said aloud, "and the magic she did back at the carnival wasn't fae, I don't think there's anything more we can do. If it was a Mage, I don't think we have any way of tracking him, especially if he used some kind of portal." She thought for a moment, then asked Mizuko "Can you sense if there's an entrance to the Hedge nearby?"

Mizuko nodded that she could sense such things, but stated that there was no Gate to the Hedge near here. She told Rey that she suspected the ticketmaster noticed he was being followed and simply doubled-back somehow.

"He could have doubled back," Rey said with a nod. "And we'd better get back too. Being late would be a Bad Thing." As they were hurrying back to the entrance, Rey offered Mizuko the last of her cash to pay for the cab ride home or back to work, wherever she needed to go. The icy nymph accepted the cash, then cast a final look at Richard before wishing them both a pleasant evening.

I wish, Rey thought to herself, but she was determined not to let her enjoyment of the last little while she had with Richard this night be spent grumbling. There would be other nights. Hopefully.

The limo arrived to take them home and Richard hesitated before leading her to the car. He leaned down and kissed her. "I very much enjoyed the evening. Including the mystery." He looked over at the car. "My time with you tonight must draw to a close but... does your time here need to end as well?"

"Everything is scheduled to finish up at midnight, the ball included," Rey said with a slight shrug. "No real reason to stick around for the last half hour." Nor did she relish the idea of being so close to the carnival alone.

He bowed slightly and waved the driver away from the door. He opened it for her himself then followed her inside.