

BONUS SCENE

ALL BY MAH-SELLLF

Things that Aru would choose over a Halloween middle school dance:

1. An encounter with a rabid demon.
2. Her mother's "vegan special" dinner.
3. Dismemberment.

Once again, Aru was faced with the fact that the universe didn't particularly care what she preferred. The last time she'd gone to a school dance, she'd stuck it out for twenty minutes before demanding that her mom take her back home. As for Halloween, Aru hadn't gone trick-or-treating in ages. For the past two years, she'd spent the evening helping her mom run the Museum of Ancient Indian Art and Culture's Halloween fund-raising gala.

Last year, her mom had forced her to dress up as a witch (boring) after the previous costume debacle, forever known in museum circles as the "Blue Monkey Scandal." Aru's costume hadn't dried in time, and she *might* have gotten paint all over the patrons....

“For a bunch of art people, they really don’t appreciate *art*,” Aru had argued. Her flying-blue-monkey outfit had taken three weeks to put together, and she was still pretty proud of it. This year, though, Aru really had the perfect costume. She, Mini, and Brynne had coordinated their efforts. If they could’ve just stayed in the museum and thrown their own party, that would’ve been fine. But *noooo*. In less than fifteen minutes, she’d be stuck at the Otherworld’s middle-school dance. Boo was a chaperone and had to report early for duty, so he’d already left. Mini and Brynne were going separately. Aiden was supposed to walk across the street so he and Aru could go through the elephant portal together. Which was *another* issue . . .

As she waited for him, Aru bounced Vajra, in Ping-Pong-ball form, off the tile floor. The curled-up lightning bolt hummed, as if deep in thought.

It was a party. There would be dancing. Her best friends would all be dancing. But would they be dancing with *each other*? It’d be fine if Aiden asked any of them to dance, including Aru.

But what if he didn’t?

For the tenth time that day, Aru groaned and turned to her mom, who had just finished placing a fake cobweb on the stone elephant at the museum’s entrance.

“Do I *have* to?” she asked.

“Yes,” said her mother, not looking up from her work.

“I could get lost!” said Aru, listing all the reasons *not* to go on her fingers: “I could choke on something. I could slip and fall and get a concussion and forget where I live and become a mole person. It’s *dangerous*.”

Her mother deigned to raise her head and lift a single eyebrow.

“You’re dangerous.”

This was sort of a compliment. At least, Vajra beamed. But it was kind of like her mom was saying *The party is more scared of you than you are of it*, which Aru highly doubted.

Her mother’s eyes widened a bit. “Beti... is *that* your Halloween costume?”

Aru glanced down at her poufy purple skirt and green cape. “Yup. Brynne and Mini have the other matching outfits.”

“Oh,” said her mom, looking bemused. “Well, as long as you’re not alone wearing that...”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

But before her mother could answer, the doorbell rang. Aiden stood at the threshold, wearing his usual green jacket and dark jeans, his camera around his neck. He stared at Aru like she’d grown an extra head.

“Why are you dressed like ginger Dracula?”

Aru scoffed. “I’m one of the Sanderson sisters—Winnie. You know, from *Hocus Pocus*? Mini is going as Sarah, and Brynne is dressing up as Mary.”

Aiden blinked at her.

“Why didn’t you dress up? It’s Halloween.”

“I *am* dressed up.” Aiden shrugged and lifted his camera. “I’m incognito Peter Parker.”

“That’s the laziest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Half of genius is efficiency, Shah,” he said. “So, ready to go?”

“No.”

“Too bad.” Aiden raised his camera, Shadowfax, to his face.

“*Wait!*”

“Smile!”

The camera clicked.

Fifteen minutes later, Aru and Aiden were waiting for Brynne and Mini at the entrance to the Night Market. When it came to dance decorations, Aru had seen some pretty awful examples: soggy ribbons dangling from broken fans, dingy lighting, straight-out-of-the-freezer chicken nuggets. The Otherworld’s idea of decoration was somehow better . . . and worse.

For one, they had let the Court of the Seasons—Spring, Summer, Autumn, Pre-winter, Winter, Summer, and Monsoon—do the designing. Pre-winter and Winter must have been responsible for the dance floor, which was made of smooth, sparkling ice in the middle of what was usually the Pandavas’ training field. Enchanted ice sculptures shaped like skeletons were doing the Macarena off to the side. Someone had hauled a moon out of the sky and set it spinning like a disco ball. Its light glinted off the arena. The effect was really pretty. It was also really *slick*, and one poor rakshasa boy with cloven hooves kept slipping and skidding into the greenery around the edges. Spring must have been responsible for that part. Huge, thick vines formed the border, and more crisscrossed into a flower-studded dome over the middle of the rink. To the left was a banquet table, and to the right loomed the nosy enchanted kiosks and tents that were spying on the party. Monsoon had conjured the leaping fountains that lined the paths from the various portals to the dance floor, and Summer, who hated everyone, must have made the great banner waving over the dome: ENJOY THIS BRIEF RESPITE FROM YOUR CRUSHING MORTALITY.

“That’s uplifting,” said Aru.

Aiden snapped a picture.

Around them, kids in costumes danced or tried to sneak off behind the vines. In the distance, Aru saw Boo swooping over the party, yelling things like:

“Leave room for Vishnu!”

Or:

“I see you, Pranav Cheti, and I will call your parents if you jinx anyone else!”

A couple kids walked past them, eyes widening at Aru’s costume, with its bright red wig and fake buckteeth.

“I don’t think anyone gets your costume, Shah.”

“It’s way better than your Peter Parker getup.”

When another kid shook his head while looking at Aru, she hollered, “I’m a Sanderson sister. From *Hocus Pocus!* Get some culture!” Aru crossed her arms. “It’ll make a lot more sense once Brynne and Mini get here.”

“Might wanna rethink that,” said Aiden quietly.

Mini and Brynne walked toward them. Aru’s stomach *dropped*. Mini was dressed up as a unicorn. Brynne was . . . a saltshaker. Both of them waved sheepishly, and Aru caught Mini’s hiss:

“*See?* I told you she was serious!”

“Oh, Aru . . .” muttered Brynne.

“I thought we were going to be the three Sanderson sisters!” Aru said, pointing at her now-ridiculous costume.

“I think I was allergic to my wig,” said Mini. “I tried to wear it, Aru, *honest*. I texted you that I changed, but you guys got here before we did.”

Brynne offered no such apology. “I seriously thought you

were joking, Shah. My bad.” She turned to Aiden and grinned. “Incognito Peter Parker?”

Aiden high-fived her and shot a *told-you-so* glare at Aru.

“Relax, Shah. If anyone laughs at your costume, I’ll punch them,” said Brynne, draping her arm around Aru’s shoulder. “Now let’s get to the important part of this party: food spread.”

“We’re not dancing?” asked Aiden.

“With who?” Aru blurted. “Like, all of us? As friends? Or, like, one at a time? Slow or fast songs? Or—”

She shut up real quick when she saw the others looking at her strangely.

“You know what? I hate dancing,” said Aru.

Mini frowned, as if she knew that wasn’t true but didn’t want to contradict her in front of Aiden.

“Okay...? Well, if you change your mind, that’s where I’ll be,” said Aiden. He tapped his camera. “I told Hanuman I’d get some shots for the Council’s newsletter. Mini, wanna come?”

“Fine, but I don’t like dancing, or being within coughing distance of people.”

“Noted.”

“To the food we go!” said Brynne, dragging Aru to the spread.

Usually, Aru’s experience of refreshments served at dance parties was a long, sagging table full of food that looked as if it had gone past *expired* and straight to *mummified*. But not this time. There were shimmering chocolate fountains, fragrant disks of dosas, silver dishes piled with pomegranates, and delicate pumpkins made of spun sugar that hopped down the length of the golden table. Everyone except Brynne and Aru was on the dance

floor. Brynne examined the treats, sometimes spooning a bite to Aru and testing her on the salt levels, to which Aru usually responded: “Salty?”

From here, it was impossible not to hear the music. They were playing Top 40 hits, but through Otherworld speakers, so the sounds were richer. The tunes were filtered through a sieve of magic so the very rhythm sparkled on Aru’s skin like scattered starlight. Abruptly, the fast song that was playing came to a halt . . . and Aru’s heart began to race for no reason.

“You should go dance,” said Brynne around a mouthful of chocolate. “You’re really good—I’ve seen you.”

“No—”

“Aiden needs to dance with *someone*,” said Brynne, eyeing a new snack. “And Mini won’t. Last time I did, I nearly broke his toes. You should go rescue him.”

Well, Aru *was* a hero. It was her divine duty to rescue people, etc., etc.

Brynne playfully shoved her forward. “Go!”

“Okay, okay!” said Aru.

When she got to the dance floor, it was packed. She could barely see through the throngs of beings in costumes.

“Watch the horns!” yelled someone to her left. “They’re real!”

“Sorry,” mumbled Aru, pushing through the crowd.

Mini? Aru called through her mind link.

Aru! I just left to get some punch. Want one?

Nope. Did you see Aiden?

He was stuck . . . in the middle somewhere.

Aru sighed. Very helpful. She turned in a circle, but all she saw were flashing scales (real or fake, she wasn’t sure), kids awkwardly slow-dancing, and kids awkwardly *not* slow-dancing.

Now the music felt too loud, like it was bursting from inside her chest. And even though the dance floor was cool thanks to the enchanted ice, her cheeks felt hot. She should just give up. He was probably dancing with someone else, and it's not like anyone had asked her—

“Shah?” said a voice beside her.

It was Aiden. He looked... *happy* to see her.

“I thought you didn't dance?”

“Yeah, well, you...”

He raised his eyebrows.

Abort! Abort! screamed Aru's brain.

“You looked like you needed rescuing,” she said.

Aiden laughed. “Fair enough. Want to dance?” He held out his hand. “My mom taught me to waltz, none of that weird side-to-side sway thing.”

Made sense, considering he was the son of an apsara.

“I can't waltz,” said Aru.

“I'll show you.”

It was loud and quiet at the same time, and Aru was holding her breath for no reason that she could explain. She put her hand in his. She wasn't sure if she was feeling his pulse or hers. Aru let the light from the stolen moon wash over her.

And then...

The music changed.

Her stomach twisted. Relief and disappointment warred inside her. She was relieved she hadn't embarrassed herself, and kinda disappointed that she hadn't had the chance. Mini's telepathic message buzzed into her mind:

On my way back! Bringing Brynne, too! And I got you some punch. Dehydration is very serious.

“Oh well,” said Aru.

“Yeah,” said Aiden, looking strangely . . . blank. Then he smiled. “Another time?”

Another time? Aru’s heart did something strange inside her chest. Maybe they’d dance again. For real. She grinned.

“I’d like that.”

Vajra leaped from ball form to bracelet form, buzzing warmly against her wrist. The ice floor felt even more slick from all the dancing. Aru sent a message to her sisters:

This floor is so smooth, I could zip back and forth and my cape would billow behind me! Who wants to join?

Mini’s response was immediate: *That sounds dangerous.*

Brynné’s response flew in next: *That sounds amazing!*

Laughter bubbled up in Aru.

See you guys soon.