

*Prologue*

When the Emerald Queen returned from Labyrinth, she was redeemed by Less Seleman's testimony. Further, she provided details of the machinations of a True Fae named the Goblin King.

During a special meeting among all the reigning regents of Summer, Autumn and Spring, Cassandra revealed the plans of the Goblin King to expand his realm. Her actions had thwarted a scheme that would have used her to expand his realm into the mortal world. He'd intended to use her to extend his power to this side of the Hedge, forging a bridge from Arcadia, through the Hedge into this world. But she'd defied him, and her friends freed the remaining leverage he had against her.

However, the Goblin King's wrath was great. Although his ambitions to encroach upon the mortal Mythic City had been curbed, he still maintained a terrifyingly powerful presence in the Hedge. Worse, he commanded an army of changelings — loyalists and hired privateers as well as his own servants — as well as dozens of fae creatures in the Hedge itself. With these servants, he engaged in war against the Duchy.

It was a vicious conflict based in terror, assassination, and subterfuge and for months the Duchy was locked in a battle for its very existence. Losses were sustained and it seemed that Oberon would never give up. The one saving grace was that the Goblin King never attempted to personally attack the Duchy in the mortal realm.

After these initial months of furious activity, things seemed to fade to the status of a shadow war. The Hedge was never a friendly place but dangers already present were intensified, fueling paranoia. In a year and a half after the opening of the conflict, the feeling of the Duchy was of nervous expectation. Labyrinth could not be located. Enemy activity could not be positively identified, but everyone feared that the Goblin King was still out there, waiting for the right moment to strike in order to inflict the greatest terror. Rumors continue that the Wild Hunt will one day come for the Iron Mountain-based freehold to destroy them all.

*The Court of Dusk*

In the wake of paranoia and fear, loss and sorrow, a new power arrived in the Desert Duchy. Known as the Umbral Court, or the Glacial Axe, its arrival was heralded by a pair of grim Knights who arrived to swear their fealty to the Duchy and announce themselves as a new Court whose purpose was to make a final stand against any True Fae that threatened free changelings. They had no system of hierarchy and no ambition to compete with the Seasonal Courts for dominance. Instead, they proclaimed their purpose was to make a final stand against the Goblin King. Their arrival drew many recruits from the Seasonal courts. Those brave souls embraced the idea that Dusk had arrived and Night was coming. They believe that the end is near and so they would make the best of it. They would make their final stand one to be remembered. Although only two arrived in the Duchy, their numbers swelled to more than twenty in a couple months.

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*Reign of the Storm King, 21 June, 2011*

Rover sat across the table from the strange man known as Less Seleman. After some... misfortunes regarding his hollow and workshop in the Hedge, the short changeling found it necessary to locate other quarters. Wardens of the Bleak Seal were known information-gathering specialist and further, Less had a reputation for helping out changelings who had just arrived through the Hedge. It wasn't a stretch to think he might be able to help Rover find some new Hedge-y digs, too.

Seleman had agreed to meet with him in a booth at one of the eateries nestled in the train station's small food court. It was open and neutral, and easy to get to. It was public, but the hum of pedestrians, even late at night like it was now, served to mask their conversation well.

Rover liked train stations, or at least he liked most of them. There was a clunky elegance about the abodes that mimicked trains themselves, and trains were one of the few pre-digital inventions of humans that he appreciated. Even though the awesomely complicated steam contraptions had faded into history, most of their stations retained their most fascinating aspects.

Not the newer ones, with their flat slabs of glass and boring concrete construction, but the ancient brickwork and pointless archways always gave him new things to consider about the minds of their architects and engineers. They drove, to him, the point that the most creative samples of humanity were... insane.

Rover rolled a rough-hewn marble of dark iron across the span of table between his hands. He'd presented Less with his troubles and how he was now on the run for nothing more than being clever and creative. Hopefully the other would have ways to get him back on his own two feet.

"Wouldn't take much." He assured Less. "Just some space to work, set up shop and get some ideas out of my head. Think you can help with that?"

The past 18 months had been a busy but profitable time for Less and the Wardens of the Bleak Seal. The war with the Goblin King meant access to goblin fruit and other Hedge materials was extremely limited. On the mundane side, weapons were channelled to the Duchy and refugees had to be hidden and moved. Several times Less had to close down doors to his Hollow where the goblin forces had discovered the opening or destroyed the usefulness of the area it led to. It was difficult work to carve new doors in and out of the Hedge - especially when he really needed more doors, not moving around the ones he already had.

Though the war had gone cold and changeling society was returning to a so-called normal, the importance of his work had only increased. Special requests from changelings asking for personal favours had been reluctantly denied of late. And so Less, dressed in his nondescript company uniform, had agreed to meet a changeling in need but had been expecting to have to present the bad news. He hadn't expected the changeling to be Rover. His work was well-known and in much demand. But still, Less played it cool, "The Hedge is a dangerous place these days, Rover. Safe havens are not easy to come by."

"Tell me about it." Rover placed his right thumb over the marble, pressing it against the smooth table top. "One good raid and... pop, you're out of business."

The final part of the statement had been emphasized by shooting the iron sphere over to his left hand. Rover managed to catch it deftly, but the action left a scratch behind on the formica.

"Still, 'not like I'm after charity. Maybe I'm down on my luck but I haven't lost my pride, or *all* my marbles. And I'm not so old that I can't start over in new digs, which could be profitable for any smart investor. With a the right resources I'm sure I could turn a trade in no time."

Less rubbed his mouthless chin as he considered the possibilities. "My organization works on behalf of the Duchy, gathering information for the security of changeling society. We've been doing it the old-fashioned way - an overheard conversation, word of mouth, carried messages. It can be a dangerous game and information gets corrupted. It would be very useful to have something reliable and innocuous that could record information for us."

Rover stopped rolling the marble around, abruptly, and carefully placed one palm over it. The other hand started smoothing out the already-perfect lines of his beard as he considered the hazard.

"Yeah... I can see what you mean. 'Had a couple of things that'd help out with that. For a while, at least. I bet I could come up with some again, or even help get the originals back if I had some help. I can't imagine it's to the Duchy's benefit that the bad guys got to them first."

"In that case, I have some warehouse space in my own personal Hollow. In return for supplying some of my

agents with useful equipment, I could clear it out for you to build your workshop. Shall we pledge our alliance?"

"Just like that?" Rover leaned back and considered the offer. Vivid green eyes peered out from under wild, white eyebrows. "Hey, I know beggars can't be choosers, but a proper shop's going to have certain requirements. Sufficient power supply, sound isolation, waste disposal... maybe some of it hazardous... stuff that you might not have considered yet.

"Why don't you let me take a look at it first? That way I can see what I'll be working with and maybe give you a better idea of what kind of production schedule might be. After all, I'd hate to get accused of dragging my feet when the reality is I don't have the space to fire a decent kiln."

"Space won't be a problem but you'll have to provide all of your own amenities," replied Less. "I'm reluctant to bring you there without a pledge from you, though. You understand." He shrugged. He played a dangerous game, sometimes, and security was important.

"Fair enough. Fair enough." Rover leaned forward so that he could toy with the marble some more. "Can't trust anyone these days, that's a lesson I learned the hard way."

He considered what was being offered. Floor space and physical plant issues were being avoided, but he had a good idea of what was waiting. All warehouses needed a few consistent concessions like large, open areas and good weatherproofing. The rest he could probably rearrange to his own liking. Even if there wasn't a river close by to provide motive power, he could usually rely on a good bolt of lightning to show up when he really needed it.

"Okay, it's a deal. Just let me know when I can start moving my stuff in."

"Sir?" Less noticed the Segeant-in-Mourning. She was a stout woman who went by the name "Worm". Despite her short and round stature, she was deceptively flexible, able to get into and out of space much smaller than herself. The darkling had dusky skin and greying hair. She was an excellent source of information about the mundane world.

"Trouble sir." She glanced quickly over her shoulder in the direction of the station's main entrance. "It would appear that a young member of the Autumn Court is being pursued and she's headed this way." She handed him her cell phone to show him the quick pictures she'd received via instant message. It showed the mortal Mask of a wild-haired young woman dressed in ragged street clothes running past a corner. Another showed her running down a side street, and the final picture had her running past the shopping center just north of the station. That meant, she might actually already be here.

"If a member of the Court of Fear is on the run sir... then it may be Kingsmen. I haven't been able to get an image of their pursuers."

"Kingsmen" was the term that changelings of the Duchy had taken to using in reference to agents of the Goblin King.

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Mizuko ran as fast as she could. There were four men on her trail, as far as she could tell and they were close. She ran into the train station, vaulted the turnstiles, and then raced for the train. Unfortunately, while the train had not yet arrived on the near tracks, a train had just let passengers off on the far side. This left a crowd traversing a path from the elevated walkway and across the entryway. Mizuko ducked and dodged, then glanced behind her to see if her pursuers were still closing on her.

That proved nearly her undoing, for she slammed right into Simon Bell. The golden Changeling dressed in a

red linen shirt over a thin tanktop and a rakish hat had one brief moment to look surprised before she hit him. Simon and Mizuko both went down near the ledge of the elevated walkway.

Mizuko jumped to her feet. She glanced at the man she'd collided with and for a moment she stopped, staring. Her eyes dilated at the handsome rogue, an embarrassed, apologetic smile curled the edges of her lips and she seemed to forget herself for a moment.

Then one of the hispanic men chasing after her shouted as he and his buddies closed. Her attention was torn away from Simon and she leaped, off-balance onto the tracks five feet below. It wasn't a bad jump and it might have ended well except that the gravel shifted under her left foot and she fell hard across the tracks. Light flashed before her eyes and she knew there was something seriously wrong by the sound of a wet snap as her ankle gave way.

On the platform above, a few travelers saw what happened, as did Simon. A woman screamed, "Look out! The train is coming!" A glaring headlight lit up the tracks, announcing the imminent arrival of the train.

Honoré Lafitte was not far away when all of this was taking place. Though she was too far away to see what had happened to the waif-ish changeling after she jumped off the ledge to the tracks below, she knew it couldn't be good by the screams of the crowd and the oncoming train.

If he'd had time to think about it, Simon probably wouldn't have done anything, but his sense of self-preservation went out the door when he saw a damsel in distress. He dropped to the ground a little more carefully than she had and hurried to grab her. Pulling her back up would never work in time, but maybe he could move her to the opposite platform before they both got smushed.

Less had slid from the booth as soon as Worm showed him the pictures. The sudden convergence of changelings on his base of operations had him on edge. *It's like Grand Central around here*, he thought bitterly. Umbrella in hand, he rushed to head off the Kingsmen. He hoped his railway uniform would distract them enough that the golden changeling could help the woman on the line. "You there!" he shouted authoritatively. "This is a paid fare zone. Let me see your tickets."

The four of them, all rough-looking Hispanic men, stopped. They looked to where the woman had fell and from a signal from the leader, they turned and fled.

With only moments before the screeching train would strike them both, Simon was able to roll them both clear of the steel locomotive. He came to a stop on top of her in the middle of the wide, safe region between the trains. While lights flashed and the train came to a stop behind them, he was able to rise to his hands and knees to get a good look at her. Her pale skin reflected the sparking lights of the stopping train. Her hair was brown with silver-blue streaks. She had pointed ears and purple irises framed by almond-shaped eyes that were locked on his face. She was quite beautiful. Though she was in pain because her ankle was certainly broken, she made not a sound. Simon was able to be certain he was not touching her injured leg after a quick check.

Less quickly pulled open a carriage door and pushed past the off-loading passengers. He knocked aside the sliding window and looked desperately around for the two changelings, hoping they were still in one piece. He let out a long breath when he saw them lying together in the gravel and recognized Mizoku. Relieved, he smiled (somewhere) and rested his arms on the window sill. "Comfy, Mizoku? Who's your knight in shining armour?"

While the nymph answered, she never took her eyes off her handsome rescuer. She finally spoke and when she did, it was as if chimes and music flowed from her. It was riveting, unavoidable magic. It drew attention like nothing else and everyone who heard it could feel it. It made one want to listen, to come to her. She didn't speak long. "I don't know but he's handsome. My ankle hurts."

"I think it might be broken." Rover added, unhelpfully, as he stood on a bench in order to look through the window. Clearly it was broken, but nobody else seemed to be pointing that fact out. The bright gnome was used to catching things that others missed, but this one seemed obvious enough that it shouldn't take a genius to figure out.

"You should probably have someone take a look at it."

Simon shook his head a little to clear it. "We can take care of that when we're up on the platform again." He rolled off of Mizoku and said "Normally before I get this intimate with a pretty lady I introduce myself. I'm Simon Bell. Now let's get you somewhere more comfortable, okay?" Partially rising, he offered her his arm for support.

She sat up and took his arm but had great difficulty rising as she could put no weight on her ankle at all.

One of the security guards for the train station had finally made it around. He looked concerned and asked, "You folks all right?" He was a portly, middle-aged mortal with a large nose and kind eyes. "That was a close thing just now." He walked up the middle area between trains to approach them. "There are steps up around the front of the train."

"Maybe you could give us a hand?" Simon suggested. "She's having trouble walking." Simon could support her weight easily enough, but it'd be much easier to move her with someone holding the other side.

He came over and helped her up. She hopped on one foot and he made a concerned sound. "We should get that looked at young lady. There is a first aid station not far from here."

Simon put one arm around her waist to support her weight on the bad side and said "Just a little way, then we'll get you taken care of, okay?" As soon as he could get Mizuko out of sight of mortals, he'd be able to heal her ills without much trouble.

Less met them on the station and addressed the mortal security guard. "It's ok, Ian, I know this girl. I'll take care of her." Though Less perfectly comfortable in the company of mortal and changeling alike, this was obviously a changeling matter and needed to be discussed freely. He led Rover and Mizuko, assisted by Simon, to a small, windowless office that contained a first aid.

Rey slipped between the people walking down the stairs onto the main platform, moving through the crowd with ease. She pulled up short, however, when she came into sight of the three Changelings. Being chased by gang bangers, especially from the Mexican gangs, was bad news, regardless of who and what you were. She wanted to help the girl, but... She shook her head and moved toward the trio, hoping her path would intersect theirs just as they reached the first aid office - if that was where they were heading.

These weren't the first Changelings she'd encountered since arriving in Mythic City, but they were ones she could actually talk to. Maybe. Sholto told her to find Less Seleman (an interesting name, she thought, once she'd written it down), and to make sure she made herself known to the Desert Duchy. It certainly wouldn't hurt to ask them, if she caught her attention.

*Onset of Dusk*

*Six months before current day, January 1, 2011*

Veridia Fear was the Queen of Autumn. In the past she had sometimes allowed her elder sister, Lydia to take on the role and duties, but the Crown belonged to Veridia. While Lydia was frightening enough with her

extra spider limbs and all-black eyes, it was Veridia that was the most frightening of the three Fear sisters. Many outside the Leaden Mirror didn't know quite what it was about Veridia that was so frightening. She seemed like many other Darklings. She wasn't tall, but she made up for it by wearing shoes and sometimes boots with very tall heels and then hid them with her long, regal dresses. The pale Queen favored bright red lipstick that offset her stark white skin and coal-black eyes that held the glimmer of insanity.

Those close to her knew that's exactly what it was. Her eyes *held* insanity. The queen herself, despite occasional bouts of eccentricity, was hardly insane. Changelings rated themselves not on how sane they were (that would be a lie), but rather how insane they were. As insanity encroached upon a changeling's mind, the changeling's grip on reality waned.

Mizuko knew she was not the most insane changeling around, but she also had enough of a grip on her own mental health to understand she was herself far from the least insane changeling. Her experiences had eroded her sanity and consequently her Clarity to a small extent. She was okay with that, but she, like all changelings feared losing her mind. Even members of the Court of Fear knew that insanity was a thing to be dreaded.

Veridia was therefore a very frightening woman. For it was her power to unleash insanity upon any she might look upon, touch, or kiss. Not some minor obsessive-compulsive disorder or general feeling of paranoia or claustrophobia, either. Full-blown, bouncing off the walls of a padded room, lunacy. While she was also a capable witch complete with large resources and even a shop full of occult resources useful to a witch, Mizuko thought it was the insanity that Veridia held in her eyes that had truly caused Autumn to make her queen. After all, what was more frightening than losing one's mind?

Like most Autumn courtiers, Mizuko respected and feared Veridia, but managed it well. It may be wisdom to fear one's Court monarch, but it was unseemly for a courtier of Autumn to show fear. They *were* fear.

Tonight Mizuko had the privilege of attending a somewhat private meeting among the Queens of Autumn and Spring and the King of Summer. Each had brought a small retinue of advisors, of course. Mizuko had been asked to attend in case Autumn required her to silence the room. Her Siren's Voice had a strong effect when she spoke, drawing attention toward her, and subsequently toward her Queen. She was of course to remain silent unless called upon by Veridia to speak. Due to her abilities, Queen Veridia had taken to training Mizuko to one day become a true Herald of Autumn. It was difficult going, of course, since Mizuko was not terribly adept at social niceties. She tended to make mistakes at times that she often failed to understand actually *where* mistakes. As a water elemental, she was removed from humanity enough to sometimes fail to realize when she had made a social error. Veridia had needed to exercise patience with the nymph's training.

The great hall of the Duchy's Iron Mountain stronghold was therefore largely empty when the envoys of Dusk arrived. There were only two of them. A tall, pale-skinned man with long blonde hair and a woman of similar look. They wore Hedgespun red and black leather armor. The man carried a sword and the woman a double-bladed axe. They looked similar enough to be brother and sister. The three monarchs had assembled to meet them.

They both bowed to show respect to the King and Queens of the Duchy. First to Veridia who currently ruled the season as Queen of the Desert Duchy, then to the monarchs who waited their turn to lead. They were given leave to speak.

The man said, "We are the courtiers of Dusk."

The woman spoke, "Known also as the Glacial Axe."

"The Umbral Court," he said.

The woman said, "The shadow of war lengthens across this freehold."

"The shadow of the Goblin King."

"We have come to make a stand."

"We shall not allow the True Fae to pass."

The woman stepped forward and knelt. "We offer you our pledge to protect the Duchy. Know that we will lay down our lives to stop the Gentry if it means saving others from a fate worse than death."

The man stepped forward and joined his companion on one knee. "Our Court has no regent, only peers. We do not ask to reign, only to serve."

"Allow us to help you, and you have our oath."

Together, they said, "We have spoken."

To Mizuko's recollection, that was the night the Court of Dusk was established in the Desert Duchy. The new court, at first consisting only of the siblings from afar, quickly drew recruits from the other Courts. These recruits consisted of those embattled changelings who'd suffered loss or endured the terror of the shadow war too long. For these changelings, a line had been crossed and their fight or flight responses had been whittled away to fight. Desperate and determined the members of the Umbral Court were determined to make their stand.

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Rover watched them work with the injured girl and shook his head. He was looking for a little peace and quiet, someplace where he could put his talents to good use without having to worry about the building chaos. If this was the place he was hoping to find then he needed to recheck his compass. Not only was it proving itself to be a little dangerous but it was also crawling with other, easily excitable, Fae.

As a perfect example, it seemed that yet another of their kind was standing close by and watching. Plus she was another good looking one, at that, assuming one was into a little light gardening.

"So which side are you on, then?" Rover turned and addressed Rey.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," Rey replied, her soft voice shaped by a Louisiana accent. "But anyone on the run from someone belonging to a Mexican gang can use all the help they can get."

Mizuko showed a mischievous smile at that and signed something.

Simon scanned the platform, eyes lingering over the fourth Changeling he'd seen in a few minutes appreciatively, but briefly. "Let's have this discussion inside, if you don't mind. Where Mizuko here can get off her feet and I can see to fixing her up." His voice was friendly, but with an undercurrent of urgency. Saving someone from a train gets noticed, and he liked to be more in control of his notoriety than that.

Rey hesitated and glanced back over her shoulder to scan the platform before stepping into the office. She quickly surveyed the room, and then took a closer look at the people around her.

Now comfortably out of sight in the office, the nymph looked back at Rey curiously. Then noticing they didn't understand the sign language she used, she addressed the gathered group. "*Thank you for your assistance,*" she said in that voice of hers. "*Perhaps I'll catch them another time.*"

Rey's lips curved in a little smile of her own. She remembered her own chases, and she pushed aside the pang of homesickness that lanced through her. "My name is Rey. Or Brambleblush. Who were those guys?"

Mizuko answered in as soft a voice she could manage. The effect was the same, but at least she would only be heard in the confines of the room. "*Kidnappers. I meant to trap one in my lair and make him tell me where he was taking them. Mortals scare easy,* she added as an explanation. She provided a disarmingly radiant smile, which then widened into a rather wicked snarl for one so beautiful.

Simon knelt in front of Mizuko and quietly said, "Your ankle is probably broken. Hold still a second and I'll fix it, okay?"

She looked worried about that, not being a very big fan of pain, which is what she figured would happen when he reset it. She nodded and watched him with those dark eyes.

Rey couldn't help but feel like she'd found a kindred spirit in the nymph, and returned the wicked smile with one of her own. The smile softened when she turned her attention to Less. "Are you Less Seleman?" she asked.

Rover knew the answer to that one, but he hesitated to speak up on the subject. Less might want to remain incognito regardless of being recognized. That one valued his privacy highly, and rightfully so. He played a dangerous game by helping out renegades and fugitives.

The gnome also watched the procedure on Mizuko's ankle without comment. Biology and medicinal support weren't his strongest arenas. Both exhibited a fundamental lack of blueprinting and schematic documentation that left him uncomfortable. It was bad enough with humans, who at least had a recognizable genetic structure, let alone the insane mixture of reality and fantasy that crafted each individual faerie. Mapping those influences out would take a better mind and longer lifespan than his own, better that he stuck to his workshop.

Simon was also trying not to interrupt, but he couldn't leave Mizuko in pain, so he worked quietly. He gingerly held the nymph's leg and lowered his head until he was almost close enough to kiss her injured leg, then he blew on it. The feeling, he knew from experience, was like a soothing spring breeze blowing through your whole body and easing away the pain. The more intense the injuries healed, the more intense the sensations, and Simon's mystical character gave his healing an erotic electricity.

Ankle bones popped back into place, pierced skin mended, yet it didn't hurt her. Instead a sensation of relief and a wave of well-being emanated from her injury and then through her body. Mizuko sighed with half-closed eyes and a small smile. She signed and mouthed, *Thank you*. All that remained to mark the mishap was some bruising and even that would soon enough fade away, too. She took his hand in hers, giving him a thankful squeeze. His touch was cool and felt strangely like water taken shape, yet when she released his hand, it was not damp.

She had been paying attention, however, when Rey asked the identity of the suited man. "*Seleman?*" she asked hesitantly. She wore an 'oops' expression as she recalled something she'd forgotten to do.

Less responded to Rey, perhaps a little belatedly as his attention was on Simon's ministrations. "Yes. People call me Less. Pleased to make your acquaintance. I've not seen you at Court."

"That's because I haven't been," Rey replied. "I've only been in Mythic for a couple of weeks." She paused, trying to figure out how to say what she needed to. "I managed to escape my Keeper and got back home about a month ago. I tried to make it on my own, but couldn't. A Changeling by the name of Sholto suggested I come here and find you. He thought we might be able to help each other out."

Simon had stood and given Mizuko's hand a kiss before he released it, along with a warm smile to let her



know her silent thanks was appreciated. Now he turned to the new Changeling and extended his hand to her.

She took his hand, and watched him with a bemused smile when he pressed his lips to her fingers lightly in a courtly gesture.

"I'm Simon Bell. That first month is hard. So are all the ones after, in their way, but I still remember wondering if it had really worked, if it was really true. If you're here to talk business with Less, then I should probably get out of your way, but I hope to speak to you in the future, Miss..?"

"Brambleblush. Rey Brambleblush." She laughed softly, wondering if a certain man back home would have appreciated her naming convention.

"Rey, like a Ray of moonlight on a dark night to guide you, or sun to warm you. It is a pleasure. Now I'll let you conclude your business. But maybe we can all talk after? Five Lost Boys and Girls have just met, seemingly by chance. But for people like us, Fate is more likely." Simon's compliments were sincere, but he smiled with warm humor since they were also rather theatrical.

"I've learned not to argue with Fate," Rey replied, and for a moment, a dark cloud of memory crossed her face.

Mizuko nodded at Simon seriously. He'd made a good point. But the new girl had her attention for the moment and so she forgot about the assignment the Autumn Queen had given her. Mizuko leaned forward and peered intently into Rey's face. Finally, she cocked her head curiously and asked, "*Where's the blushing part?*"

A mischievous look flashed across Rey's face. "Wherever..." she paused, then changed what she was going to say. "The color of my skin." She touched her face, indicating the pale petal pink, like a blush that was fading.

She looked doubtfully at Rey, studying the skin of her face. Finally, she seemed to dismiss the matter and instead finally remembered what she was supposed to present to Less.

"*Warden Seleman,*" she said. She signed as she spoke since voice was very quiet just now. "*I am glad to have met you tonight. I would like to offer you my full services, with the blessing of the Ashen Queen. I'm quite skilled as a negotiator with things fae and **Fae**, adept and knowledgeable in things occult. I have mastery of water in form and in communion with the spirits that lie within it. She sends her regards and wishes to again express her appreciation of your services in the past and in the future and wishes for you to receive what I can offer freely and without obligation to Autumn of any kind. These words the Ashen Queen has spoken and you have now heard.*"

"*There is more. Mr. Seleman, my social situation...*" She paused and looked down at herself. Despite her personal beauty, she wore essentially rags that barely covered her. She was dirty from the fall, and her hair was a wild, unkempt mess both to mortal and fae eyes. She looked homeless and that was the truth of it. She lived exactly like a homeless person. "*Veridia told me I need to do better than I have been in the mortal world and that I still haven't learned to keep what I earn. I live in the park across the tracks to the south but I think she disapproves. I don't have any money and she says I need to learn to value mundane things a little more so that I don't embarrass our Court when she makes me Herald of Autumn.*"

"If they had that much value to begin with they'd hardly be called *mundane*." Rover chimed in.

The gnome considered the group being gathered, including the mention of fate. It was looking like quite the assemblage of talent was cuspung. Even though some of the gathered individuals had not made any sort of pledge yet, Rover felt it was only a matter of time.

"So we appear to have a healer, a charmer, an organizer and a maker of interesting things and a very lovely tree... though I'm sure your talents extend beyond being leafy, Rey. Somehow I have a feeling you'll be difficult to categorize."

That was his nature, after all. Things either made sense or they didn't. Cogs fit to gears fit to pegs; that was Rover's world. It might have been a mental shorthand that limited his associations with anything off of his tool bench, but it made him comfortable with the world.

"So which of us is the dangerous one?" Rover asked. "Or are we still in search of a gunslinger to watch our backs?"

"I have moderate fighting skills," Rey replied immediately, "and my teacher, who is very hard to please, said it was adequate. I'm also trained in firearms, with a specialty in rifles, though I'm not as good with that as I am with hand to hand. My brambles can become deadly, and I have some skill in changing shapes and communing with beasts. Wolves, to be specific." There was some pride in her voice at the last words she spoke. "I also versed in the occult, though in fields outside of our kind and those who Took us. I prefer to fight only when necessary. Fear can be a much better motivator than brute force." Rey glanced at Mizuko, remembering what the nymph had said about luring the kidnapers to her lair.

Mizuko laughed, which only worsened the distracting, disorienting effect of her *wyrd* voice. "*You should be an Autumn Court witch, like me.*"

Less' head was spinning from the revelations. "Let me get this all straight. Rover came to me for workshop space, Mizuko's services were donated by the very generous Queen Veridia, and Rey, recently arrived in Mythic, needs some help getting set up in the city. That only leaves Mr. Simon Bell without a motive. Though it is not unexpected that he be present when two beautiful young changelings come calling, and his services were welcome, these times require me to ask. Are you seeking something that would allow Fate to weave your thread with ours?"

"Would it spoil the moment if I said no?" Simon asked with a chuckle. "I was just in on the train from Santa Fe after a meeting and thinking about a cup of coffee before I went home. But Fate is a tricky bitch, and I doubt she cares what I thought I was doing. I have reasons for coming back to Mythic. My Fetch is here, even if he is 20 years older than me and has a wife and kids. I also know of you, even though I've never sought you out. Kind of thinking I might try to say hello today, in fact. Another Warden helped me out when I crossed the Hedge and when she heard I was coming back here, she said it'd be nice if I helped you out if you ever needed it. But this is too much of a coincidence to brush off. Four changelings all called to you on the same day. I'd start watching out for omens and prophecies if I were you." That last was only partly a joke.

Mizuko looked around at each of the other changelings, then signed something at Less, accompanying the message with a smile. Although the company didn't know what her signing meant precisely, her meaning was clear enough. She indicated she'd be happy to interpret the omens for Less, so apparently her sense of humor was intact.

"*Less, I can back up my commitment and promise to you with a pledge,*" she stated. "*Also, making deals and identifying fairness is a specialty of mine.*" Her statement was interesting since it was well known to Less that Autumn Courtiers tend to be quite capable bargainers and pledge-crafters. Stating this was a particular specialty indicated Mizuko had skills above and beyond that even of a typical courtier of the Ashen Court. "*We may be strangers here today, so I might suggest pledge with a duration of one month. If we discover each other to be tolerable, then we might weave a new pledge in twenty-eight days of stronger alliance and duration.*"

"I'll try just about anything for a month," Simon said, and if his attention was more on Mizuko than Less, he could be forgiven for that.

"What exactly would be involved with this.. pledge," Rey asked.

Noticing his eyes upon her, Mizuko had gazed back with open curiosity, but Rey's question brought her quickly around to the matter at hand.

*"A promise of alliance," Mizuko answered, "to stand together should any one of us be threatened for a period of one month. If you like, I can weave the Wyrd to provide us rewards for that time if you wish me to weave the vow for you; but of course any of us can do that. This can take the form of greater skill in something we all value, as well as a significant blessing in the form of some special resource or capacity."*

"And what would happen if someone chose not to honor the pledge?" Rey asked. "Nothing comes for free, so there has to be a price to pay."

Less decided that he'd better make quick study of sign language if this relationship was going to out-last the month. "I'm sure the age-old pain and suffering dealt out by breaking the oath of motley loyalty will suffice, Mizuko. Is that satisfactory for everyone? To define the blessing of our pact, what are some of the things we value? I value the safety and security of changelings, avoiding detection by my enemies and accuracy in the information I receive."

Rey thought for a moment. "Accuracy of information would be useful for me as well," she replied. "I do have some mundane connections that good info would make dealing with them easier."

Mizuko's voice, and... other attributes, made it hard to concentrate, so Simon kept quiet for the moment. He also knew he'd learn more about his new companions by listening rather than talking.

"Cast whatever you want with it." Rover remarked. "To me it's just another tool. Whatever benefit it grants, I'll find a way to make use of it."

Simon decided to speak up. "Well, accurate information is always useful," Simon said. "I might suggest that since several of us are new to the city, and even long-time residents can always use new sources of information, that we weave our Fate to bring us into contact with new groups and people, and that we seek greater understanding of the people we deal with. It's easy to get people to help you if you know what they want and need, after all."

"But what do you think about communication? What if we all had a way to communicate so Mizuko didn't have to play charades if she wants to avoid using her enchanting voice," he nodded towards the siren with a smile. "And so that others would have a difficult time listening in when we want privacy? Greater empathy for one another would still be useful then as well."

"I can see either of those propositions as useful. For me, more contacts in the city would be really helpful, but if we start this Motley on selfish intentions, it's not likely to go very far and when we all drift apart, I'd just have to find all new ones since fate would drag those I gained from your good will away when I lost it."

"You say that like there's any way to actually avoid selfish intentions?" Rover spoke. "We're helping ourselves to help others. If having contacts just so happens to benefit you outside of this crew, then I don't see the problem."

"Having our own language really wouldn't be a bad idea, though. I gotta' say this, be careful with anything you write down. Okay? Notes, maps, passwords... whatever. Treat anything on paper like our enemies can see every word. So if those words don't mean squat to anyone but us, that's just one less thing we have to

worry about."

"I think binding us with a common language is a great idea," said Less. "One coded to us alone and involving signs to include Mizuko. Can you craft that pledge for us?" he asked the young waif.

Mizuko dipped her head, indicating it was her pleasure to do so. *"If this pledge is in your heart, then agree to this pledge that I offer to you."*

*"Face to face we are, a group assembled by Fate. Though my siblings and I may quarrel, none may quarrel with my sibling and not quarrel with me. This is my oath: friendship, assistance and the blessings which bloom from both, until the moon has swung one full cycle. May our resources desert us and our skills fail should we break this vow."*

*"We had our families taken from us, but now we are a new family, bound by Fate. I swear to stand by each of you as you swear to stand by me for twenty eight days, and accepting all curses that may fall on me if I lie."*

The nymph's recitation concluded, she looked at each of her companions and waited to hear their decisions.

"As do I," Rey said softly.

Rover's mind had drifted a bit just before the recitation. The others hadn't asked exactly *why* written information was to be considered compromised. For that, he was grateful. It was a little embarrassing to admit what tools he'd let fall into the hands of their enemies. Of course, that naturally led him to think about his Roots to Branches amulet. Could Rey have been given life by such...

No, that wasn't likely. He'd never seen one of his woody homonculai take on so much life and independence. Typically they were more like dunderheaded golems than genuine folk. Certainly not in possession of the intelligence already exhibited by the leafy girl.

"Uh, sure. You got it." He managed to add, throwing in his own agreement to the pact.

Simon nodded decisively and said "I so pledge."

Less watched the others pledge themselves to each other and felt a warm compassion growing in him for them all. "I swear and pledge myself to these assembled friends: my motley."

Mizuko smiled briefly and then looked around at her new friends. She signed again, but this time each was able to pick up just a little more of the meaning. The word, "Thank" was clear, and by her body language, Mizuko was thanking them all for being daring enough to trust fate and make the commitment. She then hugged each new friend starting with Simon and ending with Less. It was perhaps a little too personal for a first meeting, but she didn't care.

"Well, now that that's taken care of we still have some unfinished business," said Less, who was still getting used to this new relationship. "Rey, you mentioned someone named Sholto. Who is this person and why did he think we could help each other?"

Rey was surprised Less didn't know who Sholto was. "He said he was from Mythic and knew you, and the Emerald Queen." It was obvious to everyone that Rey didn't quite understand what the title meant. "He was the first Changeling I saw after I returned. I almost killed him before I realized he meant me no harm." A slight blush tinged her cheeks and she shook her head. "I know next to nothing about what I've become. I couldn't stay there for long, not with my Fetch living the life I had. He suggested I come here. I'd be far enough away that it's unlikely there's be any difficult questions asked, and he said that you help the Lost. Ones that have just returned.

"I don't need help with mundane things," she said with decisive wave of her hand. "I have that taken care of. What I need help with is... this." She gestured at everyone around her. "I need to be around those like me, who have gone through what I have and can help me understand it all.

"Anyway, he said that I had skills, knowledge and connections that would be useful to you. That in exchange for my putting those skills to use helping you when you need it, you'd help me."

"He was right," replied Less. "I can introduce you to all - well - most of the Courts of the Duchy. We have quite a large society here in Mythic." Less turned to Mizuko. "Now, we need to address your situation. If the Ashen Queen thinks you need to learn to fit into mortal society then I'm going to have to arrange for an identity and find you a job. But first, you will need a place to live."

Mizuko looked alarmed at the mention of an actual job.

"I have a spare room," Rey said. "It's not much, but it's clean. You can stay with me until you can get a place of your own, if you like. I live over in Highgate Manor, on Winchester - the road that faces Iron Mountain Park."

Mizuko signed rapidly at Less and Rey and then waited expectantly. After a moment, she realized they had no idea what she just said, so she tried it more slowly this time, throwing in gestures which she thought her new friends might recognize. Surprisingly, they did manage to pick out enough words to catch her meaning.

She looked concerned because she felt she already had a home in General Hyde Park. She indicated she lived in or near the Otowi Pond there but that it was her "door" to her *other* home. One thing that didn't translate very well was that she kept pointing to herself and making curvy signs, as if trying to tell them she was a woman, which was plainly obvious.

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand what you're trying to say," Rey said, "but if you're going to have an official identity, you'll need to have an address. Saying 'I live in General Hyde Park' would get you in trouble. As for a job, I could help you with that too, if you don't mind, well, breaking the law."

"Are you trying to say you live in the water?" Simon asked. He'd experienced her touch earlier.

Mizuko tried to slow down, then gave up and spoke instead. *"I do. I can become water in various forms and I enjoy that, too."* She made the unidentified sign again. *"This means water, not woman. Thank you for your offers of a place to stay. That's very nice especially since it gets cold and I cannot build a fire. But I have a beautiful place in the Hedge, a Hollow. How will I get there if not from my pond?"*

Hollows were something Rey knew about. She hadn't created one, but it was something Sholto had mentioned. In fact, while he hadn't given her entrance to his, he'd shown her a relatively safe place she was able to use before she came to Mythic. "Can you make another doorway to it?"

Mizuko sighed and reluctantly nodded. It wouldn't be easy, but she knew it was possible.

*Made an adjustment to what Rey said below, to correct an error.*

"Well, then, there's no reason why you couldn't still use it," Rey said. "Or, if you trusted one of us enough, we could make our own door into the Hollow, and let you use it. I think I know how to make a door, but I don't have access to my really tiny Hollow. The door's too far away."

"The fact of the matter," explained Less gently, "is that your Queen wishes for you to learn the ways of mortals. Though I do not begrudge your desire to live in your native element, if you are to learn how mortals live you must at least spend some of your time as a mortal. My own Hollow has several doors in the city. Now that we are a pledged Motley I'm sure we can arrange for safe passage to Otowi Pond."

"Look," Simon said, "there's no need to rush into anything. Right now, all Mizuko needs is an address. She doesn't have to actually stay there if she doesn't want to." He looked to the siren. "All this is a lot to take in. We're not going to make you do anything you don't want to do, okay? You can ease into the mortal world as you get comfortable, and nobody will make you give up your home at least until we decide if we're going to stay together next month."

To Simon, Mizuko seemed a little overwhelmed, and he wanted to give her some breathing room.

Mizuko looked from one to the other and then slumped a little in defeat. *"You're right, Mr. Seleman. I do need to learn better how to live as a mortal. Queen Veridia says it has affected my clarity, whatever that means. It's just such a big... change for me. I am so used to living in my pond, the one in my hollow, I barely pay any attention to proper clothing, save for the one outfit my friend Rose spun for me — and that I hardly wear for fear of wearing it out."*

*"There is an old cave in my home, part of it above water. Maybe we could find some path to your place through it?"*

*"Simon, thank you. I appreciate your understanding."*

*"Rey Brambleblush of the pink skin, I thank you for your offer. I would accept, if you truly have extra space. I do not want to put anyone out."* She paused. *"I don't suppose you have a pond, stream, pool, jacuzzi, or tub which you keep full of water?"*

"I would not have offered if it was going to be a problem," Rey replied with a smile, a little bit amused at Mizuko's naming of her. "To be honest, I'm not used to living alone. I don't have a hot tub or anything like that, but I do have a large bathtub. And give some time to collect the money, I could get a hot tub. There should be room for it on the deck, or in the backyard."

Simon didn't want to give anyone the wrong idea, even if he was considering that very idea himself at least a little, so he said "The place I'm renting has a pool. You're welcome to come over to use it. All of you, for that matter."

Rover looked up from where he'd taken a seat. The conversation had gone on long enough and into territory unfamiliar enough that he'd lost track. Rather than let himself be drawn into discussing doors, the gnome had started playing with the iron marble once more.

That was in his left hand, his right had produced a pencil and piece of paper. Small doodles of various symbols decorated the page, almost looking like a language unto itself.

"What, swim? Me? No thank you. At least not without a sturdy raft. Swimming with arms this short is a good way to get a close look at the bottom of the pool."

Rey had to bite back a grin and a comment. Instead, she said "I guess I'll have to go buy a bathing suit. It's been years since I've had to worry about wearing something while swimming." She looked at Mizuko. "Would you like to come with me? We can pick up some more clothes for you while we're shopping. It'll be fun. A girls' afternoon out. And don't worry about the money. You can pay me back when you're working."

She cringed at the word "work" again but smiled and nodded her agreement. Looking from Rey to Simon, her smile broadened. He's said he had a pool and that was of the most immediate interest to her, but she wondered how the motley intended to stay in contact. She decided immediately that for herself, she would try to find Less at least every day.

Rey put her backpack down and pulled a small artist's case out. She flipped it open and withdrew four blank business cards from a ziplock bag. "I'll give you my cell phone number. I've always got it on me, and I don't have a landline set up at home." She wrote the number on each card and handed them out.

Simon took the card and tucked it away. He'd caught that look from Mizuko and hidden a grin. "Working" was something he tried to avoid, too. So far he'd been able to get by with the occasional poker game, playing some studio gigs, and near the end of his time in Roanoke, negotiating business deals for associates. He was looking forward to getting into the same kind of thing here in Mythic once he'd had time to put out feelers and find out who needed what.

"So, work is something to talk about," he said. "Now that we're together, what do you think we should do? Those gangers you were running from, Muziko, were they kidnapping Changelings or just whoever they could catch? They seemed pretty damn brazen to be chasing someone through the train terminal. Maybe we should pool our efforts and look into that."

*"A couple of my friends turned up missing recently. People I know around, you know. We talk at soup kitchens, share blankets in winter, that sort of thing. I asked around and found out that they were nabbed by these Mexican guys and never seen again. I don't know why or where these Mexicans were taking them. The missing girls aren't changelings, and I don't think this gang has any changeling members either, but I don't like it when people are taken against their will." The last statement contained quite a lot of venom for such a pretty little nymph. "I know they were after girls, runaways. I'm a runaway and also a girl," she pointed out needlessly. "So I'm like their usual targets. Only I was ready for 'em and I ran. I was leading them to my pond. See, I have some traps there, things I use to scare people away if they get too close. I was going to lure one of them into a pit I have near the storm drain into the pond and then get information from him. People get pretty scared and talkative once you introduce them to drowning."*

Mizuko had it pretty well planned out except for one detail. Her plan hadn't accounted for being set upon by *four* of those guys. For her, it was probably just as well her little trap hadn't worked, or she might have gotten worse than a temporarily broken ankle. If they'd been armed, she might have gotten herself shot once they realized it was a trap. This eventuality, however, had never entered her calculations. She was used to being able to lure, trap, or escape any situation.

"I bet they do," Simon agreed. "And it wasn't a bad plan for someone stuck working alone. But I bet we can do better now. I can spread a little money around and ask some questions. I bet Rey can do even better than I can." Simon had the feeling that the dryadic changeling worked on the shady side of the law. "Once we know a little more we can set a better trap."

"Why?" Rover asked, tapping his pencil for attention. "If they don't have anything to do with changelings, then don't we have a bigger threat to worry about? Why go after these humans jerks at all?"

"I mean, yeah, it sucks that they're getting away with kidnapping and whatever, but that sounds like a job for human authorities. If we go after them just because they piss us off, then all we're really doing is just throwing a tantrum against the endless injustice of the mortal world. Once we start going down that path we may never get out. 'Just one damned big labyrinth of predator after predator."

"So define some kind of objective. Set some goals. What are we doing? Is it just this one war, and then we'll re-focus on the other side of the hedge? Are we honing our hunting skills, or are we just going to start running like a pack of wild dogs let loose on the criminal underbelly?"

The little gnome turned back to his doodling, having said his piece. It was easy to lose sight of honest goals, he knew, once the fresh energy of a burgeoning project launched itself.

"I seriously hope it's not the latter. 'Cause if it is, even if we win we'll just end up lost in our own victories. We need to know where we're going before we start running after anyone."

Mizuko looked at Rover curiously. *"But... these people are the only mundane people I know. I just want them to be left alone. I would like to find the friends they've taken from me but if you all think it is best I forget them, I will. I can make new friends."*

Less felt that Rover had a good point. "Have you spoken to the police, Mizuko? Have you reported your friends missing and told them about the abductions?"

*"It is useless for me. I found a beat cop and tried to tell him about it. He just stared at me and started asking questions about me that I couldn't answer. I tried another cop later without using my voice, but couldn't find someone who understood sign language. I then went to the police station, but I could not even get in. I did get cited and fined for indecency, though, and then escorted out the door and down the block. I was told not to come back or they'd put me in jail for loitering."* She smiled, amused at the memory. *"I refused to pay their fine."*

"Hey, hey..." Rover tapped for attention once more. "I never said to forget them, or that we *had* to leave them to the cops. Even though they're the ones who are supposed to take care of this sort of thing, they have a tendency to be slow and unreliable.

"All I want is to know *what* it means if we go after them. Is it just this one time, just this one group because Mizuko has a personal stake in it? Are we going to let it draw us into more fights farther down the road when we find out who they're working with?

"Are we going to start looking for other groups that do the same thing, simply because there's no reason to let others go through the same hell? After all, it'd be a little hypocritical if we looked the other way just because the next set of victims are strangers.

"Honestly, I think it'd be a good thing to see how we all operate under pressure. This might be a good shakedown mission for us, but is that *all* it's going to be, or is this just the first step in a long line of never-ending battles?

"My main concern is to safeguard the court and help other changelings escape their keepers. But if we're going to create safehouses on this side of the hedge then we'll need to know the area's clear. That means stepping on trouble like kidnapers, regardless of their own mortality."

Rover dropped the pencil onto his table-top and directed a finger at the rest, letting them know that he felt his next point sincerely.

"What I do *not* want to see is a bunch of us going off like cowboys. Vengeance and vigilantism has its place... in movies and comic books. I'm not having any part of an emotional lynch mob. If we take these guys down because they pissed us off then we'll end up losing focus and getting drawn outside of our territory. This fight will lead to another which will lead to another. That's how it goes.

"Now, I *am* willing to make sure the city I live in is safe for myself, my friends and those I'll be helping to bring through. That's still a risk on our parts, but at least it's a calculated risk. It's part of a larger strategy rather than a knee-jerk reaction to a bunch of scumbags. If we go in with that attitude, then when we win we'll be able to build stability which will strengthen us rather than dilute our efforts.

"Understand the difference?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Rey said. "Stability for what, or for whom? What is our 'territory'?"



Mizuko interrupted. "It would be enough for me if someone was looking into it rather than no one. I called them friends, but they are not close friends. No one is. Until now, there was no one. I would be satisfied if we turned the matter over to someone who cares enough to find out what's happening and take care of it. I do not have to be directly involved."

Rey shook her head. "These guys aren't merely scumbags, Rover. And friends are friends, regardless as to how close they might be. I for one would not ask you to simply toss them aside. Having friends is what keeps us rooted here." She tapped the side of her head. More importantly, I know something about the gangs operating here in Mythic, and my contact said nothing about Mexican gangs in Mythic. And my contact would certainly know if they were here - they like to keep tabs on that sort of thing. The point is, I don't think we can just let this slide. If the Mexican gangs are kidnapping girls, it's likely to force them into slavery, most likely as sex slaves." Rey's voice had a hard edge to it.

"Which isn't nearly as fun as it sounds," Simon said quietly. "I don't have answers to your questions, Rover. What do we want to do as a group? What's our territory? We've only been together for about five minutes. But I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to look into this because I know what it's like not to have a voice, and to have no one to help you when you're helpless. But if you don't want to get involved, that's okay, seriously. We're a family, not a bee hive. We take care of each other, but we're not joined at the hip."

"I can try to talk to the police. No offence, Mizuko, but they'll take me more seriously than you. And give me a day or so and I can try the local media. The cops don't really care about missing homeless girls, but the media can make them care."

"I don't think setting the media on the problem right now is a good thing," Rey added. "It might just get them to leave, before anyone can do anything to help the ones they've taken but haven't shipped off to wherever it is they're sending them."

Simon shrugged elegantly. "Depends on what you tell them. Most people want to be cooperative if you ask them the right way. But our first stop is probably your connections." He acknowledged Rey's point. "Getting the authorities involved might not be the right call. I wanted to start by finding out what they know before I tell them what I know."

Looking between them, Mizuko's mood lifted. She wondered if perhaps covering both routes might work, but since she didn't know, she remained quiet.

"Now this is some of the stuff I wanted us thinking about." Rover commented. Maybe they still weren't clear about their motives beyond immediate help, but they were starting to consider the environment they were working within.

"Three way we can go, here; tell the authorities and back off, don't tell the authorities and take our own initiative, or try to work *with* the authorities. Let them know about and try to stay involved, in other words."

"Personally, I don't think that'll work." He continued, unknowingly covering some of Mizuko's unasked questions. "Unless we can convince them we're some outside agency, I doubt they'll let us near the case once the cops are involved. And trying to work it underneath their noses will just get us into trouble if... when.. we do run into each other."

"And it doesn't sound like we're willing to walk away. Maybe the time to get someone else involved is *after* we get the girls freed. Or did someone else here have ideas on what to do with them afterwards?"

These weren't, after all, runaway changelings. The victims here likely still had family they'd want to be reunited with, but few of them would actually have the means to do so. Unless the motley managed to score enough funds and resources from taking out the kidnappers themselves that they could pay for bus tickets and chaperones for each one, someone else would have to take over from there.

Less spoke up after listening to the motley discuss the situation. "For myself, Rover, I'm willing to fight for a good cause. It's clear that the police are ignoring people simply because they don't fit well into society. While they are not changelings, they could easily be considered Lost. Our Glamour gives us some advantages over regular mortals that make us well-suited to take this into our own hands. I think that Simon and I should definitely express our concerns that these girls are not being afforded due process. Rey should make some calls and find out more about these Mexicans. And Rover, perhaps you could go down to Otowi Pool and take a look at Mizuko's traps. Maybe you could help her make some improvements."

Rover nodded, indicating he could certainly help out with the trap. He had a few interesting ideas for automated, mechanical restraints. Most of them could even be considered non-lethal.

Mizuko seemed pleased with Less's advice. Her traps, she knew, were very simple. They seemed effective to her, but then she'd never had more than one person at a time attempting to follow her into her home.

Then her tummy rumbled hungrily.

Simon smiled and said "Sounds like we should start all this after lunch."

The group found something to eat and garnered some attention while doing so. The extra attention was really Mizuko's fault as her attire left a lot to be desired. Yes, she seemed to be exceptionally well mannered for someone unused to eating in a formal place. Given her rather precise manner and habit of using only one hand at a time at the table, it was likely her etiquette were something she'd picked up at Court. She was a being of apparent contrasts. She was more or less homeless in the eyes of the mortal realm, yet held herself with the bearing of a princess. She was also quiet and polite in action, but yet very direct in her language. She said not a word during the entire meal, but signed something at the end which probably meant thank you.

After that the group split up. Rover went with Mizuko to Otowi Pond where she immediately shed her clothes, rolled them into a ball, and stuffed them under a bush. She then beckoned he follow her into the water.

Rover, however, kept his position on the bank and slowly shook his head.

"I'm too damned old to go skinny dipping, in case you hadn't noticed. And too damned short to go swimming... I thought I'd mentioned that before."

The second line was said a good deal more quietly than the first. He wasn't exactly ashamed of his physical shortcomings, but he was fearfully aware of them when they put his life on the line.

"Unless you have some way to keep me from drowning, I'll take a shot at working from up here."

He hadn't actually considered that she might be keeping her snares under the waterline. There had been a natural assumption that they were right along the pond's edge, otherwise she'd actually have to lure her prey several feet in before they were caught.

Mizuko studied Rover for a moment. She'd already waded hip deep into the water and then turned to face him. With one hand she pointed into a darkened area where the shore rose, becoming an embankment. There, hidden in the dark, was the place the storm sewer emptied into the pond. It made a hidden and private cave, if a small one. The only way to reach it was across the water.

The nymph bit her thumb as she looked at the old gnome. It made her look adorable. Then she came to a decision and raised her hands over the water. She slowly rose until she hovered a foot above the surface of the pond. Only, as the wizened inventor peered into the dark, he realized she was standing on a pedestal of water. She held a hand out toward Rover and water rose to make a path for him.

"Much better." Rover allowed. "Now let's see what we're working with, here."

He stepped forward and onto the aqueous path, carefully at first. Rover wasn't sure what the traction would be like and didn't want to slide off. Despite having a talented and trusted life guard nearby, he still wasn't wild about water deeper than a decent sized bath. It felt slippery, but he noticed if he just stood still, the water moved him where he needed to go at the nymph's command.

Of particular interest was the location and condition of her current snare. The gnome wanted to know what sort of path the prey would take; both up to and through the pond itself. He also tried to judge where the most likely avenue of retreat might be and how he could provide Mizuko, herself, a secure exit in case she ended up in over her head.

He arrived at the cavernous opening of the culvert and took in what he saw. There was a large metal gate in place across the opening, but two bars had been damaged and removed, allowing a full grown person entry if they were careful. Beyond that things grew very dark, but there wasn't far to go. There was a large niched hollowed out to the side. Mizuko made him stop before he entered though. She revealed her primary trap there; a simple covered pit. It was out of the way of the drain and so it wasn't full of water, but some was in it so that he couldn't tell how deep it was. It was a good five feet to the surface of the water, though. It would be a harmless enough fall, but if the water was waist deep or more, then there was little chance of easy escape. Still, the walls were not smooth. The earthy surface was muddy but uneven and here and there were chunks of concrete that an adept climber might use to get out of the hole.

Beyond the single pit trap was the simple dead-end niche. He could see she'd assembled a sort of bed made of mostly-dried water plants. There were some blankets, as well. Two hung from a line that was strung across the back of the room. A small pile of fish bones, shells of nuts and seeds she'd gathered and a few pieces of vegetable matter that had probably been edible once, tossed in the corner revealed her diet.

Her living arrangement wasn't just spartan; overall Mizuko's "home" looked like little more than an animal den. Her Queen had been right in that Mizuko needed to be better integrated with the mortal realm. Living this way might be fine for the creatures and beasts of the Hedge, but it was no way for a person to live.

Mizuko seemed proud to have her little place, however, and she went on to indicate how there was a doorway at the bottom of the pond that led to her place in the Hedge. There, she told him, was also a pond, but the water was pure and clear as glass and that instead of a hollow inside a culvert, she had a small cave. The whole place was surrounded by the thick briars of the Hedge, although she maintained there was at least one way to leave her home to go deeper into the Hedge if she wanted to. She told Rover that she had more traps there, because although her door required a Key, it was still possible for humans to find their way into her Hollow at certain times when a very slight whirlpool formed at the bottom of Ottowi Pond.

She wasn't speaking aloud, so Rover had to guess, but he thought she was inviting him to her Hollow if he desired. Or maybe she had said, if he dared. She was a siren, after all, and luring men to their doom was sort of her profession. But naw, it didn't seem terribly likely she meant him any harm. With her control of water, it even seemed possible she might form a bubble around him, capturing enough air for him to breathe, should he want to go to the bottom of the koi-filled pond and enter her Hollow.

Rover smoothed the straight-edge of his beard, again a superfluous habit, and considered.

"Let's worry about the mortal barriers first. Unless you want to deliberately lure gangers into your Hollow, any traps we lay there might be a waste of time. We'll have better luck catching the prey right here."

He studied the pit and tried to divine its purpose. There were few engineering feats in the mortal realms that compared to a really solid, urban infrastructure. Humans were always so desperate to hide the basic functions of life itself that they often created systems larger than the cities they actually served. The logic and rules behind the gradual evolution of sewers alone was worthy of grand exploration.

"Pitfalls are simple enough. It looks like this one needs a spring-driven grate or cover that can snap close once someone dropped inside. That, and some kind of door to the den itself. That way you might be able to close it and survive a brief siege if it came down to it.

"So how lethal do you want these to be? We may want to leave this pit as the last trap, that way you could have someone to answer questions if you wanted. Add some traps leading up to the entrance and we can thin any herd that might be on your heels. Set some lethal ones that activate after one or two people step on them, that way we can start weeding out some potential pursuers without scaring off the lead dog. By the time he realizes that he's alone, it'll be too late."

He looked towards Mizuko to see what her opinion of such a plan might be.

*"In general, not deadly," Mizuko said aloud. "That attracts investigation. Frightening. I want to scare people off so they leave me alone. Sometimes people might get hurt when that happens. That is an acceptable risk, but not intentional. Should a supernatural threat come for me, though, I would like to have the option of increasing the lethality of my traps. Is this possible?"*

Rover nodded.

"Some basic electrical traps, sure. The water'll be good for that. Drop in some grounds and rig an electrical source close to each. Set it to trigger when someone in front of the target passes a certain point. It won't be as debilitating as a real taser, but we should be able to regulate the voltage enough to be painful without lethality.

"A control close to your home can be installed that would adjust the amperage. The higher it goes, the more lethal the trap becomes. The effectiveness drops quickly with distance from the ground. That should keep random critters and people safe while targeting your pursuers.

"That'll be easy to reset, as well. We should be able to find some utility line around here somewhere to tap for juice. Other than that, I can think of a few snares to set. Something that can hold someone underwater long enough to scare them without killing, assuming they don't inhale too much water in panic. A lot of moving parts to that, though. It would be tricky to put back in order after being tripped, and the mud in the pond would play hell with reliability."

Rover considered the entrance to the drain itself, providing access from the pond into Mizuko's utility tunnel.

"I wonder if we can put in a reservoir in to flood the tunnel itself? Not too lethal in itself, but it might give you some extra time to prepare by washing anyone chasing you back out into the pond. If we cover your home with a concealed door then they might be distracted enough that they couldn't spot you ducking in. A few waving lights and some sound effects deeper into the storm drain might get them to keep running further down the line.

"How far does this go, anyway?"

Mizuko thought about that. She turned her face toward the inky blackness that led to unknown regions beneath the city, then looked back at him and shrugged. She had no idea really.

"You're kidding?" The gnome seemed amazed. Here she had this great, spooky tunnel to investigate and yet she'd never made it past the front door.

"Well let's go see. Who knows what we'll find, maybe the ultimate ambush site."

Rover didn't have any light sources on him, but perhaps they wouldn't need them. Either that or he might be able to jury-rig something along the way.

A few steps inside and Rover knew light would be required. The inky blackness consumed what little light from the night sky was reflected from the pond, making both the changelings feel as though they were stepping into an abyss that hid obstacles they would never see until they struck them.

Mizuko took his elbow, but not to guide him. She couldn't see any more than he, and had taken hold of him so they wouldn't become separated.

"Hold on. I think I can do something about this..." Rover trailed off. He moved back towards the light, just far enough that the industrial surroundings were visible once more. The craftsman wasn't thrilled with what he saw, though.

They were only standing in a monstrous storm drain rather than an actual utility tunnel. That meant all the truly useful engineering was buried off in other parts of the city. After all, how much tech was required to move water from one place to another?

There were a few items that managed to click together in his mind, though. A galvanized pipe there, some copper tubing here, a few corrosion-resistant linkages that he could harvest magnesium from and the polished interior of an aluminum can... a device began to sketch itself in his mind.

He needed Mizuko's help in gathering all that he needed. Much of the useful bits were well out of his reach, but that just gave him more time to work on the construction. His words became more spartan as he focused on the build, devolving into gestures and short-handed speech to indicate what he wanted and where it was. Had he paid more attention to the conversation, he might have recognized a familiarity to the sign language the slyph had demonstrated earlier.

Rover wasn't really paying attention to that, as the results of the instructions were more important to him than the means. Also competing for his focus was an annoying, little used part of his mind that took strong objection to the current task. It was a logical voice that insisted what he was doing was impossible. The physics simply weren't there, it wasn't possible to combine the items available into anything useful.

But the gnome didn't care. Long years spent outside of the mortal realms had opened him to fantastic possibilities. Feats of engineering that should be laughable now made perfect sense to him. Faerie magic flowed through him and forced the cobbled device to function whether it wanted to or not.

"Ha!" He announced, holding up what looked like the rusted, industrialized imitation of a common torch. Locating a couple of discarded batteries had been a real windfall, and even though they'd died long ago he knew some tricks to get a little more life out of the things.

Turning a dial just below the torch's base brought two leads close together and a spark of electricity jumped across the gap. Another adjustment tuned the distance and they soon had a healthy source of illumination. Although the light was inconsistent and rough without a noble gas to contain it, the primitive arc-lamp would work well enough to guide them through the tunnels.

"You ready to go?" he asked.

She had marveled at his talented workmanship throughout the process and was duly impressed. Now

looping her slender arm through one of his, she nodded and smiled.

Rover led her through the drainage system and noted as many details as he could, hoping to create a more detailed map later on. This didn't need to be a complete exploration of the city. He wanted a rough overview of what they had to work with with the idea of creating a more detailed map later on.

Utility rooms would be important. Those hidden cubby holes of municipal workers everywhere might give them access to some quick resources in a time of need, but he also wanted to watch for intersecting lines providing power, gas and electricity. Various taps could be installed, covertly, that could come in handy.

Rover also wanted to know about any telecom and even fiber optic networks they city had. It didn't much matter to him if they were provided as a public service or privately owned, they seemed to be the lifeblood of the new technology he wanted to explore. Human data systems had grown over the generations to nearly rival any source of magic he'd ever encountered. Finding out exactly how they managed to accomplish such a feat was an itch in the back of his mind that needed to be scratched. If he managed only one thing amongst the mortals, it would be this.

Street-level access to these areas was limited, Rover noted. For the most part they were only meant to carry runoff and thus only had regularly spaced grates along the curbs. Many of the channels supplying the drainage system were small as well, perhaps large enough for the wizend creatures to travel but only barely. Those regions were avoided, today, as he really didn't need that much detail.

The locations of genuine exits were put to memory. Workers had to get in somewhere, after all, and even if the access points weren't common they could still be used. He might have to rig some sort of tool to facilitate this, seeing as how the city didn't normally want just anyone wandering around the underground, but that would just require some spare moments in the workshop.

By the time his makeshift arc-lamp was sputtering out, he had a good idea regarding the layout of the system. Not every detail, of course, but enough to start working. He also had some good schematics in mind regarding Mizuko's new traps. The electrified ones would be a must, along with a concealed security door for her den and an automatic cover for the pit trap. He could certainly give her that even if there wasn't much he could do to make it more comfortable.

Hopefully she'd agree with her own queen's declaration that she shouldn't live like this anymore. Clearly the girl needed more time *not* living like an animal. Even the reclusive artisan, who typically had better conversations with a lathe than real people, could see this.

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Simon went to the library the next morning and researched the newspapers archives. Mizuko had given him a description of three girls that she knew had gone missing. There may be others, Mizuko had finally admitted, and homeless people go missing all the time either from death or because they hopped the train. But she didn't think the three girls she called her friends would have simply left without telling her or at least talking about it first.

One girl was named Stacy. She'd run away from home after getting into drugs. She'd turned to them after being unable to get along with her stepfather — and other things. It became a serious problem with her and she eventually fled to escape what felt like oppression. Once on her own she soon found herself cycling through one shelter after another, always turned out when they discovered her drug use. Then about a year ago someone she cared about overdosed and died. That woke her up and she quit doing drugs about three months ago. By this time, most of the people who knew her thought she was crazy because she'd often talk

about people and things that weren't there or weren't what they seemed. Mizuko allowed that it was probably her drug use had fried her brain. But Stacy was essentially a good person and of particular interest to Mizuko because Stacy knew sign language. Her younger brother was deaf and so Stacy learned it from an early age. A week ago, Stacy was a dark haired girl of maybe 20 years, but she looked like she might be closer to thirty. Mizuko gave Simon a detailed description of her.

Another girl was Amber. Amber was 17, and the product of a failed foster family system. Her own family had met some kind of terrible end in Las Vegas. Amber didn't like to talk about it. She was essentially a runaway, but she'd managed to keep clear of gangs, pimps, and drugs. She met Mizuko through Stacy and also picked up sign language as Mizuko never spoke otherwise to mortal friends. Amber was a pretty girl, and smart too if she applied herself. The young red-head with green eyes was quick and quiet, and Mizuko suspected she was probably a thief in the making. Mizuko liked Amber because Amber was always giving her some new piece of clothing that Amber had "found". Mizuko would always accept it and loved the gift, but she always seemed to lose the article or it got ruined or it ended up in the muck at the bottom of Ottowi Pond. She had disappeared three days ago.

The third disappearance had happened the same night Amber went missing. This girl was a hispanic girl only 13 years old, brown haired and with brown eyes. She was very troubled, but she at least had been talking about going home. Mizuko was certain she'd been abused. Amalia didn't know sign language, but she knew that Mizuko could hear and understand her. Mizuko had spent many nights simply listening to Amalia as she spoke (sometimes in Spanish) about the things in her life that troubled her, or sometimes about nothing at all.

Simon didn't find a lot of interest in the paper, at least not directly relating to any sort of recent spate of missing homeless people. They were by nature difficult to keep track of after all. However, he did run across a number of human interest stories over the past year. The most recent and relevant one made mention that one of the things homeless people had to deal with was loss on a personal level. Transients come and go but even here friendships are built and often maintained. The article stated it was particularly painful to people who had so little when they lost even this. The writer mentioned that homeless people often go missing but few notice because communication between the homeless and the police tends to be one-sided. The name of the journalist was Edmund Gomez.

Simon's mention of what seemed like a gang-related chase into the busy train station got the attention of the desk sergeant, who then asked him to fill out a report. Surprisingly, Simon didn't feel that the report would be ignored, either. The police, it turned out, had a keen interest in watching gang activity, especially gangs that suggest international origin. While some precincts might have jurisdictional jealousy over such matters, here they were simply relieved when they could ask for federal help. The station was, like most Mythic stations, an extremely busy place. But Simon was able to finish the report and come away feeling like someone was in fact going to look into the matter.

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Rey made a phone call the next day and spoke to a long-time friend about the Mexican gang tattoo she spotted. Clairborne stated she'd heard that some Mexican underworld reps had made an appearance, and that she was already looking into it. After all, if there was going to be a rivalry with some new organization in her neck of the woods, she intended to nip it in the bud. Or rather bite its head off establish her territory.

However, her pack's alpha male, Chaska, had proven to be a bit of an obstacle in some ways. Concerned that Lyla was getting too caught up in human-world things, he had asked her to take it easy, and not get too involved. Rey got the impression that Lyla was being watched carefully. As Rey spoke with her friend, she got a sense that all wasn't right with Lyla Clairborne. But it was also clear the werewolf alpha female wasn't feeling chatty about it. Whatever was eating at Lyla, her alpha and her packs was concerned. Still, it had nothing to do with the matter at hand.

Rey asked if Mexican gangs tended to take girls for white slavery. Lyla confirmed that was so, but she hadn't heard of any working within the borders of the US. That didn't mean it wasn't so, of course, only that she hadn't heard that. Anything was possible, Lyla affirmed, especially in this city. Lyla told Rey to keep her eyes open, however, and be ready to for anything if she was intending to look into this personally.

Later Rey came down to Ottowi Pond to look for Mizuko. She sat on a bench skipping some stones across the surface of the water. Today, it was warm and a few people had wandered by to feed ducks and koi. Some time passed and there was no sign of Mizuko. The sun rose higher and the day warmer, until the last jogger loped by. Rey had begun to think that Mizuko wasn't here when there was a ripple from the center of the pond that then began to stretch in a V shape as something under the water began to approach Rey. Mizuko rose from the water as she moved closer to shore. Beautiful but also naked, the water nymph stepped from her watery home like a creature right out of fairy tales. She smiled and lifted her hand in a silent greeting to Rey.

Although it was easily within Mizuko's power to command the water to leave her body dry, she didn't do so. Instead she stood in front of Rey naked as the day she was born.

"Better get some clothes on," Rey said and signed at the same time - or at least tried to sign. Some of the hand movements just popped into her head easily, while she had no idea what to do for others. "It'd be best if we didn't have to deal with the attention." She pulled a pair of track pants and a t-shirt from her backpack after tucking away her art supplies. "I brought these for you." Rey smiled, and held them out to her new friend.

Mizuko took them and held them up, enjoying the gift and seeing what they looked like. Then she rolled them up and put them carefully on the bench while she went and dug around under a prickly bush. In a moment she'd found the long shirt with the immodestly deep V-cut she'd worn yesterday and pulled it on. She tied it at her waist with a long piece of cord. She looked around but couldn't find the ripped cutoff shorts she had yesterday. She frowned unhappily for a moment, but then returned to the bench with the balled-up clothes Rey had given her. She took out the track pants and eyed them critically for a moment.

Then she did something unexpected. She held out her hand and all the water that remained on her body ran to it like it was a living thing. It froze, crackling sharply and formed itself into a dagger of ice. Then, with a few quick motions, she had sliced the legs off the pants to make them into shorts. Satisfied, tossed the icicle aside and it thunked, point first into the ground. Then the nymph put her new shorts on and signed that she was ready now.

"Mizuko," Rey said, trying to be polite. "As much as you may like that top you have on, it's really not appropriate to wear at this time of day. It would be better if you wore the t-shirt I brought for you."

Mizuko frowned but took it off, then put on the t-shirt. At least now she was dry and didn't show through the shirt. She rolled up her old shirt into a ball and tucked it under her arm.

"Why don't you let me carry that for you," Rey said with a smile, trying not to show her distaste for the dirty clothes, and the disappointment at the massaging of the pants she'd given Mizuko. Granted, they weren't brand new, but they were still in good condition. *Were* now being truly the operative word.

Mizuko hesitated, concerned she might not get it back, but she reluctantly handed it over.

Rey saw Mizuko's hesitation, and guessed at its cause. "We're friends, right? Part of a motley? I'd never steal from any of my friends." She tucked the shirt into an outer pocket of her backpack. "We can wash it at my place. I've got a washer and dryer. And if you want, you can keep your stuff at my place, until you've got an apartment or something of your own." Rey's offer was genuine, and hoped Mizuko would at least consider it. "You won't be able to keep all the stuff we're getting for you under that bush." Rey smiled broadly.



Mizuko smiled back and nodded agreement. She waited for Rey to lead the way. Conveniently, the closest shopping center was only across the tracks north of the park and over just a couple blocks, depending on where Rey wanted to go first.

Rey decided, given Mizuko's apparent track record with clothing, they'd start with inexpensive things at the thrift shop. That way, if something grew legs and walked off, it wouldn't be a great loss of money. As they walked towards their destination, Rey said "Yesterday, you said something about me being an Autumn witch, like you. What did you mean?"

Mizuko signed, and to Rey's surprise, she caught nearly all of it. The rest she was able to decipher from context. "You speak of the occult and have knowledge of secret things. I judge you to be no stranger to fear or things that bump in the dark. The Autumn Court respects conquering fear, especially in understanding that which others might fear instead. When I look at you, I see this person. I believe Autumn has much to teach you, should you prove worthy of Autumn's blessing."

"How does Autumn decide who's worthy and who isn't?" Rey asked. Mizuko was right; Rey was no stranger to fear, either before she was Taken or afterward. And she certainly knew of the occult, even if she had lost the ability to practice her Craft.

Mizuko tilted her head and looked at Rey a moment before answering. Her answer was silent again, conveyed only in that special form of sign language. "Who can say for certain what the Season will do?" She then signed something that Rey didn't understand but continued. "I think it will choose you or you will accept what Autumn has to offer. Then you may join our Court. Our Queen may ask you to share one ounce of Wyrld lore, or some other piece of occult lore as evidence of your commitment to Autumn." She signed something else and smiled.

"How could we make this happen?" Rey asked. "Do I need to be presented to the Queen or something?"

Mizuko pointed to herself and took Rey's hand with a smile. She would do the presenting, if Rey wanted to meet the Queen.

"I'd like that," Rey said, returning her smile. "Thank you. I think I even have something appropriate to wear. I made some clothes, something hedgESPUN, that I can wear that won't get torn up by my brambles."

Mizuko seemed enthusiastic about the idea. "*Come with me tonight?*"

Rey thought quickly about what she needed to do that day. "What time?"

"*After sunset.*"

"Sure," Rey said with a nod. For a moment, she'd wondered what she'd gotten herself into, but she wasn't about to turn back now.

The rest of the day passed relatively uneventfully, though with a certain amount of frustration on Rey's part. Mizuko, for the most part, didn't get the whole "you need to wear appropriate clothes out in public" thing. Rey eventually resorted to explaining to her new friend that in order not to get in trouble, women need to wear clothes that cover up certain parts of the body; ones that men like to look at and "eat" - followed very quickly by a statement that they're not talking about cannibalism.

By the end of the shopping trip - and about \$300 in clothes (as Mizuko didn't even own underwear or shoes) - Rey hoped she'd gotten Mizuko to understand that not only did she have to wear the clothes, but that she was expected to take care of them as well. Rey was reluctant to do so, but she pointed out that the Queen of Autumn wanted Mizuko to learn to deal with the mundane world properly, and that meant taking better care of her possessions.

The last order of business before heading to Rey's house for something to eat was for Rey to purchase a futon and dresser for her spare room. The dresser would be the ideal place for Mizuko to store her clothes until she had an apartment or the like of her own.

Less had gone first thing in the morning to make a report regarding missing youths at the police station. Of course, the police had wanted details and for him to fill out a report so they could assign the task to someone. By the time he'd managed to complete something the police thought they could use, he noticed Simon had appeared to make a report as well. Afterwards, they had time to compare notes.

After they compared experiences at the police station, Simon said "I've found a man at the paper I might want to talk to. He seems like he'd want to help find the girls, but I'm not really familiar with this kind of thing. Rey's got a good point that once the media gets involved, the kidnapers might lie low or leave the city to find their homeless girls elsewhere. Other than waiting to see if they make a play for Mizuko again, do you have any ideas?"

"At least we've put the bug in the police's ear," said Less. "I should have known that the Mexicans would have got their attention. What better to get them to pay attention to a disenfranchised minority than to goad them with their fear of minority gang violence." Less fiddled with his umbrella while he played over the situation. "I'm no investigator either but chances are that the girls are being kidnapped for money. But not for a ransom. I guess Rey's the best one to catch wind of what business dealings the gangs might be up to. Your reporter sounds interesting, though. He might have run into other members of the underworld while he was making acquaintance with the homeless girls. Maybe he could shed some light on the motivations."

"We'll see," Simon said. "I probably will go talk to Mr. Gomez, now that I think about it. I'll have to tread carefully, but he could be useful, and not just right now."

"What paper does he work for?" asked Less.

"The Register," Simon said. "Only one that hasn't been bought up by some chain. I gotta say I never expected that kind of thing. But I guess I never expected to see all the arcades die, ether."

"Sounds like an interesting fellow. I wonder if he's Mexican. Shall we go see him now?"

Simon hesitated for a fraction of a second. Alone, he'd be more in control of the conversation. But this wasn't a crucial negotiation, and Simon needed to get used to working with the others. Besides, Less had a good reputation and might be worth having along. "Sure," he said, standing and offering his hand. "Let's go talk to him and see what he might have to offer."

Simon and Less were shortly able to contact the *Register* and then Edmund Gomez. The journalist agreed to meet them for lunch at a small mom and pop restaurant called Gertie's.

The short, thickly-built man was sitting at a table in a booth with red cushioned bench seats. He had a digital recorder on the table next to him and was making typing in a tiny netbook-style portable computer. When Less and Simon reach his table, he stood up, greeted them both and welcomed them to a seat. A waitress buzzed by taking orders. Simon and Less noticed Gomez was a regular here, since the waitress put him down for "the usual". The journalist took a moment to look at each of them, noting with a sharp eye their dress and demeanor.

After she left, the journalist remarked, "You mentioned on the phone that homeless people were going missing. I was wondering how you knew and why you took an interest in this."

"This is all off the record," Simon said. "Although I suppose you'd be able to find out easily enough. I don't really want any publicity. There are enough people who really deserve notice for the things they've done. Last night at the train station, I saw three people who looked like Mexican gang members chasing a homeless girl across the terminal. She ended up falling onto the tracks and nearly got hit by a train. I helped her up and found out her story. And now I'm curious, and I wonder if there's anything I can do to help. The police didn't know anything, but maybe they'll look into it now. But I've read some of your work. You show a lot of compassion for those who have no one to speak for them. I respect that, and I thought you might know more than the police did."

"I suppose it depends on what you are talking about," the reporter allowed. "So this girl. Would she be willing to speak with me about this? It would really help if I could talk with people who knew those who've gone missing. And are you sure they were Mexicans and not locals chasing her?"

"Locals? They could have been," Simon mused. "They were all Latino, and wore tattoos I associate with Mexican gangs, but I'm no expert by any means. Is this something that happens in Mythic all the time? Gangs kidnapping homeless people off the street?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if it happened," Gomez stated. "But I don't think that's typically what they are interested in, no. I've seen a fair number of gang tattoos so maybe I can identify the gang, if you can describe it for me."

Less sat quietly as Simon talked to the reporter. He paid close attention to what the two said for later reference and kept an eye (or two) open for people watching their conversation. At least for now, the trio was ignored.

Simon reached into his shirt pocket for an item he'd assembled just this morning with a trip to the drug store: a stack of index cards held together with a binder clip that also held a pen. "Here, I'll do better."

Rey had been observant enough to note the tattoos the gangers wore at the terminal. She was also smart enough to draw a picture for Simon and Less. Not wanting to give away any information he didn't have to, Simon didn't hand the reporter that picture. Instead, he sketched a general copy of it on a blank card.

Sliding the card across the table, he said "It was all kind of rushed, but I think it looked like that. Worn on the arm."

Edmund took a look at it, even turning it one way and then another. "Well, it seems like a Mexican style, but it's nothing I've ever seen before. This could be something new, or it might just be something that's been here but that I just haven't run across. I might still be able to ask around. Someone knows something about it. Do you think you might run across this again?"

"I take it you'd like to be informed if we do?" Simon asked. "I can make that happen, I think. With a caveat. Not everyone wants to be under the spotlight. I might not be able to give you everything you want as this goes on."

"I can do my own investigating, if you can show there's something really going on and not just a few hobos skipping town on the train. I am the professional here, after all," he said with a smile. "Speaking of which, if you need names left out or changed, that won't be a problem. I'm used to that kind of condition on information. Just be sure to let me know who I can't quote directly, once this thing gets going."

"Certainly," Simon said. "For now, I think we'd like to keep our names out of the news. The girl might be willing to talk to you under the same condition. She doesn't put much stock in the pillars of legitimate society, but we talked a little and I can at least ask her. Assuming she doesn't run off or something." That was as far as he was willing to go without talking to the others. He hoped it was enough to make Mr. Gomez

cooperative. He pulled out an index card and wrote his contact info on it. "If you learn who this gang is, I'd like to know. And if you have more questions, I'll be available to answer them."

Edmund took the card and said, "Okay, but why would you want that? Gangs are dangerous and getting involved with them like that could get you beaten or worse."

Simon's answer was serious. "That's exactly why I want to know. I'd really rather not be involved at all. The police, and investigators like yourself, have the resources and training to deal with this kind of thing and, not me. But if they decide to come after me for some reason, I'd like to know who I'm dealing with. The girl they were chasing asked for my help, and I'm not the kind of guy to turn her away just because it might be dangerous."

"Sometimes I think that's a smarter kind of guy than I am, but whatcha gonna do?"

The day progressed for Rey and Mizuko. After all the shopping, time was needed also to arrange the guest room at Rey's house for Mizuko, and then deliveries of the purchased furniture. Rey ended up waiting some time at home while Mizuko went to speak with some people about seeing the Ashen Queen tonight. Rey fretted a bit as time went by, but Mizuko did return before sunset and told Rey she would repay her for the clothes, place to live and everything Rey had done for her that day. She didn't have money, but Mizuko said there might come a time when Rey would need some very special favors or work and Mizuko would be pleased if Rey asked her before someone else, to give her a chance to repay the favors.

Mizuko made it clear that introduction to Queen Veridia did *not* rate a favor in her eyes. It was a duty she'd do for any likely candidate to become a member of the freehold and of the Autumn Court, and therefore wasn't special at all. Mizuko said this was important to her; she would not become a charity case. If she were not allowed to repay her debts, she made it quite clear that she would abandon the gifts and return to her place at the pond full-time, regardless of the consequences. Equitable trade was an important matter to her.

While Mizuko was out arranging for the evening's introduction, Rey had some time to consider the matter of the kidnapers and perhaps catch up on it with her new friends. She dialed the cell phone number she had for Less.

"It's me," she said, trusting they'd recognize who it was. "How did it go today?"

Less felt the eyes on the back of his head twitch when he heard - and realized he understood - the magical language that had come with the formation of their motley. Glymjack Cant, they called it, in order of the metaphorical torch they would bear in service of changeling society. "We filed reports with the police. They seemed pretty eager to stamp out any Mexican gangs that might be popping up. Other than that we talked with a reporter that did a story on the homeless but he didn't anything further to go on. I'll step up surveillance but we would only be able to react to a kidnapping. I don't like it, but we might have to lay a trap."

"My contact said they'd heard some Mexican underworld reps had been seen in the area, but doesn't know much more than that," Rey said. "Tomorrow, I can start asking around with some other people I know, and see what they have to say. Our day went pretty well. Mizuko is dressed properly, though how long it'll stay that way is anyone's guess. My guest room is all set up, so she's got a place to stay and to stash her stuff. She's welcome to stay with me as long as she likes."

"Good. Thanks for taking care of her. We should meet up sometime soon to discuss our next steps. When are you next available?"

"It's no problem helping her out, less. We're like a family now, aren't we? And I always take care of family. Anyway, we can probably meet you around lunch tomorrow. Mizuko and I are going out tonight, and that'll give me some time to see what else I can find out."

"Ok, then, see you tomorrow. I'll arrange it with Simon and Rover. Bye."

It wasn't long before Rey received a collect call from Mizuko. She told Rey that she'd reached Queen Veridia, and that she was having a small gathering of some members of the court. They would be finished with business and relaxing when the Queen would see them tonight around 9, which put it near dusk. Mizuko asked that Rey meet her at the pond, with clothes if she thought it necessary, as Mizuko was recovering glamour from expenditures the night before, as well as taking care of her friend, Oliver. She assured Rey she had a "court best" to wear but she didn't know what it looked like to mundane eyes.

Rey noted that the unique quality of Mizuko's voice, so overpowering in person, was absent over the phone. She sounded like anyone else when she wasn't there in person, which made phone conversation convenient.

Relaxing, Rey thought. She wondered briefly what the Autumn Court did for fun before getting herself ready. She too had something that might be described as "court best", but really wasn't sure if it was appropriate. She'd worked very hard to make it in the tiny clearing she'd taken over in the Hedge back home. Perhaps it would be good to make a first impression that would stand out.

She donned her hedgespun clothes, knowing they looked like a pair of tight, low-cut jeans and an equally tight deep red t-shirt, but packed a nice outfit in case what she had on wasn't suitable. Rey also left early so that she could make one quick stop to buy something to Mizuko to wear. Yes, it would be mundane clothing, but it would make an impression on the Queen - and hopefully a good one. A sign of commitment to Mizuko, a member of her motley. Might the queen be impressed if Mizuko arrived at court dressed nicely in mundane clothes for a change?

Rey arrived at the pond at eight, wanting to make sure they had time to change clothes if they needed to.

The dark waters of the pond occasionally rippled as curious koi explored the edge near Rey looking for bits of fish food that were occasionally tossed into the water by idle park goers. The sun hung low in the western sky and shadows began to reach across the pond when Rey noticed a ripple approaching her. Mizuko slowly emerged from the pond as she approached the shallows, apparently unaffected by the need for air. As the siren nimbly scaled the rocks at the pond's edge, Rey got a look at Mizuko's "court best"



Siren\*

"Are you ready?" she asked Rey.

"Not quite," Rey said. "I brought something for you to wear. It's not hedgespun, but I think Queen Veridia would approve." She retrieved a plastic bag from her backpack. Inside was a pretty summer dress with a short skirt that would flare out if the wearer twirled around. The fabric was lightweight, so Mizuko wouldn't feel weighted down, and was random splashes of cream and red. Rey didn't know what Mizuko's Mask would look like to her, but she knew these colors looked good on the Changeling as she saw her, and would be at the very least decent-looking on most normal-looking people. "I've also got sandals and underwear for you that goes with it."

Mizuko picked them up and marveled at them. "Thank you, Rey. You are so generous with me." She then began pulling off her bodice. Just then Rey heard the regular crunch of a jogger fast approaching along a foot path that circled the pond. Mizuko glanced in the direction of the jogger, but simply crouched a little and continued working at the bodice. Rey got a look, too, and saw a young woman, perhaps 30, jogging along listening to music from an mp3 player strapped to her arm. She didn't appear to notice Rey and Mizuko yet.

"Mizuko," Rey said in a low rush, "you can't just strip your clothes off out here in public. You'll end up in trouble again." She put her hands on her friend's shoulders, then held the dress up in front of Mizuko as if trying to see how it looked. Hopefully that would cover up anything that had been bared, Rey thought. "Let's see how that looks on you," she said aloud, just in case the jogger might hear.

The jogger passed, gave them a nod and quick smile, and then she was gone. "She would have looked away if she thought I was changing. The clothes will get wet if I try to take them to my cave." She knew she could form a water bridge to her cave if she wanted to, but that took power, the same power she'd just spent considerable time regaining and she wasn't in a hurry to use up her glamour this early in the evening. "Where else should I change?"

"Just because she would have looked away doesn't mean you should have taken your clothes off. There's a coffee shop just outside the park," Rey said. "We could go there. You use the bathroom while I buy us some drinks to go."

"Okay," she agreed, and followed Rey to the coffee house.

Station Beanery, located just across from the West Mythic Train Station, was an independent, family owned coffee shop. The owners, Pat and Gil Grosbeck, liked to describe themselves as recovering hippies, and the shop certainly reflected it. The furniture ranged from big comfy leather chairs by the front windows to ultra-modern chrome stools at the counters, and the menu featured items from home baked brownies and fresh-made sandwiches to Twinkies and other packaged food. The shop also had two counters - an express counter for people who just wanted a normal coffee, and one for everything else. The express counter made the shop very popular with commuters, especially during the morning rush.

While Mizuko went into the bathroom to change, Rey ordered two drinks. Gil flirted with her as he always did when she came in; it was harmless, as everyone knew how devoted he was to Pat. The two of them chatted as Rey waited for Mizuko to emerge, and Rey hoped Mizuko wasn't going to "alter" the dress at all. They'd had a talk about that while they were shopping, and if they were both lucky, Mizuko remembered the conversation.

When Mizuko reappeared, she was wearing the outfit as it was meant to be worn. There were no new rips, tears or other adjustments. She had even taken the time to smooth and tie back her normally wild, unkempt hair. In short, she seemed like a new person.

After that, they went to Iron Mountain, taking a path that turned out to be rather close to Rey's home. It wound around and took them past an old abandoned mine entrance. There Mizuko called upon a touch of changeling magic and opened the Door, telling Rey that she would be able to open the Door as well, as soon as Rey swore to become a member of the freehold before the reigning monarch.

Once inside, Rey was led along a long, tall corridor that was lined with arches. Some of these arches were merely decorative. Others held doors. Mizuko counted the ones on the left, and stopped at the fifth one and knocked. "Mizuko and guest," she told the door, and it opened for her. She led Rey into the room.

The chamber had an old feel to it, like it had seen many seasons come and go. It was lit only by candle and lamp and so harbored a hundred shadows that danced from the few changelings in the room. There was one tall-backed chair upon which sat a pale woman with coal-black eyes and rube lips. She was dressed in a regal gown of blue and black. On each side of her sat women in chairs that were smaller. The youngest of the trio was the bronze-skinned girl to the Queen's left. She had dark brown hair and eyes, and when she sat still, she looked like a polished bronze statue. She wore rebellious clothes of leather and gleaming chrome studs. To the Queen's right was her another woman who possessed frightening, all-black eyes that held a glint of madness and shiny grey skin. Eight spider legs sprung from her back and hugged the changeling's torso. The webbing dress she wore revealed her belly — and the red black widow's mark it bore.

"These are the Fear sisters," Mizuko said. "The one in the middle is queen Veridia." The sound of her voice in the chamber caused the half-dozen other changelings to stop all conversation and stare at Mizuko and Rey. Mizuko ignored them all and took Rey's hand as she walked forward toward Veridia.

She curtsied deeply toward the Queen and bowed her head respectfully to each of the Queen's sisters, then tugged at Rey to indicate she should do the same. "Queen Veridia, I present Rey, a changeling newly arrived to our Duchy and a supplicant for the Court of Fear. She is a member of my new motley and I vouch for her as if she were my own sister."

Rey curtsied and bowed her head, perhaps not as elegantly as Mizuko, but with enough grace to show she knew what she was doing.

Veridia eyed Mizuko critically, taking in the siren's new clothes.

The spider-woman on the Queen's right spoke in a menacing whisper. "You've changed your dress, Mizuko. It is an improvement, but it does not yet suit you."

Mizuko looked crestfallen and looked down at her outfit. Rey, still holding her hand, gave it a reassuring squeeze. She thought of saying or signing something to her motley-mate in Glymjack Cant, but decided it likely wasn't a good idea.

Veridia's gaze shifted from Mizuko and settled upon Rey. "Mizuko is a respected and highly placed member of this court, despite her lack of manners or sense of humanity. If she vouches for you, then I see no reason not to allow you admission to my court provided you can fulfill one requirement."

"Thank you, your Majesty," Rey said, treating Veridia with the same respect she would a very powerful spirit. "Please tell me what you wish of me."

"It is the same we require of all new members of Autumn," the Queen assured her. "We of this court value occult knowledge over all other forms of knowledge. If Mizuko has brought you here, then I suspect you possess something that can add to our own. My request of you then is to share some piece of occult knowledge that I do not know. I realize there is a challenge here in that you do not know what knowledge I might already possess, but since Mizuko brought you here, I suspect that something of your own specialty might well be just the piece of knowledge that will earn your entrance to this Court as well as a place of respect with your new peers.

"You need not present this now. Take what time you need. It would be helpful if it was written down. When you are comfortable with what you have to share, then bring it to me and your initiation will be complete." Veridia smiled. "Something else to consider is your admission to the freehold. We are the Desert Duchy. Your initiation here will be confirmed with a promise to protect the Duchy in times of need with those of your skills you can contribute while the full protection of the Duchy will be shared with you should forces of, or Keepers themselves take aim at you."

Mizuko looked apologetically at Rey. She'd told Rey that she'd have to be presented to the *reigning* regent in order to become a member of the freehold. This was not the case. The Queen of Autumn, although not reigning currently, acted as a proxy for Summer, who currently reigned.

It might also be reassuring that Rey wouldn't need to devote power of the Wyrd to enforce any promise to Court or Freehold. Adherence to the promise was expected. Since the consequence of breaking the promise was exile, and that was severe enough, no further consequence was needed. Essentially, Rey's word was good until proven otherwise.

"Am I permitted more than one attempt to broaden your knowledge?" Rey asked.

"If need be," the Queen said.

"Thank you," Rey replied. "If I may, I wish to share some of what I know with you now. I will need but a moment to write it down." She retrieved her sketchbook and a pencil from her backpack, tore a sheet out and wrote *Champ, the sea monster of Lake Champlain, does exist, but it is not a corporeal creature. It is a water spirit.* When she was finished, she returned her gaze to the queen. "Do I read it aloud, or do I present it to you first, your majesty?"

Veridia did not look at the paper, but merely gazed at Rey with an amused expression. "Rey. If you were asked to write a sample essay with which you hoped to gain entry into college, would you jot a sentence down on a piece of scratch paper and hand it over to the professor? This can be verbal, if you prefer. Many do, as few changelings have a formal education.

"This is a test for you. It is a small one, but nonetheless your peers will be judging how you perform. Now that said, if you are prepared to answer any questions which may arise from your statement, then you may read that aloud."

"Please excuse my haste, your Majesty," Rey said with a bow of her head. "In the years before I was Taken, and before I escaped from my Keeper, responding the quickest I could was often the only response I could make that would result in no... consequences. It may be a hard habit to break. I have no problem answering questions."

Without looking down at the piece of paper in her hand, Rey spoke with confidence. "Some of you may have heard of Lake Champlain, and the sea monster, Champ, they like to say lives in it. Champ does exist, but it is not a monster. It is a water spirit that can possess and control water." And with that she waited, curious as to what questions they might have, or even if they would believe her. Not that she cared. She knew the truth of her words, and that's all that mattered.

Of all the changelings present, none were so keenly interested as Mizuko. But she held her tongue, knowing that interrupting now could cause Rey to make some social error.

Veridia considered that, her eyes boring into Rey and her head tilted curiously. Lydia watched Rey with an alien hunter's calm. Media looked bored. Veridia seemed to stare too long and too deeply. It made something in the back of Rey's mind itch.



Veridia straightened and then said, "I like that. It is amusing. A creature that controls and possesses water, perhaps like our Mizuko, perhaps a little less frightening." There was a nervous chuckle from several of the changelings and a nervous muttering from a couple of them. "It is enough. Welcome to Autumn, Rey. I encourage you to continue pursuing such knowledge."

After that, things became quite informal. The Queen invited Rey to stay and have some wine and a few treats, and meet some of the changelings present.

Media signed something at Mizuko who nodded. Then Mizuko took Rey's hand and guided her over to a table that had a number of treats brought over from the Hedge. Mizuko signed in Glymjack Sign that she thought Rey did well.

Rey smiled in thanks and signed back, asking what it was Mizuko had told the Court when she'd joined.

She signed, "I educated the Court in what a person who controlled water could do to another person. I demonstrated on someone who had been teasing me the night I arrived. Most people know that we are all made of mostly water. Few understand what that means. Those that do, don't tease me anymore."

Mizuko went on to detail how one changeling and a few of her friends had decided to pick on Mizuko because they thought her dirty, and unkempt. They hadn't wanted her here, and so had tried to run her off. The siren, however, had taken the abuse and waited until the Queen called on her to demonstrate what she could share that would impress the court enough to allow her entry. She told the Queen that she was here to demonstrate what mastery over water really meant.

She did so by dehydrating her tormentors, drawing the water out of their bodies through skilled use of Autumn contracts, then turning the water into spears of ice using her Elemental mastery and leveling the spears at the hearts of her three tormentors. There was a very uncomfortable moment when nobody moved, until Veridia stood up and applauded her initiative — and the way she'd managed to frighten most of the assembled changelings of the Court of Fear. Because what she did made use of powerful contracts of Autumn, Veridia herself took her training to the next level, showing Mizuko new contracts to take on.

"I am very glad I am not your enemy," Rey replied aloud. "I don't know if there's anything I could do that would elicit such fear. Unless knowing I hunted down and killed the briarwolf whose skin I used to make these clothes." She looked down at what she wore. She was still pleased with it, even moreso by candlelight. The clothes clung to her body, wrapping it in a complicated pattern of patches and lacing, intertwining in and around her brambles. The heels of her boots she'd formed lovingly out of the briarwolf's largest fangs, and used its other teeth, bones and claws throughout the outfit in both practical and decorative fashion. Her top was like a second skin, corset-like in style, and did nothing to impede her movement or view of her well-formed body. What she was most proud of, however, was the what she'd turned the briarwolf's hide into. As she cured it, it turned shades of autumn leaves, with a silvery shimmer that was definitely enhanced by the candlelight. "Or that I used their own form against them."

Mizuko peered at the leather, signing, "I would never hurt you, Rey. You are my friend." Her attention was absorbed by the leather now, however. She touched it curiously, running her fingers over it and pressing here and there to test the suppleness of the leather with her hands. It rather tickled. It was also an inappropriately intimate thing to do in a public place, even though there was no sexual touching or intent. More it was the innocent and honest curiosity of someone who'd never seen such a thing before and simply forgot to observe personal space and privacy in the face of her own curiosity.

Rey tried hard not to giggle twitch and took Mizuko's hands in her own. "Mizuko, as much as I like your admiring my outfit, it's really not appropriate to be touching me like that. I'll let you look at my clothes later. Could you teach me some of the Autumn Contracts? I know a few Contracts here and there, though I have learned all that the Contract of Fang and Claw can give me."

The nymph looked away from Rey's leather and caught her eye. Since Rey was holding her hands, Mizuko said, "*Fang and Claw? So you can draw on the powers of beasts. Is that how you hunted these briar wolves and skinned them? What is a briar wolf?*" Of course, her voice caught the attention of changelings all around them, who stopped what they were doing to listen and draw a little closer to Mizuko. At her questions, they all then looked at Rey.

Rey released Mizuko's hands, realizing her attempt to get Mizuko to keep from tickling further had once again made her the focus of everyone there. She shrugged, and began to tell her tale. "Briarwolves are, or perhaps were once, wolves who were once men, but twisted by contact with Arcadia and the Hedge. They are cruel, clever beasts. They hunt in packs, driving their prey into the Hedge and terrorizing them until they cannot run any further, then they tear their prey apart and eat them.

"My Keeper decided it would be an excellent... learning experience, to let the briarwolves run free in his garden. He forced me to watch one of the friends I'd made there get hunted down by them. I watched and learned, and when I was as good at being a wolf as they were, I made my move. The pack caught my scent and followed me, but I turned the tables on them. I did not run in terror as they'd counted on, but led them into my own trap.

"A few times, I'd managed to sneak out of the garden and explore the Hedge nearby, and I found a ravine with a sudden drop-off, filled with bushes with thorns the length of my arm. I lead the briarwolves in that direction.

"It was the alpha of the pack who took up the chase the most, my greatest tormentor." Rey's smile of satisfaction was chilling. "I led him on a merry chase. At the end, I pretended to be injured far worse than I was. He made one final charge. I twisted out of the way at the last minute, and he flew past me and down into the ravine.

"I let him hang there, impaled on the spines until the rest of the pack was gone. Then I showed him mercy when he deserved none, took what I wanted from his body, and found my way out of the Hedge and back home." Her voice held no pride in what she'd done, nor was she ashamed; she simply was stating what she considered facts.

The other changelings seemed quiet but watched. One changeling, a pale thing with raven black hair and a pair of white stripes sniffed and smiled. "Well. True or not, it's a good story. Rey is it? And I presume it is you we have to thank for dressing Mizuko tonight?"

Rey glanced at Mizuko, and signed to her in Glymjack Cant if that changeling was one of her tormentors, and if so, what was her name.

Mizuko returned the sign affirmative, but Rey didn't understand the sign that Mizuko used for the changeling woman's name.

Rey looked back at the changeling who had spoken and returned the smile with a pleasant one of her own. "I'm sorry. You are...?" she asked politely.

"Vicissitude," she answered.

"*Everyone calls her Sissy,*" said Mizuko.

"I see." Rey gave Mizuko a sly little smile. "I can assure you, *Sissy*, Mizuko is quite capable of putting her own clothes. But I did give her the dress. I got it, thinking it might look nice on her." She gave a careless little

shrug. "The more time she and I spend together, the more we'll get to know each other's taste for things." Rey knew she was goading the other Changeling, returning insult for insult.

Sissy smiled and laughed. "Well, whatever Lydia thinks, I think it does look nice. It's about time someone took her in hand and showed her a little fashion sense. She's been running around like a wild thing for a year. I'm genuinely glad she's found people to look after her a little.

"Oh don't get me wrong," Vicissitude continued, still speaking as if Mizuko wasn't standing right there, "she's quite talented. I don't think anyone would dispute that. But she's like a child savant, you know? All magic and power, but very little common sense. With your help, perhaps she'll finally represent our court better."

Mizuko, already bored with the conversation had walked away. Although she wasn't out of earshot, she seemed more interested in picking out the tastiest goblin fruits than anything Sissy had to say.

"Really?" Rey asked as if discussing the weather. "Are you a prime specimen of what a member of our Court should be?" Please, she thought, give me an excuse, any excuse.

Vicissitude laughed again. "Oh, if only I was! No one is perfect, of course, and perception is subjective. Although there are certainly minimum standards that should apply to all. You've certainly mastered that, yourself."

"And what are the standards?" This should be interesting, Rey thought, maintaining her pleasant expression and tone. Ten to one, good grooming ranks right at the top of her list. Arrogant cow.

"Think of it this way," Sissy said, "how do you want the other courts to see us? As someone to respect and fear? Or as a group of people to ridicule? Autumn, in my opinion, must pay attention to both form and function. Some of us are monstrous, of course. We have all in some way become monsters ourselves in our escape from the real monsters. But by taking care of our appearance it shows we have respect for ourselves and for what we represent. Any sane person would agree. Don't you?"

"Oh, I must say I am relieved," Rey said as if relaxing. "I was worried you'd say we have to be unconscionably rude to our peers, and bully those we believe to be weaker than ourselves or don't meet certain standards. But I must say I don't completely agree with you. There are certain advantages of not looking as expected, and being unassuming. You certainly underestimated Mizuko."

Sissy's smug smile twisted into an ugly snarl and she began to reach for Rey. A bronzed hand quickly reached out from the right and caught Sissy's arm.

"You remember what the Queen told you, right Vicissitude?" The voice belonged to the young woman dressed in leather and chrome studs, the one that had sat at the left hand of the Ashen Queen.

Sissy glowered. "Oh I wasn't *really* going to touch her. I was just going to show her --"

Media interrupted with a shrug. "Who cares? Anyway, don't you have somewhere to be? Like right now?"

The vampiric changeling gave them both a grimace. Then Sissy turned away haughtily and removed to some other friends.

Media watched her go. "Loyalty to one's motley already. Nice. Looks like you're off to a decent start, provided you survive Vicissitude's clique."

A glance around told Rey that Mizuko had by now wandered a bit outside audible range for normal conversation. She was standing near a plate on which some kind of black jelly-like substance was presented to be spread on crackers and eaten. She was nibbling on one as she watched Vicissitude and her friends and

did not appear to be paying attention to Media and Rey.

"Mizuko's one of my people," said the leather-clad, bronzed metal elemental. "And like most of us she doesn't always understand when people are picking on her. It doesn't usually bother us unless someone gets in our faces about it." She shrugged again. "But I think that Sissy has been looking to find a reason for a rematch with her. We don't want that here. If they want to tear each other to pieces, they can do that elsewhere."

"I understand, and I apologize," Rey said. "Thank you for intervening when you did. My dad taught me not to... cause a mess where you eat. But even if I hadn't made the pledge, I'd still have stuck up for her. I hate bullies."

Media nodded. "Even bullies dislike themselves." She looked across the room to where Vicissitude stood speaking with a couple other changelings for a moment. "I suppose we all have reasons for behaving the way we do." She shrugged it off. "Whatever. Point is, don't let it get to you. I don't think Mizuko does."

"Oh and a bit of advice since you're new here. The Duchy has been under siege now for over a year. Agents of the Keeper known as the Goblin King may still be out there waiting for changelings out on their own. We've lost several members of our own court to ambushes and assassination. So, use the buddy system. It's dangerous out there."

Without so much as a farewell, Media wandered off, picked up a reddish fruit and drifted out the door. Clearly she about as much social sensitivity as Mizuko, but at least she was clear and up front about her intentions.

Rey joined Mizuko and asked her to tell her more about the Court, and introduce her to other people. Although this was not the full court gathering, only a social call after business performed earlier in the evening, Mizuko answered Rey's questions as best she could. As well as introducing Rey to those present, Mizuko mentioned in passing the messy demise of the previous court herald, the Fairest changeling that had held the position of ambassador to the other great courts. He had been presumably killed by assassins sent by the Goblin King some six months ago. The position had been open since then.

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Later that night, Less contacted Rey, Mizuko, Simon and Rover. It was time to discuss their next moves as a motley.

Rey placed the last of the mismatched glasses on the table next to the pitcher of water and poured herself a glass of iced tea. "How did your meeting with Gomez go?"

Rover was there, still scratching his head over a few calculations and a small tube of muddy water. He'd spent most of the day scrounging up parts for the new traps and calibrating the system. Running insulated wire into the pond wasn't difficult, but finding a poorly maintained supply had been trickier. The gnome wanted to make sure it wasn't something that saw regular care or else a nosey utility worker might end all of their plans.

Some subtle rewiring and a long snorkle allowed for him to rig the electrical traps securely enough. Rover was still trying to average out a reliable figure for the water's resistance. Apparently the particulate content varied greatly on the temperature of the lake-bottom mud and recent activity. Rainfall, for example, could really stir things up.

He was pretty sure that he had a good door for Mizuko to hide behind. A little cosmetic modifications and it could blend in well with the sides of the tunnel, making it difficult to even know there was a door present. Reinforced with iron and soundproofing, the mortal portal would be as secure as he could make it with the

materials on hand.

Rover looked up when the meeting was mentioned. In all of his snorkling about, he'd forgotten exactly *why* the traps were needed in the first place.

"He's a pretty canny guy," Simon answered. "I gave him a little more than I wanted, but I think it'll work out. The police aren't likely to tell us much, but Edmund probably will. We talked to him enough to be pretty sure that he knows his stuff. He'd probably recognize the ink any gangs active in this area would wear, and he didn't recognize your drawing. So these are someone new. I'd start trying to run down occult connections next, but that's not really my field.

He turned to Mizuko. "He'd like to talk to you if you're willing to tell him what you know. He'll keep your name out of it, and I'll be there to help you out. If we decide mostly to let the mortal authorities take care of this, that's the best way to increase the pressure, but if we're going to do this ambush thing then we should probably wait until after that to decide. And either way, it's up to you."

Mizuko looked up from fiddling with the hem of her new skirt. She hadn't looked like she was paying attention, but she'd heard. She signed something, waited, and then repeated her response in Glymjack Sign. "I will only speak in sign language to mortals. And not this language, either. If he understands that, then it is fine." It wouldn't do at all to use her *voice* in front of a reporter, or anyone else who may be all too curious about it and she readily recognized that fact.

"Hmm..." Simon mused. "Could be tricky." He wanted to be there to offer Mizuko some support, but didn't speak ASL himself, other than maybe being able to remember most of the words to an old hymn or two from his misspent youth. Explaining how he'd talked to Mizuko before might be difficult. Not insurmountable, but difficult. "Is writing things down an option?" It really might not be, he realized, and hoped he wouldn't embarrass her.

"Edmund might be able to get the help of an ASL translator. Perhaps if you meet at the Mythic City Deaf Association someone will help out for free," offered Less.

"I can write, if that's what you mean," she signed to Simon. She knew that her new motley didn't know her history, so she took no offense to the insinuation she might not be able to read or write. To Less, she answered, "I don't know of this Deaf Association you speak of. I am not a member. I do know of someone that works in a soup kitchen Wednesday afternoons until evening that knows sign. I talk to her sometimes."

Her eyes seemed to magnetically draw back to Simon, who she stared at openly.

"um... okay," Simon said. "That's easy then. If he asks, we can tell him you and I communicated by notecard. He may not even think to ask, but I don't want to leave any openings I don't have to. I'll tell him you're mute, and you'll need a translator. If he doesn't know one, we can ask your friend if she'll help. Sound okay?"

Mizuko looked him in the eye. "That is fine. Do you want him investigating this? Or would you like me to scare him off the story?" she asked.

Rover watched the overt eye contact going on and shook his head. All the misspent energy of youth... Sometimes he was amazed any of them got out of bed long enough to get anything done at all.

"The first thing a responsible reporter would do is check the background on his source." The gnome advised. "Do you think you could stand that kind of scrutiny? Sometimes these reporters dig in like a dog on a bone, trying to find *all* of the interesting angles."

"All Mr. Gomez needs to know is Mizuko ran away from an unhealthy home," said Less referring to Mizuko's

Keeper. "Simon should try to steer the story towards investigating the gang that's preying on the homeless girls."

"While we're investigating," Rey interjected, "we need to watch out for ourselves. Media told me a bit about what's going on with the Goblin King, and it appears we have a ready-made adversary of our own." She told the others about her confrontation with Vicissitude. "We need to make sure we're careful."

"The verdant queen certainly doesn't skimp when she goes shopping for enemies," Simon said. "I look forward to meeting Vicissitude, though. She sounds like a lovely person." The sarcasm didn't so much drip as boil like magma. "Rover's got a point. We're running a little of a risk that we get more than we bargained for with Mr. Gomez. But not too much of one, I think. If nothing else, Mizuko is a difficult target for investigation. But it's still worth keeping in mind. Mizuko, I think trying to scare him off might backfire, and I'd like to look to the future a little anyway. A reporter who cares about the homeless in Mythic is probably someone who could be helpful later, so I'd like you to tell him the truth, as much as doesn't endanger our people or anything. But we'll let him wait a day or two. That'll give us time to decide what we want to do, and how much outside help we might actually need."

"Okay, that takes care of one line of investigation into the gang that was chasing Mizuko. Rey, where have your inquiries led us?" asked Less.

"I'm still waiting to hear back from some of them," Rey said, "but what I have heard so far is the locals are none too happy at some outsiders trying to muscle in on their territory. I hope to hear more tomorrow morning."

"Simon mentioned an occult line of investigation. Is there something magical we could be doing to get more information?"

"Yes," answered Mizuko. "An Autumn Seer can look into the matter, but it is not free and it is not cheap."

Simon knew of just such a Seer, of course. He knew that the Ashen Court member by the name of Dean Warwick commanded powers that allowed him considerable foresight. But Mizuko was right. Autumn Seers did not come cheap. Further, they only looked into matters they considered important. Their time was always in demand and therefore, they charged for them. *What* they charged varied greatly. Seer Warwick seemed fond of powerful Tokens. Paying him for the information, should he take this job, would likely require a search for a new Token in the Hedge, or one of the Markets. Such a thing might, however, be a worthy test of the new Motley's skills.

Simon laughed a little. "I was hoping *you'd* know," he told Rey. "You mentioned knowing a bit about magical stuff beyond the Fey, and I sort of wondered if there was a way to pin down the meaning of the tattoo. If it says 'hey, I work for the vampire lord Bob' that'd be handy, right? But I *do* know a guy. He collects Tokens, which could be tricky..." Simon explained about Dean Warwick and his tastes in fairy treasure. "If we don't have a better option, it's worth a try, I guess."

"It's a good back up plan, if he considers it important enough to take on," Rey said. "I do know *of* divination and dowsing methods, but unfortunately none that I can do. But like I said, I should hear back tomorrow about the Mexican gangs. Oh, that reminds me. I've got a map of Mythic." She grabbed it from the counter where she'd placed it earlier. "Mizuko," she said as she opened up the map, "do you know where the girls who were taken usually hung out? If we can mark it on the map, we may be able to figure out where they're operating. If they're clustered in one area, then that's a good place to start."

"Mexican gang tattoos," Rey added, "tend to have a lot of religious imagery, as they're asking forgiveness for the sins they are committing, so there might not be any occult connection with the tattoo. I just don't want to make the habit of immediately thinking there's a supernatural connection to every bad thing we come across."

Mizuko nodded and held out her hand for a writing utensil. Once Rey had found a pen for her, she quickly circled areas she thought her friends were likely to be when they were taken, then marked precisely the location she was when the gang went after her. The blocks she circled were in an area three to four blocks due east of Rey's house, and two to three blocks west of Simon's home. The place they tried to grab Mizuko was one block directly south of where Simon lived.

"No obvious grouping here," Rey said with a shake of her head. "Three isn't really enough for this, and I'm really hoping there aren't many more who have gone missing. Maybe my contacts can tell me more, something that can help make sense of this." She looked at Less. "Do you have any contacts that might have heard of people going missing?"

"I'll talk with the Bleak Seal and see if I can correlate anything that might have been picked up," said Less, though he was less than hopeful considering the Bleak Seal would be paying more attention to changelings. "We should talk about one more thing. What if these lines of questioning turn up nothing. Do we then try to coax the gang to strike at a time and place of our choosing?"

"The problem we've got is that we don't know why these people have been targeted," Rey said. "Mizuko, do you know if they were watching you, going specifically after you, or if you were a target of opportunity?"

*"They've gone after all of us who were together that night a couple weeks ago," Mizuko said. "They might have gone after me first, then my friends one after the other and then me again. I assume they did this because they thought we were vulnerable to them. But I am not vulnerable, nor am I weak."*

"What happened that night?" Rey asked.

Mizuko frowned. She began signing in Glymjack and her companions picked up most of it. "Nothing important that I know of. We often got together. Just talk. They would open up. I would take in the things that frightened them or made them sad. The same happened that night. Amber had some money from somewhere, so she bought us ice cream and the shopping center. We walked a while, then noticed some hispanic men following us. We ran and split up. I distracted the men so they wouldn't chase my friends. I knew I could escape them whenever I wished. I am sure Stacy, Amber and Amalia got away that night. I led them down a dark alley, where I knew they would think they could trap me. I left them standing there alone and unable to find me."

"It seems strange to me," Rey said with a slight frown, "that they would try to grab a group of girls at one time. It certainly would be easier to take one here, one there. There's got to be something more to this."

Mizuko looked at Rey thoughtfully.

"Did you usually get together in the same place?" asked Less, continuing the game of 20 questions as they struggled to piece together the puzzle.

Mizuko nodded yes.

"If it'd been kept to that first night, maybe not." Rover mused. "Bunch of rough punks see a bunch of pretty girls and decide to do the math? Happens all the time, but that wouldn't give them a reason to start pulling them off the street after they got away.

"No clue where Amber got the money from? Maybe she sold you all out? If the gang was looking for new talent to sell, then maybe getting one girl to gather a few others in one place was a shortcut."

"I don't think she would," Mizuko signed. "If she did, why take her, too? She knows other girls. I think she had money because Amber is quick with her fingers and on her feet. She is probably a thief, but loyal to her friends."

Simon asked "Where were you all that night?"

Mizuko had to think about that, but then she had an answer. *"I met them at the soup kitchen, the same one that's in the area I think they were taken. We walked down to the ice cream place at the shopping center and then by the mall. The security guards don't like us hanging out there, so we walked down toward the train station. We were going to hang out in the park a while. That's when Amber said she thought those guys were following us. We turned a corner and found they really were. I told them to split up and run. We could meet at the soup kitchen later. I hung back just long enough to be sure I had the attention of those men. I've always been good at that. After I lost them at the alley, I circled around and met them all at the soup kitchen again about an hour later."*

"Sissy really wants to hurt you," Rey suddenly said. "Media basically told me she's looking for any chance to get back at you for what happened. Might she have arranged for the girls to be Taken, in order to get to you? They're obviously your friends, and four guys to take just one young woman seems to be a bit excessive."

Mizuko frowned. *"Are you suggesting a member of the Autumn Court in good standing would resort to the methods of a Keeper to settle a squabble? At a time when the freehold has been engaged in a shadow war with one of the Gentry?"*

"I'm merely putting forth ideas," Rey said honestly, "but it took Media's direct intervention to stop Sissy from breaking Queen Veridia's rule about no fighting. Kidnapping them would certainly give her a ready source of glamour, and would force a confrontation between the two of you when you go to get them back."

Mizuko shook her head stubbornly. She refused to believe that.

"Then we need to find some other reason for what happened. Could they have been after Amber, because she took something for theirs?" Rey asked. "Gangs get rather testy when someone steals from them."

"Yes," she signed, "but then why take the others? Why go after me even after they already got her?"

"Because she didn't have what she took," Rey replied. "So they went after the three of you in case you had it. Or to put more pressure on her." She didn't say that's what she might do, if Amber had stolen from her. A dead thief doesn't get you back what they took.

Less spoke up. "I think the soup kitchen is worth looking into. If that is where you often met as a group and the gang was after the whole group, then there might be a connection. Maybe they thought you overheard or saw something they didn't want you to repeat."

Mizuko signed, "Saw something?" She looked away, her face troubled. She shook her head. "No. That could not be. I don't see a connection between what I saw and this gang."

Less' body rippled oddly as several eyes bulged and mouths gaped. "What did you see, Mizuko?"

Mizuko signed, the motions agitated. "I do not know what I saw. It looked like a man, but I detected in passing something unusual. I couldn't place it, so I put it out of my mind. I remember he was dressed in a dark grey suit pants and a shirt, probably blue; it was dark. He wore a hat, like a fedora. He seemed to be minding his own business so I minded mine after being unable to place what he really was."

Although being unable to identify a supernatural being didn't seem odd to Simon or Rey, Less knew that



Mizuko was a sorceress, an Autumn witch often hired out to identify strange and supernatural things. If she didn't know what something was through her very effective senses, then there might be less than a handful other changelings in the entire Duchy who could do any better.

"As I said, I can not imagine any connection between this man and gang members. There was no connection in dress or apparent attitude. Nor did I think he did more than glance in my direction before he simply left. I thought no more of it until now," she signed.

Simon shrugged. "It's still a possibility," he said. "We're probably not going to figure out the truth until we do something to get more information. With luck, Rey will turn up something more, maybe some idea of just how bad this new gang is likely to be, but that still won't tell us everything. With what we have, there's three possibilities: Vissitude taking a run at your friends as a way to screw around with you, in which case we might run into other Changeling trouble; A probably mortal gang going after you and your friends cause Amber took something and they're just trying to round up everyone who might have it; or the mysterious guy in the hat using the gang as mortal minions. Wouldn't be the first time. Some day I hope to have minions; they're terribly handy.

"But what it means for us is that we're almost certain to be able to get them to take the bait if we dangle Mizuko out there. But we won't know how much trouble we're getting into. If they're just human, they know Mizuko is unusually capable, and they're likely to up the ante on the third attempt. If they're Ensorcelled or Changelings, which I kind of doubt, then they'll know about all of us. And worst case, if the guy in the hat is some kind of supernatural being, we'd have no idea what he could do or what powers he might imbue his minions with.

"Of course, there's also the fourth possibility that it's something we don't know about, but that's just life. So what do you want to do? Set the trap in the next day or two and not be sure what we're stepping in, or make a dangerous, unpredictable run to the Hedge to try to find a Token or two we can use as bribes?"

"Before we go running into the Hedge, we may want to find out if the Seer is willing to work for us," Rey said. She paused for a moment, then continued. "Mizuko, I don't suppose you remember what he smelled like?" She was aware how strange the question was, but she needed to ask it.

"And did you see this man in the soup kitchen or outside?" added Less. "Can you remember anything else about the encounter?"

"That is all," Mizuko signed. "He was outside, across the street." She added, "*It did not occur to me to sniff him.*"

Rey shrugged slightly. "You can learn a lot about a person by how they smell. But I don't see why seeing someone out on the street, in plain sight of everyone, would be grounds for kidnapping. Perhaps he somehow sensed what you are, but didn't know which of the four of you it was. There are a lot of predators out there who can sense the supernatural."

Mizuko nodded in agreement.

When mention of learning about a person by how they smelled was brought up, Rover gave himself an experimental sniff. All he really received was machine oil and pond water.

"Sounds like we should just grab one of these guys and start asking questions. Fortunately, we already have a trap set up for doing just that."

"It's also possible that the act of noticing him was what caused the interest," said Less. "Perhaps he is not detectable by mortal senses. I'm suddenly worried that he is an agent of the Goblin King. Rover, it might not be a good idea to spring the trap too close to Mizuko's Hollow. We don't want to draw too much attention to

that area if we are dealing with the Fae."

"*You are correct, Less,*" Mizuko put in. "*Mortals would not have detected, nor would changelings unless they were both lucky and were specifically looking for it. I use certain contracts whenever I am in one place for long, looking for supernatural presences. It is a habit I picked up during the shadow war out of self-preservation.*"

Rover scratched rough fingernails across his stony pate. They wouldn't be using his new traps? He'd put so much work into them, researching the human sciatic nerve and everything. He'd even prepared a fine lecture on how the whole system worked.

*Ah, well...*, he shrugged. That allowed it to remain as a fine defense for 'Zuko's den. Wherever they decided the actual trap needed to be sprung, he was sure that he could come up with something just as impressive. It was simply another challenge to undertake, though not too great of one. Despite the appearance of this unknown presence, it seemed they were still just hunting humans. Nothing with any actual 'cleverness' about them.

Plus, he still carried the impression that all problems could eventually be solved with the sufficient application of amperage. It was an attitude that had gotten him this far, and some silly gangster wasn't about to change his mind now.

"I don't know if this strange man just happened by the soup kitchen at that moment or if he spends a lot of time there," said Less. "Rover, could you build something that would watch that area for us. Something that could detect a supernatural being?"

Rover seemed surprised by the question, followed quickly by looks of puzzlement, frustration and an unsuccessful mental argument. Eventually he leaned back with his eyes closed and spoke.

"Well, I've always had this theory that *masks* play as much on sentient psychology as they do actual tricks-of-the-light. Subtle alterations in imagery convince the viewer that they're seeing something other than what's really there.

"If that's true, and the alterations contain any sort of consistent elements, then filters could conceivably be created that either edit out, or at least detect, those elements. I'm thinking along the lines of a polarized lens that creates a specific interference pattern. Light sensors behind that would pick up on the pattern and return a signal when it's found."

He leaned forward again as the part of this theory that'd always evaded him made itself clear once more.

"The problem is that I've never actually been able to do proper research. I've only ever had my own mask to examine which isn't enough to really get a good baseline. Given enough time and test subjects, I could probably come up with something.

"Time measured in months... if not years. Way more time than we 'got right now. Sorry."

He paused right there, dimly remembering an old penpal of his. A mad, mortal genius by the name of Emil Schuffstein had some theory that a series of crystal diopters might be able to penetrate masks... maybe four of them in total. Rover had, of course, laughed and tried to get the man to understand that multiple shifts in focal length would be useless against glamours and that polarization was clearly the key.

Some people just never listen.

"Well that's too bad," said Less, feeling the danger scale rising. "I don't suppose we could convince some kind of spirit to keep watch for us?"

"You mean an incorporeal being capable of moving in and out of place at will unseen?" Mizuko asked.

"Yes, essentially. Something that could see this man and report back."

Rey debated whether or not to speak up, and decided against it. Having some knowledge of spirits and ghosts when there was nothing she could offer that's practical would be unhelpful.

Mizuko shrugged. "That is not my field," she signed. "I can deal with ghosts, but are unlikely to be helpful in this. They don't like leaving the places they are found."

Rey dropped her eyes to the table and tried to squelch the pain she felt. There had to be something she could do to help. She just needed to figure out what it was. And then it came to her, but she needed a bit more information. "Mizuko, that soup kitchen only gives out meals in the evening, right?"

*"It begins in the afternoon and continues through the evening," she said.*

Rey looked at Mizuko. "When did you see him? Before nightfall?"

"Dusk," she reported.

Dusk, Rey thought. That was close enough. Should she tell them what she thought, what she now feared? "I... I think I may know who - or rather what - you saw."

Less straightened up and crossed his arms. He was all ears. Not literally, but he was suddenly very interested. "Do tell," he said gravely.

Rover had been periodically shaking his vial of muddy water to see how long it would take to settle. Even though it never seemed to completely clear, there was obvious sediment that either never dissolved or managed to resolve itself quickly after the action. Once the dramatic pause ensued, however, he looked up with an absent minded "Eh?"

Rey took a deep breath and fought to keep the loathing she felt from her voice. "It might be a vampire. The information we've got kind of fits. It was dusk, close enough to dark that one could be up and about, if it had some resistance to sunlight. I'm pretty sure they - or at least some of them - can shield themselves from most eyes. If he realized he'd been seen, he'd want to know how. Vampires enslave humans to their wills, forcing them to serve them. The gang banger with the tattoo, who was directing the others, could be one his servants. But I don't know anything about the vampires here in Mythic. That has to be some, though how many I have no idea. A large city like this would draw them like... flies to a rotting corpse."

Mizuko didn't know what to think of Rey's colorful description but she nodded, allowing it was possible.

Less addressed the motley. "Well, that's certainly interesting information Rey. We'll have to be very careful. I think we have our marching orders now. Simon and Mizuko will try to enlist the reporter to help dig up information about the gang. Rey will see what she can get through her contacts. I will swing by the soup kitchen, incognito, to see if there is anything there to see. Rover, if it does come down to trapping one of these gang members for information, can you work on something portable that will be useful? And think about what might be done if we have to deal with a vampire. Anything else?"

"Sounds like a plan to me. If the guy in the hat *is* a vampire, it means we can sleep in. Shame we don't know for sure." Simon grinned at his own humor.

The humor was lost on Rover, who tended to not keep any recognizable sleeping pattern. Most of his downtime came as any given project allowed and it was his own tenacity that kept him awake. Once the

gnome's focus was allowed to slip, sleep usually ambushed him quickly regardless of the hour.

"Traps for humans? Sure, no problem. As long as he wasn't given any special tricks from the vampire... and assuming that it actually *is* a vampire, and that they can grant special tricks like that. The only real variable here is whether you need it to be portable, or if we're setting up an ambush site."

"Ideally, the trap could be worn by Mizuko as a backpack or something. She could even escape by turning into water if need be. If it's going to be too large or heavy then we'll have to pick a spot - somewhere close to the train station, there's plenty of vacant lots along the line - and hope we can lead them there."

In the morning Rey needed to make contact with some people. There were two things she wanted to learn about, but only one of them she knew who to talk to. Rey made her way to a certain street corner where she knew there would be people she could ask questions about the gangs of Mythic.

In the morning, Rey had two important things on her agenda, and only one of them she knew who to talk to. Rey made her way to a certain street corner where she knew there would be people she could ask questions about the gangs of Mythic. She considered herself lucky to find someone there almost immediately, but her luck ran out right then. They didn't know anything she didn't about the Mexican gangs, though they said they'd keep their ears open for any information they could pass along.

There was nobody else she knew she could ask. Well, that wasn't quite true. There was one other person, but she'd already asked them once about the gangs, and Rey didn't want to go dipping at that well too often.

So what to do next? Rey decided to help Less check out the soup kitchen. She figured she'd ask if they needed any help, and extra pair of hands. While she was there, she'd keep an eye out for the guys who were chasing Mizuko, and perhaps see if the people who worked there might have heard or seen anything. That is, if Less didn't mind her help.

Rey changed into her "college student" clothes and walked to the soup kitchen, keeping an eye out for trouble, and opportunities.

On the way there, her cell phone buzzed with an incoming call from Clairborne. After Rey answered, she heard Lyla's velvet voice. "That tattoo isn't a gang mark," she told her frankly. "It's employed by a group of ex-Mexican military types who've gone mercenary. Watch yourself. I don't know who they are working for."

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Mizuko had stayed at Rey's house, and so it was arranged that Simon could find her there the next day. Simon then just needed to set up a meeting with Edmund Gomez.

He called Edmund and said "Mizuko is willing to talk to you under condition of anonymity. But 'talk' is kind of the wrong word. She's mute. She speaks American Sign language, and she'll need an interpreter. She knows a woman who works at a local soup kitchen if you don't have some other option."

The reporter indicated they had someone on staff at the paper who could interpret sign. He didn't ask about how Simon had talked to her. Simon supposed "with pen and paper" was a pretty obvious guess. They set up an appointment for that afternoon at the Mythic City Register's offices, unless Mizuko said no.

Next, Simon drove over to Rey's place to make sure Mizuko was okay with the time and place. Then, since they had some time, Simon asked if she'd give him the pleasure of escorting her to lunch first. He had ulterior motives, of course. For one, he wanted a chance to talk to Mizuko when nothing dire was getting in

the way. Her obvious attraction was something worth exploring, especially since it was echoed by his more subtle attraction to her. But besides that, he wanted someone with him when he did what he had to do next.

Simon took the Bentley to a little pizza place down the street from the Register's offices with Mizuko on the back. She rode with her arms wrapped around his waist and her chest and helmeted head pressed up against his back, which was a little bit distracting, in a pleasant way.

Sitting on the patio, they shared a pizza and sipped cold drinks, and Simon tried to get Mizuko to talk to him. None of the usual tactics worked, so finally Simon resorted to just asking her questions. Over the course of the meal, he learned little about her life, but he did start to get a feel for how her mind worked. As an Elemental, Mizuko just didn't quite think the way most people did. She had less innate understanding of the world of people and their often confusing and contradictory interconnections.

Simon managed to learn some things just by what she said and didn't say. Her attraction for him was obvious, but he'd held off on exploiting it because he didn't want to risk hurting her later. But now he was fairly sure that to Mizuko, sex could be pleasurable, but in her mind it wasn't connected to love or commitment. That made him a little sad for her, but he had to admit that it made the current situation a lot simpler.

As much as he might want it, Simon Bell was not made for lasting love, and he couldn't be anything more than he was.

As they spoke, Simon kept one eye on a dreary, severe building just across the street; the real reason he'd chosen this restaurant (although when he'd eaten here, it had been a burger place). He saw an old man wheeled out of the church in a wheelchair. Reverend Harry Drew, wearing the same kind of clerical robes he sported when Simon was a boy named Billy, looked so sunken and withered that Simon was paralyzed with shock. The ruddy-complected tower of sanctimony and rage that he remembered from his boyhood was gone, eroded into this.

"Blood and bones..." Simon whispered.

"What?" Mizuko looked at what Simon was staring at, the old man being pushed by another who looked about half his age to a van with a wheelchair lift. "Who's that?" she asked.

"My father," Simon said. "Blood and bloody bones, what happened to him?"

While Mizuko wasn't much of a talker, she was a good listener, and Simon's story spilled out to her, about how his own father had sold him to the Fey in return for a better son. The new William, from what Simon had learned on the internet, was a minister himself and had adopted two children with his wife; Simon's highschool sweetheart.

"My parents love my Fetch better than me, too," Mizuko said, scooting over to press herself against Simon. She finally told him something about herself and the life she'd had, and about her Fetch, Irene, who was now going to college on an academic scholarship.

She also told him about her life now and the meaning of the name she'd chosen for herself: Mizuko Naia.

As the pizza diminished, Simon could tell she had something else to say, but wasn't quite sure how, so he said it for her. "Yes. I'd like to have sex with you, not right now since we have an appointment in a few minutes, but soon. And more than once. I was thinking 'until neither of us can walk straight the next day.' Does that sound like something you'd enjoy?"

Once his decision had been made, Simon saw no reason to delay, and he knew the direct approach would be best with Mizuko. The fact that the bus-boy overheard from a nearby table and dropped the stack of

plates he was holding was just kind of a bonus.

Mizuko said not a word, but presented the wickedest little smile that had ever been a turn-on to Simon. She did indeed like the sound of that.

Meeting Gomez at the office of the paper went as well as Simon had expected. Of course between Mizuko and Simon, they had every head in the place turning to watch them, or observing them obliquely while they sat in front of Edmund's desk and Mizuko began answering questions. Both changelings were used to that, however. Even though they appeared as mortal versions of themselves to these people, they made a very distinct impression. It was rare that people as attractive as the two of them came by the office for an interview.

The person they had on staff to do sign language interpretation was pretty good and things progressed quickly. Gomez asked his question and Mizuko answered most questions. She told him about her friends, including descriptions. She also described her lack of success in getting police help, followed by a brief explanation that she had only just "cleaned up a bit" to come to the office. Edmund seemed doubtful of that. Given how she looked now to him, and having never seen any other side of her, she simply just didn't look like a homeless person to him. Simon guided the conversation back to the topic of the kidnappings however, and the matter was set aside.

Mizuko gave him her first name to use, but refused any pictures. She didn't mind that he taped the interview, especially since only his and the interpreter's voices would be on the tape anyway. After the end of his questions about her friends, he then turned his questions to Mizuko herself. This was a human interest story, he reasoned, and so people want to get to know the human side of the victims and people who knew about them. He asked Mizuko a number of things about herself, including why she was homeless. She told him nothing other than that she had run away from home and didn't care to be found.

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That afternoon, Less dressed in something nondescript and went to the soup kitchen that Mizuko had described to look around. It appeared to be just what one expected. The afternoon was filled with people hustling in with donated food and firing up the kitchen. After finding nothing of particular interest across the street where Mizuko has said she had seen the strange man, Less entered the soup kitchen. Volunteers cleaned tables and got things organized as people began to filter in, either just loitering, or talking with one another while they waited for dinner. He just started helping people set up the tables and chairs and was soon accepted as a volunteer. As afternoon stretched into early evening, the kitchen began serving, and Rey arrived.

Rey casually moved around the room toward Less. When she was close enough, she spoke. "We've got trouble." Her voice was soft, just loud enough for him to hear. "Big trouble."

"What do you mean?" asked Less. "Is the gang somehow connected to the Goblin King?"

"Not unless he is hiring mortal mercenaries," she replied. Seeing what Less did, she did the same. Gone was the changeling he'd met, replaced by a young woman in her early twenties, with waist length strawberry blond hair pulled back into braid, faintly tanned skin, and hazel eyes rimmed with long, lush lashes. Vines of a tattoo curled beneath the waistband of her low-cut jeans. "My contacts told me they're Mexican ex-military, though who they're currently working for is unknown." She shook her head. "They're very dangerous."

Less nearly dropped the dirty plates he was carrying. "Ex-military!?" he whispered. "If what we suspect is true, this mysterious man just sent troops after a group of young girls just for being seen!" He stood still as he looked over the sad people grateful for their meal. He didn't really want to leave - the fog of despair was invigorating - but he didn't want to chance a meeting with the strange man without more planning. "Just let

me drop these plates off in the kitchen. Try to get a sniff of the man's trail across the street and I'll meet you on the corner of Odyssey street."

"I'll try," Rey said with a slight smile, "but don't expect me to find much. With so many people traveling that street, along with the fact I've got no idea what I'm looking for..." She shrugged and left the soup kitchen.

On the other side of the street, Rey frowned and looked around. How am I supposed to find a single scent trail of someone I've had no contact with before? She squatted down and peered at the sidewalk as if looking for something. Well, here goes nothing, she thought as she walked to teenagers walk by. Rey expended some of her power to gain the senses of her beloved wolves then slowly and carefully, hoping to find traces of something she might recognize as not human.

After a few minutes, and an explanation to a helpful passerby that she'd lost the back of an earring, Rey straightened up and sigh. There were too many scents in the area for her to be able to find the one that might lead them to the man in the fedora. She strolled over to the corner where she was to meet Less, surveying her surroundings for signs of the soup kitchen - or herself - being watched.

That's when she saw a quad of teenage boys, two of them wearing football shirts, wandering down the street towards her. It was obvious when they noticed her, because huge grins covered their faces and they started talking and laughing. Rey slowed her pace and openly appraised them in return. They were just kids, she thought, and could never really satisfy me. Her lips curved into a small, sultry smile. But doesn't mean I can't have some fun.

"Look at her tits!"

"Check out that tat. I wonder how far down it goes."

"Forget it, Mike. There's no way you'd ever get into *her* pants."

"I bet I could."

"Sure, like you did with Lacey?"

The teens laughed as they got closer, and when they were about ten feet away, Rey said "Hello, boys."

"Hey, babe," the tall blonde wearing the number 35 jersey said, trying to sound cool. The black teenager wearing number 67 elbowed him and laughed.

"So, you guys are on the football team, huh." Rey crossed her arms in front of her, knowing full well it pulled her shirt tight over her breasts and lifted the hem of her shirt enough to reveal her piercing.

"Look man, she'd got a belly button ring!" The latino teen whispered, nudging the black guy.

"Yeah, we are," number 35 replied, standing up straighter and puffing out his chest a bit. "I'm the quarterback."

"So you like to call the plays, huh," Rey said, her voice low and husky. "What about you, number 67, so close to my favorite number."

"Defensive tackle," he replied.

"Ooooh, I *like* being tackled." Rey let her eyes move slowly up and down his body, evaluating what she saw. "So, what are you up to tonight, Mr. Tackle."

"Gonna party. You wanna come?" The boys watched eagerly, and Rey drank in their teenaged lust.

"Sorry, 67. Got other plans for tonight. How about tomorrow? Iron Mountain Park, near the rock oak?" She took a step forward, her hips swaying as her seductive fragrance invaded the boys' senses. She'd chosen that spot deliberately - a known "hang out" location, close enough to the trails so they'd not get lost, but secluded enough for sex. "Make it 11 pm. Maybe we could play a bit. You know, you catch me you get me?" She trailed her finger down his chest, and kept from laughing at the pathetically eager expression on his face.

"Uh, sure. I'll be there," he stammered.

"See you then." Rey stepped back and continued on her way down the sidewalk. After a few steps, she turned and looked back over her shoulder. "Why don't you bring a couple of friends. I'll bring a couple of mine, and we'll make our own party?" With a wink and hips swaying the way she knew drove Grey wild, she walked towards her meeting with Less. She listened to their childish jubilation and wondered if Mizuko would like to join her for a late night feast. That part of the woods didn't see a lot of traffic that late at night, and it was perfect terrain for a wolf to slip between the trees.

Once around the corner and out of sight of the teenagers, she returned to walking normally. Less came from the back of the soup kitchen along Odyssey and matched pace with her. "There doesn't seem to be anything odd about the place itself. Mizuko must have just angered the mysterious man when she caught sight of him. Paying a seer doesn't seem like such a bad thing any more."

"No, it doesn't," Rey agreed. "Them being mercs just kicked the danger meter up several notches. But I don't even know where to begin to search for a token to pay him with."

Less did. The war with the Goblin King had its front lines in the world of Fae. It was an upsetting landscape that the death and destruction left behind but the Thorns were quick to reclaim it. Enchanted weapons had been lost with their champions, and the possessions of corpses took on Fae qualities amongst the Brambles. There had been talk in the markets and at court of sending expeditions but most were still licking their wounds from the war. It just wasn't worth the risks to venture close to the Goblin King's territory for objects that were as fickle as they were useful. "The Hedge," was all he said.

Rey gave a dry little laugh. "I know that, but the Hedge is a very big place."

"I know of a place," sighed Less. "My Hollow opens nearby. They say that there was once a ring of toadstools. Around them was placed a ring of standing stones. Around them grew a town and in that town a magnificent palace was built. Business brought me there for fine hedgespun articles. The story goes that the prince was looking for a bride that was the richest and the poorest in the land. A poor weaver-girl had a spinning spindle, a loom shuttle and a needle given to her by her grandmother. By singing rhymes while working, she sent the spindle out to seek her love and it danced across the land trailing a golden thread. The shuttle wove the most magnificent carpet at her front door. The needle sewed beautiful draperies and coverings in her room. When the spindle found the prince he followed it home to find the poorest girl in the most richly-dressed house of the town. They were married and the spindle, shuttle and needle were kept in an honoured position in the treasury."

"Sounds like an interesting place," Rey replied, "in the Chinese interpretation of the word."

"Of course, the prince and princess would never give up their magic spindle, shuttle and needle. But the last time I saw the good little weaver-girl her head was on a hob-kin pike. The palace had been burned and the town occupied by the Goblin King's troops. I use my Door now to report on the King's troop movements to Lord Summer." Less tapped his umbrella on the ground a little more sharply, but it was the only outward sign of his emotions. "It's possible that the looters didn't realize what they had, distracted by the gold and jewels in the treasury, or perhaps the prince and princess hid their most prized possessions before the palace fell."



"Are his troops still there?" Rey asked.

"The last time I was there the standing army was pulling out. A garrison was to remain, but it wouldn't need to be large. The town had been somewhat repopulated by unpleasant Hedge-folk, probably loyal to the King, who, shall we say, don't mind living near the aftermath of a battlefield. There have been some reports, however, that there is a resistance of sorts."

"Might be worthwhile checking it out, if only to put our own thorns in the Goblin King's side."

"Yes. Maybe." He really didn't want to turn the cold war back into a hot one. "Let's see how the others fared today."

—

After many hard hours in his workshop, time that was preceded by deep thought at the drafting table, Rover felt he'd come up with a decent two-stage capture system. There were still some aspects that had to be worked out along with a small amount of grand-theft, but the bones of his plan had been constructed.

He'd gathered the brood together for a demonstration of Less' choosing. Since firearms were involved, it might not be exactly safe to try this out indoors. At least not for the first run.

Rover addressed his friends.

"The way I see it, we have two problems. Beyond actually finding the man, that is. For one, we'll need a way to transport the captive safely, quietly and obscurely. If anyone sees us carting a screaming hostage around then we're all hosed. No getting around that so we'll need to liberate a truck. Full-size and with a hard-top cover on the bed. Preferably, we'll be renting that but I don't expect Avis to have exactly what we need.

"I'll probably have to hot-wire it for the night. It'll be returned unharmed when we're done, complete with a full tank of gas and a note of apology for anyone feeling guilty about that."

That was the most the gnome was planning on saying on the matter and he moved on to the next point, which included him hefting a very odd looking gun. It seemed to be a sawed-off shotgun with four barrels evenly spaced around the main stock, giving it the look of some survival-horror hack-job. There was a tight package strung evenly in front of the four rods and secured to the stock itself.

"Now, I can't take full credit for this since I got the idea from a Richard Bachman story. Hopefully it works as well here as it did there. Four shells fire simultaneously and drive a net towards its target... like so."

Rover demonstrated by aiming the gun at a tailor's mannequin he'd set up for this purpose. The gun made an echoing bang and flung the package with violent force, where it then spread out almost instantly and trapped the dummy.

"As you can see, once the damn thing opens up it's momentum goes to hell. So it's short range, and not really something you can reload in the field. I managed to rig up two of them, but whoever carries the things will have to be careful with their shots.

"That brings me to the second problem, being that this guy won't be alone. I can't imagine he'll be anywhere without backup and we don't want his boys following us. That's what the two nets are for, trying to slow them down. We want to get this guy running and we're hopefully scary enough to get that done."

Rover broke the shotgun open, which had to be hinged carefully to clear all four barrels, and started inserting a completely different load.

"You got one net, but you also have these stun rounds. They're loaded with heavy, rubber balls that'll drop most people with a good shot and scare the crap out of anyone still standing. Those should work just fine for herding the guy whatever direction we want... until you run out, of course. But the plan is to run the guy into phase two."

With that announcement, he asked for help moving a large and cumbersome contraption. It looked like he'd dismantled the framework of a ping pong table, loaded a bear trap onto its center pivot and strung it like a trampoline.

"I made this out of a bear trap, the framework of a ping pong table and some material from a trampoline. It works just the way it looks, you open it, spread it on the ground and wait for someone to step into it. These latches here, here and here should automatically lock down and keep it from being open on the inside.

"That's what the hardcover on the truck is for. Once we have him inside of this thing we can throw him into the back and close a solid layer of fiberglass over anything he has to say. Not perfect, but you gotta' remember this is rush job. I've at least had time to cut it down to fit perfectly into the standard bed of a full sized pickup

"Once we find the guy then we can select a suitable dark alley and lay out the trap while the rest of the team is getting into position to chase the target."

He shrugged, not liking some of the unknown variables in the plan, but realizing there wasn't much that could be done about it.

"Maybe we'll get lucky and take him down with one of the two net-guns. I wouldn't count on it, or try to go for it unless he's alone. If his friends are in an position to help him out then our risk-factor just shot up. Take them out first, snare the bad guy if you can but count on getting him shoved towards the man-trap. It should be tough for him to see if he's panicking and the lighting is in our favor."

That was about it, he'd laid out what he had in mind with the tools at his disposal.

"Any questions?"

Simon raised his hand, a bit of humor after Rover's 'lecture,' "Would a pannel van be an adequate substitute for a truck? We can get one of those from any rental place in town without having to steal it."

"It'd be more dangerous, even with a cargo cage, but it should still work." Rover admitted. "Remember that this is a makeshift job. We can't rely on anyone staying caught in the mantrap for long, and the truck bed will give him less room to cause trouble."

"We also need to keep in mind that anyone we catch might be a mercenary," Rey added. "Mexican ex-military. I've got no idea if they were special ops, but it's probably a good bet it's going to be more difficult than catching an average person. Does anyone other than myself know how to use a gun?"

Rover's attention was caught and held securely by Rey's last statement.

"Ex-military? Nobody told me anything about ex-military."

That threw his plan into a little more doubt. The gnome started revising formulae in his head to account for the faster reflexes and fearless nature of a disciplined soldier.

"Oh, and of course I know how to use a gun." He stated. " 'Just another machine, if a bit more brutal than I like. I've made and fired plenty in the past."

"Sorry," Rey said. "I found out myself late this afternoon, and I had no way to get a hold of you to tell you."

"Well, we may need more than nets and rubber balls to get these guys to panic. Unless someone has a better idea, we may want to try getting them to chase us instead. Lure our target into the trap rather than drive him."

"I do not use guns," signed Mizuko. Her body language was resolute. "Nor can I draw them into a trap carrying a weapon like that in my arms. Do you have a squirt gun?"

Simon said "It's summer. Squirt guns are easy to find. We can pick up a whole hydraulic arsenal once we're done here.". To answer Rey, he added "I have a pistol and I know how to use it, but I've never actually shot anyone."

"I was hoping more along the lines of gods and monsters." Rover stated. "Even if they're illusionary, we might need something unexpected in order to get the right response. Shooting to kill will probably just piss them off..."

He thought about that for a moment and realized what he'd been missing.

"Oh. Okay, they've already proven that they'll chase you, 'Zuko. So if we want them running in the right direction, you're the one that should lead them. Two of us can be positioned to slow down the ones we don't want while the one we *do* want makes it into the trap. We get him snagged, loaded and carted off before the rest catch up and we should be in the clear."

"Which one do we want?" Mizuko signed.

"I imagine the one who is closest to you," said Less. "How are we going to know Mizuko has got their attention and has begun the chase?"

"Sound of gunfire should be a safe bet. Otherwise we can pick up some cheap radios and stay in touch." Suggested Rover.

Less was feeling uneasy about the plan. The men they were after were trained professionals and his motley were going to be basically making things up as they went along. "I guess we'd better get some practice in on these net guns. Simon, do you have time tomorrow to get us a van and radios? I'm going to load the van with some water bladders for Mizuko in case things go pear-shaped."

"Yeah," Simon said. "I'll do some shopping tomorrow. Squirt gun, a few rolls of duct tape, a pack of balloons, and I'll get us a van. If I can, I'll get the truck with a flat-top, but no promises." Actually, getting the van might be a little difficult. Simon, as yet, had no legal identity. He was basically house-sitting a place the owner couldn't rent out in the depressed real-estate market under the table, and had made do with faked ID when he had to, but nobody would rent you a car without a credit card. Or at least nobody would rent *most* people one. Simon suspected he'd have to be persuasive.

"Let us know if you can't get one. I can try to get one, too, and if all else fails we'll steal one," said Less.

"I don't know, guys," Rey said. "I really don't feel good about making Mizuko the bait. She got away from them once. They might not just chase her this time."

"Remember my fall," Mizuko signed. She referred to her accidental dive onto the track. "Nothing special

about that. They probably would have continued to chase me otherwise. You might call me bait. I call it inevitable. They are looking for me and if I keep going to the places I usually do, sooner or later they will find me, ready or not. At least this way we are prepared."

She faced Rey specifically. "You need not worry. Bait is what my Keeper used me for. I am very, very experienced performing as a lure."

"Let's pick a place then," said Less. "Somewhere near the train station where we can keep an eye on you without being seen. We'll just try it every night until we get a bite."

"And somewhere where some innocent is unlikely to get caught in the trap," Rey added.

"If we have that sort of flexibility." Rover said. "I assumed we'd do some scouting and find out where they are, and then set our trap in a dark alley close enough to use. I may be wrong, though."

"I think we're more likely to end up the ambushed than the ambushers," Rey said with a frown. "They could be anywhere in the city. We don't even know what vehicle they were using, because we were all in the station." She turned to look at Mizuko. "Unless you saw it?"

"Yes. But I am hungry," responded the nymph. "May we discuss this over something to eat? We can retire to my Hollow if you would like to refresh with a dip in the pond."

Though Less preferred to ignore his own hunger, he was an elemental himself and knew there was no point arguing with Mizuko. The wind had changed. "Time for a break. I, for one, would like to see your Hollow."

"I would too," Rey added, and looked down at her jean-clad legs. "I'd like to change, though, into something that's easier to move around in when wet." While the three male members of the motley might appreciate what she was wearing underneath, she'd rather not give them that kind of show in the open at the park.

—

Mizuko met the rest of the motley, after giving Rover many assurances he would be fine in the water with her there, at the Pond. Those who wished had swimming clothes on under their regular clothes by the time they made the meeting at Ottowi Pond. There were people at the park but Rey, Less, Rover and Simon were able to find a somewhat concealed path around old rocks and some leafy trees that enjoyed the damp environment around the pond.

At first the group didn't see Mizuko and they had to wonder where she was, if she was already in the water. Movement caught Less's eye, however, and he picked her out of the dark waters of pond. She rested just below the surface not at all bothered by the lack of air, and gestured for the group to follow her. She signed for them to take a big breath of air first.

Rover was not at all thrilled about going into the water, however, and while she found a way to bring him courage, she gestured that the others should continue to the dark, bottom of the pond. Then to help Rover overcome his reservations, she rose from the water and extended a hand to him. After he took it and let her guide him, she was able to swim with astonishing speed and strength, even with the wizened gnome in tow.

At the very bottom of the pond, lit by only dim light, Mizuko arranged three round stones such that they uncovered holes about the size of her fist. Clear, fresh water swirled here and then retracted, creating a current that pulled the motley down into the area between the three holes. There was a brief sensation of

helplessness and perhaps desperation, too, as air quickly became stale in everyone's lungs, and then the water was clear and clean. Following Mizuko, each member of the motley broke the surface of a large pond — a spring actually. As her friends gasped and sputtered for fresh air, Mizuko quickly carried Rover to the rocky shore and set him safely on dry land. She returned to the others, guiding them to the safest path over underwater rocks to the shore, pointing out a few things in the spring itself to be wary of.

Some were clams that looked like jagged rocks. A careful look sometimes caught them suddenly move, seemingly attempting to get underfoot. Other things were little fish that darted and about. They didn't dangerous, but they were pretty to look at. Mizuko smiled as she watched them zip around playfully. Finally, there was an otter slipping through the water. It kept a wide birth away from the other Motley members as it tried instead to approach Mizuko.

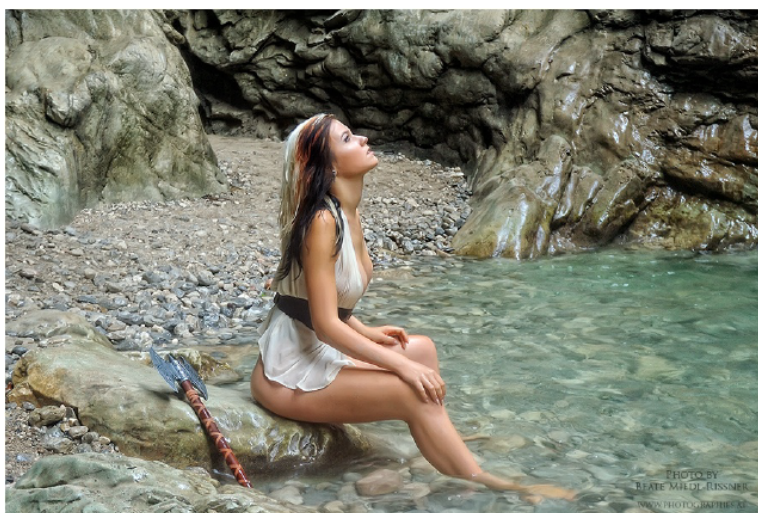
Once the party was on the shore, Mizuko turned and sped through the water at nearly the rate of a speedboat. So powerful was her movement, she leapt out of the water in a blur as she played tag with the otter.

She was clad only in a white shirt with tails hardly long enough to cover herself. The damp made it seem nearly transparent, though she moved too fast to really see very much. After a few minutes of play, she gave the otter a treat, a fish she must have caught with her hands during the game, and then came to shore to join the rest of the motley. There they could see the shirt was somewhat thicker than at first the eye guessed, but she was plainly unconcerned with modesty. She took it off, wrung it out, and then with a whiff of glamour called the rest of the water out of the garment as she stood naked before her friends. She turned and with a gesture, performed the same gesture of hospitality for the rest of the assembled group.

With everyone dry and beginning to warm up again, she pulled on her simple shirt again, and spent another touch of glamour. This caused her to double over and vomit water clear of her lungs. She coughed briefly and then took to breathing air again. While she waited for her friends to begin talking and asking their questions, she wandered near a rocky wall and revealed a small cave covered with vines. These vines had a variety of small fruits and leaves which she picked. She popped a berry the size of a large marble in her mouth and offered the rest to the motley.

"Thank you," Rey said before sampling the fruit. "This place is beautiful."

Mizuko smiled and took a seat.



Mizuko to Mortal Eyes?

After a moment, the otter ran over to her and curled up next to her, though he kept raising his head nervously to watch the guests.

"Who's your friend?" Rey asked, smiling at the little creature. She'd never seen an otter up close - at least not outside of a zoo.

Mizuko signed something and said the word aloud in Glymjack Cant so that the motley would know this was her translation for "Oliver".

Rey looked back at the spring, and felt a bit homesick. She had enjoyed several of the springs back home, many of them with Grey. Always with Grey, because it was too dangerous for her to be wandering their territory alone. The hot springs were her favorite, for more than one reason. She never wore a suit then. There was no need. It was only ever him, or the rest of the pack. They were so casual with nudity, and it was with their help she was able to overcome her own, sometimes irrational fears.

Still, if she'd had any problems with nudity, she'd have had to overcome them in her Keeper's garden. The only thing she was wearing she hadn't lost was the bracelet Grey had given her. She fingered it as a little wistful smile curved her lips. Even when she'd completely lost track of who she was, she'd fought tooth and nail to keep it. Grey certainly hadn't cared about her looks - or rather, hadn't thought the scars on her back were terrible things to be hidden.

She snorted softly. Her Keeper certainly didn't care either way, for he made them a part of her, a random, crisscrossing of woodgrain gracing her flesh. Her new scars, ones she earned from clashes with the briarwolves, He left as scars. A learning experience, He called it, as He called everything he'd done to her. A lesson, a marring of the perfection He'd crafted. But Rey didn't care. It was that imperfection that helped her recall who she was, and with the memories of a man with wolf's eyes gave her the strength to escape and return home.

Rey glanced over at Simon. He was definitely attractive, and while she was attracted to him, she didn't want him. The only man who would fill that need for her was her wolf. She turned her back on Simon and the others to look around Mizuko's Hollow, knowing very skimpy, very modern, bikini revealed all her scars and more. In truth, it was little better than being naked, but it covered what human society considered to be the "important" parts.

It was then she spotted the narrow path climbing the side of the cliff. "Mizuko, where does that path lead?"

Mizuko stood and stepped next to Rey, following her gaze. "*Danger*," she *told* Rey. "*And promise. Hope and hopelessness. Victory and death.*"

"Fear and freedom," Rey replied softly. Strange that she would consider the Hedge a sign of freedom. It was definitely a place to be feared, but for all of them, the Lost who found their way home, it was the last obstacle to be faced to be free.

The nymph knelt at a damp rock and arranged the goblin food her hollow had provided for her friends and herself. Picking a leaf, she put it in her mouth and chewed while she mentally looked back on recent events. She signed, "It was a black van. It was well behind them, but kept pace during their pursuit. It was not glossy and it looked old but not rusted. I did not have a chance to see it's license plate. I also could not see well enough through the windows to identify driver or passengers." She hadn't been concerned about the van at the time since the van wouldn't have been able to pursue across the train station.

Less had not changed into a bathing suit. He had simply waded into the pool completely dressed in his shirt and tie. Though water was not his element, he had trusted his fellow elemental and was generally unconcerned with the state of his attire. In the Hedge, his British accent stood out more prominently for

some reason. "So, we'll have to deal with wheeled backup as well. Our location will have to be inaccessible by car - like the railway or a park. I'm wondering if it would be worth the risks to open a Gateway into the Hedge and deal with the gang member there."

"Unless we plan on making sure he can't tell anyone what he saw," Rey said, "I think that really should be a plan of last resort." She glanced around the group. "Less and I were talking about it earlier, I think that given what we've learned about the guy who were chasing Mizuko, the case for seeking the Seer's services has gotten stronger."

Simon munched on a berry and then said "I'm starting to think the same thing. The more we get into the scope of this plan, the more I realize we're out of our depth. I can get word to him and find out what he'd want, or we could go fishing and try to surprise him. If we take whatever we can find, we can sort of control our level of risk, but then we have to deal with whether he'll accept it or not."

Less picked at the food. "I think it would be better to go with something in hand and see if he will help us. It keeps the task in the realm of reality. Having him pick an item off his wish-list would likely be unreasonable, if not impossible." He went on to tell them the story of the poor weaver girl and her spindle, shuttle and needle.

Mizuko listened to the story with a curious expression on her face. She knew that if it turned out the Seer could not help them, then they could keep whatever Token they discovered for the motley's use. Either way, it seemed a win for the motley, depending of course on what challenges lay in store for them in a quest to recover said tokens.

"I'd lay the best odds that way, too," Simon agreed. Aside to Mizuko he said "these are really good." "If Dean doesn't want the stuff, he still might be able to sell it, or we can just keep it and find out what he does want. He's not likely to send us after the Holy Grail or anything, because everybody loses that way. He'll probably want something relatively attainable. So are we putting off the kidnapping plan for this?"

"I'm inclined to get the Seer involved before we try to tangle with the gang," said Less. "I'd like to have a better idea of what we're up against. And besides, by the time we return from the Hedge twenty years might have passed and the gang will have forgotten all about Mizuko."

"I have to say I'm needing a little more information." Rover admitted. "Going up against random gangsters is one thing, but these guys'll just chew us up without some forewarning. Whatever we can learn is just going to help."

As for the aquatic journey, he'd kept his street clothes on as well. As a matter of fact, that was actually the only outfit he even owned. The gnome had lost nearly everything in that one fateful raid.

His trip through the water had brought out some panic in him, but in all it was over more quickly than the work he'd done installing Mizuko's new traps. Much cleaner, as well.

The motley had done as much planning as they could with respect to the gang that had kidnapped Mizuko's friends but now a new mission, with new plans, had presented itself. "We'll need a plausible story to be new in Circedell. It could be as simple as refugees still resettling from the Shadow War. We should downplay our connections to the mortal world as much as possible. I'm familiar with the layout of the town but beyond that the intelligence is limited. I don't know how to contact the resistance, if one exists."

*"The Hedge beyond my hollow is not our friend. Hobs and hobgoblins will know us for what we are,"* Mizuko warned aloud in order to make very sure her friends were paying attention. *"Blending in may not be an option."*

Her words were absolutely the truth, or course. True Fae were at home in the Hedge. So were the creatures

that lived there. Changelings were usually found to be very interesting to the denizens of the Hedge, and even those who mean no harm often inadvertently acted as beacons to draw the Gentry. That didn't mean changelings didn't take up residence in the Hedge on a permanent basis, but those who did took risks with their lives and their freedom. Or, they made deals with powerful beings in exchange for their continued freedom and safety.

The danger the Hedge represented was by no means a deal breaker, but Mizuko felt it her place to be the voice of caution in this case.

"Did Circedell have regular trade with Changelings?" Rey asked. "If so, we could tie that into our true purpose. We are indeed wishing to know more about the place. That is no lie. And we are looking for items of value. Again, no lie." She paused, to see if her motley-mates had caught on and were following her train of thought.

"Yes," replied Less. "It was considered a safe place for changelings. The weaver-girl herself had once been human. That was one of the reasons the Goblin King destroyed it. And you are very correct, Rey. We must be very careful to only bend the truth while we're there."

Rey nodded, wondering if they really wanted to know how much experience she had with bending the truth. "Would it benefit the Duchy if regular contact with a... friendly Circedell could be established?" She wondered if she needed to be less subtle and more forthright with her words. Then again, she couldn't expect them to know her well, given how recently they'd all met.

Mizuko looked at Rey blankly. She signed, "Why would they trust us or like us? Less said it is populated by unpleasant Hedge-folk and that there is a small garrison left by the Goblin King. If we are honest with them, then they have no reason to treat us as anything but an enemy."

"Greed usually works." Offered Rover. "If we can provide them with restricted or controlled goods, even if we have to smuggle them in, that can get us a good 'in' with military types. Assuming that we're not able to just sneak around them, that is. Less did also say that it was considered a safe place for Changelings. Has that changed?"

Less nodded. "The town is controlled by the Goblin King's forces now. I like your thinking, though. Commerce often trumps loyalty boundaries. The Goblin King's army has left the countryside barren and disrupted trade routes. If we can approach them as independents with hard-to-find goods it might allow us access to the town."

"I think Ms Brambleblush may be considering running a con," Simon said with a bit of a smile. "Always good to have some kind of edge," he nodded towards Rey in acknowledgment. "Do you have something specific in mind? For a really good con, we need something they'll want to believe, and I'm not sure what we can really pull off. I was leaning toward just hoping not to be noticed."

Really, he hadn't thought about it too far yet. Stealth was an early favorite, but Simon wasn't yet familiar with his new companions. He was more than ready to be surprised at what they could do.

"No, not a con." Rey shook her head. "More of a misdirection. We tell go there with the intent to see if trade can be re-established. If anything else of interest is learned, or found," she said with a Gallic shrug, "there is no reason to take advantage of the discovery. See, the problem with sneaking around too much is getting caught. If you're sneaking, you're obviously up to no good, especially if you're prowling around smack dab in the middle of their territory." She knew from personal experience how badly that could turn out.

"Now, I'm not saying we just march up to the front gates and ask to come in. But we check the place out, feel it out before making ourselves known. See what the state of the place is, then present ourselves as people looking to see if it's worth trying to re-establishing trade." She paused for a moment, then continued.



"We need to give them a reason to let us be in the town. Trade, right now, seems to be the easiest to establish."

Simon thought it over, trying to fit the pieces the group had together in his head. They didn't seem to go the way Rey was thinking. "I'm not sure how well that will work, since we're from Mythic City, and the Goblin King isn't too happy with Mythic City right now. Maybe if we pretended to be from somewhere else? But every lie you have to tell makes the deception more likely to be found out. But I don't have a vastly better idea right now. Just like before, we really can't get enough info to make a very solid plan, so whatever we do we're going to have to play it by ear."

"I never said anything about about telling them where we're from," Rey said mildly. "And the like the very best jobs, you have to be able to improvise." She looked at the assembled group. "So, are we agreed? We'll check out Circledell to see what's going on, then present ourselves as potential traders, from an unnamed location?"

"I agree, however, if we're going to be traders we'll need something to convince them we have something they want." Less paused before adding, "Something they want more than just imprisoning us for our emotions."

Rover wasn't entirely sure where this was going.

"I just figured to bribe our way past the garrison with a case of wine. Do you really think we'll need that deep of a cover? How long are we planning on sticking around?"

"Not very long, I suspect," Rey said, "but it never hurts to set things up for the future. What if something requires us to go back. As for a case of wine, what would hobs and hobgoblins want?" she asked Less and Mizuko.

Mizuko considered, then shrugged. "Why not ask them?" she signed.

"That's what I'd do for mortals too," Rey replied, "but having some insight into denizens of the Hedge might be helpful. I'd certainly wouldn't bring anything with me if it were just me going. If I don't have the goods, then they're less likely to simply taken them from me."

Mizuko cocked her head to the side at she looked at Rey. "Then there is no answer to your question," she signed, "because we do not know the hobs that live there or anything about them." Hobs were, of course, wildly diverse and it made less sense to attempt to guess what was important to an unknown group of hobs was rather like closing ones eyes, tossing a dart at the map of the world and then trying to guess what might be important to the people that lived there without looking.

Rey gave Mizuko a little nod. It really didn't surprise her Hobs would be as varied as people as to what they wanted. It was the same with spirits and ghosts. No reason to believe it would be different with any sentient being.

Less spoke up. "We should bring with us some mortal luxuries: beer and wine, good tobacco, fresh milk. And some goblin fruit, if we can find any. We can promise other things but hopefully it will get us into the town and a chance to find the spindle, shuttle and needle."

"I might be able to get the booze and tobacco," Rey said. "A couple bottles of wine, a six-pack of beer and a carton of cigarettes - or would pipe tobacco be better?" She immediately started thinking about her slowly growing network, and where she might find the goods. Failing that, she'd simply buy them.

"A few people know me at the 13th Street market," Simon said. "I can ask around and see if there's anything better that we can get easily. When I introduced myself to the Queen, I brought along a basket of goblin fruits that I paid for with a bottle of French's mustard and a pack of those little plastic army men. But I bet what the Hobs trade with each other makes a little more sense."

"I have a source for Cuban cigars," said Less to Rey. "If you can get some good wine and beer - I suspect Guinness would be popular - that would be great. Let's all gather some odds and ends to make us look like traders and try our luck."

"I'll need to go home and make a couple of calls," Rey said with a nod. "When and where should we meet to get ready to go?"

Rover wasn't sure what the timing needed to be or where they should gather. He did, however, know where he'd be and what he'd be doing.

"Come get me in my workshop when you're ready. I'm going to see if I can come up with some kind of token detector. I *seriously* doubt that it'll be something 'handy as a GPS blip, but I might be able to at least rig up a compass.

"Anything that cuts down on our search time and gets us out quicker has got to come in handy."

"A magnetic pincushion might be useful," said Less. "The story has the spindle traipsing all across the countryside looking for true love. If the needle becomes animated it might be hard to catch. We should bring the net-guns, too."

"Time is tight. I propose we meet back at Rey's tomorrow night. That gives us 24 hours to find what we can."

Mizuko's face was impassive, but her eyes narrowed slightly.

"I think that's too long a time," Rey said. "The longer we wait, the more likely something bad is going to happen to those girls." She didn't add there was a good chance something bad had already happened, but they didn't know why, truly, the mercenaries grabbed the girls. "I can be done in two, maybe three hours."

Some of Less' lips pursed. It wasn't much preparation time for such a mission but he understood what they were up against. "Ok, do what you can in a couple of hours," he said, mostly for Rover. "It's best if we meet at the train station, then. We can head to Circledell from my Hollow there."

"Make it three, and I can check with some acquaintances at the 13th Street market, maybe get a good line on what our hypothetical customers might want," Simon said.

—

The group broke up, with Mizuko escorting them back through the pond. This time she didn't leave the water, disappearing beneath the dark surface as soon as her friends were on dry land. Presumably she'd be able to guess the time well enough to meet everyone at the train station in a few hours.

Less hurried across the tracks to the train station. It was quiet this time of night. Still, there was a lone man pacing the platform while smoking a cigarette. In the waiting room a woman read while a boy, not quite a teenager, slept on the bench with his head in her lap. He nearly jogged to his small, windowless office. He carefully closed the door behind him and prepared the gateway to his Hollow. On the other side he plowed through the deep snow on the mountain top to an ancient, narrow stone bridge that arched across the chasm and disappeared into the clouds. The bridge had no rails but he never felt unsafe, even as he held his hat to his head as he was buffeted by the frozen winds.

As he passed through the posts at the other end it was suddenly quiet. It was dark and only a small amount of moonlight filtered in through the high windows of the warehouse. He walked quickly down the aisle between crates until he came to his prize. Normally he paused to enjoy the aroma of the fine tobacco but tonight he simply snatched the humidior of hand-rolled cigars and jogged back the way he came.

Back in the Hedge, he ran along a earthen work corridor supported by huge black timbers. The torch he carried threw his shadow on the wall to his left and he nearly missed the dark doorway. He balanced the torch against a short bench and began changing his clothes. From pegs on the wall he took down well-worn and stained clothing. Durable canvas trousers went over cotton long underwear. He buttoned on a mended denim shirt and shrugged on a long leather coat with voluminous pockets. He pulled on high travelling boots and slapped a floppy leather wide-brimmed hat on his head. He carefully hung his other clothes on the pegs before taking up the torch once again. He exited through the opposite door into a tunnel with a narrow gauge rail track running along it. He turned the corner and found the pump trolley where he had left it. He lit the lamp with the torch and got onboard, straining against the hand lever to build up momentum. The bearings squealed complaints at first but soon settled down.

Less soon emerged from under a hanging sign, squinting against the bright sun. The square was busy as usual, people everywhere were loudly hawking their wares and the air was full of dust and the smell of animals and agriculture. The people spoke a language Less did not understand but many of them recognized the strange man who came to their market regularly. He sometimes spent hours wandering through tight alleys browsing clothing and spices, wood carvings and strange musical instruments. This time he only smiled and nodded at those who tended their stalls until he came to a small, wrinkled woman nearly invisible under her cow. From her he bought a tin pail of milk for pennies. He carried it on a pole over his shoulder and balanced it out with a large pot of honey. He was nearly back to his Hollow door when he suddenly stopped. The swinging pails caused him to stumble and he set them down to look at the few ratty wire bird cages. The old man eagerly sold Less a pair of small brown birds - some sort of sparrow - but had to be convinced to part with the cage as well. Less had seen people buy the birds to be immediately released. It was good luck. They soon returned to the old man's breadcrumbs, he was sure. This pair, however, would not likely find their way back from where they were going.

It was a tired and sweaty Less that met the others at the train station three hours later. He rested next to his pails and a pair of shoulder slung satchels full of railway sandwiches and other sundries he often needed while travelling in the Hedge. The cigars were snug in the right hip pocket of his coat and the other bulged with half-used candles and a cheap plastic lighter. He had made the decision to leave behind his trusty umbrella so he toyed with a shiny whistle that hung around his neck.

—

Rey made her phone calls as she walked home, but she didn't end up there - not right away. Tonight, alcohol was easy to get. Two bottles of wine (she was assured they sold for \$100 each at restaurants), wrapped in cheap fabric, and two six packs of beer were soon packed in a sturdy canvas backpack. Once she was home, she changed into the clothes she'd worn when traveling through the wilderness. After shoving a handful of cereal bars and other lightweight but nutrition and calorie dense foods into her pockets and pack, she made her way to the train station.

—

Rover sat at his work bench with a golden compass layed before him. Multiple hands were sweeping its face, giving up a series of symbols painted carefully around the bezel. Subdials moving in graceful harmony within surrendered yet more indicators that Rover squinted narrowly at.

He consulted the findings on a chart littered with the same symbols and crossed endlessly with corrections. The procedure was a delicate one as each new character modified the ones that fell before as well as those

which came up after. The result was translated into a book as the following:

*sasoerdnutuhyeireo*

Rover looked at the jumbled mess of letters and came to the conclusion that something was... off... He pulled out a jeweler's loop and examined the dials carefully. As expected, one of the delicate hands was barely within its current position, as if straining to make one more tick around the face. A single misreading, then, had given up such a confusing result.

Rover gave the casing a few taps with his pencil and the seized hand make stepped one more place clockwise. This brought about a new series of translations with some satisfied expressions appearing on the old gnome's face.

*rouy oeshs aer enduti*

He pursed his lips and wondered if, maybe, he'd been using the wrong translation language. That certainly didn't seem to be making any sense to him. It sounded vaguely atin-ish, or lperhaps some offshoot of ancient greek, but he'd been shooting for plain english.

Grunting in disappointment, Rover snatched up both the compass and a delicate screwdriver to make some adjustments. Once again, there was the flurry of checking against the chart.

*yuor shoes are uietnd*

"My... what?" Rover squinted, clearly he was getting closer. More adjustments, and the message translated yet even more clearly.

*your shoes are untied*

The gnome blinked in surprise and pushed himself back from the workbench. Glancing down, he remembered that he'd put on sandals before entering the workshop. There was the sound of a heavy sigh and then a harsh 'clunk' as the golden compass were pitched into a wastebasket already half-full with crumpled blueprints.

"Stupid idea, anyway. We'll just have to do this the hard way."

With that, he picked up some charting cartography materials and left to meet up with the others.

—

After he'd picked up a few essentials at a convenience store, Simon drove over to 12th, parked his car, and walked over to the 13th Street bridge. The hobs watching the street knew him and nodded sullenly. Once inside, swimming through the chaos of the Market. Most of the merchants were the same night after night, but a lot of them seemed to switch booths according to some weird Hob schedule. So it took Simon a little longer than he wanted to find Stinky Pete. Pete had been a great find. He worked this Market, but also had occasionally shown up for one in Roanoke. When Simon had been there, he and Pete had become friends.

"What do you want, pretty boy?" Pete asked in his pleasant snarl.

"Information," Simon said. "And I'm prepared to pay." He reached into his coat and pulled out a small bag of sour apple bubble gum.

Pete's eyes lit up, and he cagily said, "I'll tell you whatever you want to know. For all that, it'll probably even be true."

Simon was giving him almost a month's supply, so if he ended up needing anything else here, he'd have to ask Edna, and not much was worth that. But you could get it good, cheap, or fast: pick two. So Simon handed over the paper bag full of gum. "Circledell," he said. "Know anything about it?"

Pete already had his mouth full of gum. "mot a fng... ut uu shob tach to Chaunschey"

"Chauncy?" Simon had experience translating Pete. "What's he look like?"

Pete tried to answer, but that was just too complicated with his mouth full of gum. He picked up a rust-spotted mirror and glared at it for a minute. It showed an image. Simon shuddered a little.

"Thanks, Pete," he said. "Here's a couple Bazooka Joes as a bonus."

He found Chauncy at the Bratwurst stand, which was run by a nice German couple who lived nearby. Why and how they'd come to sell Bratwurst in the middle of a Goblin Market was something Simon had never figured out. Chauncy the Hobkin was big in every way, arms bigger than Simon's legs, massive shoulders, and huge slabs of muscle on his barrel-like frame. His skin was covered in scales, and his head was snake-like, with nasty yellow eyes and more sharp teeth than were acceptable in polite company. He was eating a Bratwurst with surprising delicacy.

Simon introduced himself in the most polite means possible, "Hey ugly, you Chanucy?"

"Who wants to know, meat?"

"Name's Simon. Guy said you'd been to Circledell. I may be going past soon."

Chauncy laughed. "Little bit like you. Do em' a favor and fill your pockets with mustard and relish. Can't get decent condiments over there. Maybe wear some on your head."

"They like people to wear condiments on their heads?" Simon had heard weirder things, but he had a sinking feeling about this.

"People? No. But they like their food with condiments."

After a very disconcerting conversation, Simon learned from the surprisingly affable (for someone who wanted to eat him) Chauncy that the current residents of Circledell were decidedly carnivorous. If he wanted to bring something to trade, slaves would be good. Particularly well-fed slaves. Mostly young. "Once they go through puberty, they get all hormones and stuff in 'em" Chauncy explained.

He went on to say that the Goblin King's garrison had done a pretty good job of stamping out the "eat thy neighbor" sentiment, since it was bad for business. Violators found themselves on the menu, so they were always looking further afield for the next meal. When asked about the original residents of Circledell, Simon gets a "don't know, don't care" shrug.

Simon left, and decided the best he could probably do was to figure out what spices went best with long pork.

He walked back to his car, dropped by Walmart to pick up a few essentials, and headed back to the others.

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Mizuko floated in her little spring, looking up into the starry Hedge sky. For now it was peaceful and quiet and she allowed herself to be mesmerized by the odd swimming motion these "stars" made over the course of minutes. Meanwhile Oliver quietly slipped through the water in pursuit of the small, tasty fish that inhabited the stream. She listened to him a while and nearly was lulled to sleep.

After a little while, however, she left the spring and climbed up the path that traced it's way up the steep slope to the top of her hollow. There she slipped into the Hedge itself and spent the next couple hours hard at work. When she was finished, she had a small bag full of things she'd found. They weren't for trade, of course. For that, she had something more interesting and useful.

After that, she went back through to the pond, found where she'd left her clothes balled up under her favorite bush, and put them on under cover of night. She then skirted a small party of teenagers experimenting with marijuana and made her way to the meeting place at the train station.

—

Mizuko arrived just ahead of the others but after Less looking a little damp and a little dirty (how did the nymph manage to look so very cute with those muddy smudges anyway?) in her new but now rumpled clothes, a burlap bag, and an old army surplus canteen. She approached him without sign of a standard greeting. Instead, she stared at him with her head tilted to the side as she took in his present, exhausted condition. She then reached into the rough bag she carried and pulled out pink berry that looked a bit like a fleshy grape tomato and offered it to him.

Less smiled and signed 'Welcome' and 'Thanks' before taking the fruit. Normally he would have pocketed the berry for when he really needed it but he was aware that she was making a gesture that should be responded to. Humans valued these social customs and he was partly responsible for teaching them to her. He ate the berry, savouring the taste of its juices.

He didn't have anything comparable in exchange but he showed her the pair of birds in their cage.

Mizuko bent close to the cage in wonderment, having never seen their kind before. She put a curious finger near the bars, but quickly took her hand away when the little bird gave her a warning nip. She smiled at Less, thinking him quite creative for finding the birds.

Rey joined her motley-mates, comfortably carrying her backpack and dressed in rough country hiking gear. "I got the wine and beer," she signed. "The wine's worth about \$100 a bottle in the store, so I figure it ought to be good."

Something Rey said had Mizuko's attention riveted on her. "Some for me?" she signed.

"I brought it for trading," Rey said aloud, but softly, "though if you'd like one of the six-packs of beer, we can probably spare it."

Mizuko smiled happily and held out her hands.

"Why do you want it?" Rey asked.

She blinked as if surprised at the question. Then she signed to indicate she wanted to try it.

Rey shook her head. "No, that can wait until after we get back," she said. "Not a good idea to not be at our top form when venturing into the Hedge."

Mizuko pouted, but she let it go.

Just then, Simon arrived. He had a knapsack slung over one shoulder, and was battered combat boots, jeans, a t-shirt, and a work shirt open in the front. Those who knew what to look for could tell he had a pistol in a back holster. "So," he said, "The nice folks we'll meet in Cirledell are mostly cannibals. They probably ate most of the original residents."

Less nodded. It was mostly what he had expected. From what he had seen on the battlefields most of the hobs didn't much care how fresh the meat was either.

Rover showed up last, having swapped footwear back to his normal workboots. A durable jacket had been added as the extent of his salvaged wardrobe and that was about all he owned. A leather, courier-style satchel held the paper, writing implements and other utensils he planned to use in mapping out the Cirledell. It wasn't as nice as a good GPS might have been, but he was pretty sure the Hedge had no form of navigational satellite system.

Maybe once this was all over he'd have to look in to changing that...

"Given what we now know about the Goblin King's forces there," Rey said, adjusting the straps of her backpack, "are we going to change how we approach them?"

"*Good idea*," Mizuko stated with a menace in her voice that made goosebumps of fear appear on her friends' skins. "*I will approach them from their water source and kill all them while they sleep.*" Her voice seemed to carry images of violence and bloodshed and fear that had them all gasping. For a moment, her fae mein seemed to harden like ice and her eyes cloud with hatred. To Less, it brought an unbidden memory of his Queen of Ice at her most beautiful, her most terrible and her most wrathful.

Although the image was fleeting, her posture and the terrible undertone of vengeance in her voice made it difficult to argue with her, lest she turn her angst toward the speaker. "*We will strike a blow against the Goblin King and teach his people that the Duchy does not forget her fallen, nor do we forgive.*"

Rey tried to keep a calm face, but out of deeply ingrained habit, didn't try to banish the fear. Her eyes sought out Less. "I... That wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

"You can be really scary when you want to be, Mizuko," Simon said. Privately, he wondered if it was the other way around. Either way, he was glad she was on his side. "With what we know now, I really don't think we'll be able to deal with the hobs diplomatically, and I'm going to bet that we can't really take them out by force, even if we wanted to. And we probably don't want to right now. We've already got one fight ahead. Honestly, I think the best idea is to go in carefully, try to avoid notice, and hope we can get what we came for without a fight. The only thing we'd be likely to be able to trade would be modern weapons. I could go pick up a few hunting rifles or shotguns with the money I have on hand, but I don't like the idea of handing those to cannibal hobs, much less cannibal hobs loyal to the Goblin King."

"Why do you think they'd only want modern weapons?" Rey asked curiously.

"*If we arm the enemy, the Storm King will be very angry when he finds out.*" Mizuko stated. She considered it a fact that he would find out, not an if. "*I am against any plan that includes the sale or pretense of sale of weapons to them. That could backfire, especially if someone saw us and reported it.*"

She still had that hair-raising tone in her voice, but she did seem to be watching Simon and reconsidering the earlier plan of just slipping into Cirledell posing as merchants instead of a mission of war. That didn't mean she was discarding the idea of an attack on the garrison entirely, however. Viewing Simon seemed, in her case, to be a useful distraction from whatever had caused her to leap to the conclusion they should attack.

"Oh, I have no intention of giving them any weapons," Rey replied. "That's at least part of the reason why I didn't bring my gun. I'm just wondering why they'd only want weapons, and no other trade goods."

Less was shaken by the sudden memory of his Keeper. And even though he lived daily with the terrible void of all that she had taken from him, he treasured these rare memories. Memories of passions - anger and fear were so deeply tied to love.

"I will advise against attacking Circedell directly," he said. "Even if it were possible that you could kill them all in one night, Mizuko, it would very likely only start a new cycle of vengeance. The Goblin King would attack the Duchy once again and many more lives would be lost. We will fight the Goblin King, don't get me wrong, but we will do so as part of the Duchy, and in small ways fitting of our motley."

"I'm not totally convinced that Circedell's garrison is not wanting for trade other than human flesh. What Rover said earlier about greed is still true. Still, it would be foolish for us all to stumble blindly into a slave pen. Let's observe the town secretly first and try to judge our actions from there. I have some binoculars in my office. If we decide to try trade, I will go alone to test the waters. While we are watching, though your source seems to think otherwise, Simon, we may be able to make contact with the rumoured resistance."

Mizuko simmered down. She signed instead of spoke. "Okay Less, Simon. I will instead take what I can find out about Circedell to the Storm King after our goals are complete. Autumn requires retribution for our loss, although Summer rules for now." Her calm returned to hide the anger, concealing her feelings again as well as the reason for her outburst.

"That works fine for me," Simon said. "I'll help as much as I can. But right now, we have limited resources and a limited timeframe. We can only do what we can do." He laid a calming hand on her shoulder. "So first let's go get these tokens so we can find out how to help your friends."

"Are you sure you want to approach them by yourself," Rey asked Less. "What if they take you? How would you get away if we can't get to you? I know they can't keep me if I don't want to be kept."

Mizuko pointed out with sign, "If they eat you, there is no keeping, save for leftovers. And in dealing with fae creatures you cannot rule out the use of magic, which means you must never assume you can't be kept." But she said it more like a mantra than with any particular feeling. She looked at Less. "But you already know these things and are aware of the dangers." She seemed satisfied to accept that he could handle it if he said so. "I am ready to go now."

"We'll deal with that when the time comes," said Less as he led the motley to his small office. After closing and locking the door behind them, he collected his binoculars from a hook behind the door and walked over to his desk. He hefted all his cumbersome gear and took a deep breath, "Everyone ready?" he asked rhetorically. He touched his desk and opened the doorway to his hollow. The leg-space between the legs shimmered momentarily, then the dull grey carpet was replaced with a dark well fitted with a steep set of iron stairs.

It was a tight squeeze with their travelling gear, but the space beneath was roomier, if only a little. The corridor was of painted, rivetted steel, like the inside of an old ship. Piping and wireways lined the ceiling. "This way," said Less as he led the way through a dogged watertight door and on to Circedell.

Simon followed after allowing the others to proceed him and helping as necessary with crawling down under the desk. "So the broom closet door was taken?" he asked Less jokingly.

"Who are we, Clark Kent?" Rover replied. "Nobody uses broom closets anymore. Besides, seems roomy enough to me and I like the decor."

Indeed, the engineering that went into big ships was almost as fascinating as that found beneath cities. The



interplay between industrious need and an efficient lack of ergonomics always made for interesting architecture. Function defined form in places like this and the whole of the construct could be read in the hidden layouts.

Granted, he doubted this was part of an actual ship or even a lost utility corridor of the train station itself. Reality tended to do weird things as it transitioned from one world to the next. That understanding made it no less fascinating to mentally unravel.

As Rey walked in their wake, she looked around, wondering about the tunnel. Were they underwater? Could it be something else?

She didn't have long to wonder, as the tunnel transitioned into something like a culvert with rusted, copper-green sides that dripped dirty water. The small circle of light they approached soon became an opening outlined by the gaping mouth of rough tunnel. Through this, the party stepped onto spongy firmament, made juicy with rainwater that still filtered down from wide leaves that sprouted from giant, gnarled trees, covered in sinewy vines. It was raining, but the sky was a bright grey, hinting the clouds might break any time and take the rain with them.

A twisting path across the mossy ground wound a way among green hovels the color of the surrounding vegetation, rounded and dome-like. Here and there, curls of smoke crawled lazily from chimney's made of brick and bones mortared together. Although only a few structures were visible in this goblin-town, the closeness of the vegetation could hide a whole city clustered around the winding path.

Rey frowned and suppressed a shiver. Even if she hadn't known the current residents were cannibals, the sight would have disturbed her. She turned her head and caught Less' attention. "Now what?" she signed.

"Hrmp. I should have brought a loadstone." Rover was muttering.

The old gnome was already at work trying to make sense of their surroundings. He was seated with the mapping journal open in his lap and a mortal compass in hand. A pencil was being tapped against the edge of the magnetic device in an attempt to discern some standards of direction.

"A powerful enough one... or magical enough... would have let us mark the entrance. I hadn't thought it would be easy to get lost, but this looks like it might be tricky."

As a backup plan to relying on traditional navigation, Rover was also making note of the trees and vegetation around them. He had a fair understanding of the different qualities of most breeds of plantlife and thought he might be able to start his map from there. A sketch was made of their exit and markings noted for the species which lay nearby.

Even if they turned out to be some fantastic breed unheard of outside of the hedge, he still felt comfortable in identifying their various qualities.

The lush vegetation had grown substantially since Less had been here last. Despite the horrors he suspected lay hidden inside the domed huts, the forest was a great improvement on the piles of corpses and the stockade topped with disembodied heads he had witnessed after the battle.

"Now we let Less do his thing," Mizuko signed silently.

As they progressed through the village, Less was bound to discover some hob-kin out and about, and sooner or later the garrison and whatever they used as a stronghold would also become apparent. The challenge was to seem non-threatening, but not overly interesting as that could attract undesired forms of attention.

Less walked slowly through the town. He exaggerated the bend of his back under the weight of his burdens.

He scanned each and every doorway, looking for trouble or a possible contact. His goal was the centre of town, where the stone circle used to be. He hoped the garrison would be there.

The full impact of where they were began to settle into Rover's mind. On some level he knew they were going to be walking into the jaws of a meat grinder, but exactly what that meant hadn't completely registered. Now that they were here, with the possibility of slavering death surrounding them on all sides, he was starting to get nervous. Hopefully the emotion wouldn't roll into a full-blown panic or else they might as well comver themselves with barbecue sauce and start looking for a serving platter.

The gnome noticed Less exaggerating his effort and wondered if he should do the same. He'd already put the travelogue and compass away so as to not draw attention, but that hardly seemed like an effective disguise.

"So, would it help make me look more goblinish if I crapped myself? 'Cause I gotta tell you, that wouldn't be tough to do at the moment."

Mizuko looked at Rover blankly, but the truth was she understood. She was scared, too. She took his hand in hers and walked next to him. Strength in numbers and all that.

They saw the first fae creature splitting wood in front of his hovel. The being was humanoid in that it had two arms and two legs and a head. Otherwise, it didn't look human at all. It's body was huge, a barrel chested thing with worn leather overalls stretched to the breaking point. He had stubby legs that looked cartoonishly rubbery attached to hips unnaturally wide. His arms were so long he could reach the ground without bending over, and they were massive. The lump of a head sat above his chest without the dignity of any neck at all. Consequently, he turned his whole body to look at the changeling troupe. He let the axe fall and it cleanly split another log, but he paid no attention to it. He was looking at the motley. He smiled, though it was a stretch to think it was a greeting, for his lips split to reveal rows of shark teeth, wet and glistening. He slowly blinked his single, enormous eye. It stood nearly ten feet tall, if a guess was accurate.

Less wanted to avoid the goblin's gaze and keep walking but he needed to establish their cover as soon as possible. This wouldn't be the first resident of Cirledell to notice their presence. Less set the pails down and shrugged off the carrying pole with a loud sigh of relief. He took some time to straighten up and massaged his lower back. "Hello friend!" he called out. "Do you need that axe sharpened? Pots mended?" It was clear from the clean splits that the giant didn't need his axe sharpened, and the irony that any mended pot might be used to stew his own head was not lost on Less. He was a salesman now - foot in the door, and all that.

Rey stayed close to Less, but rather than look at the first resident they'd encountered, she looked around them. There was always more to see than the obvious, and who knows, she might discover something important - or at least useful.

The ogrish fae rumbled. It might have been a very deep growl or laugh. But he picked up his axe and lumbered down to the path on his too-short legs, then headed off down the path in the same direction the motley had been headed. Apparently he'd chosen to lead them somewhere. He hadn't answered directly Less's offer, but then with lips like that and a mouthful of slicing teeth, normal speech might not be an option for him.

After following the monster only a short distance, perhaps a quarter mile at the most, he stopped and pointed off the path. There was a small space between a pair of green hovels that the motley could just squeeze through with their packs and bags. Through this space could be heard the steady murmur of people's voices and the occasional bark of someone hawking fresh meat.

"Nyugh," stated the ogre, who then pointed again at the shortcut.

*Hmm, maybe it will work*, Simon thought. He chose not to dwell on other possibilities right now. But he did his best to read the ogre's body language and the sounds of his voice to guess his intentions.

Pointing the way was a lot better than being dragged kicking and screaming into a slave market. Less waved up to the huge creature and forced a smile to his face. "Thanks, friend! May your axe always stay sharp, but if it doesn't, come find us and we'll give you a special deal!"

To his motley Less signed, "Looks like we've found the market. Brace yourselves, and stay keen."

Rey nodded, and kept up her scanning of the area around them, trying not to be too obvious about it.

The motley strode forth onto the muddy street of the town center. Here they could clearly see the ruins of the old palace at the end of the square. It had already been mostly overgrown by the hedge, except one tower looked to have been repaired and kept in use. Looking to their left, the team spotted a butcher shop, with a disturbingly tall and thin fae standing in front of it shouting that the butcher shop now had new meat for sale, only one week old and just now ripe enough to eat. There were some broken and abandoned buildings beyond that, but looking to the right, the motley spied a saloon. Much larger than the homes they'd passed on the way in, it was in the same style but decorated with lewd signs depicted goblins in various drunken acts. The doors were of the classic, two-way swinging style. Right next to it stood the next largest building that had a sign depicting a number of mundane things such as sewing thread, thimble, cloth, and the like. Clearly, this was a general store. Finally, parked near this store was a wagon-load of stinking, untreated skins and furs being traded by some kind of trapper. This one was a feral-looking goblin that looked like a werewolf in-between his human and wolf forms.

Rey's first thoughts were how the poor man could have been trapped in mid-change, but she quickly dismissed them. She'd find none of Grey's people here.

Less looked for a free space near the far end of the square, as close to the old palace as possible, that they could use as a makeshift trading stall. As he dropped his pails and bags in a likely spot, he also looked for any of the Goblin King's soldiers. He spoke to the others quietly in Glymjack as he busied himself arranging bags and the bird cage. "I can stay here and mind the store, so to speak. I'd suggest the rest of you go in pairs and gather some information. We want trade with the garrison, any mention of what we're looking for, and any sign of human or changeling slaves or servants. Don't forget your covers and, above all, be careful."

The spot Less found was in front of one of the ruined buildings near the old palace. Mizuko looked about and then down the street. She pointed at two fae that were difficult to identify because they were covered in pitted, bronze armor from head to foot. It had a medieval slant to the style and they each bore halberds. They stopped up the street to talk to the skin and fur merchant.

In Glymjack, Simon said "Yeah, that's probably the local 5-0. Think we should just introduce ourselves so we get to meet them on our terms? If they don't use those hides for burritos, I have an idea."

Rover signed a reply in return.

" 'Might not hurt. It's standard procedure some places, actually. New merchants checking in with local authority to make sure they don't get hassled? Saves them the trouble of coming to us for a bribe, and I'm guessing they'll probably be looking for one."

That was actually a tough call to make. Certainly it's how the mortal world often worked, but different rules were in place here. Mortals didn't have to worry about being skinned alive if they screwed up. Discipline based on the inhuman cruelty of this side of the hedge was likely to be far more fear-inducing.

"Why don't you and Simon go talk to the guards," Rey signed to Rover, "while Mizuko and I check out the trader with the skins."

Rover had to chuckle.

"Trust me, nobody ever dropped their guard for a gnome. I'm sure we'd be better off having the prettier members of our group handling the bribes. I'd be more use demonstrating my skills for the merchants who might be paying for them."

"Maybe," Rey replied still in sign, "but you're the one carrying the net gun."

Rover looked to the weapon in mild surprise, having nearly forgotten that it was there in the intimidating circumstances. He'd been spending more time watching his surroundings with a wary eye than worrying about his own gear.

"Good point. Though I have to now wonder what the cops in a slave-based society is going to make of a crew carrying guns clearly designed for capturing a person without killing. We might have better luck selling ourselves as kidnappers and bounty hunters rather than tradesmen."

"Hereabouts it's the same thing," signed Less. "Just don't go making too many promises you can't keep."

"Oh this should be fun," Simon said. And he even partly meant it. He grinned cheerfully. "Don't go too far, ladies. There's a slim chance everyone will try to kill us." Then he sauntered over towards the guards with Rover in his wake. But he didn't immediately interrupt them, just stood waiting to be acknowledged. That gave him a chance to observe them and get a feel for how best to approach.

Rey looked at Mizuko. "Ready to try some trading?" she signed.

Simon and Rover approached the guards and, as it happened, the guards had just left the furrer to head in their general direction. The armored behemoths seemed to look in Less's direction, and then Simon and Rover's, but it was hard to tell given their eyes couldn't be seen through the shadowed, bronze visors. They rattled to a halt in front of the gnome and the fairest.

"What's your business here in Circledell?" one of them said. His gruff voice echoed from somewhere deep inside the armored suit.

"You might call it fact-finding, Lordship," Simon said with a mix of respect and ingratiation. "We represent a concern that thinks all kinds of opportunities are being wasted here since the change of management. So we're here to find out what we've got that you fine Hobs want, and what you might have that we need. Then we bring the former and take home the latter, ya' see. My companions and I have brought a few samples to prime the well, as it were."

Talktalktalk... this was part of the *civilized* way of doing things that Rover never understood. Everything would just be so much simpler if they could walk up to the guard and say "Hey, we don't want trouble. Here's a bribe. Thanks."

After all, it was obvious that's why they'd approached the guard. But for some reason it just wouldn't go over well to be that blunt with the man. Perhaps it was his long association with machinery that left Rover so ill-equipped to deal with unwritten social rules. When something didn't work, hit it with a wrench. If that didn't solve the problem then he didn't hit it hard enough.

But their bribe wasn't a wrench and the guard wasn't a malfunctioning piece of equipment. Not sure what he could possibly bring to the discussion other than interference, the gnome remained silent and watchful.

At mention of samples, the guards seemed interested. "What kinds of samples?" asked the other in a very

similar, echoing voice.

"What kinds indeed," Simon said, warming to the role. "The finest products of the mortal world. Alcohol and fine tobacco; a small bird suitable as a pet... or a light snack. Sweets unlike anything in Faerie, or in nature for that matter, condiments, and this." He produced a roll of duct tape.

"Ooo," said one to the other. "I could use some duct tape. There's always some- er something what needs taping up." The other bobbed in his armor since it was too stiff to allow a nod. "Yes. The Gray Tape has many uses." They turned to Simon. "Very well. In exchange for the Gray Tape, yer taxes will be considered paid and you may set up your table. Taxes are expected to be paid every day you set up shop."

"I'll bring a whole case next time I come to trade," Simon said, handing over his "taxes."

The two left the huge armored goblins, who now ignored both Rover and Simon, to marvel over just how sticky the tape was, having successfully negotiated their right to set up a temporary shop.

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Meanwhile, Mizuko and Rey had skirted the guards and proceeded toward the furrier. As they approached, they saw the man drag his cart a bit further down the street, away from the entrance of the store. This actually brought him closer to Mizuko and Rey. He set the sturdy wood stem of the cart down just as they arrived near him. The wolfish goblin turned toward the two changelings approaching him and looked at Mizuko, but then seemed to dismiss her mentally. His eyes focused on Rey instead.

"Hello," Rey said with a slight, friendly smile to the wolfman as she wondered what it was he preferred about her. "How fresh are the skins?"

Rey took a look at him, noticing the evaluation in his eyes. She realized what he was looking at after a moment. She was a strange dichotomy of plant and animal. Her fae mein made her appear woodsy, definitely tree-like in the consistency of her body, yet she wore leather that smelled of wolves. In contrast to her, Mizuko looked like nymph. Beautiful, of course, but also by the condition her clothes were already in, poor to the casual observer. Thus, the merchant's sense of this fae trader told him that it was Rey he would deal with, and for whom skins obviously had some use.

"Some two days. Some fresh as the morning's kill," growled the wolfman. "What are you looking for today?"

"For whatever catches my fancy," she replied, her smile deepening, "though I do have requests for skins for clothing and other such purposes. Why don't you show me what you have?"

He nodded and proceeded to go through some of the things in the pile on the back of his cart. All of them were pretty raw. Not rotting yet, but not treated either. He obviously didn't have a tanning setup and so the buyer would be expected to do that herself. Among the assortment were pelts of what looked like mammalian creatures, lizard skins, and some that appeared lizard-like but also feathered. They ranged in size from something as small as a bunny to things as large as a cow. A few pelts were pale and nearly hairless but for a few patches.

"This is interesting," Rey said, indicating one of the feathered skins. "As are those pale, almost hairless ones. What are they?" She handled them, not caring about the condition. She'd handled worse.

"Flightless raptors," said the wolfman of the feathered skins. "Those others are human. Rare, so they are expensive."

Rey managed to control her revulsion. "I don't suppose you have any briarwolf skins?"

"Nope."

"That's a shame," Rey replied. "I do enjoy working with it. Do you have just skins, or do you have claws and bones as well?"

The two set to bartering with Mizuko declaring this or that arrangement "Fair" or "Unfair" as they progressed, which oddly also kept Rey from short-changing the goblin as much as it kept the wolfkin goblin from taking advantage of Rey's unfamiliarity with the pricing and worth of his wares. Finally, the vendor settled for giving Rey four medium-sized raptor skins in exchange for one six-pack of beer.

Mizuko tried not to pout as she saw the beer disappear into the wolfkin's cart, but failed. She muttered, "Fair."

"Don't worry, Mizuko," Rey signed with a small grin. "We'll have a couple of drinks once we're back home." She was only mildly disappointed she wasn't able to get too much of an edge over the goblin, but she didn't begrudge it. It was far more important, she thought, to follow the "rules" when using Mizuko's help than to try and cheat those she's haggling with. At least until Rey was more familiar with how it was done, then all bets were off.

With a nod of thanks, and a promise to check out his wares when she was next in Circledell, Rey bundled up her purchase with the twine she kept in her backpack. Hopefully the smell wouldn't get too bad. "Shall we check out the shop next?" she asked Mizuko.

"The store is closest," Mizuko signed. She hadn't indicated whether she was interested in further shopping or not, merely pointed out the general store.

—

Less stacked up some debris from the ruins of the building to make a crude counter. He placed the cigar box and the bird cage deliberately on the slightly sloped surface. He noted Simon expertly heading off the town guards and Rey haggling for skins. His eyes scanned the square slowly, taking in details. No one was rushing to his stall but he didn't mind. It gave him time to trace the burned timbers of the ruined buildings around him and remember the occupants that he remembered once living there. He watched the repaired tower of the palace, trying to get a sense of the garrison's size and how disciplined they were.

The forbidding tower could hide a half dozen or a dozen armored goblin warriors. It was difficult to say.

Circledell hadn't exactly been a hotbed of contention against the Goblin King. It was just a place a battle happened. The people who lived here were collateral damage. The fact was, though, that some of the people who lived here before had been changelings originally. Those who couldn't survive in the mortal realm after escaping their keepers, or who simply found the dangerous life of the Hedge more to their tastes, had given up on their humanity and had become permanent fae residents. That in itself was sad in a way, but that's how it had been. Circledell was a town of lost souls.

The fae that lived here had wanted to be left alone, though they did have a couple points of interest that tended to attract attention. One of them was the palace and the fairy prince and princess that had lived there. Perhaps they'd only been creations of some True Fae anyway, cast off when their master grew bored.

But it had been the decision of the Desert Duchy that allies were needed in the ongoing struggle against the Goblin King. As it was Autumn's place to negotiate with the denizens of the Hedge, The Ashen Throne had sent their own Legate of Mists to Circledell along with a few bodyguards. But the Goblin King's forces had tracked them through the Hedge and staged a devastating ambush. The Legate had been one of the most powerful members of the Autumn Court, but he, his entourage, and much of the town were destroyed in the battle. The Legate was not someone Less had opportunity to know well. Less remembered the Legate of Mists

had carried also some Title as well, though he could not recall at the moment what it was, or what the name of the Legate had been.

As his eyes swept past Mizuko and Rey again, however, it occurred to him that by Mizuko's reactions to coming here, she might know. She might know very well who it was that had died here, and why.

After catching Simon's signal that his stall was now 'official' Less began hawking his wares. He wasn't exactly enthusiastic but if someone came close he called to them, "Milk and honey! Mortal luxuries! Place your order here!" He hoped to get a few customers that could speak English, who might spill a scrap of information about Circledell during their transaction.

Simon and Rover had completed their bargain, and shortly thereafter, so had Rey and Mizuko. By this time there were a few goblins out and about, mostly entering and leaving the saloon. One new comer road in on a huge bird with brilliant plumage. Plainly, it was some ranking member of the garrison, given the thick bronze armor he wore and the helmet that completely concealed any face.

Less wondered what his best approach would be. An officer would be better able to pay for trade goods, but if he didn't want his troops to have contraband then he could shut the whole operation down. As the goblin chief drew closer, Less gambled. He wasn't going to be a secret so he might as well go through channels. "Aho there, captain!" called Less. "Looking for a nice cigar after a long, hard day?"

"No," answered the goblin in a deep, metallic voice. "I am looking for fresh meat."

Less felt his stomach tighten in fear and had to swallow before bravely continuing. "Sorry, Captain, I don't have any access to that. Closest thing I have are these birds, who, I'm told, were once maidens. They strayed too close to a witch's castle. But I have no way to break the enchantment. I could keep an eye out for you though, maybe bring you something on the way back through town. We trap live," he said encouragingly.

"Do you?" The blank faceplate seemed to consider Less for a moment. "I'd like to see you for dinner in one hour at the tower. We could talk business and what you might bring."

Less felt hot and the sweat prickled on the back of his neck. He had gotten into the palace but at what cost? It was extremely risky but no deals had yet been made. "Yes sir! My associates and I shall report to the gate in one hour!"

"Associates?" echoed the goblin knight. He leaned slightly down toward Less from the elevated position his mount afforded him.

Less waved in the general direction of the saloon and general store. "Yes, I am part of a small band of travelling traders. They are trying to drum up business."

The goblin knight made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a growl. "How many?"

—

Rover was still shaking his head in amazement after the 'deal'. They'd gotten away with a pretty cheap price, though it really was just a day's tax. The duct tape hadn't given them any favors beyond avoiding any immediate hassles.

"So do all hobs have such... weird priorities?" He was asking. Not having had much direct interaction with the opposition, Rover wasn't sure if this was normal.

"I mean, duct tape is useful, yeah, but it's still just duct tape. And only one roll at that."

Technically it was one roll per day, but still just one roll. Like all real engineers, the gnome had respect for duct tape but didn't carry the same legendary awe of home improvement hacks or myth busting television personalities. Sure, it was good for a fast fix, but hardly a substitute for proper retooling.

Though he did have to admit it'd probably serve well immobilizing prisoners for short sessions. Plus, he was probably being a finicky perfectionist again. This wouldn't have been the first time.

"So now what? We have the heat off of us for today, hopefully, but does anyone else need help right now?"

Rover glanced around himself in search of the others, wondering if there was trouble brewing yet.

"Now, we have a day full of possibilities. And most of them involve beer," Simon said. As he led the way to the saloon, he explained what he knew about Hob marketing. "I hope the rest of my bag of tricks works as well as the duct tape. I should have thought about zip ties, too. Hobs don't always have weird priorities. The ones at the Markets almost always do, but I think something else is going on there. But they have different priorities than we do. The Hedge runs on about a high medieval level of technology, with odd little differences. Stuff from earth that won't break down can be valuable to the right Hob. It's just usually got to do something different than anything a medieval artisan could make. I've got a bunch of nylon cord I don't really think will sell, because you just know there's some spider-hob who can spin magic cord from his ass that works better. But duct tape is a wonder of the modern world. Another thing that sells well here is iron, which is why I'm carrying a box of ten-penny nails. But that's like a controlled substance, so I'm not going to break it out unless we really seem to need it."

Rover had to chuckle at what he'd just been told.

"Heheheh... You're telling me about hedgetech? Maybe after those beers we can go teach my grandmother to suck eggs. I'm pretty familiar with how things work over here. *Mechanical* things, that is. I'm just surprised they didn't ask for something heavy like C-4 or AN/FO. Maybe some titanium alloys.

"It's people that throw me, especially when it comes to their motivations. *Things* are much easier to understand. The prices associated with those things are sometimes baffling, but the things themselves are my specialty."

"Well, keep in mind they didn't actually have to do anything for us. That wasn't so much a tax as a dominance display. They're big and tough so they get to take what they want, within reason. If they tried to take something we didn't have, everybody loses. Although it's nice that they didn't decide to just beat the crap out of us and take everything we had. I'm guessing that the Goblin King really wants things running here for some reason, maybe because it's close enough to the Desert Duchy to be useful as a forward base."

"Dominance displays..." Rover echoed with distaste.

"Damned animals. 'Still think they have to piss all over everything and claim ownership. Things would be so much easier if they just let engineers run the multiverse."

The gnome had to think about that for a second. He'd had lab assistants in the past, some of them quite bright. There were also some faded memories of such people that stretched back into the dim past of *Before*, when he was still human.

Some of the behavior he'd witnessed in scientific types wasn't really any better than the hobs. People were always squabbling over laboratory resources and schedules. Those who assumed their projects were the most important sometimes had few mores when it came to grabbing prime materials. Many of them also had access to some potent toxins...

Rover cleared his throat and continued. Perhaps a change in subject was warranted?



"So, anyway, do you think the name 'Hedgetech' would be a good one for an engineering firm?"

"If you're working in the Changeling market, yeah. If you're planning on operating in the mortal world, everybody will think you're a landscaper," Simon said. By now, they were at the door to the saloon. Simon entered and caught the door so it wouldn't hit Rover in the face.

"Maybe in Great Britain. Americans tend to favor the term 'bushes' to 'hedgerow'. Hedges are for supplemental investment funds and betting strategies."

Rover stepped into the business, thankful for the catch of the door as he was spending too much time watching for trouble than errant portals, and tried to take everything in. Wicked stories of Shanghai Surprises and other kidnapping schemes marched rank and file through his mind. Somehow they almost always centered around bars.

"But maybe that's fine anyway. It'd just be a cover with most of my business going to those who knew what Hedge with a capital 'H' meant, anyway. I can't expect to support myself with odd-jobs for the Motley forever."

The grubby saloon inside was dimly lit with greasy candles with fat, sputtering wicks. The rough wood ceiling was blackened from the smoke and it was hot, humid, and smelled of three day old rotting meat. A bartender with octopoid limbs hovered near his merchandise, but currently no one was wanting any liquor. Several hobgoblins lurked around the bar, but most were watching the events occurring at a back table, unashamedly drooling with anticipation.

The back table had been set up as a butcher block, complete with a selection of knives and saws. A cyclops stood there, one huge hand holding down a struggling little sprite who screamed and wailed in fear. The cyclops picked up a knife with his free hand and tested the edge with his thumb.

Simon couldn't just stand there and watch someone get chopped to pieces, even if it was an annoying little sprite. He spoke up. "Excuse me, gentlemen, but would any of you be interested in victuals and curiosities from the mortal world?"

The cyclopean butcher paused with his knife still in the air over the struggling fairy. "Victuals?"

A frog-like goblin at the bar turned and croaked, "Mortal victuals?" Simon noticed it had rather teeth more like a shark's than amphibians.

Then everyone turned to look at the two changelings. It felt as if they were being evaluated as victuals themselves.

Another said, "Do you have condiments? I like mustard."

A feminine voice purred, "I like mine served cold, perhaps soaked with fear, and a glob of mayo between two fatty slices of skin." The soft-voiced crooner belonged to an attractive dryad who seemed to be attached to far wall. Murmured approval echoed around the room, and someone slurped, making drooling sounds.

A lot of practice kept Simon's true feelings about the dryad's dietary preferences from showing on his face. Besides, his inner sarcastic jerk reasoned, if humans can be vegetarians, why not the other way 'round? "I do have condiments, including French's finest mustard and some really interesting colors of ketchup. Supplies and selection are limited because we're here on a trial basis. The home office didn't want to invest a lot in inventory if the sales staff were likely to be eaten. But if this venture works out well, we could negotiate a more steady supply. Especially if you have sprites like that around here. I have a commission for a buyer who's trying to set up a breeding stock. Wild seed really improves the lines, she says."

The fairy struggling on the literal chopping block wiggled an antenna in Simon's direction as she picked up the conversation. Her struggles were futile, however, so she soon ceased in the hope that if she were still the cyclops wouldn't pay as much attention. She might escape if his guard was down, but never otherwise.

Said cyclops had caught on to Simon's hints. "If you have a supply, a flesh trade would be welcome in this town, changeling. Changeling and fairy meat is preferred, but we'll have mortal as well.

"You can have Lunch here," he named the fairy, "if you can afford it. What are you offering on behalf of this friend of yours?"

"Since you want condiments," Simon said as he reached into his bag, "I've got these." He produced a series of small bottles of French's classic yellow and ketchup, and a jar of knock-off Miracle Whip. For that little thing, I could let one of each go." The nylon bag of wonders then produced mini-sized chocolate bars in several flavors, and some other candies. "I have a few other items that might serve your discriminating palates as well."

The octopoid bartender wagged his arms in what might have passed for amusement. The cyclops blinked slowly.

"That stuff is barely a swallow, whereas this Lunch is a full meal. That's a poor bargain... unless you throw in the little wrinkled felly. He might be stringy and tough, but I can tenderize 'im." He put down the big knife and withdrew a far bigger, wicked-looking mallet. "We'd even let you have a sample when I'm done wit' 'im. Unless you have something else to offer? Some of yer memories, maybe? Nola over there loves memories almost as much as changeling meat." He indicated the carnivorous dryad. "And I bet she'd throw something in to sweeten the deal if you could sweeten her up a little."

Simon murmured in Glynjack Cant, "Trust me." He smiled at Nola. The Dryad was quite attractive, and she was probably a biter. The prospect was enticing. Simon turned up his charm. "Hmm... If he gets eaten, bigger cut of the profits for me." He shook his head. "Unfortunately, I have to keep him. But how about this? Nola and I can... negotiate, and while we're doing that he can work on any small repair jobs you might have. Genius with a hammer and nails, he is.

"What do you say, Nola? I could give you the most intense sexual experience of your life, then I'll give you one of mine, one I think you'll really enjoy." He smiled a grin of pure devilry. "And then I can try to top both of them... if you're still up for it. Then I get the little Spirte and I get to keep my chocolate? Sound fair?"

Rover chuckled to himself and bit back a friendly barb about Simon being a... person of loose morals. He wasn't entirely sure that the word 'slut' was appropriate for someone who found genuine sustenance this way, but it seemed like something similar.

Perhaps this was the point where lust and gluttony converged. He wasn't sure.

"Don't wanna eat me." The gnome managed to grumble. "I go down smooth, but I come out fighting."

While the negotiations were taking place, Rover eyed the captive creature to see what would need to happen for that collar to suddenly come free.

"That takes some serious arrogance on your part to assume you are better than any lover I've ever had or ever will," Nola said. "If you can't come through on that promise, don't make it," she warned.

"Nola," rumbled the cyclops in warning, but her eyes were fixed upon Simon.

"It's not arrogant if it's true," Simon said with a grin, moving closer to Nola in something close to a strut. His

tail swished back and forth in anticipation. "And if I fail, it'll still be pretty damn good and you'll have a good appetite for Lunch."

The thick branch that bound the dryad to the wooden wall of the saloon creaked and stretched out so that she could approach Simon. She reached out with one finger tipped with a sharp, ebony nail, slit his clothes rather like one might gut a fish. They fell open and she examined the promised pleasure he packaged within. Shirt, belt and pants sliced apart under the carnivorous dryad's razor-like fingernail.

"Then let's see what you can do, changeling," she said in dangerous, yet sultry tones.

Rover couldn't help but notice the lusty gazes the rest of the fae in the saloon were giving the too were more the kind very hungry beasts might give a morsel than anticipation of a very public display.

Simon was undaunted by the loss of his clothes. It had been a nice shirt, but there were more shirts where that came from. "I like a lady who knows what she wants," he said, stepping out of the ruin of his clothes to close the small distance between himself and Nola. He ran a finger across the thin, stinging cut she'd given him and let blood well up on it. "Maybe you want some of this," he said as he licked his own blood off his finger. His taut chest pressed up against her abundant breasts, and his stiffening member slid up against her inner thighs, just to make sure she knew he was interested.

The ensuing encounter was bizarre but also erotic. The dryad had a mouthful of long, needle-like teeth and when she bit at him, the green sap that oozed from inside her mouth caused the area to go numb. At least Simon felt no pain. She enjoyed herself greatly and with such violent intensity, the Cyclops had to remind her that no deal could be had from a shredded Simon. That was when the real danger he was in began to sink into his desire-drenched mind. This creature was part of the entire building and could call on the strength of the living saloon as she wished. To say she was in control of the physical encounter now that he had her interested would be accurate. Toward the end of it, Simon could no longer feel his member and that was a warning sign he'd be very sore when this was over. He wasn't even sure he'd managed to climax, himself. But then, that hadn't been his goal anyway — he'd promised to satisfy her and that's what he'd intended to do.

Apparently it worked. After what seemed like a long time it was over, though it couldn't have been more than thirty or forty minutes. The numbing effect of the dryad's toxin wore off quickly and Simon was in excruciating pain. Her bite marks along the base of his neck, left nipple and a tender place at the juncture of abdomen were oozing blood and looked badly infected — or perhaps it was a reaction to her saliva. His member was in a similar shape — red and sore as hell. It looked scratched, as if he'd mistaken a small aperture in the Hedge for a glory hole.

Pained and horrified, Simon looked back at the dryad and saw in her face how pleased she was that she'd hurt him in that way. It was as if she was snacking on his suffering and the only thing that would have satisfied her more would have been if she'd tore him to pieces at the moment of her own climax.

"As good as his word," she said. "Norman," she addressed the cyclops, "give them the sprite and in return for their promised goods you'll also have free drinks here for a full season."

Cyclops considered for a moment, weighing the benefits against losing his Lunch. Finally he nodded. "Done. For all the condiments and goods you promised, changeling, and Nola's generous gift, the deal is struck. Lunch, say hello to your new owner."

The giant strode toward Simon and then put a silver chain in his hand. It was connected to the little naked sprite's ankle. She hopped off the chopping block. Although the delicate-looking little thing was tiny compared to Simon, she wasn't much smaller than Rover. She looked at both Rover and Simon with her big, frightened eyes and then squeaked, "Hello, masters."

—

"Am I going to be the only person buying stuff today?" Rey signed to Mizuko with a grin on her face as they walked toward the general store.

"Likely," signed the nymph. "My goal is only to not become one of the goods to be sold or purchased."

The pair arrived at the chipped and dented door that marked the entrance to the general store. Once inside, a quick glance around showed the place had mostly items apparently scavenged from ruins and the Hedge. Bones, unusual goblin fruits, even rocks, sat next to used (and still bloody) hedge-spun clothing. A few hedge-forged weapons lay in cases and secured with locks.

The counter was set up near the door so that the proprietor could keep an eye on who came in the store and whoever might leave. The proprietor himself was huge goblin with the upper body of a man and lower body of some kind of feline, complete with furry tail. He wore no clothes, but wore broad bracelets and armlets, as well as silver jewelry piercing his nose and ears.

Behind him fluttered a small fae girl with leather wings that moved so fast to keep her aloft they were nearly a blur. She had huge eyes and a small mouth and might be considered pretty if one went in for clearly inhuman beings. She also wore a heavy-looking iron collar which was so big on her, it hung loosely about her neck. To this was connected a long iron chain with was attached to the floor with a heavy iron plate. She was cleaning shelves and it obviously took her a great deal of effort to fly high enough to clean the high places. The iron rattled continually with her efforts. The proprietor's size made the sprite look small, even though she was really probably only slightly smaller than Mizuko.

Rey nodded in greeting to the shopkeeper, then turned her attention back to Mizuko. "Other than being captured," she signed to her companion, "what other ways can people end up as slaves?"

"Freedom may be bartered, the same as materials, dreams, and memories," Mizuko signed. "Some will trade their freedom to save another or themselves from destruction. A person can enter a contract to forfeit their freedom for a time or until certain conditions are met. Such contracts are quite binding, more effective than any magical device or mundane shackle because it is enforced by the Wyrd and breaking such a thing can have more dire consequences than simply being someone's slave." Mizuko looked meaningfully at Rey.

It took everything Rey had to subdue the soul-deep pain she knew had flashed across her face. She hoped Mizuko either didn't notice it, or if she did, would misinterpret it. "Do you know what those goblin fruits are?" she signed, indicating the display.

Mizuko was looking at Rey's face and had in fact noticed the pain there. She suspected Rey may have misinterpreted what she'd meant, but she decided to leave the matter rest for now.

"Some of them, yes." Mizuko stared at Rey. She didn't understand why Rey would be interested in the fruit when she knew that Mizuko had brought some with already.

The gruff storekeeper was within easy earshot and he looked them up and down. "Help you... ladies?"

Rey looked up at the huge goblin, knowing he was evaluating them but not exactly sure for what. "Good day. My friend and I are part of a group looking to establish trade here in Circedell. We're looking to see what you have to offer, and if there is anything of the goods from the mortal world we have that might interest you."

"I could use a new slave," he rumbled. "This one's about wore out. Whole town is just about out of slaves because of the food shortage." He grinned, revealing rotted teeth and stinking breath.

Mizuko took a step back.

"I'm afraid we can't help you with that on this trip," Rey said placidly. "Perhaps the next time we're here to trade we might be able to help you out." By reducing the population and thus the need for food, she thought to herself. "This time, however, we did bring some samples of mortal luxury items. I have wine and beer to trade, and our associates have a table set up outside, with cigars and other items."

The lion-man laughed unpleasantly. "You make a big assumption, thinking you'll be able to leave in the first place, changeling. The Goblin King pays well for the likes of you. In meat." He withdrew a club that was like a worn, but heavy and still strong, bat and rested it on the counter top.

The fairy on the chain suddenly squealed and something breakable tumbled from the top shelf and hit the floor with a crash like breaking pottery. The sound distracted the lion-man.

Mizuko took the opportunity to tug on Rey's elbow. The Fairest didn't hesitate. The two fled the store and went back to the street in time to see a bronze-armored knight riding some kind of bird speaking with Less.

"Four!" blurted Less. "I have four associates. There are five of us altogether." Less could see Rey and Mizuko hurrying out of the General Store behind the mounted knight, but he spared them only a flicker of a glance and kept his eyes on the goblin.

"Fine then. I'll see the five of you for dinner. One hour — changeling." The knight jerked the reigns, causing his mount to complain loudly before they set off toward the tower.

Mizuko and Rey made their way over to Less's stand.

Rey eyed the knight warily before coming to a stop next to Less. "We are in just a wee bit of danger," she signed, then related to him what had happened in the store.

Mizuko signed. "The resistance you mentioned, Less, may yet be at work here, but they would be keeping a low profile and may be difficult to contact. We may need to shift our search to a high priority and skip this cover."

"I've just gotten an invitation to dine at the palace," said Less in false enthusiasm for anyone listening. More quietly he added, "On the basis that we might be able to provide slaves on a future visit. It's a dangerous play, but it gets us inside. We have an hour to prepare." He watched their faces for their reactions, then asked, "I guess you didn't the magic needle or spindle lying about in the store?"

"Didn't get much of a chance to look before being told we were going to be lunch," Rey replied.

"I bet if we killed him and set his slave free, it would tell us if the items were there," Mizuko signed coldly.

"Probably," Rey signed in return, "but I try not to commit murder when I can avoid it."

"Not murder," Mizuko signed. "Liberation."

"Mizuko, I realize the Legate of Mists was an important person in the Autumn Court," signed Less

emphatically. "But we are not equipped to liberate Circledell right now. I've counted ten hobgoblins, not including the soldiers, in the immediate vicinity. We are only five. We get what we came for, gather intelligence on the situation here, and I will submit a full report to the Duchy when we get back. You can avenge the Legate of Mists then!"

"Fine, but if we don't get help from the locals, then how do you suggest we go about finding these tokens?" Mizuko asked in sign. She wore an expression of both curiosity and doubt.

Less had no answer for the nymph. She was right, of course. Posing as slave traders would not endear them to the oppressed, but slaves and meat was all that the oppressors seemed to value. He had only a vague idea of a plan but it was time to share. "The palace - the garrison - is segregated from the rest of the town. Inside, we will be dealing with only the soldiers, not the entire town. I was hoping that some of us could keep them occupied so the others could sneak away and search. There's bound to be local slaves in there, cleaning the latrines or locked up. Could we convince them we are planning a liberation?" He shrugged helplessly. He continued, but the tenor of his voice had changed, a sad sighing of defeat. "I sort of had a fantasy that we could somehow gamble for slave prizes with the guards. A show of our skills with the net guns," he admitted.

"The slaves," Rey said, "or rather the lack thereof, is what concerns me. From what Chuckles in the shop said, they've more or less run out of them." She paused for a moment. "Who *were* the original inhabitants of Circledell anyway?"

"I don't know who erected the original toadstool or stone circles," said Less. "By the time I visited it was bustling town of various friendly fae and some changelings. Sprites, like you described in the store, formed a fairly large minority group. I guess they survived the Goblin King's attack by hiding. They are masters of illusion."

Rey nodded, thinking about what he'd said. "I *really* don't want to meet with the goblin captain."

"I certainly cannot force you. I did tell the captain that all five of us would be at dinner, but I can easily make apologies."

"I know," Rey said with a frustrated sigh. "But what are we going to do? Eat the meat that is served? And what if he decides to turn us over to the Goblin King for the bounty being offered?"

"We're not going to enjoy their hospitality - it's a business meeting. They want more slaves and we're going to show them that we're the best trappers they can hire. It's risky, yes, but it gets us into the palace." Less looked down at their measly stock of wine. "I wish we'd brought more alcohol, now."

Rey shrugged slightly. "If wishes were wolves we'd be well protected." And I wouldn't feel quite so alone, she thought silently. "How do you think we should handle this?" she asked. She didn't think they'd be able to get away without eating something, given the invitation was to join the goblin captain for dinner, but she didn't want to argue.

"It's hard to say until we get in there, but I think if we play the ruthless business-people we can convince them we can supply them with live-trapped mortals or changelings. Simon can probably give us insight on exactly what they want. We give them free alcohol and stage a demonstration of our skills - perhaps a wager for some Sprites. Hopefully, some of us can slip away to search. If things go badly, we fight for our lives."

"*I wonder what's for dinner,*" Mizuko muttered under her breath. Although not meant to be heard, she'd used her voice and that meant her friends couldn't help but notice.

It was another half hour when Rover, a sprite, and Simon appeared. Simon looked a bloody mess and was holding the ruins of his clothes instead of wearing them.

"I think that went well. Rover, do you think that went well?" Simon asked. "Hi everybody. I bought us a friend. Can any of you perhaps conjure us some privacy, and a bottle of painkillers?"

Mizuko gasped and stared at Simon with concerned eyes. "You are losing blood," she signed to him and started toward him, hand already digging in her bag for an appropriate healing fruit. But she caught sight of the silver chain attached to the naked fairy's ankle and followed the length to Simon's hand. She stopped and stared.

"What did you do?" Rey couldn't help but stare at the silver chain.

Simon winced at a fresh stab of pain and switched to glymjack cant. "Bought my new friend here so the hobs in the saloon wouldn't eat her. We can let her go once we're out of sight of the village." Explaining more than that was a little beyond his current glymjack vocabulary. "Canny slave-merchants set the merchandise free," he finally settled on.

Very tenderly, he sat on the edge of Less's improvised counter. "Right now, I need my clothes repaired, and some glamour for healing. And I need to try to explain things to 'Lunch' here. And find out what she'd prefer to be called instead of 'Lunch.'"

Mizuko left the repairs to their specialist, Rover, but she produced an amaranthine. The orange, egg-plant like fruit was the size of a softball and was the biggest one she had in the bag. She offered it to Simon and after he took it, she signed to him, "It is the only one I have that can cure injuries so severe. But I hope it will make you less..." she glanced down to his abused manhood, "uncomfortable."

Simon took the fruit gratefully. "Thank you," he said. "This will probably delay our after-mission plans a little."

Mizuko glanced doubtfully at his nethers. "A little" seemed like an understatement to her, at least right now it did.

"I don't think the goblin captain would accept 'I had sex with something that nearly killed me in order to purchase a slave to keep your people from eating her' as an acceptable excuse for avoiding eating dinner with him in an hour." Rey wiped the frown from her face when she turned her attention back to the enslaved sprite. "Did you live here in Circedell before the Goblin King's forces attacked?"

She looked up at Rey, then quickly lowered her eyes. She shivered, shifted from one foot to the other, then nodded.

Simon took a quick look to be sure the motley wasn't being observed and the addressed his (technical) slave. "Look," he said quietly, "No jumping for joy or yelling, but I didn't buy you to eat, or to take to a breeding farm. As soon as I can, I'll let you go, but if you can help us with something first, I'd appreciate it."

"Of course, master," she said in a high, sweet voice. "I will do anything you say as best I can. What is it you wish?"

Meanwhile, Rover had accepted the onus of repairing Simon's tattered remains. Or at least the remains of his wardrobe as Simon's own tattered state was beyond his help.

"So, what, now I'm the team seamstress?" The gnome grumbled. "He gets laid and I get to clean up. How does that work?"

In contrast to his words, Rover's attitude was lighter than it would seem. He'd been tense during the negotiations for Lunch as it was outside of his levels of expertise. This was a matter he had well in hand... hands which were moving swiftly and in mysterious ways over the clothing.

It didn't take long for him to finish the effort as bits of nonsense flew out of his pockets, from the ground and every other resource that was in easy reach. Things that had no business going into woven fabric found themselves commandeered and put to task. Eventually the end result was turned back to its rightful owner repaired and in fine condition.

Mizuko looked at the grumbling gnome, then leaned over and kissed the top of his head to show him he still earned something no one else had.

"Thanks, Rover." Simon put his shirt back on. He decided pants could wait until the goblin fruit kicked in. To the sprite, he said "My friends have some questions for you. We're looking for something here. But to start with, is there something you'd like to be called besides Lunch?"

"Whatever you want to call me is what I will be called," replied the sprite.

Mizuko signed Simon to remind him of something. "She won't give you her real name unless you order her to. She's already your slave, and knowing her true name would take away her last remaining freedom. Call her anything you like. I doubt she will care."

"Call her Code, then." Rover suggested. "Short for code-name since that's about all we'll be able to use. Better than 'Nick', anyway."

"Works for me. Welcome to the group, Code." Simon took another bite of fruit.

Rey tried not to roll her eyes and forced down her disgust at what had happened, and how callously Simon and Rover were treating the sprite. How could they have forgotten what it was like to be a slave to the Others? How could they be so cavalier with their behavior? "We came here looking for something, things we need in order to help rescue some people who have been kidnapped. Tokens, to be specific. Can you help us?"

"I don't know," she answered. "What things?"

"The spindle, shuttle, and needle," Rey replied, her voice soft and calm.

Code looked at Rey for a moment. Then she said, "There were many such things in this village before the fighting happened. Everyone did things for themselves. I can show you many such items in the more ruined homes that aren't used anymore."

Rey watched Code's face as she spoke, and for that moment, the sprite was like an open book to her. "I'm sure you could show us many wondrous things," Rey said with a nod of acknowledgment, "and some of them might not even be illusions, powerful ones that both you and I know you are more than capable of crafting. You see us as invaders, and worse, because Simon is now your owner, and it's enforced by the pledge that was forced on you.

"You want to protect the needle, spindle and shuttle, and not tell us anything that you truly know. But what would you do to be free, to find a loophole in that pledge that would give you your freedom?"

Severe pain threw Simon off his game, which was a bad sign. He used to be at his best while in severe pain. It had been a survival trait. "No. That's not on the table. Help us or not, I'll still do anything I can to set you free as soon as I can. I'd do it right now, but it'd probably get us all killed and you just captured and on the menu again. I'd like you to really help me because you want to. My friends and I need the Tokens to help us save some other people who have been taken against their will, but even if we don't get them, the latest item on our to-do list is to enact some justice for the people who died here, and the ones who weren't that lucky. Right now, as your master, the only thing I'm ordering you to do is make your own decision, regardless of



what you think I want."

"We're looking for *the* spindle, shuttle and needle. The ones that brought the prince and princess together. The celebrated ones that were kept in the palace treasury. It is too late for their former owners, let the items bring true love to someone else. Someone that deserves it," pleaded Less.

While the questioning continued, Rover had time to think about what the sprite was saying. There *were* other items of importance in the town. There were also enemies gathered as well. Perhaps some of those enemies tied back to the original raid on the craftsman's workshop...

"Hey, wait a minute. Don't worry about the three big ones right now. You don't know us well enough to trust us, anyway. Assuming the invaders *don't* have them, even after all this time crawling through the palace and the town, they're probably safe. If they haven't been found yet then it's a damned good hiding place.

"Of course, if the wrong people do have them, we may be your only chance to get them out of here, but that's your call. Right now I'm wondering about what kinds of tokens these jerks brought in with them... Anything that stands out as important?"

It was entirely possible that some of his own tokens were being used to keep the town secured. Not the Staff of Mana, of course, otherwise there wouldn't be so much hunger. These were the situations it'd been created for and it could produce enough food to easily feed the entire town. The entire town or an entire army... There were other toys on his mind, however...

Particularly the Borrower's Book. Rover thought about the notes he'd been making. If he had laid out enough information for the motley to find their way back to Less' secret portal, who else might be able to decipher his clues?

As Simon finished the fruit Mizuko gave him, he began to feel better. Although none of the deep, seeping wounds closed completely, they all grew smaller. The sprite watched him eat for a moment.

"Very well, master," said the sprite. "Since you have promised to release me, and ordered me to only help if I want to, then I choose not to help you. You are changelings, probably from the Duchy. I can see the way your seasonal courts influence the Hedge even here. It was the coming of your people, changeling, that brought this on my home. Because of you, my friends and family have been enslaved, slaughtered, or eaten. Or all three."

Mizuko signed in Glymjack so that the sprite didn't understand, though Code certainly did understand the menacing look in the elemental's eyes. Code squeaked and hopped behind Rover. Mizuko was signing to Simon, "You never promised to release her intact. Please allow me to rip off her wings. Perhaps then she'll be more inclined to help us."

Less was not surprised by the fae's response but it angered him nonetheless. "For someone so adept at illusion, I'm surprised you take such a dogmatic view of the situation here. I admit that it was the presence of the Duchy here that turned Cirledell into a battlefield, but it is equally the Goblin King's fault for initiating the attack. I do not know your history between your people and changelings in Cirledell but I do know they lived peacefully here for many years before the Goblin King brought war. The princess herself was a changeling! She brought with her the spindle, shuttle and needle, and the true love that bound her to the prince. The celebration of that love seemed to me the very foundation of this city. I think you are too quick to hang your troubles on the Duchy, especially when we could be your only allies."

"He's got a good point." Rover felt the need to point out. His own pragmatism prevented him from mounting much of an argument against so much unreasoning prejudice, but there was no way to miss what Less had said.

"Sooner or later the Goblin King would have found some reason to roll right over you guys. Maybe it was the Duchy, today, or the princess herself, but tomorrow it could have been something just as pointless. It's a good outpost — we're not the only ones it could be used against. Or maybe the bastard wanted a second keep in case his primary stronghold was overran... or, hell, maybe he'd just get bored.

"The problem is that we make too easy of a target. We're here, we're *almost* involved and we're easy to be pissed at. So why not use us as a scapegoat for all your pain? Except that you're missing the fact that you're trapped between a rabid animal on one side and the only people in the world with enough strength and goodwill to help you out."

The gnome shrugged, realizing he had little control over her final decision.

"But, hey, if you want us to let go of that chain so you can run back and get eaten... that's your call. Forget the fact that all we really want to do is kill everyone grinding this town under its bootheel. Forget the fact that we might just have the brains and the means to get that done. You 'got your own problems, so we'll just go do what we're going to do with or without your help."

The little naked sprite crossed her arms and stared at the ground in thought for a moment. Then she sighed in resignation. "You don't understand because you never asked, but I'll enlighten you. Letting go of what you think is a chain will not set me free. It's not a chain.

"And what you think exists doesn't anymore. Not completely. The needle was found when the King attacked. The Goblin Knight has it now embedded in the hilt of his sword so that he could use it's properties to seek out hearts to bloody effect, though I doubt it works as he intended it to. The spindle was burned with the palace, where it died with the Prince — the true love of the princess. But the shuttle exists still as the prize of the shopkeeper who jealously guards it at the back of the store, even though he hasn't a thimble-full of talent to use it."

Mizuko said coldly, "The Prince is dead then. Where is the princess?"

"Dragged to the Labyrinth by her new master," the sprite said in a fearful whisper.

Rover had begun smoothing his immaculate beard in thought. He didn't know much about the needle, but he could take what knowledge he did have and attempt to extrapolate what powers might result from the combination.

Nothing immediately came to mind, but the gnome hopped up from his diminutive perch and began to pace.

"Hilt... Hilt? Why the hilt? It's a needle. It's power is contained in the point. It pokes things, goes through them and draws a thread with it. So it's best application would be in a rapier or stiletto. Something used to pierce. But what else is a needle good for..."

"A compass? Magnetize it and it can be used to point out magnetic north. Align it, instead, with true love and it can be used to seek out those pure of heart. A hilt, combined with a properly balanced pommel, is used not only to maintain a grip on the sword but also direct its point. Establish a line on the needle, from the hilt, and through the point and it could potentially seek out anyone opposing the knight by way of noble and selfless intentions. Those with nothing but greed and hatred in their hearts would be immune."

Rover considered the theory. It sounded reasonable, yes, but magic could easily be warped and tricked into new directives. Science was awesome in that it followed rules that were above and beyond the practitioner.

It followed the letter of universal law where magic cared only for the intent. So how could the needle be corrupted by mounting it into a weapon?

Hilts were cages for the blade's tang. They were traps bound by wrappings used to slave the blade to its wielder's will. Make the needle part of the tang, encase it with the hilt and bind the entire device with wrappings that were aligned with the Goblin Knight. The needle might resist, but what could it do? It was an item of creation. It took scattered thread and, in its own way, bound it to a new purpose based on the artisan's will...

What did it all mean? A needle with a will of its own to penetrate without destroying, something with the power to draw materials together into a more beautiful and perfect union... combined with a sword meant to penetrate and cleave while leaving a void of empty destruction in its wake. One tool designed to bring in the healing power of creation, the other to leave behind the emptiness of destruction.

So which would win? Perhaps the most telling aspect was that the needle had indeed been mounted into the hilt. Was there enough division there to prevent the needle's beneficent power to be employed? Could that power only manifest when the needle were given new thread to draw in its wake? Could a clumsy or even malevolent workman work its magic in a corruption of its power regardless of how it was being wielded?

This was more that required thought and Rover continued his silent pacing...

"Your enslavement is enforced by a pledge," Rey said calmly. Here was a chance, she thought, to undo the damage Simon's interruption had done to her plan to get the sprite's help. "And pledges, like any kind of contract, have loopholes - if you know where and how to look. In exchange for a way to get you free of the one that binds you, a way that doesn't involve killing you and you staying dead or harming anyone else, will you help us get the shuttle?" The flowering fairest made the offer she'd intended to from the start. Help us and we'll help you. She wondered, though, if Code would be interested, or if she'd given up all hope of regaining her freedom.

"I was forced to pledge myself into slavery in order to avoid immediate death. You sound awfully confident you can find a loophole despite having never heard the pledge I had to give. This is why I'm not inclined to believe you. I think you boast your ability too much." The sprite shook her head sadly. "It is a very human, and prideful, mistake to make. Now I have told you all I know and my master has promised to set me free. Regardless that I don't see how it is possible, I accept that the attempt should be made, though you made no vow to that.

"I will help you further if my master orders me to do so, but I will not otherwise until you have proven you are more than simply prideful creatures full of empty boasts. I have given you what you asked in good faith. No more is merited beyond the bonds into which I have delivered myself."

"Think what you wish," Rey replied. "I never said I knew how to do it. I never said I could, nor will I blindly make promises I don't know I will be able to keep." She knew that what she was saying could be construed as backpedaling, but she didn't care. "Nor do I make vows blindly. But if you don't care about your future, if you've lost all hope...." Rey shrugged. She'd made her offer, and Code was not interested. Not that she intended to just leave it at that - she was going to learn about pledges and how they worked. "I do have one more question, if you'd be inclined to answer it. What name did you go by before the attack on Circledell?"

"It was something like, She-who-dresses-in-silks-and-plays-with-rakkies," Code replied.

Less and Mizuko knew that a rakkie was what some hobs in this area called raccoon-like hobgoblins. Some were rather brilliant though they usually still lacked the ability to speak.

Simon gave a mental shrug. If he'd pushed a little harder, she would have given him a name to call her. Or maybe not. As her master, he was unlikely to be the sprite's favorite person.

"I don't know much about pledgecraft," he said to the sprite. "So this is the best I can do for now. Other than taking any action to reveal us to the denizens of Cirledell for one full month, you are to behave in all ways as a free being, answering to no one, not even me, unless you so wish. I don't know for sure that the last part will hold, but we're not likely to meet again after today. If your pledge requires you to stay close to me or something, we'll have to fix that later, but I promised to try, and I will."

Code lifted her foot and shook it a little, making the silvery chain attached to her bare ankle jingle. "I don't know how I can do that, master. I have only as much freedom as the chain allows, and you hold the other end. If you put your end down, then whatever length you have made will be the extent of my freedom to move. As I said before, it's not really a chain at all. So, you should know this; it is a physical manifestation of the Wyrd which enforces the pledge of slavery."

None of this was a surprise to Less, who had encountered such things many times before. To Simon, who may have avoided slave auction blocks at the 13th Street Market (wise, considering the possibility of being put up on the block himself) it was not common knowledge. Nonetheless, Less knew that this was pretty standard stuff when it came to slaves. The victim was usually forced into some kind of bonding pledge. Most people will choose slavery over torture or death, after all, and willingly make the oath. Sometimes humans will make a deal to serve for a period of time, as well. Many such enslavement pledges are not permanent. They might have a specific duration or conditions put upon them that would allow the newly taken slave to escape the pledge. The Wyrd then manifests physically. For many it shows up as a metal collar about their necks. Or it could appear as a chain, a tattoo, a brand, or a scar. For this diminutive fae, it was this silver chain.

With the information Code delivered about her situation it was clear that while she had to try to do as her master commanded, she could do nothing that would allow her escape from the chain. Thus, releasing the chain would simply doom her to staying right where she was left (or within a distance equal to the length of the chain), attempting to act as if she weren't stuck there. Likely she would starve or become someone else's dinner.

Mizuko signed in Glymjack to Simon. "She's probably hungry." She then dug in her bag and then withdrew a fruit about the size of an apple but had thick, tough green skin. It squished like a stress ball when she held it out to Simon. "This one is nourishing, but it also restores some glamour," she signed to him after he took it. "You could give it to her, or you might keep it for yourself and recover some magic."

"What was the pledge you took," Rey asked Code.

She paused and then looked at Simon, who didn't like having to give her permission, but he nodded.

"I agreed to the oath so spoken by the cyclops that caught me. He said, 'In exchange for sparing your life, you shall be my slave and I your master until the end of your days or until I trade you to another.'"

Mizuko looked puzzled. "*That's it?*" she blurted in her *voice*. The sprite's eyes widened as she stared at Mizuko and the fur trader up the street looked at her as well, betraying the fact that his sensitive wolf ears could pick up their conversation.

"That is all."

Mizuko muttered, "Fair." She looked dazed, however. Despite her instinctual sense as to what comprised a fair deal or not among goblins, she clearly didn't like the way this one was balanced.

"And now we need to stop having this conversation," Rey said in their motley's secret language, "as we're being overheard."

"Shall we move on and see a bit more of the town? How long until dinner?" Simon asked, regarding the fruit. He planned to give it to Code (or She-who-dresses-in-silks-and-plays-with-rakkies), but asking about dinner was a convenient way to ask about their invitation and the host of problems that might bring.

"We're not going to dinner," said Less gravely. "I estimate we've got about three-quarters of an hour in which we have to quietly knock over the General Store and get away with the shuttle before anyone notices. We may need Code's help."

Rover managed to break in his considerations of the stolen needle and began moving along with the others. A different locale might be called for, but he had a strange enough question to have the gnome scratching his stony skull. the dry rasp of rock-on-rock could be heard.

"So... if you were bound until Eyeball traded you away, why didn't it count when you were traded to Simon?"

"Because Simon is my master now," Code replied.

"He traded for her," Rey added. As long as the person owning Code had an expectation of getting something in return, Rey thought, whether it be intentional or just the expectation of continued friendship, the pledge will bind Code. But there has to be a loophole. There always is, if you look hard enough.

"I would like to see her clothed," Mizuko remarked in Glymjack sign. "She is too distracting and also too likely to be cut on thorns and leave a blood trail should we need to run."

Rover shrugged. Clothing might not even matter if his next idea actually worked.

"Hey, Code." He spoke to the chained-one. "How about we trade you your very own sprite in return for helping us get the needle back? Sword and all?"

She blinked, missing his point entirely. "What would I do with a slave of my own? I would refuse the trade, unless it might cost another sprite her life."

Mizuko rolled her eyes and said aloud, *"No, stupid. He means what if Simon gives you to yourself in exchange for helping us get the needle back."*

Code blinked again. "Oh. Um. I don't know? It would depend on if I could really help and if the effort I made was a good enough trade to satisfy the pledge."

"We need to stop talking about this right now," Rey said in a low but urgent voice. "People can hear us and are listening!"

"Very well," said Less as the eyeballs on his hands flicked to the fur merchant. "Let's break up this meeting. Go off in different directions and meet in five minutes behind this ruined building. Hopefully it will prove to be a more secluded location."

"Yeah... okay." Rover agreed.

The little gnome was worried about the plan and had doubts that it was the safest for himself. Rover was small, physically ill-equipped to defend himself and currently without much in the way of weaponry. Normally that was fine, given his pacifistic nature, but this was hardly the neighborhood to wander around unarmed. His own capture had proven to be a massive benefit in the past. Given his increase in experience and education since escaping that bastard Keeper, his professional worth was now even greater.

But they did need some privacy which precluded being followed. Splitting up and individually guarding against pursuit was a concept that prudence alone insisted upon.

"Five minutes. I'll be there."

"Buddy system," Simon said. "Take a friend."

Less packed up his stall. Business had not been brisk and so he had to load himself up again. Hopefully it seemed like he was saving his merchandise for the garrison. By the time he had hoisted the milk and honey to his shoulders and collected his caged birds, Rey and Mizuko had gone off together and Simon had led Code out of sight. Rover remained and Less walked with him. He had also been considering the effect of the needle in the Knight's sword. "All three of the tokens were noted for their self-animation. I wonder if by putting the needle into the hilt of a sword, the knight expects his sword to fight on it's own. I hope we never find out."

"Maybe." Rover agreed. He'd done his fair share of hedgespinning in the past, but he couldn't predict for certain what the effects of this merger might be.

"It doesn't sound like the needle's very aggressive. If he expects it to fight then I doubt it'd be very good at it, and it might just be easier to animate the sword itself. Now, *guiding* the blade as it's being held, though, could be possible. Needles aren't meant to hack or slash, but a thrust? That's more likely.

"Or... if he's done his job right, it might be able to 're-weave' what's in a person's heart. Warp their minds and emotions, turning them to the Knight's command. One stab at what might be a metaphysical focal point for the soul...?"

Rover shrugged. This was strange territory, even for his own experimental nature. Probably they were asking questions that wouldn't be answered until they found out in person.

"Be sure to keep your net-gun handy," replied Less.

The group split up and the first thing that Rey and Mizuko noticed was that the fur trader was gone. However, nothing impeded any of the motley when they reconvened behind the ruined building five minutes later.

Mizuko spoke quietly when she saw Code again. "*You are much bigger than the sprites I see more often.*" It was true. Although she looked like the little creatures, she was ten times their height.

Code nodded. "Those are cousins."

"*Why are you so much bigger?*"

"I am a sprite, not a spright," she said with a shorter vowel sound in reference to her own kind. "We are alike only bigger. Little sprites never do illusion and aren't very smart. They seem to think that my siblings and I are royalty and some of us will use our powers to shrink down and live among them for a time. We aren't more powerful than other sprites, only taller, a little smarter I think, and able to work some illusion magic," Code admitted. "We are far fewer in number than our tiny cousins."

"*Can you work an illusion large enough to fool the shopkeeper?*" Mizuko pressed.

"I don't know what you mean by that. My illusions apply only to me. I can't cast an illusion over something else, if that's what you think." Code chewed on the goblin fruit that Simon gave her. A thick, crimson drop of sap ran down her chin from the corner of her mouth.

"Hmm, and you can't get very far from me because of the chain. How big an illusion? Could you look like someone around my size?"

"The chain limits me, but not you," she agreed. "If I try hard I could make myself look perhaps your size. Otherwise, I would be whatever I needed to be to whomever was looking."

"Huh... Can you be a phased plasma rifle in the 40-watt range?" Rover asked, still considering alternate self-defense mechanisms.

"No, forget it. Never mind. We're doing fine so far, no point in drawing attention. But we do still need to talk about the deal we're going to make. Your help in taking the needle *and* the sword that it's jammed into in exchange for the ownership of a sprite. That sprite being, of course, you.

"Now I'm not your owner, so I can't set this officially. But it seems like asking you to help in any way you can; short of causing harm to yourself, anyone you care about or ourselves, is a fair deal."

He looked to Simon for confirmation. Rover could only make suggestions at this point. The group's pretty-boy was saddled with the last say.

"I don't think we can snag both," Simon said. "We screwed up by discussing this out in the open, and now we have to assume the clock is ticking. The sword is guarded by a whole garrison of armed hobgoblins. Unless Code here has some insider info that changes my mind, I say we go for the shuttle. But the second part, I agree with. You do whatever you can to help us get the shuttle as Rover said, and in trade, I'll give you to yourself. I'll offer the same deal for the sword and needle if that turns out to be the smarter one to go for."

"There's a way..." Rover stroked his beard, already returning to his inner realms of thought. "There's always a way."

After all, it hadn't taken the crew long to find a loophole in Code's contract. This was just a little more complicated... and dangerous. Code wasn't likely to slaughter them all in ways more painful than could be imagined if they screwed up with her.

His prudence warred with his pride on this one. Rover was being driven mad by his inability to deduce the functionality of the sword. Perhaps he'd be able to reverse-engineer it's construction by seeing it in action. Assuming he survived such an encounter.

The inescapable conclusion was a verbal "I'll work on it", though it may not have been immediately obvious what he was *working* on.

"Meanwhile, what's it gonna' be, Code? Are you in or out?"

Code gave Rover a fluttering blink. "I don't know what you mean. What is it you want me to do?"

"He means the trade," Simon said to Code. "You help us get either Token, just like I said, and in return I'll trade you to yourself."

"Specifically..." Rover added as his detail oriented mind wanted to make sure there were no gaps in the contract. "Whether we succeed or not, if you give a fair effort within your current means it counts. Just so long as you don't use this as a chance to betray us in any way.

" 'That sound about right, Simon?"

Simon nodded.

Code watched her new master and then nodded as well. She'd finally come to a decision about the motley. "I will help you, and even if you did not offer to try to set me free I still would." Code looked at Simon. She

truly did not understand why they would even make the attempt to set her free, after he'd nearly traded his life to purchase her. In her mind, Simon clearly wanted her and it didn't make sense at all that he would set her free. She was nevertheless very grateful that she didn't end up as the cyclops's lunch, however. Since Simon didn't seem inclined to eat her, she had decided that she was safe with he and his friends. She'd gone into this new, brief relationship with no reason to trust or believe anything they said to her, but already they'd managed to convince her that at least they didn't mean her ill.

But in reading her posture, Simon thought there was still something else that was unsettling her. She didn't give word to it, though, so it might be something better addressed later.

"Thank you," Simon said. Then, to the rest of the group, "Okay, how do we do it? I'm not an expert burglar. I'm a pretty damn good negotiator, but even I have limits, and all I have left to trade is a box of nails, some rubber bands, and a snickers bar I was saving for later."

"Unless we find a way to drug him, I doubt he'd be willing to trade anything we brought with us for the shuttle. But before we just go in and start a fight, we have to be careful about the other sprite inside." Rey turned to look at Code. "There's a sprite inside, held by a collar and a chain bolted to the floor. Do you know if she's bound by a pledge to slavery?"

"I do not," Code said.

Rey nodded, then signed to Mizuko "Can you use any of your mastery of water to take the shopkeeper down quickly and quietly?"

She thought about it, then signed in return, "Maybe. How do you mean quickly? Seconds or minutes?"

"Seconds, preferably," Rey signed back, "I was hoping we could subdue him quickly and quietly. We get in, take him down long enough to search the store and take what we came for, then get out of there before anyone's the wiser."

"Give me a minute, then yes. If you want him taken down faster, then it will require a great deal of magic and I will need assistance to meet your time limitation." Mizuko continued to sign with surreal calm. "If you let me go in alone and simply kill him, then it will be much faster and less costly to me since I will not have to overcome his resistance to my magic, only empower myself to overwhelm him physically and destroy him." Her all-too-relaxed appearance about the act of premeditated murder was a frightening reminder of her Court, as well as the title and duty the Ashen Queen was grooming her undertake, but not out of character for someone reputed to be a sorceress.

The attitude had little affect on Rover. His life-long scientific explorations had inured him to the darker shadows of the world. While the gnome had no stomach for perpetuating harmful deeds, he was well aware that they happened and little could be done to stop them.

"So do we, maybe, want to test the guns out on this guy? I know that nets aren't too hard to get out of unless you have the brains of a dolphin, but I'm thinking a quick transmutation on the net themselves might make them a more effective trap."

He wasn't actually sure that such transmutations were within the group's skillpool. There wasn't much harm in asking, at least.

"What Rover means is 'raise your hand if you have the power to turn nylon into steel or something,'" Simon translated. He regarded Mizuko carefully, conflicted. Her plan was expedient, other than a few small details



like being able to find the Shuttle or the shop-keeper turning out to be a ninja. But he worried that telling her to go murder a guy (as opposed to killing someone in battle or in defense of others) might push the delicately balanced siren over a precipice from which she would never return. "I have an alternate proposal, maybe," he said. "I could go in the front and distract him. Someone else could come in through the back-- if there is a back-- and try to steal the shuttle. I have a suspicion that Code here can be very distracting if she wants to be.

"But I guess if that won't work, I don't have a better plan." Simon sounded disappointed with that, not from any regard for the shopkeeper. He was, in Simon's mind, a slave-abusing cannibal and the world would be better off without him. But Simon really didn't want to watch Mizuko self-destruct.

"Let's leave killing the shopkeeper to a hasty Plan B. If Code can distract the shopkeeper and someone supports her I can get the rest of us into the back. I expect Rover's abilities might be required to deactivate any protective devices on the shuttle itself."

"Mizuko and I returning to the shop ought to be a real distraction," Rey said, "given the situation we left."

"Don't get eaten," Simon suggested. "You got a plan? I might be able to fake setting up a trade agreement that'd keep him talking for a while. Something along those lines maybe?" Then he turned to Code. "Feel free to make suggestions. None of us really know what you can do besides illusions. If you're going to help, we'll have to trust you to figure out what you can do best."

Code nodded.

"We already presented the idea of trade," Rey said. "He decided we were talking about ourselves. Now that we're prepared, I'm certain we'll fare a lot better in our dealings with him." She looked at Mizuko for confirmation.

Instead, Code spoke up. "I'm a slave and you are supposed to be slave traders. I think your cover is intact so long as you behave as what you've represented yourselves to be."

Mizuko looked at Code and shrugged. She signed, "The fairy has a point. I have nothing I'm willing to trade and as I mentioned before, I will not trade myself. I will not even pretend to. Words are powerful and dangerous, so be cautious." She paused, then added, "And never let another fairy think you are indebted to them. They'll use it against you. Hell I probably would too, if we were not motley together."

There was a shrug from the resident workman.

"Don't look at me for a plan. I prefer to think on my feet. Maybe after I see the place I'll be able to figure something out. Just sitting here, no idea what the place looks like or where the shuttle's being kept, I'm too far in the dark to be clever."

"In that case," Rey said, "it ought to be Simon and Code going in. He's established the slave trade cover."

"Yeah, I can probably keep him occupied for a while. What's everybody got left to trade with. I'll need some props." Simon said. "Meantime, we should probably make sure there's a back way in."

Code offered, "It had a side door, as I recall. That's where they used to load in goods from the space between the buildings. There was an alley, but I think it is overgrown now."

Mizuko searched in her bag and produced three green berries about the size of golf balls. "Eat these," she told Simon, "if you need glamour."

Simon was glad to accept. "Thanks," he said. "If this turned violent, I was going to be really short of juice for

healing."

"Let's check that alley. If I can get to the door," Rey said, "and there's nothing blocking the other side, I can get through it. No need to even open the door. It just has to be there. I know Breaching Barriers."

"OK, let's go," said Less, anxious that the plan got rolling.

Rover was stroking his beard and watching the sun inch its way across the sky. Harsh light scraped across the dry, stony surface of his pate and the desire to cease wasting time was evident in his un-voice expression.

The motley moved out, Code accompanying her new master, Simon, and the others moving around to the back of the store. They discovered that the side entrance, while overgrown was still navigable and they could reach the door. It was locked, however.

Meanwhile, Simon went in the front. The leonine proprietor was eating what appeared to be raw mutton. Spread out on the stone counter were various other morsels and the huge cleaver he'd used to cut apart his meal. He gave Simon a bloody grin. Code stood in horror looking at something on the counter. Following her gaze, he realized it was a heavy iron collar with fresh blood still spattered all over it.

She turned about and fled back toward the door, but the silver chain around her ankle jerked taught (though to Simon, it didn't pull away from his hand), and she tripped. Code landed right on her face but she continued to try to crawl away in unreasoning terror while her wings buzzed in a desperate blur to add useless impetus to her escape.

Simon hated himself for it, but he barked out "Slave, calm yourself! You're embarrassing me." He turned to the shopkeeper. "It's not like you're going to eat my personal property without paying for it," he said with faked asperity. "Pity I didn't get here faster, though. We might have bargained for that one. I have a client who asked me to acquire a few for a personal project, and I still have a bit of time before my appointment with the Guard Captain. But I'm being remiss.

"Some call me Mister Scarlet, purveyor of desires," the changeling doffed his red fey-spun hat and bowed theatrically. "How may I call you, sir?"

"The Shopkeeper Who Ate the Previous Shopkeeper, or just Shopkeeper is fine," he said with unexpected civility. "What can I do you for?"

Code turned around and crawled behind Simon, where she grabbed the back of his pants covered pathetically to hide from the Shopkeeper. Frightened nearly out of her mind and in shock, she clearly wasn't going to be the help she had intended to be.

"Shopkeeper, then," Simon said. His inner black comedian thought "shopkeeper who ate the previous shopkeeper" was terribly funny. His inner person who didn't want to be eaten was thinking about trying to trade places with Code. The rest of his mind was trying to concentrate on the business at hand and NOT to look at the bloody counter and its grisly contents. "My friends and I are merchants. We came to town today to explore trade opportunities since so many other Changelings seem willing to let this market wither just because of the unpleasantness between the Lord of the Labyrinth and the Desert Duchy. Right off the bat, I see that the main thing you need here is food, as in slaves. I think I can help with that, but chattels aren't my usual line. I prefer to trade in dry goods, like yourself.

"That said, I've decided I'm never coming back here again without a healthy layer of warm bodies between me and any of your fellow citizens who might be feeling peckish." Simon smiled with humor he totally didn't feel. "Taxes here are prohibitive, too. So what I was thinking was that I needed a local partner. I can supply just about any goods from the mortal world on a regular basis, for which I'd like to be paid in Goblin Fruits and other useful hedge items. Obviously, you'd get half the profits for yourself. In fact, I don't really

care what you charge. I just want a bushel of Goblin Fruit per crate of stuff I send you. At least a quarter should have useful properties, of course, but quite a few of my customers are happy to get the glamour even the commonest fruits offer." Simon's deal was carefully set at a fair price, but one sharp merchant would try to tip in his favor. The goal wasn't to get a good deal, it was to take as long as possible to come to a plausible deal.

And not to get eaten. That was kind of important.

The Shopkeeper rubbed his jaw in thought. He wasn't set up for perishables, he considered. Live food wouldn't spoil as quickly, but required space he didn't really have. But first he needed to establish parameters. "How big would the crates be? What kind of weights are you talking about? Foodstuffs would be good, but there is a market for other materials, too. Can you get bronze? Or at least copper, zinc, tin, and other metal ingots?"

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"Feh..." Rover commented while studying the locking contraption. "If they really wanted to keep people out, they should have used something more secure than just a lock. I should be through this thing in no no time."

Rover gazed at the lock, stroked his beard and the huffed in derision. No wonder they allowed this door to become overgrown with weeds. Anyone who managed to find it could get through in seconds.

That's exactly what the gnome managed to do, as well. His small, agile hands had a slim pair of tools out of his jacket and into the lock. There were some twists, a few clicks and then the door was no longer locked.

By the expression on Rover's face, it had barely qualified as being locked in the first place.

Mizuko watched in fascinated silence while the gnome made quick work of the door lock. When it popped open she tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention, then signed, "Will you show me how you did that later? And maybe make me a set of lockpicks, too?"

There was a grim moment on his face. All engineers respected the ancient rite of Job Security, but this was for the motley. Of course he would share the technique and set 'Zuko up with what she needed to get the job done herself.

"No problem. After we get the shuttle and take care of that paramilitary bastard, right?"

Less felt time ticking like a physical yanking on his spleen but he didn't rush Rover through the door. Even though the portal had been disused, it didn't mean the shopkeeper didn't want to discourage thieves. "Careful now," he whispered.

The four cat burglars snuck inside and Rey nearly tripped over a chain on the floor. It was attached to a hook and it was a decent guess that this might have been one of the places the little fairy slave had been chained up, perhaps as a makeshift extra alarm. She wasn't here now, however, and the group proceeded without detection.

The group quietly, quickly searched through the maze of shelves at the back of the store while Simon kept the Shopkeepers attention in the details of the fake trade negotiation. A lot of useless-looking items piled here and there showed little organization, so the Shopkeepers simple security-through-obscurity tactic almost worked. But Rover spotted something that looked like a shuttle for a loom lying next to some string and slender ropes. It made Rover wonder if the Shopkeeper even knew what he had.

The gnome nicked the item, stowing safely away and then signaled to the others. They left as quietly as they had come. Mizuko followed last and paused at the door. She turned to the front of the store and waved a

signal to Simon to wrap things up. Then she, too, stepped through the door and closed it quietly behind her.

Simon caught Mizuko's nod, but didn't react. He focused on the shopkeeper's questions for now. "We're lacking for transportation right now, so we'll likely be hauling our stuff in on the backs of the slaves we bring. Crates about that size," he pointed to one of the smaller boxes in the shop, something a normal person would be able to carry on his back. "Smaller for metal. Copper is easy, bronze shouldn't be too hard, and if you really want it, I can get iron and steel." At this point, Simon wanted to play his role just well enough to be convincing and make his exit.

"Bring a few crates and I'll have a bushel of assorted goblin fruit for you. We'll see what your goods are worth and what I can sell from it at that time," the Shopkeeper said.

"All I can ask," Simon agreed. "Well, at least in the time I have. I don't want to be late for my meeting."

Simon left, picking up Code bodily and carrying her like a package he cared nothing for, and walked toward the keep until he was out of sight of the shop's windows. Then he cut back into the ruins and around to where the others were waiting. As soon as he could, he shifted his grip on Code to something more comfortable and dignified.

"Sorry about that, little one," he said. "But we're okay now."

The four foot sprite struggled in his hands until Simon realized she was fighting to keep from throwing up, and had held on about as long as she was going to be able to. The moment he let her go, she scrambled toward the nearest wall and was sick, retching up the fruit she'd eaten earlier. She kept mumbling, "I'm sorry. I couldn't do it. I'm sorry..."

Mizuko looked at the sprite and frowned, wondering what the problem had been.

"Some days I'm such an idiot," Simon muttered. He knelt down beside Code. "It's not your fault, and you did as well as anybody could," he said. To explain to the others, he said "The shopkeeper was having a snack when we got there." His normally cheerful voice was bleak. "Anybody have a bottle of water? Or I guess the booze would do in a pinch."

Mizuko's face echoed Simon's sadness. She signed, "I am sorry that happened. But we should go. Now. Refresh later."

Rey nodded in agreement, trying to rein in her own grief at not being able to save the slaughtered sprite. "Let's get out of here."

Less didn't wait for any more encouragement. He left behind his heavy burdens of milk and honey but kept the caged birds. They had brought him luck so far and he didn't feel like discarding that yet.

Rover was having a bit of difficulty in not examining the shuttle. It wasn't often he had the chance to examine a wild token. His own creations were woven out of a strange combination of storytelling, engineering and magic. Digging into items that simply formed on their own was an entirely different science.

But to even think of doing so now, and there'd be little time for later study if they were to trade this for information against their enemy.

Rey paused only to tip over the buckets with her hands, splattering their contents on the ground (but not letting the buckets rattle). Just leaving them there standing upright would show they were willingly left behind. Spilled over like that, it might cause whoever finds them to think - at least for a moment - that something else had happened.

The motley quietly left Circledell and headed back the way they'd come. However, change is the only predictable feature of the Hedge and they soon realized, without surprise, that the path they thought they'd taken to get here disappeared into foliage.

Many members of the motley were experienced, and in particular Less was. He kept everyone busy and calm by directing their focus finding a new path back to Mythic. He knew that finding any general path or trod to Mythic would be far easier and less time consuming than finding a path that led to a particular place in Mythic, and so the motley focused on that.

Three hours into their journey the motley had found their way onto a trod that they were sure would lead them back to their home city, and that was when they found the body. It looked to have been changeling. The young man was long dead, his flesh almost entirely rotted away. Due to the vines and leaves (now brown and dead) that had sprouted from his head and hands, they were sure he was changeling and not mortal. How he had died was not immediately apparent, but clearly he'd lain here at the side of the trod for some time. What clothing he wore was ruined rags now, but his belt, his pockets and his shoes were yet intact.

Of the motley, it was Mizuko who was the least immediately repulsed by the corpse and the putrid scent the body left in the air. She squatted next to it and stared at it for a moment before she turned asked Less in sign if he minded if she checked it for tokens, or if he would prefer to do it, since it was he who had led them on this path back to Mythic.

Rey tried to ignore the corpse, and instead scanned the area around them. Things like this would draw scavengers.

"Good leather." Rover humphed at the corpse. They'd apparently managed to survive a great deal of weathering without falling apart. Certainly better than the changeling's own, uncured skin.

"Watch out for traps." He warned Mizuko as she went forward to check the corpse.

Mizuko glanced up at Rover, wondering if he was kidding. Good leather? The corpse was mostly rotted and likely where bits of fabric remained, there would be fat maggots crawling through what flesh was not already eaten away. She lifted a piece of tattered shirt. Yep. Maggots. She made a disgusted face, and then turned to the pockets, but stopped. She still hadn't heard if Less wanted to search this instead, since the body had been found on the path he led them.

"Go ahead," said Less. He was more focussed on the intelligence report he was writing in his head on Circledell.

Simon mostly tried not to be sick. Back in the village, he'd been able to suppress his reactions. His life depended on it. But now that the immediate danger had passed, normal feelings wouldn't be denied any longer.

Mizuko made short work of the pockets, finding only one item that was intact. She held it up to sky to capture some of the waning light of the day. Remaining rays turned amber as they passed through the small, stoppered bottle. The nymph was fascinated. Yet, it was not the only item of interest she noticed.

"*The boots are magic, too, if you want them. There are legends about the uses for a dead man's boots,*" she told the others softly. She put the amber bottle in her bag, then signed, "I can learn what secrets the magic hides later."

She stood up and stepped away from the body. She made no move to take the boots; she didn't care for footwear and only wore them when required.

"Simon," she said. *"I have something to suggest about Code, if you are willing to hear it. She is yours, though, and I respect your judgment if you do not wish her to hear what I have to say."*

Mizuko's voice had the nice effect of distracting Simon from the putrid corpse. "I'm always willing to listen," he said. And this time he could really use some advice.

The nymph had deduced that Code was not free now because of her reaction to the Shopkeeper, not because of any intent to fail to uphold her part of the bargain. She, like Less, also knew that sprites were unreliable nuisances at best and dangerous pests at worst. But Code seemed more; larger, more intelligent, and just perhaps more capable of remaining on task over extended period of time. This made Code an ideal candidate for what Mizuko had in mind — provided both Simon and Code were interested.

*"I would like for us all to go home after we reach Mythic. Not our separate places, but the home that was once only mine but now belongs to the five of us. I would like you to bring Code there. She will be safe. And, there are things lacking in our home that, while sufficient for me, is greatly desired for the rest of you. I would like to suggest that would be a good place to have Code. She cannot survive in the mortal world after all. Not for long. And we need things for our Hollow. Food, taking care of pets and cleaning and maintain what you intend to build there are all services I do not have, but that Code could provide. In this way, she could even earn her freedom in time and, at the end of that time if all parties were pleased with the arrangement, Code might continue to live there."*

Simon thought it over and couldn't come up with a better option. Maybe someone else could, but Mizuko's idea was the best alternative he saw right now. "Is that okay with you, Code? We can figure out what term of indenture will satisfy the wyrd, and include a clause that says if we come up with a better option, like if you save one of our lives, your debt will be paid early. I know it's not great, but we at least won't eat you or abuse you."

She looked around at the motley, then back at Simon. She nodded solemnly.

As Simon and Code talked, Rey moved over to the corpse to remove the boots. She didn't know what they could be used for yet, but she was sure either she or Rover could figure it out.

Rover had his diminutive arms crossed and was waiting for the discussions to conclude.

"See? 'Told you it was nice leather."

As for Code's future, he didn't much care. Of course she would have a welcome place to live with the motley, but Rover didn't think she needed to make trade in manual labor. The world didn't *a/ways* have to be give-and-take and he thought she was to be given her freedom for helping out with finding the shuttle.

Once Rey had freed the boots from the corpse, Less hurried the motley along. "We've got a lot to accomplish in the next little while. Let's get back to Mythic as fast as we can."

It was a matter of a few more hours' walk and they found themselves in view of Mythic. They attempted to cross over and re-enter the hollow that was now the motley's, but as soon as they had crossed, they hurriedly moved back into the Hedge because Code because to quickly burn, her skin peeling before the onslaught of a mortal reality that didn't believe and was anathema to her kind. Nevertheless, with effort and a lot of luck, they were able to make it to the relative safety of the hollow.

En route, Mizuko mentioned that as a sorceress, she could study the tokens and find out all the details. It was

something she was called upon to do at court, though she accepted the other members of the motley may enjoy the thrill of discovering what they did by trial and error. She, however, insisted that should they wish to do that, they do it anywhere but the hollow in case it left a mess.

Doing this was not free, however. As Rover well knew, this kind of thing was difficult and even he had no better way to determine the function of unknown Tokens from the Hedge than trial or error. It was far safer and more thorough to have a sorceress do it. He also knew that it sometimes took days of effort to learn everything about an item — if you were a sorceress. Anyone else might figure out the main function of an item quickly simply by forcing it to activate by manipulating the Wyrd or even spending glamour, but might never find out if there is a curse or if there was a way to activate the item without using magic, or if there was some unintended side effect that left unpleasant consequences for the changeling. The fear of items which were left as traps by Keepers, items that when tripped would alert them of changelings who picked up the ingenious bits of magic they left lying about, was enough for most changelings to use a sorceress's services whenever there might be doubt.

That came with a price, however. Sorceresses were not cheap, but they were guaranteed to discover everything about an item.

Rey was worried about the girl's who'd been kidnapped, but they couldn't easily trade a token they didn't know what it did to the Seer. It would take time to figure what the shuttle did, time that Mizuko could be spending doing other things. "Mizuko, I'll make a hedgespun outfit for you while you're working on the tokens. I don't know if I'll be able to make it do anything fancy, but it will look nice." And give you something else to wear to Court, she added silently.

Mizuko's eyes widened in surprised delight. "That is a very nice trade. I will research them all for you and then the rest of motley can decide what to do with them," she signed. "But let us ask the Seer if she needs or wants the Shuttle identified. Time may not be our ally in terms of stopping what is happening. They could have been taken anywhere by now, but if there is a chance we can reach and free them from those men before they are sent away forever, I would like to press forward. If the Seer requires the Shuttle identified, then I will work on that."

"Good idea," Rey said with a nod. "How long will it take you to set up a meeting with the Seer?" she asked Simon.

"I'll put in a call once I get home," Simon said. "Probably hear back whenever he can get to it. Or I'll get home and find out I already have a message from him. He's creepy that way."

"I'll meet you back here then," said Less. His report to the Duchy was urgent. Stories about the motley trading slaves had to be nipped in the bud immediately. He was disappointed that they didn't get into the palace for good intelligence about the troops but they'd seen enough for the report to be worthwhile. The information about the Sprite genocide and the goblin knight's sword would make up for that well enough. "I need to file a report on behalf of the Wardens."

Mizuko reached into her bag and fumbled about before finally come up with one last, somewhat squishy, red berry. She presented it to Simon. *"This is all I have left, but if you are still weak, you should eat this. It may be a long night. Then perhaps you can lengthen her chain and place it so that she can get to all the places you want Code to reach."*

Simon took the last fruit and said "I feel like I'm hogging all the goodies, but thanks." He ate it as he looked around, and considered Code. The whole idea of owning someone else twisted his guts a little, but he could only do the best in his power to treat her humanely. "Are you okay with Code staying with you?" he asked Mizuko. She'd already offered, but it didn't hurt to be considerate.

"Of course, Simon," Mizuko assured him using sign again. "Don't forget this is your hollow now, too. You all

are doing so much to help me get my friends back that it is only fair that my home be shared with all of you. Besides, I am a water elemental and she a sprite. We'd hardly cross paths even here. I'm sure we will get along fine so long as she is nice to Ollie. Anyway, I am not supposed to spend so much time here. It seems my queen wishes me to spend more time in the mortal world living as someone who is not a... a street person."

"Okay," Simon agreed. "Code..." He shook his head. "First of all, is there something else you'd rather be called. 'Code' was good enough when we were in a hurry, and when I didn't really think you wanted me to even know what your friends called you, but now you should get to choose."

"Cipher? Sprite?" the fairy rolled different names around to see how they sounded to her. Then she smiled. "You can call me Auriel for now."

"Auriel," Simon tried the word and decided he liked it, and that he'd have to google it when he had the chance. "If you'll fly up to the crater lip and into the hedge a little way, I'll play out the chain behind you. I have no idea how far it will go or how inconvenient it is to drag around behind you, so just go as far as you're comfortable with."

After returning to the mortal realm, Simon was able to contact the Seer, who confirmed the Shuttle would be sufficient payment for all the information he could find on the missing girls and the Mexican gang. Simon had needed to describe the background that Less had provided on the Shuttle, but the Seer required no further study of the item; he would take care of that himself and rather enjoyed the discovery process in any case.

Rey went home to change, and when she returned, she had a fanny pack filled with a few things she thought might come in handy. Underneath her jacket she wore her shoulder holster which held her pistol. She brought it only because she was expecting to find trouble, and she wasn't so foolish to bring just claws to a gun fight.

When the Seer called Simon back a couple hours later, he had surprising news. First the Mexicans were hired mercenaries. That wasn't new or exciting. The fact that they had been hired by a shadowy individual known in some circle to hunt supernatural beings, was. The Seer found no real name for this person, but they were not known to take prisoners. Instead, victims went missing. This man, called by the Seer simply The Hunter, was more apt to make victims disappear and do so alone, not with help.

The Seer had a location as well, but he advised Simon to stay clear and not get involved if at all possible. Still, he gave Simon the information he paid for and detailed an address. It was in the basement of the building immediately west of the very building that Less used as his base and home.

Simon wrote that down in a little notebook, and said he'd go drop off the Shuttle immediately. So his first stop was the UPS store, where he put the shuttle in a well-padded box, labeled it with the right address, and drew the strange little doodle that Dean always insisted be drawn on correspondence to him on the bottom, and paid for overnight shipping with extra insurance. Then he headed over to the neighborhood tavern for some Irish Nachos and a single beer, which were really just an excuse to flirt with Misty. In her handful of years, she'd seen far too many players and pigs, so when Simon could get her all hot and bothered, he felt like he'd really accomplished something.

Simon headed to the park from a nearby bar with a bit of a spring in his step. He had a notebook where he'd written the salient points of the Seer's revelations and a to-go box from the bar full of a complimentary order of chicken wings and fries. Life was good. His gun was hidden under an open shirt in a holster behind his back. He hadn't really had time for any other shopping, and really had no idea what one would bring to a



prisoner rescue and monster-fight anyway.

Mizuko had spent the time searching for new goblin fruit since this was her primary source of magic. She had spent some magic herself on their adventures of the day and was in need of replenishment. However, there was none to be had; all there was she'd taken with them to Cirledell and it was gone. Somewhat dejected and a little hungry, she asked Auriel to take care of the Hollow while they were gone and then left to meet the others in the park.

Rover returned to his workshop, internally seething over the lost opportunities. For one, he actually *had* a token right in his nimble little hands. The opportunity to begin dissecting it was firmly denied, however. Maybe it took a sorceress to truly understand the purpose of the things, but Mizuko didn't seem to have half the scientific curiosity of the gnome.

Who cared *what* it did. Rover was dying to know *how* it had come into being. Genuine tokens (as opposed to his own constructs), were hard to come by. Developing a better understanding of the forces involved would greatly advance his own ability to pull the things together on his own. Perhaps even give him the ability to merge two or even more, such as the goblin knight's sword and the needle...

That was the second thing that had his soul burning. Just what did the pairing do? How was it accomplished and what unseen factors might have entered the joining to produce a new item capable of... well... who knew what?

Nobody, that's who. At least nobody that Rover was aware of. This seemed to be a relatively unexplored field. If any other such attempts had been made in the past, he'd never heard of them. That wouldn't stop him from doing the rudimentary research that might provide a few basic clues.

Some time at his drawing board sketching out a few theories (making sure to keep the actual notations carefully written in the motley's secret language), ended in nothing but frustration. The gnome's craggy face grimaced as he surrendered to ignorance and shoved the work aside. From there, a book entitled "Electronics for Dummies" replaced the complex sketches and figures as he began to read.

Given their luck so far, he was fairly certain that they'd all eventually get the chance to see the needle and sword work together close up. Certainly, it might be nice to have a little advanced warning on what to expect, but Rover had to admit that damn few experiments ever fully probed the universal responses that all the math in the world could predict.

The experience, should it indeed be forthcoming, was likely to be most educational.

Rey sat on a bench near the pond, reading a book with a man and woman half-dressed in a passionate pose on the cover. She was only half paying attention to the words, and aware of what was going on around her.

Simon occupied the other side of the bench after a brief greeting and a nosy look at the book cover.

Mizuko rose from the pond shortly thereafter very near the shore, walking slowly instead of swimming. She was naked, of course, but attempting not to draw much attention as she looked for her clothes under the bush. She dug around a little, then backed out of the bush, still naked. She wasn't looking at her friends, but from her rigid body posture, she was so angry, she was practically fuming.

"Um... Problem?" Simon asked.

She turned toward him and presented quite a sight to both Simon and Rey. The wet water nymph glistened in the starry evening light, but even in the dark her natural beauty was striking, even though they could see she shook with rage. She signed at Simon with jerky, angry motions. "Someone took my clothes and left beer

cans and urine in their place."

Rey pulled out her cell phone and dialed the number Less had given her.

Simon knew that if he laughed right now, he'd be a dead man. So he turned around, took his shirt off and pulled the t-shirt out of his pants so the hem would cover his gun. "Here," he said, holding out his shirt. "This will do for a minute or two."

He felt Mizuko snatch the shirt out of his hand as she mumbled some kind of appreciation for the gesture and heard the rustle as she pulled it on herself.

Less hurried to his small, windowless office at the train station. Pulling himself up to his desk, he slipped off his shoes and socks. He nearly always worked barefoot when spending a lot of time at his desk. He wasn't completely sure why but it gave him great comfort. He suspected, but wasn't ready to admit it to himself, that it was somehow related to his Keeper. In any case, he wriggled his toes and slid the heavy case that held his archaic typewriter in front of him.

Disengaging the latch he carefully set the Bakelite cover on top of the nearby bookshelf. He rolled in a blank sheet of paper and quickly began type-setting the format he used for all of his Wardens of the Black Seal reports to the Duchy kings and queens. He presented the motley's cover story very clearly and detailed all the intelligence they had gathered during their foray into Circledell, including the helpful ogre, the current inhabitants of the village, the genocide of the Sprites, known and suspected troop numbers in the former palace, the destruction of the spindle, and the whereabouts of the needle.

After finishing his typing, he zipped it out of the carriage roller, frowned a bit at the liberal use of the strikeout key but glancing at his watch he sealed it in a plain envelope. As he was lacing his shoes, he got the call from Rey and promised to look for something appropriate for Mizuko.

The Lost and Found was a small closet fitted with steel shelving. There was an inventory sheet but it was poorly kept since most things were easily claimed in a day or two. Most of the items were hats, gloves, glasses and other handheld things but he was lucky and found a small, wheeled overnight bag. Opening it, he was disappointed to find that the woman it had belonged to had obviously been preparing for a very romantic weekend. Much of the contents would not be appropriate for their current mission even if it was all stitched together into a single garment. He selected some furry slippers, a pair of stretchy black tights, a bra with so much support it seemed bullet-proof, and a gauzy black nightdress that wasn't quite a negligee. He stuffed this into an old railway post bag, grabbed his umbrella and hurried off to the meeting at the pond. On the way he left the letter in one of the Wardens' dead-letter drops so it would be carbon-copied and delivered to the Duchy royalty.

Being late again, as usual, Rover had decided to take the express route in arriving. Harsh metallic claws could be heard scrabbling on concrete, approaching unseen in the darkness. A low, rhythmic hissing sound accompanied the harsh rattling like a beast breathing through a steam pipe. A periodic growl could be heard, as if echoing in a cast-iron boiler.

Eventually, a baleful green light gave away the approaching oddity. It resolved into a pair of blazing eyes which gave off an emerald flame of their own. It was like a colorful furnace fired behind the twin orbs, and below was more of the same in dripping liquidity from an animalistic mouth.

Where the flowing green fire touched the pavement, it sizzled and fumed as small pits were carved by its splatters.

The closer it came, the clearer its appearance resolved. It had the head of a great, dog-like beast with nobility and fierce bearing. It was shaped of black enameled plates laid over bronze and strange red metallics. There was a rider on its back, a familiar gnome whose face was focused on the run that his constructed mount was

making. It was a rough and jouncing ride as the artificial dog ran on, its strides eating ground like a bolt of lightning.

Very soon, Rover was upon the gathering and he hauled his mount into a sliding halt. Sidewalk ground and scratched beneath the beast's paws but it managed the maneuver. A sideways slide brought dog and rider even with the motley with a smooth grace.

Rover dismounted quickly and snapped his fingers at the mechanical dog. In a flash, it began folding in upon itself. The angles of the construct began to twist and constrict, forming new corners upon new corners. Shadows could be seen sliding among the shifting geometry, empty spaces that the mechanical dog began falling into. Even as it turned and folded upon itself, it began to vanish into the void of angles that its own collapse formed.

In seconds, the dog had converted itself into the rough-hewn, iron marble that Rover had been playing with earlier. A sphere of aged metal and endless carving marks. What was once a fearsome and mechanically brutal mount was now a ball of beaten, rusty iron that slipped easily into Rover's pocket.

"Did I miss anything?" The gnome asked, quite calm in the wake of his own rushed entrance.

"Only the theft of Mizuko's clothing," said Less. He handed over the bag to Mizuko with an apologetic shrug. "It's the best I could do on short notice."

Rey wanted to rush over and pick through the clothing to find something appropriate for Mizuko to wear, but stopped herself. She wouldn't be doing her friend any favors by making all the decisions for her. Rey decided to wait to see if Mizuko asked for advice.

Mizuko had stood in unabashed awe of the wondrous mechanical device that Rover had ridden here. She remained staring at Rover's pocket where he'd placed the deceptively small metal ball for a long moment until awareness that Less was waiting for her to take charge of the clothes he brought her seeped into her consciousness. She searched through them mechanically, as if she didn't really see them, and chose first the stretchy black tights and pulled them up. She then removed Simon's shirt and tried on the black negligée. It was somewhat oversized for her, but she quickly found that a close look would see right through it. While she might not personally care about being seen in it in public, she had the presence of mind to realize that it could draw police attention, or worse, the attention of gangbangers or other hoodlums of the night. With that in mind, she put Simon's much larger shirt on over everything, but ignored the massive bra (which didn't fit anyway) and the slippers, preferring to go barefoot to slipping around in the gaudy things.

"Thank you," she signed to Less. To Simon she asked, "Did the Seer find something?"

"Quite a bit," Simon said. He pulled out his notebook to be sure of the details and told everyone else what he'd learned, finishing up by saying "This Hunter sounds like bad news, but the whole thing with hiring muscle seems different. I'm sure it's important, but I don't know what it means."

"It means," Mizuko signed, "that he isn't just hunting now. And he's not just collecting 'monsters', unless he knows something about my friends I do not."

"My though was that the day you first saw him the Hunter knew that someone had recognized him as a supernatural, but he didn't know which of you it was. So he had his goons trying to grab all of you. But why he'd bring in extra help?". Simon shrugged, having no idea. " Anyway, we know where he is. We should probably check the building out and see if a good entry plan presents itself."

"They always do, somehow." Rover commented. He wasn't looking at the group directly as he spoke. Instead, the gnome was doodling in his notepad.

"It seems to me that there's a limited number of reasons to act by proxy. One, you're busy with something more important and don't have the time or energy to act directly. So maybe he didn't think 'Zuko was enough of a threat to worry about personally.

"Two, you want to act secretly. Proxies allow your plans to be enacted without anyone knowing who you are. Which is weird since 'Zuko already saw him. Maybe there's still more to see...

"Three, you're afraid of your target. Why put your own life on the line when you can hire an army to do it for you. That's pretty much the whole reason armies even exist anymore, it seems. But why would *he* be afraid of *you*?"

"There's also the possibility," Rey added, "that he knows Mizuko saw him, but he's concerned he told the people she was with. If I was someone like The Hunter, it's what I'd do."

"Remind me not to be standing near anyone I like when I piss you off," Simon said. "Good speculations, but do we have any way to confirm any of them? If not, we're just spinning our wheels. Any more information we could find is probably in that basement."

"*Then I will go see,*" Mizuko said. She began walking in the direction of the old tenement buildings, which lay not far from the park itself. From the tone of her voice, she'd waited as long as she could, but now she would wait no longer to help her friends, not when Simon had revealed the location of her and her friends' antagonist. The look in her eyes bode violent ill against any mercenary or hunter she might find.

Something Rey had said sparked something in Less' mind. He spoke his mind loud enough that Mizuko could hear. "It could very well be that the Hunter kidnapped Mizuko's companions precisely so that she would come looking for them. This could be his M.O. and the Hunter is lying in wait for Mizuko to walk into his trap."

Mizuko stopped long enough to look at her companions over her shoulder. "*If true, then it is a good trap. We shall see if it is good enough. I for one intend to give him more than he can handle.*" She then continued on her path to find the hunter and his men.

Rey fell into stride next to her. "Do you have a plan, or are you just going to walk in the front door?"

"*Yes, I have a plan,*" she said quietly. "*You will open a window somewhere inconspicuous to allow us entry and then we will sneak in and search the place. When our way is barred by mercenaries or hunter, I will transform myself and frighten off those I can and together we will defeat the rest. Then we will rescue my friends.*"

"That's not a bad plan," Simon said as he hurried to catch up. "But let's check out the building first and see what our options are. There might be some things the rest of us can do to help. And we can see if there are obvious snares aimed at Changelings. This guy hunts supernaturals, so we have to count on some of those."

Rover fell in beside the march, as well. His legs had to work considerably harder than Simon's, however.

"That's not a *plan* at all. That's a Vin Diesel movie. Need I remind you that I'm only armed with a net gun at the moment?"

Of course... their opponents almost certainly had better armaments on the property. Once they got their hands on those, then the odds might improve slightly and made it more of a Max Payne video game rather than an action flick. He still didn't care much for the mortality they all faced in hitting their foe before gathering information first.

"I'm hoping there won't be much in the way of fighting," Rey replied. "The best way to avoid that is to, at the

very least, get in without setting off any alarms they may have set up. Can you help with that?"

Less sighed, shook his head and followed after. He slung the remaining net gun over his shoulder. "I can get us in but maybe it would be more prudent to let the raging bull named Mizuko spring all the traps, then walk in behind to rescue them all."

A thoughtful look crossed Rey's beautiful face. "Setting off traps... Rover, how quickly could you whip up a little robot-like thingy that we could toss through a window and have it crawl around as a distraction, and then we take out the guy who comes to check?"

*"My friends don't mean anything to you," she said, addressing the motley. "No, do not deny it. You don't know them, and you probably see little value in them apart from what use you think you might be able to get out of them. But the moment you promised me your aid in this, I'd decided to save them. Yet now you drag your feet and make excuses. You know as well as I there will be nothing to be gained by staring at the outside of the building, or Less would have noticed long before now, since he lives next to this very place. We will learn nothing until we get inside the place. Tinkering with things that may or may not be helpful is a waste of time. Telling me that I'm rushing you is a transparent attempt to lay blame for any misfortune that my occur upon me rather than face the consequences of fulfilling your promise to me yourself. You told me yourselves this hunter is a killer, an assassin of supernatural people and that he has likely mistaken my friends as being also gifted."* Her voice was chilly and a frosty mist rose from her quickly freezing skin.

*"If you force me to wait because you fear what lies inside that building, I will blame you for whatever ill befalls my friends in that time."* Her tone was even and steady, holding little emotion but cold truth, even though she all but accused them of cowardice.

"Not fair, Mizuko," Rey said as she continued walking next to Mizuko toward the tenement. "If I wanted to hold you back from going inside, I'd have said so. I'm just trying to think of things we might be able to do to prevent the girls from getting hurt. For all we know, the mercs will simply slit their throats if we come barging through the door."

Simon's voice went dead. There wasn't a trace of any emotion left in it. "Less, how many doors go into the building? How many ways into the basement? How far will we have to go to get someplace safe-- for us and several mortals-- if we can't take out the Hunter and his men? You know all that off the top of your head?"

*"I'm not here to be fair, nor am I here to offend, Rey," Mizuko replied. "So please do not insinuate that barging in through the front door was any kind of suggestion I made. I am not being stupid here, though you may think so. I have a very, very bad feeling about what is going on there based on what you all have told me tonight. Up until now, I have gone along and done things the way the rest of the motley has wished. Now I seek action because something terrible may be happening and I feel I cannot afford to wait."* She finished with a tone of finality. *"Now I have said my piece and will speak no more until this is done."*

The tenement towers now loomed darkly out of the night sky before them as they prepared to cross the railroad tracks. Looking up at them, a few questions arose in Less's analytical mind. For instance, what sort of hunter were they after here? It was already known this man tended to work alone and that he hunted supernaturals. Less also recalled that the Seer had warned him to stay well away from this hunter. If the hunter was that dangerous, then he would have no need of a gang of mercenaries, unless he was occupied with something else.

Apart from the one time that Mizuko had said she'd seen something that Less presumed to be the hunter, there was never any other mention made of the hunter being a part of the merc team. That could only mean the hunter was preoccupied with something. But what?

Such a question lead to something else. What sort of being could successfully hunt supernaturally powered people? Obviously the mercenaries were having only sketchy success and they were experienced ex-military

men. But this hunter must have been operating alone for some time to gather such a fearful reputation. To penetrate the camouflage many supernatural beings required significant power, or a particularly keen sense of some kind, above all else.

That raised a flag in Less's mind. A keen sense? Such as that which Mizuko used to identify the mystery man? Mizuko and her friends had become targets after she'd used some kind of power. Less was reasonably sure that Mizuko's relative lack of humanity prevented her from seeing what was real and what was not as well as most other changelings of her age so that meant it had to be a power associated with her abilities as a Sorceress and member of the Autumn Court. So what was it exactly that the man had used to track his victims? Did the hunter have a power similar to Mizuko's? There was no other possibility. He must have the ability to see through supernatural obfuscation, though perhaps not the Mask. Otherwise, he should have picked Mizuko out immediately as different from her friends and thus the only target given to his mercenary hirelings.

So, the hunter had changed his tactics. Mizuko and her friends had become a target after noticing him, when he should not have been noticed at all. Yet he wasn't killing them outright. He was capturing them. There had to be a reason for that. The question was, how was it linked to perceiving supernatural beings?

A lump formed in Less's throat as he leapt to a conclusion that Mizuko must have also seen. What if the hunter's ability to track prey was not inherent, but *stolen*?

Less felt the chill of the ice elemental as she spoke. He recognized the detachment from humanity and she was slipping away fast. His thoughts were coming fast and furious, all in a jumble, and as they paused there he managed to put words to them.

"To answer your question, Simon, there are two main entrances, front and back. There is one other exit to the side, from the garbage room, but there is no exterior handle. The buildings are too old to have underground parking - the lot is at the back. There should be more exits but the fire routes are grandfathered into the exterior fire escapes." He continued rapidly on, cutting off any response. "I've been thinking a little about this Hunter. This all started because Mizuko used a supernatural power to detect his presence. As a hunter of supernatural creatures, he must have a method of perceiving them. Though, this does not seem to apply to the Mask because his tactics have changed and has employed mercenaries to round up all of Mizuko's group. That's really weird. People who normally work alone don't normally turn around and hire thugs to chase down a few girls. So, this is what I'm thinking. This guy wasn't born a supernatural. He somehow acquired the ability to find them. Maybe he came across a vampire or a werewolf or whatever and *took* the ability to find them again. Maybe he's never come across Changelings before. Maybe he's rounding the girls up in order to take the ability to see through the Mask. He would find himself in a pretty rich hunting ground then!"

A low growl rumbled at the back of Rey's throat. She knew about hunters; her pack had been threatened by them. She'd do just about anything to stop one from hurting any innocents ever again.

"I'm not sure how that helps us right now," Simon said, "But it makes some sense, and it explains why Dean would say stay away from him. Maybe he's like Rogue in the X-men or something."

He looked over the building, which was big, and had several ways in and out, but no obvious view of the basement. There were probably a couple of doors that opened to different parts, like a laundry area and the boiler room and one of those big rooms that always fills up with the crap of tenants who get evicted or disappear. And the bad guys would have them covered, of course.

So Mizuko and Rey would try to sneak in and encounter at least one guy on guard duty, who they'd have to kill. Then they'd have a bunch of space to cover and only two of them. And if the mercenaries panicked, or were just evil bastards, they'd have hostages to shoot.

Simon really didn't like this plan. It was far too direct for his taste, and didn't take in to account anything the other side might be trying to do. But he had an addition to make, if he didn't mind risking getting shot in the face.

And to save four innocent girls, he supposed that was an okay risk. (Hey, if he died, Auriel was free. Bonus.)

"I've got an idea," he said quietly. "I have Contracts that will make the mercs likely to listen to me. Before we try to go kill everybody, how about I go talk to them? I can leave my phone on in my pocket, and you guys will hear what we're saying, at least a little."

"I can get the garbage room door open, so unless there's an alarm of some kind on it," Rey said, "there's our entryway."

Rover sighed his distaste of the situation. This really wasn't his ideal of a 'good idea'. They were moving quickly into hostile territory without a solid plan to execute. That sort of behavior was just going to endure plenty of bloodshed and loss of life. It was sloppy and dangerous, but apparently it was what the group was set to do.

"Maybe you should find their security center before hitting the garbage-room door? If you can clear out whoever's on monitor duty then we'll have an easier time sneaking up on the building. Then we can look for a smaller window that might not be alarmed since no normal sized person could get through.

"Obviously, I'm not normal sized. I'd have a better chance of disarming any alarms they might have on a larger door and let the rest inside."

Rover shrugged, knowing it still wasn't much of a plan.

"At least that way you wouldn't have to come up with an excuse for running around their H.Q. by yourself. Call an inspection or staff meeting... whatever it is those military types like to do. That won't turn off any alarms, but at least it'll get their eyes off of their own cameras."

Mizuko halted. "Simon, go talk if you want. I can give you ten minutes. Then I'm going in. I can get in an out of places without being seen, and so I think Less and Rey can do as well." She looked at Rover, unsure if the little man could be sneaky as well as creative. "Remember that it was not I who suggested simply barging in there. We are sneaking in and if you cannot do that, now is the time to say so."

"I hope I don't need ten minutes." Simon pulled out his phone and dialed Rey. "I'll be on speaker, so be quiet. Move in as soon as it seems like a good idea. Or if you hear me say 'dios.'. That will be my signal that things have gone to hell. That, or screaming like a little girl." The last part was only mostly a joke.

"And what if there's no cell reception?" Rey asked.

"I thought we'd covered that. Ten minutes." Simon shrugged. What else could they do?

Rey frowned and pulled her vibrating phone out of her pocket. Who could be calling her right now? She realized it was Simon, and that he'd chosen her to be the one to listen. "I know people who could kill, gut and pack you away like so much meat in less than five minutes. If you can't get a cell phone signal in the basement, then there's no point in us waiting outside. We'll come in and try to take up positions to help you if you need it." She set her own phone up so the others with her could hear what was going on.

"Start moving when I get inside. I'll say 'now' or something. That should make the timing about right." Simon decided to go in the back way, so he headed that direction, skirting the building so that someone who wasn't watching him might not immediately guess his destination. He found the door before him locked. "Well that didn't work," he said "Let's see what's behind door number two." He went around to the front instead.

That one too was locked, although the keyhole for the deadbolt was old and worn.

"Some days you just can't trespass," Simon said into his phone. "Doors are locked. Someone can either come open this one, or I'll head back and we'll do this without a distraction."

Rey looked at Rover. "Did you want to go help him out front, or should Simon come back and go in through the back door, if you can open it up?" She knew Rover might not appreciate doubting his abilities, but everyone could mess up once in a while.

"Should be able to open it." Rover didn't seem miffed about the question. Until any tech's abilities were well proven, it was always best to ask for ballpark estimates on both time requirements and limitations.

"But front door? Back door? Does it really matter right now? We really have no idea which one they're using more or keeping a better eye on. I'll go crack the lock up front.

"By the way... stealthy? That's not really my thing. I'm old, I'm grumpy and I've spent most of my life stomping around one lab or another. Sometimes that included yelling at interns. Whatever plans we make, don't count on me being able to do it quietly."

Rey shrugged. "Just thought you'd be less likely to be seen by passers-by picking the lock at the back door."

"See?" Rover shrugged, as if Ray had just proven his point. "Quiet and unobtrusive is just not my thing. But if the back door is the more discrete portal then that's probably the one the bad guys use. And it's not passers-by that we need to worry about. It's lurkers within.

"But either way's fine by me. Simon's already out front. I'll go get him in."

Rover met up with Simon and they headed around to the back door once more. There Rover got to work on the lock. He had the mechanical lock open in no time. There was no electronic component to it, at least none that Rover could see from outside. With the door unlocked, it was left to Simon to take the next step.

Simon waited for Rover to get out of sight and opened the door. His contract was ready to bend the perceptions of whoever might be waiting. Inside, there was a mexican man in fatigue pants and a sweaty tank top. He was looking at his cell phone and rocked back on his chair to lean against the wall. In an instant, he was on his feet and looking at Simon. He stuffed the cell in his pants and as he did so, Simon couldn't help but notice the big knife sheath the Mexican wore on his left hip and the pistol holster on his right. He looked right at Simon and gave him a "get lost" look.

The best defense was a good offense, so Simon sent on the offensive. "Why wasn't the door locked?" he demanded. "We're too close for you guys to screw this up now."

The guard's eyes widened in sudden recognition. He stammered for a moment, then manage, "Si! Si, Sabilla. *Lo siento*. I am sorry. I did not know you were in town." His face was flushed and he was beaming. He gave Simon a tight hug and then gave the changeling's ass an affectionate squeeze.

"Well," Simon allowed, "It's not like I called ahead." Evidently, he'd been cast in a female part, so he played it by wiggling appreciatively and smiling. "I got a line on the last girl, the one we really need. Where are the other ones? They give you any trouble?"



"No," he said. He wore a puzzled look as he added, "You work for Señor McCoy now?"

"More than just me. He wants the Asian puda muy pronto. And whoever brings he to him gets a bonus." Simon pulled his hands to his chest, drawing attention to imaginary breasts. "And since I am a completely amazing miracle worker, I know where she is, or at least where she's sleeping at night."

The mercenary grinned and nodded. "You go tell the boss. If we get this thing done, tonight me and you will party and tomorrow we will get paid and leave this place. We could go to Cancún. You'd like that, si?"

"Si, baby," Simon said. "Let's go tell him."

He laughed. "You know better. I stay at my post. You go, and when he hears we will probably move out after this chica."

Simon pouted cutely and said, "Aww... but we 'are' going to party before we get to Cancun. I've missed you." His gaze wandered down the merc's torso to make it clear exactly what part he meant he'd missed most. The mercenary opened the door for Simon. Then Simon headed down the hall with a flirty little wiggle. "Oh, the things I do for the mission," he thought. These guys were severely disciplined, he realized. The others were going to have to be careful. But he might still be able to help out.

He stopped a little down the hall and said, "Call and tell him I'm coming. I don't want to get shot or something."

The guard nodded with a happy grin and said, "Si." He pulled out his cell phone with one hand and closed the hallway door with the other.

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Mizuko waited only as long as it took for Rover to unlock the door and return to them. Then, deciding she needed to be ready when the call came, she called on her magic.

The transformation wasn't instantaneous, but it was very rapid. At first she was the nymph they all recognized. Then her clothes seemed to melt away. At the same time, a massive shard of ice seemed suddenly encase her entire body. Inside, her form transformed completely into a semi-translucent being the color and texture of blue-frosted glass. Then the shard that held her burst apart, fragments disappearing as if they'd never existed.

Although humanoid in form, she was otherwise no longer anything like human at all. Her hair swept down her back in stiff, ice-blue spikes. Her nails were lengthened and sharp as broken glass. Her eyes were devoid of expression and held no iris or pupil — only hinted at by fine lines in the ice that made up her body. Indeed most of her fine features were only hinted at by lines in the ice that made up her perfect form. Despite her delicate curves, it was plain to the motley's eyes that the hardness of her body held a deadly strength and hardness far beyond her normal self. She'd become a being born of madness, a true elemental of frightening power.

She pointed at the locked garbage door. "*If you please, Rover.*" Her voice, though spoken quietly, contained an echo of the tinkling clash of breaking glass.

Rover didn't bother to hide his surprise at the transformation. He'd expected something more liquid, something with fluidity that could flow along the ground and inside the building inhumanly. This body was built for killing, however, rather than subtlty. There didn't even seem to be a great deal of strength in Mizuko's body, just a raw of of lethality.

"Sure... no problem."

The gnome hesitated only a fraction of a second before turning his back on the woman of ice. Where her watery home might have simply made him uncomfortable, this new aspect damn near had him trembling. That wasn't a good thing seeing as he'd need steady hands for his own work.

Rover moved to the garbage door and took a few deep breaths to steady himself. Once sure of his own nerves, he looked the door over for potential alarms before going to work.

Rey stood where she was, and while her heart raced, she could not help but admire the thing Mizuko had become. It was beautiful, terrifying, but this was neither the time nor the place to express it. She began to gather her own power, in preparation of what might come. Shifting to her own form that was better suited to fighting wasn't something to be done in the view of mortals.

Rover worked his skills and once again, the door's lock popped free beneath the fingers of the master lockpick.

"We really need to start breaking into better neighborhoods before I start getting bored."

The comment was supposed to be facetious, but it failed to completely hide the nervousness Rover felt. 'Zuko was just a razor-edged reminder about how dangerous things were about to get.

"Stay behind me," Rey whispered softly to the gnome, "and I'll do my best to protect you."

Less followed silently behind them all, holding his umbrella in both hands.

"Protect me, sure." Rover commented. "Just don't fall on me. I've seen what happens to people who get pin-cushioned. It's not... pretty."

The gnome didn't mention that it would also be fairly ironic, given the innovations he'd made to the antiquated concept of the iron maiden. His keeper had constantly pushed him to develop new and more interesting ways to kill people slowly.

It really wasn't something Rover was proud of.

Rey slipped her pistol out of its holster and offered to Rover. "Here. I'll want it back when we're done."

Rover accepted the pistol with mixed emotions. While the hefty weight was reassuring, it also represented an aspect of engineering he had little respect for.

Granted, most of the higher quality guns had a great deal of creativity and tight-tolerance manufacturing process. But all of that fine craftsmanship always came out so linear. Guns only did one thing, even if they did it well; pull the trigger, ignite the primer, set off the charge, propel the round and repeat. All of the complex metallurgy and careful assembly in the world couldn't overcome that.

Plus they were all mass produced these days. Finding a one-off weapon from a quality gunsmith was an incredibly rare feat, one that belonged in the tiny community of competitive shooters. People who went to war and fought for their own survival had no use for such luxuries.

Rover suddenly realized that he'd been studying the weapon in his hand more closely than those he was supposed to follow. With a start, the gnome followed with the safety off and the gun ready to come into use.

Mizuko slipped inside the door, closely followed by Rey, Rover, and Less. The group wound their way around old garbage bins and debris carelessly left on the floor. The room, also apparently meant to be large enough to take deliveries, ended in a pair of double doors.

It was very dark here, and bringing a light would have been a dead giveaway, so Mizuko was forced to feel for the door handles. It was with some relief she discovered the doors weren't locked, and she disappeared through the doorway quickly. Rey had the hurry to catch up.

The group could hear Simon's voice coming from far down the hallway to their right and knew that was likely not the way they needed. Mizuko turned to her left and proceeded down a hall sparsely broken by doors. In the dim light, there were signs just barely visible in this direction. One indicated a stairway ascending to the upper floors. Mizuko ignored this and went toward the next sign, which seemed to indicate stairs to a basement. She went to the door and then stepped down the hallway and crouched so that she and Rey could take up a place on either side of the doorway. Voices could be heard speaking in Spanish echoing up from beyond that door.

Rey took her place opposite Mizuko and waited, wishing she'd finished learning Spanish. Something she probably ought to pick up.

It was at that time when Simon came around the corner at the far end of the hall. It dark and no one could see the other clearly, but they'd heard over the phone Simon had concluded his deception, and given that the four were crouched in ambush around the door to the basement stairs, Simon could guess it was his friends there before he arrived.

As they approached, Rey called upon the Contract of Fang and Talon to heighten her senses. Suddenly, everything seemed more in focus and she smiled to herself. She breathed in slowly and silently through her nose, picking up the scents around here. There were nine unique ones she didn't recognize - six male and three female. The females were likely Mizuko's friends; that meant there could be up to six mercenaries downstairs, and possibly the Hunter himself. This could get very ugly, very quickly. Unfortunately, she had no way of communicating with the others without revealing their presence.

Less slowly drew his sword free of his umbrella. He set his jaw as he waited, crouched, in the darkness.

A brief play of light at the bottom of the door indicated either a randomly swinging, dim lamp in the staircase or that the men had flashlights. In a moment, they found out that it was a dirty, dim old lamp that hung halfway down from the ceiling above the first landing going down so that the light only barely reached the top of the stairs.

The door swung inward in the grip of a burly, short Mexican he was looking back at his companion when he walked through so he didn't notice the motley at first. He noticed his friends expression, though, and rapidly swung his head back to take in the situation.

*Damn. Bad timing* None the less, maybe Simon could buy a moment's hesitation. As soon as he saw the mercs, he wove his glamour again. They were expecting Sabilla, maybe even coming to escort her. And if they tried to protect 'her,' that might give Simon a chance to earn his keep.

Simon, still playing 'Sabilla' threw himself forward, toward the two mercs, as if trying to escape from the ambushers. "Madre! Who's at the f!cking front door?" If he could keep them confused and keep them from firing for just a few seconds, maybe the others would be able to take these guys out before they made noise. Then there was a chance at getting into the basement without a major fight. If not (and if he didn't get his damn fool head blown off), he'd still slow them down a little and maybe be in a position to help.

Less felt that the motley's success in this matter lay in keeping the mercenaries quiet. He stood and embraced the elemental at his core. Opening his mouth, he breathed in, inflating his chest. An airy whisper

echoed in his open mouth as he called out the air in his enemies' lungs. They responded immediately to the changeling's power, gasping and trying to catch their breath.

"Less, Rover," Rey said in hoarsely whispered Glymjack Cant, "each of you grab one of these guys. Mizuko and I will take them down. Simon, keep an eye out for anyone else who might be approaching, but keep the noise down." She lashed out at the mercenary closest to the door, sprouting claws to shred the man. The merc just managed to sidestep out of the way of her open-handed slash, proving he was both nimble and lightly armored with some kind of kevlar vest.

Mizuko slipped past the first and behind the mercenaries to close with the man at the rear to ensure no escape for them. Then she struck him squarely in the chest with nothing more than an icy fist. Ribs snapped and poked through flash-frozen kevlar. Blood sprayed from the caved-in mess she made. Yet, the mercenary was still on his feet, gasping and trying to catch his breath as he stared in wild-eyed fear at the changeling. Mizuko's face was spattered with the mercenary's blood. She smiled and his mouth dropped in terror. Yet, he could make no sound.

Rover had been caught in the act of drawing out his iron marble. One flick would have cast the device at his target and then BoBo? could have had the man pinned in seconds. Unfortunately, the heavy-metal hound was even less stealthy than its creator. The noise of bronze claws on the floor alone might be enough to alert the whole building, so back into the pocket it went.

Instead, the gnome charged forward as best he could. There was a grimace of frustration and insecurity on his face as he moved. The merc looked like outweighed Rover by a factor of three. About the best he could do was serve as ankle weights, but he'd give it his best shot.

The mercenaries were staggered by the onslaught, but their training took over their reflexes instantly and they began to fight back. The one that Rey took a swing at drew a knife and went to work with it. Rey, quick and lithe, was able to keep from receiving a vicious stab wound.

The other was in a panic. He drew his sidearm and attempted to shoot Mizuko but she easily knocked his aim wide. His shot went wild, ricocheting down the stairwell.

*No plan ever survives first contact with the enemy*, Simon thought. He'd heard that somewhere, and it was certainly true here. He looked through the open door the mercs had emerged from, wildly trying to find any other enemies. The gunshot they hadn't been able to stop meant this was about to get crowded fast.

"My boyfriend is coming," Simon said in Glymjack. Mizuko seemed to have matters well in (gory) hand, and Less and Rey could probably take the other guy, so Simon charged down the hall to meet him. Blood spatter from Mizuko's opponent would help with what he had in mind. As he approached the door, he yelled "Brujah!" in a panicked voice.

Less drank in the fear emanating from the mercenaries. Now that a gunshot had been fired keeping them quiet was no longer a priority. Less let the icy breeze around him lapse and instead called on the Contract of Smoke. With a flick of his fingers he attempted to fog his opponent's vision.

Rey tasted the mercenaries' fear of Mizuko and felt invigorated. With a grin, she won first blood on her surprised target with a clawed rake across his chest that penetrated the light kevlar vest.

Mizuko clutched the gunman's throat and instantly his skin turned blue with frost bite and withered in response to the Autumn witch's touch. She dropped her hand and watched him as he clawed at his own throat in shock and pain, then collapsed.

Knowing that he was more of a hindrance at this point than an asset, Rover backed off of the fight and kept his borrowed pistol at the ready. He didn't really want to shoot anyone, but he certainly would if the

scenario degenerated that far.

Mizuko was already painting the walls red enough. The engineer didn't feel like immediately adding his efforts to the slaughter.

His companion had watched his fellow drop and now began screaming for help. He sliced at Rey again trying to cut an opening through the motley to the open space in the hall beyond. Rey easily knocked his weapon hand out of the way, however, and he gained no ground trying to get past the motley members.

Meanwhile, the guard at the backdoor threw open the door and charged down the hall. He saw Simon, and still mistaking him for Sabilla, set his jaw grimly, nodded in acknowledgement of her cry of "witch" and drew his gun. He could not see Mizuko, who was now standing just past the door for the basement stairs, but he did see Rey, Simon, Rover, and one of his companions. However, framed as they were with the dim light from the basement staircase, the lighting was extremely poor. He could not be certain he wouldn't hit an ally. With a grimace, he lowered his weapon and closed instead.

Simon got out of the way, pressing himself against the wall. As soon as the guard had passed him, the changeling reluctantly drew his gun and shot him in the back.

The shot grazed his target, causing the guard to stagger and blink even as blood began to pour down the side of his head.

Less turned his attention to the new gunman. He tried to pull the glamour-wrought wool over his eyes. This time, the magic worked and the man's eyes clouded over. New fear washed over him as he realized he was defenseless against the motley.

Rey continued the fight, cutting up the blinded man again, then Mizuko finished him with a lethal blow to his head which cracked his skull open and spray bone and blood everywhere. She coldly stepped over his body back into the hall where she could see the final gunman. This was the first time Simon had seen her in this state. She looked for all the world like a blood-spattered princess of ice and terror. It was clear that the mortals saw this form as plain as he did now.

"Brujah," Simon breathed, and this time he kind of meant it. "Baby, lay down and you just might live through this," he said.

The merc guard, still dazed from the head shot that had broke open his skull (likely he would never recover from such a wound), sank to his knees and then the floor. He folded his hands behind his head and stayed face down.

Less understood Mizuko's disregard for humanity, especially these particular villains. Her prodigious Wyrd had served the motley well but now she stood dangerously close to a tipping point. The lone Mexican was wounded, terrified, and clearly outclassed. Slaughtering him now - as long as he didn't do anything stupid - would loosen her already tenuous grip on reality. "That's enough, Mizuko," he said gently into the sudden lull in combat. "We can take it from here. Go find your friends."

"He's right." Rover agreed. More than enough blood had been shed already. To induce more slaughter would just be an act of madness.

The gnome did, however, keep his gun trained on the wounded guard. The the aged, little man might not carry a fearsome presence by himself, the steady pistol likely added a good degree of intimidation.

"I'll keep him covered. We're good, here. He tries anything and he's a dead man."

Mizuko looked at them, then turned on her heel and started down the stairs.

Simon paused only to hand Less a coil of paracord before following Rey and Mizuko down the stairs. He dropped his mask of glamour as he said "Pardname. Cancun might have been fun."

While Rover held the Mexican at gunpoint, Less securely bound his arms behind his back with hefty knots at the wrists and elbows. "Don't give us any trouble and you won't end up like your friends here. You'll only get deported and do some time in prison, but maybe one day you'll see your family again."

Once he was finished, Less nudged his captive past Rover and ahead of him down the stairs.

"Three men down," Rey said in Glymjack Cant as she walked in step with Mizuko. "I caught the scent of three others. They may or may not be here, so be alert."

Mizuko swiftly covered the stairs down to the landing, and from there the rest of the way down to the basement level. She never slowed as she approached the door. She slammed the door open and strode boldly inside. A blast of cool air assaulted her and Rey as well as the smell of blood. The elemental nymph glanced around for a moment, taking in the two mexican mercenaries who were standing near the door and to the left, as well as the stocky, dark-haired man in medical scrubs standing near the bodies.

It was the bodies that made Mizuko stop short. There were three tables, each occupied by a female. One was a mature young woman who had the top of her skull removed and most of her brain dished out to expose eyeballs and retinal cords. Another was just a girl, barely a teenager. Her skull as well was removed, but pools of blood remained in bowls set on a rolling cart next to her. Here eyes were wide open, staring, and dead. The third victim had red hair and was still intact. She appeared to be asleep or drugged as she lay strapped on her wheeled gurney.

The two mercenaries had heard the shots fired only moments ago and were ready. Both had guns out and since Mizuko had entered first, they were trained on her. The "doctor" looked up at her from his work. First surprise registered at the elemental's icy visage, then a pleased look came across his face as he pulled off his latex gloves with a snap.

Mizuko, however, was stunned. She could not seem to accept what her eyes told her. "Rey? *Is... is this real?*" she asked. Temperature near her dropped further and Mizuko's body steamed as if made of dry ice.

"Yes," Rey replied, her voice hot and sharp. "It's real." She tried to master the rage that burned in her and to keep her hands still as her claws extended from her fingertips. Her eyes flicked from the mercenaries to the man in scrubs. "How could you do this to them? They did nothing to you!"

The man's eyes between from Rey to Mizuko. Unsettlingly weird, one was brown and the other blue. He licked his lips and smiled. "Ah, but I had thought they might do something *for* me. For humanity, in fact. Their generous contribution to science, while a failure here, might have made the world safe from creatures such as yourself and your... friend here. Remarkable. Remarkable."

He smirked. "I hadn't noticed it. I hadn't known. You are the asian girl, aren't you? The one I've been looking for, had been seeking though I did not know it for certain until now. You are the one who noticed my... augmentations." He raised his hands. The backs of his hands were laced with scars and there were needle marks on his arms as well as less identifiable scars.

"Perhaps there might be something I can harvest from you," he told Rey. "But your friend, I'm afraid, doesn't appear to be human at all. Gentlemen," he added, addressing his mercenaries. "Put them both down, please."

As Rey and Mizuko began to swing into action, the mad doctor found a syringe and stabbed it into his own arm. With a sigh and a grimace, he stood waiting while silver things the size of gnats immediately burst from the skin of that arm and spread out toward Mizuko and Rey in a stinging swarm.

Rey let out a scream of rage, but rather than attack, she took a few steps to the side. Having taken herself out of immediate reach (hopefully) of Mizuko's aura of cold, she invoked the Contracts of Separation.

To get to the murderous doctor, Mizuko saw she'd have to go through the mercenaries first. She didn't hesitate to do so. She immediately moved to engage one, managing to knock his gun aside but little else.

The mercenary engaged with Mizuko couldn't back away to get a clean shot at her without exposing his boss and so he was forced to remain in close quarters. He fired point blank and the bullet ricocheted off her hardened, icy skin and took out one of the hanging lights, instantly leaving the room full of shadows. His partner tried to get a shot at her as well, though it was easy to avoid hitting his ally. He shot at her as well. This ricocheted with a screeching whine, but it left cracks in Mizuko's ice form that spread through her shoulder.

Rover, panting from the rapid descent down the stairs, skidded to a halt at the doorway into the basement lab. It was the spreading cloud of minute, silvery flying things that first caught his attention. Deciding it was best to stay out of that stuff, he took cover at the doorway and then took a shot at the mercenary currently trying to gun down Mizuko. He hit center of mass, causing his target to jerk violently. The merc was wearing kevlar, the gnome noted, so while he'd be bruised, he wasn't bleeding or out of the action yet.

The mad doctor noted the recent arrivals but decided to let his minute pets do his work for him. He backed away, taking cover behind the gurney with the drugged red-haired young woman and observed the mayhem.

"This is going to hurt," Rey muttered as she launched herself at the "doctor" as she yelled "Less! Get rid of those silvery fly things!" in the motley's secret language.

When Simon heard the fighting start, he stripped away his mortal seeming so that all could behold his glory and very few mortal beings would be able to muster the will to attack one so perfect and beautiful. (That should really just be the way it always was, Simon thought. He wasn't above a bit of vanity.) He skipped down the stairs, barely in control of his descent and hoping to be able to do something to help, but was brought up short by the cloud of silvery insects. He could see how the little creatures were biting and stinging at everyone in the room. Even Mizuko seemed to suffer under their assault. Simon knew he wouldn't last long while they were a threat.

When Less heard the gunshots in the room below he immediately called upon the most powerful of the Contracts of Smoke. His body flickered out of view. As they got to the bottom of the stairs, he pushed his prisoner suddenly to the ground and ran through the melee to be clear of the action. As he did so, he once again called upon the Wyrd, kicking up a cold, harsh wind that tore at everything in sight and funneled it through the door and up the stairs. He hoped the strange, silvery bugs would be carried with it...

...And right toward Simon's head. The feline Changeling gasped, barely avoiding a mouthful of bugs, and ducked into the room. He took in the carnage and decided where he'd be most helpful was near the only prisoner with an intact cranium. *Don't throw up now. Don't throw up now*, he thought.

Mizuko pressed her assault against one of the men she blamed for the wrongful kidnapping of her friends. Her eyes glowing white with rage, she slammed her hellishly frozen hands into the poor man's face, collapsing his skull. With another quick motion, she ripped his head completely off his neck and kicked the flailing corpse away from her. Blood splashed across the room. Without stopping, she closed on the remaining, now utterly panicked mercenary.

The merc was screaming incoherently when she closed on him, then threw his gun away and ran for the back of the room. There wasn't any way out there, but there were some shelves and boxes. He dove behind this and continued to beg for mercy. The princess of ice settled her inhuman gaze upon the butcher that had murdered her friends.

Seeing his swarm disposed of as well as his hired hands, the murderer realized he was now hopelessly outnumbered. "Aw, shit," he muttered. But he was still faced with a rather determined Rey.

Rover took a shot at the madman past his friend's shoulder. He tapped into his natural affinity for working with his hands and squeezed off a careful shot. It was well-placed, cleanly missing Rey but striking his target. The dull whump sound it made proved the madman was wearing even better body armor than his guards. He was hurt, but only bruised.

The mad hunter snarled at Rey and raised his hands. He grunted as sharp bone-blade tore through the backs of his hands, shredding skin and causing bleeding wounds. He didn't care. Instead, he swiped at Rey, cutting a horrible gash from her chest to her stomach. Cloth and skin alike tore and parted, instantly soaking her in blood.

"You fucking coward," Rey growled. "You call yourself the Hunter? Let me show you what I look like when I hunt." She gathered up the last of the Glamour she needed and called upon the Cloak of the Massive Bear's Form. The thorny brambles that wound around and through Rey's body writhed and spread out to cover her. They contracted and twisted, shifting then withdrawing to reveal a grotesque, vaguely humanoid creature covered in wolfish, shaggy grey fur. With a muzzle filled with serrated teeth and paws sprouting wicked claws, everything about her was now monstrous - save for her perfectly human eyes. Rey took a step toward her prey, her inhuman eyes locked on his.

Simon took a moment to check the unconscious girl, who might have also suffered under the swarm. Looking at her, he was unsure of her condition. There didn't appear to be any serious external injuries, but then again there were needle marks on her arms. Simon couldn't tell if she was a drug user or if this doctor had done something to her, or both.

Less commanded the air to shove the door shut, causing Rover to scuttle away from his cover and inside the basement room. Less then took aim at the mad doctor with his net gun, but with him engaged in close combat, there was no way to net one without netting the other as well. Still, he kept his gun out, dividing his attention between the door and looking for an opportunity to catch the doctor. The moment one presented itself, he'd be ready.

Mizuko wasted no more time on the remaining mercenary. Ignoring him, she realized that Rey was hurt badly. Her eyes widened in surprise at the size and ferocity of the hedge wolf she'd become and she wondered briefly if Rey might attack everyone, just like a wounded wolf might. The concern was relegated to secondary status as she focused on the man responsible for murdering her friends. She closed on him, then swiftly shifted her angle of approach to come behind him. With both of them now at his throat, the hunter would have to divide his attention. She raised her hand and a ragged dagger of ice formed. She feigned an attack, then twisted to follow his dodge, managing to drive it partway into his ribs, even through his heavy kevlar body armor. It broke off and she left it there.

Rover frowned, listening to the angry buzzing of the swarm now trapped outside the door. His choices were to either try to get a shot at the doctor or to do something to swarm-proof that door. Just now it seemed like a much better idea to keep that swarm from getting into the room, so he grabbed a sheet from the bottom shelf of the gurney upon which the dead woman lay, twirled it deftly to wind it up and stiffen the material, then jammed it into the crack at the bottom of the door.

The mad hunter was now trapped between the wound wolf and princess of ice. Both were in a blood rage. The wolf looked to be more dangerous, but to him she was still just a wolf — some kind of shape changer.



Mizuko, however, looked to him to be by far the more deadly based on what she'd done to his unfortunate hireling. He turned to face her since he had no way to escape them without exposing his back, and slashed at her with his claws. He put everything he had into what he suspected might be his last ditch effort to cut a way to freedom, and opened with a frenzy of slashes and jabs at the ice elemental. Ice shavings and crystals showered into the air as his bone claws skittered across her hardened surface. Yet, she appeared completely impervious to his assault.

Rey, her blood dripping on the floor, let out a blood curdling howl, so similar to the creatures whose form she took, and attacked McCoy? as he was distracted by Mizuko. She viciously leaped at his face and caught hold in a vice-grip. Savage fangs tore strips of flesh from his face as she shook him fiercely with an intent to kill. The man was strong and tough, though, and tore free. The hunter screamed in pain and rage as blood flowed into his own eyes and he felt the ruin of his face.

Simon hadn't realized how serious Rey's wounds were. But now he saw the flowing blood, so he pumped the healing power of Spring into her. Rey's lupine body felt the rush of healing magic and her worst injuries began to close. Instinctively, she recognized the Simon's healing power.

The remaining overhead light was swinging after the elemental gale. The light caught Mizuko as she held her dagger for her strike. The light glittered on her crystalline form and refracted beautifully through the translucent knife. He did a double take - but the effect was gone as the icy changeling defended herself against the doctor's onslaught. Though, in his mind's eye he saw the glitter still.

He remembered being in the Mirrored Hall. It was connected to the wide tower where he stabled his swans. He had just descended and breezed in with good news for his Queen but stopped suddenly when he heard voices.

*My Queen, the man's voice said. My love for you burns through me. I am yours body and soul!*

He had stepped quietly behind one of the huge mirror obelisks that lined the hall. His breath stuck in his throat. Jealousy made his ears hum. He was the Queen's Consort - their love was pure as the driven snow! This poor interloper would soon see the error his his ways. He could just see him kneeling before her, but except for her dress she was hidden from his view.

*My dear, dear Captain...* The Queen's voice thrilled him like wind through dry leaves. *You are so sweet! How could a woman not love such dedication. How I want to freeze our time together so that it would never end.* She caressed his face with a perfect hand.

He felt like a deflated sail. Becalmed as a storm raged around him. Their love was pure - how was this possible?

*I pledge myself to you, the Captain was continuing to profess his love from his knees. He could see her arm as it carressed his chest and shoulders as she luxuriously walked around him. I pledge you my heart!*

*How wonderful of you, she sighed, her bosom heaved with emotion. With her back to him, she drew his sword easily and held it in a strong hand. I have the perfect place for it!* She deftly reversed her grip on the pommel and thrust it powerfully through his chest. The bright breastplate seemed to offer no protection as she cut out his beating organ and dropped it into her purse.

Still facing away, beckoned to him as if she had known he was there the entire time and spoke. *Dear one, I need you to guard some more of my precious jewels.* He wafted closer, knowing again he was her only true love. She raked the eyes from the Captain's face but all he could see now was her shining form."

Less shook free of the flashback. The powerful emotions he had felt in that hall of mirrors in the presence of his Queen were but memories. He felt nothing now: not love, not jealousy, not sadness. It was all just wisps

of a memory.

Mizuko felt a slight shock of magic from somewhere close by but the matter at hand drove her to continue to press her enemy. She drew forth a large blade of ice and, as the man staggered with his hands held to his face, she brought it down with all the force she could muster in a two-handed swing. It caught him at the merging of neck and shoulder and split him open until the icy weapon was lodged through his back and chest. She let go of the blade as the man sank to his knees and the toppled onto his face.

The ice elemental stepped away from the growing pool of blood around her nemesis and went to the unconscious form of her sole surviving friend. Simon was nearby but she didn't see him any more than she remembered there was still a mercenary hiding in the back of the room. She had a lost look of despair on her face. She reached out to touch her friend but stopped short. Her touch right now could mean death to a helpless person. Tears of sleety ice slowly fell from her eyes.

Rey gave the dead Hunter one last look and, muzzle still dripping with gore, slowly walked toward the corner where the remaining mercenary in the room was trying to hide. "Come out, come out, wherever you are..."

Simon took a deep breath and let it out. He'd hardly done anything, and he felt like he'd been put through the wringer. "Mizuko, she's okay, I think. Just drugged." He reached out to caress her cheek, hoping the contact would help her mind return to the present, stopping just before he touched her. Even an inch away, the cold was so intense that his hand went numb but for stabbing needles of pain. "We'll get her taken care of, but we're not quite done yet, so I need you to hold it together for just a little longer."

She looked briefly at Simon, then her gaze traveled to the dead woman and girl, then back to the one still alive. Her face was cold and alien, but Simon could still detect a deep sense of sorrow coming from her. She didn't move from her spot, nor did she return to her human form. Whatever was going on in her mind, she at least had the presence of mind not to reveal her Mask to the remaining mercenary.

Simon nodded, then turned to the merc still in the corner and crouched down in front of him. "Senior, my friend is going to kill you if you don't cooperate with me completely, and there's no way I can stop her. So if you want to live, you're going to let us tie you up and leave you here to explain this to la policia, si? She probably won't be able to get you while you're in jail."

The man uttered some long trail of incomprehensible words in Spanish sounding desperate. Then, from behind a mostly empty rack of shelves came his shaking hand. There were a pair of handcuffs dangling from his fingers - a clear offering of surrender from the man.

"I'm not going to kill him. I just want to play. He'd make a good Little Red Riding Hood." Rey's lips pulled back to bare her teeth in a horrible grin. "Though the woodcutter won't be coming to save her." She took another step forward, and her voice dropped to a whisper. "There's nowhere you can hide from me. No window barred good enough, no door reinforced well enough. Even in the midst of prison can I get to you, if you don't do as you're told." She paused. "Tell them about us, even mention we were here, and I'll know. And I'll pay you a friendly little visit."

Rey backed up and turned away, returning to Mizuko's side. "You going to be okay?" she asked softly, hoping her Hunter-laced-breath wasn't too disgusting.

Mizuko looked at Rey and then around the room and then back to Rey. "Where is the other prisoner?" she signed.

Eyes turned toward the door that was currently sealed. The buzzing sound beyond was just fading away now.

"Never mind," Mizuko concluded.

"Are you okay?" Rey asked again, unwilling to let it go.

Mizuko shook her head no. *"I need to leave. Stacy and Amalia are dead. But I will not leave without Amber. Will someone please take her? I dare not touch her just now."*

With a thought, Rey shed her wolfen form. "I'll do it. I'll scare the crap out of any mundane who saw me in that form anyway." She quickly wiped her face on her sleeve, ignoring her sliced-up clothes, before releasing the girl and picking her up. "Simon's looking after Red in the corner." She looked at Rover and Less. "Can either of you do something to help us get out of here fast?"

"I wanted to steal a pickup truck earlier, but we never got around to that part of the plan. That's about the best I can offer as far as transportation goes."

The gnome was still keeping a weathered ear on the buzzing sounds and wondered just how long it'd take them to either die or wander off. He certainly hadn't been expecting them to stick around this long after their master had been taken down.

That wasn't nearly as big of an internal conflict as he was feeling towards the human vivisectionary they'd found, however. A part of him wanted to be scientifically enthralled by the whole process even in spite of the horrible nature of it all. Rover had no idea that such a thing was even theoretically possible, and yet here they'd just fought against the awful truth of it.

Somehow he suspected it best not to draw attention to such a grisly fascination. All the same, if he managed to spot some of the Hunter's medical guides laying around, something that might indicate how the process had been developed and carried out, he wouldn't hesitate to liberate volumes.

"Nobody should go anywhere until we're sure those things are dead, though. There's no point surviving this long just to get fed to that bastard swarm."

Rover's cunning eye spotted what appeared to be a briefcase sitting on the shelf the remaining merc had hidden behind. While there was no paperwork or logs to be found here, the place did have electricity. If it had electricity it could have electronics — computers even. Where research was done in a paperless void, there was always a computer involved somewhere and if it wasn't in that briefcase, then it just plain wasn't here at all.

In the background, Rover also noted the buzzing finally died.

Meanwhile, Simon finished securing the prisoner, handcuffing him with his hands behind his back to one of the gurneys and relieving him of any weapons or tools that might help him escape. Simon was a big believer in "trust but verify."

Less wandered absentmindedly around the lab poking things with the end of his umbrella. He was mostly distracted by trying to recall the mercurial memories that had resurfaced, but was unwilling to speak face-to-face with the icy elemental who had sparked the flashback of his Keeper. He orbited just outside the rest of the motley. Normally it would be one of his first priorities to help the poor girl but in his hesitation Rey had stepped up to the plate.

"I'm sure there is no hurry," responded Less, a little distantly. "In this neighbourhood, even if the gunshots had been noticed, it is unlikely they would be reported." He stepped closer and looked down at the unconscious form of the girl. "I am willing to help Amber press charges against her kidnapper. I have the best

alibi for finding her in this neighbourhood."

"Still, I want to be somewhere else," Simon said, standing up. He looked around at the medical instruments, trying to decide if anything was worth taking. There were cutters, unmarked high-pressure containers that likely held some kind of gas, a dremel-like thing with a circular bone saw, scalpels of all sorts and descriptions, prods, and things that went well beyond Simon's level of expertise. Of greater interest was a first aid kit with some rolls of medical tape and absorbent pads as well as a needle set with thread and scissors. He grabbed that stuff and tried hard not to think about the uses of the rest.

The feline Changeling glanced down at the prisoner and switched to Glymjack Cant. "You live near here?" he asked Less. He thought he remembered that from the lifetime that had passed since he'd entered this ill-favored building. "If you've got room, and if you think we won't attract too much attention, that's probably the best way to get us all off the streets as fast as possible. And I just bet you've got a Door to take us somewhere else from there."

"I have a room but no Door, though I'm working on remedying that inconvenience in the near future. My closest Door is at the train station but you'd probably attract less attention by heading to Mizuko's pond."

"The Door is optional," Simon said. "We just need to get everyone out of here, get wounds treated, and get everyone dressed in non-bloody clothes. And I want to see if I can wake up Amber. If not, I'm calling an ambulance for her. Anesthesia can be bad news."

Less nodded and led the way. Outside the building they crossed the quiet parking lot and down the alley. A couple of blocks over was an identical old hotel. This one, however, showed signs of residency. Laundry hung on balconies and stretched to a neighbouring tower. Some balconies were decorated with gardens, children's toys, foreign flags, or simply, bicycles. Less let the motley in and ushered them up the stairs to his flat. He apologised for the mess despite the fact it was as neat as a pin. There was no door to the bedroom but it was cordoned off with a folding screen decorated with Japanese paintings of snowy mountains.

"Please make yourselves at home," said Less, offering the small, old chesterfield. He fetched a couple of wooden chairs from the kitchen table. With Amber on the couch and Less standing by the kitchen counter, he was still shy two seats. "I have some pillows," he offered.

"The floor will be fine." Rey replied with a smile, "though if you've got a shirt I could borrow, I'd appreciate it." Her t-shirt was bloodsoaked tatters, and while her jeans were also cut and bloodied, she wasn't going to impose on Less for more. Perhaps, she thought, we should all keep a spare change of clothing at everyone's homes for situations like this. Less went into his room and produced a colourful shirt that must have dated from the late 60s.

Rover waved off the offer of a pillow, as well, and settled to the floor with his prize. He'd liberated the suspect briefcase before leaving and was now working his way towards its contents. The gnome had made sure to take a spot that was both out of the way and yet close enough to listen in on conversation.

If the case held what he suspected, then the notes he'd likely find would be disturbing to those without clinical detachment.

When the motley had left the building, Mizuko had allowed her ice form to melt back into human, which allowed the Mask to settle into place rather than being overwhelmed by the power of the magic she'd employed. When they had entered the apartment, Mizuko had taken a quick look around then checked her injured shoulder by pulling the collar of her shirt to the side. It was minor, though. The wound itself looked rather like an impact crater, a gouge taken from her flesh rather than a proper bullet wound. She decided it was not a concern and turned her attention to Amber.

Mizuko knelt at the couch to check her friend. When she checked Amber's pulse, Amber stirred. Mizuko

then asked Rey to find a damp cloth and a glass of water. "I think she is waking up," she signed to the others.

Shortly Amber did wake with a small start. Although she was surrounded by strangers, she recognized Mizuko. The first thing past her lips was an expression of relief closely followed by a pointed inquiry as to why Mizuko was dressed in what were clearly mismatched, cast-off clothes, insinuating that Mizuko had better. The siren didn't respond, but simply hugged her friend.

There followed a brief introduction to Amber's rescuers, then Amber described all that she remembered. It was blessedly little. She and Amalia had gone looking for Stacy again when these foreign guys cornered them and dragged them into a van. They had bags put over their heads and they both remembered all the Mexican abduction stories and were scared that's what was happening to them. The last thing she knew was that she was being strapped to a table and something stabbed her in the arm.

When Amber asked, Mizuko had to tell her that they did find Amalia and Stacy, but that they hadn't survived what the kidnappers had done to them. Amber cried, and it looked like Mizuko wanted to, but she couldn't. She only held Amber for a few minutes until the tears stopped. Then Amber thanked everyone for rescuing them.

While all this was going on, Rover sat with the briefcase. The first challenge was getting the thing open without damaging the contents. He had to scratch his head a bit until he realized that the lock was a fingerprint reader. After that, he found a way to remove it and cut the connection that presumably would cause something to ruin the contents should the lock be forced. With that disabled, he snapped the lid open to reveal a laptop.

It was pretty top-of-the-line. The brand symbol on the machine wasn't anything too remarkable. It looked like some kind of Hedge fruit with a bite taken out of it, though clearly this thing had nothing to do with anything fae. Rover found the power and got the thing booted. Everything stopped, however, at a little rectangle that asked for identification and a password.

Well, computers weren't Rover's specialty, but he weren't no dummy, either. He knew them better than most folks and what he didn't know, his quick mind could suss out. From what he saw here, he'd need to get some software disks that would allow him to work on writing a script to crack the password auto-magically for him. That might take a few days to get what he needed, but he was pretty sure he could do it. Then, all the secrets this machine held would be his.

Less explained to Amber and Mizuko that the police would have to be called to deal with the remnants of the kidnappers and arrange for notifying the next of kin of the poor, unfortunate girls. He would help them press charges but would not get involved personally as he had been at the scene. He counselled Simon that he needed to get rid of his pistol. He didn't know what conclusions the police would come up with. They would have an eye witness, but the breakdown of the Mask would make anything he told them severely unreliable. Hopefully, they would try to wrap up the strange events quickly and quietly.

Simon was relieved that Amber had awakened. That was one worry off his list. He moved on to the next ones. The wound on Mizuko's shoulder wasn't immediately threatening, but it looked like it would heal slowly, if at all, without magic. Then again, she could turn into water. Maybe she'd just reshape her flesh later on. Rey's wounds looked more serious, despite Simon's earlier healing. He insisted both girls let him clean the wounds to prevent infection, and then called up pretty much the last of his mental reserves to try to close the nasty wounds on Rey's abdomen. If he couldn't do it, she'd need stitches, at the least.

With a touch and glimmer of magic, Rey's injuries closed completely, leaving behind only bruises.

"I don't think the guy we left behind will say much of anything about us," Rey said softly to Less in their motley's Cant. "He and I had a talk. Most people who have a giant wolf who just ripped the face of their boss tell them not to talk or they're next tend to comply. But if we want to hide our involvement, then we'll

need to call in someone to do it, or sanitize the place ourselves."

Amber watched what was happening with a growing frown. She was about to ask Rey was talking about and just exactly what Simon did when Mizuko intercepted her. She tugged at Amber's shirt and when her friend looked at her, she put on her saddest face and gestured to her clothing. Then she made a slight tipping motion with her hand.

Amber laughed. "Okay, Mizuko. I'll find some more clothes for you. I'm not sure that makes us even like you say, though. You saved my life." She glanced around the room. "All you did. But if that's what you want, then that's what you'll have. I just have one question --"

Mizuko tugged at her shirt again, more insistently. Amber stopped and looked at Mizuko again. "Oh, I get it. Right now and no questions, either." She sighed. "All right, 'Zuko. I'll find ya something." But when Amber stood she seemed still just a little wobbly. Mizuko stood and caught her elbow to steady her.

The siren left with her friend, but not before she'd managed a covert signal to Less in Glymjack Sign that she'd return later. The fact that it her comment was specifically directed at Less probably meant she had something she wanted to talk to Less about.

Rey watched Mizuko and Amber leave, then turned to address the rest of the motley. "What are we going to do - if anything - about what happened in the basement? Or rather, what was there when we left?"

"I tend to think the Mask is pretty good at covering up this type of thing," said Less. "The more we do to cover it up, the more questions the police have and the more they look into it. We have to deal with our prisoner at its best that he be incarcerated under the law than by our own vigilante justice."

"Anonymous phone call with a tip, then," Rey said. "They'll find him there, and I doubt they'll give much credence to anything weird he might say. They'll find the Hunter's prints on the medical equipment."

"I figured Amber would carry the ball from here," suggested Less. "She was the kidnap victim, after all. She can say she was drugged the entire time and the police can put the whole thing down to a bad drug trip or rival gang."

"I vote with Rey on this one," Simon said. "Amber's done enough and may not want to talk to the police, particularly tonight, which is the only time she could and have any kind of plausible story. There's a payphone around the back of the building. All we really have to do is go dial 911 on it and walk away. Or I'll go back in and use one of the merc's phones. We left enough mess that the police will find what they need to find. Let them draw their own conclusions. Tomorrow, we can see if she's willing to talk to Gomez. I'd personally appreciate it, but I'm not going to force the issue."

"Use a pay phone," Rey said. "Going back could only cause more problems."

Simon agreed. "I left my bike near the park, so I'll just go there from the pay phone. You want me to call you a cab to take you home? If you're as tired as I am, even a mile is too far to walk tonight."

The motley put the police onto the mess at McCoy's lair and by the time twenty minutes had passed, there was quite a commotion with cop cars, ambulances, hearses, and specialists crawling all over the place. Less was able to see everything he wanted to from his apartment windows.

One way or another, one reported got to the scene before other reporters had even heard about it. Gomez, the reported Simon has spoken with when the search began, had a whole lot of questions for he police, especially after he became suspicious that the bodies of the girl and the woman matched descriptions of the girls Simon had spoken of. The fact that there appeared to be a bunch of dead Mexican mercenaries in addition to a live one meant that Gomez had a lot of pieces of the puzzle but didn't know how they all fit

just yet.

The police were just as mystified as Gomez, however. They suspected that two groups were involved and one possibly employed attack dogs. Bullet wounds were found on at least one of the mercenaries, as well as squashed lead in the vests others wore. To the cops, this placed things above the level of a gang fight and somewhere in the realm of mob warfare. But no known mobsters or their people seemed to be involved here.

Simon had since gone shopping to get some child-sized clothing that would fit Auriel, as well as some kind of bedding she could use, then went for a swim to use Mizuko's gate to the Hollow. It was a heck of thing, feeling around in nighttime water so dark it was pitch black. In the end, he couldn't find the three rocks he'd seen Mizuko use to activate the gate. He would have to wait until he caught up with her later, and hopefully Auriel would be fine on her own for a little while longer.

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Mizuko didn't make contact with the motley until the next day, appearing at Less's door at dawn. After he let her in, she was listless while talking to him as she looked around his place as if she hadn't been there just the night before. From the dark circles under her eyes, Less knew she hadn't slept.

Today the nymph was wearing something he hadn't seen before. It was a little black dress. It fell to just above her knees to reveal her perfectly shaped, hairless legs. It was simple and had built-in support so Mizuko didn't look like she wasn't wearing a bra even when she was not. She did carry the same bag she had when she went to Circledell.

She let him know that Amber wouldn't go to the police because she was afraid the police might want her for something she did. Of course, Amber didn't put it that way, but Mizuko knew Amber. She told Less that she felt partly responsible for that since she has accepted clothes and food from Amber many times in the past, knowing that Amber probably hadn't paid for any of it.

"I also am responsible for what happened to Stacy, Amalia, and her this week," Mizuko signed to him. "If they hadn't known me, or if I hadn't been curious about that man, they'd all be alive. None of what happened is their fault; it's mine. So, if anyone needs to go to the police, then I should be the one to do it."

"That is very noble," said Less while he put a kettle on for tea. "But I don't think that will be necessary. The police have been at the scene all night and I'm sure they found enough to charge the mercenary with something." He stared at the unboiling kettle for a moment, then continued. "You can't blame yourself for what happened to your friends. You did not make the doctor what he was. You were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The fact that you care for them is very nice. Friends are a wonderful thing. I guess part of being human is having an impact on other people's lives. It is a cruel world that such a horrible thing was inflicted on you and them but you have to remember that before all of this, you were making their lives better. They were glad to know you."

The kettle boiled and Less put the tea on to steep. "I'm very sorry that you feel responsible for what the girls went through, for their deaths. It's very human of you. And I'm sorry we couldn't do more to help them. We should have a funeral for them so you can say your good-byes."

Mizuko hugged Less from behind. She knew he wouldn't be surprised, that he'd see her intent. Even though what Less faced didn't in any way dictate what he was looking at, somehow psychologically it was easier for Mizuko that way. The hug was brief and she stepped away.

"Thank you, Mr. Seleman," she told him. She watched him a moment while he prepared his cups. There was more she wanted to talk about. When he finished she stared at the tea cup he offered, but made no move to take it.

"I'm frightened," she said finally. "My life is about to change. I am a sorceress and I can sense it so I know it is true. The Ashen Queen has said it must be so and so it shall be. Rey Lafitte has graciously offered her home to me, and so I do not want to tell her that it frightens me. I do not want her to think I am ungrateful.

"But it means I will not see the people I see every day. I know that living in the pond is not what mortals do, it's not what they would expect and I understand that my Queen worries for my health, for my ability to relate and understand people. It is important to her because she will one day need a new Legate of Mists and she intended for that to be me. I will miss my pond. I will miss my friends. Very soon, I know everything will change for me somehow."

She paused long enough for Less to begin to speak, but then she hurried to add, "That's not all. I cannot remember what happened in that basement last night. I remember parts, but not all. I remember going inside. I remember I wanted to hurt the people that took my friends, but I do not know what happened. I think I used magic that I have never used before. I think I called on something I didn't know I could call. This frightens me more than anything. How can this be? I am a sorceress of the Leaden Mirror! I cannot be afraid of magic. How can I tell my own court, my queen, that I called up upon magic that I am afraid ever to use again? I cannot tell them that fear has become my master in this. I will not be forgiven that."

She looked Less in the face. He thought he could detect her trembling. "I need to know what happened. I need the truth. What did you see, Mr. Seleman?"

It was possible that she could be lying, that she was sent here by the Ashen Queen to test him, to find his strengths and weaknesses. It was in the realm of possibility. But looking at her, Less knew that it seemed unlikely. Mizuko was an elemental; of that he was sure. Elementals were notoriously poor liars or social manipulators. If this all was a ruse, then Mizuko couldn't be aware of it. If it was a test, then whoever sent her had manipulated Mizuko as well. The Ashen Queen certainly had that power. She also had the ability to warp minds, bring forth madness, even gift madness that she crafted from her own mind. The Ashen Queen could have discovered what happened, and somehow detected Less's own moment of weakness. Was she using Mizuko now to investigate? Was she that devious and manipulative? Did she suspect him?

Less knew to tread carefully and he was quiet for some time before responding. "Mizuko, you are an elemental of water. You understand change - it is your very nature to ebb and flow. Change is unavoidable and should be embraced but hang on to the things that are important to you. Your pool - and Ollie - needs your care. There will be enough change in your life to satisfy Queen Veridia without abandoning what you need to be happy. And Rey is a friend - she wants to help you. Just tell her how you feel, she will not be offended."

Less continued on to the more pressing topic. "As for what happened last night. I saw you transform to a being of ice and fight for your friends. You killed the mercenaries and the doctor. I don't know what magic you might have been using but for a moment you reminded me of a True Fae. You *should* be afraid of power like that. Remember, emotions are what make us human. Emotions nourish us. I think last night you drifted too far from being human. The magic and horrors of the night threatened to sever you from the mortal world. Perhaps it is for the best that you *do not* remember and that you *are* afraid of doing it again. You do not master fear by not experiencing it. You need to accept it." Less let that sink in. "But I won't tell the Autumn Court if you don't."

Mizuko blinked. She didn't want to believe she'd killed anyone, but she also could think of no reason that Less would be anything but forthcoming about it. "Okay," she said. "I'll try. I was out all night after I saw Amber to a shelter. I'm very tired and have almost no magic left. I'm going to go home — I mean I'm going



to go to our hollow and look for something to eat."

Less checked his watch. He was going to be late for work but he inwardly shrugged. "I'll walk with you." He put the tea cups in the sink and checked his uniform in the mirror. On the way down the stairs (he didn't trust the elevator in this building) he asked Mizuko, "When you say you know things are going to change, do you know about anything specific?"

"That depends, Mr. Seleman," she said. Was he asking her if she knew what was in store for herself? She wasn't certain he was. If she answered that question in the personal context, then her answer may be misleading. She chose to give him a more complete answer instead. "I see things in dreams but often I forget, only to remember them suddenly when I am awake. If I am very close to someone it is hard for me to know anything specific. Lydia says it is because my emotions get in the way. Perhaps it is so. Perhaps that is why I can not see specifically what is in store for myself."

She stopped on the stairs and turned to Less so he could clearly see her signing. "But for those I am not so close to, I can sometimes see many things. Specific things." Having made her point, she turned to continue walked down the stairs. "I do not always understand it, though. To me, they are just dreams. True dreams, perhaps, but still they mean little to me."

Less nodded, satisfied.

Once they got outside, he asked her another question that had been niggling at him. "What would your duties be when you are finally appointed as Legate of Mists?"

"Ambassador things," Mizuko replied in sign. "Only, an ambassador for Autumn is expected to do more than just represent Autumn to the other Courts, and to represent the Duchy to other freeholds when Autumn reigns. It is also the Legate of Mists responsibility to negotiate with the Gentry and other powerful groups on behalf of the Desert Duchy. Without the Legate, there can be no real peace forged between the Duchy and the Goblin King because no one else has the training, strength of purpose and fae authority to accomplish it. His death was a terrible blow against peace and most freeholders have no idea."

She realized very belatedly that Less and the others might not have known this fact. "*Longinus Fray was my teacher before Veridia herself took me on. He was the Legate of Mists that was murdered in Circledell. His death has prolonged this war. If he had been able to make contact with the Goblin King, I'm certain that a peace agreement could have been made or forced. Therefore, I hold those responsible for his death also responsible for the death of every changeling since that day.*" Her voice held emotion in it that belied her feelings for Longinus.

"That is why my training is so important, why Veridia has taken personal interest in me. The Leaden Mirror *must* have its Legate of Mists again. It is why I must train very hard to become what is required of me. It is why Veridia has taught me to widen my connection to Arcadia and shown me special things only the Autumn Court knows. Without that power and connection to Arcadia, no True Fae will recognize me as someone with the status and power with whom they must strike a bargain."

Based on his brief encounter with the Goblin King, he wasn't convinced that any True Fae would have to bargain if it didn't fit their fancy. He wondered if Queen Veridia's madness was clouding her judgement and putting her Legates at risk. Still, Autumn was a rising power in the Duchy and if Winter ever wanted to grow in Mythic then he needed to support them for the time being. "Well, I have lived in Arcadia for a good portion of my free life. If you need any support in your training I would be happy to help." *And I would love to learn these Autumn Court secrets.*

Mizuko dipped her lovely head and signed, "I appreciate that, Mr. Seleman."

They crossed the train tracks carefully since the trains came through here very quickly and every year there

were several fatalities with people who did not pay enough attention. Then they were at the fringes of the park and each step created the illusion of leaving the city behind. By the time they had found themselves at the pond, it was quiet, save for the occasional roar of the passenger train.

"I'm returning these to you," she signed. Then Mizuko pulled a small bundle out from the bag she had been carrying and turned it over to Less. It was the clothes he'd lent her the previous night. After he took them, she continued. "I appreciate all your efforts. I'll begin living with Rey soon but I will be working at the Hollow to make some spaces more comfortable for you. Also, I think will craft another Door." Doors were difficult to make, bridging two world as they did and took significant time and effort. She was serious about her commitment to the motley.

Less accepted the clothing bundle and held it awkwardly. "Get some rest, Mizuko. I'll see you soon and help you with the Hollow later." With that he waved goodbye and as the nymph waded into the pool he turned to hurry back to the train station.

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Rover continued to work on cracking the laptop over the next few days. One way or another he got some software tools he needed, and then wrote a script to hammer away at the password he needed literally automatically. Basing his own method on developed hacking scripts and then modifying them to do just one or two impossible things was far faster than designing the hacking tools from scratch. Which he was sure he could do, but why spend six months on it when he could get what he needed right now with a few modifications? Still, it might be an interesting exercise to file away in his mental list of interesting things to make.

At any rate, in three days he was in. He had to hand it to Travis McCoy. The man did follow recommended password rules and breaking his password would have been almost impossible for anyone but a very expensive lab, or of course Rover. Luckily, this Travis guy wasn't using multi-factor authentication, yet. That would have been even more annoying, likely requiring Rover to come up with a way to get around authentication and hack the material directly.

But what he had, was better. He had McCoy's online identity. And the hunter's access to organization. This was where Rover found the real gold mine of information. Online was where most of the good stuff was. All he had to do was use McCoy's own ID.

Travis McCoy was not a doctor. That much was clear. He had basic paramedic training, only. That explained why in his personal notes, he had no success removing parts of "subjects" for implant and study himself. From his notes, Rover saw the man had at some point along the way, lost his freaking mind.

The mad "doctor" was, according to documents found on the laptop an employee of the "company". According to the handbook Rover found in PDF, he would have fallen under the job title of Field Researcher, but it wasn't what it sounded like. His job was supposed to have been infiltration and identification of inhuman creatures. The handbook described vampires, werewolves, and other movie-monsters. And it sounded like the movies is where they got ideas for most of the information on these monsters.

Vampires and werewolves weren't the only monsters listed in the various files that acted as addendums to the official "company" document. Other creatures had no official or consistent name. Like the little girl they'd found with thorns in her pocket and that when gassed, had looked for just a split second like something *else* with leaves for skin and mushrooms growing instead of hair. Despite the records of her pleading and begging, the company regarded her as an "it" rather than as a person. Rover assumed the girl to have had a rather unfortunate end at the hands of these people.

Throughout the documents, there was no mention of the company's actual name, but Rover got the distinct impression they branded themselves a pharmaceuticals company. It was rather backwards compared to

professional life today in that a person apparently worked for them for life. Also, all implants were company property, and they retained the right to repossess it should an agent decide the needed to retire.

Where McCoy went "off the reservation" so to speak was in that instead of identifying supernatural creatures and calling in Retrieval agents, he was taking them himself. This put him behind on his quota, of course, but the guy was nuts. He'd seen too much he didn't understand and in his warped mind, he had concluded that he couldn't protect himself unless he had more implants. The company refused him that, so he was trying to do it for himself. That's why he'd hired a bunch of mercenaries to act as his personal Retrieval agents. Obviously, they weren't nearly competent enough.

The company must not have been totally blind to something being wrong with McCoy, however, because Rover eventually realized that using the man's identity had tripped some kind of flag to company officials. They'd be hunting down the laptop, but no matter — they didn't know anything about Rover and he'd already accessed everything he could. Abandoning the laptop for the company to find would, he could be certain, throw the company into quite a fit as they tried to figure out what level of intrusions they'd suffered and how much damage might have been done to them. Or, of course, he could just dump the laptop in the Hedge and be done with it. Either way, Rover was certain the company would have fits over trying to untangle the mess McCoy had made of things and that meant they'd be too busy covering themselves to bother with looking for the motley.